INTRODUCTION

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The anthropologist Mary Douglas built her career on the insight that humans are classifying animals. We like to know where our things are. We tidy up, and pack accordingly, with drawers and cupboards for this and that. But on what basis do we classify the items we tidy? Some people may shove all their clothes into a cupboard and slam the door. Others take time to sort out underwear from overwear and neatly pair all their socks. Much of this depends on social expectation. We may sort socks because we do not want to be late for work next morning. In this case, our strategies of classification depend on conventions (about when work starts) and social expectations of those to whom we are accountable (the boss's requirement we turn up on time, not wearing odd socks). When we classify something as having passed a threshold – the spread of a virus constituting a pandemic, or the scale of ethnic slaughter in a certain place reaching a level that amounts to genocide – then duties are activated for organisations and for states. Equally, when classifications stigmatise people, they become not just the subject of conflicts about justice but the focus of active organisation and counter-organisation (witness for example the Black Lives Matter social movement). In this way, we code our world and match ourselves to the expectations of others.

A simple – as we shall see, probably too simple – way to describe an institution is to state how its implicit or explicit rules apply to a case when the case has been classified in a particular way: as a sock for a day at the office rather than a hiking sock, as an outbreak but not yet a pandemic, as shocking abuse but not a war crime. All institutions classify even though they do much

more besides. Considered as rules, institutions use classification to regulate social life. Yet all the categories in our rules generate anomalies. Some socks can be used for multiple purposes; to which drawer do they belong? Some cases prove very difficult to classify unambiguously. Is a shipwreck the property of the descendants of the original owners of the ship, or of the contemporary salvage company, and who owns the cargo that was stolen from another group of people but was classified as state property five hundred years ago?

Contrary to some social science theories, institutions do not typically come into being because they are good or efficient. We can waste endless amounts of time arguing whether (for example) driving on the left or the right is better. An agreement to do it one way (a convention) is needed, but arguments proliferate about which one to accept, and why. For example, prioritising 'equity' (or fairness) over contract law (or the reverse) are both practices that can be justified by appeal to some (but always contested) conception of what is good, right or efficient. Some institutions arise by coercion, as did many of those associated with imperialism; today, land tenure rights may be granted by authorities who first became 'authorised' for this task by colonial conquest. Others – such as rules through which children inherit land or property – may only acquire much-contested justifications of morality or efficiency long after they have become established.

Moreover, institutions, Mary Douglas pointed out, never stand alone. They interlock in a web of often equally arbitrarily chosen conventions through which we attempt to impose some order and predictability on the otherwise teeming chaos of everyday social life. It is hard to pick out and change an institution when it is interlocked with so many others. Institutions that govern who can marry whom, who inherits what, what obligations guest and hosts have to each other and to the wider community may arise initially as solutions to practical problems. Yet what is counted as a problem and what is counted as practical is intimately linked to large numbers of other institutional assumptions about how we live our lives. For that reason, we defend our institutions as bundles. We may come to see some of them as being somehow nat-

ural or God-given – the only possible way of doing things – not because we are biased by inexplicable preferences (for left over right, for example) but because we sense how much else might have to change if we were to change one of our rules. Faced with disorienting fear, some people will retreat into an institutional 'silo' and slam the door (Tett 2015). Faced with conflicts of laws, courts must determine which silo takes priority.

Now we have arrived at the point of deep conflict – the hard confrontations between different cultures and different sets of rules to which we apply terms such as nationalism, racism, ethnicity and religious intolerance. Such clashes, Douglas thought, are rooted in the processes through which institutions become tightly bundled as a way of life. We may not dare concede the arbitrariness of our assumptions (least of all when we sense they are to our advantage – as with racial privilege, for instance) because to question one of our institutions is to question them all. We may double down on our prejudices for fear that anarchy might prevail. Douglas came to understand that addressing deep conflict was her central task. For this reason, she set about trying to understand how classification works and how institutions are ordered and sustained, pondering how better to cope with the problem of institutional intransigence.

Intolerance is often fatal. We need to find ways to cooperate over planetary survival, for fear that clashes of institutions will kill us all. The problem, however, is that often there is no referee. The authority of arbitration and courts is limited. Parties may have all kinds of ways to continue contention whether despite or through procedures designed to end such conflicts. In many settings, there is no one to say which of two sets of conflicted rules or cultural understandings should prevail.

