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Review article

Elementary forms and their dynamics:

revisiting Mary Douglas

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Elementary forms and their dynamics: revisiting Mary Douglas

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Keywords

Abstract

Mary Douglas's *oeuvre* furnishes the social sciences with one of the most profound and ambitious bodies of social theory ever to emerge from within anthropology. This article uses the occasion of the publication of Fardon's two volumes of her previously uncollected papers to restate her core arguments about the limited plurality of elementary forms of social organisation and about the institutional dynamics of conflict and about conflict attenuation. In reviewing these two volumes, the article considers what those anthropologists who have been sceptical either of Douglas's importance or of the Durkheimian traditions generally will want from these books to convince them to look afresh at her work. It concludes that the two collections will provide open-minded anthropologists with enough evidence of the creativity and significance of her achievement to encourage them to reopen her major theoretical works. An internal critique of some aspects of Douglas's handling of her arguments is offered, before the conclusion identifies the wider significance of her arguments for the social sciences.

Revisiting Douglas… reworking Durkheim

Mary Douglas (1921-2007), many of whose previously uncollected papers are assembled in these two volumes by her literary executor and intellectual biographer (Fardon 1999), was one of the most important social theorists of her age. More loyal to anthropology than the discipline was to her, she conducted her first major ethnographic work in the early and mid-1950s among the Lele people, living in what was then Congo. She returned physically to the Lele only once in the late 1980s, but even her late writings applying her ethnographic analytic method to ancient Israel using materials from Biblical scholarship implicitly and occasionally explicitly referred back to

what she had learned among the Lele. Her reputation, though, rests on her major theoretical works.

Most students of anthropology, unfortunately, know only her 1966 book *Purity and danger* or perhaps the 1970 *Natural symbols*, but are less likely to have read the later and equally important writings. Among anthropologists, *Purity and danger* is known for four arguments, but the underlying theory which integrates them is still poorly understood. The book famously argued that the anomalous but auspicious character of the scaly pangolin for the Lele should be explained by its role in symbolising the self-sacrificing function of those who mediate disputes by authoritatively spanning Lele classifications. Too often Lord Chesterfield's dictum that dirt is matter out of place is misattributed to Douglas in *Purity and danger*. She cited that epigram in her argument about anomaly, but it is a mistake to think of the book as offering a theory of human disgust as being the default response to any or all anomalous things. Another chapter of the book offered an explanation of the abominations of Leviticus by reference to the fact that the creatures listed as causing defilement were anomalous in ancient Jewish classification. Finally, the book's statement that 'as a social animal, man is a ritual animal' is widely cited but rarely put into the context of her wider theory. She later acknowledged that the book's flaws may have explained readers' failure to appreciate the direction of her argument.

Douglas recognised that *Purity and danger* had failed to capture or explain the variation in ways in which people recognise and managed anomalies. Her later work was devoted to providing clearer statements than she could provide in 1966 of the varieties of ritually cultivated institutional settings which lead not only to very different ways of managing things classified as anomalous, but to contrasting thought styles more generally. *Natural symbols* has perhaps been even less well understood. Again Douglas later admitted that some of the book's presentation of the arguments was confused, and even her second edition did not resolve all the difficulties about the formulation of her typology of basic forms of social organisation and their thought styles (Fardon 1999). Yet it is hard to excuse the many commentators who misrepresent a book which argued that people paint their social organisation onto their conceptions of physical things, such as ideas of the symbolic significance of human body, as if she had argued the very opposite, that somehow the body provided a model for social organisation. Although her 1982a [1978] 'Cultural bias' clarified her typology of the basic forms of social organisation and the types of bias in thought which they cultivate, the argument was not much taken up by anthropologists. This was not only because her arguments in *Purity and danger* and in *Natural symbols* had not been

understood. Declining anthropological interest in social structure generally contributed to her being neglected by the mainstream in the discipline. Although Douglas herself wrote detailed critiques of Lévi-Strauss to show why her structural approach to social context was the very reverse of his ideational one, students still lazily bracketed her work with his. However, by the 1970s, such differences were not of interest to many anthropologists.

Therefore, from the 1980s onward she directed her writing to other disciplines and readerships. First, she tried addressing economists and sociologists. *The world of goods* with Baron Isherwood (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) not only challenged conventional economic thinking but also set out a Durkheimian explanation of consumption behaviour as ritual action of different kinds in each of the registers identified in her typology of basic forms. By the early 1980s her focus became fully inter-disciplinary. She gathered together a group of younger scholars who drew upon her typology of basic forms of social organisation and of thought to produce the 1982c edited volume, *Essays in the sociology of perception*. That collection included some of the first major developments by scholars such as Michael Thompson in extending her approach to provide a theory of social change over time, first using models from catastrophe theory which led during the 1980s and 1990s to more cybernetic approaches using positive and negative feedback trajectories. Her work with the American political scientist, Aaron Wildavsky, in their (1982) *Risk and culture* argued that differences among people in what they feared and how much they feared those things both reflected and were driven by their social organisation rather than simply individual psychological differences in bias. The book provoked a storm in US debates about risk perception, because it was misunderstood to be suggesting that environmental and technological dangers were merely imaginary, something that Douglas had to deny more than once (e.g., 1992). Douglas's decision in the 1980s to adopt Thompson's and Wildavsky's suggestion (consolidated in their 1990 reworking of the theory) that her approach be called 'cultural theory' probably seemed adroit in that decade when fascination with the concept had reached its apogee in disciplines beyond anthropology itself. Yet it had severe costs. For it appeared to suggest that culture did the explaining when the whole point of her theory was the very reverse. Her argument was that institutions explained culture, or at least those cognitive aspects of it which could be described as thought style. This put her at odds with many of her peers in the sub-field of cultural anthropology. Her major statement was the 1986 series of lectures, *How institutions think*, which set out the causal argument clearly, and largely eschewed the term 'culture'. Unfortunately the book was neither widely read nor well understood by those – mainly 'new' institutionalist sociologists – who did read it.

