

## SEEING EVERYTHING IN BLACK AND WHITE

By Mary Douglas

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Cultural Theory (or Grid-Group) made a late start, but it is now at Take Off. In 2006 the bibliography had over 700 items. It is taught in seminaries and in business schools, some major industrial firms have been reorganized in conformity with its principles. It has been the framework for writing on risk, town planning, economic history, art, market research, Bible studies, contemporary politics and more. In the first lecture I explained the grid-and-group method of making comparisons and how to use it for studying culture. That was based on its early history in the 1970s and 80s. This time I want to tell you about recent developments. I have chosen the topic of sectarianism because this is one of the fields which has seen the most development in fieldwork, and caused some revisions of my original position.

Sectarianism involves strong feelings, deep resentment, a searing sense of injustice, above all, anger. All of these are intensified when religious loyalty is engaged. Please forgive me for not measuring up to these themes; I don't mean to trivialize them by restricting my approach to what is often known as the sectarian vision.

Seeing things in black and white is definitely a limitation. When you miss the colour, you miss the nuance, the 3D effect is softened, and facial expression is less vivid. We know this from black and white photography and old black and white cinema. I am using this title to talk about certain forms of social organisation that promote anger. This limited vision divides the world into two kinds: on one side ourselves, our fellow members, our friends; and on the other side, all the rest, outsiders. In the extreme case, insiders are saints and outsiders shunned as sinners. Inside is white; outside is black. In extreme cases it makes a world of saints and sinners. A wall of virtue keeps the two apart, the saints refuse to have anything to do with the outsiders. There can be no negotiation and the word “compromise” means betrayal.

Not all sects have a black and white vision. You can't explain group behaviour by individual psychology. My theory is that it is a mechanism deliberately adopted in small groups for dealing with endemic problems. We need to understand what these problems are and what the world in black and white can do to solve them. This discussion is awkward because when we stigmatize sectarians for their narrow views we are seeing *them* as black, and *ourselves* as white. If we admit to our own insider-outsider prejudices, perhaps we could whiten the black and blacken the white, to make the whole picture a more pleasing grey.

The idea of a sect opens on to a host of contemporary problems. One concerns political partisanship, leading to terrorism. On that subject I can think of questions, but not answers. There has always been terrorism, so why is it now more threatening than in the past? Is it more dangerous because of more effective weaponry? Does it make sense to declare “war” against it? If there must be war, how should it be waged? What would it mean to win the war? I don't know. Perhaps Cultural Theory (CT) can help.

### **Bernstein's Influence on Cultural Theory?**

I have already introduced Basil Bernstein's typology of families. He used the terms "positional" and "personal" for two kinds of family control (Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*. London: Routledge, 1977). For this he used only one dimension, "classification." I thought it could be taken beyond the family and used to sort out kinds of cultures more generally. CT expands Bernstein's dimension of control by classification to the concept of regulation. It has become Grid. It indicates control on individual behaviour in the form of general rules. Some people live free of social pressure of any kind. They can wear what they like, do their hair as they like, eat and say what they like. This is the zero start, where there is no cultural control. Everything is to be negotiated.

To this idea of control by rules, CT adds another form of control, group membership. The mere fact of belonging to a group obliges an individual to accept some constraints on behaviour. There will be, at the very least, some collective pressure to signal loyalty and mutual support. So we have two dimensions of culture, one of regulations which apply to everyone according to the classifications, and one based on how much of people's lives is controlled by emotional pressure from the group they live in.

Obviously the collective pressure varies in strength. So it is a dimension on which various cultures show up differently. At one end of the scale, there are some religious groups which still count you as a member though you only turn up for an hour on Sundays, or perhaps only annually. At the other end, there are groups such as convents and monasteries which demand full-time, life-time, commitment; the same for secular groups, and some

professions. Apart from attendance at rituals, the boundary between members and non-members shows in dress, food, speech, which imply shared values and beliefs.

You have seen the French cartoonist's suggestion for three types of culture, each upheld by incompatible moral principles.



Figure1. Three Cultural Heroes, drawn by Christian Brunner .

The smug pioneer with his pickaxe, the stern bureaucrat with his briefcase, the holy man with his halo, they exemplify Max Weber's three types of rationality, bureaucracy, market, and religious charisma. All three are backed by distinctive moral principles. These three types of culture fit neatly into the grid-group diagram.

