

## Book Review

**PERRI 6 and PAUL RICHARDS, *Mary Douglas: Understanding Social Thought and Conflict*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2017, 256 pp. (pb £24).**

Anthropologist Mary Douglas passed away in 2007, leaving an intellectual legacy few could surpass. Born in 1921, she studied anthropology at Oxford under the supervision of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and conducted her DPhil fieldwork from 1949 to 1950 amongst the Lele in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Over the course of her life, Douglas wrote for both popular and academic audiences, and although her work has at times been intensely controversial, Perri 6 and Paul Richards contend that she has been underappreciated in her own field, writing that 'today, even in disciplines to which Douglas made her major contributions, surprisingly few scholars know her work in detail or of why it continues to matter for the future of the social sciences' arguing that 'the overall scope and importance of her work has been missed' (p. viii). The authors both had the pleasure of knowing Douglas personally, and thus offer insights not only into her intellectual oeuvre, but also on her personal thoughts regarding her work. The authors aim to show that despite criticisms that Douglas' contributions were discordant, she maintained a constant interest and attention to particular thematic concerns throughout her career. Although she rarely explicitly stated her arguments in her work, she constantly returned to questions she had identified early in her academic career, namely, questions concerning how social organisation influences conflict.

The chapters are organised chronologically, from Douglas' ethnographic work amongst the Lele to her latest (and final) work in the early 2000s. The first chapter focuses on Douglas' work from the 1950s through the 1960s, with a particular focus on her ethnographic monograph, *The Lele of the Kasai*. While her developments in theory are far better known than her ethnographic contributions, she drew from her material on the Lele throughout her career to test her theoretical hypotheses. The authors then turn to focus on the middle period of her academic career from 1970 through to the 1980s in the second chapter. During these formative years, she developed the typology of the universal elementary forms of social organisation with which she would use to further her theoretical interests, particularly regarding the ways in which social organisation structures and influences thought. Beginning in the 1960s, Douglas argued that social organisation shapes cognition, thus problematising earlier theories that suggested the opposite (p. 48). She further argued that there are only limited variations in the foundational forms of social organisation, and posited that it was the shape of the organisation that contributed to cognitive styles. In particular, she argued that organisation shapes thought through ritual, and over the course of the 1970s, her work was primarily directed towards ritual and the ways in which symbols were affected by social organisation.

The authors further trace her work through the 1980s, charting her increasingly multidisciplinary reach. In the 1980s she turned to a more comprehensive analysis of risk and took up an interest in consumption. By the 1990s, however, she had refocused her earlier theories in an attempt to extrapolate on conflict. 6 and Richards, by explaining Douglas' work on institutions, attempt to demonstrate the importance of certain key contributions that Douglas formulated during this period. In particular, Douglas argued that the forms of social organisation she identified resonated within all disciplines in the social sciences. In doing so, Douglas attempted to break down the disciplinary barriers between fields. Despite her multidisciplinary aims, however, she maintained throughout her life that she was an anthropologist first and foremost, and insisted on the relevance of ethnographic evidence in order to support her theories (p. 145).

Chapter Four examines the significance of Douglas' later contributions, particularly her

Emilia Groupp  
BOOK REVIEW

work on ancient Israel in relation to conflict. Using biblical materials, she approached anthropological questions on kinship, ritual, and conflict, as well as furthering her contributions to institutional theory. In the final chapter, the authors summarise Douglas' contributions, drawing out and tying together the themes that run throughout Douglas' corpus. The authors make a strong argument for the continuing relevance of her work to contemporary anthropological theory, as well as to the broader social sciences as a whole, and pinpoint how Douglas' theories make up for other theories of conflict that have all but fallen short (p. 188). The authors show how her arguments were the result of a lifetime of work and, in their words, 'the ways in which each stage [in her work] left gaps or opened up questions that she would only later be able to resolve' (p. 176). Finally, they set out a research agenda for social scientists in order to apply the theoretical groundwork developed by Douglas.

The authors argue that her main contribution 'represents the most ambitious attempt made in recent decades to demonstrate the explanatory potential of the Durkheimian programme' (p. 211). Yet, their book clearly establishes that her contributions to multiple fields within the social sciences is perhaps the most notable mark of her intellectual legacy. Throughout the book, they attend to responses to Douglas' work (including criticisms). They implore readers to study her work in full in order to grasp the complexity of her arguments, the development of her theories, and the political context that affected the reception of her work. The authors are able to skillfully synthesise Douglas' wide range of material, making clear her most important theories. In sum, this volume provides a roadmap to Douglas' work, and is highly relevant for anyone interested in social organisation, institutional theory, multidisciplinary approaches to conflict, and Durkheimian theory.

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### **About the Author**

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