



Organizações & Sociedade Journal  
2022, 29(100), 195-216

© Author 2022

DOI 10.1590/1984-92302022v29n0008EN

ISSN 1984-9230

www.revistaoes.ufba.br

NPGA, School of Management

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Received: 06/15/2021

Accepted: 07/05/2021

# Rethinking Organizations and Society from Paradoxes

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## Abstract

The theory of organizational paradoxes provides a lens for observing organizations and society, based on the role of tensions and contradictions. Taking the existence of opposing forces as inherent in pluralistic collectives such as complex organizations, paradox theory offers a conceptual angle with unique advantages. In this article, ways of rethinking organizations and society are discussed, based on the generative possibilities of paradoxes. The text addresses the way paradoxes operate at different levels and how they are felt by individuals, teams, organizations, inter-organizational systems and society as a whole. It also discusses how the paradoxical approach can inform the debate in four important areas for rethinking organizations and society: the relationship between business and society, sustainable development goals, the new space and democracy.

**Keywords:** paradoxes; tensions; organizations; society; organizational paradoxes.

## Introduction

We can understand the paradox as an abstract concept, but its presence is concrete. For example, it is possible that some of the readers work in educational and research institutions and that their institution asks them to publish their work in high-quality scientific journals. At the same time, that same institution repeatedly submits requests to fill in questionnaires about accreditations, teaching processes, curriculum updates, reports on research projects. Readers feel caught between the time they need to investigate and the need to remove administrative “sludge” from their agenda (Pfeffer, Witters, Agrawal, & Harter, 2020). Bureaucracy has these things: it

uselessly consumes quality time in the name of improvement. It can acquire a Kafkaesque trait: the rule takes precedence over the substance (Clegg, Cunha, Munro, Rego, & Sousa, 2016). This experience of being pulled in two opposite directions is a symptom of the presence of paradoxes.

The previous example, although simple, reveals the presence and impact of paradoxical presence in organizations, a possibility explored in the organizational studies literature (Berti, Simpson, Cunha, & Clegg, 2021; Cunha, Clegg, Rego & Berti, 2021). But paradoxes don't have to be debilitating, as in the previous case. New literature on paradoxes in organizations suggests that paradoxical contradictions can be a source of competitive advantage. The theory of paradoxes presents them as a source of vitality and organizational renewal. Paradoxes, defined as processes marked by persistent opposition between interdependent forces (Li, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011) are inevitable in organizational life. Therefore, there are three defining elements of a paradox, according to the definition shared by the community (Smith & Lewis, 2011): opposition (that is, the presence of elements that contradict each other), interdependence (these elements imply each other) and persistence. (which refers to the impossibility of resolution). Contradictions such as the one that opposes stability and change have paradoxical traits: the two terms contradict each other, feed each other and can be managed, but not resolved – no organization can choose only stability or only change.

Paradoxes correspond, in short, to organizational processes in which two vital forces have to be balanced over time, without the tension that opposes them being resolved – as in the case of the relationship between stability and change (Farjoun, 2010) or learning by exploration and exploitation (March, 1991); but it can be managed or navigated. The attribute of persistence of tension between two forces that cannot be resolved – because both are relevant – constitutes a fundamental feature of organizational paradoxes (Cunha & Clegg, 2018).

This text summons the conceptual lens of paradoxes to make sense of organizational reality in the light of contradictions, not necessarily as absurd constructions (Cunha & Bednarek, 2020), but as facets of organizational life that can help to understand dysfunctions and vicious circles, but also virtuous achievements and results sustained over long periods (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). This text considers three central issues in the theory: the nature of paradoxes, the way they are expressed at different levels of analysis and their possible contribution to ongoing debates in contemporary societies; that is, it evolves from greater conceptualization to possible applications. Thus, it intends to provide a broad view of the theme and its applications for organizations and society, rather than focusing on a specific dimension of the theory of paradoxes.

