

# Mary Douglas on Purity and Danger: An Interview

Theory, Culture & Society  
2022, Vol. 39(7-8) 133–158  
© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/02632764221141821

[journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs)



**Mike Featherstone**

Goldsmiths, University of London

**Bryan S. Turner**

Australian Catholic University

## Abstract

This interview with Mary Douglas took place at Lancaster University in the Religious Studies Department. The main focus of the interview was her recently published book, *Purity and Danger*, which had already become a classic of British anthropology. The questions and answers ranged mainly over the differences between the physical body, representations of the body, the body as a classificatory system, and social constructivism. Douglas's early academic years and the influences on her work, such as the role of Roman Catholicism in her childhood and youth, were discussed. The interview concluded with speculation about the connections between anthropology and colonialism, and how she responded to those developments.

## Keywords

anthropology, body, classification, colonialism, Mary Douglas, Edward Evans-Pritchard, social constructivism

## Introduction

Mike Featherstone and Bryan S. Turner interviewed Mary Douglas before an audience in the Department Religious Studies at Lancaster University on 7 November 1987. The interview was arranged by Sarah Coakley and Paul Morris. The department was the ideal setting – it was the first non-theological department of religious studies in the UK. It was officially launched in 1967 and its first chair was the renowned Professor Ninian Smart (1927–2001), who occupied the chair until 1982.

The manuscript from this interview, which runs to over 40 typed pages, was finally completed in 1991. The interview was, unsurprisingly, focused on Douglas's (1966, 1970) account of the body as a resource for cultural categories in *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*. The specific topic of much of the discussion was around her views on

---

**Corresponding author:** Mike Featherstone. Email: [featherstone.mike@gmail.com](mailto:featherstone.mike@gmail.com)

**TCS Online Forum:** <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/>

classification systems and things that are out of place that are classified as dirt. Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner were later to edit *The Body* in 1991 and to launch the journal *Body and Society* in 1995. The interview was therefore situated in the early days of the body as a topic in the sociology curriculum.

At the time of the interview, Douglas (1992, 1999) was yet to publish key texts such as *Risk and Blame* and *Leviticus as Literature*. Her first major publication was based on her field work in 1949 to 1950 in the Belgium Congo (Zaire and subsequently the Democratic Republic of the Congo) with the Lele people, publishing *The Lele of the Kasai* (Douglas, 1963). Her field work and its publication were well received, but she never became a member of the inner circle of anthropologists working on Africa, which was dominated by E. E. Evans-Pritchard at Oxford and Max Glucksman at the University of Manchester. She later published a personal memoir of her supervisor, Evans-Pritchard (Douglas, 1980). It is reasonable to suggest that, while Douglas was already well known, the interview took place at a mid-point in her academic career.

The document was stored in our office desks for over 30 years and has never previously been published. The interview was not made public because, at the time, we concluded that Douglas was not completely comfortable being interviewed by two sociologists who pursued questions, for example, about the materiality of the body, which was not part of her intellectual agenda. The relatively formal setting before an audience may have contributed to some of the difficulties in a conversation between two young sociologists and a famous anthropologist. After the formal interview, we retired to a local public house, which was a more informal setting for a more relaxed conversation, taking into account her recent publication, *Constructive Drinking* (Douglas, 1987).

Why have we decided to publish this interview some three decades later? The first reason is that there are very few interviews with Douglas at that point in her career. Douglas eventually gave many interviews, but these were clustered in the last 20 years of her life, often by fellow anthropologists such as Alan Macfarlane in 2006, John Clay in 2008, and Richard Fardon in 2013. Fardon (1999) has been the most consistent and astute commentator on her work, publishing the acclaimed *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*. In other words, this interview was still relatively early in her distinguished career and is of some historical interest.

The second reason is that Douglas's work was taken to be part of a movement towards 'deconstructivism' in which the natural world was a product of the languages we happen to have to describe it. In the interview, Douglas was reluctant to engage with these epistemological issues that did not have prominence in her work. This hesitancy to engage with this particular issue is perhaps surprising given her association with Evans-Pritchard. It has been claimed that she recognized that he had promoted a 'culturally relativist sociology of knowledge' (Weinberg, 2009: 283). Douglas was first and foremost an anthropologist. However, her work on risk, such as *Risk and Culture* (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982), *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences* (Douglas, 1985), *Risk and Blame* (Douglas, 1992) and *The World of Goods* (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978), was of considerable interest for the development of the sociology of culture. She criticized economic explanations of why we want goods and argued that goods belong inside systems of meaning. This approach allows both anthropology and sociology to reject the narrow economic opposition between necessities and luxuries.

The third reason is that Douglas may represent the last of the great British anthropologists whose work was associated with the final days of the British empire and either the heyday or the sunset of Oxford and Cambridge anthropology. Douglas was born Margaret Mary Tew in San Remo, Italy. Having completed a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the University of Oxford, she was employed in the Colonial Office (1943–6), returning to Oxford in 1947. She had undertaken field work in the Belgium Congo (Zaire and later the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1949 to 1950 and with the Lele people in 1953, publishing *The Lele of the Kasai* (Douglas, 1963). She held many professorships, for example in London and New York. However, full academic recognition of her achievements came late in her career. She was elected to the British Academy in 1989, awarded the CBE in 1992 and the DBE in 2007. We focus briefly on this third reason.

Anthropology has been under attack because of its association with colonialism, in which native informers were critical in translating and explaining the meaning of beliefs and rituals. Anthropologists became influential if not famous for ‘their’ insights into such ‘native’ beliefs and practices. We might date the emerging critique of the discipline with the emergence of subaltern studies, specifically connected with the article by Spivak on ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1992), in which she examined the subordination of voices at the periphery.

The notion of ‘positionality’ in anthropology appears to have first emerged as a critique of research on aboriginal cultures, where the ‘subjects’ were either objects of research without a voice of their own or they were research assistants to anthropologists whose role was to translate and explain. The political problems with research on aboriginal cultures are related to the consequences of colonialism in which anthropologists have often been seen to be working on behalf of colonial governments, with the aim of managing native communities or at least complicit with such colonial policies. Anthropologists who are ‘native’ to the communities they are studying have raised a new but different range of issues under the headings: indigenous anthropology, insider anthropology and native anthropology.

In the interview Douglas acknowledged the criticisms of anthropology as an aid to colonialism but argued that she (and other anthropologists) felt ‘compassion’ for the people she studied. In the context of the current debate about anthropology and colonialism, compassionate behaviour would be thought to be irrelevant. Criticism of Douglas, as perhaps a naïve conduit of colonial management, would be somewhat unfair. For example, she rejected the attempts of earlier anthropologists to explain magical ideas by naïve references to their psychology. She followed Evans-Pritchard in rejecting misleading distinctions between co-called ‘primitives’ and ‘moderns’ and she followed Émile Durkheim in showing that religious belief systems are enduring as reflections of and about social structures.

As became clear in the interview, her many publications with their focus on stability and order in the face of risk and uncertainty reflected her religious upbringing in a conservative Roman Catholic educational system. Her personal commitment to defending marriage as a stable, enduring commitment, her criticisms of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II and her disapproval of student protest movements in the 1960s illustrate her conservative cultural inclinations. Towards the end of her career, she returned to the

Bible in her examination of biblical classification systems in the Book of Numbers in *In the Wilderness* (Douglas, 1993), on dietary rules in the Book of Leviticus in *Leviticus as Literature* (Douglas, 1999), and on the composition of the Pentateuch in *Jacob's Tears* (Douglas, 2004).

In retrospect, the interview, apart from its investigation of Douglas's anthropology of classification, brought out the differences between sociology and anthropology – at least in British universities. Anthropology emerged out of natural history, which had flourished with the expansion of the British empire and became closely connected to the growth of museums that collected 'specimens' from both natural and human populations. Anthropology flourished at both Cambridge and Oxford. The growth of sociology in the post-war period was concentrated in the 'red brick' universities of Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester and subsequently at the new universities, such as Warwick and Lancaster. These differences are present in the interview and, in this respect, it reflects the time and place of the discussion. Lancaster University was, especially in the 1960s, regularly rocked by student protests. It was widely believed that Malcolm Bradbury's controversial *The History Man* was based on the university. The interview reflected some of these cultural differences between sociology and anthropology.

