

Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference

Panel “Challenges of African Studies in Central and Eastern Europe“

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African Studies in the Czech Republic: Reflections on early-career researchers

(Working title)

Despite the fact that African Studies in the Czech Republic were constituted a few decades ago, the trajectory of the discipline has been interrupted several times and it is only slowly finding its place among other established academic fields. Currently, Czech African Studies face multiple challenges at different levels: limited funding for research at the national level, heavy teaching and administrative loads at universities, external challenges of the discipline’s relevance, and internal struggles within, to name just a few. Any attempt for change would have to address the situation in its complexity.

The proposed paper argues that one of the avenues for improvement would be to focus the attention on the generation of early career researchers. In the current context of a generational exchange, where the founding mothers and fathers of the discipline are leaving the scene, doctoral and post-doctoral researchers can support Czech African studies in multiple ways. The paper analyses the situation of the early career researchers in African studies in the Czech Republic including the structural conditions shaping their professional choices. It offers suggestions that could inform the scholarly paths of young researchers within the current context and, by implication, the prospects of the whole discipline.

For example, extending professional networks beyond the Central and Eastern Europe and fostering academic cooperation with international partners could not only help to keep the scholarly debate and teaching up-to-date, but also contribute to overcoming the dependence on the limited national funding scheme by making international grant application more competitive.

Keywords: African studies, early-career scholars, Czech Republic

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Introduction

The presented paper analyses the current situation in the academic disciplines of African Studies in the Czech Republic. After the initial historical overview and analysis of current issues and perceived problems in the field, especially those pertinent for early-career scholars, it offers some suggestions

and possible avenues for change. The empirical data used for the paper come from semi-structured interviews with scholars from the Czech Africanist community¹.

History

African studies in the Czechoslovak context were established in 1960s. As elsewhere in the world, they evolved gradually in the context of Oriental studies and emancipated themselves over time as an autonomous discipline. In the early days, there was a lot of emphasis on African history, but also on language studies, both in the center of Oriental studies at the Czech Academy of Sciences and at the Faculty of Arts, where the first study program focused on Africa at the Charles University was established in 1961. The study program was conceived along the classical tradition of the “Afrikanistik”, with an emphasis on study of African languages, as the entry point to understanding of the societies of the continent, and on history. African studies as area studies, rooted in the tradition of social science with an area focus, started to gain prominence only more recently and manifested in creation of Africa centers in the regions (Skalník et al. 2017).

The trajectory and fate of the discipline was, not surprisingly, always strongly shaped by the broader historical and political context - e.g., the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 and the period of “normalization”, i.e., the following tightening of the communist dictatorship, with employment contracts used as an instrument of political power and control. Over time, a number of scholars chose emigration to the “West”, others opted for different career paths, such as diplomacy (ibid.). After the democratic turn in 1990s, there was a revival of interest in the discipline, however, the African studies program at the Faculty of Arts did not receive a new accreditation and was closed in 2006. New centers in the regions were established – one in Hradec Králové, with a specialisation on political science, anthropology, and history, and another one in Pilsen, with a regional focus on the Horn of Africa.

Currently, Hradec Králové is the biggest center in the country with an explicit study and research focus on Africa. There is, nevertheless, a number of individual researchers working on Africa-related topics within various disciplines – anthropology, development studies (e.g., at the University in Olomouc), literature (Faculty of Arts, Prague), geography (Faculty of Natural Science in Ostrava), or political science (Faculty of Social Science, Prague).

Current situation in African studies

The overall impression of the current African studies in the Czech Republic is marked by tension and fragmentation. Some of the problems that African studies face are structural. The number one among them is financial support. Salaries in Czech academia are, despite a perceived high social status of scholarly work, modest². Financial support for research is not particularly high either. The national and university/faculty grants are the most frequently used options. International project and third-party funding is often out of the reach, since some of the assessment criteria are difficult to be met – most notably publications in impacted peer-reviewed journals and research networks (these aspects will be further elaborated upon below). One coping strategy used to improve the individual financial situation is to combine teaching contract at several universities of faculties, a phenomenon that, however,

¹ Between September 2020 and January 2021 I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with scholars from different African studies centers in the Czech Republic. An additional source of information were informal conversations held at various occasions, mostly conferences, between 2013-2019. The interviews will be anonymized in the text.