## **Organizational paradox theory**

The paradoxical approach of organizations is not new; on the contrary, it has deep historical roots (Low & Purser, 2012) and emerges in classical texts (Simpson & Cunha, 2021). Nor is it a strictly organizational domain: on the contrary, paradoxes have been studied in multiple domains, from physics to philosophy, from history to religion (Bednarek, Cunha, Schad, & Smith, 2021a; 2021b). In organizational theory, pioneering authors such as Cameron and Quinn (1988) had written on the topic. Clegg (2002) has organized a volume devoted to organizational paradoxes. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) presented tensions as an engine of organizational change. But, previously, they had been topics of discussion: the tension between formal and informal organization (Selznick, 1948),

the representational and corporeal dimensions of organizational life (Flores-Pereira, Davel, & Cavedon, 2008), the mutual presence of planning and improvisation (Cunha & Cunha, 2002), the tension between strategy and execution (Sull, 2007), the relationship between control and resistance (Wiedemann, Cunha, & Clegg, 2021) and stability and change (Farjoun, 2010). In other words, organizational tensions were never exactly a well-kept secret.

These and other pioneering works have exposed the dimension and depth of contradictions in organizational life. Not all contradictions are paradoxical, but some, which are, define organizational dynamics, promoting balance (via the “both-and” integrative logic; (Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2016) or imbalance (via of the creation of solutions that aggravate the problems; e.g. Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020). Organizations are taken, in this perspective, as traversed by permanent dialectics (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002). Paradoxes are complex phenomena, about whose presence there are several explanations, namely: (a) paradoxes are inherent to organizational life or (b) paradoxes are socially constructed. To these perspectives, a third is added: paradoxes as a consequence of a performative, formative process of a reality based on the words used to act on this reality (see Table 1). The three explanations are elaborated below. We complete the discussion, following the previous points, with a complementary view still insufficiently explored: the paradox as metatheory.

Table 1

**Three ways to see paradoxes**

	<i>Paradoxes as inherent</i>	<i>Paradoxes as social constructions</i>	<i>A performative vision</i>
<b>Explication</b>	The paradoxes emerge from the system (Benson, 1977)	Paradoxes are articulated by people in the communication process	Paradoxes are discursively constructed about material reality
<b>Origin</b>	In sociomaterial reality	In the interpretative effort, carried out by the people	Socially built on material reality
<b>Persistence</b>	Due to external factors	Sustained in speech and communication	Dependent on the relationship between material and interpretive factors

Source: Author.

**Paradoxes as inherent to organizational life.** In a first perspective, paradoxes can be understood as inherent or intrinsic to organizational life. In this case, paradoxes are an inevitable result of the pluralism of organizations: goals and interests coexist in organizations. This coexistence results in tensions and contradictions. Social systems are crossed by conflicting processes (Benson, 1977). For example, organizations serve a set of stakeholders whose goals are necessarily divergent. To add complexity, organizations often have competing logics of their own. For example: an organization in the cultural sector is faced with antagonistic objectives: artistic and commercial (Cunha, Giustiniano, Rego, & Clegg, 2019); a hospital has obligations of care and efficiency (Cunha et al., 2019), and so on.

From this perspective, paradoxes have a material basis and are manifest, even if they are not interpreted as such; that is, while not being processed as paradoxes, the contradictions manifest themselves in the form, for example, of vicious circles or a status quo in which one polarity dominates the other. In other cases, of companies such as Toyota, contradictions are used to simultaneously cultivate stability and renewal (Takeuchi, Osono, & Shimizu, 2008). From this perspective, paradoxes are emanations of the material complexity of organizations, of their pluralism and diversity.

**Paradoxes as social constructions.** In a different perspective, paradoxes are considered social constructions, a result of communication and reflection of the way we communicate and act on reality. In this case, paradoxes emerge from communication patterns in use, repeated over time, which crystallize in the form of pragmatic paradoxes (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967), or vicious or virtuous circles (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). We create routines and ways of relating that become paradoxical, sometimes taking on a pathological form, as when a boss urges her/his subordinates with orders such as: “be creative!” or “Be proactive!”, or when they say “I punish you for your own good!”. When, for reasons related to power structures, subordinates cannot question the value of an order, they are trapped in this paralyzing paradox (Berti & Simpson, 2021), which helps to explain the acceptance of impossible goals, as in the case of the Dieselgate scandal at Volkswagen (discussed in greater detail later).

