

# How Oracles Are Forged

## The prophecy of an African scramble for Europe

*by François Héran*

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**Alarmist predictions about African migration are all the rage. François Héran shows that they are based less on a demographic approach than on an economic conjecture, and on the fallacy that development in Africa can only be achieved at the expense of Europe.**

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On the cover, a satellite image of Africa at night, and a title in yellow letters: “The Scramble for Europe”. A few dim points of light pierce the darkness in Nigeria, South Africa and the Maghreb, while others outline the Nile and its delta. The contrast with the bright splashes of light across the European continent is striking, and the message is clear: how could the populations of dark Africa not be attracted by the radiance of the North?

Clearly designed to grab our attention, the title “The Scramble for Europe”<sup>1</sup> is not the editor’s choice; the author begins his book with his stark conclusion: “Young Africa will rush to the Old Continent; the writing is on the wall...” (p. 15). He backs his argument with two precedents: the exodus of poor Europeans towards the New World in the late 19th century and the mass migration of Mexicans to the United States since the 1970s. If Africans were to follow the Mexican example between now and 2050, then “in slightly more than 30 years, a fifth to a quarter of the European population would be of African origin (p. 18). In an interview published in the Figaro daily newspaper on 14 September 2018, Stephen Smith expresses surprise that some people—such as myself in a recent analysis<sup>2</sup>—question the validity of such claims. For Smith, challenging his predictions with arguments based on facts and figures is a

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1 Stephen Smith, *La Ruée vers l’Europe. La jeune Afrique en route pour le Vieux Continent* (The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on the Way to the Old Continent), Paris, Grasset, 2018, 268 p.

2 F. Héran, “Europe and the spectre of sub-Saharan migration”, *Population and Societies*, 558, Sept. 2018 (online).

“castigation” of his book, an attempt to “stifle debate”. My intention, on the contrary, is to reopen it. Given the gravity of the question in hand, it is important to look more closely at the methods, hypotheses and assumptions of a prophecy whose very appeal lies in its desire to shock, but also to convince.

For the figures announced by Smith have reached their target. In an interview given on 15 April 2018, President Macron justified his immigration policy by evoking the African demographic “timebomb” so “remarkably described” in Smith’s book. In France, a number of intellectuals and politicians, from the centre left to the far right, have raised the spectre of his nightmare scenario to demand that political leaders “assume their responsibilities” in response to migrant inflows.

## **An inevitable scramble, provided...**

It is not until pages 139 and 143 of his essay that Stephen Smith makes the sensational announcement that a scramble of sub-Saharan Africans for Europe will only occur on “two key conditions”: that this region of the world escapes from poverty in the space of 30 years, and that its diasporas have already become well-established. We thus discover—and I will return to this point—that the prophecy of an Africanization of Europe is more an economic conjecture than a demographic forecast. Notwithstanding the UN biennial demographic projections that forecast a doubling of the sub-Saharan population before 2050 (from 900 million to 2.2 billion under the median scenario), Smith knows well that this will not be enough to trigger the human tidal wave that he announces. More powerful mechanisms are needed. But to argue his point, Smith presumes the veracity of the result he is seeking to prove. If we imagine that sub-Saharan Africa reaches the same level of development as Mexico within the next 30 years, then its inhabitants will migrate to the same extent as the Mexicans.

But this overlooks the fact that sub-Saharan Africa is not Mexico—not even the Mexico of 30 years ago—and that Ouagadougou or Niamey have little in common with Mexico City or Guadalajara. If we measure the human development index on a scale of 1 to 10, as I did in the above-mentioned essay, most sub-Saharan countries are at level 1, Mexico at 6, France at 9 and the United States at 10. While from level 6 to level 10 migration is massive (25 million people in the diasporas concerned), from level 1 to level 9 or 10 it is limited (less than 2.3 million). So it is hard to believe that by 2050 development in sub-Saharan Africa will have accelerated to the point where it reaches the current relative position of Mexico.

One cannot simply apply the hypothesis of a “critical mass” of inhabitants achieving prosperity to give plausibility to the scenario of a *general* transformation of behaviours in such a short time, especially in a region where the population explosion and the record fertility levels that are of such concern to the author reflect a persistent stagnation of the demographic

transition. Pointing up this stagnation does not imply that Africa is doomed to chronic underdevelopment; it simply adds a dose of realism: there is no evidence to suggest that sub-Saharan fertility will decline in spectacular fashion over the next few years, as it did in China, Iran or Algeria.