Douglas's whole *oeuvre* begins from Durkheim and Mauss' dictum (1963 [1902-3], 11) in the monograph on *Primitive classification*, that 'the classification of things reproduces [the] classification of [people]'. As a very general claim, that social organisation influences the way that people think is disputed by few scholars today. Perhaps only the most rigid of genetic determinists would deny it outright. Some other traditions neither affirm nor deny that social context shapes thought, but simply argue that we can explain all the really important behaviour and outcomes without needing to refer to the way in which people think at all. For example, that remains the position of many rational choice theorists in political science and international relations. If however we accept that institutions of social organisation, including informal ones, shape the manner in which people think, then it follows from the variety of those institutions across history and geography that there is a plurality of ways for people to think and still count as sane, competent and intelligent within the particular contexts in which they operate. Nevertheless, against both postmodernism and the methodological timidity of merely piling up local descriptions, Douglas insisted that humanity is one species subject to the many of the same basic constraints. Therefore, she concluded, variation in thought styles must be limited.

Most of those who recognise the role of institutions, however, tend to resist Douglas's next and most Durkheimian move. Douglas argued that the limitation in variety should be explained at the level of the most fundamental dimensions of the ordering of relations among people, rather than simply by locally contingent and case-specific features of context. For this reason, Douglas argued that we need some kind of typology of what Durkheim called 'elementary forms'. Rejecting the now conventional trichotomy of 'markets, hierarchies and networks' as ill-formed, incomplete and too much addressed to formal institutions of exchange to capture the most basic level at which social life varies (6, in press), Douglas sought, in effect, to show that social science has never improved on Durkheim's two dimensions of 'social regulation' and 'social integration' (in *Suicide*) or 'discipline' and 'attachment' (from his lectures on *Moral education*). Perhaps oddly, in print she rarely fully acknowledged these sources in Durkheim for her two dimensions, but always recognised that she had first come to them by way of her (1970) reformulation, which she later jettisoned, by the educational sociologist and sociolinguist Basil Bernstein who also drew some inspiration from Durkheim. In *Natural symbols* and much more rigorously in 'Cultural bias', Douglas showed that cross-tabulating the two and attending to the forms specified deductively in the cells rather than at the apices (as Durkheim unfortunately did in the 1951 [1897] *Suicide*) powerfully captures the limited variation at the most basic level. The four forms of 'hierarchy',

'individualism', 'enclave' and 'isolate ordering', as she came to call them by the 1990s, she deduced from the combinations of the two dimensions, in their weak and strong registers respectively. These dimensions and forms enabled her to develop indicators with which to measure variation both in social organisation and style of thought, which could then be examined empirically. Her commitment to deductive theory building and to hypothesis-driven rather than inductive research was deep. That approach reflected Durkheim's own procedure in such studies as *Suicide* (1951 [1897]). It also reflected her view that thick description and other inductive approaches fashionable in anthropology since the 1980s risked abandoning the central ambitions of social science to explain, to understand causation, to aspire to generality and to be parsimonious where appropriate.

But what are these elementary forms *of*? What are social regulation and social integration dimensions of? Her terminology for describing her answer changed between the 1970s and the 1990s. In *Natural symbols* (1970) she often used the phrase 'social relations'. In her (1980) book on the thought of her teacher, *Evans-Pritchard*, she tried the word 'accountability', but this too was question-begging; what exactly sustains accountability in each of the contrasting elementary forms she diagnosed? By 1978, in 'Cultural bias', she wrote of 'social context' or 'social order'. In *Essays in the sociology of perception* (1982c) she was experimenting with 'social environment'. It was in her later years, under the influence of Thompson (Thompson *et al*, 1990; Thompson, 2008) that she began to use 'way of organising' and then finally, in some of the late articles collected in *Cultures and crises*, 'social organisation'. She consistently argued that elementary forms must be understood structurally, yet she made sparing use of the phrase 'social structure'. Part of the reason was that Douglas rejected the idea that there is a general distinction between structure and agency in the conventional sense in which those terms are used in sociological theorising. She insisted that people be understood 'in the active voice', but that in order to explain agency, to give it content and to account for the variety of styles in which it is cultivated, social science must take institutions seriously as not merely being constraints but implicit imperatives, and take the elementary forms of those institutions equally seriously as explaining variation in styles of agency (Douglas and Ney, 1998). Another reason is that by the 1970s the phrase 'social structure' had come to be thought of as static. But her whole point was that the basic forms of institutions were in constant and dynamic tension, conflict, or in fluid settlements with each other. 'Social organisation' was therefore a better term. For it captures Douglas's argument more clearly that the elementary forms themselves explain dynamism and change and give content and meaning to the discrete styles of individual agency and their tensions.

Douglas's fourfold typology of the elementary forms is almost too well known. Indeed, because it is better known than the underlying explanatory theory for which it was developed, Douglas's work is too often misunderstood as static or descriptive. For, although the typology is exhaustive, the forms are not mutually exclusive. Most empirical studies are expected to find all four present in different degrees or weights, as people disappointed in any one form can only turn to one or more of the other basic ways of organising to cope, evade, revolt or attempt to reassert control. The dynamics which she would take from Michael Thompson and develop in her later work, including in several papers collected in the volumes reviewed here, show how the forms conflict but also how provisional settlements among them are possible, and even – in special conditions – how hybrids might arise but also decay. Amplification, self-radicalisation and bandwaggoning processes follow trajectories of positive feedback. These cybernetic trajectories arise from causal processes of ritual repetition over time of the same functional explanation by which each form of social organisation cultivates its peculiar style of thought (1986, 31-43; Douglas and Mars, 2003). Yet, again following Durkheim's insight about the way in which forms of life each differently disorganise even the desire to go on living (1951 [1897]) or produce organisational decay (1984 [1893], Book III) – an insight still not understood by leading social theorists who work with positive feedback dynamics (e.g., Arthur 1994; Jervis 1997; Pierson 2004) – Thompson argued that the self-exaggeration process ultimately disorganises its own institutions. As disappointment and frustration set in, people have no option but to try to organise under one of the other elementary forms, thus giving rise to negative feedback. The result is a dynamic disequilibrium theory (Thompson *et al* 1990; Thompson 2008).