**Paradoxes as inherent and constructed (performative logic).** Although it may be possible to emphasize one or another perspective, it is normal to consider that paradoxes are inherent and socially constructed (Hahn & Knight, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011). In this performative vision, paradoxes are not mere abstractions, but start from a real basis, from contradictions occurring at the material level. They are made with words, in the Austinian formulation (Austin, 1962): people construct (or not) the paradoxes with words about material reality. The way words are applied to reality helps to understand the nature of the paradox: some words help make paradoxes levers of renewal (Smith et al., 2016), while other words create absurd situations (Berti & Simpson, 2021). ), as in the case of the boss who gives the order “Be creative!” or impossible situations, as in the case of a car with technologically unfeasible characteristics (Gaim, Clegg, & Cunha, 2021).

In other words, paradoxes are not just social constructions or pure emanations of an objective reality. They operate at both levels, although subject to undue interpretations, which can attribute paradoxical traits to situations that are not compatible with this logic. Attributing paradoxical characteristics to non-paradoxical processes carries risks, such as confusing a dilemma (binary choice) with a genuine paradox. However, the material existence of a contradiction needs to be conceptualized as a paradox. Paradoxes, in short, do not present themselves as such: they are not given, they have to be theoretically formed as such. For this reason, it is possible to understand them as interpretive processes operated on reality. From this perspective, a paradox implies: (a) paradoxical material conditions, and (b) an interpretation of tension as paradoxical, through the use of language conducive to understanding the situation, as involving oppositions between interdependent forces (Keller & Tian, 2021). Words serve to form a reality with paradoxical attributes – or devoid of these attributes.

It is even possible that processes with conditions to be interpreted as paradoxical are not, which leads the organization to lose the possibility of “eating the cake and keeping it” (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011). As Mary Parker Follett defended, if conflict is inevitable, the question that

matters is: how to use it productively (in Rego & Cunha, 2017)? But it is important not to forget that when an organization takes opposing processes as compatible, but not interdependent, and therefore incompatible, it risks being surprised by reality (Gaim et al., 2021). That is, confusing dilemmas (choices between independent opposites) with paradoxes (management of interdependent and persistent opposites) can produce undesirable outcomes.

**Paradoxes as metatheory.** From another perspective, metatheoretical traits were also attributed to paradoxes (Berti et al., 2021). A metatheory is a broad conceptual framework that is based on a set of shared assumptions capable of contributing to the explanation of a wide range of phenomena. A metatheory is not confined to specific contexts or methodological approaches (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). The paradox approach has been presented as endowed with metatheoretical scope (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Starting from the tensions of organizational life, a metatheory of paradoxes articulates different organizational tensions: commitments involving conflicting objectives, generative paradoxes, pragmatic paradoxes, dialectical transformations, among others. For this reason, in this perspective, the paradox is not the phenomenon to be explained (*explanandum*) but rather the source of explanations (*explanans*). The question that matters is not “why does leadership cause contradictions?” or why leadership is a paradoxical process (Rego & Cunha, 2020), but rather, how can paradoxes help to understand effective leadership. If there are no contradictions and paradoxes, we would not need leaders to deal with them.

### *Paradoxes, organizations and society*

Paradoxes operate at different levels. They are felt by individuals, teams, organizations, inter-organizational systems and society as a whole. These themes are developed in this section, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

**Paradoxical expressions at different levels**

	<b>Individuals</b>	<b>Teams</b>	<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Interorganizational processes</b>
Origin	Individual identities have contradictory elements (e.g. ideal vs real).	Teams live in tension between the personal identities of their members and the identity of the team as a whole.	Organizations contain their own contradictions, arising from the plurality of stakeholders and their respective objectives.	Organizations are part of wider ecosystems. The relationships between the constituent elements of these ecosystems are complex and dynamic.
How to express	In intrapsychic conflicts (e.g., the leader who seeks to project an image that does not translate his authentic identity).	Teams live in the tension of alignment between collective and individual identities.	In conflicts over the purpose of the organization (e.g. social mission vs business mission): what is the purpose or purpose of an organization?	In disagreement with objectives and priorities.
Implications	People are faced with their own contradictions, which requires a personal leadership effort.	Overemphasis on individual identities breeds individualism; overemphasis on group identity generates the phenomenon known as groupthink	The need to articulate competing logics influences organizational action and the organization's legitimacy.	Managing consists of navigating a set of dynamic and complex relationships. These changes change over time.
Illustrative work	Ramarajan (2014)	Janis (1982) Raven (1998)	Besharov & Smith (2014)	Schrage & Rasche (2020)

Source: Author.

