

CRITICAL INTENT AS A FORM OF LIFE

**A Conference in Honor of
Didier Fassin**

APRIL 18–20, 2026



IAS

SCHOOL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCE
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

CRITICAL INTENT

This international gathering brings together leading scholars to engage with Didier Fassin's transformative contributions to social science—from his groundbreaking work on moral anthropology to his critical, illuminating studies of policing, migration, and public health. Through rigorous ethnographic research conducted in prisons, hospitals, police departments, refugee camps, and humanitarian zones, Fassin has demonstrated how sustained attention to lived experience can illuminate the ethical contradictions embedded in institutions and policies. His influential frameworks—moral economies, humanitarian reason, the politics of life—have reshaped debates across anthropology, sociology, law, social theory, and politics.

The conference features wide-ranging discussions on ethnographic methodology, the ethics of fieldwork in sites of violence and precarity, and the relationship between creative

and scholarly practice. Over six panels, panelists explore how Fassin's scholarship has reshaped our understanding of power, inequality, and ethical life, examining both the reach of his intellectual interventions across disciplines and the evolving challenges facing research and researchers in an era of mounting constraints on academic freedom.

This celebration of Fassin's extraordinary career offers an opportunity to consider the intellectual and public significance of social science: its capacity to reveal the moral dimensions of political life, to document realities that official accounts obscure, and to produce knowledge that deepens understanding of how institutions shape—and are experienced by—the people subject to them.

AS A FORM OF LIFE

Didier Fassin is the James D. Wolfensohn Professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study and Professor on the Chair Moral Questions and Political Issues in Contemporary Societies at the Collège de France. At the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, he was the founder and director of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute on Society. Anthropologist, sociologist and physician, he has conducted research in Senegal, Congo, South Africa, Ecuador, and France, focusing on health, moral and political issues. He gave the Tanner Lectures at Berkeley on punishment and the Adorno Lectures in Frankfurt on life. Recipient of the Nomis Distinguished Scientist Award, the Gold Medal in anthropology at the Swedish Royal Academy of Science, and the Huxley Memorial Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, he is a member of the American Philosophical Society. Former Vice-President of Doctors Without

Borders, he is currently President of the French Medical Committee for Exiles. He edited or coedited thirty collective volumes and authored twenty books, translated in thirteen languages.



SCHEDULE

SATURDAY
18
APRIL

2:00 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Introduction

Alondra Nelson
Institute for Advanced Study

2:15 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Critical Interventions

Wendy Brown Moderator
Institute for Advanced Study

Duana Fullwiley
Stanford University

Mara Viveros Vigoya
National University of Colombia

Bernard Harcourt
Columbia University and EHESS

Axel Honneth
Columbia University

4:00 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL LOBBY

Break

4:30 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Critical Trajectories

Anne-Claire Defossez Moderator
Institute for Advanced Study

Lorenzo Alunni
University of Milano-Bicocca

Valeria Añón
University of Buenos Aires

Chowra Makaremi
French National Centre for
Scientific Research

Nadia Marzouki
French National Centre for
Scientific Research

Miriam Ticktin
CUNY Graduate Center

6:00 p.m.
RUBENSTEIN
COMMONS

Reception

CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

This panel examines the theoretical and methodological transformations generated by Fassin's work across moral anthropology, public health, migration studies, and critical theory. How does foregrounding moral economies and ethical life reconfigure social scientific inquiry? Panelists explore how ethnographic description of inequality and violence constitutes critical intervention, challenging institutional logics and reshaping disciplinary frameworks.



CRITICAL TRAJECTORIES

How are critical frameworks transmitted, adapted, and transformed across intellectual generations? This panel examines the impact of Fassin's conceptual innovations, from moral economies to the politics of life, as they travel through diverse empirical, linguistic, and institutional contexts. Panelists trace how scholarly engagement with sites such as policing, refugee governance, and healthcare extends and challenges foundational empirical and theoretical commitments.



