An Open Letter to the ESA: A Response

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I read the spirited letter by Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová expressing dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the 2015 ESA conference held in Prague with interest and pleasure and a deep sense of hope. Hope because the writers represent the Next Generation, and declared that they believe it is important 'not to be cynical', not to slide into the complacent view that things cannot be changed, and to make proposals with the view to improving future ESA conferences. While we the 'elders' may look back wistfully on a glorious past, having and articulating visions is what a 'next' generation is supposed to do. For the biblically inclined, Joel 2:28 reads, 'It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions.' While none of us should ever become complacent with the way things are, the young, especially, *must* feel and express impatience with the status quo and push for radical change. Sadly too many fall into spaces of either rejection of the status quo accompanied by dissonance and despondency, or urgent rebellion.

The authors take issue with what they see as a discrepancy between the stated 'main topic and the actual event', that is, of the 2015 ESA conference held in Prague. The conference was titled 'Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination' and the programme did indeed refer to the responsibilities of sociology's global community's to confront social inequality. However, Bek, Kubala, and Lokšová are of the view that the conference served to deepen rather than address inequalities because it was classist—expressed by the conference price tag, the failure to engage with the public, and a lack of social responsibility in the services and products provided. Basically the authors see these aspects of the conference as a function of a business-as-usual rather than a radical approach to current sociology and event management praxis. These are not minor or inconsequential critiques.

So here are my responses. I have already hailed the authors' pro-activism and revealed my conclusion that this is associated with their youth—an assumption I make because they are PhD students. I have noted elsewhere (http://futureswewant.net/akosua-adomako-ampofo-african-future/) while our energies may not be consumed daily with the *struggles* for a better world, practising our

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trade as sociologists means that, inevitably, we *engage* with questions of the possibilities of an improved version of the current world. For Africanists such as myself, that improved world includes a continent, and her Diaspora, re-imagined in very particular ways within global geopolitics. And so of course I hope for a European sociology meeting that, despite its location and the fact that it is for sociologists in Europe, will pay attention to links with the Global South. And for this reason I was very pleased to have been invited as a plenary speaker on a panel titled, 'Public policies and solidarity in women's lives: Comparing regions of the world to feed sociological imagination', where I spoke on the subject 'Changing Gender Policies in Ghana: The Journeys of Civil Society and State Actors'. This particular panel was submitted to the ESA Conference Committee by the Research Network RN33, Women's and Gender Studies, along with RN13, Sociology of Family and Intimate Lives. Glenda Bonafacio and I spoke on women's activism in Ghana and the Philippines and South-East Asia respectively—a slice of social activism outside the ivory tower.

Which brings me to the charges of ivory-tower exclusivity, academic classism, or perhaps even chauvinism, which the authors see as systemic. The authors wanted to see a deeper engagement with the public, especially around subjects of immigration, as well as greater social responsibility in relation to catering, conference events, and conference paraphernalia. We must recognise that the academy and its appendages such as professional disciplinary associations are not democratic but rather hierarchical spaces. The hierarchy requires that some be at the top (professors, senior administrators, and association presidents), some in the middle (mid-level academics and administrators), and others at the bottom (students and staff). Indeed, it is a club for the initiated. So why would young academics who want to see change even join the ESA or any other such association? Because once upon a time people like them started the ESA and other similar professional associations. Like church, the Lutheranism that challenged the Catholic Church became the status quo. Radical becomes every day. And every day loses its edge. One source notes 37% of young professionals in the United States do not see the value of joining professional associations, 45% reported participation was too expensive, 27% said it lacked proper curation, and 67% stated they would prefer to join an organisation founded by peers of a similar age (https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/246691).

To my peers—those who have been in the academy for thirty years or more—I say that it is critical for us to sustain the relevance of our discipline by re-birthing our intellectual DNA and humanity in the next generation of thinkers. And to do so we need to listen and be open to change, even change that may be considered 'too radical'. Many of us do not ply our trade within the hallowed walls of the academy, but also take the proverbial 'gown to town' and share our knowledge outside the walls of the academy, often in the spaces of popular culture and social media. Some of us have made the persona of the public intellectual so *every day*. And thus public engagement via diverse media and with diverse audiences is

vital to retaining the very people for whom we advocate a just world within our fold. At a personal level I have found youth pop culture to be one of the most exciting, and productive spaces to engage on issues of social relevance. To name but one example, Ghanaian Hiplife music has produced a number of artists, some themselves with university degrees in the social sciences and humanities, who provide serious commentary on contemporary social concerns. Elsewhere Clark [2012] has written on Hip Hop as Social Commentary in Accra and Dar es Salam [see also Adomako Ampofo and Asiedu 2012; Osumare 2012]. Reggie Rockstone is generally acknowledged as the father of Hiplife,[1] and both he and Kubolor have songs that speak eloquently and realistically to the migrant experience in the US. M.anifest, in his song 'Suffer' notes, '*If your name is Mohammed or Mustapha/ Flying may be harder/My sympathies brother'.* In another song, 'If you don't love me (let me go)', Reggie Rockstone places the painful issue of domestic violence squarely in the public domain. In his 'Songs for Kukua',[2] Paapa hMensah, a college student in the US, sings an ode to his motherland in which he upends the sometimes schizophrenic relationships that today's 'Afropolitan'[3] youth have with their countries of origin. The duo Buk Bak, have a song 'Akwasi Broni' (literally Akwasi the white person/foreigner) about colonialism and its contemporary effects, and in 'Dear Africa' Ghanaian DJ Blitz teams up with Les Nubians to Blitz raps about Africa's exploitation and how Africa has become 'synonymous to charity'. I have used some of these songs, and frequently the accompanying videos, more eloquently than my own spoken word in social activism outside the classroom—issues ranging from domestic violence, to pan-Africanism and racism. A slice of pop culture would not have been ill-placed at our academic conferences.

To the younger scholars, however, I add, that the important project of keeping the sociological imagination alive and relevant means that you too must understand and acknowledge the knowledge, practices, and cultures that built up the discipline and profession of sociology. This means that there will be some required spaces that are 'exclusive' and 'hallowed'; where our concepts and jargons can be tossed about and tinkered with; and where theories and concepts can be debated freely and comfortably in the knowledge that we understand each other and don't require translation. Thereafter we can unpack them for policy, social activism, and engaging in changing the world.

[1] Hiplife has been variously defined but it can best be described as a musical genre that fuses dance hall, reggae/ragga, rap and even strains of old-time high life, with strong cultural overtures and originally mainly performed in the Akan language [see also Halifu Osumare 2012].

[2] Kuukua is the name for an Akan female born on a Wednesday. Paapa himself is also Kweku, the male Wednesday-born.

[3] The term was popularised through a widely disseminated 2005 essay, 'Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)', The *LIP Magazine,* by Taiye Selasi, and according to Wikepedia, Selasi describes herself as a 'local' of Accra, Berlin, New York and Rome (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiye_Selasi).

References

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