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Towards a Cognitive Anthropology

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Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987. 146 pp.

Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, eds., *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 400 pp.

The preface to Douglas's book claims that "a theory of institutions that will amend the current unsociological view of human cognition is needed, and a cognitive theory to supplement the weaknesses of institutional analysis is needed as well." Despite all their differences, these two books both demonstrate the search, shared by scholars in various fields of study, for the anthropological method in which cognitive and social sciences meet. Stemming from different traditions and discussing different issues in the light of different conceptual frameworks, they nevertheless offer complementary perspectives to the same principal questions concerning the relevance of cognitive approaches to the study of human behavior in society.

A cultural anthropologist, Douglas takes the institutional approach as her point of departure and is obliged to make her contribution to it. Her book proceeds from a crucial problem in the social sciences: Assuming that social institutions exist, how do they in effect impose mental frames on their individual members and generate their particular actions, so that we can say that people share attitudes, think, feel, and behave, at least to a certain extent, alike? Her first move is to reject the purely sociological notion of "collective personality," current in traditional theories, as nothing but a theoretical construct. Even

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when acknowledged in culture on a legal basis, this concept is still not enough to explain how culture-dependent emotional biases are attributed to people in reality. Given this question, the book more or less surveys related problems, by way of reviewing the ideas of prominent thinkers in anthropology and anthropological sociology, such as Durkheim, Weber, Evans-Prichard, and others, and, in a way, reconsiders the theoretical stances developed by Douglas herself.

By contrast to this theoretical integration, Holland and Quinn's is a collection of mostly empirical works by some of the up-to-date representatives of what is called "cognitive anthropology," an interdisciplinary field relying mainly on linguistics, psychology, and anthropology. The collection includes papers by Eve E. Sweetser, Paul Kay, Dorothy Holland and Debra Skinner, Roy D'Andrade, Geoffrey M. White, Naomi Quinn, George Lakoff and Zoltan Kovecses, Willett Kempton, Allen Collins and Dedre Gentner, Edwin Hutchins, Catherine Lutz, Laurie Price, Charlotte Linde, and Roger M. Keesing, most of them based on versions presented at a conference held in May 1983 at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. In this trend of anthropology, culture is viewed as shared knowledge that people need to have in order to take part as functioning members in a given society; this kind of (cultural) knowledge, it is assumed, can be extrapolated from what people do or say. It is worth noting that the editors are very much aware of the intolerable tendency, the legacy of a simplistic reception of rigid linguistic methods, to reduce people's actions to what people *say* and take pains in their introduction to attack it. Their focus of investigation is thus the way this knowledge is organized and functions. The notion of cultural models suggests presupposed, widely shared schemata about the world which mediate people's understanding of it and their actions in it.

Such a theory of knowledge, discussed here from the down-to-earth viewpoint of the people (with which Douglas's own work is by no means unfamiliar), is in fact what Douglas strives in her recent book to introduce to the realm of social theories allegedly dealing with global and abstract structures. Her task is not only to account for the way cultural knowledge is organized but also to explore, from a cognitive perspective, its role in generating the cultural competence to produce cultural objects (things, actions, views). From the methodological point of view, one of the strongest points such research has to offer to the study of social behavior is that it concentrates on everyday activities within the limits of small, "reality-like" observable units such as "situations." However, confining oneself to isolated (sometimes artificially constructed) fragments of "social actions" is at the same time also a great disadvantage, since it leaves out the fields of social power and the way these determine the very coming into being of cultural models, their effectiveness, and the way they relate to each other. No doubt this

failure is given attention in Holland and Quinn's collection more than once, as, for instance, by Keesing in "Models, 'Folk,' and 'Cultural,'" presented in this volume as a sort of concluding statement: "Cognitive anthropology grew up curiously innocent of social theory; it need not remain so in its maturity. . . . in (this) Marxist tradition, the realm of common sense is viewed as refracting as well as reflecting, disguising as well as illuminating, shaped by as well as shaping in realities of a social world" (pp. 376–77).

It seems, however, that this failure characterizes Douglas's enterprise hardly less than it does Holland and Quinn's; there remains a missing link between the two levels, a link which Douglas claims to trace in her comments on social theories concerning the relations between the individual and society. It is not surprising that the arguments developed in her book clearly draw on a very specific range of theories at the margins between sociology and anthropology, having not the slightest association with "fields of social realities" in a "Marxist" sense. Hence there is, according to her observation, no adequate theory of "human motivation" for social behavior. First, the notion of "solidarity" (current in the sociology of knowledge inspired mostly by Durkheim) is insufficient in that, developed in regard to "distant primitive" societies, it assumes rather than explains the possibility that social categories are totally internalized in the minds of all members of the group, an assumption which nonetheless cannot hold for modern societies. In the case of modern societies, one needs to take into consideration a constant struggle over the legitimacy of the social order and thus to explain how individuals, presumably rational, may think and act even against their own self-interests and "make sacrifices" on behalf of views of the world conferred upon them by the group. Second, the rigid (social) functionalists' accent on social "sanctions" as an exclusive motivation for human action is misleading, since, being associated with sociological determinism, it allows for no explanation of social action (and social change) other than passive reception of external forces.

Apparently, a more vigorous confrontation of the problem is made somewhere else. Douglas's discussion of institutional behavior is innovative in that it leads to a view of social institutions as a matter of *convention*. Convention is defined as a mechanism of self-policing which derives from a need for stable rules to regulate behavior (although in reality these rules are constantly subject to violation). The question, then, is one of *institutionalization*: How do conventions grow into legitimate social institutions? The discussion is now entering the realm of the most fashionable information and communication theories, according to which institutions are organizers of information. Institutional structures held by society are perceived as forms of informational complexity; hence, institutionalization is a matter of information

transactions: The more an item of behavior is predictable the less information it carries. This means that a smaller ratio is maintained between the amount of information carried by a particular behavioral item and the standard expectations against which it is seen. In this light, issues involving the construction, growth, and maintenance of institutional knowledge and patterns of action are raised. In this discussion, a crucial concept is the so-called institutional inertia, which makes up a counterforce balancing the constant fluctuation and individual violations of behavioral patterns (i.e., mutability of information) as a means of making communication, and cultural actions in general, possible, and of controlling them.