**Bryan S. Turner:** Perhaps I could just start by asking Mary to respond to biographical questions. The first I think would be: What sort of influences led you to become an anthropologist?

**Mary Douglas:** I was at a convent school, which I enjoyed very much, which I was very happy at. It was a very well organized school of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and this was in – I don't know if you have ever read Mary McCarthy's *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood?* – the same order of nuns, the Sacred Heart Nuns, and I recognized her description. I think she makes hers a bit larger than life, but they were very significant people, these women. They were very impressive and strong personalities, and also very scholarly. They despised the educational system and thought that what they were teaching was more important than what the school examiners and inspectors expected, and we believed them. So we were taught not to be frightfully impressed with the educational requirements that gave recognition to the schools. They gave us exams to do, so that we would pass the equivalent of O-levels and A-levels, and so we did, and if we wanted to go to university they would help us to do that but, much more important they felt, were the true values that they were teaching us, and exams that they were very enthusiastic about were two, which really did make an impact and affect my choice, I think. One is an exam on geology, set up by the Diocese. I've forgotten the details of that one, and the other one was on Catholic social teaching, the encyclicals. Between the two of them, what with the church history and the theology course, and the encyclicals about the just wage, and so on, I knew that I wanted to do something at university that would not be history. We were very bad at history actually at the school because the nuns kept giving us the Reformation. Every year we had the Reformation again. I really enjoyed it but I didn't find it all that difficult, and when they said 'What would you like to do at Oxford dear? Surely you'd like to do history?', I said 'I've done it you know, I know history'. I didn't know there was such a thing as anthropology. I didn't know where I could do a course in social

sciences. They knew, and I didn't know that the London School of Economics existed, but they thought that wouldn't be at all good for my soul, I'm sure. So they said 'Oh dear, you'd better go to Oxford', and there I did [politics, philosophy and economics] and stayed in their house, and that was such a very difficult course because actually, although we had had a wonderful education in many ways, we hadn't been at all well trained to handle the hard thinking of PPE, politics, philosophy and economics. So I found myself very over-challenged and have been trying ever since all my life to catch up with PPE and find out how to make a synthesis of it all. And then the war came while I was at Oxford, and I was drafted into the Colonial Office, the Civil Service, and that was where I met anthropologists and decided to go and do that, and found I could go to Oxford again and do the course I really wanted to do as a graduate in anthropology.

**BST:** Which thinkers of this period were influential in the way you began to approach anthropology?

**MD:** Evans-Pritchard was the main thinker. Every year he gave us a course, a seminar called 'Field Methods'. Yet I was always waiting for the field methods to start, but each year it was on Robertson Smith, Darwin or jurisdiction . . .

**MF:** Was it unusual for a woman to go into anthropology at that time?

**MD:** Not at all. No. There's always been a lot of women role models in that subject. I think it was unusual for Margaret Mead to go into anthropology a long time before, but I don't think it was, what with Audrey Richards, Cora Du Bois, Hortense Powdermaker and many women anthropologists. It was quite a common thing to do.

**MF:** What is it about anthropology which made it an accessible avenue for women?

**MD:** Don't you think it was because other avenues were blocked to us I think. There wasn't much of a career anywhere else. Very hard for women to get in. A lot of things have opened up since then.

**BST:** When did the issues around *Purity and Danger* begin to emerge? Did they come from a very early period – in your graduate training, or from the work of Evans-Pritchard?

**MD:** Well I think that *Purity and Danger* comes out of my early school course on theology because the question 'what is magic?' is the issue, and 'what is their kind of science?', what do we mean when we use the word 'magic' and the idea of automatic taboos? In Evans-Pritchard's work on magic he was saying that you should treat other people's magic as part of their whole universe. So that was where the seed started and then there's, as I said in the introduction to the book, that we're a very mixed lot. We had Suniverse the Hindu, the Brahmin. We had Frank Steiner, Jewish. We had Essaw, Egyptian. There were many, many different nationalities. Well, each of us was different. There was only six of us, we were all different nationalities or from different continents.

On a Friday evening, we would go to the Kings Arms and have something to drink. I would have a tomato juice actually, but there'd be sandwiches there and we'd have this conversation in which Suniverse sits near me and other people would say 'when on Friday no meat', you see, one way or another I got very interested in the taboo. I heard a woman behind me saying to her, who was not a member of our department but a member of Oxford, 'I never eat meat on Friday'; she said 'it brings me out in spots'. Which seemed to me a sort of pollution situation. But I didn't get into the problem until I went back to the field a second time. I didn't know what the problem should be the first time.

**BST:** I think this is related to both the question about women and anthropology and your own earlier religious background. I mean, speculatively, would you think that anthropology and religious faith are possibly more compatible than religion and sociology, say? Because, from autobiographical and biographical notes, I think that a distinctive religious faith amongst sociologists tends to get diminished very quickly, but it seems to survive more readily in anthropological circles.

**MD:** Yes, I think it's quite true, but I don't know why it should be so. In the beginning, when I first went into anthropology, it didn't have that reputation that you've just given at all. Quite the opposite. It was thought to be a place which made it impossible for you to subscribe to any faith, because you were aware of the variety of faiths of the world, each of which would undermine any particular faith, so it was assumed. It had a very strong rationalist tradition from Fraser onward. That is something that is a kind of clarification of the fact that the other people's religion doesn't really affect God himself. What they do to Him doesn't make any difference and you have to work out your faith from within your own heritage, wherever it is.

**BST:** Do you see a tension between your own anthropology and your own worldview, or not?

**MD:** I don't know what you would call a 'tension'. I don't feel God needs to be defended as much as many do; I don't feel we need to look after God and protect him in various ways, and I feel the benefit of doing anthropology and having a faith is that, you can really relax and let Him look after Himself and go and do the questions, holding in suspense any particular commitments, but feeling in the end they would be to the greater glory of God, the results. Or at least trusting Him to make it come out alright.

**BST:** Perhaps I could steer the conversation from pollution to the discussion of the 'body'. I think that you've addressed this question in various places in your work, but one of the crucial things I wanted to ask you is whether your approach to the 'body' is a form of structuralism, and I know we can get into lots of difficulty talking about what we mean by structuralism, but I may be able to pinpoint it by comparing an approach to the 'body' in which you are concerned with classification, to someone like Merleau-Ponty or, for the sake of argument, Erving Goffman, who approaches the 'body' in what I would regard as a phenomenological tradition. That is, there is one approach to the 'body' which sees the 'body' as a lived experience or the 'lived body', the 'body' of

senses, and feeling, and touch, and so forth, and there's another type of tradition which I would associate with writers like Foucault. I wanted to ask you where, if at all, you place yourself in that dichotomy? Whether you wouldn't want to accept that dichotomy? But perhaps I could start by simply saying the 'body' for you is a problem about classification.

**MD:** Regarding phenomenology I'm never too sure really what that means. I don't read enough of it. I have been very interested in Merleau-Ponty and the new developments with Foucault, but where do you put Durkheim in that, talking about classification, and Marcel Mauss?

**BST:** Well, I would put Durkheim in the classification 'structuralist approach' to the 'body'.

**MD:** So you're contrasting the structuralism of the Durkheim type with Merleau-Ponty and the others?

**BST:** Yes.

**MD:** I see. I'm afraid I'm really entirely in the structuralist approach in that case, if that's where they come. I've been having a continual talk with various people since I've been in Lancaster, trying to explain to them I'm not at all modern, to say nothing of the postmodern, and hardly understand what they are talking about when they are telling me I don't take the thing seriously enough. I'm sure they're right. I don't. But I do know I don't belong in that tradition, although I admire and enjoy bits of it I feel it's just another conversation altogether.

