



Introduction

This introduction provides brief biographical information and a short description of Mary Douglas' influence, before discussing the significance of her contributions to both explanatory and interpretive theory across the social sciences. We show how her work engages with some major traditions of social theory. We also introduce the main theoretical puzzles and research questions to which her work sought to develop answers, and the main concepts and themes she developed in order to answer them. These topics are addressed in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

Douglas' Life

Douglas was born Mary Tew in 1921, to a father who was a district commissioner in the Indian Civil Service and a mother from an Irish family. After her mother's death and her father's retirement, she became a boarder at the Sacred Heart Convent, a Catholic school for girls in Roehampton in 1933. In her later writings, the school would become an occasional point of reference in her accounts of hierarchy – one style of social organization that she regarded as of general importance, though quite incorrectly understood by many of the social sciences.

After a short spell in Paris to take a diploma consolidating her already fluent French, in which she conducted exchanges over many years with leading French intellectuals, she was admitted to Oxford in 1939 to read philosophy, politics and economics.

On leaving the university, she joined the Colonial Office, where her interest in anthropology was quickened. In 1947, she applied to Oxford again to read anthropology, which she studied under Edward Evans-Pritchard, and felt the last embers of influence of the outgoing *éminence grise*, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. Evans-Pritchard exercised

a profound influence upon her. Decades later, she would publish a short account of his work (Douglas, 1980). That book also remains invaluable for explaining the origins of many of her own intellectual concerns.

This return to her teacher's thought undoubtedly sharpened her own theoretical focus. Her fieldwork for her D.Phil. was conducted in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1949–50, among the Lele, a people living along the Kasai River. She visited the Lele again in 1953 to finalize her ethnographic monograph for publication, but thereafter returned only once in the 1980s. This was a short visit with momentous consequences for her thinking, as will be explained below.

In 1951, she married James Douglas, and they set up home in Highgate, where, apart from their sojourns in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, they lived until the last years of her life. James Douglas was an economist and a former civil servant who at that time had just been appointed to the Conservative Research Department. In 1970, he became its director. He played important roles in providing policy advice to the centrist 'modernizers' of that party under Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath, resigning in the mid 1970s when Margaret Thatcher became party leader. After that, he made significant contributions to the academic study of voluntary organizations.

In the same year (1951), Mary Douglas moved to University College London, where she remained until the late 1970s. Her work in the 1950s was dominated by her African ethnography. During the 1960s, she began to write extensively for some of the weekly general readership journals influential in Britain in that decade, such as *The Listener*. Those outlets enabled her not only to present her arguments to a wider public, but also to use a series of short pieces about ritual to develop arguments for subsequent book-length publication.

In the 1960s, she consolidated her move to comparative and theoretical work, toward which she had aspired from the late 1940s when she first studied anthropology. This was the decade in which she began to develop a particular and distinctive Durkheimian approach, building upon Evans-Pritchard's own idiosyncratic developments of Durkheim's insights, which freed them from the straitjacket of Radcliffe-Brown's static conception of discrete societies.

This phase of her work culminated in her 1966 book of comparative analysis, *Purity and Danger*. It remains her best-known, most cited, most quoted and most frequently excerpted work. The book is widely remembered, not only among anthropologists, for five things. Its slogan – 'as a social animal, man is a ritual animal' (Douglas, 1966,

63) – is well-known, although its significance is often insufficiently appreciated. Second, the book's examination of the idea of dirt is widely cited, using an ancient common definition of it variously attributed to Lord Chesterfield, Lord Palmerston and William James, yet often wrongly ascribed to Douglas herself (Fardon, 2013c) as 'matter out of place', which made dirt into a case of anomaly. Third, the book is recalled erroneously for having offered a theory of disgust. Douglas hardly refers to that word and she never thought of *Purity and Danger* as an account of emotions. Fourth, the work introduced many readers to a scaly tropical mammal, the pangolin, via Douglas' reanalysis of the Lele cult of the animal, which she explained as a solution to a problem about anomalies in classification. Finally, the book is remembered for its explanation of the abominations of the biblical book of Leviticus as ways in which things deemed anomalous in the classification systems of the people of ancient Israel were prevented by prohibitions from threatening the social organization and social distinctiveness of the Jewish tribes. Yet *Purity and Danger's* larger argument about the relationship between social structure and ritual is rarely recalled. Likewise, many readers failed to appreciate its methodological argument that if we are to see how social organization works, and notably how social organization cultivates particular ways of thinking, we need to track how anomalies are managed in specific social settings.

