



Virtual Roundtable: Julie Billaud's response

Julie Billaud
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

I started engaging with the notion of political agency in my earlier work on gender politics in 'postwar/reconstruction' Afghanistan. In a context where foreign occupation (under its multiple forms) and nationalist politics considerably



constrained women's capacity to speak, I wanted to understand the conditions of possibility of an autonomous and culturally intelligible feminine political voice. Through fieldwork carried out among various groups of women in 2007, I realised that Afghan women's engagement with the public had to be understood in terms of performances with deep political meanings.



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Because gender policies were locally perceived as a transplant imposed by 'the West', women were conscious of the necessity to manage the impression of their audiences in order to maintain their public legitimacy. The emotional, religious, nationalist and poetic repertoires they mobilised in their everyday interactions were evidence of the extreme resourcefulness they demonstrated when attempting to articulate rights claims without radically disrupting the intricate rules of the honour system. The international community's agenda to « empower women » and promote "women's rights", because of its disconnection from the subjective experiences of Afghan women, mostly served to bolster the myth of a return to normality for the Western public. As a consequence, such discourses intensified moral panics around identity at the local level. The drama that is



currently unfolding in this region of the world, triggered by an indefinite foreign military occupation, flawed development projects and social inequalities, has created a lumpen youth in thrall to radical Islam and violence. Women, far from being the passive victims of these developments, have accumulated over time an intimate knowledge of their place in the moral world they occupy. This knowledge does not merely reside in cerebral machinations: it comes alive in practice, that is, in performance.

Their agency precisely resides in their (mostly intuitive, but also sometimes strategic) capacity to manoeuvre this extremely precarious and symbolically charged political space.

These reflections have deeply shaped my understanding of current debates around Islam in Europe and in the UK in particular. Of course, the situation of European Muslim women is not totally similar to the one of the women I met in Afghanistan. However, British Muslim women's political agency has to be placed, like for Afghan women, in a broader context marked by rising Islamophobic sentiments and contradictory attempts by the government to "manage diversity". Among second and third generations of "post-migrants" Muslims in the UK, Islam provides a new framework for leading a moral life, a framework that is both emancipated from Western modernity but that nevertheless remains contemporaneous to it. Indeed, British Muslims testify of subjectivities oriented towards 'moral life'. Their postures are both inward and outward looking: their command of Islamic knowledge is a source of self-empowerment, a form of 'care of the self' (Agrama 2010) that nurtures a sense of distinction. However, in their quest for self-betterment, they do not passively reproduce a traditional lifestyle but they rather project a view of what ethical living ought to be. This personalized form of religiosity goes hand in hand with a desire to improve the world around them. In this sense, religiosity sets the condition of possibility for broader political action. The younger generations of Muslim women, for example, have begun to revisit the sacred sources of the *deen* to rethink the position of women in Islam. A number of them have made their entry in Shari'ah councils or have specialized



in Islamic family law or Islamic finance, an expertise that has become increasingly valued on the British market of identities. The vast majority of British Shariah councils' clients are women seeking a religious divorce. Ironically, these institutions which are perceived as discriminating against women from the outside, are seen as a threat to men's authority from the inside.



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Western liberal tradition tends to associate secularism with the preservation of the principle of gender equality in democratic societies. Indeed, the notion of freedom is conceived as an individual's ability to autonomously assert her/his will and pursue personal interests unfettered by the weight of custom, tradition or transcendental will. Individual autonomy is central to how freedom and personal fulfilment are imagined. To be considered 'free', an individual must act without social constraint. To a large extent, Western feminism has assimilated these liberal presuppositions and has envisioned women's emancipation as necessitating a clear break with traditions and beliefs. The fact that visibly (veiled) Muslim women have emerged in public and that they marry religiously, divorce in the same way and use spiritual guidance to lead their lives in accordance with their faith challenges Western conception of women's emancipation.

In this sense, British Muslim women's performances could be read as



subalterns' unapologetic attempts at asserting a feminine identity distinct from Western's standards of emancipation.

As Ghassan Hage argues in a recent article published in *American Ethnologist* [\[1\]](#): “What if there was something indeed threatening in a good anti-colonial way in every Muslim man growing a beard and every Muslim woman peacefully but defiantly putting her hijab on”? This is the question I am daring to ask in my current work on British Islam.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

These two examples derived from my fieldworks in Afghanistan and in England demonstrate the somewhat out-dated approach of area studies. In my view, area studies are ill equipped to draw the kinds of comparisons necessary to understand our contemporary globalised world. Because of the increasing speed with which « cultures » interact, political developments in the Middle East can no longer be analysed without making references to political developments happening elsewhere in the world. This has always been the case since the birth of the discipline but because flows of information have intensified exponentially over the past 50 years, the intensity of these exchanges and interactions has been magnified. The expansion of diasporic lifestyles is a good illustration of the limits of area studies for capturing such a cultural phenomenon. How would you place culturally a person born in Lebanon from Palestinian parents, who resides in Australia, regularly returns to Lebanon on holidays, and has never visited Palestine? The analytical framework offered by area studies may well not be the most useful to understand such an experience.

[\[1\]](#) Hage, Ghassan. 2016. « État de Siège: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism? »



American Ethnologist 43 (1): 38-49. doi:10.1111/amet.12261.

Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Virtual Roundtable: Latif Tas' response

Latif Tas
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

First of all, I think you need to change the wording of the first question: e.g. “To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?” The notion of political agency didn’t help all those activists in the Middle East Civil Uprising (e.g. in Syrian, Iraq, Turkey) or for the women who took part in the Tahrir Square demonstrations. ‘Agency’ doesn’t mean anything if you’re being barrel-bombed in Aleppo, or your town is totally destroyed with dead civilian body stayed on the streets, or you are for weeks adrift in a sinking boat in the Mediterranean, or when more than 100.000 people are forced to leave their home, as in Cizre.



