

INTRODUCTION

How cultures precipitate risk and resolution

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Mary Douglas (1921–2007) was the most widely read British anthropologist of the second half of the twentieth century. Her writings continue to inspire researchers in numerous fields in the twenty-first century.¹ This volume of thirteen essays, not previously collected, were published in the final decade and a half of Mary's life; many of them were co-authored, and the remainder are collaborative in other respects; they demonstrate the development of a 'cultural theory of institutions', for short 'cultural theory', from the 'grid and group' analysis Mary Douglas first detailed in *Natural Symbols* in 1970. From the outset of this theoretical endeavour, perhaps thinking along the lines of Emile Durkheim's *Année sociologique* school, she sought to surround herself with a group of like-minded thinkers who would extend the power and applications of the model. Because the history of the theoretical approach is itself a recurrent topic of these collected chapters, I can be brief in introduction (see also Fardon 1999 for developments to the late 1990s).

Cultural Theory

Although 'grid and group' analysis began as a relatively static comparative schema – designed to align diverse ethnographic instances along the two axes of group pressure to conformity, and the stringency of the grid of rules governing classification and conduct – in application to contemporary western societies the schema soon became more dynamic. The book Mary edited in 1982, under the title *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*, presented a collection of her collaborators' ideas. These were to be employed in her own close collaboration with Aaron Wildavsky in their monograph on the perception of risks in the USA, particularly the heightened perception of risk that correlated with membership of environmental organizations they dubbed sectarian. *Risk and Culture*, published in 1982, caused quite a rumpus since some reviewers took the view that its argument amounted to blaming the victims for their sense

of being put at risk by the big battalions of business and government. In an attempt to specify the argument more carefully, Mary wrote *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*, published three years after *Risk and Culture*, emphasizing that her theories concerned the perception and not the actuality of risks (although a strong sociological position in the theory of knowledge made it difficult to explain how ‘actuality’ would be calculable from a view unbiased by ‘perception’). Mary’s concern with environmental risk, and particularly with its perception, was already longstanding. Before he became the long-serving Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Jonathan Benthall held the same position at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), for some years the must-visit venue for any Londoners keeping abreast of the latest developments in contemporary culture in a very broad sense. The theatre director and polymath Jonathan Miller, then a council member of the ICA, had suggested an invitation to Mary Douglas to speak on environmental risk, and she did so in 1970, concluding that in terms of social perception of it, ‘each environment [is] a mask and support for a certain kind of society’ (Douglas 1999: 217; personal communication, Jonathan Benthall, 20 September 2011). She hardly departed from this view over the next four decades, adding to it a particular concern with crises when voices are raised about hazards, and arguments polarize. These are references picked up in the title of this collection: cultures and crises. Contemporary concerns, particularly panics, are refracted through ‘thought styles’ characteristic of the broader cultural contexts of those who urge their pre-occupations upon us; the biases of ‘their’ culture (and this applies to us all, whoever ‘we’ are) are supported by the particular capacities and incapacities of their social institutions. Hence within all societies, and not simply between societies, debates between proponents of different institutional arrangements encourage different perceptions of: the urgency of risks, the need to resolve them, and the resolution to do so. The sub-title picks up this double sense of resolution as both ‘solution’ and ‘resolution’ to pursue it.

The essays in Part 1 detail, in brief compass, the development of cultural theory and, the first three chapters particularly, look at the lessons of cultural theory for the conception and constitution of the person. These thoughts belong to the same period of composition as the inaugural series of the Aaron Wildavsky (1930–93) Distinguished Lectures in Public Policy which Mary delivered together with the political scientist Steven Ney (Douglas and Ney 1998). The overall drift of Mary’s thought is to revisit classical anthropological ideas of culturally variable personhood, which would have been at home in her comparative project to map grid and group, and to reinscribe them as ideal, or literally caricatural types of persons, or tendencies of persons, that are co-present within societies. Around this time she was much taken with the series of cartoons created

by Christian Brunner as illustrations for a pamphlet illustrating risk contagion by the physicist Serge Prêtre, *Nucléaire symbolisme et société: contagion mentale ou conscience de risques?* (Prêtre and Brunner 1991; Douglas and Ney 1998, figures 4 & 7; see pp. 59–60 in this volume), so taken by them in fact that they appeared regularly in her PowerPoint presentations and publications over the next decade.²