**Individuals.** Paradoxes manifest on an individual level. They are characterized by tensions between roles, such as mother, professional, parenting daughter (Ramarajan, 2014), between the desired best self and the current self (Jennings, Lanaj, Koopman, & McNamara, 2021; Roberts, Dutton, Spreiter, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005), between functional challenges such as those resulting from being a doctor and being a soldier (De Rond, 2017). These tensions between dimensions of identity can generate paradoxical challenges, for example, when someone decides to dedicate more time to work or family: more time dedicated to work means less time for the family. In some cases, such as family businesses, these domains overlap. In this context, when conflicts between the two domains occur, how to protect the family from the company's intrusions while protecting the company that guarantees the family's livelihood? These tensions can be felt acutely and have no resolution (Cunha et al., 2021), however, they can be managed.

Processes such as creativity and leadership can be worked from a paradoxical perspective. Creativity, an individual phenomenon with collective ramifications, depends on the coexistence of positive and negative effects (Bledow, Rosing, & Frese, 2013). The "creative energy" that fuels an entrepreneur (Kets de Vries, 1985) can be the cause of his failure when misdirected, turning into

passionate obsession. In the case of leadership, the most effective leaders were presented as those who think “integratively”, articulating opposites (Martin & Austen, 1999). Leaders need to integrate self-confidence and humility (Moore, 2021), a dove side and a hawk side (Ortiz, 2020). Even if leaders want to be positive, their action, taking place in circuits of power with diverse interests, necessarily has negative implications (Vince & Mazen, 2014), which confronts them with inevitable tensions between doing something well and its opposite. Leadership, like other organizational processes, can benefit from the presence of paradoxical ways of thinking (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), and it is also important to understand how the paradoxical thinking of leaders can define institutions (Cunha et al., 2018).

The paradox management process is not emotionally neutral: it can generate tension and discomfort (Cunha et al., 2019; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Nor is it controllable: the paradoxical forces in tension are not strictly domesticable (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). In other words, paradoxes are a way of seeing the organization, not a tool of intervention.

**Teams.** In the recent past, teams have gained great relevance for organizations. Many organizations have structured their work around teams (rather than individuals) to achieve agility. Agile organizations are designed around teams with high levels of autonomy, oriented towards a common purpose and coordinated through digital technologies. That is, teams are the constituent unit of these new organizational forms.

Teams are units with contradictory traits. Its paradoxical nature has been pointed out by authors such as Smith and Berg (1997) and Kets de Vries (2011). Teams require a combination of acceptance of collective identity without suppressing personal identity differences. They need to accept the existence of an “I” in the “we” (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). This “we” is built in victories and defeats (Silva et al., 2014). They demand proximity and distance. Teams constitute a microcosm of collaboration with tinges of competition (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991).

Research has deepened the study of this paradoxical trait of teams. Some examples of this search include understanding faultlines, identity sub-boundaries within team boundaries (Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009); the need to combine collective psychological safety with individual accountability (Edmondson & Lei, 2014); the maintenance of a productive space between proximity and distance.

**Organizations.** At the organizational level, paradoxes have been studied as factors in building competitive advantage (Smith et al., 2016). Organizations have been characterized as rich in tensions and trade-offs (Eisenhardt, 2000), and theoretical approaches such as the contrasting values model suggest that the best organizations are able to articulate four contradictory demands: collaborate, compete, create and control (Lavine, 2014). The same message is evident in the notion of ambidexterity (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013), the design of structures with elements of convergence and divergence.