**BST:** So you're interested in the 'body', as the 'body' provides society with a set of metaphors, a picture of its own social structure and organization, and your debates about pollution and the 'body' are therefore very much located in this tradition of seeing the 'body' as a continuous aspect of classification? I think there are actually two components to this. One is that, if you see the 'body' as a classificatory principle, do you see the 'body' as also an historical phenomenon? Because I find in reading your books that I would believe that you do not, in a way, have a distinctive historical view of the 'body', because for you the classificatory problems of the early Hebrews are the same classificatory problems as the contemporary Irish or whoever.

**MD:** I do have a lot of problems with people who limit themselves to a historical approach, because with a historical approach it just depends where you start, what you're going to find. Perhaps you could cite some historical approaches and perhaps I may have heard of them. In principle my problem with them is that they tend to limit themselves to chronology, so that you haven't got anything you can take away from anything that isn't inside that chronology. Like the art historians, who say, 'Now we come to the Mannerists. Now we come to the Post-Mannerists. Now we turn to Rembrandt or we go back and go forward', and each element that you see has to be given its own classificatory principles,

and you start again. So it becomes very boring. You can't do anything with it. It certainly doesn't help you to understand yourself, since you're outside that chronology, and it doesn't help you to understand the tribes that the anthropologists are especially interested in. So you must have some more thoughts there that you need to help me with.

**BST:** Well, one writer that the *Theory, Culture & Society* journal has been interested in is Norbert Elias who, as you know, has written extensively on the historical development of manners, and I suppose I would want to contrast Norbert Elias's approach to the emotions and the training of the 'body', as it were, with both the work of Foucault on the one hand, Durkheim on the other, and yourself. It seems to me that Elias's work is very important and very useful for understanding long-term changes in the way in which 'bodies' have been managed and handled and presented, for example. A question that I would like to lead you into at some stage is the whole question of sexuality in the 'body', which clearly does play a role in your work, but I've felt, and I would like you to correct me, that in a way you possibly don't take sufficiently seriously the historical development of sexuality, for example, and the way in which this changes in different societies, because I think the way in which you want to talk about classification in a way makes that not an issue.

**MD:** When we read Foucault on the disciplines of the 'body' and how modern society, as he says, is most extraordinary in the intensive discipline it places upon the modern 'body' and the anthropologist's reaction is 'why is modern society so much more [about] disciplining the "body" than any other society?', and this might be an example of what I mean about the arbitrariness of the so-called historical approach. Why do we start thinking that the modern society is more [about] disciplining the 'body' than any society that's never heard of modernism? Like the ladies of the Kasine in Africa, whose bodies are disciplined utterly for every sort of movement and layered with beliefs about what they should do, what will happen to them if they don't sit, behave and even have intercourse in this way? People whose left hand is continuously not able to be used in social life because the left hand is behind you cleaning your body when defecating. That is just an example of classification and control over the 'body' by society. But all their medicine is a social control. So that what is marvelous about Foucault is that he applies it to us, what we've been applying to them, and that's wonderful because he establishes that continuity that the anthropologist is in the business of trying to find. Where before there were people who were quite different, now we realize, thanks to Foucault, that we are also under the same conditions and not free like so many people such as Daniel Bell, for instance, thinks we've got more freedom from all those social controls. We haven't; thanks to Foucault he shows us we haven't. Now the arbitrariness of taking us, and at a certain point that he chooses, and saying 'Oh look, we are under a terrible discipline', it doesn't give rise to a lot of misconceptions about other people and our past and ourselves, but it follows them. There's no means of controlling the surprises he's going to get. He says 'Look how surprising it is. We are under control by our society. Every bit of our body and medication and sex is under social control.'

**MF:** Do you think there's a danger here of the assumption of a sort of 'body natural', in earlier societies?



**MD:** A 'body natural' is definitely the assumption, and hidden therefore. It misconstrues us. This is what we should be seeing about ourselves. Which is that we are like other people, not under an amazing despotism that nobody's ever had before. I think Foucault has been criticized for presenting a very evolutionary model of history, in which there's an implicit sort of theory about rationalization, I think, which I find very endearing, but I think when one says that a history of the 'body' is an important topic for social science, it doesn't have to be in this evolutionary cast.

**BST:** I think the interesting thing possibly about Elias is that he does recognize both significant historical breaks and the possibility of both processes of formalization and possibilities of informalization. Perhaps I could make it specific to the question of women. You see I don't know whether, in your anthropology, you see the issue of women and women's body in sexuality as somehow historically constant, and whether there's a sort of a notion of a non-history of women, so to speak, or whether you would believe there are significant changes but also backward processes. If I could put it that way.

**MD:** I'd really rather you didn't put it that way because of the backward, forward and developmental implications of which I do think are a great drawback to understanding or appreciating Elias, and if you can tell me what there's left of Elias after you've taken out the developmental field I'd be very instructed.

**BST:** I think that he has a theory of emotions. I think he's one of the few people that has actually tackled this issue, and I don't think he has a developmental idea in that particular work.

**MD:** I would like you to tell me more about Elias, then we can get down to women and to sexuality. I mean, as far as I can see, he's saying a lot of very banal things about manners, but that would sound more interesting because he puts them in a false evolutionary mode.

**BST:** Well, he's been often accused of evolutionary schemes but he has written some articles in the *Theory, Culture & Society* journal on the history of the sexes, which I don't think do have a developmental aspect.

**MF:** I think perhaps they actually may have. In his paper 'The Changing Balance of Power Between the Sexes in Ancient Rome' he talks about a civilizing spurt, which happened in the early Roman Republic, in which women actually gained more power. At that time men were allowed to kill women without legal redress. They were property – a man could kill his daughter, or wife. He then argues that the accumulation of spoils from war led gradually to a situation where patrician women gained property and had some power vis-à-vis men. They could eventually take a lover or divorce their husbands. So there was a gradual shift in the balance of power between the sexes which may itself have been an influence on the development of the Christian notion of marriage. He doesn't really take that process further. He argues that there is a spurt forward in the gaining of power potential for women and then it's lost. Maybe today we can see a similar spurt over the last

hundred or so years with a further change in the balance of power between men and women, so that there are definite developmental sequences. But these aren't to be understood as a steady long-term linear evolution. The 'gains' can be lost and there's no sort of teleology pushing the whole thing forward.

**MD:** With the concept of a spurt is, I think, a well-chosen expression for covering this kind of approach, don't you think? I mean how do you explain a spurt? A spurt is a little bit more of us coming into consciousness and rationalization, isn't it? It's a bit again what Bryan was calling a process, and I would once call Hegelian. The spurt is arriving somewhere where we know we ought to be.

**MF:** If you just take something that happens at one point, and then you look at how things have happened over a number of years, and you say that a man cannot kill his wife or kill his daughter at a certain point, and then whereas earlier he could, maybe that's a type of development, or process, or change, which Elias is trying to orientate towards explaining. He tries to explain it in terms of the process of state formation. The formation of the Roman Republic would itself affect the inter-personal balance of power between the sexes.

**MD:** State formation. But a spurt is always forward, isn't it? You don't spurt backwards.

**MF:** Well, I think you can say there can be a deformation process as well. You can, I think, see this with the Roman Republic; the little gain for women in balance of power between the sexes which was attained was then subsequently lost. Certainly in the Middle Ages.

**MD:** But don't you feel there's an absence of any analytical power in periodizing everything, turning things into 'what came first' and then spurting forward? You've got your own position which you know worked where we ought to be, so that there's a spurt towards reaching it, and otherwise it would be called a 'sliding back' or a 'deformation' or 'disintegration', and yet you haven't got any analytical construction about how it happened or why it happened except the state. If your study is of the formation of the state as such, that's an exercise, but I can't believe that the study of the changes in attitudes to the body or to sex go hand-in-hand with the state formation in the way that Elias suggests. Perhaps in Europe. Perhaps in the period he was looking at.

