

A solution to a Victorian anthropology paradox

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper considers a paradox which the historian of anthropology George Stocking draws attention to: from the point of view of parts of the Victorian middle class, Victorian society was highly evolved yet also contained savage components. I clarify the paradox and propose a solution.

Draft version: Version 2 (21st September 2022, title change).

I dug up the graves where great men lay

Asked, "Which of them forgot to slay

A dragon that's back from yesterday?"

In his book *Victorian Anthropology*, George W. Stocking Junior reports a paradox faced by some people from earlier in history. In Victorian society, some groups flouted Victorian middle class moral codes:

The survival of such "savagery" in a world of unprecedented progress was one of the more disturbing of the cultural paradoxes experienced by thoughtful members of the Victorian middle classes. (1987: 214)

Given the theory of evolutionism – that societies went through stages of evolution, with Victorian society being at an advanced stage – we can clarify the paradox as starting from these propositions:

- (a) Victorian society as a whole is to be classified as in an advanced stage of evolution in the sequence from savage to civilized.
- (b) But there are groups within this society who behave in ways that reveal them

to be in a savage state still.

(c) They do not have to behave in this way.

This combination gives rise to the question of why groups who behave like this exist and also the question how one can even say that Victorian society is in an advanced stage of evolution, if such groups exist. I suppose that there are actually two paradoxes here rather than one, corresponding to each question. I shall address the former question, which is more fully: “If we have made an advance and it is available to that group, why are they not advancing with us?”

A solution is to start from an analogy with puzzle loss in science. There is such a thing as a community of scientists abandoning some important assumptions of theirs in favour of other assumptions, because that leads them to solve more puzzles. Nevertheless, there may be puzzles which they regarded as solved within the old framework of assumptions which are now reopened with the new set, although the new set is an improvement overall in terms of puzzles solved, or its promise for puzzle solving is. That reopening is called puzzle loss.

Similarly, if one (briefly) imagines oneself as a reflective middle class Victorian, one can propose the following: “There is some puzzle that the savage groups solve which we do not solve. Thus members of those groups do not embrace our moral codes and correspondingly change their behaviour because they think, ‘What about that puzzle?’ The fact that we have made progress in several areas where they are stumped does not move them, rather the current failure to solve that one puzzle.”

Reference

Stocking Jr., G.W. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.