

# conferences

## MARY DOUGLAS AND RAYMOND FIRTH AT 100/120

Despite Alan Macfarlane's initiative to record video interviews with our ancestors of the future, most of us, like characters in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, may expect ourselves forgotten in 100 years, but there will be exceptions.

To mark their joint birthday on 25 March, Patrick Lavolette invited colleagues to contribute to an informal commemorative video-conference session on the influence that Raymond Firth (1901-2002) and Mary Douglas (1921-2007) have had in moulding their thoughts. Speaking for 10 minutes each were Henrietta Moore, Jonathan Benthall, Aleksandar Bošković, Sarah Green, Adam Kuper, Paul Richards, Perri 6 and Marion Berghahn.

Moore, Bošković and Berghahn highlighted memorable points in their early training when these two supported them with advice. Berghahn has since decided to launch a biographical book series that introduces the lives of those who shaped the discipline.

Richards' first contact with Firth was through his interest in the work of one of his star protégés, Kenneth Little. He retrieved his heavily marked up copy of Firth's *Human types* (1938), noting how he followed its overall ethos and approach rather closely. Green brought up the relevance of current debates over decolonization and recent Black Lives Matter discourses to uncover some of the political voids within British social anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s. Kuper spoke movingly of his evolving friendship with Douglas, especially once she returned to the UK from America. Similarly, Benthall spoke of Firth as 'a rocklike mentor and friend'. Perri 6 reminded us how powerful ancestors can be disruptive forces, a point gleaned from Douglas's theorizing, but which also applies to tense interpersonal relationships that both characters had with several colleagues, and with each other. Indeed, whereas both were committed to asking the big questions of comparative social anthropology, they were not soulmates.

During the Q&A, Hugh Firth, a clinical psychologist based in Newcastle, and the Firths' only child, mentioned how seldom Douglas's name was mentioned at home. He also outlined his interest in producing a biographical account of Firth's relationship with Edmund Leach and his family. Janet Farnsworth, one of Douglas's three children, indicated how unmusical their family seemed to be, a recollection she once made in response to a discussion with Richard Fardon. Richards and 6 reflected on the relevance of Douglas's work to the general subject areas of performance studies and ethnomusicology.

Douglas and Firth were advocates for an interdisciplinary social science. Firth's life spanned five continents and the whole of

the 20th century. Once a junior colleague of Westermarck and Frazer, he was able to deliver a dazzling speech at a lunch on his 100th birthday at New Zealand House in London. The chronicler of a tiny atoll island, he also embraced most branches of the humanities, starting from his training in economics. He was highly cultivated, a team-worker and a skilful institution builder. A superb teacher too and sharp critic of intellectual fashions, he was always returning social anthropology to the middle ground – as explained by John Davis (2004) in his obituary of Firth for the British Academy. His humanistic interpretation of religions, respectful but demystifying, always stressing their intimate connections with art and aesthetics, is still impressive. Raymond Firth had a long and intellectually fruitful marriage with Rosemary, who was like one of the vivid, forthright female characters in an E.M. Forster novel. And while always unshakingly loyal, he was a more complicated person than his urbane, ambassadorial public image might have suggested.

Mary Douglas, the subject of an insightful biographical monograph by Richard Fardon (1999), had a famously complicated personality. Her husband James, Director of the Conservative Party Research Department from 1970 to 1974, was always a steadying influence. Full public recognition of her worth came extremely late in life. Her method was at times eclectic and unsystematic – though Perri 6 and Paul Richards (2017) have argued to the contrary in their stimulating interpretation of her thought as a coherent whole.

Her grid-group model, especially as developed by Michael Thompson and others, stands as a tool for comparative social science. Her writings on purity, dirt and risk – influenced by Franz Steiner and probably Kenneth Burke – continue to be highly relevant to today's debates over pandemics, pollution and climate change, especially with regard to conflicts between interest groups and between short- and long-term priorities.

No matter that the contribution she became best known for – the anomalous nature of the pig – she radically adjusted in her later work on the Hebrew Bible. Implicit in her research, though not obvious, is the notion that there are competing 'purity frameworks'. This could profitably be mapped onto the currently popular idea that there are competing *universalisms* – which used to be called *totalizing strategies*. Firth opposed totalizing strategies. If he is less cited today than Douglas, this may be because one of his strengths was his empiricist challenge to one-size-fits-all theories. Part of his role in the history of anthropology was to rein in the heroic systematizers of yesterday, who often now seem unconvincing.

If Firth set an example of clear-eyed rigour in his challenges to totalizing strategies one by one, Douglas provided us with a kit for analysing the processes by which totalizing

strategies form. She concluded that, far from being intrinsically objectionable, some such strategies are essential as protections against anomie and social entropy. Foremost for her was the Catholic Church, into which she was born. Firth on the other hand might have been happy to be called an 'Enlightenment fundamentalist', as Ernest Gellner once described himself. ●

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