The institutionalization of African Studies in the United States: origin, consolidation and transformation

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Abstract

This article surveys the foundation, consolidation and transformation of the field of African Studies in the United States from the 1960s to the present. It deals with the academic, political and geopolitical contexts that led to the creation of *area studies*. Particular attention is paid to the changes which American society underwent in the 1960s, particularly the civil rights movement, as well as the international context, notably the Cold War. At the heart of the rise of African Studies were US government policies and the active participation of private funding agencies such as the Ford and Mellon Foundations. The so-called field of *area studies* provided the conceptual basis on which African Studies were created. The article argues that this model has undergone changes in the past decade with the incorporation of the African Diaspora as part of African Studies.

Keywords: African Studies; Africa; African diaspora.

In 2003 the Brazilian government made the teaching of African history compulsory at all levels of education. This measure belatedly corrected one of the paradoxes of Brazilian education. In the nation with the greatest number of Afro-descendents outside of Africa, primary, secondary and university students were educated without obtaining a basic knowledge of the rich history of the African continent. In the last ten years, in a large part due to governmental and university funding agencies and the pioneering efforts of researchers and professors from various Brazilian universities, the scenario has changed substantially. Various research groups have concerned themselves with the systematic study of the African past and present. Recently, scholars have ignored (begun moving beyond) the most obvious matrix – the slave trade – and begun concerning themselves with questions of African sociology and anthropology.

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Recent Brazilian experience in the institutionalization of African Studies has parallels with the paths followed in another nation in the Americas with strong African connections: the United States. Both in Brazil and the US these ties are enhanced by millions of Afro-descendents. In the two countries generations of intellectuals have dedicated themselves to the study of Africa outside the academic environment even before African Studies became part of school curricula. To the contrary of the United States, however, where African Studies since its beginnings has had a strongly interdisciplinary character, the history of the African diaspora plays a primordial role in the Brazilian experience. This characteristic seems to reduce one of the most striking tensions in the US experience, where only recently have studies of the African diaspora being fully aggregated in the field of African Studies.

Context

In 1959 research by the American Historical Association (AHA) revealed that only 1735 post-graduate (masters and doctoral) students in history in the traditional American elite universities (Yale, Harvard, Princeton e Columbia) had specialized in Africa.[1] At that time only 31 American institutions offered courses about Africa.[2] A few decades later the scenario had changed dramatically. In 1996 there existed around one thousand doctoral students in African Studies (covering not only history but also correlated areas such as anthropology, sociology and political science).[3] From only 49 doctoral dissertations between 1951 and 1960 the production on Africa advanced to 529 dissertations between 2000 and 2001.[4] In addition, the number of centers of African Studies was more than seventy in 2002.[5]

This advance has reflected directly on American intellectual production about Africa. Between 1983 and 1993, 39% of the articles published in the *Journal of African History* (JAH) perhaps the most important academic publication on Africa in the area of History – were written by Americans.[6] This hegemony makes it necessary to investigate the institutional bases that led to the development of African Studies in the United States. According to Philip Curtin, one of the 'founding fathers' of the discipline, this process passed through two stages. The first stage was marked by the foundation of the first programs of African Studies – at the in Northwestern University in 1948, and at the Boston University in 1954. This initial phase would last until 1958 and would result in the creation of a further ten programs of African Studies.[7] As

at the in Northwestern and at the Boston universities the other programs would be built around interdisciplinary centers of African Studies, with specialists working in different areas – a structure that would obey the *area studies* model.

