

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306032193>

# A very personal anthropology of Mary Douglas

Article in *Anthropological Notebooks* · April 2016

---

CITATIONS

0

READS

2,240

1 author:



**Aleksandar Boskovic**

Arheološki institut

121 PUBLICATIONS 160 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Gender Equality in a Global Perspective (Routledge) [View project](#)



William Robertson Smith's influence on the "Myth and Ritual School" [View project](#)

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### A Very Personal Anthropology of Mary Douglas

Fardon, Richard (ed.). 2013. *Mary Douglas. Cultures and Crises. Understanding Risk and Resolution*. Los Angeles, London: Sage. xiv + 325 pp. Pb.: \$52.00. ISBN: 9781446254677.

Fardon, Richard (ed.). 2013. *Mary Douglas. A Very Personal Method. Anthropological Writings Drawn from Life*. Los Angeles, London: Sage. x + 318 pp. Pb.: \$52.00. ISBN: 9781446254691.

The two books discussed here are both dedicated to the legacy of one of the most original and influential anthropologists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work of Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007) marks a turning point in the British social anthropology, as it represents a gradual incorporation of structural and symbolic elements into the then-dominant functionalist paradigm. In this, she followed Sir Edmund Leach (1910-1989), but (for the variety of reasons) perhaps went even further – especially in later discussing what German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944-2015) later labeled ‘The Risk Society’ – and this makes her very much our contemporary, and also makes one appreciate even more the effort that Richard Fardon (Professor at SOAS, who has written extensively about Douglas, as her Literary Executor and “official” biographer) has put in editing these important volumes. The theoretical insights and methodological rigor that she employed in her research also make Douglas very useful for interpreting some of the perplexities of our everyday, globalised world, with all the challenges that we confront on a daily basis. I will point to some of them in this review essay, although, obviously, the best course of action, and the easiest way to appreciate the scope and importance of her work, would be to read the original texts. In doing so, I will also refer to several recent monographs that deal with the history and theory of sociocultural anthropology.

### Historical setting

After attending school at Sacred Heart Covenant in Roehampton (London), Mary Douglas (born Margaret Mary Tew) completed a degree in philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford in 1942. Influenced by Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), whose ideas were already setting the tone for a radical revision of British structural functionalism, and following a brief period of work for the Colonial Office, she came back for the graduate studies to the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford in 1947. She completed her B.Sc. degree in social anthropology in 1948 and defended her D.Phil. thesis in 1953. According to Adam Kuper,

... she was always a Durkheimian, convinced that rituals and cosmological notions were bound up with social norms, and as a student at Oxford she had been particularly inspired by the lectures on taboo of Franz Steiner. (Kuper 2014: 121)

Kuper also notes that she made a gradual change in her theoretical orientation, from claiming ‘that Evans-Pritchard had anticipated anything that was valuable in Lévi-Strauss’s theories’ to eventually becoming ‘something of a Lévi-Straussian, if an idiosyncratic one’ (2014: 121). Douglas’s own original fieldwork among the Lele of Kasai (in what was then Belgian Congo) also brought her in contact with Belgian and French scholarship, so Eriksen and Nielsen write that she became ‘a bridge-builder between French and British traditions’ (2013: 124). Along with Leach, she became the most prominent representative of the “structural turn” in British social anthropology in the early 1960s, sharing ideas and frequently commenting on each other’s papers, although the two of them came from radically different starting points, as Leach was a convinced atheist, and Douglas a devout Roman Catholic. Douglas was also a contributor to Leach’s ground-breaking edited volume on *The Structural Study of Myth* (Leach 1967).

From the early 1960s, she combined Durkheimian sociology with a critical approach to cultural patterns that different societies produce, focusing on developed Western societies and their relation to ‘natural symbols’ (Douglas 1966). A particularly interesting aspect of her research has been a re-evaluation of the symbols of ancient Israel, leading her to critical assessment of some parts of the Old Testament – especially the book of Leviticus (Bošković 2010: 144-145).

