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FACULTY

'Multiple Steves and Pauls': A History Panel Sets Off a Diversity Firestorm

By Emma Kerr | MARCH 15, 2018

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Priya Satia, a professor of history at Stanford University, found out about the Applied History Conference being hosted at her university two days before it was set to start. While scrolling through her Facebook newsfeed, she saw that a friend had posted about the conference's lineup of presenters: All 30 were white men.

The conference's organizer said he had invited several female scholars to speak at the conference, held this month and sponsored by Stanford's Hoover Institution and the Belfer Center at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. But none accepted.

Critics are skeptical of the effort made to attract a more diverse set of historians.

Niall Ferguson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, organized the conference, which he described as the first of its kind and an annual event. He said nearly one-quarter of the attendees were women, though none of them had been invited to present their research.

The conference, which took place on March 2 and 3, was invitation-only and was not publicized. Historians received a personal invitation to attend. Ferguson said he had selected speakers based on informal conversations with colleagues.

An official website for the conference has been taken down, but a screenshot of the presenters has been making the rounds online. Headshots of the presenters appear in rows and columns in the online images. Some smile, while others look stern. All of them are men, and all are white.

Diversity in Academe: The Gender Issue

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Ferguson said the presenters he had invited largely came from a network of his contacts.

"To put together a start-up, the organizer racks his brain, asks other people, invites the people he knows who work on the right kind of material and hopes that they say yes," Ferguson said in an interview on Thursday. "So there was a kind of a relatively informal process of trying to identify historians not only in the United States but also in Europe who were interested in questions of a policy-relevant nature — hence, applied history."

Satia, who is also chair of the Stanford history department's diversity committee, said it's not hard to find female historians.

Lisa Lapin, a spokeswoman at the university, reaffirmed its values of diversity and inclusion in a written statement on Thursday.

"Our president and provost have stated that we are only successful as an intellectual community when our discussion benefits from the entire range of perspectives," the statement says. "The university was aware of the efforts to achieve a more diverse cohort of attendees for the March 2 event, and has encouraged the organizers to take additional steps to do so in the future."

Stanford did not provide further information on the makeup of conference attendees.

'It's Incomprehensible'

Satia said her concerns went beyond the all-male nature of the presenters. She also criticized the lack of minority representation on the panel.

"If you have an agenda for your conference that somehow manages not to be attractive to a single woman you ask — and not just women, but any person of color in a discipline that has, relatively speaking, a healthy number of women in it and people of minority backgrounds — there might be something wrong with your conference," she said. "It just seems to me it would be really hard to even randomly invite a bunch of historians and get this outcome."

Ferguson invited speakers from the United States and Europe to present research that aimed to answer such questions as: Does rising inequality matter? What lessons can a modern democracy learn from the fall of the Roman Republic? And are recent developments in American politics unprecedented, or is President Trump merely populism revisited?

A consequence of the conference's secrecy, Satia said, is that few scholars were aware of it outside the select individuals invited by Ferguson.

"Me sitting here across the bike lane from this building," she said, "I would have never known there was this conference of men, of multiple Steves and Pauls, happening in my discipline, right here. It's incomprehensible."

Ferguson defended the conference as a start-up with some problems to work through, and admitted that the organizers needed to do better next year to include women among the presenters.

"I've taught at Harvard for 12 years," he said. "I think I have some awareness of this issue, and have always tried to address it in the classroom. We're all perfectly aware of this, and the only way you can correct it is to try to send more invitations and hope that you get a gender-balanced set of yeses."

Satia said that because Ferguson was aware of the gender imbalance before the conference, he might have considered pausing before going forward with it.

In the past Ferguson has criticized the emphasis on diversity in the discipline. During his acceptance speech for the 2016 Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education, presented by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, he described a structural shift in the field, with an increasing number of historians who specialize in women and gender, cultural history, and the history of race and ethnicity.

Gender "is now the single most important subfield within the academy," Ferguson said, according to a transcript of his remarks. These "transformations" of the discipline "are generally celebrated as a triumph for 'diversity,'" he said, but "I fear this triumph has come at a significant price." As a consequence, he said, "not all historical subjects are equal" in the public arena.

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