

*In The Active Voice*. Mary Douglas (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) Indexes, 306 pp.

This volume consists of previously published articles by the author ranging over a twenty-year period starting in 1962. It is always difficult for one to reread older papers, and eventually try to ascertain the trend of one's intellectual growth, the use of strategies by which theory and data are brought together, and to appeal to scholars who normally expect fresh thoughts, new positions, and a critical form of argumentation. By the author's own admission, many of these pieces are no longer of interest, they might have been wrong at the time of writing, and overall they only have a particular historical interest. But let us not sell Professor Douglas short. Such a caveat is not intended for the quick dismissal of the works, nor are they simply flippant pieces of flawed scholarship. The caveat is a warning that tells the reader that we must read *with* Professor Douglas, not at her, and thus a reading in unison will form the foundation of an intellectual experience that will be fully shared in seeking to make anthropology a comparative science of human societies. Thus the work is to be taken seriously and the author, who gave us *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*, is again pursuing a more refined sense of societal explanation and interpretation.

Three groupings cover how the essays are put together in terms of certain anthropological themes that run through the gamut of Douglas's efforts over the past twenty years. Passive voice theories in religious interpretation and the lengthy piece titled "Cultural bias" form the theoretical underpinnings of the anthology. I will return to this later. A second set of essays on goods, food, money, and economics deals with how society and economy articulate and the extent to which food is simply not the issue in getting at the roots of poverty. However, the category "Food" is not neutral and thus Douglas correctly and emphatically argues that food is a form of communication that must reflect the workings and structure of the body politic. It is a symbolic construct apart and above the economy, thus she refutes previous anthropological dicta such as Malinowski's contention that the line between the savages, stomach, and mind is short; or as this has recently been used in vulgarized materialism, you are what you eat; or the Aztec variant that you are whom you eat. Ritual and the symbolic constitution of myth are what establish the moral underpinnings of society; but why do western liberalism and rationalism have such a fear of the power of rituals? Why does western culture seek to create rituals that we can rationally

understand and control and which in turn emancipate us from what Kant bemoaned as the shackles of the subjective conditions of knowledge? The resentment of ritual and language has evoked a basic contempt of all forces that smack of a metaphysical potential, thus giving rise to secular religion, to ideas that knowledge must be measured by use-value, and to the creation of a scheme of life and meaning that is controlled and fits into our expression of human destiny. As Douglas notes, it is money that we have now tamed for our service as the ground of all social interaction and the kinds of meanings that create and add emotional sustenance to everyday life. Surely this last message is not new either from Douglas or Keynes, for the sociologist Simmel said more about money and what it means, and that was back in 1897.

The third component of essays are review articles on Frazer, Maurice Halbwachs, a review of Peter Brown, and another piece on Pierre Bourdieu. I personally found each of these pieces done in a creative, imaginative, and highly sympathetic exposition of thought and style. The article on Halbwachs is a masterpiece in placing his work not only within the Durkheimian tradition but how the contrast between Bergson and Leibnitz is still central for our understanding of what the young Durkheimians saw as their message after the death of the master. Douglas's discussion of Frazer is also an insightful think piece that seeks to demonstrate that the *Golden Bough* is in many ways the final expression of a form of thought in which representation, contiguity via James, and structural convergence via Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss all culminate in what Douglas convincingly shows might be a prism that refracts and reflects light in terms of what one desires to read into it or to read out of it. True as it might be, most of us still read Frazer from a Wittgensteinian perspective, one that not only laments the spiritual blinders in Frazer, but also in understanding what Wittgenstein envisioned as the grand "*übersichtlich*" that framed the Frazerian enterprise in its totality.

What is the active voice? What are passive theories of religious sociology? These two questions, which initially can be separated to a certain extent, are part of a larger whole, a whole that Douglas insists is missing in most anthropological and sociological treatises in that most of our writings, our style of literary discourse, and our theories (as weak as they might be) have always backgrounded the individual and thus have never come to grips with the real issue of what society is—namely, a system of accountability. Passive voice theories are psychological and sociological approaches that create a passive human object influenced by forces that are impersonal. Thus the passive voice would include all structures, mental categories, and forces that work on and through the individual. In turn the individual does little or nothing to interpret, modify, or change such structures that fully embed the individual and all of the ideas that people might possess.