In retrospect, it is interesting to note that Douglas is the only prominent British social anthropologist who got away with using the “C” word, perhaps because of the time that she spent at two American universities, Northwestern and Princeton. The notion of “Culture” had traditionally been criticised and almost despised by all British social anthropologists, who found it extremely irritating, preferring “social structure” instead. Therefore, they were more than happy to leave this tricky concept to their North American colleagues.

## Douglas as an engaged anthropologist

Fifty years after its initial publication, it is difficult not to overstate the importance of the *Purity and Danger*. In this brilliantly written and well argued book, Mary Douglas not only presented a convincing comparative perspective for interpreting symbols in both “traditional” and “developed” societies, but also did this in such a way as to engage her readers similarly to the way that Ruth Benedict did three decades earlier, in *Patterns of Culture*.

The book combines an almost orthodox structural-functionalism with a symbolic analysis drawing on structuralist and psychoanalytical models. ... In both books [*Patterns of Culture* and *Purity and Danger* – A.B.], the concern is with group identity and values; but whereas Benedict restricts herself to the symbolic aspects of culture, Douglas links symbols to social institutions [...]. She sees symbols as means of social classification, which distinguish categories of objects, persons or actions, and keep them separate. The order of the classificatory system reflects and symbolizes the social order, and ‘intermediate’, ‘unclassifiable’ phenomena come to represent a threat to social stability (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013: 124–5).

Human beings, Douglas claimed, essentially ‘yearned for rigidity’ (1966: 162). They wanted to organise all things around them in coherent and non-contradictory segments, resulting in attempts to classify everything into neat, well-ordered, and well-organised systems. However, at the same time, human beings are also very well aware that, after all, these processes of classification, there is always something that eludes them, something “in-between,” and “dirt” is an inevitable product of things that somehow just evade ordering. In order to resolve this paradoxical situation, and turning to some specific rituals, human beings need to understand a need to move beyond divisions and contradictions, beyond the need to classify everything, in an effort to reach the ‘at-onement,’ as she nicely put it (1966: 169).

This take on liminality goes way back in anthropological research (probably to Van Gennep), and Douglas shares it with her contemporary Victor Turner (1920-1983). Over the years, she was also present as what I would like to describe as a public (or engaged) intellectual, speaking on different issues, but also taking the opportunity to re-work some of her ideas and reinforce some arguments, using prominent figures from the history of social anthropology. For example, in one of her lesser known texts, Douglas used William Robertson Smith’s (1846-1894) ideas related to ‘the triumph of gods over demons to the triumph of man over wild beasts’ (quoted in Douglas 1995: 274) to demonstrate how ‘a change in society, not a change in technology’ influenced a development of a particular type of rationality, as outlined in the Old Testament (1995: 276). She proceeded to make a point about reconsidering what many would interpret a very conservative, gender-biased view present in the Bible (especially in Leviticus), avoiding ‘ethnographic dazzlement,’ and concluding that ‘the emotions which their [demons – A.B.] interventions serve to allay are grave fears of community dissolution and the anguish of divided loyalties’ (1995: 292).

In another of her highly influential books, *Natural Symbols* (1970), Douglas formulated a “group/grid” analysis (dealing with how clearly was an individual’s position defined within boundaries of a group / how clearly defined was an individual’s role with regard to the whole system of social obligations and responsibilities) that has profoundly influenced some important theoretical concepts (like *cultural theory*), but also the ways in which we perceive the role of individuals in societies in which they live and the issue of the whole Durkheimian (that is to say, collectivist) legacy of sociocultural anthropology.

## Douglas as our contemporary

The “public intellectual” persona is most visible in the volume *Cultures and Crises*. The book is divided into three parts: *Cultural Theory* (the concept for which one of her long-standing collaborators, Michael Thompson, is primarily responsible), *Culture and Climate*, and *Institutionalized Risks*. Of the thirteen chapters in the book (all papers published after 1993), those in the second and third parts are also written in collaboration with different scholars, which creates a unique, almost dialogical, atmosphere. This also makes this volume an example of a successful collaborative effort by Douglas and eleven other scholars (twelve, if one includes Fardon) – a splendid opportunity to reformulate

and rethink concepts and ideas very much related to our lives and daily concerns. For example, when discussing approaches to climate change, in the article originally published in *Daedalus* in 2003, Douglas, Thompson and Marco Verweij conclude:

Does global warming put the future of the world at risk? Is time running out? Or should we take our time in order to investigate and evaluate soberly the possible risks presented by greenhouse gases?

