

Postcommunism, the African 'outside', and 'the denial of coevalness': The situation of African studies in the Czech Republic

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The post-1989 Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic both craved to become part of the West, seen as a universal vector of the world's progress, again. In the end, the country has actually become just one of its inner peripheries as Krastev and Holmes noted in 2019.¹ As the political scientist Pavel Barša wrote last year, however, the country's politics of "not a single refugee" finally did position Czechs well in the West during the migration crisis of 2015. Czechs finally sank themselves deep into the morass of the West's primal sin – biopolitics informed by colonial views of the world and other human beings. Barša calls this moment when Czechs became citizens of the West in this regard (not paying attention to the colonial origin and nature of its enormous economic progress) "the point zero of decolonization".²

Contrary to the common argument of never having colonies, Czechs have a long history of colonially framed relations with the world, including the African continent. It is, indeed, 'modest' in scale and different in quality from that of the colonial part of the West, nonetheless, it is there, and it should be studied. Out of the wide variety of consequences, I see as most urgent what I call *colonial imagination* which Czechs, without ever having colonies in the proper sense, share with the broad stream of Eurocentric visions of the world, including Africa, and which they further adapt to fit local experience.

One of the key conditions of difference between the Czech Republic and the former colonial superpowers here is the virtual *absence* of Africans in the country and their lacking a strong voice in both public and academic debate that would correct Czech mythologies of Africa, the worst biases and most outlandish ideas. Undisturbed by confrontation with reality and dependent on problematic media coverage Africa became a metaphor for an outside, a distant place in space *and* time, irrelevant as far as it does not step its foot on Czech soil or does not serve as a comparative takeoff example in some 'commonsensical' debate about levels of

¹ Krastev, Ivan and Homes, Stephen. 2019. *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. New York: Pegasus Books.

² Barša, Pavel. 2020. Nulový stupeň dekolonizace [The point zero of decolonization]. *Artalk*. Accessed 19 Jan 2021, <https://artalk.cz/2020/01/20/nulovy-stupen-dekolonizace/>.

civilization. For most Czechs, the notion of Africa oscillates between unthinkability regarding its actuality, exotic fantasy, virtual threat and irrelevance. And, sadly, academia is no exception. How did we get there?

The situation was not helped by the general ignorance of postcolonial debates (and other emancipatory discourses) taking place in the West, seen as too leftist ('communist', 'Marxist') and even as communist propaganda, among Czech dissidents and intellectuals before and after 1989. To illustrate the late arrival of the issue, Said's *Orientalism* was translated into Czech only in 2008, thirty years after its original publication, and translations of other and more recent postcolonial texts followed only after 2010. Significantly, none of these texts was published in any of the country's better-established academic or university presses. Postcolonial critique got to be seen as 'ideological' in the Czech, uncritically pro-Western and, after the decades of communism, to the right deflected liberal academic milieu preferring 'facts', 'data' and reading 'primal sources' to theory and interpretation seen as suspicious of ideology. Similarly to and even more so than other emancipatory ways of thinking cultivated in the West since the 1960s such as feminist theory, postcolonial criticism ended up being perceived as foreign and with few exceptions not of concern for Czech academics until recently. Enter African studies.

Instead of discussing the position of African studies by and large in the Czech academic landscape, I focus on humanities and, to a lesser extent, social sciences as they are taught in Czech faculties typically called 'of arts' or 'of philosophy'. How African perspectives are present there, if at all?, I ask broadly. And more specifically, what does it mean that Africa has become more likely to be studied by political scientists, researchers in international relations or anthropologists than for example historians, philosophers, linguists, literary scholars and scholars of culture at large in the Czech Republic since the 2000s? And from another point, how can we explain that it has become easier to find Africa studied at regional or private universities than at Charles University, country's oldest and largest tertiary institution which had, in the past, even hosted the program of African Studies in its Faculty of Arts? However simple and perhaps even naïve these questions may sound, I believe that answering them may turn productive for understanding the Eurocentric nature of knowledge production in Czech faculties of arts or philosophy which continue its business largely untouched by the world's events and global debates, both public and academic, to this day.

To give a brief outline, there is no African Studies program on bachelor and master level in the country, except in combination with Political Sciences at the University of Hradec

Králové, a rapidly growing regional university in the last two decades. There is one PhD African Studies program in the country at the same university. It is the only institution that has systematically and successfully developed African specialization and it has done so within political sciences. Thus, regarding the first question, instead of asking about African studies or African Studies (with the capital 'S'), it makes sense to ask about a focus on Africa in various other fields of study, and, thinking in terms of representation, about African perspectives there. Although a possibility to specialize exists in other departments, such possibilities rise and fall with – often temporary – individual researcher's employment there, altogether making for a fragile situation of African studies in the country.