Of course, plenty have tried. Ignoring Acemoglu and Robinson's own caution that 'you can't engineer prosperity', too many development consultants have concluded from their book, *Why Nations Fail* (2012: 446–50), that the answer is to pick the best institutions and spread them across the world in an all-inclusive way. The hapless president of a struggling African country is asked by international development advisers 'Why can't you be

more like Denmark?' (see Fukuyama 2011). But there is no being 'more like' – the only option is to *become* Denmark because institutions come in mutually supporting bundles. Even if a 'bad' institution could be identified, excising it would be more complex and dangerous than brain surgery; the patient might die.

Faced with the impracticality of everywhere becoming Denmark, Douglas's approach is different. First, she tries to identify and map the social processes through which we generate institutions and then wonders how to influence that process. Institutions are explained functionally. Ritual action cultivates organisational arrangements (X), which in turn shape styles of thought (Y) to sustain and thus protect (Z) the form of social organisation in a group (Douglas 1986: 33; Chapter 5 below). The process achieves its effect without the group being aware of how it works. But it is not 'functionalist'. Nothing about the process is necessarily efficient or 'meeting society's needs', and as the dynamic proceeds among different groups and looser clusters of individuals, it generates conflict. This is one of Douglas's most important but most controversial claims. Most people like to think they control their own thoughts. We imagine that it is only other people who are fooled by the company they keep. Douglas's retort is that all ideas are filtered by social processes, and she uses ethnography to prove it. Even the very idea that our thoughts are our own is a product of a society organised to encourage and reward individual action.[1]

If this explains a central process in how institutions arise, we also need to know how institutions are legitimated and stabilised. Often institution builders start with a rough analogy, along the lines of (for example) the ruler is up and the people are down, but group work on the analogy invests it with a greater clarity of outline and gathers around it a sense of collective commitment. In terminology adopted from the French social theorist Émile Durkheim (1995 [1912]), the result is a group totem – something symbolising who we are, socially speaking.

Waving a flag or attending a parade or a swearing-in is part of a grand public ceremony celebrating the nation. But Douglas had also taken seriously the American sociologist Erving Goff-

man's insight that much ritual activity is also carried out in minor daily exchanges (Goffman 1967). We are not always thinking at the level of tribe or nation. Often, we are simply trying to get a project to work or to win a game, and not every game is a cup final. When a sports team prepares to attempt a difficult passage of play, members will often mimic the task, knock hands together or perhaps huddle in a group. They are gearing up to engage in a collective task with an uncertain outcome through ritual. Ritual action speaks about organisational challenges ahead. Before a match, the coach gives a 'team tactics talk'. The sentences of this talk would probably be useless if written down. But the social interaction in which the speech is delivered and listened to are consequential. The coach's words have efficacy and become inspirational to the team only because the speech builds upon weeks of everyday ritual activity in which collective action is rehearsed. Teams are built ritually in members' routine conversations during training and refreshment breaks, not by trainers' rhetoric or by ceremonies to present trophies.

Now Douglas can tackle the outcomes (the Y variables). Her model is configured with a causal arrow passing from social life, through ritual activity, to how people think (6 2014a: 93). Deciding and acting based on this ritually cultivated manner of thinking will, over time, lead to institutionalised outcomes. In the sports example, this might be a game won. With the mobilisation of nationalism or other group sentiment, it might be economic success or victory in a war. Others might limit their ambitions to organising a birthday party or a day out among friends. On whatever scale, the result has been achieved through collective effort stabilised by an institution or a set of interacting institutions.

Institutional success is not easily achieved, because it requires a kind of trick. People come to believe they will succeed through skill, natural superiority or because God is on their side. It is too easy to see through rational appeals to institutional mobilisation. Someone else will soon be along urging the exact opposite, and on rational grounds also. But ritualisation blinds us to our self-fulfilling prophecies. Success is achieved because we know in our hearts this is the right thing to do. Conversely, the activi-

ties supported by an institution are in trouble when it no longer seems the natural way to respond. Prior to 2020, it used to be viewed as 'natural' to go to a workplace run by an employing organisation. The great hiatus of the pandemic of Covid-19 caused much white-collar work to be done from home. Now it is hard to get these workers back to offices, with significant consequences for (for example) urban transport and city centre coffee bars.