Figure 2. The Grid Group Diagram

Strong Grid

Isolates Strongly Regulated	Complex Regulated Groups
Individualists Self-organized by Competition	Simple Groups, including Egalitarian Enclaves

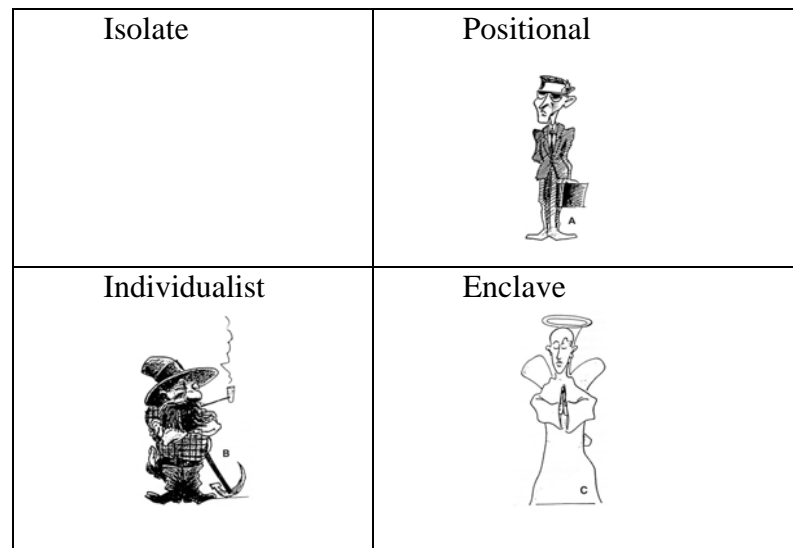
Zero 0 . . . . .> . . . . .> Strong group +Weak grid

Group” (meaning a general boundary around a community) shows on the horizontal axis, and “Grid” (regulation) on the vertical.

The only materials you need to set up this form of analysis are the two dimensions. Put them together, Regulation and Group. Now you have four opposed and incompatible types of social control. Individuals may move, or be forced to move, across the diagram, according to choice, or according to circumstance.

Figure 3. The Three Heroes in their Grid-Group Slots

Strong Grid



Zero 0 . . . . .> . . . . .> Strong group + Weak grid

At each point, as we go round the diagram, we ask what sort of ideals, virtues and moral principles provide the motive to live in this particular way, regulated or unregulated. It is a taxing form of research. If you ever wonder whether students are more group-oriented than staff, for example, you need to think hard about what behaviour to count for indicating

group. If they are to count as a group, I suppose that at least they know each other's names. Do they eat together? Drink together? Meet each other outside official class hours?

Or, if you wonder, for example, whether geographers are better organized than anthropologists, you will compare them on a grid dimension whose indicators you will want to think up for yourself. Do they have more regular meetings? Do they keep minutes? Allocate roles? Have a chair? A secretary?

### **Complex Groups**

The word "hierarchy" called forth so much flak from radical ideologists that I have been trying to find a better term. I tried to switch from "hierarchy" to "positional system" for a form of society that uses extensive classification and programming for solving problems of coordination. But nobody liked it. I am still looking for a name.

Now turn to the bottom left quadrant of the diagram. According to the properties of the diagram, this is by definition weak both in group controls and in grid controls. These are the conditions of cultural individualism. The main form of control available here is by individual competition. Dominant positions are open to merit. This culture is bound to be at loggerheads with the culture of groups, complex or simple. Individualism is where Max Weber's commercial society fits in, where the individual is only concerned with private benefit. Group commitment is weak here by definition. It is in principle a society of equals, but its deference to wealth and power easily defeats egalitarian ideals.

The extreme left hand top cell has strong grid controls, without any group membership to sustain individuals. Anyone who arrives here is a cultural isolate. Prisoners might be located here, or slaves and any strictly supervised servants, soldiers, or the very

poor, or the Queen of England, hedged around as she is by protocol. Also, note that some individuals come voluntarily to this situation which avoids responsibility and pressure. The hermit or the monk may find it a benign culture to live in; they are free because they are alone. As far as public policy is concerned, isolates attract no attention, no one asks for their opinion or takes them seriously in argument. (Hence their reputation for apathy.)

There is a message here for research: we should never consider conflict of opinions without looking for the underlying conflict between institutional forms. Culturally shared worldviews are reinforced by supporting institutions. Not stabilised by any strong loyalties or pressures, the opinion of an isolated person can easily change. Ideas and values become strongly entrenched only when they are embedded in working institutions. Grid and group, or CT, can deconstruct irreconcilable differences by identifying the particular type of civilisation which the culture upholds.

### **Enclave, the Simple Group**

Originally, I thought of the enclave as a small group living in a relatively hostile environment from which it has withdrawn in anger. (New work shows that this is not always the case.) I saw their culture as dominated by passion for justice on the one hand, and fear of defection on the other. They ought to be the conscience of the nation. We should attend to their voice and be sensitive to the injustices they attack. But they tend to spoil this noble role when their attention is distracted by their own enclavist affairs.

