BOOK REVIEW

Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology, Mary Douglas.
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, 325pp., £7.50

The feeling one gets from a first reading of this remarkable book is one of optimism. In a discipline which has repeatedly been threatened with extinction both from without - as the 'primitives' disappear or are absorbed into industrial society - and from within - as "diversification" occurs, leading to "social anthropology, which has in any case only a nebulous and unconvincing definition...falling apart" (Needham 1970;39), this work is a reflection of Professor Douglas's disregard for the wailings of the Jeremiahs. The golden age of anthropology, one feels, is just over the brow of the next hill, and our journey is already mapped for us:

> When anthropology can recognise that thought is the central organising activity, that all social activity is symbolic, and that all behaviour contributes to the constituting of reality, it will be ready for a big theoretical revolution (122)

The aims and skills of Professor Douglas: her desire to "turn the telescope (of ethnographic study) the other way" (213) so as to study 'us' in the same way as we have studied 'them'; and her willingness to borrow inspiration from other disciplines without threatening the integrity of social anthropology, should, one feels, be an example to us all.

And yet this collection of articles, written originally for a variety of audiences, and to which "the author has made slight alterations in the texts" (vii), leaves one with a nagging doubt about whom she is addressing. That which was written for New Society ("Heathen Darkness"), and which will have enlightened its readers, is too bland to be accurately called an essay in anthropology; it is an essay about anthropology for lay readers, who are presumably those who need to be warned to "Take care" when tempted to "touch each other more", because "Uncontrolled, such a practice would rip up any system of communication"(216). Fortunately, this tone is not characteristic of the work as a whole.

Despite the diversity of themes in this collection, it is possible to talk of Implicit Meanings as a whole, the first of which is the already mentioned attempt to use the techniques of anthropology on elements of our own 'culture' so as to dissolve the distinction between the studier and the studied. This requires close attention to details of our daily lives which normally go unquestioned, so that "The humble and trivial case will open the discussion of more exalted examples".(249) But can we generalise that reaching for the Sunday papers is a signal? And the assertion that "Meals properly require the use of at least one mouth-entering utensil per head" (255) evokes, among other things, a certain rhyme concerning the eating of peas with honey: funny, but, it would appear, structurally proper. The discomfort one feels on looking through Professor Douglas's reversed telescope stems from the ambiguity: are 'we' really different from 'them', despite the claims presented here; or are our accounts of 'them' as naive as these accounts of us? A final example to make my point: "To domesticate an animal means to teach it to bring organic processes under control. To socialise a child means the same thing" (213 - my emphasis).

Ambiguity, of course, is Professor Douglas's stock-in-trade, and this brings us to the most positive, if deceptively simple, aspect of the contribution to anthropology provided here. The struggle for neatness and order prevalent in this writer's works gains a good deal from attention to symmetry. In the writings on the Lele, the Hebrews, the Karam and others, this element is fairly obvious (which is not to say unimpressive, especially when one compares her work on pigs in Hebrew culture, in "Deciphering a Meal", with

the work of Marvin Harris on the 'same' subject - Harris 1974:35-46). But symmetry of a different order is detectable in the way in which 'established' theories and methods are assessed: the title of the work balances the search for the explicit found in much contemporary anthropology; 'foregrounding' is contrasted with 'backgrounding'; we learn on page 71 that "...there may be some validity in arguing the other way"; the article "Do Dogs Laugh?" is "offered as a preface to Professor Jenner's discussion of endogenous factors. I will suggest a parallel set of social factors exogenous to the biological organism..."(83); and so on throughout the collection, leading us to learn that "a new, more general trend enables this generation to make a fresh approach"(91). For Professor Douglas, it seems, this trend consists largely of the turning over of anthropological stones in order to see if the negation of established thinking makes as much sense as the original statements themselves. And where the stone has already been turned, as in the debate outlined in her introduction to the selection of "Critical Essays", between those who treat the symbolic as the crux of anthropological investigation, and those who see it as "mere show, an illusion", the answer lies in the mediation of the two, in a plea for "the symbolic system always to be presented with a scrutiny of the social system in which it is generated" (128).

The work as a whole is an attempt to achieve a balanced harmony in anthropology, to remove the anomalous and 'polluting', and is to that extent successful. As cleanliness is to Godliness, structural order is to good anthropology. It is to be regretted, then, that this collection as a whole does not fulfil the promise and hope of some of its parts. But the "big theoretical revolution", one presumes, is yet to come. It may, perhaps, arrive when the two Professor Douglasses, sensitive ethnographer, and imaginative theorist, finally settle down together.

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References:

Harris, M. 1974. Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture.

Needham, R. 1971. "The Future of Social Anthropology: Disintegration or Metamorphosis?"

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