

Mary Douglas: A Taste for Hierarchy

By François Buton and Eric Soriano

Though poorly known in France, the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas is nonetheless essential for understanding the elementary forms of social organization and daily life. By shedding light on her academic career and personal life, this portrait rehabilitates the thought of a major intellectual.

Unquestionably, the work of Mary Douglas (1921-2007) does not enjoy the recognition it deserves from French readers. Best known for two books published twenty years apart – *Purity and Danger*, 1966 (first translated into French in 1971) and *How Institutions Think*, 1986 (first translated in 1999)¹ – the British anthropologist is the author of a far more extensive oeuvre: her collected works consist of twelve volumes that were published by Routledge between 1963 and 1992, to which must be added around ten other books published by other editors through 2007. Douglas considered *Purity and Danger*, her first book, to be inseparable from her second, *Natural Symbols* (1970), which was never translated into French, and she maintained that *How Institutions Think*, which consists of lectures delivered in 1986 in the United States, where she lived for a decade, could serve as a retrospective introduction to these two earlier books. In other words, to present Douglas' work, as this essay will attempt to do, is to encourage readers to complement their reading of (occasionally confidential) translations of her books and the work of scholars who, like Marcel Calvez and Denis Duclos, have made use of Douglas' oeuvre, by experiencing it in its original language.

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge, 1966 (trans. *De la souillure*, Maspero, 1971, 2^e ed. 1981, 3^e éd. 1992); *How Institutions Think*, Routledge & K. Paul, 1970 (trans. *Comment pensent les institutions*, La découverte, 1999, 2^e éd. 2004).

In what follows, we seek not to explain her oeuvre in its totality, but, at the risk of being reductive or even partial, to suggest its profound coherence, by relying on the writings of the anthropologist herself and of her most astute commentators, of whom the most important is Richard Fardon.² Mary Douglas' intellectual trajectory is indeed an enigma. The salience of her work stands in contrast to the academic positions she held, which were not so much peripheral as out of sync with her other accomplishments. On the one hand, she worked, over the course of her career, on a variety of topics (African society, consumption, risk, the Bible, and so on), which earned her considerable disciplinary notoriety, notably in the sociology of culture in the United States, at the same time that she was being acknowledged as one of the major British anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century, the author of a classic text (*Purity and Danger*) read by every British anthropology student, and a scholar who was honored by some fifteen universities across the globe and ennobled by the queen of England. On the other hand, after completing her thesis at Oxford's prestigious Institute of Social Anthropology (ISA), her career consisted, by her own admission, of a series of second-rate if not necessarily bad jobs at non-central institutions. She held a position at University College London (UCL) from 1951 to 1977 when, after failing to secure positions at the London School of Economics (LSE) and Chicago, she went to the United States, first to the Russell Sage Foundation in New York at the invitation of the political scientist Aaron Wildavski, then to the department of religious sociology at Northwestern University, and finally to Princeton. After her retirement in 1988, she returned to England, where she wrote several books.³

We shall argue that the force of Douglas' work lies in the project, pursued throughout her career, to model the effects of a few basic forms of social organization on the way people classify, perceive, know, and act. For simplicity's sake, we will identify two major moments of Douglas' intellectual trajectory. Until the mid-sixties, she was primarily an "Oxonian" African anthropologist, who was already interested in institutions. By the time *Purity and Danger* appeared, she had explored first ideas, then domains that were more oriented towards the western world, using comparative sociology to formulate an analysis of social behavior that is called "cultural," but which is in fact sociological through and through.⁴

² Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*, Routledge, 1999. We would like to warmly thank Fardon for the documents and references that he kindly made available to us as we prepared this article.

³ These biographical details are drawn from Fardon and a [filmed interview](#) of Douglas with the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, February 26, 2006.

⁴ Due to lack of space, we will not address her later work on the sociology of religious texts.