## Using the known to gauge the unknown

There is little need to refute the parallel with European migration to the Americas, given the vast differences between the New World pull factors of the 19th century and those of Europe in the 21st. I will examine the parallel with Mexico, however, as it illustrates the author's method of documentary research and his mode of reasoning. The "Millman 2015" and "Douthat 2015" supporting references that he cites are not scientific studies but, in the first case, a *Politico* editorial by Noah Millman entitled "Africa will dominate the next century" published in May 2015, and in the second (missing from the bibliography but easily retrievable on the Internet), an opinion piece by Ross Douthat called "Africa's Scramble for Europe" published in the *New York Times* in August 2015. If we compare the two texts, we discover that Smith's long discussion of the Mexican analogy (p. 179) is filled with unacknowledged citations of Millman's own words. But who is Millman? Head of *Politico's* literary pages, he is neither a demographer nor an African specialist, but a former financier who knows how to do everyday arithmetics. His method is simple; it involves convincing the American public with scant knowledge of African realities that the known can be used to gauge the unknown, i.e. that the situation in Africa can be likened to that of Mexico. As for Ross Douthat, a regular author of op-eds on practically all topics, he is cited in turn because he cites none other than... Millman!

At the end of the book, Smith explains that by continuing the timeworn practices of development aid, European policy "may end up turning the flow of Africans towards Europe into a tidal wave" (p. 225). The reader is puzzled. Does this mean that the demographic determinism proclaimed so loudly at the beginning of the book is not so inescapable after all? But few readers go so far. The message they take away is that of the book cover: there is no escape, Africa is out to conquer Europe.

At global level it is not the poorest regions that produce the most emigrants, as the author well knows. He also knows that sub-Saharan Africans do not have the resources to emigrate in large numbers. Likewise, he is not unaware that development aid is more likely to stimulate emigration than curb it—to the point where some commentators credit him with this discovery, as if development economists had not already established this fact many years ago. But Smith's knowledge in this respect is second-hand. He quotes extensively an editorial by Jeremy Harding, a contributing editor of the *London Review of Books* and author of a book recounting the experiences of migrants at border crossings (pp. 148-149). Smith's essay thus includes research-based knowledge, but obtained indirectly—mainly from journalists or literary

sources. I have no qualms with that; the problem lies in the fact that Smith no longer applies this knowledge when he imagines sub-Saharan Africa's rapid escape from poverty and the migrant flows that this entails.

## Incomplete documentation

For a seasoned specialist of Africa, Smith's documentation is surprisingly incomplete and obsolete. He claims, for example, that demographers have closed their eyes to the ongoing trends in African fertility. My analysis for "[La vie des Idées](#)", cites numerous demographers (Caldwell,<sup>3</sup> Tabutin, Schoumaker,<sup>4</sup> Leridon,<sup>5</sup> Casterline,<sup>6</sup> and more) who have been signalling the slow pace of demographic transition in Africa and its link with under-development since the 1990s. Are demographers really so blind? It is the author who seems to be wearing blinkers; he cites none of these publications, all of which are easily accessible.

Smith gives great credence to the findings of surveys of migration intentions compiled by the Gallup Institute in which one-third of sub-Saharans reported wishing to leave their country. He cites the figures from second-hand sources (via an article in a French daily) and without the slightest critical comment. However, we need to look at the actual question that was asked: "ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to settle in another country or carry on living here?". In fact, when asked if they were planning to leave within the next 12 months or, more tellingly, if preparations were under way, the proportion dropped to below 5%. Dreams are one thing; practical realities are another. Italian researchers who retrieved the data from these surveys at the request of the European Commission reach the same conclusion: the Potential Migration Index constructed by Gallup on this basis is of no predictive value.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. C. Caldwell, P. Caldwell, "La natalité élevée de l'Afrique subsaharienne", *Pour la Science*, 153, July 1990

<sup>4</sup> D. Tabutin, B. Schoumaker, "The demography of sub-Saharan Africa from the 1950s to the 2000s. A survey of changes and a statistical assessment", *Population, English Edition* 2004/3, 59, pp. 457-555.

<sup>5</sup> H. Leridon, "Afrique subsaharienne : une transition démographique explosive", *Futuribles*, 407, July-August 2015, pp. 5-21

<sup>6</sup> John B. Casterline, John Bongaarts (eds.), "Fertility Transition in Sub-Saharan Africa", Supplement to *Population and Development Review*, vol. 43, 2017 [collection of 14 articles].

<sup>7</sup> S. Migali, M. Scipioni, *A Global Analysis of Intentions to Migrate*, European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2018, 57 p.