We don't have answers to these questions. But our cultural theory teaches us that vigorous debate among rival perspectives is the best way to address them. That is because the issue of global warming will never be resolved simply by making a rational choice on strictly scientific grounds. It is a battle, as well, between groups of actors with different perceptions of time that derive from conflicting ways of organizing and justifying social relations (Fardon 2013: 144).

This is a very good example of the critical analysis that takes into account different actors' perspectives and points of view. This also shows that answers to some of the more complex questions of our time sometimes demand a step back, away from heated polemical arguments. For the world in which we live is too important and too fragile to be left to people screaming at each other. Perhaps the important first step could be listening **w**hat different actors have to say. Critical considerations of risk in different institutional settings not only make for new applications of the "group/grid" analysis but in many instances (like studying terrorism from a Cultural Theory perspective) seem perhaps even more appropriate and fruitful today than when originally published. The same probably goes for Douglas's plea (or stating the obvious) that we have had enough about 'traditional culture,' because there is 'no such thing as traditional culture' (Fardon 2013: 285).

The second volume, *A Very Personal Method*, presents twenty-five chapters (including two interviews), in five parts plus an *Epilogue*, almost from Douglas's entire career (the earliest paper reprinted here was originally published in 1959). This volume offers valuable insights into the development of her main ideas, as well as her ongoing theoretical debates with some of her contemporaries. For example, Kuper notes that, even with their ideological disagreements, Leach for a time referred to the 'Leach-Douglas theory of taboo' (2014: 123). This book includes some of the gems of Douglas's anthropological writing and argumentation and, more importantly, brings to contemporary readers some valuable papers that are not very easy to find in their original publications. It also nicely combines personal narratives (including essays on her father, as well as on her grandmother – as we all are very much determined by the families that we come from and societies in which we live) with skilful portraits of some contemporary anthropologists (Part 4, *Contemporaries: Steiner, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, and Clifford Geertz*). Part 3, *Taboo and Ritual*, although one of the briefest in terms of space, will be of particular interest to anyone interested in understanding her ideas about the key concepts of her research, as they were formulated in three papers published between

1964 and 1968. Of course, some historical considerations are still vital – like the fact that Douglas was very much annoyed by what she perceived to be the Second Vatican Council’s “anti-ritualist” position.

These two volumes present her as very much our contemporary, and explain why she was, according to Fardon, the most widely read British social anthropologist of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fittingly enough, especially given the topics that they cover, both of the volumes finish with two beautiful “Endpieces” – the first one, with Oscar Wilde’s “Selfish Giant,” and the second one, with the Brothers Grimm’s “Golden Fish”. Perhaps the last sentence in the second one can be applied to illustrating the presence of the concepts that Mary Douglas developed in her anthropological career spanning sixty years: ‘And there they live to this very day’ (p. 308).

## References

- Bošković, Aleksandar. 2010. *Kratak uvod u antropologiju. [A Brief Introduction to Anthropology.]* Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk.
- 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.* London: Barrie & Rockliff, Cresset Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1995. Demonology in William Robertson Smith’s Theory of Religious Belief. In William Johnstone (ed.), *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 274-292.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, and Finn Sivert Nielsen. 2013. *A History of Anthropology.* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Pluto.
- Kuper, Adam. 2014. *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The British School in the Twentieth Century.* 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London: Routledge.
- Leach, Edmund (ed.). 1967. *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism.* ASA Monographs, 5. London: Tavistock.

ALEKSANDAR BOŠKOVIĆ

*University of Belgrade and Institute of Social Sciences (Serbia)*