Another important 'site' of Africa-focused research is the Viva Africa international conference regularly organized since 2006, first annually, since 2013 biennially. It was founded at a moment when the old African Studies institutionally deteriorated at Charles University, and with a vision to create a platform for regular exchange of ideas on international level to overcome the institutional crisis. Out of this fragile situation, in 2013, the Czech Association for African Studies was founded during one of the Viva Africa conferences at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, another regional university that has helped to cultivate Africa-focused academic research in the country, especially (then) in its Department of Anthropology and (later) Department of Politics and International Relations. In a related development, the journal *Modern Africa* began to be published in 2013 by the above-mentioned University of Hradec Králové. Besides the universities in Hradec Králové and in Pilsen, the conference has also been hosted by the Metropolitan University Prague and Palacký University Olomouc thanks to personal initiatives of individual researchers teaching there at the time.

Most recently, the Centre for African Studies was founded by the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in 2019. Instead of re-institutionalizing African Studies as a study program where it had already been taught between 1961 and early 2000s, it is – so far at least – meant to merely coordinate the scarce Africa-focused research taking place across the faculty and university. It tries to loop in the researchers who have been more closely aligned with their various home departments and not felt to be part of African studies passing them by for a long time due to its still rather emerging institutional and academic structures in the country. The Centre's budget, however, covers just a half-time coordinating position currently held by a PhD student.

(To clear my own position, I have been part of decision-making bodies of both the Czech Association for the African Studies and The Centre for African Studies for a year now, or two respectively, and I teach in the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Charles University.)

To everyone familiar with the traditional philology-culture-history-centred model of African Studies in Central Europe and, perhaps, even with the old African Studies program at Charles University (co-founded by the historian and co-editor and one of the authors of the *UNESCO General History of Africa* Ivan Hrbek in 1961, that educated several top language experts, especially in Swahili, until it closed down in early 2000s)³, it should occur that language, culture, philosophical and historical issues belonging to the core fields of humanities, historically endowed by significant symbolic and cultural capital, *do not* virtually feature in the current shape of African studies in the country. I do not plead for the old model of African studies to be revived in the future here. I do ask, however, why Africa as researched and taught seems not to matter to core institutions of Czech humanities, and, to a lesser extent, social sciences: most faculties of arts or philosophy. Speaking of my own faculty (Faculty of Arts, Charles University), I see the situation of Africa being largely absent in scholarly discourses and teaching practices where it should meritoriously be a relevant part of the debate unbearable, all the more so at a school largely considered the country's benchmark of academic performance in humanities.

Where does our responsibility ends? Beyond what point do we no longer feel obliged to respond, to care, to study, to re-experience and re-think our own? When the philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote his post-WWII philosophical texts (for example *Negative Dialectics*, 1966) his perhaps most urgent call was for *including* the unthinkable horrors of holocaust *in* Western philosophical thought, to *let* this radically outside experience *in* the philosophical cabinet.⁴ When, in *Time and the Other* (1983), the anthropologist Johannes Fabian contemplated how his discipline produces knowledge about the world's other people he famously coined the phrase 'the denial of coevalness' to describe the various strategies by which ethnographic texts *deprived* the others' experience of *coevalness* with that of the West.⁵ It seems to me that, while academia has been quite ready to accommodate Africa in its well-

³ Skalník, Petr et al. 2017. *Afrikanistika v českých zemích a na Slovensku po roce 1960: kritické ohlédnutí* [Czech and Slovak African Studies after 1960: A critical hindsight]. Ústí nad Orlicí and Hradec Králové: Oftis.

⁴ Adorno, Theodor. 1973 (1966). *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum.

⁵ Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

established slots for ‘the other’ (international relations, development studies, political sciences, anthropology etc.), it has constantly hesitated to let it in its sanctuary epistemically guarding its cultural core, the humanities.

I believe that it is precisely this – both false and necessary – sense of Africa being irrelevant to the production of either (supposedly) merely ‘local’ (Czech focused) or ‘universal’ knowledge that leads to arts or music historians teaching and researching Czech artists and composers and supposedly universal aesthetic values, philosophers being occupied with hermetically re-reading Hegel ‘as he wrote it’ over and over, historians studying ‘Czech’ versus ‘general’ (understand, selected Western) history, literary scholars omitting piles of books published by non-Western writers and expressing different than the Western experience even when their original language is the European one, let alone when it is not. It is rather comfortable and well in sync with the colonial worldview to establish and maintain ghettoized area studies departments with exotically sounding names that are everything but relevant to the actual core knowledge that is produced in the humanities’ ‘fields proper’.

What could be a remedy, a way out of this situation? How to make African *perspective* (not just a focus on) relevant at Czech universities, its presence more robust? My answer would be that we need to decolonize our – not only – humanities academia. This academia that accepts Africa only as the ultimate other and Africa-focused research only as an activity itself always already othered to the unmarked knowledge deemed as true, real or universal and cultivated elsewhere by the ‘true’ researchers. We do not need yet one more ghettoized exotically smelling *department*. We need to have African *perspective* in every department, every discipline, every study program where relevant. It must, however, come from within the respected fields. Such move won’t happen by including yet another course on yet another exotic or trendy topic next to the core curriculum, although it may help. It can only happen by genuine contemplation of one’s own scholarly and teaching practices, by changing the subject itself, changing the shape of how and – to some extent also – by whom it is being researched and taught.