

Ageing with Anthropology

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Abstract: *The paper will argue that social anthropology, as an intellectual discipline, is ageing alongside its practitioners. In my case, I have been ageing with social anthropology since my university years (1962-1967). My teachers were Ladislav Holý, Milan Stuchlík, and Dmitri A. Ol' derogge. However, at the same time, I formed myself as a social anthropologist through self-study, specifically in the library of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad. Another factor was criticism of dogmatic Marxism, particularly the renewed discussions about the Asiatic Mode of Production. That was long before the arrival of anthropological Marxism in the West. The critical approach to the problematic of the state, in fact, the early state (the term I have coined in discussions with my Dutch older colleague, Henri (nicknamed Hans) Claessen), was derived from both firsthand experience with the communist state dictatorship and the study of African state formation. The paper discusses the vicissitudes of my anthropological career as they developed, reflecting both theoretical shifts in social anthropology and world politics during the decades of my life.*

Ageing is maturing, bringing wisdom but also decay. When I was only 17 years old, I was lucky because, despite growing up in a communist dictatorship, one of my university teachers was Ladislav Holý, who, together with museologist Milan Stuchlík, became converted to social anthropology. After all, they were interested in non-European studies, namely Africa and Indonesia. Most of the literature they had to digest was social and cultural anthropological. Moreover, that was non-Marxist primarily. At the same time, home ethnographers were

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mandatorily instructed to absorb and apply Marxist historical materialism; Holý and Stuchlík only paid lip service to the Marxist dogmas and used data from anthropological field studies collected only recently. Also, my ethnographer mother, Olga Skalníková, was a fan of Holý and recommended Holý's first Darfur fieldwork in 1961 (financed by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences). By coincidence, my mother conducted some urban fieldwork in Conakry in the same year (cf. Skalníková 1964; a letter exchange between the two fieldworkers still awaits publication). Both African sojourns inspired me to study Africa, and 1962 can be considered the beginning of my social anthropology. Not only did I start my Africanist studies along with history at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, but I also volunteered at the Náprstek museum during the summer vacation (under Stuchlík's supervision, I inventoried Oceania items from the museum collections). One of the courses I read was Holý's 'The Evolution of Culture in Africa', which was based on social anthropological literature.

Another influence during my first study year was Dr Josef Wolf, author of numerous textbooks dealing with anthropology in general and specifically in Africa. In 1962, the Permanent Council of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) met in Prague. Africanist anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits, Daryll Forde, Meyer Fortes, Vinigi Grottanelli, Antonio Dias or Dmitri Ol'derogge were among the delegates, and my mother was one of the organisers of the meeting. Holý was the secretary. Thanks to my mother, I met Herskovits and informed him about my Africanist studies. To attend Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and study with Herskovits was then an impossible dream. Ol'derogge was another attractive contact for me, and in 1963, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education selected me to join the African studies program at Leningrad State University (1963-1967).

In 1964, one of my Prague teachers, the historian of Antiquity Jan Pečírka, arrived in Leningrad for a conference and during our discussions, Pečírka informed me about the renewal of discussions about Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production (A.M.P.). The discussion started in the 1930s but was suppressed by the Stalinists. The concept allowed for a reappraisal of non-European history and the dedogmatisation of historical materialism. I was fascinated and soon read No. 114 of *La Pensée*, where Godelier, Chesnaux and others explained their ideas about the A.M.P. Following the discussions about the A.M.P. led me to a critical approach towards historical materialism and critical Marxology. In 1964, I was a student participant at the International Congress of the IUAES in Moscow. Besides meeting and watching world leaders of social anthropology, I had a decisive meeting with Ladislav Holý. Holý asked me what direction in anthropology I would like to specialise in.

I retorted that it was “spiritual culture” and African anthropology. I had been privileged to study social anthropological literature on African political systems. During my vacation in Prague, I attended the seminar conducted by Holý and Stuchlík in the Department of Ethnography and Folklore at Charles University. I presented my findings about state formation in West Africa, namely in northern Ghana. In 1966, I participated in an archaeological expedition in Tuva, Soviet Central Asia and collected more than 100 items of material culture for the Náprstek Museum. It was my first field experience. In 1967, just before finishing my stay in the Soviet Union, I joined the Department of Ethnography of the Caucasus at the Georgian Academy of Sciences in their expedition to the Kurtat Valley in Northern Ossetia. I collected field data about the religious life of the Ossetians. My diploma thesis in Leningrad was entitled ‘The Political Systems of Five Voltaic Societies (An Attempt to Make a Comparative Analysis)’. D. A. Ol’derogge was the scientific supervisor. My previous coursework on state formation in the Voltaic area in West Africa, written in Russian, was rejected for lack of a Marxist approach. When I wrote my diploma thesis in English, it received the highest accolades. The thesis, provided with a Czech summary, was accepted as a PhDr. dissertation by Charles University in 1968. Starting in October 1967, I embarked on the so-called *aspirantura* to be crowned with the Candidate of Sciences (CSc.) title. It was in the Department of Sciences of Asia and Africa in the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague. My supervisor was Karel Petráček, an eminent Arabist and Ethiopianist, who supported my social anthropological specialisation without mentioning it. Nonetheless, hoping to profit from the liberalising Prague Spring, I planned to study at Northwestern University in the U.S.A. Therefore, I joined the Czechoslovak Army for a mandatory year of service.

