
SIR RAYMOND FIRTH



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IN 1994 SIR RAYMOND FIRTH, then ninety-five, was invited to participate in a conference on the topic of knowledge and identity in Oceania. Challenging participants to explore Oceanian and Western understanding of what is meant by the terms “knowledge,” “knowing,” and “beliefs,” Firth was still encouraging us to reflect on our statements and texts, much as he had done years back in his seminars and lectures at the London School of Economics. Like many of his students, I was inspired by his definitional queries as they revealed to us the complexity of social events and the complementarity of differing interpretations. At the same time, Firth rejected and continued to eschew sloppily constructed arguments, thoughtless use of terms and catch phrases, analogical thinking, and speculative generalizations that had no evidential underpinning.

By distinguishing knowing and knowledge, Firth was reminding us that not all actors in a society share the same “knowledge” (or beliefs); hence they do not all have the same information to guide their behavior and decisions. Here we see one of his major contributions: that social organization could not be glimpsed through theoretical models alone, but required also an examination of individual variations of behavior. While he acknowledged the value of the formal models of Radcliff-Brown, whom he admired for his brilliance, Firth believed that little attention was paid to social interaction and the interrelation of collective and personal knowledge. He remained much more interested in individual divergences and in social change than in narrow formal representation of collective behavior and culture. When “structure” and “function” were fashionable terms in academic circles, Firth continued to keep open another vision of what anthropology could be about, thus encouraging younger scholars to consider issues pertaining to decision-making, social transactions, and social conflict.

Firth’s attention to individual variation and change is reflected in each one of his many published case studies. His account of the ritual cycle in Tikopia documented variations in performance and the significance of ritual for the participants. He considered religion as an artistic creation intended to bring coherence in a universe of social and physical relations, as well as coherence with individual impulses, desires, and emotions. Attention to process allowed him to anticipate discussion of the plasticity of unilineal systems. His many books and articles about Tikopia religion, kinship, songs, and economic and political organization were initially based on data gathered during his first field work in 1928–29; his writing was amplified by a second visit with Spillius in 1952 and several short visits. In later years, Firth compiled a dictionary of Tikopian language, which, together with his other texts, was also intended as a historical record for the children and grandchildren of his

Tikopian informants. His representation of Tikopian society reflects his enormous empathy and respect for the islanders, a respect that was mutually shared by his island friends and their children, who sent him greetings on the occasion of his hundredth birthday celebration.

His earlier books were written at a time when there was little information available about non-Western societies. Like other young social anthropologists of his earlier years, Firth believed that a first responsibility was to make available observations that could contribute to the formulation of new and more adequate theories.¹ Exploratory discussions about theoretical constructs were mostly argued informally in seminars and meetings. Although these earlier publications offered detailed observations, they were not “ethnographies” in the narrow sense of the word; they were anchored in explicit intellectual problems. It was only after the interruption of academic life by the Second World War that the writings of Firth and his generation of social anthropologists became more theoretical as different points of view emerged, which were to challenge established approaches.

Although Firth was especially attracted to the study of ritual and beliefs, he is probably best known for having transformed the study of non-market economies from descriptions of technology to an analysis of economic organization, as seen through the eyes of reasoning and evaluating actors. This approach was unquestionably influenced by his initial training as an economist (his M.A. thesis in 1924 was on the Kaori gum industry). However, this influence was tempered by his childhood experiences in New Zealand and by his long, close friendship with Michael Postan, an economic historian in Cambridge. When he wrote his doctoral dissertation on historical changes of land tenure in Maori society, he was very well aware that their exploitation and the loss of forest and land had set limits to their land use practices. Tikopia society gave him a better opportunity to discuss the impact of social and economic constraints on the behavior of individual producers and transactors. Years later, after having lived from 1939 to 1940 in a fishing village in Malaysia with his wife, Rosemary Firth, he was able to discuss the problem of resource allocation in a fishing economy. Rosemary Firth, also an anthropologist, studied family relations and the local domestic economy, while Raymond Firth concentrated on the activities of the fishermen and traders. Following a return to the village for a few months after the war, and again in 1963, this time accompanied by Rosemary Firth, he revised his Malay fisherman book, including a

¹In an interview with David Parkin in 1988, Firth reminisces about his generation of social anthropologists and how his ideas differed from those of his colleagues. See David Parkin, “An interview with Raymond Firth,” *Current Anthropology* 29 (1988): 327–41.

chapter on the developments of the fishing industry. This second book has inspired many anthropologists to reconsider the significance of share contracts and the pliability of those contracts. He wrote extensively on other aspects of peasant economy. As a humanist, Firth felt a responsibility to contribute to the design of long-range, well-reasoned policies that might ease the plight of less fortunate populations while enhancing human freedom and dignity.