If you and your family reach Lesvos, I question how much agency there is if you are not allowed out of the refugee camp, but have been told you have to submit a residency application in Rome?

It's different if you have a US or UK passport (the public wind used to be against Communists in the West, but now has turned towards the Muslims). With the media supporting 'thinkers' like Trump and Cameron (it used to be Bush and Blair), it's difficult to know how much real agency American or British citizens have. It's just the elite who have political agency. And some of them - Tony Blair, for example - choose to throw it away. Their lies are so 'convincing' that they can even promote the sense that they have not done anything wrong.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

The two biggest political and social transformations in the world at the moment are much bigger than 'areas'. Climate change is obviously global, even if it affects/is going to affect some areas more quickly than others. The most affected areas must understand the areas which are going to affect them. Even more urgently, although the vast number of refugees in the world today come disproportionately from specific areas, if they are lucky, individual migrants and families become members of a diaspora, or more than one diaspora. They're merged in, more or (often) less, with other people from other areas. The less fortunate simply become refugees. Their 'area' may become just a tent, in a camp. I'm not suggesting here that 'area studies' has nothing to offer. But the 'area experts' must understand how limited a 'pure' area focus is. An example is surely the 'experts' on Iraq whose advice before and after the invasion was so catastrophically wrong.

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Virtual Roundtable - Paul Anderson's response

Paul Anderson
August, 2016





1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

Michel de Certeau argued that agency comes in different shapes and sizes, according to how agents are positioned in any given social field. He distinguished between tactical and strategic action. If the powerful are able to deploy “strategies” to achieve their goals, “tactics” refers to the ad-hoc, improvised, clever moves and diversions through which people who lack power and visibility in any social field get by. So we can say that

political agency does not always imply political change; if it is tactical, it can also be a way of coping and making do in the face of any given system of power.

I visited the town of Raqqa during my fieldwork in Syria in 2008-09 looking at trade and business trust relations. After my visit, one of the people I had been put in touch with by another anthropologist suffered several weeks of harassment from the local security office. When I asked my Syrian friends and interlocutors back in Aleppo what I could do to ameliorate the situation, one - a middle-aged professional woman - told me I could not approach the police or security officials directly, but to wait and find out circuitously in a week or two if there was still pressure on them, and if so, to consider introducing myself to a local university in Raqqa, but without referring to the incident. “Don’t worry, there is always a solution”, she said. Relations with the regime, she added, were like “cat-and-mouse” - a game of tactical moves and counter-moves. She compared it to the use of internet proxy servers: strictly speaking illegal, but common, and tolerated by the security apparatuses until the cat decides to come and shut one down and the mice move elsewhere to find another server.

Her description of political agency - the ways that ordinary Syrians needed to interact with the security state - recalled De Certeau’s notion of tactical action: the way that less powerful actors cleverly turn a given system to their advantage, without confronting or challenging it. This also resonated with the way other



Syrian friends related everyday life to the political. Many Syrians understood the regime to govern by producing a “patterned disorganisation of everyday life” (to borrow a phrase from political scientist Steven Heydemann). Some saw this as a deliberate strategy to deprive ordinary citizens of the capacity for strategic mobilisation, and to keep them in the realm of tactical action - in other words, without power or visibility in the political field.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

Area studies can help to foster a depth of historical knowledge and philological expertise which can enrich disciplinary fields in the social and political sciences. But we should be wary of compartmentalising our analyses along regional lines. For example, it is hard to understand recent Syrian history without connecting it to transformations in the former USSR and its orbit. In the early 1990s, Aleppo’s economy and political scene were dominated by pyramid schemes which I think were connected to similar schemes that arose in the postsocialist economies of Romania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe and Russia. Commercial, educational and cultural connections between Russia and Syria remain strong and are an important part of understanding Putin’s recent adventures as he seeks to maintain his presence and extend his military power in the country.

For all the strengths of area studies, disciplinary fields such as political science or anthropology can also bring a wider comparative lens and help identify such connections to transformations beyond the region.

This seems particularly important now, with military intervention, migration and refugees bringing Europe and the Middle East into ever closer articulation. How can we illuminate these connections: through studying narratives of crisis, crises of citizenship, challenges to and enactments of civility...?



Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Virtual Roundtable - Mjriam Abu Samra's response

Mjriam Abu Samra
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

I should emphasize here that my analysis of political agency is grounded in an international relations (IR) background rather than in an anthropological one. In IR the “dilemma” over the extent to which political agency can bring about or even just affect political transformations is a major issue. Opposing positions have emerged, shaping two different approaches. One is neo-realist, which denies any relevance to “people as political agents” able to impact macro political changes. The other is a “social-constructivist” school of thought that draws on sociology and anthropology, and emphasizes political agency as a crucial factor, among others, in understanding political changes.



My approach to this issue is influenced by my empirical research and, particularly, by the study of Palestinian student movements and their contribution to the emergence and development of the Palestinian liberation movement.

It is undeniable that systemic mechanisms (i.e. state interests, geopolitical concerns and economic dynamics especially in a globalized world) have a direct impact on, and shape politics. However, contemporary developments in the Palestinian youth movement and the attempt to elaborate new strategies and regain a vanguard role in the struggle for liberation show that people remain important political agents and their actions are still fundamental to respond to political dynamics at the structural level and even to impact them. In the past few years the protests that Asef Bayat terms “youth non-movements” were unorganised and even uncertain in defining their strategies and demands yet, they clearly broke from the apathy of previous decades. The current *intifada*, suggests that a decisive rupture in the political framework has already happened and that spontaneous, decentralized and unorganized resistance might persist beyond the political infrastructure of party politics, neo-liberal economic coercion and repression.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformations?

Area Studies are still central for understanding political transformations. While the relevance of regional analysis has been challenged by the emergence of globalised politics and the consequent need to elaborate on theoretical frameworks that are able to incorporate the new transnational dimension of political and social changes, contemporary events have reminded us of the necessity to keep focusing and even strengthening Area Studies.

