



NAVARRA CENTER
FOR **INTERNATIONAL**
DEVELOPMENT

MIGRATION FROM AFRICA: ¿OPPORTUNITY, CRISIS?

**SCRAMBLE FOR
EUROPE: YOUNG
AFRICA ON ITS WAY
TO THE OLD
CONTINENT**

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REVIEW OF
JAVIER LAREQUI FONTANEDA

Europe has once again turned its attention to immigrants, in this case refugees, because of the war in Ukraine and the displacement of millions of people to the West. While this is the most urgent drama facing Europe, the medium and long term focus is on Africa, a young continent that in the coming decades will be marching on Europe, much more sharply than at present.

African population barely increased by 20% between 1500 and 1900. In the same period, the European population increased five times. Demographic projections for Africa now point to exponential growth in the coming years: by 2050 it will have reached 2.4 billion people, compared with half that number today, according to the data provided by the author of the book. It should be borne in mind, however, that demographic forecasts should not be taken at face value because they do not happen sometimes as they do not take into account extraordinary events that may occur. Compared to aging Europeans, most Africans will be young and in the prime of their lives, in the prime of their lives, at the prime of their lives. Africa will therefore be the youth of the world.

ARPA Ediciones published in 2018, before the COVID-19 crisis, an interesting book on this subject entitled “The travel to Europe. Young Africa on the march towards the Old Continent”. Its author, Stephen Smith (1956, Connecticut), teaches African Studies at Duke University and has been a correspondent in West Africa for different French media. If there are currently some 9 million Africans living in Europe, the author of the book assures that in 30 years we will be talking about 150 million.

In five chapters, Smith explains the main challenges that Africa will face in the coming years, especially from the demographic point of view and from the point of view of migratory pressure. The author states on the cover of the book that “nationalist egoism and humanitarian naivety are equally dangerous”, which anticipates a vision of migration that is far removed from the usual dogmas. However, other relevant topics such as education, the environment or conflict, among other issues, are also covered. The author also shows his intentions when he assures that he will not distinguish “between legal and illegal immigrants (...) or between economic migrants and asylum seekers” (p. 15). The aim of the book, Smith assures us, is not to polarize, but to inform so that readers can have a knowledge-based opinion on Africa.

The introduction, in addition to presenting the book, includes a review of the history of African migrations and various demographic comparisons between Europe and Africa: “In just over thirty years, between a fifth and a quarter of the European population will be of African origin (...), there will be one rather older European, close to fifty, for every three Africans, two of whom will be in their prime” (p. 20-21). The problem, the author rightly argues, is that Europe has ignored its demographic decline and now needs to welcome 50 million immigrants by 2050 if it does not want to lose population. Africa is, in fact, experiencing a moment of change and great demographic growth that the author calls “generational tension” in which the youth must step forward and decisively face the challenges of the continent.

The author of the book refers in the first chapter to the fact that the “Herculean progress” (pp. 67) that Africa is making on issues such as, for example, urbanization, is often relativized and pushed into the background by other large-scale statistics. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this epigraph is that it provides an explanation for the



“before and after” that is occurring with regard to African demographics. Among the factors that explain Africa’s low population density until World War II, Smith comments on “rudimentary agricultural techniques, tropical diseases, the level of hygiene, infant and maternal mortality...” (pp. 39), but he highlights another above all others: the slave trade that Africa suffered between the 7th and 19th centuries, with around 28 million slaves sold. The end of imperialism and colonialism in its various forms thus allowed Africa to begin to grow demographically in the same way as other territories had done earlier in history.

Smith states in the following chapter that Africa is “Peter Pan’s island continent” in reference to the fact that it is the continent of youth. For the author, in contrast to more alarmist analyses, Africa’s demographic growth “multiplies the opportunities as much as the risks” (pp. 69). One opportunity may be, for example, the emergence of cities in Sub-Saharan Africa with the consequent risk that most people will end up living in shantytowns in these cities. Another opportunity that entails a risk is youth, “which increases the risk of armed conflict within a society” (pp. 92). It has also been shown that violence is one of the indicators that contributes most to increasing poverty, to halting economic development and also “diminishes the chances of consolidating democratic systems” (pp. 95).