In this phase the Ford and Carnegie Corporation foundations played a fundamental role in the institutional feasibility of African Studies, providing resources for research, the hiring of professors and the organization of conferences where the general guidelines of the new field would be put together. The first African Studies program, at the in Northwestern University, was created with funding from the Carnegie Corporation in 1948.[8] In 1954, "the Ford Foundation selected four American institutions (Northwestern University, Boston University, Howard University and the University of California, Los Angeles) to receive funding to prepare curricula, research and professional training in African Studies" (McCann, 2002, p.31). Thanks to funding from Ford in 1961, the African Studies program of Northwestern University had financial autonomy to function for ten years without having to resort to university funds (Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.128). Until the end of the 1970s, Ford – by itself – would invest around 20 million dollars in the consolidation of African Studies.[9]

The second stage in the process of the institutionalization of African Studies started in the 1960s and would result in the creation of graduate programs in various other universities, including the University of Wisconsin in 1961. Once again the role of private funding agencies was critical. In the University of Wisconsin, the "Carnegie Corporation provided supported during the first five years of the program – [offering] a quarter of a million dollars, generous financing for the standards of the time –, making possible the concession of grants in the second semester of 1960" (Curtin, 2005, p.131; Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.134). In the words of Jan Vansina, another of the 'founding fathers' of African Studies, having recently arrived in Madison, "new African Studies programs were created every year."[10] Thanks to this largesse, Wisconsin would have twenty professors in its African Studies program in 1970 (Vansina, 1994, p.139). Significantly, the torrent of funding also began to come from the universities themselves – at that time in a process of strong expansion (Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.37).

The background to this growth was the effervescent political context – both in Africa and the United States. In the first case, the independence of the former African colonies is worth highlighting, as this created euphoria in relation to

the development of Africa and attracted the interest of students and professors. Curtin's report captured this fact with precision: "the collapse of the Congo combined with the announcement of the new program in tropical history brought six new candidates [to the African Studies doctoral program in the University of Wisconsin]" (Curtin, 2005, p.132). The other pillar which propelled the institutionalization of African Studies was the struggle for civil rights for Afro-Americans, which weakened American structural racism and led to curricular changes in subjects offered in universities. As Vansina noted, "selecting this field [African Studies] in the turbulence in the 1960s constituted a commitment to liberal values [progressive in the American case], which for some [students and professors] included some element of radicalism" (Vansina, 1994, p.145). According to Paul Zeleza, "nationalism, decolonization and the struggle for civil rights [in the United States] had much more importance for introducing African Studies into the segregated corridors of American universities than any other academic debate".[11]

Area studies

From a methodological point of view, African Studies were part of the so-called area studies (Latin-American studies, Soviet studies, etc.), whose principal characteristics were the intensive study of local languages, prolonged field research and inter-disciplinarity.[12] Underlying the creation of area studies were concerns about the eminently western character of curricular content and research directives in American universities. Until the 1940s, only sixty doctoral dissertations, a large part dealing with on themes of antiquity, had been produced focusing on non-Western regions of the world (Szanton, 2004, p.5). In the words of Wallerstein, "in 1945 the typical history department in American universities had at least 95% of its members working with the history of the United States, Europe, or Greece and Rome."[13]

To internationalize curricula and research, in 1951 Ford established a two year grant program for the study of foreign languages. According to Robinson, the program "marked the beginning of a coherent support strategy for individuals and institutions committed to specialization projects in the contemporary culture of foreign countries."[14] In addition to spending two years in a foreign country, the program provided two-year writing fellowships for doctoral candidates. Between 1951 and 1972 this program financed 2050 doctoral dissertations in human and social sciences (Szanton, 2004, p.9). Before Ford,

significant investments in area studies had already been made by other American private foundations (Wallerstein, 1997, p.208). However, it is undeniable that the support of Ford produced a significant differential. Between 1951 and 1966, it would invest $270 million in the creation of area studies programs.[15]

At the end of the 1960s, illustrating the dramatic change in the composition of teaching staff, as well as in the content of university curricula, "30% of members of large history departments carried out research and regularly taught courses about the non-Western world" (Wallerstein, 1997, p.219). This change in the profile of American universities marked a differential in relation to European and Latin American universities that has last until the present. As in Europe and Latin America, the typical American history department concentrates on the history of the country where the university is located, e. g. American History. Nevertheless, due to the changes introduced by area studies, there is a flourishing debate about the internationalization of curricula.[16]