**MF:** Well, I think this is what he would say, and I think he's been misunderstood as a sort of Hegelian grand theorist trying to tell the story of mankind. Against this I think he claimed that he has looked at one case, evidence drawn from certain countries in Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, in *The Civilizing Process*. Then he looked separately at the balance of power between the sexes in ancient Rome – which was part of a longer work which was, unfortunately, lost, and he recently managed to reconstruct the part of ancient Rome – and he isn't really saying more than that. I suppose that if there is a lesson in it, it would be: 'today perhaps the balance of

power between the sexes has changed more than we might think, if we take a long-term perspective. In addition, if we look at the past there were times when there was a different balance, and the past wasn't all the same homogenous male domination'. I wonder how far that notion of focusing on short spurts forwards and backwards might get us away from the long-term evolutionary development, which perhaps you don't feel sympathetic towards.

**MD:** I certainly don't, but I like little bits of history because they are like little bits of tribe snapshots, and you can see the variables here, and see things put together, but in fact the more intensive they are the more satisfying those little bits are.

**MF:** Would you say tribal societies have small historical spurts? Or could you say they don't change, or there's no non-historical societies?

**MD:** Can I hold that? Because I think it's a tremendously essential question. It's a terribly important one and I would like to just see what you think about that, but I don't know, I just don't find any conviction about any of the examples you give. I don't see how to generalize any of them you see, so consequently they seem just deeply sunk in their own historical moment, and that's the difficulty of using them for me, speaking as quite a cryptic anthropologist who picks examples quite lightly out of places you know as much as anybody.

**BST:** I think the problem is that I was trying to get you to respond to 'does anthropology need history?', and we've got stuck on whether we like different authors. I could name some authors whom you might like; you know George Duby's work on medieval France, which strikes me as very interesting historical and sociological material. He traces changes in the patterns of marriage in France, and it seems to me in your work that if you hold that the 'body' is a classificatory system, then there's a sense in which you don't need history in your anthropology.

**MD:** I need history very much and I'd like to say a word about that in general. When I was trained we didn't need history; historians were people who didn't have evidence, who were very biased. Where I was trained historians really were so selective and they didn't understand trace processes. They didn't understand functional relations. This was a functionalist period which I still am in. I remember saying this to my colleagues at University College London, and they reminded me of it 20 years later because the whole thing has been completely transformed. It's the historians now who have got all the information, who go really deep into the matter, and have much better resources than we ever had, and who are so open in every possible way. So that I certainly would hate to go on record now, at this stage, as saying the things I used to think before. Malinowski, who said he didn't need history or that anthropologists were sort of above and beyond history, made so many enemies for us in London, so that anthropology really had a struggle to overcome that bad reputation as vandals. But I think history is the great anthropology at this point in time. My reason for being bothered by ecliptic historians, not ones who go deeply into a period, but ecliptic ones like Elias, is that they seem to present theories

without going deeply into the nature of a place and this historical trend satisfies people too easily, that they've understood something. If you ask somebody whose read something like Lawrence Stone's history of the individual in the 16th century, and what they get out of it for themselves, they haven't got anything out of it for themselves. I'm basically a sociologist at heart you see, and that's the point, and I'm certainly not a belletrist and it is the problem between belletrist and sociology that poses the problem, I think. A lot of history is not at all belletristic. It's beautifully written but it's got a very careful concern, to present a balanced and a whole picture, fully documented, and that's what I think anthropologists try to do.

**BST:** Can I follow on from that by asking you, 'Do you see implicitly or explicitly anthropology having an educational role in changing attitudes towards sexuality?', for example, because clearly Margaret Mead's work has been classically used to demonstrate human variation and variability. Perhaps you might comment on how you see your work in this respect?

**MD:** When you first talked about sexuality, I was nervous, because I wondered what you were going to ask me about my attitudes to sex. Later on you were asking me about women, and we haven't talked about that at all, and women in history and the women as a muted segment of all societies or, as you nicely put it, 'the non-history of women'. You want to talk about that too, don't you? Yes, I would like to talk about that too. Or whether they are really historically constant. How could we think of them as historically constant? I think anything being historically constant would be a misunderstanding. I'd like to take up that expression. Could you say more about what you meant by that expression?

**BST:** The non-history of women?

**MD:** No, that I understood very well. The idea of anything being historically constant. About what I do that makes you bring out that nice expression.

**BST:** When Foucault talks about sexuality, he talks about how this set of practices emerges and is constituted through historical processes and historical change. So for Foucault there isn't a natural phenomenon out there which is sexuality. The whole thing is a discourse that is produced in human interaction and struggle and so forth. So, insofar as one adopts Foucault at all, in a way it makes writing about other societies, other periods, even more difficult because one would have to then start asking questions about 'how do different cultures and historical periods constitute what we want to try to identify as the body or sexuality or whatever?'. This is why the historical problem for me is so paramount. It makes things so problematic.

**MD:** It's a very favorite topic, as you gather, or you wouldn't have thought of asking me, but it's one that takes a long time to expand. Can I try? Because when you say 'are women historically constant?' it's a wonderful question. I mean are women right through history? Or are they sometimes something quite different from what we think of as women, and is the 'body' the 'body' right through history? Different cultures have

different constructions of the body, so are we talking about the same thing at all? And then when I came to purity, is there such a thing as purity? I'd like to take up that issue as an example, because I was recently asked to a series of seminars on purity and I saw that they'd got some historians talking about purity in 16th-century England, and there you are within a culture, everybody knows what the cultural limits are and you're entitled to, with full scholarly permission, to go round and licensed to see what there is about what the people in the 16th century said about purity. Then they had the Bible, the idea of purity in the Bible. Ritual purity. Then they had purity in chemistry, which is an interesting idea. Chemical purity. With those examples immediately you've got your problem. But are we talking about the same thing at all? Is it a thing we can have a seminar on? Though apart from the question of having a seminar on it, is there anything? Are we not just constructing our idea of purity in every scene that we go to? So I thought I would help them, going on like this, and I had the Chairman's nice introduction like we had today, saying 'nobody needs introducing to *Purity and Danger*', and started to spawn off. So I started work. By the time I'd explained what I thought was their problem and what I thought was my solution, they were so horrified and so surprised that I realized that he could have given more introduction actually. I don't think that will happen here. But you see, if you have a concept like purity, the problem arises more acutely than it does for a 'body' because it certainly isn't a physical biological thing, so you haven't got the reinforcement of physiology and natural science to give an anchoring point to when your referring to the 'body', and you haven't got the kind of pains you feel when you stub your toe, and the rest, to guarantee the same kind of thing. That kind of appeal isn't available for purity. So that's a good field to take it to?

I don't see that there's any way of justifying the concept of purity to take it across cultures at all. But there is a way of doing it with impurity, I said to them, and I'm saying it to you too, because if you want a definition what will stand up within your own culture, to the other cultures, they are finding out what they are using for the translation of purity. Like they might call it dirt, or defilement, or some word like sin, and it would be different in each case. That's where the problems rise out of the language and into translation issues. But if you take an action definition. A sociological and power action definition of impurity, you can cut it free from whatever they're calling it there, and you can use your own historical cultural position for taking a lens out and seeing if there is impurity there. The definition of impurity would be that it's a disapproved mixture. That is to say, it's not all mixtures, but it's a disapproved mixture which requires actions of rejection and separation of, or what you like to call purity. So now you've got yourself focused on actions which are comparable and explicable in the same terms as actions of your own kind that we can interpret.

