# Contradictions

## From the intrapersonal to the social, and back

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In the original debate which spurred Kierans and Bell's essay ("Anthropology and the study of contradictions" *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic* Theory 6(1) 1–27.), I argued that humans are structurally made of contradictions, living peacefully, sometimes painfully, with their oxymoronic selves. Contradictions are pervasive in our intrapersonal life and they are particularly visible when strong beliefs come into play. I am very pleased to see the reactions triggered by this topic, and I have learned a great deal from them. I am enthusiastic to see that esteemed colleagues share the vision to take social actors' ambivalences seriously. However, from an epistemological point of view, my intention should not be confused with a *poetics* of contradictions. I do not want to dilute the complexity of human experiences in a philosophy of the *contradictoire*. To me, the formula "humans are full of contradictions" does not constitute an existentialist conclusion about the messiness of life, but rather the starting point for an anthropological exploration. This is why I deliberately spoke of a "science of contradictions," with the desire to explore the complex psychological and social processes through which contradictions take place (or not) and to explain how and why such universal processes are being deployed (or not) in specific cultural and social environments.

Three ideas seem crucial to research this domain in the future. Each one of them deserves an entire article, but I'll be very sketchy here. First of all, we could look into the cognitive attraction generated by "contradictory figures" on our mind. In Guinea-Conakry and Lao PDR, where I've conducted extended ethnographical research, most people are convinced of the existence of spiritual entities that transform themselves into a multiplicity of incompatible forms, able to ontologically turn

themselves into animals, plants, or objects, or to even be invisible, all without the slightest concern for contradiction. Our own popular culture features zombies, alive and dead at the same time, and robots with all-too-human emotions. Our minds are, indeed, full of these entities imbued with contradictory qualities that defy the "principle of non-contradiction." While one thinks that it is impossible to be *A* and non-*A*, in fact humans adore entities with incompatible properties. As anthropologists and psychologists of cognition have shown, such contradictions are particularly attractive to the human mind. Pascal Boyer (2002) has demonstrated that they violate core ontological expectations that we have about animals, artifacts, or persons. As a consequence, they hold important cognitive salience and memorability. In the same vein, certain types of human experiences seem to challenge the principle of non-contradiction. To be more precise, they *temporarily* put it in brackets. Since 2016, I have been conducting ethnographic work with people who, during their leisure time, play to transform themselves into imaginary or historic characters. Some spend their weekends living the life of medieval women and men. Others reenact the military adventures of Napoleon, or embody cartoon heroes they admire (cosplayers). Whilst extremely varied, these playful experiences share some characteristics, in particular when it comes to selfhood (*ipséité*, in the sense of Paul Ricoeur [1995]), a self that becomes momentarily "blurred." Many interlocutors describe their transformative experience as essentially contradictory. In the midst of the performance, they are "themselves" but, at the same time, they play to be "someone else." In the consecrated and liminal space of the game, one can be oneself and another, a state of being that ordinary life does not allow, an experience reminiscent of Lévy-Bruhl's law of participation, where contraries are rendered compatible.

Secondly, things get even more complicated when one moves beyond the confines of the self and delves into social interactions. In his humoristic and subversive novel *The dice man* (1971), Luke Rhinehart (his real name is George Cockcroft, a psychotherapist by training) describes the grotesque story of a psychiatrist who, at the dawn of his midlife crisis, decides to live his life by playing it by dice. Little by little, Luke comes to challenge the very idea of a coherent personality as, following the indications given by the dice, he adopts contradictory discourses and behaviors from one day to another, even from one hour to another. Perceived at first as a fool by his family, friends, and colleagues, he slowly becomes a guru for a number of adepts as well as a national threat, since a world in which one were to permanently generate discourses and practices that contradict each other would be a dangerous place. By taking the premise to an absurd extreme, George Cockcroft's book, which is influenced by the theories of Dutch psychiatrist Jan van den Berg (himself influenced by William James) on "multiple selves" (1974),[1] raises many questions about how we live *together* with our contradictions, an aspect that I had underestimated in my initial contribution. Contradictory thoughts, discourses, and emotions are produced and dealt with in the midst of social interactions. How to account for the harmonization of communication given such individual psychological diversity? How to explain the orchestration of life-group with multiple,

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1.  In his book *Il existe d'autres mondes* (2014), French psychoanalyst Pierre Bayart goes even further into the absurd by imagining a world made of parallel universes where humans would exist in several forms at the same time.

sometimes oxymoronic, selves? These issues concern the roots of human sociability, involving mechanisms of habit-memory and conformism. They invite us to explore our learned competence to play multiple, sometimes contradictory, roles in diverse contexts and the processes through which humans compartmentalize different repertoires of knowledge and action and maintain "separate" multiple selves. Needless to say, colossal ethnographical work remains to be done in this area.