In the third chapter on “emerging Africa,” Smith states that “the continent is still awaiting its green revolution and industrialization” (pp. 117). However, the author of the book is pessimistic in this respect: “Africa is not likely to play a significant role in the transformation of our planet (...) in the ecological reconversion of the world economy” (pp. 118). It is a paradox that Africa is the continent most affected by climate change even though, compared to other continents, it has contributed practically nothing to it. In any case, recent projects such as the Great Green Wall to reforest the Sahel and stop desertification, as well as to prevent the advance of terrorist groups, may be interesting in the African case. All this would contribute, on the other hand, to curb climate migrations, one of the great challenges that Africa and Europe also face.

The author of the book states in the following chapter that for the moment we are living more “a staggered exit”, as he titles the chapter, than “a travel to Europe”, to which he refers in the name of the book. He also states that “the migratory tide of 2015 exposed the weakness of European defenses” (pp. 133). This has perhaps changed with the activation by the European Union of the Temporary Protection Directive to assist Ukrainian refugees, something that was certainly not done in the aforementioned 2015 crisis.

He also addresses in this epigraph the interesting dilemma of co-development: “Northern countries (...) subsidize migration by helping poor countries to reach the threshold of prosperity at which the inhabitants have the means to leave and settle elsewhere” (pp. 141).

In the penultimate chapter before the conclusion, Stephen Smith wonders whether Europe is the destination or the target of hundreds of thousands of African migrants and refugees: “The only certainty is that a large-scale migratory encounter between Africa and Europe is in the making” (pp. 170). With the example of Silicon Valley, where “more than half of the technicians (...) are Asian or of Asian origin” (p. 188), Smith explains what migration can contribute to the development and innovation of a country. Stephen Smith does not shy away from stating in the conclusion of the book that “the mass migration of Africans to Europe is neither in the interests of young Africa nor of the Old Continent” (pp. 213) and points out that “the challenge for contemporary Africa is not its surplus of young people but its deficit of adults” (pp. 213). He also states forcefully that “the good omens coming from Africa will be dire omens for Europe” (pp. 215) since it is precisely the greater economic development that offers Africans the means to leave the continent.

The book ends with a conclusion on what European policy should be on the important issue of migration, which Smith describes as “the reign of the arbitrary in the land of hypocrisy” (pp. 219). While it is true that the invasion of Ukraine has awakened in European society and institutions a spirit of solidarity with refugees, this should not be forgotten when it comes to welcoming those arriving every day from Africa. European migration policy should also articulate a solidarity and coherent response to those fleeing other humanitarian catastrophes such as war or climate disaster. As Smith points out in this book, full of interesting facts and figures, migration is not only a risk for Europe, but also an opportunity that we should take advantage of.

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STEPHEN SMITH (1956 -) is an American journalist, writer, academic and Africanist who has worked for many years as a correspondent for Radio France International and Reuters in West and Central Africa. He has also headed the Africa section of the newspapers Libération and Le Monde and has worked as an analyst for the UN and the International Crisis Group. From 2007 to the present, he has been a professor of African Studies at Duke University in the United States.

Smith has published a total of fifteen works, many of them on Africa. Among them are “Necrology: Why Africa is Dying” (2005) and “Oufkir: a destin marocain” (1999). He has also published other works jointly with Antoine Glaser such as “Ces messieurs Afrique” (1997) or “Comment la France a perdu l’Afrique” (2005). His recent book “The Flight to Europe” has been awarded as the best work of Geopolitics of 2018 according to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In recent years, he has become one of the most prestigious Africanists in the world thanks to a realistic and pragmatic vision of migration.