SCHEDULE

SUNDAY
19
APRIL

9:30 a.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Introduction

Wendy Brown
Institute for Advanced Study

9:45 a.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Intervention in Action

Alondra Nelson Moderator
Institute for Advanced Study

Lucas Bessire
Colorado School of Mines

Veena Das
Johns Hopkins University

Carolina Kobelinsky
French National Centre
for Scientific Research

Marcelo Moura Mello
Federal University of Bahia

David Owen
University of Southampton

INTERVENTION IN ACTION

This panel considers research as an intervention. What ethical, epistemological, and political dimensions emerge when fieldwork occurs within institutions of power: prisons, courts, borders, hospitals? Panelists examine how research practice itself generates forms of knowledge that contest institutional opacity, produce counter-narratives to official accounts, and establish new terms of accountability while advancing critical modes of social scientific analysis.



11:30 a.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL LOBBY

Break

11:45 a.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

At Risk: Ethics, Exposure, and Academic Freedom

Joan Scott Moderator
Institute for Advanced Study

Bruce Western
Russell Sage Foundation

Reuben Jonathan Miller
University of Chicago

Deva Woodly
Brown University

Aslı Ü. Bâli
Yale University

Robert Quinn
Scholars at Risk

AT RISK: ETHICS, EXPOSURE, AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Critical scholarship produces risk for both research subjects and researchers. This panel confronts the ethical paradox of exposure: how can documentation that challenges institutional violence simultaneously endanger those it seeks to defend? Panelists examine the structural conditions constraining academic freedom—legal repression, institutional censorship, surveillance—and theorize strategies for sustaining scholarly inquiry under conditions of precarity and constraint.



1:15 p.m.
RUBENSTEIN
COMMONS

Lunch

SCHEDULE

SUNDAY
19
APRIL

2:00 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Witnessing Otherwise: The Arts as Critical Practice

Maria Loh Moderator
Institute for Advanced Study

Rosalind Morris
Columbia University

Natasha Raheja
Cornell University

Jake Raynal
Comic Book Artist

Derek Bermel
Composer and Clarinetist

WITNESSING OTHERWISE: THE ARTS AS CRITICAL PRACTICE

What epistemological possibilities emerge when aesthetic practice travels with social inquiry? This panel examines how film, photography, graphic narrative, and poetry generate distinctive modes of intellectual insight and meaning irreducible to conventional scholarly frameworks. Panelists theorize the relationship between ethnographic and artistic methods, exploring how affective and sensory dimensions of witnessing produce knowledge that challenges, complements, or exceeds social scientific analysis.

3:30 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL LOBBY

Break

3:45 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

In Conversation with Didier Fassin

Razia Iqbal
Princeton University

João Biehl
Princeton University

5:15 p.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Closing

Alondra Nelson
Institute for Advanced Study

Didier Fassin
Institute for Advanced Study

5:30 p.m.
RUBENSTEIN
COMMONS

Reception



SCHEDULE

MONDAY

20
APRIL

10:30 a.m.
WOLFENSOHN
HALL

Ultima Verba
Violence : A Critique

Didier Fassin
Institute for Advanced Study

12:00 p.m.
RUBENSTEIN
COMMONS

Reception

The School of Social Science extends its sincere appreciation to Joseph Cifelli; Miriam Harris; the IAS Events, Media Technology Services, and Dining Services teams; the Office of the Director; and the Scientific Planning Committee for their invaluable support.

SCIENTIFIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

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Princeton University

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French National Centre for
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French National Centre for
Scientific Research

Alondra Nelson
Institute for Advanced Study

Richard Rechtman
School for Advanced Studies
in the Social Sciences

Miriam Ticktin
CUNY Graduate Center

Mara Viveros Vigoya
National University of Colombia

ULTIMA VERBA

A specter is haunting the world: violence. Yet it has until recently been ignored by the social sciences, while it was morally reproved by society but actually perpetrated. Such paradoxes and ambiguities call for a critical analysis of both this epistemology of ignorance and this politics of refusal.





SPEAKER
BIOGRAPHIES