Images, anecdotes and tales always played a large part in Mary Douglas's presentations, and from this one might fairly infer in her own style of thought as well. The cover to this volume of her essays, like several others of her books, is illustrated by her sister Pat Novy. This illustration is from a mural Pat created for a new-build, post-Second World War school (see Fardon in Douglas 2013: 2–3 for details). Like her other murals of the period (she was commissioned to paint five, one of which is currently lost), it depicts the kind of stories and characters likely to have animated the sisters' childhoods in the 1920s and 1930s. 'The Selfish Giant' is based on a story written by Oscar Wilde, or it has been claimed his wife, that tells how a giant returned to find his garden invaded by children whom he chased out, erecting a fence. In response to his actions, the seasons ceased to change and the garden became a wilderness until he was redeemed by his affection for one of the children, breaking down the fence and allowing the children back in to play. The seasons resumed, the giant was fulfilled, and the child transpired to be a Christ-like infant who promised him entry to the heavenly garden of paradise. In several ways, this is a perfect illustration of Mary's ideas: mixing only with other giants formed the character of the Selfish Giant. His behaviour was punished both by Nature and by God, as happens automatically on breach of a taboo. His reformed behaviour led to inclusion within a hierarchy consisting not only of the living but also the souls of the saved.

Reminiscent of the Oscar Wilde story in their directness, Christian Brunner's caricatures invite their own tales of predisposition and contest on which Douglas drew in the fourth essay included in this Part, which offers a bare-bones summary of the four-quadrant model of institutional preference in cultural theory (illustrating hierarchical, competitive, enclaved, and isolated positions).

Culture and climate

The first three essays of Part 2 are fully collaborative; indeed Mary's is not always the dominant voice in them. We can see the implications of cultural theory explored and the theory itself being extended in the course of the essays, as it had been already in the volume by Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, which claimed the title of 'cultural theory' for a stretched version of grid and group analysis made processual by arguing for

the simultaneous co-presence of two, or even all, of the outlooks of the four quadrants in most areas of contention (1990; for later development see, for instance, Thompson 2008; Hendriks 2010).

‘Human needs and wants’ extends the themes of the essays in the previous Part by relating variability in personhood, and critique of the neo-classical economists’ model of the person, to the policy need for fairness when considering who bears the costs of environmental policy, and how to balance constraints on economic growth in the interests of the environment against efforts to alleviate poverty and meet desires. The next pair of essays might be read as successive takes on the same argument. The authors of ‘Is time running out?’ highlight wide variations in people’s willingness to recognize and address issues of climate change. Why do perceptions of the robustness of our planet, the impact upon it of human actions, and the reliability of our modelling the relations between the two, differ so widely? The answer is framed by the different positions, as defined by the quadrants of cultural theory, from which commentators speak. An enlarged team of co-authors extend this line of thought in the next essay to ask how occupants of different positions can be made to align or coordinate their understandings and activities sufficiently to produce environmental policy. This opens what has been one of the major more recent developments of cultural theory designed to take on the messiness of real-world problems and of real-world responses to them. Problems that are complex do not allow simple solutions. This much would be banal, but complexity here is understood not only to describe the problems in themselves. Indeed, the idea of ‘problems in themselves’ is itself problematic, since speaking from different institutional positions implies, from a cultural theoretic perspective, perceiving different problems. Forming an alliance for action hence depends on a clumsy solution that draws proponents together on a course of action that in some way combines their different understandings of what is at issue, and what can be done about it. Three of the authors, Christoph Engel, Michael Thompson and Marco Verweij, have written a Postscript to Part 2 of this collection, explaining where this kind of understanding might take policy, and what kinds of predictions it has proved capable of making (for further examples, see Verweij and Thompson 2006).

The last paper in this Part is also among the last Mary wrote, an address to the Congress of the German Sociology Association which returns to two familiar inspirations, the philosopher Nelson Goodman and the Lele of the Kasai at the time she studied them at the turn of the 1940s, to ask whether an aesthetic notion of repleteness can be applied to the relationship between a unit of organization, at whatever level, and the environment it occupies.

Institutionalized risks

Part 3 presents five essays on different aspects of risk culture: the first asks, with some amusement, not how we judge the reliability of the Risk Prevention Officer, the professional charged with risk assessment, but how that Risk Officer ought to judge his or her job prospects. This paper was initially published in French, but Mary revised it to serve as a talk for new graduates in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, hence the centrality she gave to the hapless figure of the, presumably newly-graduated, applicant risks manager. All institutions have to manage risks. But only some do so by taking overall institutional responsibility for them, and for the person whose job it is to assure compliance with risk policy. Others may marginalize the Risk Officer, and hence the sphere of activities of that post. Mary recalls a university department which posted a notice to the risks manager quoting St Paul. The quotation is not in her essay, but perhaps Pennsylvania graduates know their New Testament well, or she ad-libbed it.

