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Gender ambiguities and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*

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Abstract: In this article, Mary Douglas' cultural anthropology, especially her thoughts on social and symbolic classification in her seminal study *Purity and Danger*. *An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) are applied to an analysis of gender and sexual classification in modern societies.

Keywords: Mary Douglas, Cultural Anthropology, Queer Studies, Gender, LGBT

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1. Introduction

"In primitive cultures, [...] the distinction of the sexes is the primary social distinction" (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 141). Following this statement of the seminal cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007) in her classic study *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) one might ask whether this distinction is of importance in modern Western cultures as well. In this essay, I will argue for an affirmative answer to this question.

This answer rests not just on the history of patriarchy and sexism in Western modernity but especially on the practices and people blurring and

transgressing this basic distinction, e.g., by being ambiguous or anomalous with respect to it.[1] Instances of blurring this central social and cultural division ought to be of special interest for ethnological and sociological research but curiously—though maybe not so surprising in the end—Douglas does not mention ambiguous or anomalous phenomena like male or female homosexuality, bisexuality, intersexuality, non-binary, queer or trans* identities.[2]

Hence, this essay endeavours to investigate the position of people and practices transgressing or blurring the distinction of the sexes in modern Western societies through the lens of Douglas' cultural theory and symbolic anthropology and to probe whether her insights on social classification and symbolic boundaries are helpful to understand this position in a more profound way.

For this purpose, in section 2, I will describe some of the central features of Douglas' symbolic anthropology, in section 3, I will briefly explore the sexual minorities and practices this essay is focusing on, in section 4, I will characterize the religious background of modern Western cultures from Douglas' point of view, in section 5, the religiously backed symbolic and social order of Western societies will be set in relation to transgressive sexual groups and practices, followed in section 6, by an analysis of the strategies the symbolic and social order uses to control these transgressions, and, finally, in section 7, an analysis of the transgressive, marginal position of sexual minorities itself.

2. Mary Douglas' Symbolic Anthropology

In 1966, Douglas published her most famous work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, in which she, influenced by

[1] Following Douglas, in this essay there will be no differentiation between anomalies and ambiguities since from the point of view of the symbolic and social order both have the same disruptive effects regarding this order.

[2] Some of these concepts and terms, of course, were not in use in Douglas' time, though neither is she employing the terms applied to sexual minorities or practices in her time; they are simply omitted.

structuralism, developed a profound theory of culture, symbols, classification-based order and society.[3]

Grounded in an analysis of the concepts of purity and pollution, Douglas assumed that every society derives its social structure and symbolic order from various, usually intertwined dichotomies, which organize both the social and the symbolic planes in a structurally isomorphic way. Binary, opposing distinctions such as male/female, old/young, inside/outside, up/down, raw/cooked, village/forest, human/animal, etc., arrange the social and the symbolic order in a uniform manner, be it on the plane of society, the plane of the individual or that of the cosmos. However, for Douglas, the organizing and structuring distinctions underlying these structural isomorphisms are not universal, contrary to Claude Lévi-Strauss, though they are often found in many different cultures. The symbolic classification systems that are based on these binary distinctions and which structure the social, intellectual, cultural, individual, and cosmic order, form the basic structure of every society—they constitute the order of things.

Due to the centrality of these binary distinctions, a blurring or transgression of these is deeply problematic for social and symbolic order. If the principal symbolic boundaries are dissolved or breached through ambiguity, transgression, or anomaly, the order of the world is threatened with collapse. Societies react to such symbolic boundary violations, particularly those involving fundamental distinctions—which are often explicitly or, especially in modern societies, implicitly conceptualized as taboo violations—in a decidedly severe and often violent manner.

At the heart of Douglas' analysis of the system of boundaries and distinctions are the concepts of purity and pollution. Things are believed pure if they conform to the order of things, i.e., the symbolic classification systems; things that break or dissolve boundaries are deemed impure, polluted, or dirty. “Uncleanness is matter out of place”, is Douglas' famous and classic definition (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 41). We perceive things as dirty when they are not in their designated place. Tomato sauce on a plate or in the mouth appears pure to us, but tomato sauce on a shirt or on the face is considered to be dirt. For Douglas, dirt is thus not something absolute, but always relative (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 36), and, therefore, what is regarded

[3] For an overview of Mary Douglas' life and works, see Fardon (1999).

dirt in one culture, i.e., a transgression of boundaries, "matter out of place", might be judged to be perfectly pure in another culture.