After the end of lockdown, the British minister in charge of government efficiency developed a passive-aggressive tactic of dropping in on civil servants' empty offices and leaving a card on which was written 'Sorry you were out when I visited. I look forward to seeing you in the office very soon.'[2] This signalled that their absence had been noted and work done elsewhere was discounted. The tactic is unlikely to succeed in inducing staff to come back to the office, because it attempts to confront a Y variable with another Y variable – in a battle of competing ideas.

Douglas's argument at this point is that ideas never directly change ideas, at least where institutions are involved, because this short-circuits the institution and its many subterranean interconnections with other institutions.[3] What is needed is to look again at the practices shaping our institutional ideas. How and why are the practices of work changing? During pandemic lockdowns, people discovered how to work effectively from home, so institutional understandings changed as well. Rituals of work once reached out to include dress-down Fridays. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, sometimes this now extends to stay-at-home Mondays as well. (Both authors come from Lancashire, so we cannot resist adding that Lancastrians at the heart of the British industrial revolution early discovered the cult of what overworked mill operatives referred to as 'Saint Monday', an unfailing source of life-restoring spiritual help.) Douglas's explanation to the employer would be that a deep institutional change in where work ought to take place is underway. These dynamics might of course be reversed in time. But if so, any reversion is likely to arise from dynamics in social relations and practices, not from appeals to beliefs and ideals. By 2021, working from home had already become institutionalised in some settings. After the pandemic

of Covid-19, a five-day working week in the office cannot be restored by decree or by appeals to ideas of employee duty alone. The British minister for government efficiency may be a modern-day King Knut athwart an institutional tide. Those who work from home have discovered how to organise work from home, and this organisational knowledge cannot now be undiscovered.

A theory of how institutions emerge and regulate social life and social change was laid out in Douglas's most important book, *How Institutions Think* (1986). It is short but by no means an easy read, and one of the purposes of the present book is to prepare those interested to give it a go. It proposes something missing in many other accounts of institutions – a clear, conceptual separation between independent and dependent variables. The independent variable is always social action, which encompasses social relations and the organisation or ordering of those relations, including the stylisation of social interaction that takes place through ritual activity. The dependent variables are, in the first instance, styles of thinking. Action based on those ways of thinking then leads to outcomes. These can include the sustaining of institutions, resulting in, for example, collective achievements and constitutional settlements, but also the undermining of institutions, resulting in intractable conflicts and socially effervescent occurrences such as riots and massacres.

Douglas consistently rejects the notion that institutions are the product of ideas – that a nation (for example) is the product of wise elders sitting down to draft a sacred text (a constitution). First there must be a set of social relations and interactions among some people intent on becoming a nation; the constitution emerges as its expression. 'Originalists' insist that the American constitution must be interpreted by reference only to the intentions of the framers (that is, as a sacred text), but in practice it has had to be reinterpreted afresh and through practices and rituals to address every generation's problems, to sustain its institutionalisation (Ackerman 2000). The Italian statesman d'Azeglio commented in his memoir that after unification 'We . . . made Italy. Now we must make Italians.' The declaration of unification, independence and statehood itself did not create Italy or Ital-

ians. Citizens' identification with the newly united nation took at least a generation to cultivate via participation in common life and governance. Through everyday interactions (many of them with ritual connotations – consider the stylised iconography of a stamp bought to send a letter on a national postal delivery service or the small but decorated piece of card authorising journeys on a national rail network), it now more and more made sense to relate to others as fellow citizens of a national community. Citizens are made through the everyday practices of citizenship. Douglas argues that these existing fields of social action and interaction are the only drivers of institutionalisation.

Douglas began her academic training with a degree in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) but later switched to anthropology, at a time when the discipline was pondering the implications of policy changes driven by global cooperation during the Second World War. The Roosevelt and Truman administrations made it clear European colonial empires had to be demolished as part of the price for US cooperation in winning the war against Hitler. British anthropologists became engaged in debates about what this would mean in the African colonies. African self-government was on the way, but the colonial territories were predominantly rural and agrarian and had only partially recovered from social damage sustained in the last and most intense periods of the slave trades to the Americas and Middle East. Colonialism had stepped into this breach to impose by force of arms a kind of sullen and resentful ceasefire – 'they made a desert and called it peace'.[4] In what condition were these once turbulent and battle-scarred but now conquered and quiescent African countries to rule themselves? This question forced anthropologists, many of whom were fundamentally anticolonial in their sympathies, to direct their attention to local institutions and how they worked, and this was the training ground for Douglas's interest in social classification as a key to institutional order.