In 1970, she first presented her fourfold typology of elementary forms of social organization. The styles of thought cultivated in each of these forms would be basis of her method of comparative analysis. She continued to refine this typology over the next thirty-five years. The book *Natural Symbols*, in which the taxonomy was first set out, used some examples drawn from the ritual life of Irish Catholic communities living in Britain. Unfortunately, this led some readers to ignore the theoretical advance and to direct their fire at the case study material. She was disappointed that the theory of variation in elementary forms of social organization attracted little interest in anthropology itself. Although she worked diligently to produce her rigorous methodological template for its application in comparative anthropology, 'Cultural Bias' (1982a [1978]), her discipline responded with a shrug. By the 1980s, she began to use this scheme to present her arguments to other disciplines, and to address empirical problems of political conflict and religious sectarianism.

Political turmoil in the Congo and the demands of her own growing family ruled out further fieldwork among the Lele. Anthropologists sometimes look askance at those among their number who are no

longer active in fieldwork, but take up comparative generalization in its place. Yet the decline in the appeal of her writings to her fellow anthropologists in Britain after 1970 was not due only to the lack of fresh ethnographic observation. The intellectual fashions in the anthropology of the period circled variously around Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myth, historical theories inspired by Karl Marx, or a dense ethnographic particularism shunning comparison or ambitious general explanation. With none of these approaches did Douglas have much sympathy, and by the mid 1970s she was beginning to be bored by debating them in the discipline's journals. The publication of her (1975a) collection of ethnographic essays under the title *Implicit Meanings* marked a kind of summation of what to date had been a conventional anthropologist's career path and intellectual focus.

In the late 1970s, her attention shifted away from Africa. Building on her ethnographic work earlier in the 1970s on meals and on drinking behaviour, her 1979 book with an economist, Baron Isherwood, examined the social organization of consumption of both private and public goods in Britain and other developed economies, thus consolidating her growing commitment to straddling boundaries between anthropology and other social sciences. By the 1980s, she was engaging very directly with major normative political topics concerning environmental and technological risks. British anthropologists at that time paid rather little attention to these writings. By contrast, the growing cross-disciplinary community of researchers working on risk came by the mid 1980s to regard her as a major figure. Her treatment of risk as a political concept led to her work being taken seriously among psychologists studying risk perception and by political scientists too. What was not so obvious to these other disciplines was that her arguments were still grounded in her Durkheimian theory, which she now synthesized in a wholly fresh manner.

During the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s, there gathered around her a small cluster of people who would take her ideas into fields and disciplines far from her own interests. Some were her Ph.D. students, while others were established scholars simply attracted by her theories. Of those who continued to develop her legacy, four of those who worked with her in these years were especially important. Richard Fardon, who would later become her intellectual biographer (1999) and literary executor, continued to develop her Africanist anthropological concerns. In particular, in his work on societies formed from the fragments of nineteenth-century dislocation south of Lake Chad (today territory infiltrated by the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram), Fardon elaborated Douglas' Durkheimian concerns with

ritual agency as a tool for composing peace. Steve Rayner used her theory for his doctoral research on extreme political sects in Britain. He showed how her arguments could be used to understand why people working in different kinds of social organization would think very differently about the past and the future. Later, he became internationally renowned as an influential scholar of environmental risk, using Douglas' theory to explain the polarization of debates about climate change and threats from a wide range of technologies. Michael Thompson, perhaps the most ambitious theorist among the group of scholars attracted to her, supplied much of the dynamic theory of institutional change underpinning her theory of institutional cultivation of thought style and classification. Gerald Mars applied her arguments in industrial anthropology and in particular to the study of dishonesty and crime in the workplace, as well as extending and deepening her interest in meals, drinking and consumption.