In fact, human communication consists of subtle maneuvers between ambivalences: for instance, between what is said and what is expressed through gestures and tones. As an individual, one persistently strives to interpret the contradictory messages of one's interlocutors and decode the inconsistent behaviors that one observes in social life. So much of our existence is spent deciphering the ambivalent statements and actions of others, from the multiple layers of meaning of a love letter, to the tone of voice of our moody boss, or a wink addressed to us in the street (or is it a twitch of the eyes?). Gregory Bateson (1972) and Paul Watzlawick (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1962) have abundantly studied these phenomena in the midst of human interactions. There are social situations where one is stuck in paradoxical injunctions: for instance, when a teacher commands her students to "be spontaneous!" The worst scenarios imply a "double bind" in which infants are wedged in the contradictory emotional demands of their parents (and, according to Bateson, they are more likely to develop schizophrenic tendencies). But there are also many nonpathological settings described by anthropologists, such as rituals, where contradictions are institutionalized, performed, and valued as modes of communication. Take the ancient Jewish "slapping" rituals performed at a girl's first menstruation (see Houseman 2007). In the past, among Eastern European Jews, when a girl told her mother that she'd got her first period, the mother would slap her daughter's face and, at the same time, exclaim "Mazel tov!" Here, the contradictory nature of the messages constitutes the foundation of the ritual and the necessary ingredients for its efficiency.

Thirdly and lastly, the anthropological study of contradictions leads us to a better understanding of human creativity. For the last decade, I've been mostly interested in the ways in which anthropologists approach phenomena of cultural continuity and discontinuity. This is an old question that haunts our discipline. For a long time, like a kind of paradigmatic pendulum, scholars have paid attention either to the persistence of social forms, or to the transformations undergone by them, until they have finally understood that the two movements are intrinsically related. However, addressing this issue through the lens of ambivalences, both in their intrapersonal and interactive dimensions, is promising. While most humans struggle to maintain a sense of psychological unity (contrarily to Luke, "the Dice Man"), contradictions produce destabilizing breaches in the self. From the intrapersonal to the social, whether conscious or unconscious, these fissures dialectically nourish creative inspiration. I believe this can be said of all domains of creativity (see Csíkszentmihályi 1996). Without contradictions, there would be no art, literature, philosophy, or science. Sometimes, contradictions and their recognition lead to personal and collective crises and to the deployment of new ideas and practices. On a larger level, they are worth being considered as they produce breaches in social life and can trigger cultural innovation and change. For all these reasons, the study of contradictions poses a serious epistemological challenge to anthropologists, emphasizing plurality and fragmentation over uniqueness and consistency. In

approaching human experiences, the anthropologist faces the multiple. Contradictions are an expression of such psychological multiplicity. Rimbaud's formula must definitely be used in the plural: "I" is others.

The essay by Ciara Kierans and Kirsten Bell addresses a dimension that I had briefly touched upon in my introduction to the debate. Anthropologists themselves do not elude contradictions, in particular when it comes to the question of advocacy and their taking of moral stances in the field as well as in academia. In the '80s, Marilyn Strathern (1987) had already described the relationship between anthropology and feminism as "awkward." The position of the researcher is often uncomfortable, swinging between her own convictions, the moral opinions of her multiple interlocutors, and the scientific desire to produce an analytical knowledge above the fray. At the very foundation of our discipline lies a dizzying ambivalence between detachment and advocacy, with some of the founders striving to build a science and, at the same time, solve social problems (like Boas, Clews Parsons, and Mead, who were militant scientists). For Kierans and Bell, it is only by "cultivating ambivalence" that such epistemological and moral vertigo can be overcome. By adopting such an approach, they raise important questions about anthropologists' discourse at a historical moment when populism and nationalism are spreading dangerously. A time when, in the face of propaganda and political lies, facts are utterly needed.

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