Mere three weeks after I enlisted, the Prague Spring, which promised ‘socialism with a human face’, was suppressed by the invasion of Soviet and other ‘friendly’ armies in August 1968. When I returned to Prague in the summer of 1969, the political situation changed, and although I was invited for a six-month ‘post-Master’s’ study at Northwestern, the new pro-Soviet Czechoslovak Minister of Education cancelled my departure. My later applications for study at Cambridge or Bergen were already thwarted at the faculty level by then Vice Dean Robek. The plan to go to Northern Ghana to study the Nanumba chieftaincy became a chimaera. I managed to finish my CSc. thesis, ‘The Dynamics of Early State Development in the Voltaic Area (West Africa)’ in early 1973, but the defense of it was officially disallowed. My freelance lecturing of ‘general ethnology’ at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, turned into a full-time specialist worker (odborný pracovník) employment. In fact, it was a semi-exile

because in Prague, I was told that I could not become an assistant professor for political reasons.

Some Czech colleagues joked that I am the only Czech orientalist who regularly commutes to the Orient. Luckily, my Slovak job not only allowed me to teach social anthropology under the guise of ethnology but also to carry out intensive social anthropological fieldwork in the villages of Nižná Šuňava and Vyšná Šuňava (today Šuňava). I used Forde's *Habitat, Economy and Society* in my teaching. I prescribed reading of Parsons' *Societies* and Wolf's *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, both of which came out in Czech in 1971, just in time when a ban on liberal literature was imposed. Holý's teaching text on Africa and Stuchlík's on Oceania were also helpful. In 1972, I presented an explicitly social anthropological paper, 'Social processes in present-day village communities in Czechoslovakia', at an international conference. It was included in the volume prepared for publication but eventually excluded from it. It was published in Slovakia 17 years later! In 1973, I was allowed to attend the 9th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Chicago, where I presented the conclusions of my CSc. dissertation and field report from Šuňava. I met Henri Claessen of Leiden University, with whom we found common interest in state formation and agreed on further cooperation. In Bratislava, a malicious colleague reported me for prescribing Parsons, a 'bourgeois' sociologist (sociology was forbidden in 'socialist' Czechoslovakia). In addition, some Soviet ethnographers informed my Bratislava employers that I published an 'enemy comment' in *Current Anthropology*. The Communist Party committee of the Faculty of Philosophy invited me to their session. I proved that it was slander. The committee concluded that I am not 'against' but still needed to show that I am 'for' meaning the Communist regime.

Meanwhile, Claessen invited me to the Netherlands to work with him on a volume on early states. The 'complex evaluation', which, in fact, was a political probation, that followed in Spring 1976, concluded that my employment at Comenius University would be terminated and that I could not work any longer in higher education. Also, I was told that I was not allowed to accept the Dutch invitation. I was close to my 31st birthday, faced with the end of my academic career.

In this existentially crucial situation, I decided to defect. I travelled through Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, and from there to the Netherlands. I applied for refugee status but was granted asylum status. I was issued a Dutch passport for foreigners, which required a visa to all countries except Benelux. In October 1977, I became a half-time member of the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University. The coedited book *The Early State* was published in 1978.

Also in 1978, I got a research grant from the WOTRO Foundation and started fieldwork in Northern Ghana. (Up to 2003, I visited the field site several times, totalling more than two years, cf. Skalník f.c.) The publication of the volume and intensive fieldwork in Ghana marked my recognition as a social anthropologist. I became a regular contributor at the congresses of IUAES (Skalník 2025). The appointment as senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town in 1983 was a coming of age as a social anthropologist. The nine years in South Africa turned a learner into a teacher. When the communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia ceased to exist in 1989, I decided to return to my native country with a plan to launch social anthropology as a university specialisation there. Although social anthropology encountered stiff resistance from the conservative *národopis*/ethnography/ethnology establishment, by the turn of the century, social anthropology became a university subject in Pardubice and subsequently in Prague, Brno and Olomouc. The academic press described my role in this struggle (Skalník 2002; cf. Balaš 2025), and here I shall leave it at that. I was among first collaborators of French Research Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES) in Prague. In 2006 I was made a *chevalier dans L'ordre des palmes académiques* (Bedřich and Retka 2015).

I started my work at Pardubice in 2000 as a recognised specialist. While a fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), The Czech Grant Agency approved my application for a three-year grant to restudy Dolní Roveň. This village community was studied by a rural sociologist in the 1930s. Pardubice lecturers and students had a unique fieldwork opportunity, mere 15 kilometres from Pardubice. The ten years I spent in Pardubice were happy. I enjoyed being part of the teaching collective, which shared the enthusiasm of introducing social anthropology to one student cohort after another (Retka et al. 2021). One of numerous Erasmus exchanges, which I initiated from Pardubice, led me to Wrocław, where I became an extraordinary professor after I left Pardubice in 2010. I got support for the restudy in Dobrzeń Wielki with colleagues and students from Wrocław and Pardubice (Skalník 2018). In 2019, I became a fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), where I compared populism in Central Europe and South Africa. By then, I became an 'independent researcher' who writes essays and book reviews ever since (cf. Skalník 2022). Social anthropology was ageing along with me, and I aged with anthropology. After all, it has been 63 years of a parallel run in which life became a permanent fieldwork.

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