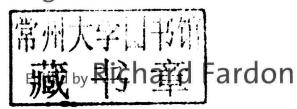


# Mary Douglas

# **Cultures and Crises**

Understanding Risk and Resolution







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# **Cultures and Crises**

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## About the author and co-authors

Mary Douglas (1921-2007) remains one of the most widely read social anthropologists of her generation. Celebrated as both a literary stylist and an anthropological thinker, the books of her mid-career, Purity and Danger (1966) and Natural Symbols (1970) quickly became acknowledged as classics. Douglas began her research career in Africa but soon developed her interests in religions and classification comparatively. These insights became the theoretical approach to different forms of society that she initially called 'grid and group theory', and later 'cultural theory'. The intention was straightforward - to find predictable relations between ways of organizing socially and the cultural bias of those organized. Douglas began to work intensively, and often collaboratively, on western society. An investigation of British food habits was broadened into an anthropological theory of consumption more generally. Moving for a period to work in the USA, she embarked on a study of the burgeoning environmental movements there, applying to them her general theory which related perceptions of risk to trust in the wider organizational environment. While continuing to write extensively on social theory, Douglas's later decades were devoted to close readings of the first five books of the Old Testament to radically re-envision the societies which gave rise to them. She continued to work collaboratively on contemporary questions of climate change, risk, terrorism, gun control, witchcraft movements, and the role of women in organized religious life,



to mention only a few of her very catholic interests. Consistently, her ability to find similar patterns in the familiar and unfamiliar allowed her to explain complex anthropological ideas to a wide readership. A week before her death, Mary Douglas was invested as a Dame of the British Empire at Buckingham Palace.

Mary Douglas's literary executor, Richard Fardon, is Head of the Doctoral School and Professor of West African Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. He was a student at University College London throughout the 1970s when Mary Douglas taught there. Richard Fardon's intellectual biography of Mary Douglas, published by Routledge in 1999, was updated by a memoir in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* volume 166, 2010.

Richard J. Ellis is the Mark O. Hatfield Professor of Politics at Willamette University, in Salem, Oregon, where he has taught since 1990. He did his graduate work at University of California at Berkeley with Aaron Wildavsky, with whom he co-authored two books relating to Mary Douglas's 'cultural theory': Cultural Theory (1990, with Michael Thompson) and Dilemmas of Presidential Leadership: From Washington through Lincoln (1989). Several of his other books are also shaped by cultural theory, including American Political Cultures (1993) and The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America (1998). His more recent books include Democratic Delusions: The Initiative Process in America (2002), To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance (2005), and Presidential Travel: The Journey from George Washington to George W. Bush (2009).

Christoph Engel is a lawyer who these days mainly runs experiments on legal issues. He is one of the directors of the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods in Bonn, and a member of the Bonn Faculty of Law and Economics. He was attracted to Mary Douglas's work, and to cultural theory in particular, since it provided him with a language for addressing the apparently deep and irreconcilable conflicts between lawyers about the normative goals that the law in general, and specific legal interventions in particular, are meant to attain. Applications are to be found in *Abfallrecht und Abfallpolitik*, Nomos, 2002; and *Generating Predictability*, Cambridge University Press, 2005. Representative essays can be found in the collection (co-edited with Lorraine Daston) *Is There Value in Inconsistency?*, Nomos, 2006, as well as in 'Governing the egalitarian core of the internet', *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 10: 1–25.

Des Gasper studied economics and international development at the universities of Cambridge and East Anglia, and throughout the 1980s worked in Africa. He now teaches public policy analysis and discourse analysis at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, a postgraduate institute of Erasmus University Rotterdam. He continues to write on theories of human needs, human security and wellbeing, as in: 'Securing humanity situating "human security" as concept and discourse', Journal of Human Development 6(2): 221-45 (2005); 'Conceptualising human needs and wellbeing', in I. Gough and J.A. MacGregor (eds), Wellbeing in Developing Countries, Cambridge University Press, 2007; 'Human rights, human needs, human development, human security', in P. Hayden (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Ethics and International Relations, Ashgate, 2009; 'The idea of human security', in K. O'Brien et al. (eds), Climate Change, Ethics and Human Security, Cambridge University Press, 2010; 'The human and the social – a systematised comparison of the discourses of human development, human security and social quality', International Journal of Social Quality,

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Frank Hendriks is Professor of Comparative Governance at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. His research focuses on the analysis, assessment and comparison of democracy, governance and reform, both at the national and at the sub-national, urban-regional, level. He has used Douglas's cultural theory in two monographs – Vital Democracy: A Theory of Democracy in Action, Oxford University Press, 2010; and Public Policy and Political Institutions: The Role of Culture in Traffic Policy, Edward Elgar, 1999 – and in various book contributions and journal articles, two of which may be seen as representative for his interpretation and use of cultural theory – 'Purity and democracy, beauty ideals and pollution reduction in democratic reform', Administrative Theory & Praxis 33(1): 44–61 (2004); and 'The poison is the dose: or how more egalitarianism may work in some places but not in all', Innovation: the European Journal of Social Science Research 14(4): 349–63.