An African anthropologist

The work Douglas began in the 1950s is less read in France, presumably because of its more strictly disciplinary orientation, that of a social anthropologist. Yet one finds in it many of the strands she would tease out over the course of her career, and it is summed up by her fondness for social forms and institutions. Mary Tew was born in 1921. The daughter of a colonial administrator serving in the Indian Civil Service in Burma, she and her younger sister were sent to England in 1926. Raised by their maternal grandparents, as was the custom of colonial bureaucrats, the two sisters were, after their mother's death in 1933, educated at the prestigious Convent of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic school in London's southwestern suburbs. Douglas' childhood was steeped in a conservative atmosphere marked by social Catholicism, which was undergoing a resurgence. Despite her desire to study sociology, she finally opted for a more general course of study (politics, philosophy, and economics) at Oxford and spent a few months at the Sorbonne. It was during the war, notably while working at the Colonial War Office, that Mary Tew developed an interest in anthropology.

At the center of British anthropology?

When she began to study anthropology at Oxford University, the field was gradually shifting away from James Frazer's (1854-1941) evolutionism and his postulate of western superiority. The London School of Economics (LSE) had established itself as a major center of British anthropology, due notably to the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). Since the 1920s, he had contributed to formalizing the functionalist doctrine and particularly its method, which is founded on hypothesizing the unity of social facts: phenomena as varied as parenthood, magic, taboos, and religion can be connected by assigning each a particular social function.

By gravitating towards the Institute of Social Anthropology after the Second World War, Douglas joined a milieu that, while making evolutionism its primary target, gradually distanced itself from the dominant current of functionalism. The reservations expressed by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and especially by Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) had a decisive influence on the course of her early work. Several years earlier, Evans-Pritchard had proposed a political analysis of

a system lacking any central government and laid bare, in this way, a structure that seemed to be anarchical. Douglas thus participated in a fertile intellectual movement, one that was more inclined than evolutionism to analyzing the social context of behavior, yet which was just as inclined to emphasize the coherence of stateless societies.

In 1949, she thus set off to the Belgian Congo to study a matrilineal society of the Kasai River region: the Lele. She freely admitted that in the late 1940s, she was more tempted by Europe's Mediterranean shores than Africa. She ultimately chose the latter because funding was available and the region, due to its climate and stability, was seen as easier going. In fact, the forms of organization distinctive to the Lele placed her at the center of anthropology's concerns, and she hoped to expand upon the theories inherited from Durkheim (1858-1917), the tutelary figure of postwar Oxonian anthropology.

The Leles' world is marked by a strong division of tasks: between men and women and between hunting in the forest and food-crop production. Yet its polyandric matrimonial rules allow some village women to have multiple husbands. Despite what Douglas had learned from her readings and Evans-Pritchard's seminars, the egalitarianism, autonomy, and apparent anarchism of this world astonished her. She discovered a social world that was completely different from the one she knew, a society with little hierarchy, but which functioned. She defended her thesis in 1953, though she did not publish *The Lele of Kasai* until the early 1960s. The work is something of a classic, in the way it deals with the production and distribution of wealth among clans, the detailed description of matrilineal organization and the role of aristocratic clans in the power structure, and the place of marriage in the alliance strategies between clans and the practice and supervision of witchcraft. Already, her approach had broken with functionalist habits. It also distinguished itself from the idealism of French ethnology, centered on mythology and symbolic systems. If Douglas' intense empirical work allowed her to offer an account of Lele thought, it was because she saw the discrepancy between the ideal and the real, the breach between what institutions say and the concrete practices of individuals, and the discrepancy between implicit and explicit rules.