## The global database of diasporas: discrediting the notion of communicating vessels

The most glaring omission in Smith's essay is the absence of any reference to the Global Bilateral Migration Database, a major source of knowledge on the state of world diasporas developed over the last 15 years by the OECD, the World Bank and the IMF.<sup>8</sup> It served as the basis for my recent analysis in the monthly bulletin *Population and Societies*, and has been used by countless migration researchers before me. The open access Bilateral Migration Matrix comprises a table of 215 lines and 215 columns giving, for each country, the number of natives living abroad. It counts a total of 266 million migrants out of a world population of 7.7 billion. Information on origin and destination is systematically matched to ensure overall consistency.

A series of additional indicators can be added to this open-access database to characterize each country, or the differences between countries, such as growth rate by sex and age drawn from the United Nations population projections. While it is more time-consuming to perform such analyses than to read political opinion pieces and literary editorials, they produce conclusions that have long been familiar to economists and demographers alike: the model of communicating vessels is a fallacy. It is wrong to imagine that the most fertile countries migrate to the least fertile ones, the poorest to the richest, the most densely populated to the least densely populated, the tropical to the temperate and, last but not least, the youngest to the oldest, as claimed in the sub-title of Smith's book. I cannot count the times I have read that "high population pressures" will inevitably escape to fill the areas of "low pressure"! Alas, just because a metaphor is evocative does not mean that it is necessarily true. The image of a bursting pressure cooker is incapable of conveying the complexity of population movements. The largest emigration flows towards rich countries tend to be from middle-sized, middle-income nations such as Mexico and Turkey, or the countries of North Africa, the Balkans or Central Asia. And above all, from countries where fertility is already falling rapidly – which is certainly not the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

In his interview in the *Figaro* newspaper, Stephen Smith dismisses the World Migration Database because it does not consider his scenario of rapid African economic growth! He seems to have got his wires crossed. A database which gives the world distribution of migrants at a given moment in time cannot take account of future growth hypotheses. But it forms a vital starting point for those wishing to make such hypotheses. Without this grounding in fact, hypotheses are plucked out of thin air and become unverifiable, at the mercy of all and any analogies, including the most implausible ones.

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<sup>8</sup> World Bank Group, *Migration and Remittances, April 2018: Recent Developments and Outlook*.

## An economic rather than demographic conjecture

By cross-matching the global migration data and the United Nations projections for 2050 for each birth cohort, we can estimate the weight of the diasporas in receiving countries, on the assumption that current emigration factors remain unchanged. This is what I did in the September 2018 issue of *Population and Societies*, obtaining a number of sub-Saharan migrants in 2050 around five times lower than the figure advanced by Stephen Smith. What does this difference tell us? Simply that the scenario of a “scramble” of sub-Saharan African migrants to Europe is, for the most part, not built upon demographic determinism, but upon a highly speculative hypothesis about African economic development. The demographic reasoning in the book’s sub-title (“Young Africa on the Way to the Old Continent”) and in the introduction is actually very secondary in the fabrication of Smith’s prophecy. This is hardly surprising, given that he fails to analyse any data.<sup>9</sup>

My estimates for 2050 are of the same order of magnitude as those obtained by two in-depth analyses based on the same Global Bilateral Migration Database, one by the World Monetary Fund,<sup>10</sup> the other by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.<sup>11</sup> Smith cites the first, but without mentioning that since the 2000 censuses, the increase in numbers of sub-Saharans leaving the sub-continent primarily reflects population growth. In proportional terms, the share of migrants who remain in the region has changed little since 1990, at around three-quarters (70% today, versus just 15% who head to Europe). Internal migration within sub-Saharan Africa should benefit greatly from the treaty on the free movement of persons signed in March 2018 by 27 African countries.

While Stephen Smith knows that extreme poverty is not a factor of migration, he perpetuates the other variants of the “communicating vessels” fallacy, notably when he mentions the inexorable pressure exerted upon ageing societies by surplus masses of young people impatient for emancipation. He even suggests that European societies, incapable of financing their pension systems due to population ageing, will face the dilemma of closing their borders and dying a slow death, or of opening them to keep the system afloat, at the risk of being submerged by a flood of African workers: “to maintain a minimum level of social security coverage, must we accept that a quarter of Europe’s inhabitants in 2050 – more than half of them aged below 30 years – will be ‘Africans?’” (pp. 179-180). The French text (p. 180) even speaks of “more than half of the under-30s” in the European population being “African” by 2050! And Smith inevitably mentions the famous report by the United Nations Population

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<sup>9</sup> The author is often presented as a specialist of Africa or a “university professor and former journalist”, but his title at Duke University - *Professor of the Practice of African and African American Studies* - has a precise meaning: he is a professional (in this case a journalist) invited to teach students about his practice. That’s fine, but it doesn’t make you a demographer or an economist of migration.

