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Introduction: The theme

The coming 5th European Conference of African Studies (ECAS 5) which is being held on 27-29 June 2013 in Lisbon, Portugal, of which this book is partly a sneak preview, proposes to make the case that African Studies are a vibrant, productive and meaningful research and teaching area, uniquely capable of not only producing knowledge about Africa, but of gauging the viability of the decision-making processes, be it at grass-root or at the most macro of levels, through detailed analysis, thoughtful understanding and – let us admit – personal involvement.

The 2010s have witnessed the consolidation of most African states and institutions. However, fifty years after the foundation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963, the international panorama and Africa’s position in it have changed considerably. The world’s geopolitical and economic configuration has evolved, with
new actors appearing in a new phase of globalization. Under these conditions and given its own trajectory, the current challenges that Africa faces include the promotion of peace and security, human rights, democratic institutions and particularly the integration and socio-economic development of Africans, as stated by the OAU’s successor, the 2000-established African Union.

The new international political configuration has to consider the fall of old dictatorships in Africa, the role played by new political actors and unconventional forms of involvement such as those made possible by information and communication technology. From an economic perspective, the increasing importance of “emerging markets” such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (i.e. the BRICS), with their own cooperation agendas, limited resources and growth and far-reaching effects on climate change and food security, have a strong impact on African economies and societies and their position in global forums. In social and cultural terms, the dynamism of African societies and their diasporas is evident in the ability of both individuals and groups to combine endogenous and exogenous elements and develop strategies to overcome the all too well-known odds. Such creativity is found in diverse areas such as cultural forums and academic debate and also in migration, trade, information and communication technology, health, social protection, the problems of youth and urbanization, and the reconfigurations of the socio-political and religious spheres.

It is of the greatest importance to look into Africa – its people, societies and institutions – and the possibilities of becoming a major player in the formation of the emerging post-Cold War, post-2000s US-hegemony new world order. The experiences that are appearing in Africa question many dominant paradigms in terms of political practice and academic reflection and thus offer a clear challenge to the academic community. For African scholars in particular, it is vital to play a key role in this endeavour. A number of questions that need to be addressed in this respect immediately come to mind:

- Is this impact globally positive or negative for African countries and African citizens?
- What disciplines should be applied, and in what way, to the situation and to gauge its probable consequences, both at a local and regional level?