For we hear that there are some which work among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busy bodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. (Paul, 2 *Thessalonians* 3, verse 11–12)

Not for the first time, Douglas recommends the hierarchical setting for its incorporation of risk management, taking the opportunity to draw upon Christopher Hood's (1998) application of grid and group theory to the management of public affairs while also dismissing Ulrich Beck's influential *Risk Society* as highly selective in its picking of apocalyptic risks, and riding on the wave of western disenchantment with modernity.

The second essay might seem distant from Mary Douglas's usual interests in that it interrogates the consequences of our increasingly frequent interactions with automated risk management technologies. Yet, as the main author Michalis Lianos makes clear in a postscript written for this volume, the important implication of cultural theory for the areas of automated control central to his own interests lies in the prediction that there will continue to be varied perceptions of/reactions to even the most technically sophisticated modes of management of information about populations, because the opinions of those occupying the four quadrants of the cultural theory model will not cease to be in contest with one another.

The third essay, co-authored with Gerry Mars, who also provides a brief postscript, applies cultural theory's understanding of the 'enclave' institutional quadrant to contemporary concerns with terrorism. The point here is not just to place terrorist enclaves within a single quadrant of the cultural theory map but, by reinscribing the four cultural theory variants within the enclave quadrant, to ask about the effects on the *trajectory* of potentially extremist enclaved groups of the decisions made about the flow of information into and out of them, or succession to leadership within them. The upshot changes the static analytic type of sect or enclave into a more dynamic, branching series of trajectories triggered by successive decisions. In his postscript, Mars mentions the work of Emmanuel Sivan, of which Mary thought highly, and I have added her epitome of this work to a footnote (for a fuller account, see Almond, Appleby and Sivan 2003).

In the context of a methodological critique of a survey of attitudes towards gun control in the United States, a fourth essay in this Part returns to a topic close to Mary Douglas's heart: the difficulty of getting a fair hearing for hierarchical organization. In fact, in spite of its title, the essay is concerned with also getting a fair hearing for other quadrants on the cultural theory map. How to operationalize the cultural theory variables so that attitudes on a particular subject (in this case, whether fire arms should be controlled in the US) can be differentiated according to a disposition towards what this essay calls 'individualist', 'isolate', 'hierarchical' and 'egalitarian' cultures, and how to do so objectively proved a methodological challenge not met by the piece of work she scrutinizes.

The concluding essay applies cultural theory to debates in development to argue that concepts of 'traditional culture' are not simply meaningless in explanatory terms, but actively forestall understanding of the role of culture in development. The essay brings us full circle back to Amartya Sen's analysis of poverty that Douglas addressed in the first essay in this collection, and to the Human Development Index (HDI) explored as a, relatively, more culturally sensitive index of poverty in Chapter 5. But for all the progressive intentions behind the HDI and other wider measures of human well-being, which Douglas argues have recognized inherent human sociality, there still remains the task of fully integrating a conception of culture, which has only slipped in through the 'back door'. Taking on board the version of cultural theory urged by some of her collaborators, which rests on the co-presence of competing versions of culture, Douglas ends by warning against the ills of cultural impoverishment, whether or not dubbed 'traditional', that restrict the scope for economic development and hence risk cultural failure or breakdown. Healthy cultures are plural cultures.

In the final analysis, these essays belong to a single, albeit developing, argument. Negatively, the argument is about the indispensability of social and cultural context for understanding human activity, and hence the inadequacy of a-social, a-cultural or otherwise invariant accounts of human

persons. Positively, it is an argument in search of a method that will capture what is most significant about social and cultural variation in the most objective fashion. These late essays, all conceived on the basis of collaborative discussion whatever their authorship, chart the culmination of Mary Douglas's career-long concern with the ways in which our perceptions of danger in our social and natural environment support positions about the value of the institutions that organize us and hence move us to act on the basis of our own fears, or to resist action on the basis of others' fears that we do not share.

Notes

- 1 A companion volume to this, Mary Douglas *A Very Personal Method: Anthropological Writings Drawn from Life*, edited by Richard Fardon (Sage, 2013), collects occasional essays written throughout her career to demonstrate the sources of her creativity, both theoretical and literary. The longer works of Mary Douglas's later career were predominantly in the fields of Old Testament Studies and literary theory; I provide a bibliography and discussion in Fardon (2010).
- 2 The original pamphlet has been translated into English and is available, at the time of writing, as a download at www.second-fire.ch/downloads/07_atomsymb_en.PDF

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