Douglas uses these insights to examine the dietary laws of book *Leviticus*. In this investigation, she shows that those animals are deemed impure that violated the ancient symbolic classification systems of the Hebrews (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 42-58). E.g., if an animal is cloven-hoofed, like a cow, it cannot, according to the classifications of the ancient Hebrew symbolic order, also be a carnivore. An omnivorous and therefore meat-eating, even-toed ungulate, like the pig, must, as a transgression of this order, be unclean. Animals moving on land must have four legs; if they have six, or eight, or none, like beetles, spiders, or snakes, they are equally regarded as impure, dirty anomalies.

These symbolic classifications are arbitrary and culturally relative; they are human-made categories of understanding and ordering the world, and, though mostly unconscious, simultaneously socially deeply significant. Society, and with it the entire world, is ordered by these categories, and the social energy and power of society are condensed and frozen within the distinctions of the classifications.

When these boundaries are shattered, the social energy frozen within them is released and fills the transgressor. For taboo breakers are not only thought of as dirty, but also as highly dangerous, since in their anomalous, transgressive existence they represent, on the one hand, a threat to the order of things, an agent of chaos, while on the other, through their act of transgression, they are charged with social energy, and thus appear as exceptionally powerful and dangerous (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 95-114). This charge or infection with released social energy, which according to Douglas manifests itself, e.g., in Polynesian *Mana* or in Islamic *Baraka* (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 110 ff.), is reflected in an ambivalent relationship of society to these transgressive persons or practices. Taboo breakers and taboo violating practices are impure and defiled, but at the same time powerful and dangerous. On a more religious level, they are also both cursed and sacred. In some languages, such as Latin, the same word is used for both the sacred and the cursed, since in both, the fundamental order of cosmos and society is touched upon in the form of its basic distinctions and classifications. In addition, this aspect explains the close connection of concepts of pollution to the religious sphere, where such

transgressions/pollutions are often conceptualized as sin, sacrilege, unholiness, abomination, perversion, disorder, unnaturalness, abnormality—in short, as violations of the divine and/or natural order.[4]

3. Gender Ambiguities

Following this exploration of Douglas' theory of symbolic classification, I like to think about people or practices transgressing the central symbolic distinction of the sexes.[5] In all known cultures, there is a wide range of sexual minorities and sexual practices which defy the clear-cut distinction of the sexes: male and female homosexuality, bisexuality, intersexuality, or non-binary and trans* identities. These terms, of course, describe them in modern Western concepts, whereas other cultures and epochs use different nomenclatures—e.g., the two-spirits in Native American tribes, the *hijras* in India, the sworn virgins in Albania, the *wakashu* of Edo-period Japan, or the *kathoey* in Thailand.

In modern Western cultures, people transgressing the distinction of the sexes used to be either invisible and/or heavily persecuted. E.g., male homosexuality, after the advent of Christianity, was first persecuted as a sin, then prosecuted as a crime and finally treated as a disease; "the love that dare not speak its name", taken from Alfred Douglas' poem "Two Loves" (1894), was punished by death at the stake, castration, imprisonment or debilitating medication. Lesbianism, non-binary and trans* identities, and intersexuality on the other hand were mostly unheard of and made invisible, apart from, in the case of intersexuality, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and, though awareness

[4] This section is an adapted translation of an excerpt from Schmiedl-Neuburg (2022, pp. 1-7).

[5] The common sociological distinction between biological sex and social/cultural gender will not be consistently upheld in this essay. On the one hand, because Douglas herself does not employ this conceptual distinction, on the other, because contemporary feminist and queer theory, e.g. Judith Butler, have cast doubt on the theoretical sustainability of the division (Jagose 2001). Further, from the point of view of symbolic and social order, it does not matter whether a person's sex is biologically ambiguous or whether one's gender does not conform to social and cultural gender roles or identities. In both cases, one transgresses the basic symbolic and social distinction between the sexes since for order sex and gender are the same.

e.g. of intersexuality has increased during the last four decades, even today in official sexed statistics usually there is no third row for intersexual persons.

4. The Order of Society and its Roots in Christianity

The sexual and gender ambiguities manifested by these sexual minorities often collided with the symbolic and social ordering schemes of Western societies since the distinction of the sexes plays a cardinal role in them. A central reason for the lasting importance of this distinction for the symbolic and social order in Western societies is their rootedness in Christian values, ideas, and distinctions. Given the crucial part the distinction of the sexes plays in Christian theology, starting with the story of book of *Genesis* and further intensified by the churches' stress on the sacrament of marriage and the protestant view of the family as the place of spiritual life, it is not surprising, that this distinction became foundational for the Western symbolic and social order.