When Douglas pointed to ritual as a causal mechanism by which basic forms of institutions cultivate styles of thought, she did not principally have in mind grand, formal public ceremonial events in which there is a sharp distinction between those who perform by presenting and those who perform as an audience. Her (1973) edited volume for teaching entitled *Rules and meanings* included enough excerpts from Schutz, Garfinkel and Wittgenstein to make clear that she regarded what would, after Goffman (1967 – oddly missing from Douglas's *Rules and meanings*, though compatible with her approach in its Durkheimian approach) and Collins (2004), be called 'ritual interaction order' at the quotidian level as being even more significant in shaping thought style.

Understood in this context, Douglas's two dimensions and four forms make much more sense than they do in many presentations. Although the labels for the dimensions seemed to trip off the tongue when Douglas introduced them in 'Cultural bias', in retrospect it may have been a tactical mistake to label social regulation as 'grid' and social integration as 'group'. For many scholars seem to find these names trivialising or even cheap. Moreover, because too many summaries set out only the dimensions or the four forms, what is in fact a dynamic causal theory has too often been misunderstood as simply a method or a descriptive or diagnostic tool or a heuristic. The problem was made worse by the fact that in the 1980s Douglas accepted names for the four forms suggested by her colleagues, some of which appeared to describe them as ideas, ideologies, or points of view. For example, to describe the strongly socially integrated, weakly externally socially regulated elementary form of social organisation that, for example, sustains sects as 'egalitarianism' effaced the importance of the form's emphasis upon inequality between members within the integrated zone and non-members beyond it. Worse, it appeared to suggest that what distinguished the thought style of sects was an ideology, or a set of claims about distribution of resources, when the whole point was supposed to be that people can adopt a sectarian style of thought in many contrasting ideological positions. By the 1990s, Douglas (e.g., 1996) wrote of 'enclave' instead, which had the merit of accurately indicating structure, closed boundary and density. Describing the weakly integrated, strongly socially regulated form as 'fatalist' likewise emphasised an idea or a despairing sentiment rather than a peculiar form of social organisation. By the 1990s, as the papers in *Cultures and crises* show, she was using the more precise and structural term, 'isolate' ordering. In using 'hierarchy' to describe the strongly integrated, strongly regulated form, by contrast, Douglas was – as she argued, drawing upon Dumont (1980 [1966]) – quite strictly correct but in ways that did not help her to be understood. Beyond anthropology, unfortunately, that term had lost the crucial connotation of membership of a common community and had come to mean just any inequality in power or status or resources. Douglas tried using 'central community' instead, but the point that each of the elementary forms sustains its own peculiar inequalities in different things and in different registers was not widely understood. Durkheim (1961; 1973) faced the same problem when he tried to explain that he used 'individualism' – which, for Douglas, is the weakly socially integrated, weakly regulated form – to mean a form of quite general institutional ordering which sustains a cult of the individual person, not a nineteenth century set of political beliefs associated with Herbert Spencer.

By the time of her death, her *oeuvre* constituted an ambitious body of social theory of human cognition, and one of the most distinctive institutional theories of the limited variation in the basic forms of human social organisation across history and geography. As she foresaw, that project has been appreciated and understood both more deeply and more widely in political science, public policy and public management research, organisation studies, risk studies, human geography, development studies and criminology than in anthropology. In part, this reflects the much greater continuing commitment in at least some of these disciplines than there was from the late 1970s until recently in anthropology, to deductive approaches to theory building and to hypothesis-driven designs for empirical research. But that acceptance was also due in no small part to Douglas's own efforts to recruit influential figures in other disciplines (such as Aaron Wildavsky and Christopher Hood in political science and Karl Dake in social psychology) to make use of her theory.

The publication of these previously uncollected papers provides an occasion for anthropologists to reconsider the importance of her achievement for their discipline. For Douglas never left the discipline; rather, it left her. As the influence of Geertz's (1982) 'thick description' and the 'writing culture' debate spread among cultural anthropologists, especially from the 1980s, the aspirations which animated Douglas's work for causal explanation, for generality in social theory, and for parsimony in pursuit of the most fundamental features of variation in human social organisation were expressly rejected as belonging to an era of social thought now classified as 'modernist'. Instead, those anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s who were not fascinated by Marxian claims about the ubiquity of class formations and interests or Foucaultian assumptions about the undifferentiable nature of ubiquitous power were being encouraged by postmodernists to return to particularity, to insist on the uniqueness of cases, and to rely on epistemological arguments for avoiding causal explanatory claims. None of these approaches could then see much value in the Durkheimian tradition. It was then still widely supposed that the Durkheimian tradition implicitly carried conservative normative presumptions, as if Durkheim's own support for Jaurès, his commitment to the Dreyfusard cause in the name of a reformed individualism, his (1957) commitment to the democratic state, his educational radicalism, his (1995 [1912]) arguments about the creativity unleashed in collective effervescence and the centrality of morality in his conception of law (Cotterell, 1999) were strangely inconsistent with his general social theory. To be sure, the British structural-functional anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown that had claimed Durkheim in the 1950s had indeed been static and apparently conservative in its exclusive attention to the explanation of consensus and perpetuation of institutions, and by the

