

## Introduction

# *Paradox and Evolution*

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This is a little book about a big subject — why humans are weird. We act in often apparently bizarre and inexplicable ways. Our behaviour seems sometimes to be utterly unpredictable at the individual level and almost as difficult to forecast at the group level. Human systems — such as stock markets, fashions and musical tastes — seem to change capriciously. This book suggests a not so novel hypothesis for how we are and a fairly novel hypothesis about how we got to be how we are.

The not so novel hypothesis is that people are paradoxical — that is they act in ways which are often contradictory, indeed self-contradictory. They can behave as war-mongers and peaceniks, avaricious thieves and altruistic Samaritans, cooperative bees and lone wolves, conformist teachers' pets and rebels without a cause. Not just different people — the *same* people can do all these things.

This idea is not so novel because it has been around a long time in various religions — everything from Christianity seeing humans as part divine and part devilish through to Chinese Taoist ideas about yin and yang in human behaviour. Maybe the religions were on to something, even if they express it in mystical terms, because there is quite a lot of thoroughly modern and scientific literature which suggest that humans do indeed behave paradoxically — from organisation theory, economics and other sources (as we shall see later).

However, treating paradoxical behaviour (and its source in paradoxical instincts) as axiomatic about humans is taking this a step further than most writers have done so far. Most social scientists have retreated into one of two camps: either adopting a 'blank slate' view of the sources of human behaviour or rather one-sided views of heritable behaviour. What is proposed systematically in these pages is that human instincts and behaviour are permanently contradictory — which is what we mean

by paradoxical. Understanding this paradoxical nature is fundamental to understanding our branch of life on earth.

We share some of these characteristics with some close relatives in the primate branch of life (and even a few other animal neighbours). This is hardly surprising as we are an evolved species and didn't (contrary to what some people say) simply materialise out of thin air. The novel hypothesis is just that — humans have *evolved* paradoxical instincts. We are weird because we evolved that way. It is deeply buried in our evolutionary history and is therefore ineradicable.

This idea will certainly be attacked as another 'just so story' which seems, these days, to be an epithet readily applied to anyone else's hypotheses that you don't like. I am happy to admit this is a guess, a hypothesis or even a 'just so' story if you like. But as with all such ideas the only way to find out is to test them. First you have to actually read what evidence has been drawn upon, inferences made and conjectures conjectured before you can understand where the idea comes from. Then you have to see if there's contrary evidence which successfully rejects the idea or not. Then you can call it a 'just so' story if it doesn't 'stack up'.

The reason the 'paradoxical primate' hypothesis might cause a bit of a stir in certain circles is because it leads to some pretty obvious and for some unpalatable conclusions. All sorts of utopians have built ideological schemas not about 'how the camel got its hump' but about 'how humans would behave if society were just so' (although for some reason these are not considered 'just so' stories). Some of these ideas have even been tried out. Unfortunately they didn't quite work out. The 'paradoxical primate' hypothesis suggests that such utopian schemes — if they run contrary to human contradictions — will never work out. I confidently predict this will not be seen as good news by various ideologues (of both left and right) — I do hope I am right.

So by now, if you are convinced that nurture rules, or that everyone is just a simple rational utility maximising machine, or you are just uncomfortable with illogical stuff like paradoxes you will have guessed this book is not for you. For those with more open minds (even some of the above) I hope it will convince you that there is something a bit more than a 'just so' story in these pages and it is worth exploring further. It also starts to make sense of an awful lot of stuff that we've had problems with for the past 5,000 years or so and many social scientists are still going quietly bonkers over (well, some of them anyway). But first, a little personal diversion (but it does tell you something, so bear with me).

This book — in part at least — recapitulates my own intellectual journey in trying to understand the peculiar beast we call 'human'. My personal trajectory is not at all novel: — a radical Marxist in the 1970s (my

20s), mellowing to a progressive reformer in the 1980s and (I hope) a more reflective pragmatist in the 1990s. If I were to try and sum up my trajectory it would be roughly from materialist dialectician to materialist rationalist and now to materialist paradoxicalist. (I am not sure 'paradoxicalist' is a word — but if it isn't, it is now). Whilst I have lost some intellectual excess baggage and some comrades on this journey, fortunately not all I have acquired along the way has proved completely useless (I hope).

Even Marxism still has some useful things to say, however unfashionable that might seem in the post-communist, end of history, 'Noughties'. Dialectics as an approach is very close to paradox — but it is not the same thing and has the unfortunate tendency, through the notion of synthesis, to assume inevitable progress or sometimes regress — 'socialism or barbarism' in Rosa Luxemburg's famous phrase. What really often exists — in human systems — are cycles and fluxes, which sometimes progress (or regress) but more often just change over time in the balance between contending and contradictory forces.

