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Book Review: Mary Douglas: Understanding Social Thought and Conflict by Perri 6 and Paul Richards

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Perri 6 and Paul Richards. *Mary Douglas: Understanding Social Thought and Conflict*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. xiv + 241 pages. Paperback, \$34.95.

Perri 6, a Professor of Public Management in the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London, and Paul Richards, a former Professor of Anthropology at University College London, have collaborated across disciplines to articulate Mary Douglas's grand theory of human organization based on the collected works of her lifetime. Dividing her work life into three periods, the authors chronologically explore how each stage in the development of her ultimate theory built upon earlier work to result in a neo-Durkheimian institutional theory that can account for the role of ritual in shaping and attenuating conflict. The authors feel that this work is timely in that Douglas's schema offers "a way out of the difficulties attending both postmodernist and rationalist optimizing approaches" (p16) in which they see the current social sciences mired. In the process, they attempt to rehabilitate her reputation from the damage done by her 1982 collaboration with Aaron Wildavsky (*Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*) and her shifts between disciplines.

As an anthropologist, I was familiar with Douglas's early work grounded in the ethnographic work among the Lele of Africa (formerly Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and her best known monograph based on that fieldwork, *Purity & Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). I was pleased to see how she continued to develop her theories of institutions and religions beyond the anthropological cannon and to learn that her work remains popular with political scientists, organizational theorists, and economists. Even her later work on the Hebrew Bible expanded upon how institutions can shape thought among their adherents and explored the implications of how social organization foments and addresses conflict. Central to all of Douglas's theoretical investigations is the belief that all social

organizations can be defined somewhere on the axes of social regulation and social integration, leading to four distinct types: hierarchical, isolate, enclave, and individualistic. The symbology of the people within these institutions reflect the concerns of the institutions and ritual, both formal and informal, is used to maintain categories that are useful in supporting a worldview. For Douglas, coming of intellectual age against the backdrop of the demise of structural-functionalism, it was important to maintain that the causal relationship between institution (structure) and culture (ideas) remained focused on how institutional forms shaped culture or thoughts, not the other way around. Her concern with cross-cultural and cross-epoch comparison led her away from an anthropological audience, though all of her work remains grounded in the traditions of the discipline. Her later work on risk became her avenue to political sciences and sociology, where she further developed ideas about how the four elementary types of institutions interact, adopting strategies from cybernetic theory concerning positive and negative feedback and grafting those onto Durkheim's concepts of collective effervescence and sacred contagion to begin exploring conflict. In her later years, she turned to the Hebrew Bible as a way to explore how different institutional types attenuate and exacerbate conflict with interesting political ramifications for a world in which extremism and radicalism is having greater and greater impacts.

The authors explain well the theoretical parallels in Douglas's diverse subject matter. The authors' attention to theoretical detail allows them to build a case for how Douglas was influenced by and moved beyond those theorists to make a meaningful, significant contribution to social science as a whole. Their discussion of the application of her theory to contemporary problems holds promise. As a history of science, this makes for fascinating reading. Too often, we act as if theories spring forth fully-formed like Athena from the head of Zeus but 6 and

Richardson contextualize Douglas's intellectual growth over time and throughout disciplines, culminating in a cohesive, overarching theory that allows for comparison of groups across time and space. While the authors address Douglas's critics at each stage, this may be the first time this grand theory has been articulated fully as part of a Douglassian school and so it remains to be seen how it withstands the, hopefully, empirical test of time. This book reflects a larger shift in the ethos of the social sciences as more emphasis is being placed upon the scientific nature of our collective enterprise and data-driven analysis displaces humanistic exploration at the center of anthropology in its place among other social sciences. The audience for this book may be limited by the fact that it requires a good grasp on the development of social science theory that transcends solely anthropology but will be useful for scholars looking to expand their repertoire of concepts for understanding conflict and graduate students looking to learn about the conditions that produce knowledge. Mary Douglas did not shy away from adopting strands from a wide variety of disciplines and honing them towards a theory that could explain much of the human condition. This magpie-like tendency may have alienated her contemporaries from following her work through all its varied subject matter but ultimately may have led to a theory that transcends a single discipline.

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