

**Opening Remarks for “Critical Intent as a Form of Life:
A Conference in Honor of Didier Fassin”**

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Good afternoon, and welcome to the Institute for Advanced Study. On behalf of the School of Social Science, it is my honor to open three days of reflection, argument, and celebration in honor of our colleague Didier Fassin.

I am Alondra Nelson, the Harold F. Linder Professor in the School of Social Science. To those of you who have traveled across continents to join us, thank you. To those who have traveled from down the road, thank you as well. You have each accepted an invitation to think together about a body of work, and a way of working, that has changed what social science is for and what it can do. We gather this weekend not only to honor a scholar, but to take the measure of a question his work has posed more insistently than any other in our generation: what does rigorous social science owe a world in which the most consequential forms of power have learned to speak the language of care, of security, and of reason itself? That question is the through-line of these three days, and it is the question I want to put before us at the outset.

Let me begin by situating this gathering in the place that makes it possible. The Institute for Advanced Study was founded in 1930, on the conviction that basic research in the sciences and the humanities deserves a home free from immediate pressures, free from ideological coercion, and free to pursue questions that may take a generation to ripen.¹ Abraham Flexner, our founding Director, asked that the Institute be, in his words, “afraid of no issue.”² Academic freedom was not appended to the mission later. It was the mission. That commitment has been tested many times across nearly a century, and it is being tested now. To hold to Flexner's charge now, to be afraid of no issue, is a harder and more consequential commitment than it was when he wrote the words. These pressures are themselves a subject for social science, and the scholarship we will hear over the next three days is a demonstration that the disciplines are still capable of taking their own moment as an object of serious inquiry. The work of this School has rarely mattered more.

Social science was part of the original imagining of the Institute. When Flexner opened the second generation of Schools in 1935, Economics and Politics stood alongside Humanistic Studies and Mathematics.³ Over the decades those Schools were reorganized, and in 1973, under the intellectual leadership of Clifford Geertz, the School of Social Science as we know it today was established. The School that Geertz built, together with Albert Hirschman and those who

¹ "Bamberger Gives \$5,000,000 for Study," *New York Times*, June 8, 1930, p. 1.

² Abraham Flexner, quoted in Peter Goddard, "A Paradise for Scholars?" in *A Community of Scholars: Impressions of the Institute for Advanced Study* (Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, 1980), viii.

³ "Research School to Extend Work: Advanced Study Institute at Princeton to Open Politics and Economics Unit," *New York Times*, January 16, 1935, p. 15.

followed, rejected the idea that the social world should be studied on the model of physics. It took up the interpretive turn, insisting that human institutions, actions, and meanings deserve a more patient and more honest grammar. It took up, with equal seriousness, the study of power that was central to the foundational vision for social science at IAS alongside an emphasis on human experience. Those twin commitments still animate this School.

As Joan Scott has argued in her co-edited book *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, we take seriously the proposition that understanding human societies requires attending to meaning, contestation, and the instability of categories we too often assume as given.⁴

This interpretive tradition has always carried within it a critical dimension. Joan Scott herself puts it this way in an interview with the Social Science Research Council: "I think my definition of critique is that it opens new ways of thinking by denaturalizing the taken for granted, exposing common sense as a collaboration with normative regimes. Critique doesn't provide roadmaps to the future, but stimulates us to think beyond where we are now."⁵ It is precisely this form of critical social science, rigorous, interpretive, denaturalizing, that Didier Fassin has practiced across four decades of scholarship.

What Didier has done, across that long arc, is to show that the most consequential modern power does not announce itself as power. It arrives in the language of care, of protection, of humanitarian concern, and it is inside that language, not outside it, that the hardest questions about authority and violence must now be asked. His work takes up the institutions where this is most visible, prisons and hospitals, police departments, refugee camps, and humanitarian zones, and shows that moral economies of compassion and repression, protection and punishment, operate there simultaneously. That is a claim the disciplines were not equipped to make before he made it, and it has reshaped what rigorous inquiry into power looks like.

