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First published in 1986 Mary Douglas' theory of institutions uses the sociological theories of Emile Durkheim and Ludwig Fleck to determine not only how institutions think, but also the extent to which thinking itself is dependent upon institutions. Different kinds of institutions allow individuals to think different kinds of thoughts and to respond to different emotions. It is just as difficult to explain how individuals come to share the categories of their thought as to explain how they ever manage to sink their private interests for a common good.

Douglas forewarns us that institutions do not think independently, nor do they have purposes, nor do they build themselves. As we construct our institutions, we are squeezing each other's ideas into a common shape in order to prove their legitimacy by sheer numbers. She admonishes us not to take comfort in the thought that primitives may think through institutions, but moderns decide on important issues individually. Our legitimated institutions make major decisions, and these decisions always involve ethical principles.

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John David says

Ever since the time of Descartes, and very probably since the time of the ancient Greeks, we have been deeply enamored with the idea that we – conscious, rational, decision-making beings – control the way that we think and act. While Mary Douglas certainly doesn't suggest that we are just mindless cogs in a machine, she does offer some interesting insights into how we think about institutions, categories, and rationality that have serious implications for the idea of wholly autonomous human intellectual agency. Douglas, one of the greatest social anthropologists to come out of England in the twentieth century, is known better for her "Purity and Danger," "Risk and Blame," and "Implicit Meanings." "How Institutions Think" is a series of Frank W Abrams Lectures that she delivered at Syracuse University in 1985.

Some scientific ideas enter the world, readily accepted and widely read by an eager scholarly community. Others languish – but not because they are of a lesser quality, and not even because they are incorrect. Ludwig Fleck's book on the discovery of syphilis titled "The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact" (*Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache*), was one of the latter. Anticipating a sort of social constructivism, Fleck said that scientific ideas are accepted or rejected into a canon for reasons not because of their inherent worth, but because certain social conditions (Fleck called these "thought-conditions" or "thought collectives") allow or disallow their admittance. The *Denkkollektiv* is a whole matrix of social circumstances, thoughts, and assumptions that envelop the scientific project. If a new idea substantively differs from one some aspect in the *Denkkollektiv*, it will be ignored – not consciously by individual scientists, but by the scientific profession as an institution.

This is where Douglas picks up on her anthropological history of the "classificatory enterprise." How can the phenomenon that Fleck described really happen? What was it about science – or any institution – that shapes social cognition and categories so profoundly? How do these institutions develop, and why? Following Durkheim's lead, Douglas claims that autonomy (in the sense of radical social individualism and atomization) was in many respects an illusion, and that we are marked by a strong sense of social solidarity through shared "classification, logical operations, and guiding metaphors [that] are given to the individual by society."

One of Douglas' implicit arguments is that the difference between sociology (group action) and psychology (action of a single agent) is wrong-headed. Instead, she asserts that for a rule to turn into a legitimate social convention, it needs a parallel cognitive convention to sustain it (46). Social institutions encode information, and then use that information to minimize the entropy, or inherent disorder, in decision-making. The stabilizing principle of institutions – what keeps them from breaking down – is that they "naturalize social classifications." By naturalizing the social in reason, the institution automatically legitimizes it. After all, one of the first priorities of the institution should be legitimacy, or else it would incur so much doubt that it would eventually be destroyed. Douglas considers the common social analogon of likening the roles of men and women to that of the left and right hand; the logic of complementarity in nature legitimizes the social order, constructing a rationality which seems like it was there before time began. Even the institution of sameness (yes, even sameness – logical similarity – is an institution) is time- and culture-sensitive. Douglas cites the example in Leviticus of the camel, the hare, and the rock badger: they all chew cud, which would lead us to believe that they would all be classified as cud-chewing ungulates. However, since they don't have cloven hooves, they are excluded. The criterion of difference here, having a cloven hoof, is completely arbitrary – yet it is the sole category that bestows "sameness" on a group of individuals. Douglas makes it clear that categorizations like this are not cool, objective observations into the inner working of nature. They

are very telling maps that “model the interactions of the members of the society.”