So putting your own interpretation out frankly and not pretending it's their interpretation, we've got our interpretation, you are safely there, and then you want to say: what kinds of impurity are we going to be attending to? Well obviously, we don't want to waste our time on sugary purities, we want to attend to important ones. Well, what we think is important may not be what they think is important, right? So we want to get rid of that content. We want to get a level of abstraction away from the subject as we see it. We want to stand really apart from it. So we want impurities defined in that way which are guaranteed to be important ones because, according to the people, there are bad

physical results which happen from leaving them there, or for letting them be. There again, you're still using our local cultural definition, but you haven't got it in such a way that you can't go out. Now you're right into the whole way in which they've structured their universes, because they have got their universe on this account to try to say that one or two things, perhaps hundreds and millions of things, unleash impurities. And that's my method. And I would like to say that I would love to persuade you that this is the only method to get past these problems.

**MF:** Has your method changed at all over time or is this still your method, the one fully encapsulated in *Purity and Danger*?

**MD:** I didn't realize what a good method it was until I went on thinking about it afterwards. So it goes on seeming to me to be a very reliable and rich method, and where it particularly leads me to is in the philosophical comparison of other people's versions of the world, which is valid, even with our own society, where we are comparing other attitudes to risk and danger. People making different selections of dangers because they are constituting their words differently. Upon different social relations. That's very rich, I assure you. I would like to persuade you to join this enterprise.

**BST:** I think in *Natural Symbols* there's a sentence in which you say something about, what we all have in common is a 'body'. More or less paraphrasing you. But of course there are different bodies. There are men's bodies and women's bodies and old bodies and young bodies and so forth. So there's a sense in which even this appeal to, as it were, a common element then disguises differences again.

**MD:** But it was stronger than that actually. I said we all have a body and we all use body symbols, but we select from the body different characteristics for symbolizing and I would attribute that to our relations with each other. To the social dimension, which gets left out and analyzed so ruthlessly, I think, by idealism and sentimentalism.

**BST:** I feel happy about one point, which is we have clarified the fact that your main concern with the issue of the body is the body as metaphor and classification, and how the body symbolism tells us things about the structure of society and it seems to me that, for very legitimate reasons, you have not pursued an alternative approach, which would be the idea of the 'lived experience body', and I think that these differences become quite interesting if one were to think, for example, about the possible roles of medical anthropology and its contribution to health care in our own society. Because it seems to me that there is a lot of 'therapeutic' advantage to the whole tradition of an experienced body. For example, when one is talking about pain. I would see that tradition making a bigger contribution, say to medical anthropology than the classificatory school or classificatory approach, which seems to me to clarify world views more rather than, say, the phenomenology of pain or whatever.

**MD:** I think you've got me wrong about classification. You think that I think classification is the end of the subject. No, it's only the beginning.

**BST:** I had accused you of being mainly interested in the body as classification and I'd implied that that was, in a way, your total interest in that area and you were, quite rightly, annoyed by that and you were going to explain why it was only the beginning of the story and not the end, so to speak.

**MD:** That's right. This links to your first question, which is 'that I see myself as a structuralist interested in the classificatory principles, or as interested in the lived experience', which I couldn't understand as a contrast you see. I didn't ever start out to be interested either in the body or classification. Africanists in my day used to be a very lively group who talked to each other a lot about the tribal societies that they were studying and, in particular, we were contrasting different kinds of religious beliefs; and if you were working in West Africa, this is really what the whole thing is about; nothing to do with classification you see. If you were working in West Africa, you likely as not were dealing with people like the Tallensi, who had elaborate ancestor cults and lots of our conversation was about how these ancestor cults were constructed and intervened in people's lives. So that we would compare the kind of society that had a 10 generation level of the dead intervening over 10 or 15 levels of living people, and other ones that only had three generations discriminated at the dead, and other ones that just had the collective dead. The clear message came across that people were constructing the number of ranks of dead ancestors according to what they wanted to use those ancestors for in their relations with each other. This is what I'm mainly interested in you see: the construction of the cosmology. Where I worked in Central Africa, they didn't have ancestors. This was almost anonymous, but they didn't have visions either so it was not anonymous because several things go with not having ancestors. They had a few but they didn't remember them. They didn't pay cult to them at all, but they were overwhelmingly interested in the witchcraft of one or another. That's where the whole thing for me starts: why does one society set up its supernatural, or its cosmology of mysterious forces, outside of human society or magical ways of dealing with your neighbors who have got occult means of killing you and your children; this is the absolute overriding obsession. Whereas in other societies all the things that go wrong in your life are due to these ancestors who've got a benevolent and just idea of what behavior should be, and who are always intervening so as to keep you on the straight and narrow.

So that was Evans-Pritchard's first question. This is where I start, with people's curiosity about the causes of misfortune; that's the ongoing interest that I've never lost, ever. I don't know how you've managed to lose it because I don't know how you can do any work in comparative society and sociology without being interested in how people handle their disasters. It seemed that they are simultaneously constructing a society that they can operate in that at the same time is handing them out answers about their disasters, and that the only interesting question to go to from there is, 'what kinds of societies are we constructing?', 'how many kinds of societies can we handle?'. And that's the old 19th century natural history question, 'how many kinds?', you know. But it's the only question you have to face if you are going to start doing any serious comparisons. That's why I say I'm not modern or postmodern. It's all 19th century. And with that question, 'how they classify the world', there's a subordinate element in it, and *Natural Symbols* was about four kinds of societies. That's what it was about. It wasn't about classification,

remember, and the body comes in as one of the things that gets classified along with the rest because the body takes most of the hurts. So the body's very important where the disasters are hitting. Other people's bodies get hit and your own, and your shoe pinches and the rest. So that's why I'm interested in the body. As one of the many but not the only or primary object of construction.

**BST:** So one linkage would be your work on witchcraft and women?

**MD:** Absolutely! I've never left the witchcraft obsession you know. That's what I'm doing now, but I'll go onto that. So when you talked about medical anthropology just then and the lived experience of the body, I sort of felt slightly alienated. What's the 'lived experience' of the body if it isn't a shared experience with other people who are also giving the categories in which that experience is felt? So I have a problem in seeing how you are dealing with the 'lived experience' of the body at all, except in a very vacuous way, unless you are also seriously trying to set up kinds of social dimensions in which the body's experienced. You have to face a lot of difficult pressure and different questions about pressure as a tolerance of different kinds because the body's so pliable. We are apparently getting messages all the time from our bodies about pains. Apparently, our bodies are aching all the time. We are able to completely control it and only think about certain pains which are indicated to us by other people. Actually by being labelled and having a name and being recognized. So that if we say 'how are you feeling?' and you say 'well I'm not too bad', you think 'well I'm feeling lousy' but you can't say anything about it and you can't really think about it, because the culture that you are in hasn't got a word and isn't interested in that particular ailment.

Other cultures don't let you feel ill at all because if you do feel ill, you're going to leave your job and your whole career and everything else. So when Gilbert Lewis, a wonderful medical anthropologist, went out to these people in New Guinea and asked them about illnesses, they mostly said they weren't ill. He could see that they were ill, but this was a highly competitive, individualistic society and no one could be ill. Nothing's going to come of being ill. There's no rewards for the sick role in that society, and the body's under that kind of control. There's another kind of society where you are who you are because of your status. There's plenty of little corners in which you can be ill in, and words for being ill of different kinds, and until the medical anthropologists take that dimension seriously they're just playing as far as I'm concerned.

**BST:** But could we tempt you into the discussion of women and anthropology?

**MD:** I thought you were very right in the question about 'do women have a non-history?', and I think that what one's gained enormously by the work of the feminists, especially in historical work and anthropology, in bringing this muted experience to light. I think Shirley Ardner's work has repercussions, not just for women, but for all sorts of corners of society where people are not able to express it because there isn't any room in that culture for their opinions. The whole concept of exploitation and oppression has been enriched by this focus by the women upon their own situation. On the other hand, they have problems. We have problems. In ordinary problems of validation, which



I take seriously, and of comparison. So that sometimes when women are muted in the larger society they've got a lot of conversation going on in their own corner, and to recognize and to know whether this is important to them or not is very important if we are only getting the information for the larger society from which they are excluded. I think historians studying women have a problem and the anthropology is particularly valuable to them. In reminding them of other places they could be looking for evidence of this conversation which is muted as far as the outside world goes.