1970s this had given all the traditions stemming from Durkheim a bad name in anthropology. Unfortunately, those Durkheimian traditions which did encompass conflict, dynamism and creativity were articulated in sociology rather than in anthropology and even then only in the late 1980s (e.g., Alexander, 1988). Today, now that the waves of Marxism and postmodernism have receded and Durkheim's thought is being appreciated much more fully (see e.g., Rawls, 2004; Cladis, 1992; Alexander and Smith, 2005), and now that evolutionary and neuroscientific arguments play a greater role in debates about social organisation and bias in human thought (cf. Turner and Whitehead 2008; Dominguez Duque *et al* 2010), perhaps more anthropologists might be willing to consider whether Douglas's work offers resources on which they can draw.

Collecting the uncollected

Richard Fardon's two new volumes of Douglas's previously uncollected papers are very different from each other. *Cultures and crises*[1] mainly reprints pieces from the 1990s and 2000s, which address her theory of basic forms of social organisation and the thought styles they cultivate, and then illustrate the argument in studies on such risks as climate change, crime, terrorism and economic development. The collection demonstrates Douglas's engagement with the most fundamental bodies of theory and scholarly literature in epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, institutional economics, sociology and development (especially in the papers, 'Human needs and wants' and 'Institutions: problems of theory').[2] By contrast, *Very personal method* is more eclectic. An opening section shows Douglas in semi-autobiographical mode and then engaging with her father's fascination with fishing; the theoretical arguments of the memoir-like paper are about hierarchy whereas the burden of her paper on her father's trout-fishing community is a return to her 1960s concerns as an Africanist with classification and the use of animals as symbols. A clutch of papers about religion is rather diverse, but does include an important piece of horrified reflections on the causes and aftermath of brutal anti-sorcery cults among the Lele that she observed on her return to the Congo in 1987, and which was the beginning of her major rethinking of the Durkheimian category of 'sacred contagion' from her somewhat coarse treatment of that concept in *Purity and danger*. A short section on ritual and taboo reprints pieces from the 1960s and is followed by a group of reviews of anthropological greats such as Steiner, Lévi-Strauss and Geertz (to whom she is surprisingly generous in this paper, for in her later years his 'thick description' became something of a *bête noire* for her). The final section slightly oddly combines a paper criticising the individualistic underpinning in social network theories together with papers and interviews on matters of Catholic faith. Whereas

Cultures and crises is clearly designed for anthropologists interested in theoretical approaches which can be applied to explain puzzles about contemporary dilemmas and afflictions, it is less clear just what the readership is for *A very personal method*. Moreover, whereas a common spine of theoretical argument and even of empirical interest runs through the selection in *Cultures and crises*, both the title *A very personal method* and the selection and ordering of pieces around themes of autobiography, her father, her intellectual friends and enemies, and her faith leave the theoretical concerns of each paper rather disconnected from those of the others. We are given studies on animal symbolism as classificatory index of social organisation within groups, the nature and consequences of social integration in hierarchy, sacred contagion as destructive dynamic, ritual as causal mechanism and the one-sidedness of individualistic ordering in many contemporary uses of social network theory and analysis.[3] Yet the volume does not show the common underpinning theoretical framework which integrates the disparate arguments of these papers.

What might anthropologists want from these volumes, that might persuade them to look afresh at Douglas's work? Some may want clearer, simpler, shorter, more direct statements of her theory than they may have found in her books. They might be looking for the text which can justify the injunction, 'new readers, start here!' Others may want to find fresh arguments or at least new fertility from applying existing ones to new fields and problems. Anthropologists might want more ethnographic evidence to persuade them that the theory is helpful. They might want to see material showing Douglas engaged with what many may think of as the core concerns of the discipline (with such concepts as the nature of human thought, religion, ritual, taboo, social organisation, and social change). As evidence for fertility, some might want to see how the body of scholars gathered around Douglas pressed her to extend and deepen it. Others might want to read answers to objections and criticisms made by Douglas's contemporaries. Those who are already convinced of the importance of Douglas's writings may want something which will give readers reasons to go back and read her major works alongside the studies by the scholars who have drawn upon her work.

In part, at least, they will find some of each of these things in one or other volume. *Cultures and crises* provides short, direct, crisp statements of both her underpinning theory of social organisation as institutionally driven in 'Institutions: problems of theory' and of her typology of basic forms of institutions in 'Four cultures: the evolution of a parsimonious model'. These could certainly be offered to those in need of an introduction to her approach. That volume in

particular displays collaborations with scholars and researchers who have developed, deepened and extended her work, which should suffice to demonstrate the continuing fertility of her theorising. Fardon has even commissioned short notes from Douglas's collaborators to follow the papers included in the volume which she co-authored with each of them, about the significance of the arguments developed in their joint work. Because the empirical topics examined in the papers in *Cultures and crises* include climate change, risk management, terrorism and fear of crime, those anthropologists who judge a theoretical tradition by what it can contribute to understanding religion, classification, ritual and perhaps by its critique of other traditions of anthropological theory will have to turn to *Very personal method*, where they will find some material on each of these things. Those who want answers to criticisms will find some of what they are looking for. Anyone who thought that Douglas was a conservative thinker should read the ferocious critique of commonly presented accounts of poverty in 'Traditional culture: let's hear no more about it' in *Cultures and crises*. The same paper, read together with 'Institutions: problems of theory' should dispose of lingering misunderstandings that Douglas used 'culture' to provide explanations. Readers who suspected that there might have been something in Leach's comment that the argument of *Natural symbols* was lightly disguised Catholic theology will have to rethink their view on reading Douglas's argument for respect for African religions in 'Other beings, post-colonially correct'. Those who thought her theory static should read 'Terrorism: a positive feedback game', where they will find Douglas and Gerald Mars using flow charts to convey the structure of a cybernetic explanation of institutional dynamics. The semi-autobiographical 'A feeling of hierarchy' is significant mainly because it displays more straightforwardly than Douglas does elsewhere just how and why her concept of 'hierarchy' is so very different, and indeed more classical, than the fashionable Weberian notions about 'top-down' organisation, and because it explains why it matters for explaining conflict and social integration to rescue the concept of hierarchy and to get the work of concept formation right.