Though, in addition, there is a further, more general element in play. Using the heuristic religious classifications of Douglas and taking into account the historic behaviour of Christianity towards sexual minorities and practices, Christianity would need to be classified, in Douglas' terminology, as a purity-affirming, pollution/dirt-rejecting, dualistic and incomplete religion.[6] These attributes manifested e.g. in the witch hunts, the inquisition, and the relegation of mysticism with its quest for unity beyond dualities to the religion's sidelines. They also can be observed, etymologically, in the names of evil: Satan (śāṭān, שָׂטָן) is Hebrew for ‘enemy’ and *el diablo* stems from Greek *diabállein* (διαβάλλειν) which signifies a casting apart. In both cases, the devil, the wholly “other”, is etymologically not seen as an integral

[6] However, it must be pointed out that all the potential inconsistencies Douglas is highlighting regarding her own classifications, especially the internal differences and diversity within religions, e.g., between official and unofficial religion, or between official and private religion (Douglas, p. 166 f.) can be found in Christianity, too. Taking this into account, as well as the great differences between different sects, nations, and times, and between academic and folk-religion within Christianity, one must be cautious about such generalizing classifications.

part of creation but as something different and apart which must be eradicated—even if academic theology, knowing the problems of theodicy, may take a more differentiated position. Inversely, this dualistic, purity affirming and incomplete aspect, can also be seen when comparing the all-good god of Christianity with the morally ambiguous gods of Greek or Norse religions which merge the opposites of light and dark, good and bad within them.

As a dirt-rejecting religion, one could expect Christianity and a social and symbolic order formed by it to be rigid in its distinctions, whether symbolic or social, and consequently strongly dirt-aversive, especially when it comes to central divisions like the distinction of the sexes. That, in Christianity, this distinction is important and rigid, becomes obvious by, as already mentioned, analysing the creation myth in the book of *Genesis*, its position and importance for Christian theology, and then comparing it e.g. with the creation story of the sexes in Aristophanes' fable in Plato's *Symposion* which allowed for three sexes instead of two, and a mixing of the sexes alike, thus exhibiting features, in Douglas' terms, of a complete, dirt-recycling myth.

5. Order and Gender Ambiguities

Hence, a social order shaped by Christianity in all probability will monitor sexual transgressions with special concern because, given the significance of the distinction of the sexes in Christianity, these transgressions defy the total structure, the holy whole, the unity, integrity and perfection of the world manifesting in the systematic ordering of society and nature in the Christian image. The fact that Catholic teachings on morality focus mostly on issues of sexuality provide a telling proof for this. From the point of view of a Christian influenced symbolic and social order, sexual transgressions and people involved in these are seen as dirty and dangerous at the same time, even though there might be, as Douglas points out, different grades of dirt and danger—e.g. according to the Catholic church a homosexual person doing homosexual acts is seen as more sinful (i.e. dirtier) than a homosexual person living in sexual chastity, avoiding transgressive sexual acts, like anal sex.

Applying Douglas' differentiation between so-called “primitive” and modern societies to Western history since the advent of Christianity, we can identify two phases of dealing with sexual transgressions and ambiguities: a “pre-” and a “post-Copernican” one. In “pre-Copernican” times, when the cosmological order was still the mirror of the social order and both were integrated into “one single symbolically consistent universe” (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 70), sexual transgressions were seen as violations of nature, violations of the cosmic order. They were cosmic pollution proper, and therefore, consequently in those times, they were called sins, religious sacrileges, unnatural and unholy. After the fragmentation of the Western experience in “post-Copernican” times and the separation of cosmic and social order, sexual ambiguities were not anymore sins, i.e. cosmic pollution, but crimes against the law of the Leviathan, the mortal god, as Thomas Hobbes called the state, i.e. social pollution proper, punished in prison and not in hell. Later, in the 20th century when sexual transgressions were not necessarily sanctioned by capital punishment or mutilation, and sometimes not even imprisonment any longer, instead they often were treated, medicated and conceptualized as diseases of body and mind, bodily pollution—an issue Michel Foucault explored in many of his writings.