But the contradictions generated by the presence of contradictory objectives can both generate an advantage and can be a source of problems - which result from attempts to square the circle, that is, to try the impossible, as in the case of Volkswagen's search for a more efficient car. faster, cleaner and more efficient. Although this triple objective was not technologically feasible, the company assumed it, resulting in the fraud known as Dieselgate (Gaim et al., 2021).

**Interorganizational collaborations.** Organizational life is full of collaboration processes between organizations, with customers, suppliers, partners or even competitors. In fact, all organizations are part of networks or ecosystems (Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018), with which they develop complex relationships. Organizations compete, collaborate and sometimes practice this hybrid relational form known as coopetition (Ritala, 2012). Collaborative processes between organizations, even oriented towards obtaining mutual gains, imply tensions between partners. Collaboration is a process of discovering synergies and even close relationships are not necessarily good, as these relationships also combine synergy and trade-off.

Research has revealed that close relationships contain difficulties and that even good personal relationships can be a factor in difficulties in managing interorganizational partnerships (Anderson & Jap, 2005). The study of how interorganizational collaborations promote tensions and paradoxes can help to understand the challenges of managing processes that involve different organizations, such as alliances, joint ventures and supply chains (Schrage & Rasche, 2020). Some tensions run through supply chains differently, with different actors managing tensions in different ways. These tensions are relevant insofar as practices accepted in one part of the chain may be contestable in other parts of the chain. Management practices acceptable in one geography (e.g. China or Pakistan) can be criticized and taken as unacceptable in other geographies, including people management practices in companies such as Foxconn (Ngai & Chan, 2012) or the use of child labor in Pakistan by large multinationals (Khan, Munir, & Willmott 2007).

**Society.** Society constitutes another field conducive to the application of a paradoxical lens. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a paradox between protecting public health and protecting the economy, which also has implications for health. Managing the pandemic was an exercise in navigating tensions between these relevant but contradictory goals (Pradies et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). In another context, the ostensible presence of Indian military forces in the Kashmir region to maintain security is seen by the population as a form of humiliation and pressure that generates violence, which recursively leads to increased surveillance (Kazmin, 2019), in an illustration that solving a problem can contribute to its worsening.

Corporate governance can be understood as an exercise in balancing opposing objectives. Different societies find different solutions, more or less effective. The most developed societies are those that balance three sides of a triangle: strong states and institutions, a strong business fabric, and a strong civil society. Each of these elements plays an important role – and reinforces the other two.

States create favorable contexts for human flourishing, ensuring the elaboration and application of fair laws. They protect freedom and fulfil critical functions for society (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). A strong state is a *sine qua non* for a decent society. A vibrant business sector offers solutions to human problems through free markets, where people find conditions to pursue their professional vocations and where they find decent jobs. Finally, a decent civil society allows people to organize themselves to actively face their problems, instead of waiting for others to solve them.

A decent society values the three elements of the triangle and understands that dominating one over the others is a source of problems. When the State prevails, the risk of creating totalitarian societies, dominated by a repressive administrative apparatus, increases. In the name of any utopia,



the greatest abuses are committed (Clegg, Cunha, & Rego, 2012) and utopias become dystopias (Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2015). When corporate power prevails, societies are liable to capture by private interests. These interests can even control the State apparatus, which are subordinated to the interests of private businesses. In the worst cases, the interests of companies and state leaders are confused. Finally, when forces emanating from civil society gain control of society, sometimes in association with criminal groups, the risks of tribalization are real, resulting in so-called failed states.

From this perspective, governing means balancing the three societal pillars. The balances of this trialectic (Ford & Ford, 1994) are dynamic, unstable, tense, but they define good societies. The management of trialectics requires paradoxical skills and the understanding that progress lies in balance, not dominance.

## Applications

In this section we consider how the theory of paradoxes can contribute to advancing the debate in four important areas for rethinking organizations and society: the relationship between business and society, sustainable development goals, the new space and democracy.