Just because these are for the most part previously uncollected papers, it is not surprising that readers must turn to other collections of her articles for some major Douglasian arguments. Neither of these two volumes contains her crucial statements on blame and accusation: for those, readers must turn to the 1992 collection *Risk and blame*. Nor do we have here such major statements of method as 'Cultural bias': for that, one must go to the 1982b volume, *In the active voice*. The great pieces on classification such as 'Rightness of categories' and 'Self-evidence' and the studies on anomaly such as the famous papers on jokes and Lele animal symbolism are readily available in *Implicit meanings* (Douglas 1999a [1975]). As we should expect in a collection,

there is no space for so developed a theoretical argument as that which is set out in *How institutions think*. Nonetheless, there is enough in these volumes that might induce readers to go back to her major works.

There are also some uncollected papers which Fardon has not chosen but which might have strengthened each of these volumes. For example, Douglas's (2001a) 'Multatuli' lecture 'Dealing with uncertainty' presents afresh her theory of the role of analogy in classification and the ways in which people manage things they find anomalous and how and why people in some institutional settings will use analogy to create classificatory anomalies by which they can manage problems they find anomalous in other ways. A 1985 paper entitled 'Pascal's great wager' might have merited a place, perhaps in one of the sections in *Very personal method* about religion. Its significance is that Douglas there revisits in a fresh way, as she did in each period of her work, the debates about philosophical relativism which had dogged social and cultural anthropology from the 1940s through to the 1990s and which were the occasion of much of the furore about her 1980s writing on risk. In that paper, Douglas argues that, if we are to move beyond the stale aporias of epistemological debate, both relativistic scepticism and commitment must be understood anthropologically as practices that make sense in particular ways of life, both of which must be explained institutionally. Perhaps *Cultures and crises* might have found space for a 1989 reply to James Spickard about the two dimensions, which offered a distinctive explanation of her conception of social regulation.

Entirely missing from these volumes are any of the papers from Douglas's late work from 1992 to her death in which she applied her institutional dynamics to understanding several books of the Hebrew bible in the institutional setting of ancient Israel. That series of three major books and several articles provides major extensions and developments of her theory, not so much of conflict amplification (although *In the wilderness* 2001c [1993] provided that too) but of conflict attenuation. Douglas very final years were taken up with work on ring composition, or the rule for composing literary texts in which not only does the end return to the beginning, but each section is chiastically linked in a series of parallels to a corresponding section on what would appear to be the opposite side of the ring if the contents page were organised in a circle (Douglas, 2007). Although the structure can be found in works from many civilisations and periods, her interest in it sprang from her revisiting of the books of Numbers and Leviticus and from her demonstration of the peculiar structure of those Biblical books and her institutional explanation of that practice of literary ordering. Douglas's (1999b, 37-40; 2007, 146-8) argument

was that the integrated disciplining and limiting of meanings and in particular of analogies in ring composition is especially cultivated in the strong social integration and social regulation of hierarchical social organisation. Just as hierarchy, Douglas argued, constrains people from the violence of sacred contagion in social relations, so its rule-based design in ring-composed oratory and writing constrains sacred contagion in thought style, for sectarian thought all too readily cultivates excessively tight and excessively extensive similarities in meanings and analogies through which it asserts its aggressive demands and what Durkheim called its '*mal de l'infini*'. One might wish that Fardon had included Douglas's 2001b lecture to the Collège de France entitled 'Nostalgia for Lévy-Bruhl: reasoning in circles', which locates her social explanation of the use of literary form in her wider argument about institutional cultivation of styles of thought which make different uses of analogy, synthesis, linear inference and close analytic distinction.

Three controversial arguments in Douglas's work emerge strongly from these two volumes and most strongly from *Cultures and crises*. First, they show Douglas determinedly focusing her energies to demonstrate the plurality, but the *limited* variety, of practices and conceptions of personhood, and the fact that in certain institutional settings multiple persons are recognised within one body in some sense in almost every period and part of the world. This, she shows, is expressed in everything from being held accountable for actions in the courts, by way of exercising choices as consumers, through to practices of personhood in religious communities.

Secondly, in these papers Douglas returns frequently to the theme that 'culture' is never coherent but always riven with conflict. She showed with meticulous rigour in *How institutions think* that functional explanation cannot be dispensed with, but its contribution is precisely to explain conflict and therefore to explode the cosy assumptions of functional*ism*. Because Douglas argues that culture, understood as thought style and type of bias, reflects the basic form of social organisation, it follows that the loose and lazy notions of ethnic, national, traditional, class cultures cannot describe coherent systems of belief and motivation that drive individual action.

A third theme may surprise some readers who are not familiar with Douglas's approach. The opening pair of papers in *Cultures and crises* present the bluntest of challenges to the fashionable contemporary use of emotions as causal explanations in disciplines as diverse as individual psychology, organisation studies and political science. Douglas argues that it is a mistake to take feelings at face value, as if they were palpable motives. Consistently with both her Durkheimian insistence on institutions as more fundamental forces than the individual expressions of mental

life which institutions cultivate, but also with her constant focus on how people invoke claims about personhood in holding each other to account, she argues that the principal role of emotions in social explanation is not the fact that we feel them but that we attribute them to others in praise and blame and we claim them for ourselves in justification and exculpation. In effect, Douglas does to anger, joy, hope and boredom, what Evans-Pritchard did to witchcraft – she turns the question of what emotions are on its head to ask who accuses others of particular feelings and who claims to feel what, in just which circumstances. Again, she uses a functional explanation to argue against functionalism and for the centrality of conflict and instability.