Michalis Lianos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Rouen Haute-Normandie in France, taught previously at Goldsmiths, University of London, and in the Centre for Empirically Informed Social Theory at the University of Portsmouth. His collaboration with Mary Douglas influenced his subsequent work, particularly with respect to the dynamics of socio-cultural diversity as these figure in his theories of 'new social control' (*Le nouveau contrôle social*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001: English translation *The New Social Control*, Ottawa, Red Quill Books, 2012) and 'holistic politics' (2011 Ολιστικήπολιτική, Paraplevres Idees, Athens). Several of his publications during the past decade develop strands of his overarching ambition to provide a unified theory of the transition from 'direct' to 'institutional' sociality, which has involved the rapid replacement of sociocultural negotiation in human relations by the efficient submission of all to the mediation of late modern institutions.

Susanne Lohmann is Professor of Political Science, Public Policy, and Human Complex Systems and Director of the Center for Governance at UCLA. Her articles on collective action and central banking have appeared in American Economic Review, American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, World Politics, International Organization, and other leading social science journals. Her current research is on the political economy of research universities and higher education. Professor Lohmann is completing a book entitled How Universities Think: The Hidden Work of a Complex Institution, which is under contract with Cambridge University Press.

Gerald Mars is currently Honorary Professor of Anthropology at University College London, and he has held eight Visiting Professorships and research appointments at Oxford and Cambridge universities. He was an early convert to Mary Douglas's 'cultural theory' and in 1982 applied it to the study of workplace crime and black economy practices (*Cheats at Work: An Anthropology of Workplace Crime*, Allen and Unwin). Since then he has applied, adapted and developed the model as a consultant and academic to examine democracy in Israeli Kibbutzim; the uses of space; criminal organizations; accidents and risk management in the construction industry; restaurants and hotels; household cultures and their styles of consumption, and the different ethical systems applicable to stages of long-wave economic cycles. He has published 10 books and over 60 articles. In 2003 he was awarded the Lucy Mair medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 'to honour consistent excellence in applied anthropology'.

Steven Ney is currently Professor of Policy Sciences and Social Entrepreneurship at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Jacobs University, Bremen. Inspired by Mary Douglas and her work during his time as her research assistant in 1994–96, Ney developed an interest in analysing the way societies deal with complex and uncertain policy challenges. Recently, he has concentrated on social innovation and social entrepreneurship as a means of bringing about institutional change. Steven Ney was Mary Douglas's coauthor on the 1998 book *Missing Persons: A Critique of Personhood in the Social Sciences*, (University of California Press). Subsequently, he has used her theoretical approach in a range of articles and books, including (with Steve Rayner and Michael Thompson) 'Risk and governance Part II', *Government and Opposition*, 33(3): 330–54 (1998); 'Are yo'u sitting comfortably ... then we'll begin: three gripping policy stories about pension reform', *Innovation – The European Journal of Social Science Research* 13(4): 341–7 (2001); and *Resolving Messy Policy Problems*, EarthScan Publications, 2009.

Steve Rayner is James Martin Professor of Science and Civilization and Director of the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society at Oxford University where he also directs the Oxford Programme for the Future of Cities and co-directs the Oxford Geoengineering Programme. He is also Honorary Professor of Climate Change and Society at the University of Copenhagen and Senior Fellow at the Breakthrough Institute in California. He previously held senior research positions in two US National Laboratories and has taught at leading US universities. He has served on various US, UK, and international bodies addressing science, technology and the environment, including Britain's Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the Royal Society's Working Group on Climate Geoengineering. Until 2008 he also directed the national Science in Society Research Programme of the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. He

is the co-author (with Jonathan L. Gross) of *Measuring Culture: A Paradigm* for the Analysis of Social Organization, 1985, and of numerous journal articles applying and developing Mary Douglas's 'cultural theory'.

Originally a professional soldier, Michael Thompson studied anthropology (University College London and Oxford) while also following a career as a Himalayan mountaineer (Annapurna South Face 1970, Everest Southwest Face 1975). His early research on how something second-hand becomes an antique, or a rat-infested slum, or part of Our Glorious Heritage (Rubbish Theory, Oxford University Press, 1979) diverted him into teaching at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, and at Portsmouth University's School of Architecture, and from there to the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), an East-West think-tank in Austria. There he has worked on energy futures, on risk perception, on climate change, and on environment and development in the Himalayan Region, the key unifying concept in all that being 'plural rationality': people doing very different things and yet still behaving rationally, given their different sets of convictions as to how the world is and people are (with Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, Cultural Theory, Westview Press, 1990; with Michiel Schwarz, Divided We Stand, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990; and Organising and Disorganising, Triarchy Press, 2008).

Marco Verweij is Professor of Political Science at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany. In his research, he is trying to understand when and why efforts to resolve pressing global problems fail, and what could be done about this. In this, he often finds it helpful to make use of the 'cultural theory' pioneered by anthropologist Mary Douglas. This approach is put to work in his recent monograph, Clumsy Solutions for a Wicked World: How to Improve Global Governance, Palgrave, 2011. Together with neurophysicist Robert Turner (of the Max Planck Institute for the Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig), Verweij is also attempting to test and further develop Douglas's cultural theory with the help of insights from brain research.

## Acknowledgements

#### PART 1 CULTURAL THEORY

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#### PART 3 INSTITUTIONALIZED RISKS

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1888 'The Selfish Giant', from Oscar Wilde, The Happy Prince and Other Tales.

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# INTRODUCTION How cultures precipitate risk and resolution

#### Richard Fardon

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. 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

2 Introduction

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 preoccupations 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 societé: 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.<sup>2</sup>

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