Douglas feels that the social sciences must now shift to active voice approaches that are based on the encouragement of expectations of individuals,

which in turn implies that humans as individuals are the creative agent of what is around them. The test for understanding the active voice is the determination of what Douglas calls the “tracing the accountability systems which individuals develop when they make claims against each other, and which they reinforce by appeals to unseen powers or attributes of the personality” (page 1). Accountability is more than claims against your neighbors. Because people are responsible for their actions, they in turn see one another as behaviorally and morally responsible, thus in turn each person is a voluntary and intended agent. The upshot is “by tracing areas of accountability and different ways of keeping tally, the active voice sociologist can do better justice to beliefs and behaviour” (Preface, ix).

Active voice approaches are not only created to correct the overdeterminism of sociological determinism, but in many ways to rescue anthropology and sociology from being another form of literary criticism, which for Douglas is replete with insights and a beauty of exposition but is not sociology. On lamenting why a deterministic sociology of religion has failed, Douglas clarifies four major issues that are shortcomings in approach and theoretical insight. Passive theories claim to study beliefs but they cannot penetrate beliefs in any way. They claim objectivity yet observers clearly belittle the importance of belief. Third, they claim the study of meaning is a pivotal question, but meaning is reduced to crude behaviourism; and last, they dismiss the subject as a creative agent. For the sake of causality, the autonomy of the subject and his statements are impugned with the force of realism that not only dismisses the dignity of the human subject but also belittles the human and his world of faith and belief for the sake of “talking sociology” (page 2). Active voice theories are simply not a question of a new vocabulary or a metalanguage; they do require a whole new effort in trying to create a humanity with humans whose dignity is not white-washed by the greasy, heavy-handed social scientist.

In demonstrating how this contrast works, Douglas offers a highly abbreviated discussion of the language theories of Max Muller as a case of active theory and Benjamin Whorf as a passive expression of language. However, the intellectual springboard for accountability emerges from phenomenological theories of society. The ideal for Douglas is that all aspects of culture are never to be dealt with as suspended animation or as noble sentiments, but in how morals, faith, and beliefs are caught up in the nitty-gritty of daily life, in the way individuals get promises paid off, in the way in which one extracts from the other, how leniency emerges and when, and so on. The moral is thus not an imperative but a canopy or arena in which all these actions occur, the moral along with belief and faith is invoked to support and justify what is being done. Within Douglas’s conception of humanity, the ideal individual is a free-swinging, free-negotiating form who knows how far the moral can be pushed and in what direction, and why. Each system of accountability is composed of explanations, attributes, and qualities that must be played off in terms of what

the active/creative agent is pursuing. Will this condition lead to a war of one against all? Douglas smartly recognizes that excesses will occur, which I suspect she feels are innate to the individual, thus she concludes just in time to tell us that "For the sake of living together in peace, each society will combine the active voice and the passive voice in different measures" (Page 10). We have been saved from a Hobbesian existence, but only for the sake of living together in peace. Surely cultural existence is much more than peaceful coexistence.

"Cultural bias" is the follow-up of how active voice theory is programmed in terms of comparison, the concept of the negotiating individual and its relationship to culture and cosmology. Most of this framework deals with the nexus of group and grid in which strong states in one might be accompanied by weak states in the other dimension. Although most of this argument was extensively published in *Natural Symbols*, Douglas expands the framework to include virtually everything which would normally constitute what culture is about. Thus questions of cultural processes, space, time, time, cookery, attitude to old age, attitudes to youth, time past, sickness, health, death, personal abnormality, personal relations, punishment, and so on, are all framed in a way that permit them to be plugged into the group/grid framework. Nothing escapes the group/grid contrast, and to a certain extent it brings back the old ills of classical functionalism or Freudianism in that it explains everything and at the same time explains virtually nothing. But Douglas is committed to the long-range plan of doing comparisons, not as cultural portraits, but through a form of methodological rigor that is not only scientific and empirically based, but that minimizes or even excludes interpretation and reduces the investigator to a nonsubject. It is these very conditions that she laments when criticizing passive theories of explanation.

Social science as developed in western philosophical traditions has always been trapped in the dilemma of the individual/person/self on one side, and the ontological uniqueness of society and culture on the other. French structuralism escaped this dilemma in part from the Durkheimian adherence to the *sui generis* nature of the social collectivity and in turn the very idea of structure is simply not rules, but those systems of thought that are anterior to structure and behaviour. British anthropology via Radcliffe-Brown also held that social structure, either as a social reality, a model, or as a set of expectations, also gave rise of behavior. American anthropology never was able to surmount this dilemma, and thus over the past century two themes have been in competing conflict. One, the psychological side of Boas as translated by Benedict, Mead, and Sapir, argued that culture is either an operational heuristic that not only guides our enquiry and thus culture either rests in the individual and has a "skin" analogous to the individual, or that culture is a spurious category. The other side via Kroeber and White insisted that culture was above the individual—it was a superorganic entity or logic, and this logic could only be explained and understood in its own

terms because any attempt to reduce culture to behaviour and the individual was crass reductionism.