Douglas was awarded a personal chair in anthropology at University College London in the 1970s, but in 1975–76, her husband, James, resigned from the Conservative Party Research Department ahead of the change in party policy and organization led by the then new leader, Margaret Thatcher, with which he disagreed. With their children now adults, the Douglasses were free to look abroad for new intellectual challenges. Like many British academics at the time, they were attracted to the United States. During a sabbatical as a visiting scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York in 1977–78, she had encountered the influential American political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, who had become the Foundation's president. He secured her appointment there as Director of Research on Culture. Unfortunately, Wildavsky himself was soon demoted by the trustees and lost influence over the Foundation's work, later resuming his academic career at the University of California at Berkeley. Douglas continued to work with him, and in 1982 they produced what would become the greatest scandal of her career, the 1982 book *Risk and Culture* (see below). Wildavsky went on to make great use of Douglas' theory and to work with Michael Thompson, even though the Wildavskian rendering of her concerns with practices of social organization often appeared to become a theory of worldviews and ideologies.

In 1981, she left the Foundation and accepted the Avalon chair in the humanities at Northwestern University on the lakeside outskirts of Chicago. Her role there was to work on comparative religion. Although her writings about religion in the United States from the 1980s are not usually counted among her major writings, these papers

laid the basis for the turn she made in the 1990s, in retirement, to applying her anthropological theory and method to the understanding of ancient Israel, as presented in the books of the Hebrew Bible. In the 1980s, she challenged leading figures in the sociology of religion such as Peter Berger, whose theory of secularization she regarded as ill-founded. Equally importantly, her work in that decade began to return to following Durkheim's own methodological argument that religion provides not only a central case for understanding social organization and human thought more generally, but that its institutions also provide people with models of how to organize and think, that are replicated in secular and everyday settings.

There then appeared what was perhaps her most important single book, *How Institutions Think* (Douglas, 1986). Although it was written immediately before retirement, with the appearance of a final major statement, she commented that it might have been better had she written it many years before her other books, for then her whole oeuvre might have been better understood. The monograph laid out the general theoretical basis of her Durkheimian account of social causation. At the time, few people in her now scattered and disconnected readerships – in anthropology, risk research, political science and the sociology of religion – understood its significance. Perhaps she compounded the problem of the work's reception by addressing a new potential audience as yet unfamiliar with her work, seeking connections for her own neo-Durkheimian theoretical framework among the sociologists and historians of science, Ludwig Fleck, Robert Merton and Thomas Kuhn.

Soon after her retirement from Northwestern University in 1985, she returned to Britain, and to recognition in her former department at University College London as professor emerita. Her final twenty-two years, freed from academic routine, were perhaps her most productive.

One strand of her work was to develop the theory underlying the fourfold typology of basic forms of institutions and thought styles that had preoccupied her since 1970 and that had organized her arguments about risk, danger and blame. She cultivated scholars across several countries to make use of her approach, but their diverse interests, methods, disciplinary roots and geographical locations made it very difficult for them to form a coherent Douglasian school.

Douglas remained at heart an anthropologist and was wont to say her theories would amount to nothing unless they passed ethnographic scrutiny. This may have been a recognition of a blow landed upon her in the late 1960s by one of the most influential critics of *Purity*

and Danger, Melford Spiro. Reviewing the book in 1968 for a leading journal, the *American Anthropologist*, Spiro had taken her to task on two counts. First, he had suggested that she had not grounded her analysis in a sufficiently thoroughgoing theory of symbolism. Second, he criticized her for failing to provide sufficient empirical justification for her claims.

The first criticism surely left her unmoved. Spiro was interested in psychoanalysis and symbolic archetypes. Her own concerns were closer to those of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who sought to understand meanings through appreciation of the contexts within which words are used, and whose arguments she anthologized in her book of readings for use in teaching anthropologists, *Rules and Meanings* (Douglas, 1973a). What mattered to her was how rituals are to be understood in the shared contexts in which they are performed and through the shared understandings they cultivate. Spiro's other criticism of lack of empirical grounding would have seemed more damaging, because it implied that her ethnography was insufficient. Her account of the workings of the Lele pangolin cult was, in effect, judged to be too skimpy.

