

Oct 30, 2014

Melford E. Spiro, Department of Anthropology Founder, Dies

Melford E. Spiro, founding chair of the department of anthropology at UC San Diego, died Oct. 18. at the age of 94. Spiro not only played an important role in the formation of the university's anthropology department but was also an important figure for the discipline of anthropology at large. He will be missed by many in the profession and on campus—especially at this year's Founders Celebration and at the Faculty Club, where he was a regular convivial presence up until his last days.

Spiro came to UC San Diego in 1968 to found the department of anthropology and set the department's general intellectual direction, hiring its initial group of six faculty members in 1969 and recruiting the first class of graduate students. Two of the original professors, David Jordan and Shirley Strum, are still at UC San Diego.

As one of a handful of department founders in the Division of Social Sciences, Spiro was long an influential voice, both in the division and in the university's Academic Senate. He was appointed in 1982 as UC San Diego's first holder of the Presidential Chair. In nominating Spiro for the honor, then UC San Diego Chancellor Richard Atkinson called the anthropologist "a major contributor to modern personality psychology, to methodological issues germane across the social sciences, and to those areas in which the interpretations of social science are of major importance to the general intellectual climate of our time."

Though Spiro retired from UC San Diego as professor emeritus in 1990, he remained engaged with the university, returning regularly to teach over the next 15 years.



Melford E. Spiro, founding chair of the department of anthropology at UC San Diego. Photo by Manuel Rotenberg.

Spiro was born in 1920 in Ohio to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who moved to Minnesota when “Mel” was an infant.

The family was desperately poor and suffered grievously during the Great Depression. Nonetheless, Spiro earned his bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Minnesota and went on to study anthropology at Northwestern University with Melville Herskovits and A. Irving Hallowell, earning his Ph.D. there in 1950. After his doctoral studies, Spiro taught at Washington University in St Louis and at the universities of Connecticut, Washington, and Chicago before coming to UC San Diego.

A leading figure in the psychoanalytic study of culture, Spiro contributed powerfully to the study of unconscious motivation in religion and social life. Spiro’s influence on cultural and psychological anthropology derived from his life-long engagement with theoretical issues and was firmly based in his ethnographic fieldwork. He conducted fieldwork in many points around the globe, including among North America’s Ojibwa Indians, on Ifaluk Atoll in the South Pacific, on Israeli kibbutzim, and in Southeast Asia.

He published hundreds of articles and more than a dozen books, including “Burmese Supernaturalism” and “Kibbutz: Venture in Utopia,” one of the most influential and earliest studies of its kind.

Spiro was also a significant voice in the cultural relativism vs. universalism debate, following the 1986 publication of an incendiary critique of relativism in the journal *Cultural Anthropology*.

Spiro served on many editorial boards and was one of the founders of *Ethos*, the Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology. He served as president of that society and of the American Ethnological Society as well. During his long career, he won many awards and distinctions, including two Guggenheim fellowships, an Einstein Fellowship at the Israel Academy of Science and an Excellence in Teaching Award from the Chancellor’s Associates at UC San Diego. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Spiro was married for 62 years to Audrey Spiro, a vivacious and brilliant woman who, after raising their sons, earned her Ph.D. in Chinese art at the age of 60 and taught art history for many years at different University of California campuses.

He is survived by two sons – Michael Spiro, a professor of music at the University of Indiana, and Jonathan Spiro, the academic dean at Castleton College in Vermont – and three grandchildren: Remi, Sophie and Benjamin.

A campus memorial will be held in the Faculty Club Lounge at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 19, 2015. For more information, please contact Thomas Csordas in the Department of Anthropology.

In lieu of flowers, the Spiro family suggests donations be made to the [Mel Spiro Graduate Student Research Support fund](#). For more information or questions, please contact Samantha Lang at samlang@ucsd.edu or (858) 822-3366.

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