However, the emergence of area studies was far from exclusively characterized by a positive agenda. In addition to the private financing agencies, area studies were propelled by an actor as fundamental as controversial: the US government. This association would plunge area studies into American international geopolitics, especially the Cold War, and would generate political disputes and debates that are still ongoing in the heart of the African Studies Association (ASA). Strictly speaking, as demonstrated by Zeleza, area studies were created before the two world wars,[17] but the influence of the Cold War made it more palpable (Bundy, 2002, p.67). According to Holtzner, "during the Cold War, from the point of view of governmental financing agencies, intellectual production in area studies advanced in part anchored on imperatives of [US] national security imperatives."[18]

As demonstrated by William Martin and Michael West, without the military, the cultural and the technological competition with the Soviets, it would be difficult to imagine the torrent of governmental resources available to area studies in the 1970s (Martin; West, 1999, pp.85-123). The geopolitical dimension of these investments is undeniable. In 1962 the report of the US State Department stated that Africa was "probably the biggest area open to maneuvers in the competition between the Sino-Soviet bloc and the non-communist world" (Robinson, 2004, p.17). Between 1949 and 1964, the volume of resources available to studies related to Africa alone amounted to US $76 million.[19] One of the landmarks of governmental involvements was the

1958 National Defense Education Act VI (Title VI), primarily aimed at the teaching of African languages, which is still one of the main sources of resources for area studies (McCann, 2002, p.31).

Between 1964 and 1965, each of the five African Studies centers selected by the American government to teach African languages (Howard University, UCLA, Duquesne University, Michigan State University and Columbia University) received US $600,000 to finance their operations.[20] Governmental financing was used to create specialized libraries and to give grants to students and professors, as well as to hire teaching staff. Initially, the program benefitted both public and private universities, but later public universities gained clear priority. Since its beginning, the program has been renewed every three years, based on competition in terms of the presentation of proposals. Around twenty African Studies centers have regularly benefitted from the funds obtained through Title VI (Robinson, 2004, p.14).

According to Brizuela-Garcia, government financing was critical because it increased when the funds of private agencies were shrinking in the 1970s (Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.124). From a strictly academic point of view, the results of the governmental financing programs were lower than initial expectations. For example, research conducted in 1995 demonstrated that until that date only half of doctorates in African history had been financed with governmental resources – the so called Title VI funds (McCann, 2002, p.33).

On the other hand, the dependence of African Studies in relation to US government funds became one of the most controversial questions in American academia. At the time the first funding was announced, Melville F. Herskovits, an anthropologist and first president of the African Studies Association (ASA), publically attacked the use of Africa in governmental Cold War strategies (Staniland, n.d.). In an analysis from the beginning of the 1970s, Curtin said that it was only at the beginning of the African Studies program that access to government funding was facilitated due to the Cold War (Curtin, 1971, p.360). More recently, however, the same author admitted that "around 1957 the launching of Sputnik by the Russians led to the approval of the National Defense Education Act VI [in 1958]" (Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.38).

In 1996, the question was raised once again within the ASA. Under pressure from its members, the Association approved a motion which rejected a program molded around the National Defense Education Act VI, gifted with a perpetual investment fund which could reach US $150 million. Members of the ASA said that they had "opposed this program since the beginning because

it is controlled by the Department of Defense (Pentagon), and Department of Defense and Intelligence employees were part of the committee which controlled the program."[21] Opinion polls carried out in 2002 among US academics showed how controversial this question still is. The vast majority of Africanists were against the funding provided by American information agencies and the Pentagon.[22]

In reality, the relationship between geopolitics and the production of knowledge is not a US singularity. In England, as shown by John Fage, one of the principal names in English Africanist historiography, the social sciences – especially anthropology – were 'key' pieces in understanding how to better dominate African societies.[23] The relationship between intellectual production and English colonial geopolitics became particularly evident with the foundation of the International Africa Institute (IAI), in 1926, whose objective was to eliminate the "lack of cooperation between governments, missionaries and scientists" and to "congregate academics, missionaries and colonial administrators."[24] Between 1942 and 1948, soldiers and employees of the British crown formed the main part of the students (34%) of the IAI, followed by diplomats and staff of the Department of Colonial Affairs.[25]