The most important result I think of, or contribution from women anthropologists to gender studies, has been in pointing out the kind of structure of the whole society as the big variable for whether women are muted or not. Whether they've got a recognized place and a voice to speak out or not, and that is a work of Michelle Rosalda and Marilyn Strathern and others, and especially Shirley Ardner, on the kind of society is one that's got a big division between the domestic and the public sphere, and if women, as usually happens in those situations, are relegated to the domestic sphere, then they are muted and then they are also not recognized and often very much abused and exploited. So that's the line you've got to look for in the whole of the society. The line is where women are separated off into a sphere of less interest to other people. Then the big political sphere. I haven't tried it out with enough experts yet, but I think it brings a correction to the feminist theorists' idea of patriarchal and pre-patriarchal societies.

The whole concept of pre-patriarchal is a kind of nonsense. Pre-patriarchal doesn't do the things that the women think it would do in the way of liberating women. It's an unspecialized myth about what some kinds of society might be like. The ones that seem to be the most patriarchal, in the sense of being run by men with herds of cattle that are moved around from place to place, generally have no distinction between the public and private sphere. Between the sphere of women, domestic and the sphere of politics and justice and the rest, and in those societies women are extremely free. So it's just where the patriarch is strongest that women very often, paradoxically, have the loudest voice and I think my own idea about that is the mobility question. If you have a system in which everybody can easily get away and are expected to get away. It's not a physical matter, it's a cultural matter. That you are entitled and helped to evade exploitation or any kind of obstruction or interference from anybody. In those societies there's less tyranny anyway and women have a better time. I don't think they have to have a better time. I think they have a hard time everywhere. It isn't linked to patriarchy, I don't think.

**MF:** Maybe we can turn to the question of tribal societies having a history?

**MD:** When you spoke about it before you usefully linked up the idea of people without history with people who have got a continuous present. Who are not changing. And there I do find the two ideas seem to go together a lot. I really think it ought to be deeply challenged by everybody. By ourselves particularly. For example, how if we carry forward a belletristic kind of anthropology we aren't able to bring any criticisms except those that are currently important to ourselves, and this one about modern society being so innovative and being always interested in progress and actually changing, is based on undeniable technological change. I believe in technological change. Whether that means other people have got less sense of their history or not it seems to me to be quite a separate

question. The fact that their technology hasn't changed very much, or hardly at all, doesn't necessarily mean that they've stayed in the same place, or that they've stayed in the same kind of environment. The impression we got, for instance, in Robin Horton's writings when he contrasts traditional African thought with modern science; it is a wonderful essay, and the things he's mainly trying to say, but there's an aside, an assumption that there are societies which are not open, whose thoughts are closed. They're a closed system. Even if he just says 'relatively closed' rather than 'relatively open' like ours. He's got the Popperian distinction between the marketplace of ideas, the questioning and testing of thought, and the traditional closure upon fixed metaphors in society.

But when you look at Africa, which is my area, and Central Africa, which is especially my area, you find that the history of these people, the Central Bantu, is giving us something that just happens to be named now in the atlas. In the little descriptions. As wherever there happens to be an archaeological dig there's a 'oh they must have come from there'. Chad is named in the *Atlas African* as the central home of the Central Bantu, passing through Nock. Nock is a great Nigerian plateau where archaeology has been done. If you look at it, what the book says, you don't know where these people came from. Or what direction they came from. But they must have come from Chad and Nock in Nigeria and then arrived here. If there had been ten instead of three archaeological sites, no doubt their journeys would have been traced through those. If there had been 50 archaeological sites it couldn't have been traced through any of them. It would have been more serious. So to start off where archaeology happens to have been done, which is very sparse in Africa, gives you a very odd idea of how we construct their history. Assuming they haven't got any history.

Well, I talked to an Africanist historian last week, my colleague and friend Bensina, had aired some of these worries to him because he constructed 'our tribe', his and mine when they came into our two areas very recently. About the same time as the Europeans got there. Isn't that odd? Why did we arrive at the same time as they did? It seems very fortuitous. Another fortuitous thing is that they really started at the Christian era so that all our big dates are their big dates. This seems odd to me. And he said 'Well you know one reason why we know that your area, your tribe and my tribe, both got there at the same time is the uniqueness of your tribe. They're so unique'; and I said 'What about the other people, they have got similar customs. What's unique about them?' 'Oh they must have got them from the lady'. He hasn't got any evidence. He's just picking on me as one of these privileged sites. Me! And there hadn't been actually any other researches done of the kind that I did in that area. So that our history of them is terrible. But the idea that they haven't got any history comes from a kind of superiority in ourselves, I think. It comes from this Hegelian idea that the advance of civilization is through increasing self-consciousness and that we are able to formulate consecutive and discursive ideas about ourselves and our society, which they are not. But we know our own history is constructed, and I don't think the literacy of our history makes all that much difference to it but we still select out of the vast amount of evidence to construct bearable myths of ourselves. I think its extraordinary egocentrism on our part.

**MF:** So you would come out strongly against people who say we have more freedom in modern societies?

**MD:** Yes. This is one example where, if you go into an American restaurant of the cheaper kind, there would be very little choice. It would be just four kinds of hamburgers and then they'll ask you, the waitress will waste your time, while you might be eating or talking, by asking you which dressing you want on your salad, and you have this enormous choice of dressing on your salad. Until you've made up your mind about that she can't start with the meal, and I feel that when Daniel Bell says that our civilization is characterized by its fantastic amount of choice, he's thinking of Thousand Island dressings. We don't feel we have all that much choice. What he's particularly interested in is the fact that we have more sexual choice because our society isn't built upon marriage. So our grandparents aren't bothering too much when we're born about who we're going to marry, arranging the marriage inheritances. But as far as jobs are concerned or education is concerned it's very predictable from where we were born what we're going to do.

**MF:** Some people might say that mobility, the degree of geographical mobility, is a form of freedom. We can also actually move around in different locations where there is, like in New York, a massive density of people. Manhattan Island, for instance, has a density of physical building and people which is different from anything you'd find in a tribal society. Would not this make a difference?

**MD:** I feel that is like the Thousand Island dressing because you know, at the same time people are saying we're having more choice in our society compared with the tribes, they're also saying that we are wearing uniform clothes. That we are consuming the same foods. We are going to the same films. We are reading the same books and the same magazines, and getting on the same airplanes.

You reminded me of another thing about our absence of evidence that they, the other tribes, and ourselves are not changing. There's an anthropologist, a very good one, who works in Peru,<sup>1</sup> who found that Peruvian villages were constructed to honor and celebrate the source and equinox of the passages of the sun in exactly the way the ancient Incas did. They had remembered this through all the fantastic upheavals and changes of their history. That would be seen to be a sign, wouldn't it, of unchangingness? Wouldn't it? You'd think so? How long has our calendar been going? When does our calendar start? Where does it start? If a Peruvian anthropologist came here and just took the calendar as a sign he'd say that we were just making minor changes of a technological kind about where we get to but still doing the same things. Because we've still got the seven-day week and the annual calendar combined with that. A solar calendar. It's just an assumption. A prejudice on our part I think.

**BST:** Could I perhaps ask you to explore your criticisms of Daniel Bell a bit further? One thing that always strikes me is that, on the whole, sociologists or social scientists normally are people with very bad messages. They tell us that we're alienated or we suffer from anomie, the world's coming to an end, we've lost community. Daniel Bell was unusual in saying, 'well however terrible contemporary American society might be, it's better than X'. Or he has a particularly important passage in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* where he is precisely talking about the motor car and he explains how, whilst we're all polluted, at least we can get around more and see pictures and he talks

about the impact of the motor car on sexual behavior because young people could drive out into the American wilderness and watch open screens, and engage in sexual activities in their motor car. So, I think my view is that Bell was criticized, in addition to possibly being wrong, because he was optimistic about modern society. I don't know if you have any thoughts on the idea.

