



# THE ECUMENICAL ACADEMY AND ITS JOURNEY

*Jiří Silný*

## The Origins and Contexts

Today a registered institution, the Ecumenical Academy (EA) started as a civic association, Ecumenical Academy Prague, at the beginning of 1996. The registration was preceded by about two years of preparations.

From its beginnings until today, the EA's name is a matter of contention and is often mangled. Despite that, we stick to it. Not only is it an established brand, but it has its significance too. "Ecumenical" means relating to dialogue and cooperation between various churches, but in its wider sense, which we prefer, between different views of the world. The original Greek meaning, after all, refers to the inhabited world (*oikoumenē gés*). "Academy" has a Greek origin too, of course, but in our case, it is inspired more directly by the tradition of German evangelical academies, which, after the Second World War,

became important centres of dialogue on social issues after the terrifying experiences of Nazism and war. The establishment of the EA was supported by German evangelical churches in order to assist in the formation of a dialogue about the direction of society in our new, post-revolutionary times.

Several churches, as well as organisations with only some clerical connections – or none at all – and individuals from various milieus became members of the EA. Members hail from the Czech Republic, Germany and Austria. In its activities, the EA is more of a civic organisation than an ecclesiastical one. It is generally concerned with non-religious topics and usually promotes more radical opinions than those of the local, more conservative ecclesiastical groups. In reality, the EA is often more critical than most Czech civic organisations.

## A Socially, Economically and Ecologically Sustainable Society

Since the beginning of its activity, the EA has organised seminars and conferences on topics which we see as important and pressing. That is a principle we still follow. It means that the emphasis changes, though the basic direction remains the same. In the beginning, we spoke of "justice, peace and the preservation

of creation," goals defined on ecumenical grounds by the so-called conciliatory process of the World Council of Churches. We find further inspiration in the theology of liberation. Today, we declare our **aims for a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society, and we promote justice and emancipation.**

Over the course of twenty years, there have been many topics which the EA has dealt with. Most of the activities began with seminars, attended by experts in the field and the general public. The 90s saw the birth of a new topic: **refugees**. It was already apparent then that the ostracism of the **Roma minority** was becoming a problem, **unemployment** became a new phenomenon, and crime was changing too: the EA took part in a public education programme on preventing trafficking of women, in cooperation with the Conference of European Churches. Some seminars were focused on ecology or animal rights, but there were also discussions on cultural and religious issues, and we also organised international meetings, mostly between Czechs and Germans.

Around the year 2000, the range of topics widened considerably. In addition to questions connected with transformation, the EA focused more on questions of **globalisation and its effects and contexts**. The first significant activity in this direction was our participation in Jubilee, an international organisation which strove for the **remission of unpayable debts** of third world countries in the symbolic year 2000, in which, coincidentally, a meeting of the most important creditor's institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – took place in Prague. The EA co-organised protests and debates with leading non-government experts, and took part in the handing over of signatures for the international campaign to the leaders of the financial institutions. The EA remains active on the topic of debt and critiquing the international financial system.

In the first years of the new millennium, the EA took part in a programme ran by the World Council of Churches, examining the **social, economic and ecological consequences of neoliberal globalisation**, and looking for **alternative models**. The resulting project, *theology-factory.net*, with partners in several countries, was then occupied with the connections between economic, political, theological and spiritual questions.

The EA's activities that accompanied the NATO meeting in Prague in 2002 dealt with questions of security and peace, and, a few years later led to a project on the control of gun trafficking.

Since 2003, the EA has also focused on questions of international trade and its impact on poor countries and their development. Apart from a critique of the negative consequences, it focuses on the **promotion of an alternative model – fair trade**. This has led to several other projects, recently focused on fair trade cities, schools and churches. In addition to promotion

and education, the EA also began trading. In 2004, it opened the **first wholesale fair trade store in the post-socialist region**, whose example helped considerably to spread this form of trade in the area. The EA subsequently discontinued its wholesale activities and currently runs one of the few brick-and-mortar shops specialised on a wide range of fair trade goods. The EA also **initiated the Fair & Bio cooperative, which operates a roasting house for fair trade coffee**. The roasting house functions as a social enterprise, employing people with disabilities.

A series of projects focused on raising public awareness on production conditions (electronics, flowers, cocoa and chocolate; there is a project currently being implemented on tropical fruit), discussing violations of human rights and the devastation of the environment. Some activities focus on a critique of specific participants, such as multinational corporations or retail chains. Concurrently, we advocate alternative models of production and consumption. In addition to fair trade, it is **support of solidarity economy, cooperatives, local or ecological production and food sovereignty**.

In the long term, the EA is also active in a neglected area of human rights: **economic, social and cultural rights**. In 2008, following the EA's initiative, an informal **Czech coalition of the international Social Watch network** was established, which monitors how the relevant international agreements are upheld in the Czech Republic, and publishes a yearly report. One project also promoted the participation of citizens on decision-making, e.g. in the form of participative municipal budgets. 2015 saw the formal establishment of the Social Watch Czech coalition as an organisation.

Since 2009, a long-term project, the School of Alternatives (formerly the Prague School of Alternatives), along with several other organisations, has pursued primarily **domestic political, economical, social and cultural questions** and aids the development and improved quality of dialogue in the segment of civic society which could be broadly defined as the liberal left. As part of this project, the EA also supports campaigns like the European civic initiative for unconditional basic income, or the current campaign against the **Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)**.

## Alternatives, Education and Enlightenment

Just like the topical focus, the working methods changed too, as the EA always tries to adapt to the current challenges, to use the opportunities that offer themselves for constant learning.