Understanding institutions beyond functionalism

The influence of Durkheim, which Radcliffe-Brown had launched before his arrival at Oxford, shaped British functionalism's model of social causality. Yet it also harbored the potential for a deeper critique. Whereas in Malinowski's anthropology, institutions are central to a system of functional utility, Durkheim suggests that they contribute to a process of adaptation and continuity. Douglas was particularly drawn to debates over their classificatory functions. Her thinking at this time followed that of Evans-Pritchard, whose public break with functionalism occurred in the early 1960s: he formalized a conception of anthropology that equated societies with "moral systems" and emphasized interpretive work, as his focus gradually shifted from function to meaning. Moreover, if Douglas played a role in introducing the United Kingdom to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) in the early 1960s, to the point that she is occasionally associated with "British structuralism,"⁵ it was primarily because, as an "inconstant disciple" of Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss sought to access the "primitive logic" of classification and thinking in "the savage state." Contrary to the structuralist project, Douglas did not seek to reconstruct a universal and timeless world. She tried to show how groups attempt to marginalize those who do not respect certain norms or who do not fit into commonly recognized classifications. This made it all the easier for her to emphasize the dynamics of change resulting from exclusion and reintegration.

The importance that Douglas attaches to the cult of the pangolin is indicative of her interest in exceptions that appear to disobey the social order and the institutions charged with expressing its principles. Indeed, this little creature seems to contradict most animal categorizations. The pangolin is a scaled anteater that climbs on trees. The female lays eggs, nurses her young, and gives birth to only a single offspring at a time. Douglas was interested in the taboos that are applied to this animal, and her analysis made it possible to find method in the madness. She observed how, for the Lele, relations between spirits and nature and between the forest and human beings are forged through the mediation of wild animals, notably in the ways that honoring them was tied to female fertility and successful male hunting. The influence of Franz Steiner (1909-1952), whose teaching Douglas followed, led her to examine the contradiction between negative and positive connotations associated with prohibitions and sacrificial rites reserved exclusively for initiates. An entire economy of relationships

⁵ Adam Kuper, *L'anthropologie britannique au XXe siècle*, Editions Karthala, 2000, p. 197.

between social groups, clans and territories, the young and the old, and men and women could in this way be glimpsed.

Purity and Danger, published in 1966, marks an important turning point, in which Douglas mined her African material in order to turn away from it, to elaborate a comparative analysis of "primitive" and modern societies, drawing in particular on numerous examples from daily life in the western world. Four years later, with *Natural Symbols* (1970), she began a systematic examination of the effects of the elementary forms of social organization on behavior and modes of thought.

The guiding thread of an *oeuvre*: towards comparativism and the sociology of knowledge

The last two decades of Douglas' career are marked by an incongruity between her research and the universities where she conducted it. In a filmed interview from 2006, she declared, with an air of amusement, that she was "off the map": over the course of her career, and notably during her years at UCL, she served on only one or two thesis committees and never had doctoral students. She also claimed to have felt "intellectually deprived" in UCL's anthropology department, which had few resources and exhibited little dynamism, and where, in the 1960s and 70s, no one was interested in her work. A few weeks before she accepted his invitation to come to New York, Aaron Wildavsky was suddenly forced out of the presidency of the Russel Sage Foundation, which complicated her stay (1977-1981). At Northwestern University (1981-1985), near Chicago, she taught in the department of religious studies while she was still working on the problem of risk. It was only during her final years as a visiting professor in Columbia (1985-1988) that her scholarship, which at the time dealt with the Bible, was on a par with her institutional position and that she finally seemed to blossom in the academic world.

From Africa to western society: daily life, anthropological vision, and sociological comparison

In his book, Richard Fardon cites an extract from the article in which Douglas explains that she is convinced that researchers can better solve theoretical enigmas

when they tie them to their own "inner life"; through "some vivid experience," they recognize a simplified or summarized version of the problem that helps them to model it.⁶ Attention to her own experience, which was decisive for Douglas – what might be called everyday life – contributed to the increasingly general character of her writing and was, in part, the result of her unsatisfying institutional situation. After "choosing" a position at UCL to follow her husband, who had been named to the Conservative Party's research department (which he would later run) in London, after teaching and publishing on the Lele, and after raising three children, Douglas participated actively in British intellectual debates of the 1960s, a period in which the Tories assumed responsibility for Labor's legacy as they managed the welfare state and defended positions less economically liberal than those they had embraced in the past. She set out to make anthropology better known through short articles appearing in intellectual journals,⁷ such as, in 1963, *New Society*, a new publication that was quite close to the Conservatives and which sought to popularize the social sciences. To help her readers understand these ideas, she tended to compare "primitive" societies systematically with British society. These articles gave her the opportunity to present and fine-tune her current research, on such issues as the "contempt for ritual" and food classifications.⁸ This activity introduced her to an intellectual landscape than was more expansive than specialized academic communities, which paved the way for the editorial reception and success of *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*.