Didier has built this work by refusing choices the disciplines wanted him to make. He is an anthropologist and a sociologist and a physician, and he brings each of those trainings to bear on the others. He has conducted research in Senegal and the Congo, in South Africa, Ecuador, and France, with a kind of ethnographic patience that is increasingly rare. The concepts for which he is best known, moral economies, humanitarian reason, the politics of life, travel widely because they were earned slowly. Moral economies helped us see that politics is always also a contest over which obligations count. Humanitarian reason taught us to notice when compassion displaces rights. The politics of life confronts the uneven value that institutions assign to the lives in their care. They are diagnostic instruments, and they have changed what is sayable and what is askable across our fields. Taken together, these concepts do something I think is rarer than we acknowledge in our fields: they give us a usable vocabulary for the ethical life of institutions, a way of describing, with precision, how benevolent systems produce harm and how harmful

⁴ Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates, eds., *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Mayanthi L. Fernando, Sara Farris, and Joan Wallach Scott, "A Conversation between Sara Farris and Joan Wallach Scott," *The Immanent Frame*, Social Science Research Council, July 5, 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/07/05/conversation-between-farris-and-scott/>.

systems produce benevolence. That vocabulary is a gift, and it is also an obligation, because once a field has it, it can no longer claim not to see.

Those diagnoses were earned in some of the hardest places to do fieldwork well, and their authority rests on the quality of that looking and witnessing. Didier understands that critique is not a performance and not a posture. It is, in the phrase that gives this conference its title, a form of life.

That form of life has a home here. Fifty-plus years on from the School's founding, we work in an intellectual landscape Geertz could not have anticipated in detail, even if he anticipated its shape. Our Members and Faculty take up democracy and its erosions, the reconfigurations of liberalism and illiberalism across world regions, the rise of artificial intelligence and the political economies that surround it, the planetary pressures of climate and the geopolitics of supply chains, the persistence of racial, gendered, and economic inequality, the future of work and the reorganization of labor in a platform economy, the politics of public health and biomedical authority, and the moral life of the institutions that shape all of these. We approach these questions with the full range of tools the social sciences have developed: ethnographic, interpretive, historical, theoretical, comparative, and empirical, in careful combination. What unites the work done here is not a single method. It is an ambition: to better understand and illuminate, to give a more truthful account of how power is organized, how authority is legitimated, how suffering is distributed, and how ordinary people make moral sense of the worlds they inherit and sometimes remake. At a moment when truth itself has become contested terrain, when the politics of knowledge increasingly decides whose accounts are credited and whose are dismissed, that ambition is a vital necessity. It is also why a body of work like Didier's matters now in a way it could not have mattered in quite the same way even a decade ago: he has given us the instruments to see power where it hides behind its own best intentions, and to hold institutions to account in their own moral vocabulary.

Over the next three days, we will trace the many strands of that form of life. This afternoon brings us two panels. "Critical Interventions" will examine the theoretical and methodological transformations Didier's work has generated across moral anthropology, public health, migration studies, and critical theory. "Critical Trajectories" will then take up the ways his conceptual innovations have traveled across empirical, generational, linguistic, and institutional contexts. Tomorrow morning opens with Intervention in Action, on research as intervention inside institutions of power, followed by "At Risk: Ethics, Exposure, and Academic Freedom," a panel whose subject has grown only more urgent since we first convened this program. Sunday afternoon turns to the arts, in "Witnessing Otherwise," and then to an extended conversation with Didier himself, hosted by Razia Iqbal and João Biehl. On Monday morning, we close with Didier's own lecture, "Ultima Verba: Violence, A Critique."

None of this would have come together without the dedication and intellectual care of our Scientific Planning Committee: João Biehl, Bernard Harcourt, Axel Honneth, Cécile Laborde, Nadia Marzouki, Sarah Mazouz, Richard Rechtman, Miriam Ticktin, and Mara Viveros Vigoya. I am grateful to each of them. I also want to thank the IAS Events, Media Technology Services, and Dining Services teams, the Office of the Director, and in particular Joseph Cifelli and Miriam Harris of the School of Social Science, whose care has shown up in every logistical and intellectual detail of this gathering.

And now, to begin. It is my great pleasure to turn the program over to Wendy Brown, the UPS Foundation Professor in the School of Social Science and a colleague whose scholarship on politics and democracy has shaped my own thinking for many years.