**Business and society.** Business organizations are part of society, but their relationship with society is not necessarily peaceful. The interests of organizations are sectional and the recent adoption of the idea that companies aim to create shareholder value has reduced the focus of business organizations. This preference for the interests of shareholders over the interests of other stakeholders has increased the tension between the business world and society. The recent emphasis on organizational purpose (Cunha, Rego, & Castanheira, 2016; Mayer, 2021) seeks to mitigate this tension, but opens up new trade-offs: how to articulate the interests of different stakeholders if the focus on one stakeholder implies less attention to others?

The relationship between organization and society can, therefore, be interpreted from a paradoxical lens: how to find ways to transform tensions into sources of progress and shared value (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016)? How to use tensions to find integrative forms of involvement of different organizational actors? How can we take advantage of the natural tensions between stakeholders to find platforms of understanding – even if crossed by conflicts – on major shared goals?

**Sustainable development goals.** The seventeen sustainable development goals promoted by the United Nations (UN) constitute challenges on which the future of Humanity will depend. These are noble objectives that, however, present numerous trade-offs. Indeed, the attempt to incorporate sustainable practices in organizations confronts them with paradoxical challenges (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2010), namely because an acceptable way of achieving an objective for one stakeholder may not be so for another. Managing sustainable development goals will require integrative, paradoxical thinking.

**New space.** After the space race between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), space constitutes a new environment for human activity, a new frontier (Weinzierl, 2018). Many of our daily activities are already made possible by the use of space technologies. The progressive opening of the space sector to commercial actors (companies such as SpaceX, Blue Horizon or Virgin Galactic, to name a few of the best known), represents a new era in

space exploration. The previous space exploration logic is now joined by a space exploitation component.

The new space, defined as the movement of companies involved in the commercialization of space (e.g. Frischauf et al., 2018) constitutes a critical area for rethinking the future, including the previously discussed sustainable development goals. Improving agricultural production can lift millions of farmers out of poverty. This possibility depends on the use of meteorological information obtained by satellite. The use of space and its potential to help achieve sustainable development goals find numerous illustrations on the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (Unoosa) website (Available at: [unoosa.org](http://unoosa.org)).

The role of the new space in accelerating the resolution of planetary problems is, however, a process rich in tensions and paradoxes. The tensions between exploration and exploitation will be particularly important in a domain where knowledge is still embryonic, namely on the side of companies. On the other hand, managing the tension between risks and opportunities is fundamental, despite the fact that economic variables are changing with the new logic of commerce. On the other hand, the commercial exploitation of space raises important questions in the domain of institutional logics, insofar as they overlap competing logics (Pache & Santos, 2010), in a terrain where public and private, scientific and commercial, civil and military actors, move simultaneously, with different agendas. The way in which these issues are dealt with can be decisive for achieving sustainable development goals.

**Democracy.** The paradoxical lens can help to understand the dynamics of society, namely the democratic process. If we understand democracy as a process, it is fueled by citizens and institutions. In many contexts, democracy has been challenged by politicians on the left and right, more interested in extremes than in accepting vigorous opposition-based dialogue – but dialogue nonetheless – as the infrastructure of democracy. To gain some emotional distance and thus facilitate a more analytical approach, consider the case of Spain and an ongoing process when these lines were being written: the president of the Popular Party, Isabel Ayuso broke a coalition with the Ciudadãos party and called for elections regional. Here is his motto: “Socialism or freedom”. A few days later, Pablo Iglesias, vice president of the government and leader of the Unidos Podemos party, announced that he was resigning from the executive branch to run in Madrid against Ayuso: “It is essential to stand up to the criminal right.” In the Portuguese newspaper *Público*, Jorge Almeida Fernandes (2021) explained that “Pablo Iglesias and Isabel Ayuso play at civil war”. He added that these slogans designed to “warm up voters” have a powerful toxic effect. Its users seem to be experts in heating voters, that is, in the process of polarization. And he concluded that “Spanish politics is becoming manifestly toxic” (p. 31). If the reader exchanges Spain for many other countries, the description still makes sense. Politics in diverse world contexts is indeed polarizing (Klein, 2020). The process is dangerous. In a paradoxical framework of analysis, it is up to opponents to maintain the ability to respect opponents and to keep open the principle of defending common values – such as democracy itself. The demonization of the adversary – turned into an enemy, who must be defeated –, in addition to revealing democratic immaturity, is dangerous because it pushes the game to extremes.