The idea which proved to be a 'eureka' moment for me was the idea of paradox. Let me start by giving a very crude (and stipulative) definition — by paradox I mean 'permanent contradiction'. That is, something which appears logically impossible or inconsistent but which is nevertheless the case. This applies not just to ideas (the classical use of paradox) but to material and 'real' things, including and especially human behaviour, culture and institutions. Paradoxes are real. They are all around us in our religions, political beliefs, institutions, organisations and even inside our heads.

I am not the first to see the importance of paradox — if you manage to read the whole of this book I think you will come across paradox in many surprising places. Nor am I the first to see its importance for human organisations. Where I think this little book breaks new ground is in pulling together and synthesising a lot of work and thought already undertaken by others, but often not connected to each other. Above all, I am grateful for the work of Bob Quinn, who's ideas about paradox in organisations I discovered in about 1990 and have influenced me deeply ever since (but he is not to blame for what appears in these pages).

'Paradox' feels today like a semi-fashionable term in many fields of social science writing, but it was not always thus. We conducted a little analysis of articles in scholarly journals in the social sciences from 1970 up to date (see Figure 1). This shows that in the 1970s and 80s 'paradox' was a very sparsely used term. After 1990 there is a clear explosion in its use. In the twenty years between 1970 and 1989 the average number of article per year was only 13.4, between 1990 and 1999 this shot up to 68

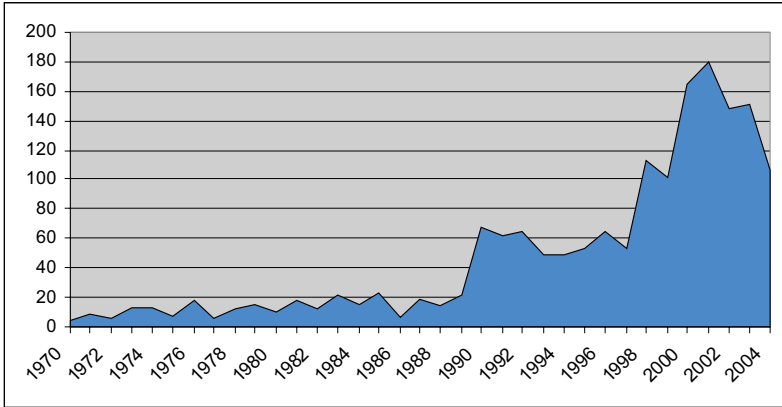


Figure 1: 'Paradox' articles in the social sciences 1970–2004

(Source: Derived from the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences. All articles containing the word 'paradox' in Title, Keywords or Abstract. As at 26th June 2004, so figures from 2004 represent only 6 months.)

per year and between 2000 and 2003 it rose to 161 per year. In the final year of our survey it stood at 106 for only 6 months worth of journals.

Of course this little survey may be flawed – maybe the term has simply become fashionable and therefore appears more often even though any serious exploration of the actual concept of paradox in human systems is absent from many of the articles. This is to some extent true, but even so it indicates something of a shift in perceptions and interests, but it is also true that many of these articles do have some serious considerations of 'paradox' issues in them. On the other hand, searching only on the term 'paradox' may well have missed many articles which consider the essential concept under other terminology (e.g. dilemmas, ambiguities, contradictions, etc.). This crude survey therefore probably does represent a significant shift in attention and interest towards 'paradox' as a research issue in human systems.

The watershed year seems to have been 1988. That year saw Quinn's seminal *Beyond Rational Management* (Quinn 1988) as well as the edited collection involving a range of organisation theory 'heavy-weights' (Quinn and Cameron 1988). Other management texts published that year also started to examine paradox (Harvey 1988; Pandy, Boland et al. 1988). Co-incidentally two important books dealing with paradox in group life (Smith and Berg 1988) and 'ideological dilemmas of everyday life' (Billig, Condor et al. 1988) also appeared. A popular philosophical text also appeared discussing paradox (Poundstone 1988).

Finally, it is usually a safe bet that something significant is going on when the management consultants (e.g. Price Waterhouse 1996) and management gurus (e.g. Handy 1995) catch on to a new concept. Contrary to popular belief the consultants and gurus do not usually lead this process but follow it, usually *after* initial research by academics which they shamelessly plagiarise (see Huczynski 1993 for an extensive analysis of this process). So the fact that they have now tried to stake a claim on 'paradox' suggests something is really going on. What is it?

Let's first take a small detour into the history of social sciences. The social sciences originally set out to emulate the physical sciences and discover the laws of motion of human societies. They have had poor and patchy results and some social scientists have retreated from the whole idea and sought refuge in the ultimate relativity of a socially constructed humanity.