Douglas defended, moreover, a rather classical vision of anthropology as a human science rooted in universalistic values for which everything in the minute details of daily life could serve as a primary source, as long as they were taken seriously. As we have seen, her fieldwork with the Lele marked the young woman deeply, but the post-independence situation in Congo and then Zaire, under Mobutu, prevented her from returning. Thus she had no choice but to go back to her field notes, on the pangolin, for instance, and to compare it with other observations of other kinds. Encouraged by the success of anthropological theorizing, notably among the structuralists, she incorporated these insights into reflections that were even broader in scope. An echo of the Lele's egalitarianism could be found, for example, in London's "swinging sixties," which surprised Douglas in the repeated challenges it posed to hierarchical forms of social organization. Two books were born from these late-sixties reflections. The argument of *Purity and Danger* (1966) is well known: it offers an

⁶ Fardon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*, 78.

⁷ The extract Fardon cites is drawn from "Nommo and the Fox," which appeared in the BBC's journal, *The Listener*, September 12, 1968.

⁸ For example, "The Contempt of Ritual," *New Society*, March 31, 1966.

analysis of the ways of classifying dangers in primitive and modern societies, with particular reference to symbolic pollution and the rituals that make it possible to grasp and manage society's margins, by analogy with the physical world (particularly the body) and society. The second book, *Natural Symbols* (1970), was partially born of the critique leveled by Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) of Douglas' tendency, in *Purity and Danger*, to universalize the need for order, even though certain actors can, in certain situations, appreciate disorder or adapt to certain kinds of disorder. Widely discussed and criticized upon its release, *Natural Symbols* does not contend that symbols are natural, and thus legitimate, but, in a constructivist vein, maintains to the contrary that they are the product of social processes of naturalization. Douglas worried about the denigration of the most ordinary rituals of social and religious life in western society in the 1960s, as much in dissident political movements on the left as in the modernization of the Catholic Church after Vatican II. She borrowed Bernstein's distinction between restricted and elaborated codes, understood as socially determined modes of communication,⁹ to emphasize the possible damages that could result from abandoning rituals, which she associated with restricted and thus more available codes. That said, she also insisted on the universal character of the determination of beliefs and practices by the "social environment," i.e., of the other social actors with which each individual interacts: the critique of rituals, hierarchies, and institutions in the name of individual autonomy is often blind to its own conditions of possibility and to the limits of individualistic perspectives.

It is obvious, finally, that the comparison of the results of sociological investigations with ordinary British life is rooted in Durkheim's thought, which held comparativism to be the essence of the sociological method. Beginning with *Natural Symbols*, Douglas based her comparisons on full-fledged studies of consumer practices in the 1970s, risk perception in the 1980s, and religious texts in the 1990s, to put things schematically. This work on British and American society, undertaken in collaboration with economists and political scientists, resulted in numerous publications that established her reputation in communication studies and political science, as well as sociology. Across the Atlantic, Douglas is thus considered one of the primary figures of Durkheimian cultural sociology, which examines classifications, rituals, and symbolic boundaries.

⁹ Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, Routledge and K. Paul, 1971, partially republished and revised in Bernstein, *Langage et classes sociales, codes socio-linguistiques et contrôle social*, Minuit, 1975.