² Depending on a particular university and faculty, a PhD scholarship currently amounts 7000 – 12 000 CZK/month (approx. 300 – 500 EUR), a post-doc can earn approx. 1000 – 1200 EUR (<http://www.doktorandivcr.cz/>).

means another increase of teaching load, and, as a consequence, further limits time for research (Interview #3).

The financial conditions are grim for PhD students and early-career researchers in particular. Even after a recent increase of the PhD scholarships in 2018³, it is far from enough for covering even the basic living expenses⁴. The precariousness of the situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the scholarship is not counted as a regular working contract and, therefore, there are no contributions into the social insurance and parental benefit scheme. This has, obviously, serious gendered impact on the PhD students. This is why many PhD students keep their research as a “side project”, kind of a hobby they do because they are “interested in the topic” (interview #1) and they do not have the ambition to pursue an academic career. Despite this, there is apparently not an absolute lack of financial means in the Czech academia. Some of the respondents mentioned that “the money is there, it just does not flow in the same way in all directions” (interview #3), hinting to the fact that some of the faculties or departments can access more funding than others. In this regard, perspectives displaying Africa in the widely established and accepted “light”, such as security, political science, or development, seem to have more chances to access funding for research (interview #3).

Gender issues are another structural problem of the Czech postgraduate education and academia. In the current situation, where the usual length of parental leave in the Czech Republic is three years and little institutional support is offered to cover the care for younger children. With women representing the overwhelming majority of parents who stay at home with their children, the system effectively penalizes mothers in their scientific paths. There is a solid body of research mapping the gendered impact of the structural conditions in the country, some of them conducted by the National Contact Center - Gender and Science (<https://genderaveda.cz/en/>). Many young female scholars find the demands of high flexibility, performance in research, teaching and administration incompatible with the family obligations to the extent that they choose to leave academia altogether (Cidlinská 2015, Linková et al. 2013, Harvánková 2017). The lack of facilities for children under the age of three means that PhD parents – mothers especially – have to rely on alternative ways of childcare organization, which are often precarious.

In this respect, African studies are no different from the rest of the Czech academia. Some of the respondents mentioned the partners as a crucial variable when it comes to combining scholarly career and family: those academics, who have a partner with a stable, good income, can potentially afford private nursery or day care for their young children, and could also stay in the academia just for the sake of their personal fulfilment, not being pressed by the need to provide for the family (interview #2,3, cf. Otčenášková a Sobotková 2014). They also, however, openly acknowledged the strong discomfort with such arrangements, which ultimately foster inequality and replicate existing stereotypes in the relationship, creating dependencies on the one hand, and a pressure on performance and “provision for the family” on the other (interview #3, cf. Harvánková 2017). Another “gendered” factor mentioned was the perceived incompatibility of family obligations with the required time of field research or more broadly, academic mobility, such as study visits abroad (interview #7, cf. Harvánková 2017).

³ The change was pushed through also thanks to organized efforts and advocacy of the Czech Association of PhD Students.

⁴ Apart from the regular scholarship, there is some additional funding available for field research, a crucial aspect for many in the discipline.

These systemic or structural factors, which apply broadly to the whole field of the Czech academia⁵ are further exacerbated by several variables typical for African studies. One of them was already mentioned – the tensions and more or less open animosities among institutions and sometimes on the personal level. This issue was mentioned several times by the respondents (#2,3,4,5). Not only does it increase the atmosphere of competition over scarce resources, but it also effectively hinders much of the cooperation within the “community”, which might be beneficial in many ways. Quite interestingly, Prague, otherwise the hub of most prestigious academic institutions, “lost” against the regional centers and finds itself at the bottom of the imaginary hierarchy (interview #3).