These volumes do, however, give us strong reasons to doubt that this apparently reductionist or even eliminationist view of emotions was Douglas's final word on the subject. Indeed, her late works on ancient Israel show that she regarded both the fears, jealousies and millenarian aspirations cultivated in enclaved settings, and calmer solidarities of forgiveness and reconciliation which she thought the priestly hierarchy of post-exilic times sustained as being genuinely felt, for all that they were the work of institutions. Indeed, other papers in *Cultures and crises* show her taking feeling seriously. In 'Terrorism: a positive feedback game', for example, Douglas clearly recognises that the self-radicalisation process in enclaving cultivates actually felt emotions, and does not only sustain self-attributions and accusations. In 'Traditional culture: let's hear no more about it', she devotes a section to discussing the emotions *other than* apathy which are cultivated in isolate ordering, precisely to emphasise the alternate pathways possible, contingent on particular conditions, in the generation of genuinely felt emotion. 'Dangerisation' too is concerned with fears sincerely experienced and their explanation. Presumably, she intended both attribution and cultivation of feelings to be understood as outcomes of the same quotidian ritual interaction processes.

A writing style for explaining thought style

These two volumes display well both the reasons that Douglas's work matters for the social sciences and the features of her work which have led many anthropologists to be doubtful about whether they can use it, and which have perhaps made her work less attractive than it ought to be to scholars of social theory in sociology.

Although the point is rarely made in print, anthropologists can be heard to remark in conversation that Douglas's writings contain few works which show ethnographic 'depth'. It is

true that *The Lele of the Kasai* (1963) is her one extended work of detailed analytic report using observation and participant observation data drawn from extended residence with a group of people studied at close quarters. That study predated the development of much of her theory, and she never provided an extended reanalysis of her 1950s African ethnographic data even using her typology, let alone her full theory. Instead, she moved on to works of theory building which are illustrated with comparative analysis of empirical material from many times and places. It is therefore perhaps unfortunate that Fardon has not anthologised any of her late papers about ancient Israel, for the works of her old age on Numbers, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and (in *Jacob's tears*: Douglas 2004) Ezra and Nehemiah constitute an extended and close analysis, using her own theory, of a large body of ethnographic, literary and scriptural sources. For those anthropologists who accept that methods of data collection other than participant observation can enable the anthropologically trained researcher to reconstruct the thought style of the people they study in the same loving detail, profundity and rigour as that afforded by classical ethnography, Douglas's series of late books and articles on ancient Israel show her engaged in that task with the same ambition and depth as, for example, her teacher Evans-Pritchard displayed in his reconstruction of Zande thought. Moreover, as she examined the conflicts and reconciliations of the Jews of early antiquity, the Lele were never far from her mind.

Some of the papers in *A very personal method* do draw on her field observations. In particular, 'The problem of evil among the Lele' rests on data collected during her 1987 visit. More generally, Fardon's case for 'A feeling for hierarchy' rests partly on the argument that in that paper Douglas analyses her own experience ethnographically. Nevertheless, for those anthropologists who will respect nothing other than the series of doorstop-sized monographs of close analysis of one or two settings, Douglas's elegant combination of essayistic writing with comparative illustration and theory-building will never be enough to appeal. Yet, as one would expect in a scholar who argued for the independent importance of the *style* of human thought from whatever importance we must attach to its propositional content, her style of composition was integral to her theoretical project and should be judged by the standards of theory-building, theory development, defence of theory against philosophical criticism, and integration of theory with wider theoretical debates in the social sciences.

Those who like their social theory to be grandiose and full of definitions, deductive inferences in numbered propositions (think of Parsons, Weber, Merton or Jonathan Turner) or supported by detailed historical analysis (think of Elias or Foucault) have often found her style too essayistic

and light. Again, some pieces in Fardon's volumes show Douglas – often working with collaborators – going some way to accommodate even the dustiest and most closely referenced of social theorists. For example, 'Human needs and wants' and 'Institutions: problems of theory' engage in the sort of extensive review of theoretical literatures to derive conclusions that social theorists will recognise. Yet even such papers as 'Terrorism: a positive feedback game' – with all its flow charts and formal analysis of pathways – move with characteristic lightness among its brief, schematic and very diverse illustrations in the ways that led her critics to mutter that Douglas's writing was too anecdotal. Douglas was unrepentant, of course. She once said to me gleefully that her critics always complained that her articles were 'not dull enough or cramped enough for them'. She used very diverse anecdotes not only to make for more engaging writing but also to illustrate her claim that her theory had a vast range of application.

Institutions and their dynamics

The core argument running through Douglas's work and through these volumes still seems to me at once correct, profound and challenging for many traditions across the social sciences. That social organisation shapes thought style, that its variation should be accounted for at the level of elementary forms rather than empirical contingency, that basic ways of being organised and their styles of thought are in dynamic conflict, and that these conclusions explain puzzles that other approaches leave baffling still seem to me to be broadly right. Yet these arguments are still news in many fields of the social sciences. Indeed, even the fourfold typology seems as good an account as the social sciences have so far yielded of variation in elementary forms, at least in Douglas's late formulations exhibited in these volumes, where the weakly regulated but strongly integrated form is understood as enclaved and the weakly integrated but strongly regulated one as isolate ordering.