Thus, the interconnection between “the local” and “the global” is fundamental



in understanding political dynamics and transformations, as the two levels influence each other.

Even more, it is now evident that Area Studies not only provide relevant empirical analysis but also allow to trace more general trends and to foresee broader, transnational, political trajectories. The recent Arab uprisings are a case in point in this sense, and demonstrate how relevant Area Studies still are in understanding socio-political and even economic and cultural transformations. The analysis of regional transformations has focused on local as well as international factors: scholars have pointed out that Arab politics-and resistance-should be understood “as a complexity that goes beyond the mere interaction between ‘the regime’ and ‘the Arab people’ and these politics are related to shifting power balances in contemporary globalization” (Bogaert). The transnational relevance of the “Arab spring” becomes evident: the emergence of movements such as *Occupy Wall Street* in the USA, or *Podemos* in Spain share the same critiques of globalised neoliberal policies of many opposition movements in the Arab region.

The study of current events in the Arab World is shedding light on the new understanding of politics and the role of “the people” not only in the Middle East but also more broadly across the world.

Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Virtual roundtable: Deniz Gökalp's response

Deniz Gökalp
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

I do not think that political agency is no longer relevant to understanding political change in the 21st century. I think the masses have never been as politicized or political as they are today in the history of the Middle East. Agency is



conventionally associated with the ability of the masses to make change, become a part of the political decision making process, or influence the status quo. Classical sociologists of the 20th century studied the revolutionary potential of the masses; nevertheless, contemporary sociologists have perceived political agency as something still potentially powerful that can subtly challenge or gradually change the status quo.

In the 21st century, social scientists might have to reconsider, deconstruct and/or redefine the term, but political agency continues to remain an important aspect of our understanding of the national state apparatus and the international politics, and the changes happening in/to them.

Although there was a discernible concern that the masses would become apolitical as civil societies get depoliticized following the end of the Cold War era, the so-called end of the ideologies, and due to the neoliberal encroachment, the 21st century has already proved to be quite different than expected, and very interesting in terms of wars, social conflicts, discontent, grievances, and their manifestations. The deterioration of the security situation and life chances, and externally triggered civil wars in countries like Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and the continuation of the decades old political fragmentation and enmities among the states of the region is disheartening for the scholars studying the Middle East. It is difficult to imagine where to look at to see the power of the masses that could change their circumstances as they wish given their desperation in the face of wars, violence, displacement and massacres across the entire region.

The states are getting hollowed out, state institutions are falling apart, armies and armed groups are all threats for civilians, and organized crime and black markets are the widespread economic activities in the region. Yet, all these developments are social and political transformations transcending the borders of the Middle East. Based on my research in the conflict zones, I can say that change



inflicted by or associated with violence, oppression and displacement makes the people involved even more political and politically engaged. Life becomes a matter of survival, and survival is about how to read, react to and act on the overwhelming political developments at home and abroad.

It would be naïve to think about political agency as something inherently progressive, positive, rational or peaceful.

I think the 21st century will push the boundaries of our intellectual imagination as we see the masses in the Middle East, in Europe and around the world discovering new forms of mobilization and ways of doing politics that we had never seen before in the 19th and 20th century.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

To a great extent, Middle Eastern/Near Eastern Studies have failed to support independent academic research to understand the political and social transformations taking place in the region. Zachary Lockman discusses the problem with the Middle East Centers and Studies in his book, [*Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; second edition, 2009). Middle Eastern Studies have been done in the Centers at the American and British universities with funding coming from quite controversial sources since the WW2. The boundaries of intellectual discussions have been manipulated and sometimes forced on the works of the individuals affiliated with these centers depending on the source of the funding and the political group dominating the center. The State Department, corporate foundations (e.g. The Ford Foundation), gulf regimes as well as the Jewish and Armenian lobbies have been quite influential in designing the research at these centers. For decades, these centers have been a battlefield for competing



political agendas and/or produced quasi-academic work on Middle Eastern history, literature, culture and Islam reproducing orientalist discourses. Even when an independent academic reaction started to develop against orientalism and political manipulation of academic discourses, it has been limited to the criticism of orientalism and colonialism without a deep delving analysis of the particularities of history, society, politics and economic relations in the region. The best research on the Middle East has been produced by the historians, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists in their respective departments, mostly not in the Middle Eastern Studies Centers. In my opinion, Area Studies, as far as the Middle Eastern Studies is concerned, have never been very relevant to understand the politics and societies of the region analytically and independently.

Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Virtual Roundtable: Antonio De Lauri's response

Antonio De Lauri
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

To some extent, the notion of political agency has been used in social sciences as an instrument to assign social actors with forms of intentionality that were more in the eyes of the observers than in the minds of social actors themselves. This top-down approach - although it is always represented as a bottom-up perspective - has produced sometimes sophisticated analyses of social life and power relations, sometimes mystifications, but it has anyway contributed to marginalizing the very idea of political action as the expression of clear individual or collective wills and consciousness.



Perhaps, the notion of political action – associated with qualities such as “resolute purpose”, “certain and untamable will”, “individual effort at the service of the collectivity” (Gramsci, A., 1967, *Scritti politici*, Editori Riuniti, Roma) – can thus be more effective to address the problem of political change in an unjust social world, “a world of delirious larvae in a fog prison” (Gramsci, *ibid*).

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

The level of simultaneity and togetherness of the contemporary world crumbles the geographical borders that have historically inspired area studies. There is not anymore – was there even in the past? – an “elsewhere” of critical political events. In order to grasp the significance of contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation we need to transcend geographical borders: beyond area studies.

Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Virtual Roundtable: Luigi Achilli's



Response

Luigi Achilli
August, 2016



1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

“Political agency?! What is political agency?” When I first spoke about “political agency” with my mother, I did it to explain what was the main focus of my PhD research. I failed miserably - she did not really understand what I was studying, a notion that I was actually struggling to make sense of myself. Pausing a moment and looking at me reflectively, she added: “...do you mean political action?” That



day the woman probably gave up the idea that her only son did not do anything useful with the money that she diverted so lavishly to his education. On my side, her question was a terrible blow to my intellectual self-confidence, which led me to doubt the very use of the term:

Was political agency only jargon - just another way to reinforce scholars' haughty intellectual aloofness vis-à-vis "ordinary" people? No... of course not! The concept of political agency means something more, it points to those actions that are conducive to real change.

It is like political action, yes, but more effective, powerfully enabling and inherently benign. As James Laidlaw correctly points out, "only actions contributing towards what the analyst sees as structurally significant count as instances of agency. Put most crudely, we only mark them down as agency when people's choices seem to us to be the right ones."

In this sense, political agency represents a crucial analytical frame both to observe contemporary social and political transformations as well as to define the role of anthropology in the interpretation of our age. However, the problem with this conception of political agency is that it produces a set of interrelated issues. The first one is entailed in the unspoken presumption of what a person's actual or ultimate goal is. By taking for granted the universality of a desire to act, this understanding of agency looks only at those actions inspired by a genuine desire of freedom and equality. Secondly, although "resistance" - as an ideal form of action - is surely an important facet of political agency, its overemphasis denies dimensions of human action that does not fit into the logic of repression and resistance. This has been especially evident with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings: lured by the spectacular clarity of political demonstrations and acts of violence that have dramatically upset Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, many Middle East scholars and political analysts have, with few exemptions, missed the complexity of political change in Jordan, occupied Palestine, and elsewhere in the region.

A more nuanced analysis of political change in and beyond the Middle East would



require an analytical shift away from the classic parameters of political agency. As several authors have pointed out, we need to understand political agency as not simply the capacity to act politically against overarching forces and practices of domination, but simply as to the ability to effect change. Such an approach can offer new insights into the nature and experience of the political in contexts where the complexities of political change often left authors recognizing as effective only those actions that are conducive toward freedom and liberation from subjugating forces.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

As Edward Said and other scholars already warned, area studies contribute to shape a very specific understanding of the Middle East as well as other regions—an understanding that is very much anchored in the economic and political concerns and needs of others. Most importantly, however, the nature of these studies precludes the capacity to provide more nuanced analysis of a given phenomenon for a flaw intrinsic to its very gaze: while the processes that produce specific political and social transformations are global in character, the social scientist describe these phenomena in local terms.

Visit our [virtual roundtable](#) for more responses.

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Political Agency - A Virtual Roundtable

Julie Billaud
August, 2016



Last May, an international workshop entitled *Rethinking political agency in the Middle East: Engaging political anthropology* took place in Fiesole at the [European University Institute](#). We published both [an introduction to the workshop](#) and the [workshop abstracts](#) here at Allegra. The workshop was sponsored by the [Wenner Gren Foundation](#) and intended to bring ethnographic research in the Middle East into conversation with anthropological debate on political agency. This Virtual Roundtable is exploring two questions discussed during the



workshop, namely:

- 1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?**
- 2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?**

We will gradually reveal the answers to these questions given by workshop participants in the days to come. Click on the portraits below and read the responses!

[circles_gallery ids="20420,20765,20419,20421,20767,20766,20430,21186"]

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Summer EVENTS list

Allegra
August, 2016



Hello Allies! Once again, Aude came up with this wonderful list of events for you, to give you a foretaste of the new academic year about to start. You will find here a bit of something to please the interests of everyone: equality, mobility, linguistics, heroism and...micromachismo! Here are just a few themes for what promises to be a wonderful year!

Do get in touch with Andrea at andreak@allegralaboratory.net or Aude at audef@allegralaboratory.net if you want your event to feature in our next event list or if you feel like writing a short report!



International conference: [Organizing Equality](#)

24-26 March 2017, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Organizers and advocates for local and global social justice are the lifeblood of solidarity movements worldwide that disrupt historic projects of exploitation, violent dispossession and social fragmentation. Social and economic inequality is a global challenge of the 21st century. The Global North's Occupy and anti-austerity movement spoke back to the 2008 financial crisis. They now confront the urgent, mass scale migrations of peoples from the Global South to the North, fleeing a colonial legacy of deprivations, militarization, wars and land grabs. Settler societies are also experiencing Indigenous re-centerings, from #IdleNoMore to the Truth and Reconciliation process, and the #BlackLivesMatter cry to enfranchise African diasporas.

It is now increasingly recognized that rising levels of inequality are linked to poverty, discrimination, illness, environmental degradation, and social unrest. It is further recognized that inequality, in turn, is conditioned by and contingent on a range of other factors, including citizenship rights, gender, race, ethnicity, age, location, and education.

But despite this recognition, social movements contesting inequality face serious problems of organization, strategy and tactics. Recent years have shown the limits of traditional trade unionism, occupy and assembly movements, vanguards and new electoral parties alike. They have also shown that anti-racism, anti-violence, LGBTQ and migrant rights movements, to name a few, face major challenges organizing in the face of violence, xenophobia, marginality, impoverishment and under threat of criminalization. Across the board, movements have to reckon with the unprecedented levels of surveillance of the digital networks which have become an important part of their organizing



practices.

This conference therefore asks what forms of organization might, in today's conditions, be most useful to movements for equality. It especially seeks contributions willing to explore new possibilities for the organization of equality struggles. [[more](#)]

Deadline for submissions of abstracts: 1 August 2016



Conference: [Mistrust, mobilities, insecurities](#)

16-17 November 2016, Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany

This international conference will be organised as part of the [EU-FP7 CASCADE project](#) by the working group dedicated to issues of migration, mobilities and poverty in the Caucasus.