It is true that in the history of religion, dissident groups may quarrel with the established church in which they started, and may break away. The origin of such a sect will have been some serious disagreement about moral principles and doctrines. While the

founder is alive, his charisma and the excitement of dispute can hold the group together. But after his/her death something we call “demographic insecurity” worries the new leaders. They are afraid of defections following internal dissent, and they are at a grave disadvantage in dealing with it. There is nothing to stop frustrated dissenters from breaking away and forming a new sect. Their original numbers will decline, and soon there will be nobody left.

This is the explanation I prefer of the black and white vision. To present the outside as thoroughly bad is meant to deter defectors, but of course it is a strategy to improve demographic security which promotes fear and hatred. Not all enclaves need to take this course. A lot depends on their history of origin. Some, like the Mormons, are lucky to have been founded by a prophet who had visions; he attracted followers without a quarrel with any previously affiliated group.

Other factors may be a strong deterrence to leaving the enclave. The German Pietist cults which came over to America to find religious freedom had complete “demographic security.” Defection held no fears because the peasants who had followed them couldn’t speak English, so they would not be able to survive in the outside world. The enclave’s membership was safe; it didn’t need to have recourse to black and white thinking.

Another solution to the same problem is to try to control internal dissension. If they could stop competition for followers inside the enclave, there would be less scope for a new leader to arise and walk out with his clique. In this spirit many sects develop spontaneous disapproval of competition for power. This naturally becomes a bias towards equality. The only approved source of prestige is the demonstration of virtue. Individual members of a religious sect tend to compete for the holiest reputation. This can turn sour if the habit grows of denouncing each other’s failures to live up to the ideal. (For an awesome description of a



particular case, read Malcolm Calley, *God's People: West Indian Pentecostal Sects in England*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.)

Not surprisingly, many enclave communities tend to be strongly egalitarian. If the primary purpose of its foundation was to form a model society, to allow its members to enjoy a better community life, the first major mistake the enclave can make is to install equality as its central principle. James G. Flanagan and Steve Rayner, in *The Rules that Keep us Equal*, show how the effort to preserve equality encumbers a community with a tangle of fairness rules. Differences will always emerge and be useful, but many sects abjure the usual ways of justifying them, by ranking and ordering.

This can lead to tragedy. Instead of being esteemed and honoured as the true conscience of the nation, sectarianism can become a byword for prejudice and closed thinking. The enclave that has chosen to live by a rule of equality will have tied its hands when it comes to controlling jealousy. It has blocked its own power of decision-making. It will drag down its leaders in the name of equality. Any show of individual authority is going to be challenged. In sum, the egalitarian enclave is a thoroughly ineffectual form of organisation. If, as is commonly said, terrorism is born and bred in small, disadvantaged enclaves, and if it is true that they are intrinsically incapable of effective organisation, we don't seem to have much to worry about from terrorism from that source. But this is not the last word. There are many kinds of enclaves.

### **New Research**

When Michael Thompson and Aaron Wildavsky dynamized grid-group, they introduced a normative principle: the general well-being of a community depends on the

extent to which all its interacting cultures mutually recognize each other. Though one culture may be dominant, it must avoid excluding the other three from the public forum. A dominant culture should not drive the others underground or reduce any of them to silence (Michael Thompson et al., *Cultural Theory*. Boulder, CO: 1990). If a sectarian enclave is never allowed to publish its dissident views, it will make itself heard, even if it is by outrage. Counterattack from the main community will only inflame the conflict. If the enclave culture dominates, closure of boundaries will become the order of the day, conflict will be deepened by the black and white vision of the world. But how to keep the incompatible cultures from trying to dominate each other? A suggestion comes from grid and group studies in the Far East.

### **Grid-Group in Nepal**

Dipak Gyawali, hydraulic engineer, ex-minister in the Nepalese government, is a leading CT theorist. His book *Water in Nepal* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2002) uses CT to explain the political conflicts around the geo-politics of water policy. It is a gripping account of the perplexities of national policy for Nepal's abundant water resources. The Indian government was a huge potential customer, industrial multinational companies were competing for contracts to build high dams, but political activists formed an enclave to protest against such mega-projects. The business interests and the bureaucracies were allied in favour of high dams. The political activists protested against the forced relocation of populations, the impoverishment of the marginal farmers, and the loss of local political authority.