In later years Firth refrained from physically demanding field experiences, and used his energy to invigorate the study of family and kinship in European society with an anthropological perspective. He did so by engaging in field studies and by encouraging other anthropologists to raise problematic issues about kinship in Western societies. He had already completed a kinship study in a working-class area of London, but in the 1960s he chose to focus on a middle-class neighborhood.

While best known for his long association with the London School of Economics, from 1930 to 1932 he was acting professor at Sydney University in Australia. He retained a long association with this university, helping it to build a strong program in social anthropology, even after he returned to the London School of Economics in 1933. During the war, Firth wrote a number of handbooks on the Pacific Islands for the British Admiralty. This experience convinced him that one of the most urgent postwar tasks was to gather information on social and economic conditions in the colonies. His lobbying efforts resulted in the creation of the Colonial Social Science Research Council. He became the first secretary of this organization, and remained connected with it when it was later transformed into the Social Science Research Council. In 1944, Firth was appointed to the London School of Economics chair in anthropology, after the death of Malinowski. He succeeded in consolidating Malinowski's initial prewar efforts to create a strong social anthropology department. It became, together with Oxford and Cambridge, one of the centers of anthropological research and teaching, attracting young scholars who became prominent anthropologists all over the world. He was particularly keen in attracting and encouraging students from Southeast Asia, and was instrumental in efforts to build departments of anthropology in Malaysia and Fiji.

Although Firth formally retired from the London School of Economics in 1968, he continued to teach abroad at Stanford, Chicago, Cornell, British Columbia, Hawaii, and New Zealand. Although in later years he no longer traveled far, he remained an active participant in seminars and conferences within Great Britain. Firth received many honors during his long career: he became fellow of the British Academy in 1940, was knighted in 1973, became a companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2001, and was to receive the first Leverhulm Medal for a scholar of international distinction in 2002, the year of his death.

For those of us who studied at or visited the London School of Economics, a most vivid memory is that of Raymond Firth sitting at the head of a long seminar table, surrounded by pencils of many colors. Thus armed, he would prod and guide the discussion of data and arguments presented, constantly urging us to examine critically the validity of the stated propositions and encouraging us to explore the theoretical relevance of the topic presented. If any one of us was anxious when our turn came to present, it was not because we feared searing criticism. He was a kindly, courteous critic and supportive mentor, who responded to our occasional lapses and personal distractions appropriately. He knew that sometimes a smile and a kindly word were more effective than a critical comment. We experienced his seminar as a place for critical evaluation of one's ongoing research, a learning experience for the younger graduate students, and a forum for established scholars. He also included non-anthropologist participants, inviting them to offer their own experiences, which he believed were as valuable as those of declared experts. In a *Guardian* obituary, Maurice Bloch recounts his favorite memory of Sir Raymond Firth, at the age of ninety, "talking animatedly with young graduate students about to go off on their first field work. His eyes twinkled, his body danced with the stimulation of the conversation; he would listen, comment, criticize, advise and suggest further avenues of investigation and further reading."² When my husband and I visited him on our occasional trips to London, he would engage each of us in conversations about our areas of work and interest, offering his own reflections, sometimes in the form of a no-nonsense dry comment. He was a curious listener and inevitably asked about current emphases and developments. What was most striking to me is that despite Raymond Firth's academic stature and professorial position, he never demanded a loyalty to his theoretical approach. Quite to the contrary, he used his many colored pencils to keep track of our arguments, not his own, and to ensure that they would grow into clear and solid statements. It is to his credit that all of us went in different directions, some of them not to his liking. With his death we have lost a keen participant and observer of an intellectual era: the birth of British social anthropology, its many transformations, and diverse reorientations.

Elected 1965

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² Maurice Bloch, Sir Raymond Firth. Obituary. *The Guardian*, London, 26 February 2002.

