

# Life as Fashion Parade: The Anthropology of Mary Douglas

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I had better begin my review of Mary Douglas' *Implicit Meanings*<sup>1</sup> by justifying my title, which might otherwise seem unjustly sneering. If we like to divide human activities into "work" and "play", fashion parades are distressingly both and neither. People strain for the glory of leisure. Can fashion then be linked with art and sport as an exacting celebration of the human capacity for spontaneous creativity? It lacks surely their moral pretensions, appealing with crude honesty to envy, vanity, and the pursuit of the ephemeral. Yet in the concept of fashion and the event of the fashion parade are certain resemblances to the presuppositions of social anthropology, particularly as expressed in the work of Professor Douglas. They remind us sharply that culture is something made by people, and that choice can bring change, indeed that change should be seen as part of the nature of culture. Again, each set of fashions must, like a culture, have a certain internal consistency, partly explicit, partly implicit. Then, in fashion as in culture, the distinctions which we can make readily enough between the aesthetical, the ethical, and the utilitarian become difficult to apply in practice. Culture, like fashion, is first tailored to the human body and then in turn affects our perception of it.

This metaphor criticises, as well as elucidating, social anthropology. Inevitably, social anthropology tends to stress the autonomy and specificity of cultures, and thus tends to blur our perception of the underlying unity of human nature. Inevitably, too, social anthropology is attracted to the analysis of the more elaborate and formal patterns of human doing and thinking, kinship terminologies, the etiquette of gift exchange, ritual and mythology, neglecting the more formless and unspecific aspects of human behaviour. Hence, anyone living in a Western country, and knowing traditional societies only through the books by anthro-

<sup>1</sup> *Implicit Meanings, Essays in Anthropology*, by Mary Douglas, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1975, page 325, £7.50

pologists, tends to slide towards a new romanticism in which they are seen as primarily concerned with the production of arbitrary and delightful events. This is a healthier view, of course, than the one in which they are seen as totally static, or as so overwhelmed by problems of immediate subsistence as to have no creative power, but, still, it is a distorting mirror. The solution, is not to break the distorting mirror but to balance it with other equally partial views. *Social anthropology cannot be an entire humanism*, which is not to say that it is of no significance in our understanding of humankind. Fashion parades or their equivalents—occasions when private world and public property, private property and public world, significantly relate—are, after all, a very significant aspect of living in different cultures, and the gift of sharply perceiving the significance of what is presented is an enviable one.

*Implicit Meanings* is a collection of essays and reviews already published. There is an interesting general Preface and useful Introductions to the three parts into which the book is divided, “The Implicit”, “Critical Essays”, and “The *a priori* in Nature”. Thus, the book does have a certain unity of theme, unlike some volumes of collected essays.

Professor Douglas does indeed spotlight the theme of the book as a whole in her Preface where she argues that Durkheim has not had the same impact as Marx or Freud because he did not take far enough his theory of the sociological origin of belief and ritual by applying it to the thought of Europe. She is prepared to carry through this revolution, declaring: “Surely now it is an anachronism to believe that our world is more securely founded in knowledge than one that is driven by pangolin power”,<sup>2</sup> and this is an attitude that is found elsewhere in the book, particularly in the more recently written essays. I shall try, and discuss this radical sociological relativism later; just now, readers deserve some kind of general view of the book.

The essays grouped under the heading “The Implicit” include both early studies which it is good to have easily accessible, such as “Social and Religious Symbolism of the Lele” and “Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism” and later more theoretical work, dealing in one way or other with questions of boundaries, “Pollution”, “Couvade and Menstruation”, “Heathen Darkness” (a foreshadowing of some of the ideas of *Natural Symbols*, as Pollution is of *Purity and Danger*.) “Do Dogs laugh?” (which in fact deals with the rather wider problem of the body as a means of

<sup>2</sup> Preface, page xxi

communication) and “Jokes”. This last paper seems to me to fall down through not distinguishing two types of explanation, one of the metaphysics of humour (which is, to me, where her explanation belongs, together with those she quotes from Bergson and Freud), and the other of actual joking in given social contexts. Dr Douglas justifies the grouping of these papers as being concerned with “foregrounding” and “backgrounding”, the processes by which particular items of knowledge are either chosen for stressing or quietly thrust out of notice. Historians of ideas and ideologies clearly have something still to learn from social anthropologists in general, and from Professor Douglas in particular on how this can take place, but also there is a certain difference between this and the actual act of knowing.