How did we get here? Several explanatory facts can be invoked, but mainly the inability of institutions to deal with new problems, such as globalization, as well as the use of social networks. The role of refereeing public opinion played by the traditional media with a view to correcting the

excesses of the system, gave rise to amplifying processes, dominated by the dynamics of social networks. As another journalist, José Manuel Barata-Feyo (2020) explained, “the media appetite for controversies is well known and . . . sublimated by the tribalism of the 'social networks' that fuel the industrialization of stupidity (p. 11).”

It is said that the media should stir up the waters of stagnant societies and calm the spirits of exalted societies. Social networks may have played an important role in extremizing positions that were previously far removed from the persecution of minorities in Myanmar (Strangio, 2020). A paradoxical vision, based on the value of coexistence between opposites and on the regenerative power of synergies and trade-offs (Li, 2016) could constitute an antidote against dangerous polarizations.

## Implications and research avenues

Paradoxes *are not* a management tool, but a way of reading reality in order to act upon it. They can be productive or debilitating, producing healthy or pathological forms of organization, as discussed in this section.

**Contradictions as dialogic tools.** The contradictions inherent in organizational life can serve to open up possibilities of interpretation, to initiate dialogues. The different angles can serve to add polyphony (Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2006) to organizations that sometimes struggle with dominant interpretations from the top.

**Contradictions as sources of pragmatic paradoxes.** Paradoxes can be a source of organizational pathologies. Perhaps writers such as Kafka or Orwell have best revealed the potential of organizations as producers of pragmatic paradoxes: paradoxes as a form of protection against dysfunctional organizations. Consider an excerpt from the thoughts of Winston Smith, the character in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

His mind entered the labyrinthine world of doublethink. Knowing and not knowing, having a notion of absolute veracity while telling carefully crafted lies, simultaneously defending two opinions that cancel each other out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both; using logic against logic, repudiating morality while claiming morality, believing in the unfeasibility of democracy and that the Party is the guardian of democracy; forgetting whatever it was necessary to forget, then recalling it when necessary, and then forgetting it again promptly: and, above all, applying this same procedure to the procedure itself. Such was the supreme subtlety: consciously inducing unconsciousness, and then, in a second step, becoming unconscious of the act of hypnosis just carried out. The very understanding of the word 'doublethink' implied recourse to doublethink. (Orwell, 2007, pp. 40-41)

The paradoxical lens can be invoked to analyze the labyrinthine, tortuous and dysfunctional side of organizations, the way in which they can lead their members to accept forms of doublethink, rich in contradictions between what is done and what is said. Examples abound, from the creation of bureaucracies to reduce bureaucracy, to the defense of participatory behaviors that feed coercive

leadership (Cunha, Simpson, Clegg, & Rego, 2019). The concepts of paradox theory may therefore be necessary to understand the irrational dimension of organizations (McCabe, 2016).

### *Research avenues*

The foregoing discussion leaves open several avenues of investigation. In this section we consider possible clues for the development of organizational paradox theory based on three lines of investigation centered on power, processes and positivity.

**Power.** Paradoxes have been studied as sources of organizational renewal through the search for new possibilities. Some investigation, however, reveals that paradoxes can be debilitating rather than liberating. The work of Berti and Simpson (2021) discussed how power circuits can confront people with impossible choices, putting them between a rock and a hard place. The way in which power circuits (Clegg, 1989) influence the response to paradoxes is important for promoting the activation of paradoxes as productive tensions rather than debilitating contradictions. Research in the area of strategic change shows that the multiple change initiatives that, at the top, can be seen as parts of a strategic mosaic, at the bottom can be seen as inconsistencies, arousing negative emotions (Kanitz, Huy, Backmann, & Hoegl, 2021). That is, the paradox of some can be the inconsistency of others, and what can be a source of intellectual stimulation for academics can be an uncomfortable challenge at the ground level. It is therefore important to consider how paradoxes affect different people differently, and in particular the influence of cultural contexts on their expression. On the other hand, if the normal tendency of so-called “practitioners” when faced with a problem is to solve it, the idea of keeping it open to revitalize the organization may not be appealing – unless for academics who study contradictions, but who have no to resolve them.