There are, however, regularities in human social systems and in individual human behaviour; they are simply not as simple as some physical systems. Drop a leaf in a vacuum tube on the surface of planet Earth and you can predict with complete accuracy its trajectory and acceleration. Drop the same leaf in a hurricane and no physical scientist on earth can tell you where it is going to end up, or how fast and by what path it will get there. Gravity still works — its law has not been suspended — but other, very complex, forces come into play, far too complex to be precisely predicted. Each is based upon well understood physical laws but as an ensemble it becomes impossible to predict where the leaf will go. This does not invalidate any of these laws — it simply suggests that there are some limits to what is 'knowable'.

So part of the problem for social science has been complexity — even if every individual human was utterly predictable (but different) predicting the behaviour of complex social groups would be impossible. But as we now know, apparently chaotic or near-chaotic complex systems do have features we can understand and, if not predict, certainly develop some theories about how they work.

There is however a deeper problem in our approach to these issues and it is a philosophical one. Western social science is still dominated by a Newtonian world view. Despite the huge upheavals of relativity theory and quantum mechanics the view of the world we carry around in most of our heads is very mechanistic and linear. Many of us know about curious phenomena in quantum mechanics like the paradox that light can appear as waves or particles depending how you measure it but it has hardly penetrated our normal working lives. Where it has been adopted by social scientists it has been unfortunately transformed into a surreal, constructionist view of reality which alleges that light gets

turned into waves or particles by the observer, so even material reality becomes socially constructed (how's that for an ego trip).

A realist, difficult but still materially based, understanding of how the physical world works understands that the paradox of light's nature reflects deeper aspects of physical reality and is in no sense subjectively created.

Humans, we usually assume, are either one thing or another. Creative or pedestrian, aggressive or pacific, competitive or cooperative, rational or emotional, and so on endlessly. There was even a semi-popular set of psychological theories and practices known as 'personal construct theory' which suggested that bipolar contrasts are fundamental to human thinking processes (Kelly 1963).

Most social science has traditionally been constructed around the notion that if you are more of one, you must be less of the other. If you are more competitive, you must be less cooperative.

This book looks to a different, new and as yet relatively under-developed approach to understanding human behaviour at the individual, group and social levels. Paradoxical theories about human nature are not entirely new and not restricted to specific fields of social science. As we will show, elements of this approach have surfaced in evolutionary psychology, psychology, sociology, organisation and management theory and elsewhere. They have not however been systematically brought together so this is a work of fusion and, hopefully, creative synthesis that we might call 'human paradox theory'. It seeks to show why humans may have evolved a paradoxical 'human nature' and that this may indeed be a 'human universal' (although not invariable or unchanging at the individual level). These paradoxical traits or instincts in turn generate paradoxical human systems, especially human organisations – a subject which has been more fully explored – and these explorations are brought together here fully and reconceptualised in the context of the evolutionary explanation of their origins. We then go on to look at some of the implications of this approach for specific branches of the social sciences and for issues of public policy.

The book adopts a slightly odd sequence, which reflects a personal intellectual journey but has a justification as well. I happened to first develop my thinking about paradox mostly, but not exclusively, in the context of organisation and management studies. By coincidence this is also the field where it has been most developed. So I have placed the chapter on paradox in organisation and management before developing the evolutionary explanation of individual paradoxical human nature. I hope by doing so to convince the reader of the universality of human

paradoxical behaviour before developing the evolutionary explanation for it, which mirrors my own intellectual journey.

It is worth saying something briefly about my own intellectual history because it helps to understand this journey and why some bits were easy and some very difficult. I was for about a decade a convinced and committed Marxist (of the Trotskyist variety). As those who have been through such intense periods of ideological commitment will know, breaking away does not come easily. However my Marxist past both equipped me and hindered me in trying to understand paradoxical human nature. In understanding paradox it was a clear help. Many of the interesting debates within Western Marxism during the 1970s addressed a whole host of issues about dialectics which come close to (but differ in certain very important respects from) understanding notions of paradox.

The whole idea of contradiction, and moreover contradictions which co-exist despite logical incompatibility, is of course not alien to Marxist thought. Where it differs from what I now call a paradox approach is that Marxism always assumed that contradictions can be resolved by synthesis or dissolved by collapse of the system. Rosa Luxembourge's idea that the future of capitalist contradictions meant it was 'either Socialism or Barbarism' gets beyond only progressive synthesis but still does not admit that there is no 'third way' as her then social democratic contemporaries such as Karl Kautsky argued, long before Tony Blair latched on to the idea. Marxism acquired this legacy from Hegelian dialectics which was wholly positivist and assumed the working out of contradictions through successive syntheses towards and ultimate utopian, contradiction free, solution. For Hegel this was an idealist working out, but Marx's great innovation was to place dialectics into the material world of developing human societies, and especially his analysis of classes and the evolving modes of production employed by successive human societies (agrarian feudalism, mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism, industrial socialism, etc.).