With the Introduction to the next part, “Critical Essays”, I find myself in almost total agreement. Professor Douglas repudiates both those anthropologists who study formal systems of classifications without concerning themselves with seeing how they are generated or kept in being and those who see symbolism as simply a cover for the struggle for power and prizes. “If the Dogon” considers the elaborate contrapuntal system of ideas unveiled by French anthropologists among the Dogon of Mali, and suggests that the method used by British anthropologists, of seeing how belief and rite are manipulated in the push-and-pull of everyday social life, would have complemented, rather than called in question, the discoveries of Griaule and his associates. The same problem, of the contrast between Anglo-Saxon and French theoreticians, comes out in the next paper, “The Healing Rite”, where V W Turner’s work on ritual healing is compared with that of Levi-Strauss. Here, Professor Douglas points out very fairly that the theories of an anthropologist will be, and should be, profoundly influenced by those prevailing in the society he is studying, but she does not stress, as she might, that what Levi-Strauss has written on ritual healing has been very largely based on other people’s fieldwork, not his own.<sup>3</sup> The next essay “The Meaning of Myth” takes a very critical look at Levi-Strauss’ analysis of myth. Here, Professor Douglas feels that the end of Levi-Straussian analysis is to produce a complexity of inversions and oppositions which has somehow got disconnected from the lived experience of the people to whom it belongs. “Humans Speak” on Professor Bernstein’s work indicates considerable admiration, since for Professor Douglas his work on the use of speech is a

<sup>3</sup> See the two essays, “The Sorcerer and His Magic” and “The Effectiveness of Symbols” which form chapters IX and X of *Structural Anthropology* by Claude Levi-Strauss, Penguin University Books, 1972.

quest, similar to hers, for the hidden implicit. Similar admiration for another French anthropologist, Louis Dumont, who has attempted to interpret the Hindu caste system as being a ranking based on purity/pollution rules rather than as either a frozen class system or an elaborate system of exchanging services between groups which, at any rate, at village level, are relatively equal, is again evident and understandable. A review of Castaneda's books is surprisingly sympathetic, brushing aside the question of their actual authenticity, and finding the accounts of training in hearing, seeing, and even dreaming, a needed stimulus for anthropologists.

The last part "The *a priori* in Nature" shows us how Professor Douglas' thinking has moved forward since *Natural Symbols*, rethinking what she said there and in *Purity and Danger*. It is also the part of the book in which her sociological relativism is most evident. "In the Nature of Things" seems to be an attempt to rehabilitate the concept of "grid" used in *Natural Symbols*, and enable it to be used to mark simultaneously the individual's experience of controlling, or being controlled by, others, and the degree to which his world is the public world of the society around him, or a private world of his own devising. "Environments at Risk" is an essay on ecologism, which makes some useful points, notably that even one's perception of the climate at a particular season of the year as being good or bad may be very considerably influenced by sociological factors. But this is also an essay which shows Professor Douglas at her rather glorious worst, playing with so many ideas that somehow the main thread is never revealed. She seems to be arguing both that ecologism is really a new set of taboos reflecting boundaries in our society of which we are unconscious, which surely is true, but she does not develop this by showing us where these boundaries are, and at the same time, that ecologists to put over their propaganda, must make a study of our society to see where they can anchor their warnings to particular boundaries. Now, of course, a particular line of argument may arise from a society's hidden boundaries, and yet be relatively ineffective because its expression is not sufficiently linked to the society's standardised neuroses, but in applying these points to ecologism, they surely need to be worked out in sequence and in much greater detail.

Undoubtedly, the two most interesting articles are the two final ones, "Deciphering a Meal" and "Self-Evidence", both of which return to themes treated already in *Purity and Danger*, even though "Deciphering a Meal" points forward to the work on the cultural determinants of nutritional choices with which Professor Douglas

has been more recently associated. "Deciphering a Meal" begins with an invocation of Roland Barthes and his studies of "sartorial encoding"<sup>4</sup> This is taken one step further, since if fashions can be decoded, so can meals. They too are structured events, in which each element is a word, which communicates a message when grouped with other words. This theme is sketched out with the swift-moving acuteness which is Professor Douglas' intellectual style. "Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance. Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we only know at drinks we know less intimately—There are smaller thresholds and half-way points. The entirely cold meal—would seem to be such a modifier. So those friends who have never had a hot meal in our home have presumably another threshold of intimacy to cross. The recent popularity of the barbecue and of more elaborated structured cocktail events which act as bridges between intimacy and distance suggests that our model of feeding categories is a common one"<sup>5</sup> Obviously, it is possible to crab this line of argument. The intimacy that goes with pints of beer may be much greater than that found at a working lunch between negotiators. Yet it opens up chances of going beyond long-established wisdom on the counterpointing of meat and wines, savoury and sweet.