**MD:** That's an interesting idea. Yes, I think it might be true. Apart from his optimism, you would feel that would be his main difference from Schumpeter's contradictions of capitalism?

**BST:** I think that there are some theoretical differences. Bell's view of contemporary societies, the three great structures, the political, the economic and the cultural, that he talks about have become disassociated, and I think that would be something rather different. I think Bell (and I want to go back to this belletrist problem) writes essays, not theories, and I thought that from your point of view that might feel that he's not a serious scholar. On several occasions this morning you have talked about belletristic anthropology, and contrasted that with what you call serious scholarship. How do you see serious scholarship in relation to Bell or contemporary anthropology?

**MD:** I don't think of Daniel Bell as a belletrist. People I think of as belletrist are people who call themselves that. Who would say, in fact, that what I'm writing is not meant to be in that field of pseudo-pretensions, of scientific pretensions at all. Well he has got pretensions to be interpreting and analyzing and working within quite a recognized tradition where he can get criticism, and does get it, from people who are also working in the same tradition. Whereas a belletrist is someone who is free from any criticism because what he's writing is his own reflections on the world, and he offers them to you from himself. They are not pretending to be anything but subjective. That's my idea of a belletrist and I wasn't calling it not serious. You used the word 'serious'.

**BST:** Are you an optimist or a pessimist about social change?

**MD:** I don't know. I often feel very pessimistic about getting people to join me on what I think is the right, the most fruitful project in anthropology.

**BST:** Could I ask you to comment on this aspect of consumerism and consumption? I think Bell sees an expansion in the availability of mass goods as a positive aspect of contemporary society providing, in his terms, people with more mobility, more choice, and more fantasy, and I don't know whether you would disagree on those issues. You clearly disagree on the choice of salads issue. That you see this as a trivial meaning of freedom. But would you see the motor car in the same negative way that a lot of critics of mass consumption do?

**MD:** Well, freedom. What kind of sense of freedom? Obviously if you really feel free, is it freedom from, or is it freedom to? Freedom to do something or freedom from control? In the sense of having a large choice of goods available in the shops and having a small

amount of money to spend upon them doesn't necessarily make for any sense of freedom that you really get much benefit from talking about. I don't feel that this is the context of freedom.

**MF:** Some people might say the more goods available and the more affluent the consumer society is implies some collapsing of the social hierarchy, or some form of leveling of distinctions, but would you say that the increased range of goods would just be used in different ways to maintain symbolic hierarchies? That the symbolic hierarchies would still really fit with the social hierarchies? In effect, would we really see any major change in the use of goods from a tribal society to a modern society?

**MD:** Yes. This might be one of the questions I really find very difficult to answer. I can't imagine how you could pose it in a way that it could be answered, because as soon as you put it in material terms then you have to think that people who haven't got enough to eat are very un-free, and probably those are the terms in which we should be thinking. In that sense, in the sense that we are not worrying about where the next meal comes from those of us who are not, and there are plenty in England who are, we are much freer, and if that was the sentiment, wrapped up, it needs to be put more blatantly I think. I think that the trouble with *The World of Goods* is that I thought that one should not have a material definition of well-being, or of poverty, as the base line of the sociological study. But the main problem for economics and thinking about consumption was to stop people from falling into the point at which they can now only think about food, and that one needed to take a base line much higher up than that concern that people should not die for thinking about poverty. It's too late then. Once they are destitute you have to rush in with soup kitchens and lorry loads of food and the real analytical task is to start before then. About how they have managed to get pushed into a comer, or pushed off the raft in such a way that they're destitute. I have found myself much misunderstood or perhaps rightly criticized for that. That I should have taken hunger as the point of starting. And the book that I admire greatly that does exactly that is [Amartya] Sen's book called *Poverty and Famines* in which he makes the stark observation that the point about food is, if you don't have it you die, and that's where we start. Then he does his marvelous analysis which leads up to the point where I want to start. Which is about what he calls 'exchange entitlements'. 'Legal entitlements' or 'exchange entitlements'.

Famines are not due to lack of food in the larger country in which the famine has occurred, and he goes through the four major famines in which lack of food was thought by the administrators to be the causes of famine, and thought by the historians afterwards that there was this monsoon that failed. That there were these two drought seasons that failed. And in the cases he chose, I'm so glad he wrote it before the new ones happened because otherwise he wouldn't have been able to go into it. When he goes very closely, he says: well, they had a lot of reserves. That monsoon did fail but it wasn't the worst failure of monsoons in the last ten years, and each time it had failed worse than that before there hadn't been a famine. So why do you think the famine failed because that monsoon failed? True there was that flood. But when you look at the stores in the country, there was plenty in the granaries, and the problem was not getting it to the people, and so he turns the analysis round and says that the problem is that

something happened to their exchange entitlements. These people, these cattle herders, were not able to get a price for their meat. They had to kill it off and their being destitute made these other people, who would normally buy and sell from them, destitute, and so that it snowballed along.

A lot of the feminist literature, although it's written as a protest against the market, capitalism and the rest, for women in modern society, adopts expressions (e.g. commodification) which come from the market-economy thinking. So that you have symbol for symbol. This symbol means that thing separate from the rest of the system of symbols for an anti-semiotic approach. Whereas the semiotic effort is to put them back into a system. So food gets treated as a symbol instead of being part of a system of social relations with entitlements, and sex gets treated as a symbol to have questions asked about by itself instead of about the whole society.

**MF:** There are a number of Marxist critics, such as Fredric Jameson, who have written about the consumer society and would argue that today's society is saturated with signs and images to a level unknown before, and this is a definitive feature of the consumer society. I think he's really taken his ideas from Baudrillard here, who talks about the commodity-sign and the postmodern implosion of images and occlusion of meaning. I understand from what you said before that you perhaps wouldn't be too happy with these notions. I wonder if you could explain why.

**MD:** If you mean saturated with signs, signs that don't make sense, then there is something special going on probably. But how do we know they don't make sense? I'm not sure about that. Whereas it's a truism that most anthropologists find that the place they're going to, everybody, every little bit of blade of grass, every footprint and every sound is a sign, and that the world is full of signs, but they are signs that don't, they're not a cacophony, they're not a smudge. They make a lot of communication.

**MF:** One of the examples often given is of the MTV (music television) viewer who is channel hopping and just gets fragments of different images of programmes which do not hang together to give a coherent message.

**MD:** But do you really think that these people are such fools? You see a lot of the media people take us to be absolute fools, and a lot of the argument about the media assume that we are all duped right and left. Whereas I would have thought most of us are making fairly sensible selections from available goods and available signs. In fact amazingly I think.

**MF:** Few people watch MTV all day, I agree. Even if it does allow some limited sign disorder, we then have to move into contexts where the signs work and are read and are constantly being coded and become hierarchized, as they are in everyday practices. This is the everyday world in which their bodies move, in which they live, and any disorder is only a limited enclave of this. Is this what you mean?

**MD:** When people dress themselves to be tourists you feel that, when you see them from many different nations, walking around, they are certainly not following any coherent clothing code. But it's a time-out incoherence. Rather like that few hours we watch

television. I think Baudrillard has got an investment in moans of pain about the contemporary world.

**BST:** I wonder if I could bring this full circle by introducing another autobiographical question? I think a lot of post-war American sociology clearly reflected the American sense of 'fascism had been defeated', and this was the biggest proof of the virtues of the liberal democratic capitalist system, and this sort of triumphalism was very prominent I think, in both Parsons and Bell, and they subsequently were heavily criticized for it. I wonder in your own intellectual career what major catastrophes or disasters influenced your thinking and emotional response to your work? Particularly in this area of risk and so forth. For example, did the Second World War and its aftermath represent a major turning point in how you thought about the world?