However, there are some particular arguments in some of the papers in these volumes about which one might have theoretical reservations, even and perhaps especially if one accepts Douglas's own theoretical starting point. Here, I focus on three problems of theory raised by the papers in these two volumes, which together raise an internal critique, not of Douglas's underlying causal theory, but of the manner in which she specified and articulated it. They have to do, respectively, with the understanding of what an institution is, with the puzzle about whether all the elementary forms are to be treated symmetrically in explanation and in their limited capacity for viability when each is locally dominant, and with the question – which

follows from the previous one – of whether permanent or temporary stability, to the degree that we do find cases of it, is to be explained by relations among all the elementary forms, or whether it can arise from capabilities cultivated within some or each of those forms.

One might question whether Douglas's treatment of the concept of an institution is either entirely consistent with the Durkheimian basis for her work, or indeed appropriate for the explanatory task for which her theory requires it. In her major reformulation of her theory in 'Cultural bias' and *How institutions think* Douglas argued that the loose and baggy concept of 'culture' must be broken down, and a causal relation between its constituent parts – social organisation and thought style – identified, specified and evidenced. To do this, she proposed, first, (1982a [1978] that 'social context', meaning the structural features of social organisation captured on her two dimensions, explains 'cosmology', later 'thought style' (1986) which captured a variety of aspects of cognition. Douglas's turn in the 1980s to the then 'new' institutionalisms in economics (Williamson 1986), organisational sociology (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), and historical political economy (North 1990) made sense for several reasons. Institutions appeared to provide a clear solution to the question of what the elementary forms and dimensions were of. For institutions are aspects of social structure, but are in dynamic tension with each other. They can readily be exonerated of the old charge made against Durkheimians of positing some mystical notion of a group mind. Therefore, there was no danger of circularity in using them to explain features of cognition. Institutions captured the features of social organisation which are at once collective, binding, often tacit, typically taken for granted, constitutive of particular social arrangements, and sustain accountability.

Yet perhaps Douglas borrowed too much from the institutionalist theorists of the 1980s. For as the essay 'Institutions: problems of theory' shows she readily adopted their definition of institutions as sets of *rules*. But a rule is an 'if… then…' statement. In these circumstances, a rule prescribes, people who meet that description must carry out this particular task or refrain from that other act. A rule is therefore a statement which is either accepted or not. It should therefore belong on the *explanandum* of cognition in Douglas's account, not the *explanans*. If a rule is tacit and taken-for-granted in such a deep way that it remains inarticulate for its practitioners, even when the behaviours it prescribes or proscribes are challenged, then it clearly matters very much, especially for the Durkheimian project. But then we can legitimately wonder whether it is accurately described as a 'rule' at all. For if its binding and authoritative and collective character remains inarticulate in that fashion, then it makes little sense to speak of accepting a rule and still

less of accepting the 'if… then…' statement. Following or breaching something so tacit, so taken-for-granted, so inarticulate is really better understood using some term from the arena of 'practices'. Indeed Douglas (1973) suggested that she accepted Garfinkel's (1967) critique of the overly intellectualist view that people deal with the social world already prepared with heads full of indefinitely vast numbers of beliefs in propositional rules. Moreover, as Rawls (2004) demonstrated, the most accurate reading of Durkheim's conception in *Elementary forms* is that he used practices to explain features of cognition such as classification and categories. Moreover, in the Durkheimian traditions, institutions achieve their binding effect by means of a causal mechanism in which, not individual commitment to those institutions, but the content and boundaries and defining classifications of those institutions (as Douglas argued in *How institutions think*, 1986) are established and disestablished by *ritual* practice, often as much at the quotidian level of routine interaction analysed by Goffman, Garfinkel and Collins as at the level of high, formal ceremonial. Therefore, it is more consistent to define those institutions as practices than to define them as rules (6, 2011; 2013). Significantly, she did occasionally (e.g., in 'Emotions and culture in theories of justice' in *Cultures and crises* but also in several essays in the 1992 *Risk and blame* collection) indicate general approval of Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*, although she was careful never to endorse his underlying theory which took interests in the pursuit of goals about types of capital as fundamental. Moreover, a strategy of defining elementary forms of institutions as practices is more appropriate for Douglas's project, for she consistently posited ritual cultivation as the key causal mechanism from her earliest ethnographic work on the Lele through to her middle period work on risk, and on to her late studies on conflict attenuation in ancient Israel. Yet Douglas did not make this shift away from the consensus among economic and sociological institutionalist thought. Whether that was for tactical reasons, feeling perhaps that alliance-building with institutionalist traditions was more useful in the 1980s and 1990s than marking up differences, or whether she feared that a 'practices' conception of institutions might elicit a different kind of accusation of obscurity, it is hard to know.

The treatment of enclaved institutions in these volumes raises queries of which Douglas herself was well aware. There are other papers from her final years which suggest that the arguments set out in such studies as 'Terrorism: a positive feedback game' may not describe her final thoughts on the subject. At least officially, by the time the papers in *Cultures and crises* came to be written, Douglas had disavowed the notion which marred her 1982 collaboration with Wildavsky, *Risk and culture*, that hierarchical and individualistic ordering constitute the 'centre' of social organisation, while enclaved and isolate ordering make up a 'border' or periphery, defined only