The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) – one of the principal English academic centers for studies about Africa – was founded under the auspices of English colonialism.[26] Like the IAI, "its principal objective was to train colonial and military staff".[27] In the American case, Goran Hayden argues that it is simply impossible to establish a correlation between the US government agenda and American academic production on Africa. According to Hayden, if the interest of the US government was the creation of knowledge about regions that could be influenced by the former Soviet Union, the principal beneficiaries of the funding turned out to be progressive liberal groups who 'modernized' university curricula through the inclusion of courses on Africa and other regions of what was then called the Third World.[28] Often the themes covered privileged subaltern groups, while some of the intellectuals who wrote these histories participated in the African freedom struggles.[29]

Methodology

The first American African History program, in Northwestern University, was created by the renowned anthropologist Melville Herskovits, a specialist in Afro-descendent populations in the United States who would later do field

research in Africa and Latin America. As has been highlighted, Herskovits was also the first president of the ASA in 1957, reflecting not only the hegemonic role that anthropology had in the initial development of African Studies, as well as the institutional weight of Herskovits (Brizuela-Garcia, 2004, p.70).

However, it would be the participation of another anthropologist, the Belgian Jan Vansina, that would give a specific methodological shape to American Africanist historiography. In the University of Wisconsin Vansina led, with Philipe Curtin, the most influent post-graduate program in African History on US soil, training various members of the first generation of American Africanists – many of whom are still working. This project was based on a model which preached that the study of Africa should be done in a program which covered other Third World regions – thus the name Program in Comparative Tropical History (Curtin, 2005, p.130). According to Vansina, "the objective was to train specialists in African History who also had a strong base in comparative history" (Vansina, 1994, p.102). Between 1963 and 1999, 87 historians obtained doctorates in African History from the University of Wisconsin.[30]

Built into the Wisconsin model was a direct criticism of the regional – parochial – nature of doctoral programs in American universities in the period before area studies. The singularity of Wisconsin was evident even in relation to universities where African Studies were also growing, such as Northwestern University. While Curtin created a program of comparative and interdisciplinary studies of tropical regions in Wisconsin, Herskovits proposed the study of Africa in relation to Afro-American History.[31] To the contrary of Northwestern, which had one of the "oldest [centers of African Studies in the United States], but unfortunately with little emphasis on historical studies", since the beginning history occupied a central space in Wisconsin.[32]

At the core of the 'Madison school' was the notion that African Studies were characterized by fundamentally interdisciplinary techniques and methodologies. Despite the important contributions of linguists and archeology, the principal influence undeniably came from anthropology – which was already a discipline with a long, though disputable, relationship with Africa.[33] According to Miller, "the first generation of professional Africanist historians was based on non-historic disciplines established in Africa, principally anthropology."[34] The dialogue with anthropology created a contrast with Europe, where the 'colonialist past' of anthropology would not be ignored, which made the dialogue with African History unfeasible. In the United States, a nation whose

direct colonialist past was relatively limited, the conditions were better suited to dialogue between the two disciplines.

Initial studies by africanists were concerned with refuting current stereotypes of Africa, such as the idea of perennial institutional backwardness and the isolation of African societies. In Guyer's perspective (1996), the agenda was defined as 'basic research', aimed at recently independent nations. At the same time, it sought to emphasize the political refinement and commercial complexity of African societies. At a point when various African countries were becoming independent, the aim was to write history from the point of view of the Africans.[35] In the vision of Frederick Cooper, "the first generation of Africanists, in the attempt to distinguish themselves from historians who worked in a line of imperial history, anxiously tried to find the true history of Africa."[36]

A direct challenge was thus made to the current notion of what constituted the discipline of history, principally the distinction between pre-history (attributed to oral societies) and history (attributed to nations).[37] In methodological terms, the practice of fieldwork had a central role, demarcating American Africanist historiography in relation to conventional historiographic techniques.[38] Prolonged fieldwork, as well as the learning of African languages, was an integral part of the collection of oral traditions. Until the end of the 1950s, according to Vansina, the consensus was that historians should take advantage of anthropologists in the collection of oral sources, which helps to explain the interaction with the anthropology which marked with initial generation of American Africanistas.[39] In summary, the triad of *fieldwork*, *dominion of African languages* and *collection of oral traditions* became a central feature of Africanist historiography produced in the University of Wisconsin and influenced various other African Studies programs in the United States.[40]