The central notion to be explored during the conference is mistrust. In contrast to the notion of trust, which has become popular as a social phenomenon in the social sciences of late, the notion of mistrust is mostly overlooked. If at all, mistrust is investigated as the flip side of trust, as an annoying absence and a societal failure. In this vein, post-Soviet citizens such as those from the Caucasus are depicted as notoriously deficient: alienated from the state due to the Soviet past they are still haunted by, incapable of creating a genuine civil society, unwilling to follow the rule of law, relying on personal networks and relations rather than the state apparatus, predisposed to corruption. The most pressing question thus seems to be how to restore trust in the state, and how to foster trust in civil agents and free markets.



With this conference, we intend to take a step back and explore what people actually do when they mistrust. Particular attention will be paid to how mistrust relates to poverty, insecurity and (voluntary as well as involuntary) forms of mobility as widespread experiences in the post-Soviet Caucasus and beyond. We also ask for the constructive potential of practices of mistrust. Can we identify communities of mistrust? May mistrust be culturally coded? If so, what is particular about these codes? Does the sharing of mistrust create new forms of legitimacy? [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of proposals: 31 July 2016



Symposium: [Rhetoric of the past](#)

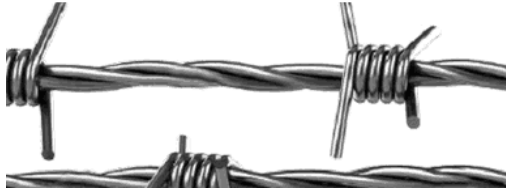
22 September 2016, 13.00-17.30, The Hague, The Netherlands

How and why do people re-appropriate rhetoric from the past in present contexts?

In 2014, the Dutch producer Bakermat released his pop song 'One Day' in which he incorporated the famous words 'I have a dream'. His song became a hit in several European countries. Another example is the re-appropriation of the 1989 slogan 'Wir sind das Volk' during the recent Pegida demonstrations in Dresden. The rhetorical use of the past can articulate a certain identity and influence historical consciousness. Especially now, in times of cultural diversity, it is important to gain more insight. How and why do people use references to the past? How can we analyse these practices in text and images? And how do people respond as consumers to these practices?

Keynote speaker: [Professor Michael Rothberg](#) [[more](#)]

Free access! Register: info@knhg.nl



1st international conference:
[Micromachismo in communication](#)

27-28 October 2016, Seville, Spain

Adjusted to political correctness, new ways of formal equality offer a superficial sense of respect for the rights and opportunities of women. However, this formal recognition does not guarantee social justice. On the contrary, it becomes a reinforced obstacle while declaring legal equality, not corresponding to the social dynamics of integration and equal opportunities for women.

“*Micromachismo* acts” are negative expressions disguised in comments, gestures, attitudes and decisions that still maintain a hierarchy of values between feminine categories and masculine ones. This is a velvety model of equality which patriarchy adapted to political correctness for keeping convictions on gender-based inequalities.

The result is a more complex way to fight against that mutated “machismo”, using the formal language of equality to prevent its effective recognition. These new forms of discrimination of a lower voltage have been described as “micromachismo” and require a more rigorous analysis from the different areas of social reality so to be detected and produce a profound change on gender convictions. [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 18 September 2016

International conference: [Heroism as a global phenomenon in popular culture](#)

28-30 September 2017, Freiburg, Germany



In an age of globalization and transnationalism, heroes transcend their cultural spheres of origin and are re-rooted, adapted, and translated in new local contexts across the world. We understand (male and female) heroes as a phenomenon of exceptionality that has a positive significance in relation to the values, ideals and norms of the communities in which these figures are admired, followed, functionalized but also debated. In this process of “glocalization,” popular culture, with its world-wide markets and media, is a driving force. Such different media as films, comics, graphic novels, computer games, or internet blogs construct and disseminate narratives about heroes and heroisms across the globe and are consumed in the Global North as well as the Global South. At the same time, there are centres of dissemination - including Hollywood, Bollywood, or Hongkong - that continue to dominate processes of production and dissemination of hero narratives.

This multidisciplinary conference aims to highlight the complex and interrelated processes of creation, marketing, consumption, and impact, of globalized hero narratives, as well as the numerous cultural flows of exchange that have made them possible since the end of World War II. We are interested in contributions (case studies) which conceive of heroism as a transcultural and transnational phenomenon that may originate in one particular nation but ultimately transcends borders. Questions to be discussed would include how the meanings of heroic figures and narratives are changed in cultural translation, or what specific processes are active in the world-wide exchange of figures and concepts of the heroic. Case studies can focus on situations in Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia. [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 31 December 2016

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On the State. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992.

John Postill
August, 2016



As stated on its back cover, in this book the influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) investigates the state's 'extraordinary power of producing a socially ordered world without necessarily giving orders, without exerting a constant coercion'. After all, 'there isn't a policeman behind every car'. This 'quasi-magical effect' of the state, he adds, demands an explanation. In other words, how did the state's powerful influence come about? To answer this question, Bourdieu embarked on a three-year course of lectures (1989-1992) at



the Collège de France, now carefully edited by Patrick Champagne and colleagues, along with a brief but helpful editors' note, two appendices, two bibliographies, and 28 pages of endnotes. Translated by David Fernbach, the English is fluent, with none of the awkwardness so often found in French translations, perhaps owing in part to the oral nature of the original text.