The paradoxical approach does not accept this inevitable unfolding of thesis-antithesis-synthesis but instead accepts that contradictions can remain permanently unresolved. An understanding of Marxist dialectics certainly helped me understand paradox.

It is in the evolutionary part of my story that my Marxist past created the biggest problems. As a rigorously materialist approach, with none of the baggage of religion to get in the way, Marxism readily adopted Darwinian thinking about evolution. It had no trouble at all accepting humans were descended from an ape-like ancestor. Where it clashed with evolutionary theory was in the outcome — in understanding what humans are like now. Most Marxists, along with most of the rest of the

utopian left, assumed that human had evolved into something completely unique with no fixed 'human nature'. Indeed the very idea of 'human nature' became one of the chief ideological battle-grounds between Marxism and its opponents.

It was clearly impossible for Marxists to deny that actually existing humans were in many ways pretty vile creatures – robbers, murderers, rapists, destroyers. But Marxists, and other utopians, took the view of Jean Jacques Rousseau that humans are not born like that but socialised into their despicable ways by the primitive forms of social organisation they had developed (hunter-gatherer, agrarian, feudal, capitalist). Unlike Rousseau however most Marxists did not believe humans were born naturally good, kind and cooperative but were simply blank slates. This assumption was essential because it explained human adaptability to nasty and brutish existence and that they could be perfected if only the correct social conditions (socialism or communism) could be created. Human perfectability and the blank slate were two-sides of the same argument – if we can create socialism we can end theft, murder, rape and destruction because humans won't want to do these things any more.

Most of us had never read Margaret Mead, but we knew by heart the arguments of her *Coming of Age in Samoa* about the vast differences in social and sexual mores in this island utopia (conveniently remote enough for us to know nothing of it other than Mead's account). Human differences, and indeed every flimsy example of cultures which appeared more utopian (mainly from hunter-gatherers, with the odd contemporary commune, free school or revolutionary episode thrown in for good luck) was called in aid of the blank slate hypothesis. This was made all the easier by the fact that many theorists of evolved human nature could be labelled (however wrongly) as fascists, eugenicists and social Darwinists and the dominant model in economics – the rational utility maximiser – was so obviously tied to right-wing ideology about selfish, un-reformable humans who just had to be 'managed'.

I must mention two interesting exceptions – the first is Norman Geras' little book on *Marx and Human Nature* (1983). Norman was a comrade in Manchester in the early 1970s and I read and re-read his book, which argued that Marx had not, despite later readings, completely rejected the idea of human nature but rather had a more sophisticated understanding of human nature plus socialisation. Whilst I agreed with Norman Geras at the time, I then had nowhere to take his ideas. They did however keep simmering away in the background of my thinking, and probably in no small part contributed to the synthesis presented here (although I expect my former comrade will not agree with much of it).

The second exception, and much more recently, is Peter Singer's *A Darwinian Left* (1999). In this Singer argues that the traditional Marxist position has been 'Darwin for nature, Marx for humanity'. In other words there is a fundamental 'break' between humans and the rest of nature. Whilst Darwinian explanations might be fine for evolution in general, and even for explaining how we came about, we as humans have now moved beyond such explanations and require a different set of explanations of how we are as we are. Singer argues that the Left have been frightened by Darwinian explanations, especially as they have been (mis)interpreted by 'Social Darwinism', eugenics and other right-wing forces. On the contrary he suggests, the Left should welcome Darwinian explanations both because they are correct and because they offer ways of fulfilling left-wing aspirations. He concludes that the Left must accept that humans are, by nature, sociable, have concern for kin, are ready to cooperate, accept reciprocal obligations, tend to live in hierarchies, recognise social status and have sex role differentiation. Culture, he accepts, has a role in 'sharpening or softening even those tendencies which are most deeply rooted in our human nature' (Singer 1999 p. 37). Most importantly Singer believes that the Left needs to understand human nature as it is, not because that implies that 'is' means 'ought', but because only by understanding how human nature is shaped by nature and culture can realistic policies be formulated which move towards desired objectives – such as a more peaceful and cooperative society.

Both these examples show that there are those on the Left who accept that Darwinian ideas have a place in understanding humans. This is not to suggest that Darwinian thinking – any more than any other scientific ideas – will not be subject to values conflicts and ideological 'interpretations' from both Left and Right. It is merely to suggest that the old divisions where Darwinian ideas were solely the property of (supposedly) right-wing thinkers and were rejected by the Left as explanations of human behaviour are fast breaking down.

This book is about combining two fundamental ideas – the idea of Darwinian evolution of human beings and the idea of paradox as a real phenomena in human behaviour and institutions – to produce a different understanding of how humans are the way we are. Whether or not it succeeds is clearly a matter for others to decide.