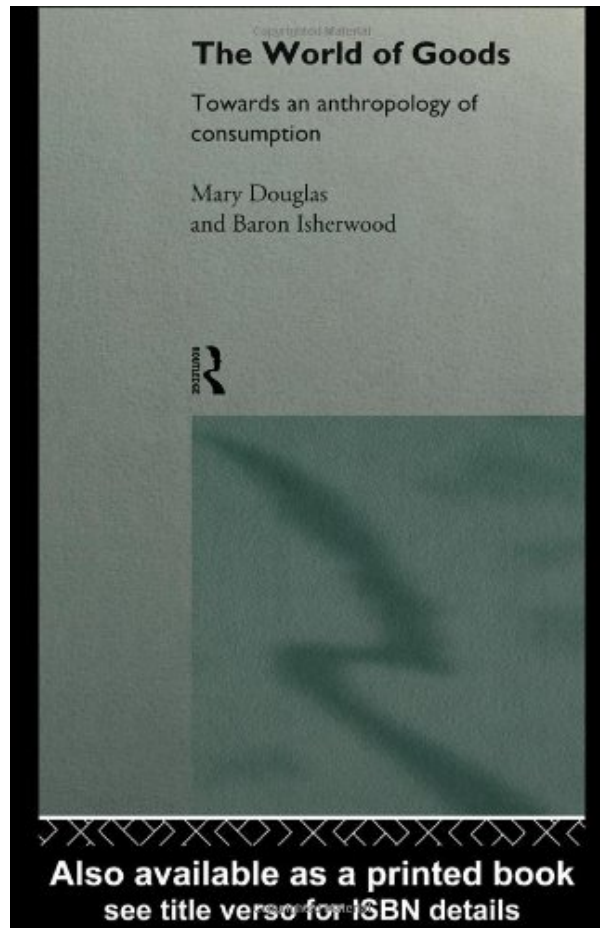
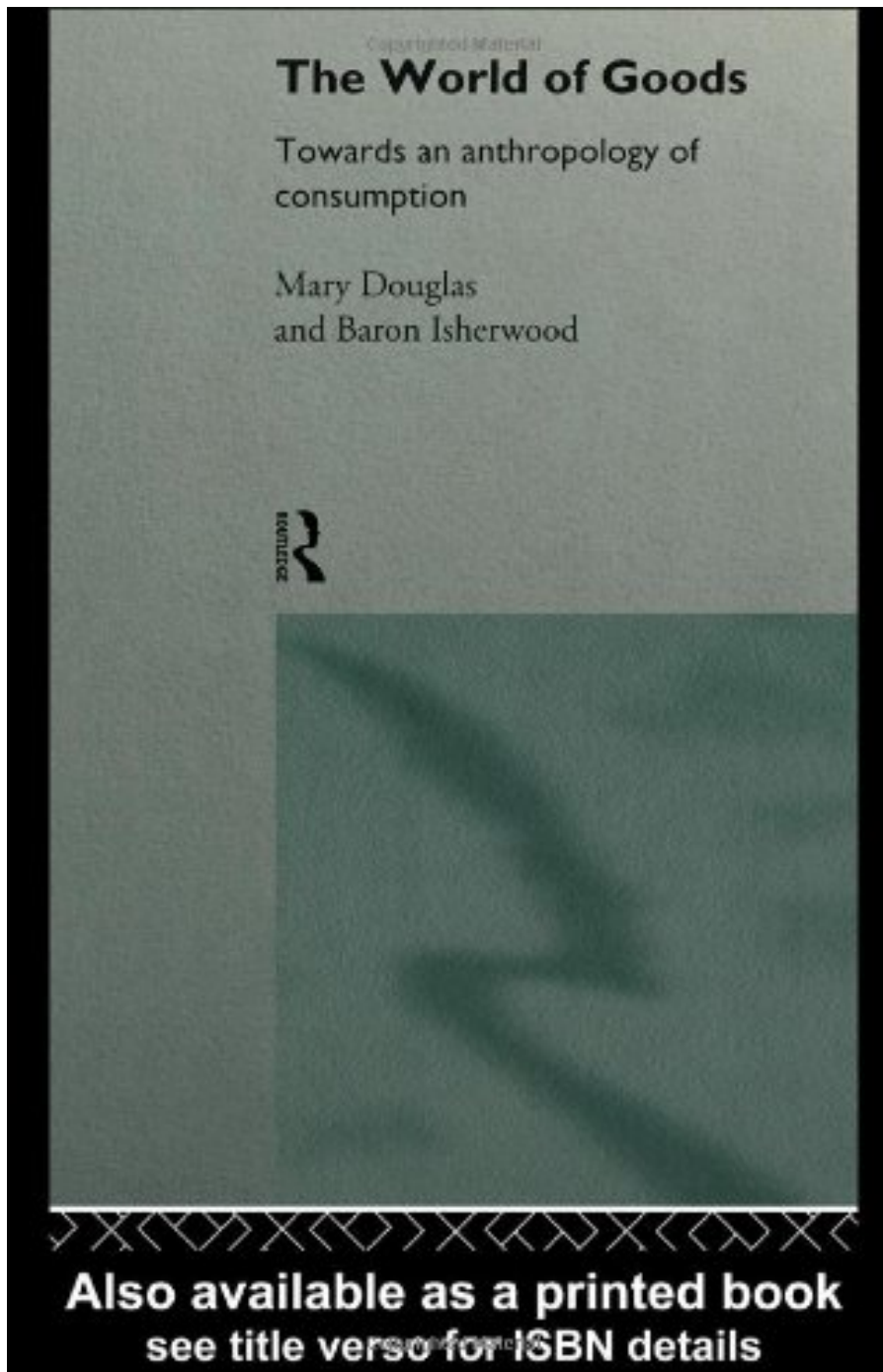