**MD:** It's hard to say what I think. I think it would be hard to take up. It is too big a question.

**MF:** To generalize it even further. If we think of the anthropologist, it's often said today that he's moving out into a world where the Other speaks back to him, and the conditions of the whole anthropological enterprise have changed in the sense that his account is not an a priori, authoritative account, a privileged account in the sense that it was before, and it may be challenged, and this balance of power perhaps between the Western anthropologists and the Other has now shifted. Is that a noticeable process that you've seen in your anthropological career?

**MD:** I really don't know why I don't seem to be able to respond to this line of questioning. It doesn't ring with me particularly. I mean I could explain how much we felt a compassion with the peoples we studied. I could mention the things that have happened since post-colonial times, but I don't feel that's up to the measure of these deep questions. Perhaps I will just have to settle for that. The anthropologist now who goes into the field doesn't write his book alone. He has to write with somebody from that place. But even that doesn't protect you from this criticism. I wrote a book with a tribal person, we wrote it together jointly, and I was criticized by [the] literary anthropology movement,<sup>2</sup> for writing about America after only having been there six years. But I think it's a very good thing. It has changed the kind of things anthropologists can write about because, to go back as I did this summer to the fieldwork, and find that these people who didn't speak any European language before are now speaking very elegant French, much better than mine, and also they could read English: they were so happy to have an old fashioned functionalist book written about them. So proud of it.

**Question from audience:** Professor Douglas, can I ask if you would like to comment as to how you see the importance of language in the role of cultural studies within the field of anthropology?

**MD:** When I did fieldwork training in Oxford, Evans-Pritchard was one of these anti-methodological people. He didn't believe in teaching you methods, and I wanted to have language training before I went out because I knew I had to speak the native language,

he said, 'Well, why bother? Because you could spend a year learning a language here and when you get there, it will all be wrong and three weeks there will teach you more than you will learn in a year here. What's more', he said, 'if you go there knowing the language already, though knowing it badly, you throw away your one card, your one chance to be helpless and in their hands and dependent on them, like a child. They will have to teach you things. Whereas when you come to the District Officer, you've got your radio perhaps, you've got your pens and pencils. You're so rich and powerful that not having the language gives you the very chance of your whole fieldwork of being in a position towards the other of dependence'. But fortunately for me nobody knew that language anyway. There was no written version of that language, or any grammar, or any dictionary of it. But there was a team of linguists after the war who were going out on a voyage of discovery to find the Bantu line, they said. This was to trace the language which the Central Bantu and other lines took. I was able to go up to London once a week to join the lesson in which they explained the structure of Luba language, which was a fantastic leap because it gave at least an introduction to a non-European language structure. Luba was about as close to the language I had to learn eventually as modern Greek would be to German – so they said to me. Which means not much help you know. But at least you got the idea of how it was constructed, and also its extraordinary regularity and beauty. You got that even without knowing that language. So when I got there, knowing a little bit about concordances and five sets of nouns and how these concordances run through the sentence, and little bits about that, I started to look for somebody to teach me the language while I was at the missionary station. None of the missionaries knew that language, which I think is dreadful, and very destructive for their work, and 40 years later nearly none of them know it still. There was one man who spoke some French. Very, very primitive, and my French wasn't all that good but he gave me some instruction, and after that I was just like that child. I just had the most horrendously difficult time, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. They got very impatient with me and, 'when are you going to learn to speak our language?' Very hard on them, very very hard on them.

**BST:** I think throughout today in a laudable way you've insisted upon the consistency of your work and the fact that, to be quite specific, I had misunderstood some aspects of your earlier work, so I think you've insisted on continuities between the work on risk and the early work on pollution and knowledge, and so forth. So the two questions are related to this. Do you feel that you set out, as it were, with a plan? I mean was there a scheme in your head as a young anthropologist in which you explored all the ramifications of an earlier idea, or does it relate to your sense of serious scholarship? Which is another thing we talked about earlier on. Namely that a serious scholar is someone who has a constant vocation as it were, so that there's a moral aspect to it and there's an intellectual aspect too.

**MD:** I'm trying to think of the name of that cognitive sociologist who wrote about kinds of cognition. You see there were two kinds of pragmatic and programmatic practices and the third kind is the theoretician. The theoretician never lets go and I recognize the bad part of the theoretician in myself. Now, I said I didn't have a plan, yet there's an awful lot of ego involvement once one has seen something. I think when I was working on the



Lele and was writing on them I didn't have any plan at all, but once I got the idea about their residual categories in category systems – the very thought of a residual category which most systems would probably have to have – was quite dizzying to me, I was very excited about it. So that when I wrote *Purity and Danger*, which didn't take very long to write, though I took about ten years to prepare, thinking about it, there was quite a lot of contradictions in that book because at different levels I was always thinking of it as a sociologically powerful effort that people are making to organize their universes.

So it was always a disappointment to have the chapter on Leviticus picked out and re-published by the *American Anthropologist*, amidst much praise, without ever putting it in the context of its sociological analysis. So that things that I said that were perfectly strong and clear in the chapter are being brought up by people who have only read the reproduced chapter on abominations of Leviticus as if it was what the whole thing was about. It was probably the most interesting part of the book. So that once I'd written it, I got criticisms about how not everybody sees matter out of place, although I had anticipated that in the book. Here I was influenced by Basil Bernstein, who said what about an artist whose whole world of order is on that canvas, everything else is in total disorder, and he lives it happily, in total incongruity and mix up and is just in such a hurry to get on with his painting? He just eats his food standing up. He urinates in the sink, he hasn't got time to go anywhere else. What about him? You see? So I realize I haven't got enough kinds of categories, and that's why I wrote *Natural Symbols*, and that really came out of stimulus entirely from talking to Basil Bernstein. So improving on that has been the rest of the plan.

### Acknowledgements

This interview is a shortened and edited version of a three hour discussion with Mary Douglas held before an audience at the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University in November 1987. We would like to thank Sarah Coakley and Paul Morris for their help in organizing the session. We would also like to thank Marlene Melber, Jean Connell and Beryl Wilkinson of the Data Preparation Section at Teesside Polytechnic for transcribing the tapes and keying in the various versions. We are very grateful to the Wenner Gren Foundation, New York, for financing the transcription.

### Notes

1. It is not clear who Mary Douglas was referring to at this point in the interview due to poor audio quality.
2. It is likely Mary Douglas makes direct reference to James Boon (a notable anthropologist associated with the literary anthropology movement), but it is not entirely clear due to poor audio quality.

### References

- Douglas, Mary (1963) *The Lele of Kasai*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, Mary (1966) *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Douglas, Mary (1970) *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

- Douglas, Mary (1980) *Evans-Pritchard*. London: Fontana.
- Douglas, Mary (1985) *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Douglas, Mary (1987) *Constructive Drinking*. London: Routledge
- Douglas, Mary (1992) *Risk and Blame. Essays in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Douglas, Mary (1993) *In the Wilderness. The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Douglas, Mary (1999) *Leviticus as Literature*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, Mary (2004) *Jacob's Tears. The Priestly Work of Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, Mary and Isherwood, Baron (1978) *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. London: Allen Lane.
- Douglas, Mary and Wildavsky, Aaron (1982) *Risk and Culture. An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fardon, Richard (1999) *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*. London: Routledge.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1992) Can the subaltern speak? In: P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 66–111.
- Weinberg, Darin (2009) Social constructionism. In: Bryan S. Turner (ed.) *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 281–299.

**Mary Douglas** (1921–2007) DBE FBA was Professor of Social Anthropology and later honorary research fellow at University College London. Her books include *Purity and Danger* (1966), *Natural Symbols* (1970), *Rules and Meanings* (1973), and *Thinking in Circles* (2007).

**Mike Featherstone** is a Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is founding editor of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* and the *Theory, Culture & Society* Book Series.

**Bryan S. Turner** is Professor of Sociology at the Australian Catholic University and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Graduate School, City University of New York.

**This article is part of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special section on ‘Notes on Structuralism’, edited by Sunil Manghani.**