There is also a perceived tension between senior scholars, who are seen as well-established, and the upcoming generation of young researchers⁶, who got their PhDs recently and would like to “do some things differently” (interview #3,5), but find themselves hitting the wall of senior refusal. The power of the senior scholars, however, is hard to be circumvented, as it plays out, among other areas, in the “politics” around potential future plans, both on individual and institutional level⁷. Sometimes, senior scholars are seen as “not particularly supportive” vis-à-vis the junior ones because they “do not want to help their potential competitors rise” (interview #1). Wrong advice in a PhD candidate’s publication strategy was mentioned as an expression of such an attitude in one case, other times it is the lack of willingness to support the young scholars’ stays abroad due to scarcity of human resources: “We are told to stay here and focus on the duties we have here, in Czechia. Sure, if we leave for a semester abroad, who will be there to teach and do all the work?” (interview #2)

“The Renegades”

Each of my interview partners told a different story, due to their different situations, backgrounds, and ambitions. The stories, and also my personal experience with the Czech Africanist community, put together a multi-faceted picture of the situation in the field. At the same time, it was clear that behind all these particularities, there is a shared background, a kind of a soil, from which the whole ethos of the discipline grows. It was quite intangible, but it has become clearer when it came to the topic of “those, who left”. The “renegades”, as I labelled them for myself tentatively for the lack of a better term, were a virtual table, where a number of values and beliefs about “being an Africanist” or maybe even more broadly, about “being a scholar” surfaced – both from those, who left, and those, who stayed. On both sides, the reproaches pointed to some of the prevalent beliefs, with which the ones leaving did not identify any more.

The ones “going” spoke about being fed up with low salaries, the wishes to try something new, longing for “normal” working hours and the need of a meaningful knowledge transfer – “to reach out with what I know, to do something useful, practical” (interview #2). Some expressed their frustration with the “practical incompetence” of their colleagues: “You know, they are all about the methodology, and their research, and they are so rigorous, but when it comes to a meeting, where you need to decide on something, then, it takes hours and nothing gets done. This could not work anywhere else, in business, in the real world!” (interview #2). Others said they felt looked down upon: “like I betrayed them, like it was not enough for me to carry the label of a scholar, like if I were superficial, wanting to be paid properly and I did not stay for the sake of...or I was not fulfilled by the scientific inquiry and

⁵ I am well aware of the need to differentiate between the situation in particular disciplines, or at different universities or faculties, but, by and large, these factors do seem to apply across the whole field.

⁶ The adjective “young” does not refer to age, rather to a junior position of the person, i.e., a PhD Student or a post-doc. It is used interchangeably with the term “early-career researcher”.

⁷ E.g., to get an accreditation for a new study programme, a support of two associate professors (with habilitation) as guarantors of the programme, is needed. At the same time, for many young scholars it is difficult to reach the habilitation in a reasonable time span, mainly due to the high teaching load and administrative duties, which limit the time for research and independent publications.

production of knowledge itself” (interview #1). The slightly sketchy picture that came up from the responses, was an old-fashioned scholar in his ivory tower, who does not care about the superficial problems of the world, and focuses on his scientific inquiry that has little practical application and utility for practice. S/he is satisfied by a mere belonging to an exclusive group of academics and does not need money to prove his achievements.

Those, who stayed, in turn, showed partly despise, partly understanding vis-à-vis the decisions of “the others”. The decisive factor that all the “staying” scholars had in common, was the enthusiasm for their career and their projects: “I like what I do. And I think it needs a constant, long-term engagement to change something, so that people [the broad public] see Africa in a different light, not just the catastrophies and wars reported by the media” (interview #3). Another respondent, who had an offer for a post-doc position abroad, explained: “I will not lie, I considered leaving abroad, to be better off and also to work with that professor. But then, because of Corona, I could not. And then, it would also mean to leave behind what I have started here [an outreach project of popularization]” (interview #5).

What can be done?

The previous section pointed to some of the challenges African studies in the Czech Republic face – some of them generic for the Czech academia in general, some of them more specific. The following section offer some suggestions, how the situation could be improved. Attempts for change at the structural level will be omitted here. Current situation of global pandemics and the erratic way the Czech political leadership addresses this major challenge leave issues, such as support for equal opportunities or more money for the higher education, in the category of potential plans for the not-so-near future.

The first part of this section will focus on the possibilities my respondents mentioned as responses to the challenges identified as most pertinent by themselves. In the second one, I add some more suggestions that appear to be relevant, based on my analysis of the current situation.