Gyawali makes a comparison with China's modernisation controversies. "This same tension between two forces has existed in modern China since the 1950s, where the fight has been between the Maoists who promoted widespread micro-hydro development programmes controlled by the communes, and the Stalinists who went for heavy industry controlled by the bureaucracy...." (p. 49).

During these crises of decision in Nepal, political activists were the only pressure group defending the interests of the people. Two things had changed to make their stand more effective than the disparaging version of enclave would have predicted. One was the new communication technology, as in the case of the Middle Eastern terrorist groups. But this time the communications went not within the nation, but trans-nationally. The second new factor was the rise of Human Rights programmes, NGO's, and many globally operative philanthropic organisations. Information technology made it easy for the activists to get quick support and worldwide attention. The government could not completely ignore them. It was a triumph for them to demonstrate that they were the conscience of the nation. But on the practical issue of high dams, the stakes were too high for them to be able to obtain a major compromise. The point to carry forward is the effect of external support on the enclave's success.

### **Grid-Group in The Middle East**

When grid-group research began to be applied to Palestine and Israel, we got two specific improvements to our original thinking about enclaves. One is to attend to religious belief. The other is to set the enclave in its larger encircling environment. The two are connected.

I have been foretelling inevitable failure as the destiny of enclave societies. Authority is unprotected, leadership is under challenge, decisions have no coherent institutional framework. When the institutional support comes from outside, can this improve the sect's effectiveness? Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, from the Political Science Department at the University of Tel Aviv, have been studying Islamic terrorist organizations.<sup>1</sup> Their findings support my case that *destabilizing* is the task which this kind of organisation does best. The goals of Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad are to liberate all of Palestine and Arab territories in Lebanon from Israel's control. Al-Qaeda's goal is similar, but more global and trans-national: "the overthrow of Arab rulers that do not adhere to the Islamic Sharia rules," and "to destabilize the western world, especially America, Russia and Israel, so as to free the Islamic world from domination." Overthrowing and destabilizing are their intentions but, after what I have said, we need to know more about how effective they are.

It is gratifying to learn that early radical activist groups in this region were indeed relatively ineffectual. But now everything has changed. The reorganized paramilitary enclaves can summon instant support from affiliate groups; they can combine for a well coordinated strike, do the damage, and then dissolve and disappear.<sup>2</sup> The change is supposed to be due to the new technology of communication. It is strange to hear of enclaves in sustained collaboration. Normally strong animosity against outsiders would inhibit external alliances between sectarian groups. I do not believe that electronic communication alone

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<sup>1</sup> Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Towards a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(4), July/August 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Shaul Mishal, and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organisation: Towards a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(4), July/August 2005.

could have that effect. So why and how did the enclaves in Israel break through the sectarian walls of mutual mistrust?

The key can be found in Emmanuel Sivan's contribution to the book, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*.<sup>3</sup> Historian and CT practitioner, Sivan adds a new necessary element to grid-group analysis – not just the internal organisation but also their external environment. The fundamentalist religious groups in Israel do not abjure the mainstream society. Nor are they regarded as a menace. On the contrary, they are morally and financially supported by society and the government. The young members of the enclave are financially subsidized for their education, they are exempted from military service, and receive other advantages from the government.

This puts a very different complexion on the comparisons. Their relation with other like-minded groups is friendly: they give each other mutual support, especially in planning campaigns against their common enemies, sharing supplies and information, and if need be, increasing each others' fighting strength for particular raids. The point is that their cultural environment is thoroughly supportive. The sects recognize themselves as the conscience of Israel, the upholders of the religion, proudly standing in good public esteem. No one in their sense would plan to defect.

## **Conclusion**

The case of Israeli radical activists strongly suggests that a benign cultural environment enables a sect to overcome its restricted vision. Seeing everything in black and white makes outsiders into villains. It aggravates existing hostility. Thanks to public support

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

the Israeli sects are able to see beyond their wall of virtue, make alliances and work together effectively. We learn that something to do with better communications has successfully integrated them.

Can we draw a moral from all this for immigrant groups in Great Britain? If they could be better integrated, we could have less reason to fear terrorism. It might help to put a high priority on learning English. They can't afford the cost of classes. We should subsidize language teaching (currently the government has just cut off the subsidy). We could send buses round to take them to their lessons, even award big prizes for language proficiency.

Ah! The snag is that if we were so generous to immigrants we would get even more unwanted thousands arriving on our shores. How could we deter them? The Home Office might insist on language proficiency. They might test immigrants regularly, send them back home, if they haven't reached a high standard in the first year. It would be a little bit like introducing electronic communication to Israel. The common language would gradually penetrate the high walls. Black and white thinking would go grey. We would have less reason to fear terrorist attacks.