Institutions do more than order categorical knowledge. They also filter information in such a way that they can be said to remember and forget. Fleck’s book recounts a classic case of institutional forgetting. The failure of a legitimate scientific idea to be accepted into the prevailing canon of knowledge is usually the result of a lack of “formulaic interlocking with normal procedures of validation.” For an idea to gain acceptance, it sometimes has to exploit “the major analogies on which the socio-cognitive system rests.” Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Nuer focuses on institution remembering, according to Douglas, discovering “an explicit demonstration of how institutions direct and control memory” (72). He showed how economic interactions, including weddings and cattle distribution, order the memory of ancestors.

The one thing I was curious about while reading the book was that Douglas never mentioned Berger’s “Social Construction of Reality,” which covers much of the same territory. Of course, not being an anthropologist, Berger has a somewhat different take on matters. “How Institutions Think” should definitely be read alongside the Berger, and I think the reader will find that they shed light on one another. Highly recommended.

Rhys says

I'm not sure if she answered her question on how institutions are formed, though she does a great job showing that prevailing theories are tautological - that the institution/community must already be in existence to be able to coerce individuals to create a community.

She also shows why 'rational choice' is not sufficient to create communities or institutions.

In the end she seems to depend on 'natural' metaphors and something called 'justice' as necessary and sufficient to the task. I didn't quite get that, but her critiques of other theories were enlightening.

If anyone knows of a good book on how communities and institutions (and with it behaviours like altruism) are formed and fostered, I would appreciate it.

Ariel says

This book changed the way I think about everything. Best book I've ever been assigned in a class.

Von says

A compilation of lectures by Mary Douglas, near the end of her renowned career as an anthropologist. She describes how our cognition is shaped by social classifications and institutions.

Jennifer Doyle says

Really interesting reading for these times, esp. if you work in a big, over-articulated hierarchical institution!

Simon Akam says

The British historian Peter Hennessy - author of *The Secret State* etc - suggested I read this book as part of research for my book on the British Army.

Jon Morgan says

While not dull or incomprehensible, this book did not advance a thesis beyond the seeming truism that institutions structure human cognition. The last chapter wraps up the argument very well, but to the point where I found the rest unnecessary.

Daniel Moss says

Esoteric. Might have to read this again to fully grasp it. I come away with the idea that institutions matter because they have a strong hold on how people relate to one another - making me wonder how strong an impact they have, as in... can they be strong enough to help successfully guide a society based on the private property ethic (or is man too depraved like I'm always told?).

This book seems to think, as Hume argues, that the concept of justice is more or less not immutable but rather it's simply a cognitive instrument to get people to buy into the ideas underlying the particular society's institutions. In other words, "believe in our institutions because they are grounded in justice."

I prefer Hoppe's theory of justice 'the a priori of argumentation', which seems to me to be the rational and irrefutable answer to the question of what justice is.

P.s. The book is horribly written.

Zeynep Nur says

Lisans e?itimini tamamlamam?? ö?rencilere a??r gelen bir kitap. Çeviriden kaynaklı olarak bir anlam karma?as? var kitapta. Paragraf?n içinde bir anda farklı bir konuya geçiliyor ve bu da iyice zorla?t?r?yor kitab?n okunmas?n?.

Kitab?n bölümlerinin ad? ile içeri?inin çok da uydu?unu dü?ünmüyorum. Kurumlar hat?rlar diye ba?lık at?p bunu 1 cümle ile aç?klad?ktan sonra geri kalan 10 sayfa antropolojiden bahsediyor yazar. (Kendisi bir antroplog)

Orneklerde özellikle "döngü" kısmında sorunlar var. Birbirinden farklı oldu?unu iddia etti?i ?eyleri karşıla?t?ırken aynı birimi kullanmıyor.

Ben sevemedim bu kitab?. Lisansüstünde okusaydım belki farklı düşünürdüm.