*As the editors rightly point out, the importance of this work lies in its gathering in one place of Bourdieu's extensive, but little known, investigations into the genesis of the state in the wake of his *State Nobility* (1989). They note that Bourdieu only started using the term 'state' in the early 1980s. Having previously worked on the genesis of a number of other fields (photography, art, sociology, etc.), he eventually turned to the systematic study of the state as part of a general theory of social space late in his career.*

The book is divided into three sections, each corresponding to an academic year. Year 1 explores how the concentration of bureaucratic resources led to the formation of states. The year starts with a modified definition of Weber's famous state formula. For Bourdieu, states possess the monopoly not only of legitimate physical violence but also of *symbolic* (to do with prestige, renown, recognition) violence. He then steers clear of two ahistorical approaches to the state: the 'optimistic functionalism' of the state as a neutral site for the pursuit of the public good (Hobbes and Locke), and the 'pessimistic functionalism' in which the state is a coercive instrument of oppression (Marx). ✘

He is then in a position to retrace the invention of public interest - an 'obligation of disinterestedness' - and how it was made into official law in opposition to private or particular interests (pp. 48-54).

In Year 2 the opening gambit is a distinction between economicist (e.g. Elias, Tilly) and non-economicist (Sayer and Corrigan) models of state genesis. Bourdieu takes the latter, culturalist path, arguing that over a long period of time 'state actions' created a *nomos*, i.e. 'common principles of vision and division'



(Durkheim) that shaped the social world through key institutions such as the school, the army, and the official arts. This move takes him to England and Japan, two island nations that demonstrate that cultural archaism and economic transformation can go hand in hand. In both countries, an official, quasi-religious culture (e.g. *kabuki* theatre) became codified and canonised as 'authentic' during periods of rapid industrialisation.

In the third and final year, Bourdieu reconstructs the transition from a logic of dynastic states centred on the royal house to the eventual triumph of a very different logic, that of *raison d'état* - a transformation from personal (kin-based) to impersonal (bureaucratic) reproduction. This was a protracted, messy process in which jurists and clerks were crucial to the invention of a *res publica* and a powerful new space: the bureaucratic field. Contrary to 'a certain materialist tradition', he concludes that the state became a 'central bank of symbolic capital', with bureaucracy being a meta-field in which social agents struggle over the relative power of other fields across the social space. Today the state is a 'well-founded illusion' or 'theological entity' whose effects are all too real (pp. 9-13), constituting 'the form of collective belief that structures the whole of social life in highly differentiated societies' (p. 381).

Three key features of On the State merit particular attention: Bourdieu's 'genetic sociology' method; his central argument about the state as a social reality founded in collective belief; and the unclear role of nations and nationalism in his theory.

First, Bourdieu rejects what he sees as the artificial boundaries separating history, sociology and anthropology, and regards 'genetic thinking' as the best weapon to combat 'the amnesia of genesis' that afflicts most social theorists (pp. 366-370). He cogently takes issue with functionalist theories of the state that neglect to inquire into the conditions that made current state functions possible in the first place. Additionally, he advises historians to take seriously the epistemology of their own craft. Although historical transitions are non-



teleological 'one-way street[s]' (pp. 39-43), the trajectory of states resembles a funnel in that the 'space of possibilities' narrows as time goes by (pp. 116-119). Given that the chasm between historians and social theorists is as wide today as it was at the time of Bourdieu's writing, there are still valuable lessons here for students and scholars wishing to bridge it.

The book's collective belief thesis has much to recommend it, too, but it does not give enough credit to people's critical faculties. Bourdieu suggests that many of the things that today we take for granted, e.g. school timetables, spelling conventions, road signs, etc. are the outcome of state-related struggles between dominant and dominated social agents that were long forgotten (pp. 171-175).

However, while this may well be the case with school schedules and traffic signs, I am not persuaded that it applies to the way people think and talk about the state itself - or indeed about its numerous representatives.

Research and personal experience tells us that around the world, faith in the state ranges from devout believers at one end of the spectrum to state 'atheists' of many stripes (including libertarians and anarchists) through state 'agnostics' and other doubters. In fact, Bourdieu shows that wealth redistribution paradoxically helped emerging states to accumulate symbolic capital. Yet this came at a cost, for the state intermediaries in charge of this process found themselves in a position of 'structural hypocrisy', i.e. of being able to derive personal gain through their double agency as both state representatives and self-interested individuals (pp. 281-289). All political cultures around the world harbour both folk and intellectual critiques of this inherent corruption of the state system, but these are missing from Bourdieu's doxic model of state power.

Arguably the weakest part of the book is Bourdieu's handling of the question of nations and nationalism in relation to the formation of states. While students of nationalism will find food for thought in the discussion about the origin of states, they will be disappointed by his scant attention to the literature on ethnicity and nationalism beyond a nod to Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (p. 347) or his



commonplace contrast between France's *jus loci* and Germany's *jus sanguinis* paths to nation-statehood (pp. 350-352). On the other hand, this weakness presents nationalism scholars with an opportunity to design alternative genetic models of the nation-state, particularly in view of the prominence given in Bourdieu's analysis to old 'nations' such as France, England and Japan; precisely the countries that greatly interest non-modernist theorists of the nation such as Anthony D. Smith.

The scale, format, and sheer ambition of *On the State* make it a challenging book to read, or indeed to review. These are no ordinary, pre-packaged lectures; they form a wide-ranging, meandering, at times disorientating, investigation into the genesis of the state. To move the discussion forward Bourdieu draws liberally from his previous work in Kabylia (Algeria), among *Béarn* peasants in France, and on housing policy also in France, as well as from a vast set of historical and sociological sources. More than merely thinking aloud, Bourdieu turned his lecture series into a long-term research project conducted live before a mixed audience - ranging from sociologists well versed in his work to complete novices -, occasionally pausing to reflect on the scientific and pedagogical difficulties that such an endeavour entails.

Whilst admirers of Bourdieu will be fascinated to track his thoughts on a complex issue as they evolved over three years, students and scholars new to this author would be wise to study his more accessible texts before attempting the present work.

Pierre Bourdieu. 2014. [On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992](#). P. Champagne, R. Lenoir, F. Poupeau, & M. C. Rivière (eds.). London: Polity. 480 pp. Hb: £ 30.00. ISBN: 9780745663296.