A model of cultural sociology

In *Natural Symbols*, the British anthropologist proposed a first model of the effects, on forms of classification, of social organization, which she conceived as consisting of two dimensions: a group's relative openness or closedness, and the degree to which a group's relationships are more or less regulated. It is these dimensions that, henceforth dubbed "group" (the openness dimension) and "grid" (the rules dimension), would be constantly reworked in her subsequent research as or "grid-group theory" or "cultural theory" (terms that are problematic for French scholars). Far from defending a culturalist perspective, in which social actors are shaped by their "native culture," Douglas' cultural theory seeks to connect manifestations of culture as a means of knowing the social world (ideas, symbols, and so on) to several elementary forms of social organization.

Though Douglas' model has gone through many changes and contradictions, it remains the key feature of her work, and one that is fundamentally sociological, in that it is directly opposed to methodological individualism and the atomistic theory of rational choice that informs many analyses of consumption and risk. Rather than a new theory, the grid-group model is in fact a way of extending and integrating already existing analytical elements, notably the Durkheimian evolutionary framework of the shift from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, while deliberately remaining schematic, at the risk of neglecting history. Douglas insisted on the necessarily parcimonious character of a two-dimensional model with four quadrants, which shows how elementary and antagonistic forms of organization and interaction favor, in ideal-typical ways, biases in modes of perceiving, classifying, and acting, which are also now seen as endowed with rationality – as plural rationalities. The first dimension ("group") distinguishes more or less open groups, milieus, or societies from the rest of the social world, and measures the impact of institutions on social behavior; the second dimension ("grid") distinguishes more or less egalitarian ways of regulating social relations within groups, milieus, or societies and measures the impact of circumstances and interactions on social behavior. Ultimately, the model can be interpreted as a synthesis that accounts both for structures and interactions.

The primary contrast is between forms that are more closed (strong group) and hierarchical (strong grid) and forms that are more open (weak group) and egalitarian (weak grid); or, in ideal-typical terms, state or clerical bureaucracies on the one hand, the market on the other. According to Douglas, these two forms are the basis of two

cultures, one hierarchical, the other egalitarian, that are at play in most battles for defining the best government for a society: it is these forms that she observed in the 1980s, when, with Thatcher and Reagan, neoliberalism was on the rise and the welfare state was being reconsidered. A third form, which Douglas calls an “enclave” and which she observed in protest movements, particularly ecological ones, in the 1960s and 70s, differentiated itself from the other two: they are somewhat closed (strong group), like bureaucracies, but also egalitarian (weak grid), like markets.. Enclaves are typically characteristic of professional monopolies, though Douglas tended, rather, to associate them exclusively with political protest: very often, those she called sectarians were not fighting to obtain actual political power. The fourth quadrant, which stands opposed to the latter, is conceived by default, and consists of those that she calls “isolates” or “fatalists”: this form is, like markets, relatively open (weak group), but, like bureaucracies, subject to restrictive rules (strong grid). The work of Douglas and her collaborators consisted in examining the effects of these forms of organization on, for instance, risk perception, conceptions of the environment, and connections to official knowledges.

This model has been criticized for its determinism and its ahistorical character. If the first point is largely rhetorical, as Douglas’ thinking has never been based on necessary causality, the second is undeniably relevant, as she herself acknowledged that she was unable to situate and connect things chronologically,¹⁰ perhaps by virtue of the anthropologist’s disciplinary habitus, which, as is commonly recognized, is inclined towards presentism. Even so, some authors who have drawn on the cultural theory have infused it with a clearly diachronic perspective.¹¹

Making hierarchy meaningful

Douglas expressed her interest and desire for order, but it is hierarchy that, more broadly, truly mattered to her. In the fascinating interview from 2006, which cannot be too highly recommended, she explains how her childhood years with her grandparents, followed by the adolescence she spent at the Convent of the Sacred-Heart, endowed her with a self confidence that had rarely been tested by situations of conflict: the hierarchical principle that governed both her grandparents' home and the

¹⁰ See “The Interest in Order: An Interview with Mary Douglas,” P-ROK vol. 1 n° 3.

¹¹ Christopher Hood, *The Art of the State: Culture, Rhetoric, and Public Management*, Oxford UP, 2000.

