Raymond Firth, Between Economics and Anthropology

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When Raymond Firth died in 2002, Marilyn Strathern wrote that the world had lost 'the last of the great founders of social anthropology' [Strathern, 2002]. Facts about his life can be found in obituaries and in entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Proceedings of the British Academy* (Bloch, 2002; Davis, 2004, 2011; Strathern, 2002). His personal and professional papers are held at the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the LSE.

Firth did not possess the charisma of some of the other 'founders' of modern social anthropology. Nor did his writings reach the peak of style and form found in classics such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* or *The Nuer* [Geertz, 1988]. He is remembered today principally as an area specialist and by historians of the discipline as an 'organization man' [Davis, 2011; Mills, 2005]. But Firth's writings on economic anthropology and on the anthropology of Great Britain were pioneering. This essay focuses only on one aspect of his research: his work on non-industrial economies. Firth's ideas merit attention on their own terms. But they are also relevant to a great deal of debate on the fringes of economics and anthropology: about rationality, markets, the development and growth of global capitalism and the parting of ways between economists and anthropologists. Firth is particularly worthy of recovery since scholars have recently begun to historicize and contextualise the pre-history of the so-called 'substantivist'/'formalist' debate that erupted in the 1960s, 70s and 80s (Cook & Young, 2016; Cook, 2017a, Cook, 2017b; Guyer, 2000; Mirowski, 2000; Pearson 2000, 2002, 2010).

Firth's work arguably set the spark for the whole affair. This essay sketches out some of his

most illuminating writings from the 1920s-1950s in order to shed light on the interconnections between social anthropology and economics. Firth was often ignored by more partisan interlocutors seeking to widen, rather than narrow, the gap between these disciplines. However, with the benefit of some critical historical distance, his interventions seem rather more persuasive, avant-garde and far-reaching than the contributions of many of his more fiery contemporaries. Firth is long overdue a sustained critical and historical investigation. This essay points out some outlines of the wider significance of his thought.

* * *

When Firth arrived at the LSE as a young student of economics in 1924, Bronislaw Malinowski had recently published his magnum opus *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [Malinowski, 1922]. A year earlier, in 1921, Malinowski published a field-defining essay in *The Economic Journal* that surveyed much of the terrain that Firth would go on to explore. Malinowski contended that social scientists should seek to understand how non-capitalist economies function according to the particular social contexts in which they operate [Malinowski, 1921]. Anthropologists should not speculate about the pre-history of capitalism on the basis of existing non-capitalist societies; their work should not be driven by economic theories developed for the study of capitalist nations. Rather, they should observe what exchanges actually take place amongst non-capitalist peoples. This was not a naïvely empiricist agenda but rather of a piece with Malinowski's overarching concern to show how culture functions as a collective of institutions working towards the maintenance of human life. Economic institutions, those related primarily with production and exchange, would be, in a non-capitalist society, interconnected with other institutions. The Kula ring, famously described in *Argonauts*, was at once an economic, ritual, social and political system.

Firth's first major publication, 'Economic Psychology of the Maori', followed Malinowski's lead. He wrote: '[e]conomic activity is social activity'. '[I]t must not be wrenched from its social setting'. 'It is clear that self-interest alone is not the driving force in native industry, and that each man is also actuated to some degree by the wish to promote the welfare of the community of which he is a member' [Firth, 1925, 361]. He developed these insights in his PhD thesis, published in 1929 as *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori*. The book contains a typically Malinowskian sensitivity to collective welfare, the alienness of cash money to so-called 'primitive' societies and attention to the social bases of economic transactions: 'social motives form the great spur to economic action,' Firth wrote. 'It is in use and not in mere blank possession that value lies. [...] On the whole, then, the compulsion to work, to save, and to expend is given not so much by a rationalistic appreciation of the benefits to be received as by the desire for social recognition through such behaviour.' [Ibid., pp. 483, 484] Firth, like Malinowski, saw non-capitalist societies as social wholes and understood production and exchange in this light.

The great social historian, R.H. Tawney, recognised the importance of such an approach. He wrote in his preface to Firth's book, '[w]hat are called primitive peoples are not necessarily, it appears, uncivilized. Some of them, of whom the Maori were one, are merely peoples with a

different kind of civilization [...] If the only result of economic anthropology were to establish that fact, its practical importance would, nevertheless, be considerable.' [Ibid.: xiii]. By the 1940s, Tawney's hope for economic anthropology's relativizing potential had been partially fulfilled. Social anthropologists, many of them Malinowski's students, had carried out a number of studies of non-capitalist societies. These works inspired another historian, Karl Polanyi, to write about British history in the 18th and 19th century in a new fashion. Polanyi's tale of the disaggregation of a socially embedded economy into a market society drew heavily on the writings of Firth and Malinowski. In doing so, Polanyi made an implicit analogy between contemporary forms of social change studied by social anthropologists and the history of capitalist development in the 17th-19th centuries [Polanyi, 1944, 1957]. Thus began a long and illustrious tradition of informing British social history with theory drawn from social anthropology, from Keith Thomas's work on witchcraft to E.P. Thompson's conception of the 'moral economy' [Thomas, 1963; 1970; 1971; Thompson, 1971; 1972].