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Where are the ladies, Didier Fassin? #EASA2016 Keynote

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari
August, 2016



It's hot and humid, and yet circa 1000 anthropologists are determined to enter



the main conference room of U6 of the University of Milano-Bicocca. Fortunately the air-conditioning of the room works. Still it promises to be an intense session.

A few hours earlier the corridors of this enormous and slightly Soviet style building have been swarming with participants who have rushed around to gather their badges, greet long-lost friends and colleagues - and of course, mentally map the location of the coffee stations.

The latter, in particular, has been a smart move since we are in Italy: true to the country's reputation the coffee is excellent, and the baristas know exactly what they are doing. Undoubtedly this promises some of the best coffee breaks in known anthropological conference history!

In other words, it is the first day of the 14th bi-annual conference of the European Anthropological Association, more affectionately referred to as EASA2016. The event, hosted in the middle of an amazing heat-wave in this grand Italian metropolis, is the largest one the organization has seen to date.

Still far from the staggering participant numbers of the AAA - and honestly, few people seem to mind that - the EASA is definitely becoming 'the' anthro-hot spot of the summer calendar. And why would it not be: with a record number of panels, including experimental laboratories, the event promises conference days filled to the brim with anthro-fun!

One of the most anticipated events of the conference is, of course, the keynote. Back in 2014 a few of our devoted readers may remember how Allegra got some heat for [our critical take on Elizabeth Povinelli](#) - an online controversy/slashing that still remains unparalleled in Allegra's 3-year existence.

So what's the rap this time - will there be equal controversy? Heated aftermath, slashing or celebration of our cutting-edge critical (post-post-critical) reflection?



The mood is certainly right for all of the above due to a very specific exchange that happened in yesterday's keynote - admittedly due to yours truly. Let me elaborate by taking a few steps back.

This year's keynote was given by Didier Fassin, one of the most celebrated scholars of our discipline at the moment. Perhaps sensitive to the criticism of EASA2014 in having invited an American scholar to open the event, this time the issue of geographic alliance was clarified from the outset.

Fassin appropriately acknowledged his academic connections on both sides of the Atlantic, referring to his 'golden exile' in Princeton, yet affirming the importance of maintaining active links to the European anthropological and scholarly community.

For good reason the audience seemed pleased.

Fassin then proceeded to offer an impressive tour-de-force of critical anthropology, 'critique of critique' - of critique, etc. If earlier EASAs offer any indication, that talk should be online soon enough, and a great summary is also formed by [Allegra's tweets](#), courtesy of Felix Girke - thus I won't attempt to reproduce the talk here.

It was actually Felix who first noticed that something was amiss in the talk: around 2/3 into it Fassin had not yet mentioned the work of a single woman!

Soon enough I found myself growing increasingly obsessed with this theme too: seriously, were there NO women anywhere in his summary of how anthropology critical of the imperialist mindset reproduced the very same frames of thought in our beloved discipline, or the 1980s debates on how the politics of textual representations reduced all our attempts at objective description to fictions?!

Latour, Bourdieu, Foucault, Said, Wolf, Marcus, Erikssen - the list goes on. Ding-ding-ding, and congrats: You have an All-Male-Panel! In fact, by the time Fassin concluded, there was only one woman mentioned. Guess which one?



Why yes: Judith Butler!

At this stage it became impossible to remain silent. As the talk ended, I succeeded in grabbing the mic and addressing this point: that for a discipline that celebrates its commitment to diversity and claims to uphold any critical stand, it is downright embarrassing to end up with an all-male panel.

Making such a comment was undoubtedly a gamble - fortunately it, however, struck the right chord. I will remain grateful for the comment's warm reception, embodied in applause and expressions of support from fellow audience members. Evidently we had not been the only ones noticing this particular gap in Fassin's talk - how could we have even been!

Ending up with an 'all-male-panel' is even worse when considering how our discipline from the outset has included so many formidable female scholars - and how, not unrelated, we have in our discipline a particularly rich array of ethnographic data also from contexts that are strictly gender-specific.

In other words the kind of data that it would simply have been impossible for male scholars to produce - and without which our shared understanding of the human condition would be far more impoverished.

Underlining the inappropriateness of Fassin's total silencing of all female voices was the fact that the keynote session had opened with a surprisingly vigorous vocal ensemble constituted of both female and male members of the EASA.

It is sad irony indeed that it was only for this fleeting, performative moment before the actual, real - 'fascinating and important' - scholarship began. After this, the floor was occupied almost exclusively by men: in addition to Fassin, the opening session included speeches by the chair of the EASA Thomas Hylland Erikssen.

My comment on Fassin's talk wasn't the only one that addressed a certain



conservativeness of his critique - yet it was the only one addressing the issue of gender directly. What did he thus respond?

In short, his response was a dramatic disappointment. In essence he referred back to his last slide which had embodied the catalogue of mostly dead white men - some of whom, he pointed out, were not fully white, but realistically of such delicately shifting tones as to go unnoticed to the fast observer. And, of course, Judith Butler.

This, Fassin noted, summarized what he admitted directly: that he held a gender bias. Perhaps the slide was intended as a self-reflective critical move. Yet, making this point explicit did little to alleviate the situation. In fact via his explanation the outcome became worse.

He explained how in his talk he had been quoting the scholarship of people who had worked on critique - had he been talking of religion, for example, the list of people quoted would have been quite different, and included women too, he insinuated.

So: critique male, religion female? Any other clear divisions - politics, law, economics: male; gender, kinship, food; female, perhaps?!

The dissatisfaction of the audience was tangible.

And indeed, it is impossible to let this reply simply to go by for these are not issues to be toying with, they are far too important. They regard decades of hard work that is thus ignored - as well as send a message to an entire generation of new female scholars that their hard work, too, will be entirely ignored in due time.

In introducing - and further, justifying upon being asked - critical theory as something that is entirely 'male', Fassin as a leading scholarly superstar effectively erases the work of the many women who undoubtedly have had and continue to have things of real importance to say from existence all together.