What was to be done? Further work in Central Africa was impractical. But a brief visit to the Lele immediately after her retirement in 1987 helped open up a new avenue of empirical enquiry. Most unexpectedly, and in ominous anticipation of the later killings in Rwanda, she encountered the Lele consumed by a witch-finding purge led by two Catholic priests. This, she saw, was a collectively effervescent reaction to years of civil war and economic immiseration. But how could priests – who might be expected to have some expertise in the ritual composition of social understanding – have come to the point of leading such a violent purge? Sympathetic colleagues in religious studies, intrigued by her earlier speculations in *Purity and Danger* on the Book of Leviticus, pointed her towards an era of history when priests had been similarly involved in responding to passionate political excess, but in a very different manner from that which she had observed on her return to the Lele. This was the period of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, around 500 years BCE. Now an empirical opportunity beckoned, if only by proxy. Wryly aware that she no longer had to endure the privations of life in a raffia palm hut, she worried that she might be considered to be no more than an anthropologist on holiday in the bible (Douglas, 1999b, v). But aided by several distinguished scholarly mentors, she accepted the challenge to develop the scholarly skills appropriate to a new kind of ethnographic analysis with astonishing vigour and seriousness.

This new ethnographically grounded study focused on the theme of social conflict and reconciliation. She used several books of the Hebrew Bible as sources of data about ritual and priestly politics among the people of ancient Israel. The series of books she produced during the 1990s and the early 2000s did much more than apply the theory that she had already developed to biblical history. More importantly, she returned to her debates with the structuralists of the 1960s who analysed myth and language and literature, and especially to the work of Roman Jakobson. This involved her in examining the structure of the composition of the Books of Numbers, and Leviticus, examining what work their distinctive literary forms might perform. She showed that the form was indeed the message. Literary form, and the compositional challenges it set, modelled dilemmas of social conflict. Relating this to her interest in social explanation, she used her understanding of relations between priesthood, sect, sacrifice and purification in ancient Israel to present an argument about the social uses of ritual invention, and the peculiar contribution of hierarchy to conflict containment and resolution.

This body of work brought her new readers in biblical studies, whose links with other sections of her readership across the social sciences were even more tenuous than those linking risk researchers with sociologists of religion. It was hardly surprising, then, that only a few scholars had a sufficient range of interest to appreciate the tightly integrated character of her thought, as it ranged across her apparently disparate studies on witchcraft, taboo, classification, consumption, eating and drinking, risk, blame, institutions, 'culture', religion, ring composition and the roles of priests.

By the 1990s, poststructuralist ideas were dominant in much of anthropology. Douglas' critiques of Geertz and Clifford and other advocates of such approaches made little headway, although *Purity and Danger* continued to be cited. Ironically, it was even taken up in a strangely recast form by the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva (1982 [1980]), whose arguments were in many other respects entirely antithetical to Douglas' own commitment to comparison across history and geography and to causal explanation. By the time of Douglas' death, researchers using her theoretical approach were to be found mainly among political scientists and others interested in political or organizational culture, or in the so-called 'new institutionalism'. For these researchers, the fourfold typology of elementary forms offered clear analytical appeal. Scholars in the field of religious studies found her arguments about ancient Israel highly stimulating, but were less interested in the theory of elementary forms of organization that she

claimed underpinned them. The rather sudden arrival of her discipline, anthropology, in the emergent and expansive field of peace and conflict studies then seemed to herald a new outlet, something she herself anticipated in her penultimate book, *Jacob's Tears* (2004b), a collection of essays ostensibly about the Bible, but implying a subtext of concern with the infamous pogroms in Rwanda and the African civil wars of the 1990s.

In the last months of her life, the efforts of a few of her friends resulted in Mary Douglas finally being made a Dame, the equivalent for women of a knighthood in the British system of state honours. The French newspaper *Le Figaro* wondered at the tardy public recognition of this great anthropologist in her own country. By now, she was already terminally ill. She died in May 2007, shortly after giving an interview to the British political weekly *The Spectator*, which was keenest to ask her what her theory had to say about ways to mitigate the threat of international terrorism. The answer she gave was 'listen to your enemies', which was immediately misunderstood as a call for negotiation. She meant to urge people to comprehend Islamic terrorism as ritual performance.

