



Where are the ladies, Didier Fassin? #EASA2016 Keynote

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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!

References:

2001. Cowan, Jane, Marie-Benedicte Dembour, and Richard Wilson. *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



2007. Goodale, Mark, and Sally Engle Merry, eds. *The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law Between the Global and the Local*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.