

Mary Douglas (1921 - 2007)

Date : May 18, 2007

Students who came to several of the regular material culture seminars last year at the Department of Anthropology UCL were probably somewhat amazed that there, in the audience, was a slight woman, evidently in her eighties, who listened and questioned, and was still clearly an active participant, despite having become one of the world's most renowned anthropologists long before they were born. After one of these seminars she came out with the rest of us to have a drink with the speaker. During which she beckoned me over. The conversation started in typical Mary Douglas style:- 'Aren't you the person who is responsible for all this nonsense about materiality?' We then had an entirely amicable conversation based on finding an academic whose influence we could both agree to heartily dislike, in this case, the psychoanalyst John Bowlby.

Her presence at these seminars was entirely appropriate because it is hard to imagine that they would have existed but for her influence on the department at which she was Professor for many years (1951-1977) and at which she wrote several of her best known works. In recent years there has almost always been one of the material culture PhD students working as her personal assistant in her continued writing – I believe she completed two further books this year. Its not that she ever associated herself with the term material culture, but rather that several of the many productive strands in her work were essential ingredients to what become the characteristic cuisine of UCL material culture. Even when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge it seemed almost impossible not to devote at least one essay to the application of Purity and Danger to almost any genre of objects that one chose. When you told people you were hoping to become an anthropologist it was the most common point of recognition. 'Oh an anthropologist, you mean like Purity and Danger.' For good reason; this was a book that simply changed the way people saw their world and made sense of every day distinctions that we observed but failed to understand. In my case the most important impact came with *The World of Goods*. Along with Bourdieu's *Distinction* these were the two books that ensured that it was in some ways astonishingly anthropology, the discipline least associated with modern industrial society, that actually invented the modern study of consumption which was the path I took into material culture studies. Furthermore she established the essential grounds for those studies of consumption - the critique of economic assumptions as to why we

desire goods and the critique of the consequences of those economic assumptions, for such fundamental issues as to what we mean by poverty.

More generally Mary Douglas became the conduit for the application of structuralist and semiotic studies to material culture. More immediately accessible, both in writing style, and in her choice of illustration than Levi-Strauss, it was her work, that at least in Britain, was the model for countless student essays. Applied to familiar terrain such as working class meals in Britain, comparative studies of drinking, or well known biblical texts, she showed how to see pattern and order in what previously had just appeared to be arbitrary behaviour, and then ground these in a Durkheimian perception of social order and social difference. I won't pretend that I was equally enthralled by all her work. Some of her closest acolytes favoured her model of grid and group which always left me cold. On the other hand some of her most recent biblical studies such as *Leviticus as Literature* (1999) are to my mind quite brilliant and yet have been comparatively neglected outside of biblical studies. But there is simply so much to her legacy. In my recent work with Heather Horst on the impact of the cell phone on poverty in Jamaica, the central point that we were trying to make had only ever to my knowledge been made clear by one academic - Mary Douglas. It was she who showed that previous studies only saw communication as a means to other ends and therefore failed to acknowledge its importance as a facility in its own right within modern development. In typically combative style she had written 'a social being has one prime need – to communicate'. Something of an inspiration given the intentions behind our project.

When you then reflect on the extent of all her other work, on risk, on organisations, on culture more generally, it is a breathtaking landscape of intellectual argument and insightful interventions. Mary Douglas will leave a considerable and lasting legacy throughout the social sciences and humanities, and in her case this goes well beyond any narrow academic impact to have become part of the popular understanding of the world, something very few anthropologists have ever achieved. But I think that for material culture studies at UCL there was a more particular and more personal debt. It was her association with the department that prepared the local ground, the soil from within which what became our collective approach to material culture could take root and flourish.

Daniel Miller, UCL

Major Works

The Lele of the Kasai (1963)

Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966)

Pollution (1968)

Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (1970)

Implicit Meanings (1975) essays

Evans-Pritchard (1980)

The World of Goods (1979) with Baron Isherwood

Risk and Culture (1980) with Aaron Wildavsky

In the Active Voice (1982)

How Institutions Think (1987)

Missing persons: a critique of the social sciences (1988) with Steven Ney

Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory (1992)

Thought styles: Critical essays on good taste (1996)

Leviticus as Literature (1999)

In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers (2001)

Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation (2004)

Thinking in Circles (2007)