To the contrary of anthropologists, however, who looked for synchrony and the ethnographic present by using oral sources, historians were concerned with the diachronic and the attempt to track social changes through the use of oral sources.[41] As noted by Vansina (1996, p.129), "the ethnographic present is anathema to historians." From the methodological point of view, in Miller's perspective, both the use of sources and the rest of the Africanist methodological and theoretical apparatus were part of an effort to satisfy the "standards of objectivity of history as part of the social sciences" (Miller, 2007, p.9). As Newbury said, "the principal objective was the acceptance [of African History] in the most universal field of history."[42]

As well as influence of anthropology, the political context of African independence explains in part the relevance that use of oral sources assumed for the first generation of American Africanists. The assumption was that written sources left by colonial administrations reflected the point of view of the colonizer and served to 'perpetuate' a vision of Africans as passive actors. According to Daniel McCall, "written documents carried with them not just prejudice but also gaps due to the lack of interest – on the part of those who wrote and preserved these documents – in relation to certain topics, persons and events."[43] In this context, oral traditions offered a counterpoint to the written sources in European languages, allowing the recovery of an African past that had not been registered by written sources, in either European or African languages. According to Barbara Cooper, "the persistent commitment of Africanists to oral sources, whether traditional or personal narratives, derives from a healthy skepticism in relation to the status of written sources, in general produced by external observed, as the sole source of evidence about the African past."[44]

Despite the initial impact, the use of oral sources was soon criticized. The most fervent came from some of Vansina's own students. Anthropologists such as Wyatt MacGaffey refuted the use of oral sources with the argument that these were nothing other than myths produced by different African societies to systematize visions of how these societies should be organized.[45] At the end of the 1980s, according to Phyllis Martin, the use of oral sources was more celebrated than effectively practiced by historians, having become a technique most associated with the disciples of Jan Vansina.[46] The same criticism would be later repeated by Barbara Cooper. According to Cooper, "Jan Vansina and his advisers developed an admirable and rigorous methodology for the use of oral evidence.However, although his work served as effective propaganda for the methodology, at times it seemed that oral history was more of a fetish than a method."[47]

Rediscovering the Diaspora

In a recent analysis, the political scientist Pearl Robinson highlighted the existence of two traditions of African Studies in the United States. The first was a tradition that is intertwined with Pan-Africanism and preceded the institutionalization of African Studies in the 1960s (Robinson, 2004, p.1; Szanton, 2004, p.10). According to the definition of Martin and West, this was

the 'transcontinental tradition', bringing together Afro-American and Caribbean intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Alexander Crummell and Martin Delany.[48] In essence, it combined social and political activism with rich intellectual production, with the focus of study not only being Africa but also the African peoples in the African Diaspora. According to Martin, these intellectuals "had for a long time conceived and studied Africa in the context of Afro-descendents and their culture through the Atlantic."[49] At the beginning of the twentieth century, they already had an institutional network that included specialist journals and academic organizations. Nevertheless, despite graduating from elite universities, (both Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson had doctorates from Harvard), the majority did not manage to achieve teaching positions in elite universities due to American segregationism.[50]

The second tradition of African Studies flourished in elite universities and benefited directly from the private and governmental funding available from the 1950s. As shown above, this perspective became hegemonic. In addition to access to funding, it was conceptually differentiated from the transcontinental tradition since it established restrictive frontiers for African Studies, which were defined by the principal focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and by the exclusion of the African Diaspora. In the words of Carter, "African Studies deal with Africans in Africa: their history, culture, environment, philosophies, aspirations, difficulties and conquests in time and space."[51]

According to Miller, this divergence between the transcontinental school and the so-called Restrictive African Studies in part occurred due to the evolution of African politics in the post-independence period, when political fragmentation was said to have demonstrated the unfeasibility of the notion of transregionality as an analytical concept.[52] The almost exclusive focus on Africa and the exclusion of the African Diaspora was reflected in the policies of American funding agencies. For example in the 1960s, a central period in the formation of African Studies, the joint committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), responsible for the allocation of resources for graduate and post-doctoral research in American universities, did not have place reserved for specialists in the African Diaspora (Robinson, 2004, p.18).