The latter part of "Deciphering a Meal" and the whole of "Self-Evidence" are taken up with a rethinking of the argument in *Purity and Danger* as to the Old Testament food taboos being founded on the need of Hebrew culture for a highly coherent set of categories. Professor Douglas pays very careful attention to the work of Bulmer and Tambiah on Karam (New Guinea) and Thai animal categories.<sup>6</sup> She feels that basically her original argument stands, but that it has to be expanded. Her theory as expanded is that taboos, the boundaries they mark, and the mediators that cross them, all relate to the relations of exchange that exist within a society, or between societies. To argue that taboos are a reaction to the abnormal and anomalous is to return to the positions of the

<sup>4</sup> *Implicit Meanings*, page 249. The reference to Roland Barthes is to his *Systeme de la Mode*, Editions Seuil, Paris, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> *Implicit Meanings*, page 256-7

<sup>6</sup> These two important papers by Bulmer and Tambiah can most easily be found in a book of readings edited by Professor Douglas, *Rules and Meanings*, Penguin Modern Sociology, London, 1973. S J Tambiah's "Classification of Animals in Thailand" is on pages 127-166, R Bulmer's "Why the Cassowary is not a Bird" is on pages 167-193.

19th century, which explained nothing. To argue (and here she is evidently thinking of Levi-Strauss) that human thinking is necessarily dichotomous and that mediating figures or ideas are thrown up by an equally deep-rooted need to bridge dichotomy is ultimately pure assertion. It is more profitable to see how the boundaries and mediators of belief systems parallel the group boundaries and exchange relations, both economic and matrimonial, of the society. Here, it seems to me, Professor Douglas has succeeded rather well, not only in defending her own earlier position, but also in turning a lot of Levi-Strauss right side up. Levi-Strauss first made his reputation by his study of kinship systems as being systems of exchanging women in marriage. His later work on myths has been often enough subject to criticism on the ground that it too often (though not always) neglects the actual social context of the myths. If Professor Douglas' approach in "Self-Evidence" is as influential as it deserves to be, all studies of categories and transitions between categories will have to be looked at in relation to the system of exchanges of goods and persons prevailing in the society studied.

Certainly, this is a book which should have been published, and which ought to be read. What, then, of my complaint of her "radical sociological relativism?" This doctrine is very clearly proclaimed in the Preface. "The refusal to privilege one bit of reality as more absolutely real, one kind of truth more true, one intellectual process more valid, allows the original comparative project dear to Durkheim to go forward at last—Relativism is the common enemy of philosophers who are otherwise very much at odds with one another. To avoid its threat of cognitive precariousness, they shore up their theory of knowledge by investing some part of it with certain authority. For some there is fundamental reality in the propositions of logic or in mathematics. For others, the physical world is real".<sup>7</sup> Against all such claims, she advances with W. V. O. Quine "a theory of knowledge in which the mind is admitted to be actively creating its universe".<sup>8</sup> This relativism in no way disturbs Professor Douglas' religious faith. God for her, if not the Great Astronomer of the eighteenth century, is the Great Structuralist. "If these connections hold good and if this is how classification systems are shaped to social ends, how could the extraordinary destiny of the Jewish people

<sup>7</sup> *Implicit Meanings*, Preface xviii

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* The reference is to *Word and Object*, W V O Quine, M.I.T., U.S.A., 1960.

have been otherwise achieved? If you were God, could you devise a better plan?"<sup>9</sup>

I am no philosopher, but it seems to me that anybody who like Professor Douglas believes on the one hand in "a real personal God, existing outside nature and the human mind"<sup>10</sup> and on the other in a universally applicable method of analysing society is a rather dubious sort of relativist. Obviously, my cognition of the typewriter on which I am writing this is conditioned by my culture-given perceptions; but my cognition of it is in some way a trans-culturally valid one, just as my wearing glasses does not prevent me from having a physiologically effective knowledge of it. The rise of the psychological and social sciences has meant that any theory of knowledge must take cultural factors into account; but this is very far from being able to say that knowing takes place simply in the categories found in the culture of the knower. What seems to have happened for Professor Douglas and for other people too is that rules of method of social anthropology have been transformed first into necessary presuppositions and then into metaphysical absolutes. Cultural relativism was first of all surely recommended to anthropology students as a necessary restraint from instant moral condemnation and a means of entering into the minds of people with different values; it is a distortion to use it as a justification of moral nihilism or as a claim that peoples in different cultures live in closed and uncommunicating universes. Unhappily, the popularisation of social anthropology seems to be encouraging such views of cultural relativism, just as the popularisation of psycho-analytical thought has tended to discredit moral self-discipline.