Catholic boarding school offered her stability, security, and a sense of belonging and community. Douglas described her relationship to hierarchy on several occasions, and the title of the present essay evokes that of a striking lecture she gave in 2001, entitled “A Feeling of Hierarchy,” on the occasion of her reception of the Marianist Award, given each year by the University of Dayton (Ohio) to a prominent Catholic intellectual.¹² By her own admission, her theoretical project sought to give meaning to the concept of hierarchy and to the values, which she regarded as virtues, that individuals encounter in the course of socialization. Of the convent, she remarked:

Some of us benefited from all this rule-driven organization by leaving school as young rebels, resistant to the claims of hierarchy, free to think our own thoughts. Others simply accepted the system and some, like myself, were endowed thereby with a life-time project - to make sense of it.¹³

Far from being tantamount to a rigid, soulless bureaucracy, the hierarchy of family and educational institutions is defined positively as an inclusive system, which regulates tensions that are internal to groups through balance and symmetry. The order inherent in hierarchy is an encompassing principle that simultaneously presupposes the modeling of positions, respect for the lowest-placed individuals, and the ritualistic rather than real character of certain dominant positions. After a Catholic education that emphasized social justice, Douglas confronted, over the course of her life, other forms of organization and values, which surprised her and, at times, dismayed her. This obviously includes the foundational encounter with the Lele’s fanatical egalitarianism – their rejection of hierarchy and authority, and the sophisticated ways they avoided any monopolization of power. But she was also referring to the almost atheistic liberalism found at UCL, the individualistic values of the Russell Sage Foundation, which made possible the overnight dismissal of Aaron Wildavski (himself an individualist), and the sectarian logic of the ecologist movement or terrorist organizations. In contrast to individualism, which defends a philosophy of equality but results in an inegalitarian practice founded on power and wealth, hierarchy, as Douglas conceives it, establishes a coherent and coordinated model of positions and roles that protect individuals from brutal forms of competition and prevents power from being concentrated, at the price of frustrations that may be rationally justified. To the French reader who is surprised that, as this essay reaches

¹² Mary Douglas, 2005. “A feeling for hierarchy”. In *Believing scholars: Ten catholic intellectuals*. Edited by J. L. Heft, Fordham Univ. Press, 2005, p. 94–120.

¹³ *Believing Scholars*, p. 102.

its conclusion, no mention has been made of *How Institutions Think*, which in France is undoubtedly the best known of Douglas' books, we reply that it is precisely in light of Douglas' relationship to the elementary forms of social organization and to the rituals of daily life, along the lines presented in this essay, that this book must be read or reread--perhaps even in its native tongue; for in this work, the British anthropologist, at the end of her career, no longer describes how antagonistic institutions produce plural rationalities, but, to the contrary, how they make possible shared visions of the social world.

Further reading:

- Mary Douglas, *A Very Personal Method: Anthropological Writings Drawn from Life*, Sage, 2013
- Mary Douglas, *Constructive Drinking* (Cambridge UP, 1991)
- Mary Douglas, *Risk and Culture* (with Aaron Wildavski, 1982)
- Mary Douglas, "Four cultures: The Evolution of a Parsimonious Model," *GeoJournal*, 47, 1999, p. 411–415.
- Mary Douglas, "Being Fair to Hierarchists," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, Vol. 151, No. 4 (April 2003), p. 1349-1370.
- Mary Douglas, "The Lele of Kasai" in D. Forde, ed., *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, Oxford University Press, 1-26.

On Mary Douglas:

- Richard Fardon, "Margaret Mary Douglas, 1921–2007," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 166, 2010, p. 135–158.
- Perri 6 and Gerald Mars, eds., *The Institutional Dynamics of Culture: The New Durkheimians* (2 vols). Ashgate, 2008.
- James V. Spickard, "A Guide to Mary Douglas's Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory." *Sociological Analysis* 50.2, 1989, p. 150–170.

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