Interwoven with this conceptualization of gender ambiguities or transgressions as diseases, is the idea of contagion. For Douglas (1999 [1966], p. 113) transgressions of the symbolic and social order filling the transgressor with social power and energy also are infectious. Unfrozen social energy, e.g. in the form of *mana*, *baraka* or German *Glück* and *Pech*, can easily be transmitted to others, infecting, defiling and simultaneously empowering them. Similarly, transgressive gender ambiguities are often thought of by society as infectious and contagious, as well. One example in contemporary times, regarding male homosexuality, was the social depiction of HIV/AIDS as a homosexual[7] disease, intrinsically connected to being gay and to stigmatized sexual practices, especially anal intercourse, a depiction culminating in the simple equation of being gay = being sick/infectious. This

[7] Throughout the essay, I employ, most of the times, the somewhat antiquated term homosexual instead of gay. Importantly, this use is not to be seen in political terms, as this terminological distinction is often cast in gay culture, but instead as highlighting the sexual dimension and thus that what is transgressive in sexual minorities and practices in the eyes of the symbolic and social order.

depiction was further reinforced by the fact that HIV is transmitted by "mixing" bodily fluids like semen and blood, mixings which, as Douglas has shown, are often seen as transgressing symbolic bodily boundaries, and thus dangerous and dirty. The fear of contagion can also be seen in society's reluctance to give homosexual couples the right of adoption because, according to the logic of contagion, society perceives a danger of children being "infected" with a sexual transgression, i.e., in this case, homosexuality.

Another instructive aspect is the peculiar difference of society's handling of male and female homosexuality, and the question why male homosexuality tends to be more stigmatized. From Douglas' perspective, we can identify two possible answers. First, given the patriarchal constitution of Western cultures, in this regard very much like the culture of the Mae Enga in Papua New Guinea Douglas (1999 [1966], p. 148) discusses, we find, when looking for similarities between the two cultures, the idea of male superiority and its vulnerability to female contagion in both. Thus, feminine pollution will be perceived as dangerous to men, but not (or at least not to the same degree) vice versa, and indeed, in Western society a man acting in a stereotypically 'feminine' way was and is treated as significantly more problematic than a woman acting in a stereotypically 'masculine' way. Second, the different handling of male and female homosexuality might also be influenced by at least stereotypically differing sexual practises. If the body is a symbol of society, then penetrating sexual acts, e.g. anal intercourse, are perceived as considerably more dangerous to the symbolic order than non-penetrating ones, consequently providing a further reason why male homosexuality is often judged more dangerous to the social and symbolic order than female homosexuality.

6. Society's Handling of Gender Ambiguities

Since gender transgressions and ambiguities are a central problem for Christian shaped cultures and societies, it is crucial to understand how these societies try to control and oppress these in practise. As an analytic scheme for this purpose, I will utilize Douglas' typology of society's strategies of handling ambiguities and boundary transgressions. She distinguishes five

different typical ways in which a society reacts to a transgression of its symbolic and social order (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 40 f.):

(1) The first strategy is reduction of ambiguity by settling for one interpretation. Ambiguous cases get reduced through forced, unambiguous assignment (Douglas 1966, p. 40). Especially in the *machismo* cultures of southern Europe, the Islamic world, and South America one finds e.g. the habit of classifying homosexual men into an active and a passive group regarding their position in anal intercourse and classifying the members of the first group as male and the ones in the second as female. Consequently, the men in the first group feel, act, and dress as heterosexual men whereas those in the second often dress, act, and feel like women. Though, this habit is not confined to *machismo* cultures. In Europe, one encounters a related fantasy among heterosexual people, that in a male homosexual relationship one partner will take the "male" part and the other the "female" part. Beyond homosexuality, the forced mutilating surgeries performed on intersex babies, which made it possible for medicine to assign them unambiguously to one sex, offer another harsh and violent modern example of this strategy.

(2) The second strategy is the physical extinction of the ambiguity, the annihilation of the transgressive (Douglas 1966, p. 40), a cleansing to ensure purity. Here, too, modern Western history with its genocides, deceptively and revealingly called ethnic cleansing, as well as the gas chambers of the Nazis camouflaging as showers, offer gruesome examples. Though, medieval and early modern Western history as well, from the crusades to the inquisition trials leading to the extermination of heretics, provide further illustrations of this strategy which was often utilized not just against ethnically and religiously different people, but also against gender ambiguous people.

(3) The third strategy is employing ignorance, i.e., the transgression of a boundary is avoided and ignored (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 40). Consider, for example, how long the female intellect—and with-it women philosophers and authors—was rendered invisible historically, since the intellect, at least in Western cultures, was associated with masculinity. Further, intersexuality and trans* identities as well as lesbian sexuality for long were socially and culturally made mostly invisible which was only possible due to smaller numbers in the first two instances and the subordinate position of women in patriarchal society in the last.