As well as limiting the focus of African Studies, the Restrictive African Studies perspective made Africanists absent actors in debates and discussions about global questions and transcontinentality.[53] The differences between the two

schools, it can be said, were not restricted to the conceptual plane or the focus on African Studies. In reality, disputes were not slow to emerge, first concerning access to funding and later gaining racial contours.[54] These divergences would terminate in a split during the 1967 annual ASA meeting. As a result of this crisis, dissatisfied with lack of space in ASA, Afro-American intellectuals created a distinct association.[55]

Although it did not receive recognition in the 1960s, the idea that the African Diaspora should be a proper part of Africanist studies has become a central part of Africanist academic discourse in the last ten years.[56] According to Hayden, "African Studies should not be confined to the geographic entity known as Africa" (Hayden, 1986, p.14). More recently, Akyeampong declared that "disapora studies have arrived to stay", and that "African Studies are being revitalized by interaction with local, regional and oceanic histories."[57] Significantly, recent research has demonstrated that a large part of Africanists – 41% – believe that the study of Africa should also include the populations of the African Disapora (Bowman; Cohen, 2002).

Underlying this change were various factors. First, transformations in the structure of American funding, caused by the end of the Cold War, which led to the crisis of the so-called area studies – including, obviously, African Studies. Since the principal US enemy – the former Soviet Union – no longer represented an immediate danger to American imperialism, the need for the production of knowledge for the area of American national security underwent a restructuring. In this scenario, Africa, which had been one of the principal theaters of the Cold War, lost its geopolitical importance. In addition to the geopolitical factor, the crisis of area studies derived from the notion that these areas involved excessive academic specialization and did not reflect the concerns of a globalized world in which the idea of the nation-state was surpassed by transcontinental ties.[58] The crisis of legitimacy was followed by a significant reduction in resources for area studies (Martin; West, 1999, pp.106-111).

In addition to the crisis of area studies, another factor contributed to the positive, though belated, inclusion of the African Diaspora in African Studies: research on the history of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Atlantic World. In relation to the slave trade, these studies since their very beginning were centered on comparativism and transnationalism. Taking as a central mark the work of the Africanist Philip Curtin, this research approach was initially marked by quantification, in an attempt to specify the number of

Africans brought to the Americas. However, the principal vector of change may perhaps have been the studies of Atlantic Slavery, which was initially inclined to questions that were typically 'Herskovitsians', such as the permanence of African cultures in the Americas and the weight of these cultures in the formation of slave communities in the Americas.[59]

Final Considerations

The development of African Studies in the United States was dependent on the American and international political and geopolitical circumstances in the 1960s, especially the Cold War and the struggle for civil rights and the decolonization of Africa. The internal configuration of this field was molded by the so-called area studies, with strong interdisciplinary content and a vocation for prolonged fieldwork. The area studies model turned African Studies into a 'history of success' in the United States, contributing to the globalization of the curricula of American universities and to the internationalization of history departments. Based on the generous resources of private and US government agencies, African Studies became a vital part of the American academic studies. In the case of history departments, for example, there is no important department that does not have at least two members of the teaching staff specialized in Africa.

Nevertheless, since the beginning African studies were marked by tensions, with controversies about the origin of the research resources and initial exclusion from the African Diaspora. Until very recently, the dispute over the research funding offered by the American government dominated the backstage of academic meetings of American Africanists. However, perhaps the principal problem of the areas studies model was not the excessive dependence on government funds, but rather the aim to demarcate African Studies as a specific area, related only to Africa and excluding the African Diaspora. Only recently has this tendency been reversed. In the United States the current panorama of African Studies combines elements of the so-called transcontinental school and concepts derived from the ideas of the anthropologist Melville Herskovits.

NOTES

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