Why Douglas' Work Matters Today

Some readers may be wondering why, if these were Douglas' empirical interests, and they themselves have quite other ones, they need to pay any attention to her work. After all, to many social scientists, African agricultural peoples of the Congo and their taboos, meals and consumption, ancient Israel and biblical studies, ring composition and perhaps even the concept of risk itself may have seemed both ill-assorted and unrelated, and also at times too recondite to be of much general or practical interest. Why struggle with these curiosities when urgent public policy concerns or even matters of business relevance seem more pressing?

Our answer to this question is both large and blunt. We will show that Douglas was using these topics to develop a tightly integrated and yet constantly developing body of theoretical argument centrally focused on grappling with the nature of political conflict, the dynamics of religious radicalism and terrorism, the challenges of environmental and ecological security, and basic issues of human dignity.

Moreover, her work provides very distinctive answers to some of the most basic questions to be addressed in every piece of research in social science. Why do people think in the way that they do? What

does it mean to claim that someone is acting 'rationally'? Just what is an institution, and how great is the power of institutions relative to human agency?

First, she sought to provide a set of what might be called micro-foundations for a social science capable of explaining the full range of human social organization and thought styles. The required micro-foundations would be found in rethinking the core concepts of twentieth-century social theory, such as institutions, cognition, ritual and rationality. For this, she drew upon arguments and concepts first developed in Durkheim's writings. Yet she found that Durkheim's materials would have to be synthesized afresh if some of the problems and limitations to be found in his work were to be overcome. Her central Durkheimian argument was that the institutional forms of social organization and of disorganization shape and therefore causally explain 'thought styles', meaning the manners in which people classify, remember and feel. Thought style describes not what people believe, but the way in which they think with whatever they believe. For example, it captures such things as how rigidly people treat their classifications, how flexibly they accommodate fallback options, how far they are prepared to contemplate compromise, how they conceive of the past and future, how they deal with things that appear anomalous within their implicit schemes for classifying problems and opportunities, and what emotions they attach to their beliefs. Her major statement of her account of the ways in which different elementary forms of institutions cultivate contrasting thought styles appeared only relatively late in her career, in the book *How Institutions Think* (1986).

The causal mechanism by which social organization cultivates thought style, she argued, works through ritual. Like the sociologist Erving Goffman (1967a) and the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), Douglas did not just have in mind the grand, formal public ceremonies in which one group of performers presents and another larger group participates only as an audience. Like Goffman, she regarded the small-scale performative rituals of everyday conversation and writing, etiquette, the conduct of meetings, the layout of rooms, etc. as being critical. Her argument is similar to but not precisely the same as that to be found in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]), or in the short monograph by Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification* (1963 [1902–3]). But Douglas' theory of ritual processes by which social organization inscribes itself upon the style of thought is a clear descendent of Durkheim's argument that basic categories are fixed through social ceremonial. However, what is

distinctive is Douglas' demonstration that social organization is replicated in the ways that people *use* the categories with which they classify their problems, resources and relationships with other people.

Second, Douglas' project was to provide a theory of available variation in human social organization, which would in turn yield a general method for social science. She argued that the elementary forms of institutional social organization exhibit only limited variation in all human contexts. She cross-tabulated the two dimensions of institutional variation in social organization that Durkheim had distinguished in *Suicide* (1951 [1897]) – namely, social regulation and social integration or, as she called them 'grid and 'group'. Moreover, whereas in *Suicide*, Durkheim attended to the apices of the dimensions, Douglas directed attention to the forms produced in the resulting four cells, thus making central to her recasting of his theory the hybrids that Durkheim considered too briefly and only secondarily. The four elementary forms derived deductively are hierarchy (strong regulation and integration), individualism (weak regulation and integration), enclave (weak regulation and strong integration) and isolate ordering (strong regulation and weak integration). Contrary to the conventional wisdom (Alexander et al, 1987), she sees no 'micro-macro problem' in social theory, for she argued consistently that the same elementary forms organize people in the large and small scales alike. For example, she would have agreed with a significant part of Collins' (2004) argument that micro-interaction rituals perform social organization into being. But she rejected his (1986, 1999) claim that social scientists should turn to Weber when explaining larger-scale problems of, for example, state crisis or revolution. In the same vein, she argued that these basic forms specify organization and thought style in any setting, irrespective of technological sophistication or field of endeavour. Finally, she argued that in any social context, there will be mixing, weighting, hybridization, settlement or conflict among these four elementary forms, and these relations will shape how people think.