Douglas went to the Belgian Congo to carry out fieldwork among the Lele people of the Kasai province (Chapter 1, below). The biggest social concerns of the Lele were how to keep up their numbers. Reproduction and marriage were major issues, as in all

the Congo, where colonial forced labour had spread venereal diseases and depressed birth rates. Because both intergenerational and interfamilial tensions ran high, another major challenge was to find ways to resolve disputes, given that the Lele lacked any tradition of strong rulers. Douglas homed in on how the Lele used classification to locate themselves within wider natural and social worlds and withstand their abundant hazards (Douglas 1977 [1963]). She realised that foodstuff consumption rules – who could eat what, when – played a major part in marking and sustaining social boundaries. The cult of the pangolin (the scaly anteater) was a highly significant institution, since it brought attention to those who were the most successful in the struggle to reproduce (the begetters of female and male children). Classification reinforced institutional boundaries. Anomalies confirmed rules by testing those boundaries.

In her first widely successful book (Douglas 1966), *Purity and Danger* (Chapter 2, below), Douglas was mainly concerned with examining similarities and differences in the way various societies used classification and built institutions. In her later work, however, she became highly interested in the various conditions under which institutional choices are made. Forms of institutions are constrained by degrees of what Durkheim (1951 [1897]) called social regulation and social integration – that is to say, the degree to which social life is ordered, on the one hand, by rule-based constraint (or else by discretion) and, on the other, by groups with internal bonds and external boundaries around their members (or in some cases around loose clusters of transactionally linked individuals). Defining the two dimensions in terms of social interaction and operational practices also allowed Douglas to keep causes clearly separate from symbols or ideas. Douglas's term for 'social regulation' was 'grid', and correspondingly she labelled social integration as 'group'. Cross-tabulating these dimensions and attending to the cells provided her with a fourfold scheme. This typology became an important tool for challenging institutional economists in their belief that there were, basically, only two kinds of institutions – markets and bureaucracies (Williamson 1975)[5] – and that the task of the economist was to secure

an optimal division of labour between them, based on some universally applicable principles of institutional design.

Some readers may ask whether Douglas's early ethnographic work, which was developed within the milieu of decolonisation, is still worth reading today. The struggle for colonial independence was a passing phase. When Douglas completed *Purity and Danger* (1966), formal sovereignty over much of Africa by imperial powers had ended. But arguments about decolonisation did not end there. This is because these arguments became institutionally embedded in, for example, contested viewpoints on nationhood, immigration, asylum and trade in the postcolonial world. Today, decolonization remains a prominent focus in the humanities and social sciences, promoted or opposed with ardent ferocity by those who see themselves as occupying different mental and political spaces. This is an institutional perspective in which ruling elites and dominant cultures must be challenged forcefully, since colonial mentalities still imprison minds and destroy life chances. From an opposing institutional perspective, 'woke' arguments sustain a vindictive, victim culture, thereby undermining technological answers to urgent material challenges; complain not about the injustices of colonialism but look at the opportunities it provided. This is exactly the kind of deadlocked situation where Douglas felt she had something distinctive to contribute.

Conflicted ideas were always, Douglas argued, a symptom of dynamics driven at an institutional level. A first step in breaking the deadlock was to revisit the classification of people in order better to map the ways in which social agency shapes patterns of exclusion and marginalisation. Change cannot readily come from outside, however. This is because where institutions have made boundaries between an 'inside' and an 'outside', ritual processes will seek to protect the 'inside' from interference. An engineered institution, Douglas concluded, will struggle to take root, since its artificiality is clear for all to see, undermining its functionality. A prior requirement, therefore, is to provide useful tools to assist people to make changes of institutionalisation from within. In her later work, she enters an important reservation. Some groups