The challenges identified by the respondents included a lack of young scholars’ academic literacy, described as the ability to publish internationally (#2,3,5), lack of institutional support for writing grant applications (#2), or the sometimes rather narrow-minded approach to the subject of their study, which is not up-to-date with the current international state-of-the-art of the respective discipline (#2,3,4,5,6). The scope of attention paid mainly to the national Africanist community and not beyond was also listed as a hindering factor, especially given the tensions among regional centers described above (#2,3,4,5,6). The solutions my respondents offered matched these challenges: more support for young researchers in the field of academic writing and project proposal preparation, need to “catch up” with the latest moves in the disciplines (e.g., post-colonial approaches) and pragmatism with regard to the divisions at the Africanist scene, with the common goal (= promotion and improvement of Czech African studies) serving as a common cause to overcome the differences and disagreements.

Interestingly, most of the respondents stayed also focused on the national level and their respective university/center in their responses, which seems to reinforce the unconscious scope of action that is, indeed, limited and does not include, e.g., the possibilities offered by networking with universities or research institutions abroad.

Similarly, although some interviewees indicated the need to present Africa beyond the usual security-related discourses and perspectives, and include multidisciplinary in teaching and scientific inquiry, the ideas for future cross-disciplinary cooperation seemed to include mainly social sciences and humanities, not natural science, medicine, engineering, or other, less “traditional” disciplines, that are

currently often included in research on Africa internationally. Also a true interdisciplinarity⁸, which is a common approach to study of Africa-related issues elsewhere, as well as a more collaborative approach including African research partners and hence bridging the North-South divide and overcoming the hierarchies in knowledge production, seemed to be missing.

My reflections about the possibilities to further develop Czech African studies went along similar lines as the thoughts my respondents shared with me. The clear starting point was the goal to make the field more competitive internationally. This could be achieved through:

- publications in international, peer-reviewed journals (for this, the above mentioned support for academic literacy and support for language competencies of the researchers would be crucial);
- increased participation at international conferences, which would bring not only the necessary scholarly exchange and networking possibilities, but – contrary to a number of other aspects related to scholarly work in the context of the global pandemic – is further facilitated by the possibility to take part digitally and access the events at universities around the globe, which otherwise would be out of reach;
- building networks with individuals and institutions abroad, including African continent.

All these points would, besides their primordial utility, are elements that increase the score and potential success of applications for third-party funding, which could then, in turn, improve the financial support for competitive research projects.

Some support offers for early-career researchers that prove to work well abroad could also be included: coaching, mentoring, or initiatives that make universities more family-friendly environment.

Conclusion

The paper briefly portrayed the history of the African studies in the Czech Republic and analysed the current situation, shaped, besides the unfavourable structural conditions, also the particular Africanist context, characterised by multiple intersecting tensions – regional, generational, and disciplinary. Based on the suggestions of the respondents and my analysis of the situation, the contribution offers some strategies that could improve the situation and make Czech African Studies more competitive: support for peer-reviewed publications and grant proposal writing, networking, additional offers, such as coaching or mentoring, or initiatives for a more family-friendly environment. All these suggestions could help to make Czech African studies more visible and internationally competitive. The necessary precondition would, nevertheless, be a certain pragmatism, which would allow to overcome the ruling atmosphere of tension. The young researchers seem to be willing to try this path.

At the same time, making the brave move out of the “small pond” would also mean to overcome the trope of the “skillful Czech”, deeply embedded as a stereotype Czech people are proud of. It is a person used to work with limited resources and, due to her invention and wit, able to deliver excellent results, comparable to the world-class achievements produced by much better-funded actors. Such a change, however, would have to be connected to another profound shift: a certain de-mythisation of the scholarly work linked to a more adequate remuneration. Production of high-quality research could be then paid as any other job and enthusiasm and personal satisfaction would cease to be perceived as sufficient reward in itself. To be sure, this would mean that scholarship might lose some of its exclusivity allure. On the other hand, it might also help the transformation of the perception of a scholar, from a

⁸ The Czech academic system seems to adopt interdisciplinary approaches only slowly. There are several initiatives, e.g., the recently established interdisciplinary research centers at the Charles University in Prague, nevertheless, the system is predominantly anchored in the disciplines.

slightly old-fashioned picture of a person dedicated, but isolated in her ivory tower, not really caring about the world outside, to one no less dedicated, but more aware of the value of her work to the outer world, who would consider practical and pragmatic choices, that would allow for knowledge transfer and whose work could be attractive and applicable for business, industry, or policy-making level. By this, Africa might also become more of a “mainstream” issue, beyond the common exoticization or security framing.

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