These two aims required her to conduct, throughout her life, debates and exchanges with philosophy of a kind that had been central to British mid century anthropology. In particular, she engaged with problems in the philosophy of knowledge, language, meaning and rationality which made up much of what was, in the twentieth-century analytical philosophical tradition that she knew best, defined as epistemology. For many philosophers in the British tradition, arguments that social context explained how people thought were not simply regarded neutrally (as Douglas herself thought of her explanations) as ways of explaining human bias. Rather, many philosophers feared

that this kind of explanation raised the spectre of relativism – the doctrine that we cannot have good reasons to suppose that any of our beliefs are reliable. For if social organization affects the very basis of our thought, then perhaps everything we believe – and here ‘we’ includes social scientists themselves, not just people studied by social scientists – is so systematically biased that the results of all human inquiry, including scientific research, merely reproduces the biases we bring to undertaking it.

Douglas had to debate several times with philosophers who supposed her to be guilty of relativism. Her strategy in answering them was subtle. She never sought to claim for social science any greater firmness or security in knowledge, other than that to which any other human inquiry could aspire. As Durkheim (1995 [1912], 439–40) had written, the categories of science have to accommodate themselves to the categories of wider opinion, but the purpose of social science is to explain opinion and to make it ‘more conscious of itself’. Like Durkheim (Jones, 1999), Douglas was a ‘realist’ about social institutions; that is to say, she regarded institutions as substantial constraints and imperatives, not simply as artefacts of perceptions. Institutions cultivate distinct kinds of bias in all of us. She freely admitted that social scientists also ought to worry that biases from their own social organization might well affect their findings or their interpretation of those findings. There are no guarantees against systematic error. On the other hand, again developing Durkheim’s point, the aim of her theory of the limited variety of basic styles of thought, and of the ways of social living that sustained them, was to provide both a diagnostic tool by which social scientists, as much as anyone else, could check each other’s arguments for signs of bias and also a means of using the different kinds of bias to offset each other. The final stage in her reply to the philosophers was a very distinctively anthropological one. It was also a move that was consistent with her whole approach to explanation. She pointed out that both falling prey to relativism and worrying about it in other people’s arguments are phenomena that wax and wane over time, but these trends can be *explained*, not simply documented. Evidence of both rising scepticism and of panics about relativism could be found in the historical record as far back as postexilic ancient Israel and more recently in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France in the writings of Montaigne and Pascal. Postmodernism, she thought, is a phenomenon that has welled up and sunk away many times before. The thought style which relativism exhibits is something that itself requires explanation by reference to the social organization in which both sceptics and those in a panic

about scepticism are sustained. The converse, she argued, is also true. Great certainty about the status of our knowledge rises and falls over history. Its booms and busts should likewise be explained by reference to the kinds of social organization that bias people toward thought styles of great and insistent certainty (this argument was later developed by Fuchs (2001)).

Although her principal goal was positively to build her own social theory, these first two aims also involved critique of dominant theories and approaches across the social sciences. On the one hand, in her 1979 work with Isherwood on household consumption and elsewhere, she argued against monolithic theories, such as the narrow and economistic forms of rational choice in which there is only one form of human rationality, with interests more or less determined by objective payoffs and optimized under constraint. She showed throughout her work that there are too many situations in which people, entirely reasonably and explicably, forego opportunities to advance their wellbeing for such theories to be adequate. On the other hand, she argued strongly against the postmodern, poststructuralist relativism of the 1970s and 1980s. These schools of thought supposed, first, that thought can float free of grounding in situation, constraint or organization, second, that there is an unlimited range of possible variations in human thought styles and, third, all that social science can do, therefore, is to document how people appear to think via an endless series of supposedly unique cases, without offering generalizing explanations for any of them. These three propositions, she regarded, respectively, as preposterous, lazy and lacking in intellectual curiosity and purpose. To the cohorts trained during these decades in sociology, political studies, business and management studies, anthropology, cultural studies and development studies to believe that the only options were a supposedly 'hard-headed' utilitarianism from economics or a supposedly 'humanistic' poststructural approach, her firm rejection of both in favour of a refurbished and resynthesized Durkheimian institutionalism seemed paradoxical – at once exotic and old-fashioned. In the years since her death, it has begun to be apparent to many social scientists that her approach might indeed offer a promising way forward beyond the impasses left by the prevailing traditions.