The specific concern of social anthropology in its earliest days with societies that were, or seemed to be, utterly different from "us" has been a major factor in orienting anthropological interest towards human differences rather than human unity, and specifically those differences which are particularly unintelligible at the superficial level to outsiders, but which are equally particularly capable of formal analysis, such as kinship systems and ritual. One could of course consider the possibility of a re-orientation of anthropology to such topics as the way effective communication can take place between people of very different cultural background, but the search for the difference even in similarity is now so deeply embedded in social anthropology that it seems unlikely. This has probably been added to by the limited status long given

<sup>9</sup> *Implicit Meanings*, page 309. For a similar argument, see Preface pages xiv-xv

<sup>10</sup> I cannot give the exact source, but believe this quotation comes from Heine, in a letter written in 1850.

anthropology in universities. Those who have constantly to justify their own existence end by making their own speciality the alpha and omega of everything else. Hence, we cannot look to anthropology for the complete image of man as a whole, even though it can provide one set of very significant perspectives, just as the spread of the methods of fashion journalism to other kinds of news reporting has had a trivializing effect, even if it has also given a new eye for details. Life is not only a fashion parade; anthropology is not the only logos about anthropos.

I have said I am no philosopher, and certainly I am no theologian either; but I am a Catholic priest and an anthropologist, and it may perhaps interest some of my readers if I say how Professor Douglas' approach to anthropology relates to the way Christian anthropologists can relate their faith to their learning. Is Professor Douglas' theorising really radical Durkheimianism? Or is it a re-entangling of two strands of thought with a common origin which had drifted apart over the past hundred and fifty years?

One of the basic principles of social anthropology—perhaps even in a sense the basic principle—is the inter-relation of society and religion. Society is held together by ritual and belief, by, precisely, the non-rational elements in its systems of thought. Yet religion is equally dependent on society, being generated by the need for some absolute ground to sanctify the institutions and resolve the tensions of man in society. As held by many anthropologists, this view disposes of the question of the truth of religion by applying reductionism to it; religion is only a needed prop for society. Yet this argument seems to have been first worked out by the Christian critics of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre.<sup>11</sup> The positivism of Comte was an answer to this Christian stress on the need for the non-rational elements in human society, an answer that to a large degree accepted this particular Christian line of argument, while rejecting the metaphysics of Christianity. Durkheim, while much less prone than Comte to don the prophetic mantle was most of his academic life at grips with the same problem of providing absolute moral foundations for a secular society. Meanwhile, the line of Christian apologetic that stressed the relation between Christianity and society has more and more become the property of a particular kind of right-wing Catholic of the sort the French call *intégristes*. To me, both Durkheim and the *intégristes* seem to be engaging in intellectual suicide in different ways; Durkheim,

<sup>11</sup> See Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* and de Maistre's *The Nights of Saint Petersburg*. This argument is of course quite different from the much older and purely cynical one that religion is useful for keeping the poor in order.



in rejecting a metaphysical basis for morality, gives society ultimately a metaphysical role; the integristes end up by destroying the transcendental nature of Christianity, making it simply an aspect of society. Does Professor Douglas combine both these positions? If, with Durkheim, she regards social relations as ultimately metaphysical and moral, she is surely right. To claim that she, like the intègristes, sees the religion in which she believes not simply as working through certain cultural and social forms, but as being in some way absorbed into them, may seem severe, but there are certainly passages in this book which suggest it. Take for instance the comment on mysticism in the chapter "In the Nature of Things", which seems to include not only Oriental but Catholic mysticism; "such a person finds it especially hard to draw a line between man and nature. Evidently, we have located the vantage point where the distinction between man and beast is easiest to dismantle".<sup>12</sup> That is, moving apart from society necessarily means an identification with nature, without any question of the recognition of supernature as a significant religious category. As against this, I would argue that there exist great ranges of human experience, bodily, aesthetic, spiritual, which can be, indeed must be, perceived through sociologically-given categories, but are not reducible to them.

*Implicit Meanings* certainly does not fall within Orwell's category of good bad books, well-written trash. Perhaps it falls within a category of bad good books, in which the intellectual stimulus and bold explorations are outweighed by the questionable nature of the central ideas, or, to use a metaphor inspired by "Deciphering a Meal", a feast where rich ingredients and skilful cooking add up to a total pattern that disconcerts rather than satisfies. But then one's dissatisfaction comes because of the very skill with which Professor Douglas has clarified and drawn out certain received ideas in social anthropology. Ultimately, this book raises questions about the limitations and the metaphysics of social anthropology which need very hard thinking.

<sup>12</sup> *Implicit Meanings*, page 228. But surely even a contemplative hermit can have a relation with society not expressed in visible institutionalised forms.