The EA has not abandoned its original goal, to work as a **forum for dialogue**, even though it became apparent that dialogue across ideological and political boundaries is, in our environment, very difficult – sometimes even impossible. Within civic society, and even among ideologically allied groups, a competitive approach is more common than attempts at cooperation, mutual support and joint solutions. Supporting integrative processes is therefore amongst the EA's most important activities.

The EA **initiated the formation of several organisations** (Fair Trade Association – now Fairtrade Czech and Slovak Republic; the Social Watch coalition; the Fair & Bio cooperative) and became a founding member of others (Czech Forum for Development Cooperation – FoRS; Climate Coalition; the Czech Republic Against Poverty campaign (part of GCAP); the Clean Clothes Czech Republic; the Czech Christian Environmental Network – ČKES). The EA is also a member of the Thematic Network for Social Economy (TESSEA) and is active in several international organisations (Oikosnet – a European association of Christian academies; EURODAD – a European network of organisations working on development and debt). We must also add the dozens of partners in the Czech Republic, Europe and other parts of the world, with which the EA cooperates in projects that are almost always international. This allows us to learn from others, but also to share the specific problems and needs of our region.

**In its day to day operation, the EA tries to act with an emphasis on solidarity and partnership, the sharing of information and supporting the activities of others.**

It is apparent that a large part of the EA's programmes is focused not only on discussing various positions on specific problems. Starting with a critical analysis of the current form of globalisation as a process that deepens social and ecological problems, the EA uncovers individual problems, but also critiques unjust systems and structures. Concurrently, the EA strives to establish specific alternatives promising better solutions. The EA is, in this sense, political, in the manner discussed by the theology of liberation: it stands on the side of the poor, the outcasts and the exploited, as well as the ravaged environment.

As for the specific working methods, the range is very wide. Apart from seminars, workshops, conferences and lectures, the EA also produces exhibitions, videos, teaching materials, publications and expert studies, and also communicates with politicians on local, national and European levels.

Another important aspect of the EA's activity is the **connecting of educational and analytical work with practical projects and experiences**. In the area of education in developing countries, important experiences included development cooperation (electrifying a school and health centre in Masuk, Zambia in 2005) and a number of study trips to countries of the global South, undertaken by associates of the EA.

**Activities in fair trade entrepreneurship form another crucial experience.** In addition to the noticeable contribution for producers in the global South, it is also an opportunity for activity on the side of those consumers who want to straighten out the unfair economic conditions. As a successful example of an alternative trade system, fair trade also has a large educational potential.

Experience with founding a cooperative and directing a social enterprise provides necessary feedback and means educational activities in this area are not removed from the difficulties of reality. Our newest practical activity is the cooperation of EA staffers in **community supported agriculture**.

The EA creates meaningful jobs, including protected ones, supports education and re-qualification of its staffers – currently ten – and practices equal remuneration.

The EA's sources are composed mainly of grants, and despite the rising competition in applications, the EA is continually successful in applications, in large part because of how sought out it is for international projects. Currently, they are mostly European Commission grants for education and development, partially co-financed by the Czech Development Agency. Other sources of income include funds (in recent years it was the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation in particular), German ecclesiastical organisations (Brot für die Welt, the Evangelical Church of Westphalia) and private donors. Almost a fifth of our resources come from member fees and the sale of goods and services.

## Our Journey

Even though the EA's options were, particularly at first, quite restricted, and are still limiting, we were still continually successful in bringing new topics and initiating new processes, which later had a wider effect, even from a marginal position.

This was doubtless the case regarding **the debt crisis of so-called developing countries** as part of the Jubilee campaign. Today, the subject is current once again, because most of the solutions proposed then have not been realised. During the present negotiations at the UN, the Czech Republic, also thanks to lobbying by the EA, has taken a more constructive stance to the proposed agreements.

The EA was not the first organisation to bring fair trade to the Czech Republic (that was the One World Foundation – Nadace Jeden svět), but through its educational and practical activities, it greatly helped its dissemination and inspired others to take part in this movement.

Another recent contribution has been the **broadening the debate on social economy, usually understood narrowly as employing the disadvantaged in the job market, by adding the dimension of solidarity economy and economic democracy, as it is represented by cooperatives. Food sovereignty is another new topic.**

Supporting cooperation within the civic society, as described above, can also be considered a positive result. The EA is a respected organisation, even though it is hard to classify. It is too secular and radical for churches, for others, it is its connection with Christian tradition that makes it hard to accept.

**For me personally, the exceptional and irreplaceable nature of the EA, which I led for twenty years, lies in openness, in an attempt to cross borders and look for wider contexts, in the process of learning: between the personal, local and global; between praxis and reflection; between the rational, the spiritual and the ethical.** I think this is a good direction.

In many ways, current times shows the clear boundaries and conflicts of previous development, determined by the capitalist politically-economic system, which destroys both nature and human lives. It is gratifying to know that the Ecumenical Academy is one of the places in which alternatives to this regrettable development are being sought, and where people looking for new directions can meet.

**For that, I would like to thank the dozens of colleagues who worked at the EA or continue to do so, the hundreds of partners with whom we cooperated, and the thousands of participants in the events we organised.**



**Ekumenická  
akademie**

Sokolovská 50, 186 00 Praha 8 – Karlín  
Tel.: +420 272 733 044, +420 272 737 077  
Email: info@ekumakad.cz

[www.ekumakad.cz](http://www.ekumakad.cz)

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