From the mid 1970s, when she published the first edition of her collection of ethnographic pieces, *Implicit Meanings*, Douglas developed a set of normative ambitions for her project, which had not been apparent in her work in the 1950s and 1960s. These later normative concerns have by and large not been well understood, either by her

professional colleagues in anthropology or in the social sciences more widely. Almost certainly this is because she at first only revealed aspects of her normative argument in a piecemeal fashion, and then not always clearly or adroitly. Never did she show their full scale and character in a single key work. Her most important normative concern, it became clearer during the 1990s, was that social science should have something constructive to say about how institutions could be ritually composed, so that conflict might be attenuated through arresting the process by which each of the basic ways of organizing tended to exaggerate itself over time and become more extreme. This understanding might then provide an institutional basis for reconciliation among conflicted ways of organizing and living.

She once told one of us that at the time she toyed with the idea of confronting the arguments of John Burton, a major pioneer of peace studies, who was briefly her colleague at University College London. Burton (1990; cf. Dunn 2004) advocated a 'bargaining' approach to conflict resolution based on the notion of a universal hierarchy of human needs. But instead of writing a book overtly about the theory of conflict management, Douglas chose to use her ethnographic examination of several books of the Hebrew Bible to develop her account of what kinds of institutional capabilities might sustain the thought styles required for peace making and social reintegration, and for calming the frenzied and runaway processes of hostile classification such as stigmatizing people and demonizing groups.

Unfortunately, some of her critics were suspicious that she was smuggling into her social theory a set of normative concerns derived exclusively from her own Catholic faith. She admitted to a 'feeling for hierarchy' (Douglas, 2005; reprinted in Fardon, 2013b) that disquieted those who assumed she used the term in the way her critics did – to mean a coercive system of command and humiliation of subalterns. In fact, she meant something quite different by the word. Indeed, in some respects, she had in mind an opposite of what they understood it to mean. Inspired in part by the French historical anthropologist and scholar of Hindu practices and her Oxford contemporary, Louis Dumont (1980 [1966]), she developed an understanding of hierarchy as an institutional ordering that distributed powers across linked but separated spheres and that then tended to provide mutual checks and balances, for example, between church and state in the Holy Roman Empire.

Collaboration with Aaron Wildavsky in the 1980s, whose politics appeared to veer between libertarian individualist and U.S. conservative, and who could be ferociously hostile to environmentalists,

did not help her normative concerns to be understood. Their jointly written book, *Risk and Culture* (1982), proved an uneasy compromise between their respective and distinct normative interests. Moreover, some of her most central concerns were submerged in the text. Wildavsky wanted the book to fight a contemporary political battle, whereas she wanted it to analyse more generally the dangers of social disorganization resultant upon fighting all kinds of battles so ferociously that complete breakdown threatens.

Her relationship with contemporary politics was not quite the same as that of her husband James, but Mary and James Douglas were both, although for different reasons, deeply repelled by Thatcherite monetarism. He was a centrist postwar conservative, pro-European economist with qualified Keynesian views who had worked closely with Edward Heath's administration. She rejected the Thatcherite ideology of rugged individualism and feared for its consequences upon social institutions, whereas he, as an economist, was alarmed most by the Thatcherites' strategic use of high unemployment, and their commitment to growth through the expansion of a financial sector based on burgeoning claims against wealth and production rather than on productive capacity itself. By contrast, her anxieties about the outlook expressed in Thatcherism concerned the risks that individualistic social organization would undermine social cohesion (Douglas, 1997; reprinted in Fardon, 2013b).