It is simply not persuasive – again, in 2016 – to argue that no women, or rather no women besides Judith Butler, have anything of relevance to say on the vast range of issues that Fassin addressed; issues extending both to grand theoretical generalizations as well as the very rudiments of our shared scholarly endeavor.

Erasing the work of female scholars in the keynote of the largest anthropological conference in Europe, and further doing so as an international academic superstar intensifies this omission's weight. The outcome forms a textbook example of how the male dominance of the academia is not only being actively reproduced, but even emphasized.

Of course Fassin is not alone. I wish to highlight this via another recent example from a field that is at the centre of my own research: the anthropology of human rights. More concretely I refer to a recent talk by Mark Goodale, published by Allegra both as a [video](#) and a [paper](#) a while back.

Like Fassin's keynote, also Goodale's talk – titled 'The world as it is and the world as it wants to be' – did a grand tour-de-force, covering the expanse of the contemporary human rights phenomenon especially after the cold war, the discipline's complex relationship toward studying human rights as well as the recent proliferation of work on the topic.

Rather startlingly, exactly like Fassin's talk, also Goodale's paper is a virtual 'all male panel' with literally the work of only one woman cited: Kirsten Hastrup.

Absent were for example discussion of the works of Jane Cowan and Marie-Bénédicte Dembour who, among many other things, co-edited one of the pivotal first volumes of the new Millennium on the anthropology of human rights with Richard Wilson (Cowan, Dembour, Wilson, 2001). The latter, by contrast, is featured the text. Absent was Annelise Riles, Shannon Speed – and even Sally Engle Merry with whom Goodale has himself edited an important book in 2007 (Goodale & Merry 2007).



For me reading Goodale's paper - and then publishing it on an online platform that I had co-created with another female scholar, Julie Billaud, and practically slaved in terms of getting it started, was a mixed experience, to put things mildly.

Not only was I seeing the work of all the scholars who had been influential for my own work vanish from in front of my eyes - I was doing so on a platform of my own design that was supposed to be about challenging prevailing power hierarchies, among them male chauvinism of the academia.

So why did I do it at the end - choose to publish this paper when I was very concretely in the position of power myself to stop this and change the course of scholarly debate? Why did I opt to stand by silently, and thus contribute to the intensification of male dominance in the one scholarly debate where I hoped to become recognized participant myself?

For the same reasons that make me hesitant in sharing this story here: because it was a good thing for us to have Goodale's post on our site to boost Allegra's visibility. Because being on good terms with him might, perhaps, prove advantageous for my future career - he is, among many other things, the editor of the one book series in which I had been hoping to publish my next book.

Surely I don't think of Goodale as being petty enough to turn against me on academic grounds for sharing such, still relatively mild critique. Yet I trust that the reader will understand my hesitation.

I share all this to concretize just why it is so difficult for scholars like me - operating in utterly precarious professional circumstances with no permanence or guarantees for continuity - to be vocal about such blatant discrimination as what we can see both in Goodale's paper and Fassin's keynote - and why it is so dangerous for their like to simply casually brush aside critique with a mere 'oops - I'll do better next time'.

For there is no excuse. With power comes responsibility, as is obvious to not



only all self-respecting anthropologists, but to reasonable people more generally.

Let me conclude by emphasizing what such erasure of scholarship produced by women does to us in the younger generation: with only slight exaggeration it pushes one to think 'what is the point?' Why should I continue to work this hard, for years on end, with great financial insecurity and personal stress if at the end my work too, just like the work of all the other fabulous female scholars, is simply ignored and erased from the debate?

I have no doubts that this outcome could not be further from what anyone in our discipline wishes - Fassin and Goodale both included, never mind their self-admitted gender biases. Yet it is a reality that such 'all-male-panels' contribute to.

Of course not all of what I write is the fault of men. I have only recently realized, to my horror, how biased I am often also myself in my quotations. Nowhere has this been more explicit than in the course curricula that I recently crafted - before I, luckily, caught myself.

And naturally there are a lot more factors that contribute to the sustenance of scholarly male dominance also. I genuinely believe that we at present only understand a fraction of what it all entails - and that we should re-think this entire issue quite a bit.

Evidently I have further entirely overlooked other forms of discrimination that our scholarly community undoubtedly embodies, importantly among them issues of race. Suffice it to say that, as the participant profiles of EASA2016 testify, at present we hold a dangerously close resemblance to the loathed imperial project that our discipline once embodied... A lot of work remains if we want to see real changes. Yet, to conclude:

We can - and need - to do better than this! After all, we're anthropologists!



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The International Institute of Not Doing Much

Allegra
August, 2016



Browsing the web in preparation of this ‘Slow week’, we came across an online initiative whose Manifesto resonated with Allegra’s very own. Below we reproduce the Manifesto of the [International Institute of Not Doing Much](#) in the hope that it will encourage you to quit the rat race and like us, go fishing for a while. If you fail in this endeavour, why not take a stroll on this fabulous website, and get some [tips on how to slow down?](#) Remember that our beloved [University of Muri](#) will not recruit any Professor who is in a rush and is anyway on holidays most of the time. Convinced to join us now?

Slow Manifesto

There are those who urge us to speed. We resist!

We shall not flag or fail. We shall slow down in the office, and in the bedroom. We



shall slow down with growing confidence when all those around us are in a shrill state of hyperactivity (signifying nothing). We shall defend our state of calm, whatever the cost may be. We shall slow down in the dining room and in the streets. We shall slow down everywhere. We shall never surrender!

If you can slow down when all around you are speeding up, then you're one of us. Be proud that you are one of us and not one of them. For they are fast, and we are slow. If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing slowly. Some are born to slowness—others have it thrust upon them. And still others know that lying in bed with a morning [cup of tea](#) is the supreme state for mankind.