negatively in frustrated reaction against the centre, either by revolt or by withdrawal and circumvention. At least in presenting the typology, by the end of the 1980s, Douglas described all four forms as being… well, on all fours. That is to say, each form is a way of being organised that is no less and no more stable than any of the others, that each is as subject to positive and negative feedback dynamics as any other, and institutional outcomes must always be explained by showing how all four are related – for example, how they conflict, how they depend on each other, when and why provisional settlements might be struck, when empirical cases exhibit hybridity among them, with different weights for each one. The converse of this methodological rule of equal treatment for elementary forms is that none is to be assumed to be any more reactive than any other, or any more or less defined than any other by the way in which it seeks to express frustration or disappointment or surprise in relation to the others, or in the way in which it organises countervailing action against the others. Yet somehow Douglas only came very late in her work to accept the full implications of this stricture. For in 'The problem of evil among the Lele' enclaving is described only in its destructive phase, as in the violence of the anti-sorcery cult, while in 'Terrorism' only the destructive force of enclaving is explained, as it both reacts against hierarchical or individualistic ordering, and as it reinforces itself through repetition of the mechanism by which institutions ritually cultivate and therefore reinforce thought style. In a slightly different way, isolate ordering appears in 'Dangerisation' only as a deformation. By contrast, 'A feeling for hierarchy' shows the eponymous form only in its stable form, neither radicalising itself nor undermining other kinds of practice. In none of these pieces does Douglas show us either the deformations of excessive hierarchy, even in the sketchy manner that Durkheim pointed to them in his example of late Byzantine imperial bureaucracy in Book III of *The division of labour in society*. Nor conversely do we see isolate ordering sustaining capabilities for survival in dire adversity, nor any consideration of cases where enclaved institutions as part of a mix might at least sustain types of moral conscience for an organisation or a field of endeavour, let alone cases where it might cultivate benign capabilities.

Researchers who used Douglas's own theory published studies which, she appreciated very clearly, challenged at least this limited view of the capabilities of enclaved organisation. Two papers entitled 'A history of grid group cultural theory' and 'Seeing everything in black and white' written around 2006(a,b) for an online course which are not included in *Cultures and crises*, no doubt because much of their content is shown in 'Four cultures: evolution of a parsimonious model' each conclude with discussions of the work of the Nepali researcher and scholar of water and environmental management and politics, Dipak Gyawali. Gyawali's 2002 monograph, *Water*

in Nepal convinced Douglas that indeed there are situations in which enclaved institutions can be no less viable and no more negatively reactive than any other basic form of social organisation. She recognised that his argument had shown her account of enclaving to be 'disparaging'. Although mostly published after Douglas's death, Hakak's (e.g., 2010; 2011; Hakak and Rapoport 2012) studies on enclaving among Haredi communities in Israel and diaspora Jewish communities have made the point even more powerfully that under certain conditions at least, the positive feedback dynamic in enclaving can be constrained to no less a degree than it is constrained in Douglas's own accounts of hierarchical institutions (in settings as diverse as her own Catholic girls' school and in what she argues was the priest-led context from which the book of Leviticus sprang).

But what, then, are those circumstances? Douglas's portrayal of cases of more or less stable hierarchical settings appears to suggest, without demonstrating with the rigour she devotes to explaining the self-reinforcing bandwaggoning process in 'Terrorism: a positive feedback game', that somehow hierarchical institutions can stabilise themselves. Hakak's work, mentioned above, implies (contrary to Douglasian expectations) that enclaved institutions among Haredi Jews are stabilised by their own resources. Yet the logic of the argument developed by Thompson, Verweij and other collaborators, to which she added her signature in 'Clumsy solutions for a complex world' is that it is the special case of negative feedback among all four forms, in which their countervailing action is roughly balanced and therefore produces homeostasis, in which each form regularly administers small institutional surprises often enough to ensure that excess in each form is constrained. In other words, it is not that hierarchy or any other form stabilises itself. Rather, if it appears stable it is due to the work of the other forms and, most of all, to the particular way in which all four are interrelated. In these papers Douglas does not really resolve the tension between the two perspectives on how the elementary forms work. In some ways, the approach that posits only homeostatic relations among all four by constraining positive feedback in each one is theoretically more elegant, because it is symmetrical, and also more parsimonious. But as yet the base of empirical analysis on which to distinguish more benign from less benign forms of four-way relations remains slender.

A living tradition

The major papers in these two volumes deserve to be widely read. They should lead social and cultural anthropologists, in particular, to a renewed appreciation that Douglas was both one of

the great system-builders of their field and also one who designed her approach both to draw upon the unique capabilities that anthropology brings to the social sciences, and to extract it from some of the anti-theoretical fashions to which the discipline succumbed in the late twentieth century. The cross-disciplinary work that marked her middle period studies on risk perception, her collaborations with others on climate change and her late use of Biblical studies and structural analytic method of literary texts were always rooted in both an ethnographic approach to the reconstruction of how people think that could only have come from anthropological training, and in a strategy of theorising that built upon approaches developed in the British mid-twentieth century social anthropology in which she was trained. She borrowed theoretical resources from institutional theory, from cybernetics, and from philosophers such as Nelson Goodman, but always sought to integrate them into a body of thought which retained deep roots in the kinds of intellectual ambition that marked anthropology from the period of its pomp.

One purpose which these two volumes serve is to show just how fertile, how systematic and how widely ranging was Douglas's work in the latter years of her retirement. Unfortunately, however, they do not showcase the remarkable insights and arguments developed in her concurrent work on ancient Israel. The key value of gathering these previously uncollected papers, though, will be achieved if they lead readers to turn afresh to her more extended statements and to the development and application of her theoretical legacy.

Notes

[1] In the interests of transparency, I should declare an interest. At their request, I provided Sage with an endorsement which appears on the back cover of the volume, in which I wrote that it contains some of her most sophisticated work and it will show new readers why her work matters and why they should reappraise her *oeuvre*.
[2] I should declare a small interest in this paper too, because I thought sufficiently important to arrange its first publication in English in 6 and Mars, 2008: previously, it had appeared only in Italian translation in a social science encyclopaedia.
[3] Again, I should declare an interest in the paper, 'Knowing the code', on this last topic. In 1997, I commissioned Douglas to write it for a collection being published by a London-based think tank.

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