When she retired in the mid 1980s, before her work was complete, many people who knew her earlier writings therefore misunderstood her as if she were a straightforward conservative with ultramontane Catholic leanings, and supposedly hostile to environmental concerns.

Yet this picture of her normative positioning was quite wrong. For example, although nowhere in *Purity and Danger* is fascism discussed explicitly, a fierce concern runs through that book about the consequences of cults of purity and of sects that insist on drawing boundaries around supposedly pure social or ethnic identities. The idea that anomaly is something to be lived with by intelligent accommodation has political as well as methodological implications. In the 1979 book with Isherwood about consumption, she made her concern about poverty very clear, not so much as a matter of class in the Marxist sense as of its tendency to undermine human dignity. She was often in sympathy with the writings on poverty of the economist Amartya Sen. A late piece (2004a) attacked, in language of a vitriolic fury uncharacteristic of her writing as a whole, the contemporary form of arguments about the supposed 'culture' of the poor that some people held to be responsible for the perpetuation of poverty.

In the writings from her final years, the true and quite general character of the normative concern was made clear; it had been latent in her previous work, but it was obscured in *Risk and Culture*. That normative aspiration was centrally to develop a social science capable of explaining how conflict might be attenuated, channelled and contained in the face of risks of polarization and deepening opposition. Her final works were not only about ancient Israel. Societal conflict in late twentieth-century Africa, and not least the predicament of the Lele in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, was also implicitly present in these studies, though often without being mentioned directly. Perhaps that silence was chosen in deference to the interests of a learned audience of biblical scholars upon whose territory and patience she felt at times to be a trespasser. It is also likely that she hoped that using ethnographic material from deep antiquity, but also of fascination to Jews, Christians and Muslims ever since, would more effectively make the case that she was offering an argument of universal relevance than a book offering only examination of contemporary cases might have done. For just as she argued that relativism and realism are problems to be tackled not only on the basis of philosophical argument, but also with an appreciation of social context, so she chose ancient Israel for her case studies in conflict and its attenuation to show that the forms of social organization that make peace and war are in eternal ritual tension.

Thus, Douglas made her argument obliquely, as she always had in each of the periods of her writing. Her style is often conversational and full of domestic and common-sense allusions, and this has misled some readers into assuming lack of substance; in effect, they confuse whimsy in expression for flimsiness in argument. In her later books, however, the depth and substance are readily apparent when read closely. The Israel of antiquity provided a case study and a canvas on which to paint a much larger argument about the dynamics of conflict, the process of using social institutions to rein in conflict, and the role of ritual composition as a tool to defuse resentments and diffuse concentrated bitterness. The anxiety in *Risk and Culture* about sectarian extremism was now finally displayed as just one special case of those processes of extreme self-reinforcement that led to irreconcilable conflict and disorganization in any of the four main varieties of social organization that her typological theory had identified.

Her work matters in the social sciences today for two broad reasons. The first is that she identified a way out of the difficulties attending both postmodernist and narrowly rationalist optimizing approaches. As we will show in the following chapters, her causal, explanatory,

institutionalist approach based on a limited plurality of basic forms of rationality is as empirically powerful as it is intellectually fertile. She provided rigorous and distinctive microfoundations for one of the most promising theories of institutional dynamics available in the social sciences. By these means, she also demonstrated the essential unity of structures and causal processes across the whole gamut of the social sciences, from the institutional economics of consumer choice to the analysis of poverty in development studies, and from the sociology of terrorism to the political science of environmental governance. Second, she was able to use that approach to apply her arguments about institutional dynamics to a central task of understanding the possibilities, risks and mechanisms associated with the task of containing conflicts.

We should also add that the significance of her work in the humanities remains high. Although her earlier work – especially *Purity and Danger* – continues to be widely cited in the humanities and in branches of cultural anthropology influenced by the humanities, her late work has had significant impact on studies of the Hebrew Bible. It is from here that her posthumous impact on the much broader field of religious studies and other specialist fields of literary and historical scholarship has begun to radiate brightly once again.