During the late 1950s and 1960s, however, anthropologists began to read Polanyi as if he was saying something new. In fact, Firth wrote, Polanyi's ideas 'came as no great surprise to many anthropologists' [Firth, 1972: 469], or at least to those who had been influenced by Malinowski, like him (after all, Polanyi had repeatedly stressed the signal importance of Malinowski for recasting economic thought in his essay 'Aristotle discovers the economy' [Polanyi, 1957: 69-70]). After Polanyi, economic anthropology, largely in America, was split between 'substantivists' who followed Polanyi and 'formalists' who did not [Plattner, 1989: 13]. To Firth, though, the whole debate seemed rather bemusing and beside the point [Firth, 1972a]. By the end of the 1930s, he had left behind the attempt to describe coherent social wholes as total spheres of reciprocal exchange. This was due, in part, to studying issues of social change. In his 1939 book *Primitive Polynesian Economy*, he wrote that both 'substantial' and 'formal' economic categories were needed (crediting this distinction, in turn, to the economist John Hicks) [Firth, 1939: 27]. Anthropologists, he thought, had to build a "well-constructed bridge" between the disciplines in order to explain the ways that people in specific contexts choose to allocate their time, labour and capital and why and when certain goods are exchanged [Ibid.: 28].

In this way he was following the pioneering work of Margaret Read on central African economics [Read, 1938] and anticipating the productive, and ground-breaking, research done by Phyllis Deane in collaboration with members of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute [Deane 1947, 1949, 1953; On Deane's work: Messac, 2018; Morgan: 2011; Schumaker, 2001: ch. 4]. Firth's own contribution to this tradition of interdisciplinarity was carried out in collaboration with his wife, Rosemary, and can be found in the couple's publications on Malayan fisher peasants [Firth, 1946; Firth, Rosemary: 1943]. Firth also published an important collection of essays with the economic Basil Yamey on saving in peasant societies [eds Firth & Yamey, 1964].

This moment of interdisciplinary research between anthropology and economics has largely been lost amidst the framing of economic anthropology as a zero sum struggle between

'formalism' and 'substantivism'. Another reason why these studies have largely dropped out of the discipline's collective memory might be due to the fact that in the late 1960s and 1970s, Marxist-inspired economic anthropology began to undermine the theoretical assumptions of Firth and his colleagues [Firth, 1972b]. Meanwhile, two powerful political and intellectual changes further challenged the claims of economic anthropology. Postcolonial theorists attempted to undercut the epistemological bases of social anthropology in general [Asad, 1972; Forster, 1972; Mafeje, 1976]. And, since the late 1940s, development economists had been constructing powerful new models of social change aimed at boosting industrialisation in what became known as the 'underdeveloped' societies that anthropologists had traditionally studied [Alacevich, 2011a, 2011b; Cooper, 2004; Escobar, 1991; Speich, 2011]. A sense of this sea change can be found in the review written by the prominent development economist W. Arthur Lewis of Firth's *Primitive Polynesian Economy*: Lewis was impressed by the book's attention to detail but disappointed by its lack of policy prescriptions for raising the levels of welfare amongst the people studied [Lewis, 1941].

Seen in this light, the theoretical debates of the 1950s, 60s and 70s in economic anthropology can be read in a different fashion. The divisions were more than merely methodological (i.e. between 'formalism' and 'substantivism'). They took place in a charged geopolitical atmosphere. Social scientists like Lewis sought to rapidly industrialise previously 'underdeveloped' societies to achieve escape velocity from colonial overrule. Meanwhile many anthropologists thought that this process of rapid modernization – regardless of the political goals it was aimed at – would lead to huge levels of disutility for the subjects of dirigist schemes of economic intensification. Firth wrote:

> It is assumed by anthropologists that development should not mean simply increase of per capita income or investment per head, but should relate to increase of economic opportunity and raising of levels of living in a broad sense. It is assumed too that rationality is a limited good, that people have values which may not be externally appreciated but which are so important to them that breach may not only give distress but lead to dislocation of their social structure. What is apt to be left unexplored in this attitude to development are question of control – of resources and social institutions. But generally the economic anthropologist is seen as having an analytical role, with its advisory aspects a matter of some argument. [Firth, 1972a: 472]

What development economists seemed to mean by 'welfare' was raising per capita income. The flipside of this definition, from the anthropologists' point of view, was the destruction of a social system that had grown up to meet the needs of its members. Industrialisation-come-what-may would do untold damage to these social linkages. Anthropologists like Firth meant something different by 'welfare'. They stressed the ways that social solidarity offered opportunities for group agency and gave people's lives meaning and direction. Their critics, like Arthur Lewis, saw this as a kind of romanticism or patronising paternalism (Ferguson, 2007: 73-74). Only rapid economic change could bridge the gap between the rich and poor nations. Needless to say, these fault lines are still playing out in debates within the social

sciences, in government policies and amongst communities facing predatory capitalist expropriation.

Raymond Firth grappled with many of these complexities. And his writings present a rich and sensitive source of reflection on the promises and pitfalls of 'development', both as a participant in many of the key debates and as a sensitive field researcher studying the effects of social change on capitalism's restive global frontiers. For this alone, his writings are worthy of sustained attention; it is high time for in-depth research on his life and works. This short essay has provided some suggestions for further lines of inquiry.

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