**Process.** The procedural approach conceives of organizations as shaped by time. In this perspective, more than stable entities, organizations are considered as part of broader change processes. Changes in society mark the change in organizations. As a result of these changes, for example technological, new tensions emerge, such as those related to emerging forms of control (Zorina, Bélanger, Kumar, & Clegg, 2021). These new tensions interact with existing ones.

The interaction of tensions with other tensions, in complex paradoxical nexuses, constitutes an important source of new opportunities for the study of organizational paradoxes (Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017). In other words, it is important to understand how paradoxes are intertwined with other paradoxes (Sheep et al., 2017) and how the attempt to manage a paradox can give rise to new tensions.

Although the organizational paradox theory has emphasized the tension between two “poles”, there is no reason not to assume that the tension can articulate three or even more poles, as in the case of the triple bottom line (people, planet, profits) (e.g. Elkington, 1994). The study of paradoxes as processes involving much more complex realities than suggested by “poles” such as stability or change is therefore imperative. In fact, these two poles are processes of extraordinary complexity.

**Positivity.** The new logic of positive organizational studies seeks to stimulate the improvement of organizations based on the existing forces (Cunha, Rego, Simpson, & Clegg, 2020), in order to take advantage of the best in people. The positive logic has been associated with the

emergence of new organizational forms, structured as networks of talent and no longer as hierarchies of subordination. This change implies the discovery of new ways of acting positively. Positivity can be understood as a paradoxical process: we improve with what goes well and what doesn't, with successes and failures. The positive, therefore, does not dispense with the negative.

The previous points suggest possible areas of investigation: the dynamic nature of paradoxes (Smith, 2014), the emergence of virtuous or vicious circles, the way in which power circuits influence the handling of tensions, the effect of different sectors and professions on management of tensions (see Table 3).

Table 3

**Future research on paradoxes**

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**Power**

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How do power circuits influence the response to paradoxes?  
 What is the influence of top leaders, namely the CEO, on the way the organization interprets paradoxical tensions?  
 What is the influence of structural types on the acceptance of paradoxes?  
 How can factors such as psychological safety stimulate paradoxical ways of thinking?  
 How is the same tension interpreted at different positions in the power circuit?

**Application**

Consider the way in which power structures can make paradoxes sources of renewal, but also of organizational stagnation;  
 Consider the role of leaders in managing paradoxes – namely avoiding the construction of contradictory rules.

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**Process**

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How do tensions change over time?  
 When and how does a balance become an imbalance?  
 How are different tensions articulated and mixed over time?

**Application**

Unresolved paradoxes can be a source of vicious circles, so it is important to understand how the repetition of problems can be an indication of circularity;  
 Looking at processes as paradoxical – and taking advantage of that paradox, always looking at the “oppositions” of each choice.

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**Positivity**

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How can the positive generate the negative, and vice versa?  
 How can positive or negative processes change over time?  
 How are virtuous and vicious circles created and broken?

**Application**

Use the positive to consider and manage risks;  
 Use problems as a source of possible solutions.

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Source: Author.

**Conclusion**

Organizational paradox theory has revealed how persistent contradictions, more than momentary failures in organizational rationality, can be an expression of the very complexity of organizations. It is therefore important that contemporary organizations and societies decode the tensions that characterize them – not to resolve them because the paradoxes are, as we have seen, unresolvable – but to use their positive potential in order to build organizations richer in polyphonic diversity and creative routines (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2021). It is therefore important to take paradoxes as dynamic organizational puzzles. Dealing with paradoxes is like putting together a puzzle whose pieces keep changing. The challenge of putting the pieces together is impossible, but it has to be done anyway.

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## Funding

The author is grateful for the financial support of the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2019, UIDB/00124/2020 and Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016), POR Lisboa and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016).

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks the Editor and anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions. This work was supported for Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2019,

UIDB/00124/2020 and Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016), por Lisboa and por Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016).

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