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About the Author

Mary Douglas is one of England's most distinguished anthropologists. She is author of, among many other works, *Purity and Danger* (1966), *Natural Symbols* (1970), and *Implicit Meanings* (1976).

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This revised edition with new Introduction from a leading anthropologist and an economist is unique in being about consumption but not a sermon for consumers, nor a moan against consumerism. The World of Goods bridges the gap between what anthropologists know about why objects are desired and what economists say about the specialised topic called consumption behaviour. The economist treats the desire for objects as an individual urge grounded in psychology; according to the anthropologist it is for fulfilling social obligations and represents the distribution of goods as a symptom of the form of society. It is a totally different perspective and raises issues that lie beyond economics.

The World of Goods asks new questions about why people save, why they spend, what they buy, and why they sometimes but not always make fine distinctions about quality. It is well-understood now that consumption goods communicate, create identity and establish relationships. But not so well-known that goods exclude as well as include, and that the pattern of their flow shows up the form of society. This book will be essential reading to students and lecturers in anthropology and economics.

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Accounting for tastes

By Timothy M. Hall

In this book, a renowned structural anthropologist collaborates with an economist to propose an explanation for one of the great mysteries of economics: where do "preferences" come from? Much of neoclassical economics rests on the assumption that, once we know the basic desires and tastes for a given population, we can then understand how people make rational decisions about how to acquire them and how to allocate their resources. The actual preferences themselves, however, are a black box. Douglas & Isherwood tackle this problem, evaluating several theories of "rational" economic actors from cross-cultural and systems theoretical perspectives. Their answer is that many of these mysteries are not so mysterious after all: we have

good reasons for valuing the things we value, and many of the apparently frivolous fads and fashions are in fact life-and-death matters. "Good taste" is an index of social connections, of reproductive fitness, of one's ability to mobilize resources -- and in a society increasingly dependent on information and services rather than physical products, the race to remain on the cutting edge becomes like traveling with the Red Queen, faster and faster just to stay in place. Along the way, Douglas throws out a number of gems which are incidental to her argument, including a proposal for why women's work is always and everywhere valued less than men's. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in what anthropologists can tell us about the deep logics of behavior in the consumer society.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

An excellent discussion of consumption and culture.

By Gregory L Dyas

Written in 1979 and revised recently in 1996, Douglas and Isherwood's classic breaks through our own love/hate relationship with consumption and the biased interpretations of history and the present to look in a reasoned fashion at the patterns with which all people choose to buy things and the affiliations we create using these things. Lamenting the fact that economics has restricted itself by limiting human tastes to a black-box phenomenon, Douglas (a renowned, now retired, anthropologist) rips open the box and finds many convincing arguments for the uses of goods as a means of communication in all societies.

Additionally, they discuss previous and current ideas about why people save, or don't consume, and provide excellent comparative analyses between societies in Great Britain, blacks and whites in the US, the Nuer of the Sudan, and Zimbabwe's Lele people. What the reader comes away with is a deeper understanding of how people use consumption, both consciously and unconsciously, to provide information about themselves, send messages to others, and try to control the flow of culture and information to best benefit themselves and their interests.

The writing, which I have the impression was mostly written by Douglas since I'm familiar with her style from other books, feels a bit cerebral but is extremely lucid and will keep you on your toes with novel interpretations of familiar cultural phenomena.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

A Classic

By A Customer

This is one of the early anthropological critiques of neo-classical economics. Many of the ideas expounded here are now being seriously pondered by economists who are attempting to find ways around them. Douglas, who is arguably the best known British anthropologist of her generation, has a particular insight into the way economists think - possibly because her husband is an economist. This makes her uniquely qualified to provide us with an anthropology of consumption, that does not dismiss economists, as much as show how much they miss by not understanding the cultural dimensions of consumption.

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