Douglas, especially in her earlier writings, has always stressed the Durkheim position in that the world of meanings and symbols had to be anchored in social structure. Thus meanings and symbols have little existence on their own; they only make “sense” through the understanding of social structure and the behavioural attributes that govern human beings. However, the essays in this volume move far from her early position by arguing that social imperatives are not to be understood on how they control and channel human action and thought, but how humans negotiate them for their own ends. Because systems of action are not passive, the individual has the ability and the right to seek a better life through manipulating people and symbols as long as responsibility and bonds of accountability are maintained. Institutions exist to be worked by individuals and one hopes that individuals derive beliefs that are plausible to what they think and feel they need.

What is the upshot of this approach? First, the bottom line of society is not only the individual but the quest for human freedom and choice that Douglas assumes is what all individuals seek to obtain. Thus we are back to the old Boasian “bug-a-boo” in arguing that culture is there, but at the same time each culture and each individual has the freedom of choice and interpretation that makes him or her possess a certain amount of human dignity. But choice and freedom are very heavy western ideals that might or might not occur elsewhere, and they should not be exported to other societies under the guise of rationality or liberalism. Douglas does not advocate this kind of cultural transmission and learning, but the implications of her approach end the same way. For example, cosmology is interpreted as a support mechanism that is invoked by individuals in different ways depending on where they stand within the social arena, and thus cosmological value simply provides a justification for one’s action, it maintains one’s tally sheet against another, and it is used to justify one’s own sense of responsibility and accountability.

Issues of choice, freedom, accountability, and responsibility not only deny and denude the concept of culture of its explanatory vitality, they almost smack of a new form of behaviorism that I feel has strong political overtones.

Instead of devoting the remainder of this review to sociological and anthropological issues, I would like to explore some of the sociopolitical implications that Douglas’s approach creates for the operation of the modern state as we know it. Over the past thirty years in American and English political criticism, the issue of what government responsibility is toward its constituents has always been a crucial problem. Liberals on one side have espoused opinions that the state should be involved in more welfare legislation and action as a means of reducing human misery. Conservatives of different shades argue that welfare leads to burgeoning bureaucracies, waste, and in the long run, those

needing assistance are reduced to wards of the state with no motivation for economic and social achievement. American academics of all shades have taken different positions, and in many cases, some have changed positions by simply relabeling the rubric under which they operate. The whole issue goes back to the initial problem of what is the linkage between the individual and the society/nation/government, and what is the responsibility of one toward the other.

Within this contrasting perspective, one that will never be resolved, nor should it be, Douglas's interpretation is all the more revealing. The burden of accountability and responsibility shifts back to the individual, who is now constituted as a semiautonomous rational actor who knows what he or she wants and how to achieve it. If that achievement fails, if human expectations are denied, and if individual will is curtailed by another person, who is to blame? What Douglas implies is that the burden to explain failure to oneself must be sought within oneself, and not the society/nation/government in which one lives. Final responsibility for failure and success is attributed to how one conceptualizes the maze, how one utilizes means for ends, and in turn how the individual draws on a rubric of meanings and symbols to justify and support the trajectory of individual expression and enhancement.

Thus, don't blame the system, and don't blame the government you have, for government is only a vague policing unit that enforces the ideals and rules that govern the game and penalizes those who break rules. Within the game, some make it big, some lose big, and thus accountability and responsibility, which are organically linked to freedom and choice, provide the means of doing what one does best. Is this another version of 1984? I think not, because the idea has evolved for some time and is currently pushed on both sides of the Atlantic. If the Thatcher government is looking for an ideal model to enhance the final demise of the English working class, it would be fair to conclude that *In the Active Voice* is the model for conservative government ventures in getting people off the back of government.

—Aram A. Yengoyan  
 Department of Anthropology  
 University of Michigan (Ann Arbor)

*Education in the Computer Age: Issues of Policy, Practice and Reform.* Stanley Pogrow (Sage Publications, 1983) 231 pp.

According to Stanley Pogrow, his book is not about technology per se but about the traditional goal of improving education. In today's world of massive environmental change and constrained resources, Pogrow believes that this