lacked the freedom to experiment with institutional change. Blaming poor 'culture' or local institutions often implies blaming the poor for their own predicament. Although local efforts often fail, importing better institutions is an even more complicated game with less clear prognosis of success. She picks up an important suggestion of Amartya Sen (1999), that what the poor need to overcome poverty is freedom, including freedom to experiment with institutional changes, although Douglas envisaged that freedom not only as individual choice, as Sen had done, but as being a social choice as well. Douglas et al. (1998) recognised that Sen's conception of 'positive' freedom was a good deal more social and institutional than the conception of choice entertained by many economists. The hope is that an easing of constraints changing local practices will cultivate institutions better adapted to local circumstances. Douglas also recognised that in the most deadlocked cases positive solutions may be highly elusive and mutual avoidance may be the only practical option.

Doubtless, however, she would have shaken her head in despair at current attempts to foment culture wars, often for no better purpose than the protection of authoritarian regimes. These kinds of campaigns cannot work over the longer term because they are wrong about culture. Culture is the product of social agency, not its cause. The drivers of culture are rooted in social life, and specifically in the ways in which social classification stabilises emergent institutions. Peace is the product of institutional accommodation and reform. A world convulsed by identity-based feuding requires a method of analysis that does not take identities at face value but seeks to explain their emergence, conflict and decay not merely as manipulation but as the work of institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation.

After the present introduction, our short book is divided into eight main chapters, followed by a brief concluding discussion. Chapter 1 provides an account of Douglas's career and identifies five major strands in the development of her intellectual concerns. Chapter 2 offers an account of the main themes addressed in *Purity and Danger*, in which she explains how social classification grounded in natural analogy serves both to bind groups

and to separate and stigmatise individuals. Chapter 3 offers an account of her fourfold scheme for mapping different strategies of institutionalisation. Douglas's work on risk is examined in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 considers the ways in which social life is regulated by institutionalisation and offers a summary of her model of institutional dynamics as laid out in her most important book, *How Institutions Think*. Chapter 6 offers an account of the role of exemplars of categories in the making of distinct social worlds, largely drawing on one of the most important of her later articles, 'Rightness of Categories' (Douglas 1999d [1992c]). In Chapter 7, we consider Douglas's work on consumption and goods and her later interest in debates about institutions in economics in the 1980s. Chapter 8 explains how her 'fieldwork' on the Hebrew Bible illuminated arguments about deep conflicts and provided a path to understanding terrorism, communal violence and civil wars, and the mitigation of such conflicts. The conclusion argues that grasping the point of Douglas's insistence on social dynamics as drivers of ideas, and not ideas as drivers of social dynamics, provides a basis for comprehending a modern world convulsed and confused by populist politics, autocracy, social media bubbles and internet miscommunication.

NOTES

1. Douglas termed the outcome of this kind of social filtering of thought as 'cosmology' but later preferred (for reasons we explain in Chapters 3–5) 'thought style'. Her key focus is on any collective activity through which a sense of institutional patterning is imposed on the profusion of social life.
2. See, e.g. 29.04.2022, *Financial Times*, https://www.ft.com/content/c8f678b3-6c54-44d2-9de8-059112c590e2. Office use increased again in late 2022 for a mix of social reasons and high costs of winter home heating, even its most ardent advocates acknowledge that flexibility is likely to persist at least for some categories of workers (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/04/new-love-affair-with-office-step-towards-better-philosophy-of-work). This is likely to be partly because employees want to do some work at home and employ-

ers want to retain and attract skills, and also partly because employers have seen opportunities to reduce their commercial real estate costs. For both workers and employers, change in working practice is driven by a combination of social pressures of bonding and accountability and also financial constraints, not by ideas or exhortation.

3. We need to be clear what Douglas means by ideas. If we ask a friend how they hope to meet us, they might say 'my idea is to come by bus'. That refers to an arrangement, a plan or a promise and is included within social action (Austin 1975 [1962]). Douglas is referring to abstractions – democracy, fairness, the nation and so forth. Max Weber (1947: 87–118) called such abstractions 'ideal types', having in mind a model against which social reality is compared. These abstractions are descriptive summaries of situations, not causes.

4. Tacitus (2009 [1948]) credited this remark to a Caledonian warrior describing the Roman conquest of the Scots.

5. Some economic institutional theories also recognise clans (Ouchi 1980) or 'networks' (Thompson et al. 1991).