(4) If ignoring transgressions or making them invisible is not possible, stigmatization offers a fourth social and symbolic strategy, i.e., despising the transgressive as dangerous, dirty, and unclean (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 40 f.). The fourth strategy thus stigmatizes ambiguities as dangerous, unnatural, irrational, sinful, perverse, crazy, criminal, pathological, and polluted. Again, the history of discrimination in the Western world offers a concerningly rich trove of examples for this strategy. Take, e.g., the fate of nomadic people, like the Roma and Sinti, who transgressed the symbolic and social order by not settling and staying in one place. Regarding gender ambiguities, this strategy entails labelling e.g. homosexuality or trans* identities, as unnatural, irrational, sin, crime, pathological, or contagious disease. The current witch-hunt against trans* people in some Western societies provides a chilling contemporary instance of this strategy.

(5) The fifth strategy, which, according to Douglas, is exceedingly rare in Christian Western history but occurs more commonly in other cultures, uninfluenced by the Abrahamic faiths, is the strategy of "recycling" (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 41). In this approach, (gender/sexual) ambiguities and transgressions are understood as necessary and enriching components of the symbolic order and are integrated into it, without denying or eliminating their transgressive or ambiguous nature. Hindu examples include the god Ardhanārīśvara, "the lord who is half woman", and the *hijras*, who are treated as dirty and dangerous as well as holy and healing at the same time. In Greek religion and in the religions of ancient Anatolia, we find hermaphroditic deities, such as the bearded Aphrodite (aka Aphroditos) of Ephesus, in Norse religion there is Loki changing his gender to conceive and give birth to Sleipnir, in Buddhism the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara appears as male in India, but as female, in the form of Guanyin, in China. However, in Christianity there is a telling lack of such a recycling of gender ambiguities and transgressions.

This lack of usage of the fifth strategy, usually combined with the view of the sexually transgressive as being filled with danger and disgust, applies, in Douglas's view, primarily (though by no means exclusively) to religions, such as Christianity and Manichaeism, that are incomplete in their doctrine (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 167). Due to a fetishization of purity, they fail to give a proper place within their symbolic and social order to transgressive, dirty,

and order-disrupting phenomena, to the hybrid or anomalous marginal position (Douglas 1999 [1966], pp. 96-99). This purity fetish can have its source either in the dogma of a religion, or in its lived practice throughout history. Unlike complete religions (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 167), also described as "dirt-affirming" (ibid., p. 165) or "composting religions" (ibid., p. 168), such as Chinese Daoism or ancient Greek religion, incomplete religions, according to Douglas, adhere to the dualistic idea that classificatory symbolic distinctions—e.g. between good and evil, spirit and flesh, or man and woman—are absolute, without exception, and eternal, and that perfect purity therefore represents a real and truly achievable possibility (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 172). Concerning the nonetheless real instances of transgression or ambiguity—that is, the perceived dirt, pollution, abominations, and monstrosities—there is a fervent hope in incomplete religions, that all these will eventually be completely and violently annihilated, usually in a Last Judgment.[8]

7. The Marginal Position

Having investigated the handling of gender ambiguities from the perspective of the symbolic and social order, to conclude, I want to explore from within the corresponding marginal position in which sexual minorities often found themselves in Western societies shaped by Christian heritage. In this social position, sexual minorities face two different consequences:

The first consequence deriving from the pollution- and dirt-aversive aspects of Christianity is obvious: anyone blurring or transgressing the distinction of the sexes faces discrimination, with all the psychological and social implications entailed in this, from microaggressions to hate crimes, state persecution, and extermination.

The second consequence, though, is less obvious but equally impactful because sexual minorities at the same time find themselves in a position similar to the privileged position of the members of the pangolin-cult of the Lele in Central Africa which Douglas (1999 [1966]) researched so deeply.

[8] Parts of this section are adapted translations of an excerpt from Schmiedl-Neuburg (2022, pp. 1-7).

Like the members of the pangolin-cult, gender ambiguous people experience the relativity of fundamental social and symbolic distinctions on a visceral, foundational, and personal level. They are forced to "turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognise them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are" (Douglas 1999 [1966], p. 171). Thus, people on the margins are able to understand the workings of society far more deeply than those at its centre ever can. They are in a similar borderline position as cultural anthropologists engaging in participant observation, oscillating between being inside and out.[9]

To conclude, joining all the above explorations together, and to return to the initial question of this essay, it becomes apparent that Douglas' cultural anthropological insights provide a useful theoretical framework for the analysis of gender ambiguities in modern Western cultures.

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[9] Furthermore, being so deeply affected by arbitrary distinctions, people in the marginal position might become highly interested in and sensitive to form, or in other words, these early metaphysical insights into the conventional nature of human existence might yield a special interest in form, including style and aesthetics, which might in turn affect the lifestyle, worldview and choice of occupation.

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