<sup>10</sup> J. González-García, E. Hitaj, M. Mlachila, A. Viseth, M. Yenice, “Sub-Saharan African migration, Patterns and Spillovers”, International Monetary Fund, *Spillover Note 9*, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> F. Natale, S. Migali, R. Münz, *Many more to come? Migration from and within Africa*, Brussels, EC Joint Research Centre, June 2018.

Division on “replacement migration”<sup>12</sup> regularly cited by the proponents of the “great replacement” theory.

Yet the last scenario of this publication, in which young migrants serve to create a permanent numerical balance between the working-age population (15-64) and older adults (65 and above), was acknowledged to be unrealistic by the United Nations itself, due to the increase in life expectancy which is continuing to age the population. Freezing the ratio of young to old would involve massive inflows of migrants, who would in turn grow older themselves. The United Nations used this absurd fictitious scenario to show that immigration is not a solution to population ageing, including in France, and that measures of a different kind are needed (with respect to employment rates, working hours, retirement age).

## The social welfare pie

If one is truly convinced by the scenario of a massive and disorderly inflow of migrants from the South, then the only remaining question is whether there is still *time* to prevent it. With the debate couched in these terms, Smith can allow himself some hesitancy: policy makers still have “room for manoeuvre” but “time is running out”. There is one certainty, however, central to his argument: development prospects are “auspicious” for Africa, but “an ill omen for Europe” (p. 225). As if the two continents can only survive at the expense of each other. According to a Neapolitan custom, one must not wish a Happy New Year to someone without secretly wishing evil upon someone else. This is the linchpin of Smith’s book: not the rigorous analysis of a demographic mechanism, but an economic conjecture whose optimism for Africa (a closing of the development gap within 30 years) is more than counterbalanced by its pessimism for Europe.

At the end of his essay, Smith reiterates the idea that immigration is fundamentally incompatible with the welfare state, a popular misconception totally disproven by the social history of western Europe since the Second World War. Need we mention the detailed studies on this question by the OECD,<sup>13</sup> extended more recently by d’Albis and his team,<sup>14</sup> which demonstrate that immigration or, more precisely, a sudden influx of migrants or asylum seekers, far from bankrupting the welfare state and raising unemployment, actually increases GDP and employment rates over the long term? D’Albis shows that the positive effect is merely delayed

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations, Population Division, *Replacement migration: is it a solution to declining and ageing populations?* 2001, 151 p.

<sup>13</sup> OECD, “The fiscal impact of immigration in OECD countries”, *International Migration Outlook*, 2013, pp. 125-190.

<sup>14</sup> H. d’Albis, E. Boubtane, D. Coulibaly, “Macroeconomic evidence suggests that asylum seekers are not a “burden” for Western European countries”, *Science Advances* 4(6), June 2018.

in the case of asylum seekers, and for a simple reason: they are not allowed to work until their asylum request has been granted.

The error is always the same: forgetting that immigrants are also producers and consumers, tax-payers and pension contributors, imagining that they take from the collective pie rather than adding to it. Of course, they are an expense for society when they are young, an asset in adulthood, and become an expense again in old age but, as clearly shown by the OECD, this life cycle is the same for the rest of the population, with minimal differences linked to age structures. The idea the immigrants “steal” natives’ jobs or take an unfair share of their welfare benefits again harks back to the fallacy of a fixed quantity of resources to be shared, around which the entire final part of Stephen Smith’s essay is constructed. As if realism and respect for political and moral rights were irreconcilable. Until these research findings have been seriously refuted, they are irresistible. But evocative metaphors or implausible analogies are no substitute for scientific argument.

Likewise, simply pitting the advocates of a fortress Europe against those of an open-door Europe is not enough to claim the title of pragmatist or upholder of the “ethics of responsibility” in opposition to the “ethics of conviction”. While the author regularly contrasts two extreme positions to establish his credentials as a moderate realist, he takes an extremist path himself when he claims that sub-Saharan population projections signal an imminent threat of mass incursion culminating in nothing less than the creation of “Eurafrica” (p. 227)

## **Establishing the facts: neither scaremongering nor false reassurance**

Demography is like music: it attracts many players, but few know how to read the score. In the present case, the very nature of the tune is misunderstood: Smith’s essay is an exercise in economic speculation and sensationalist communication, rather than a demographic demonstration. In response to the fear of mass invasion, a falsely objective variant of the fear of others, it is the duty of demographers to explain the orders of magnitude of population movements. They must also identify the nature of the hypotheses put forward and of the prejudices upon which they are built. Contrary to popular belief, the purpose of demography is not to alarm or reassure but to take stock of the issues by establishing their true proportions. Only in this way can it provide the necessary insights for lucid long-term policy-making. Inflammatory metaphors have a powerful effect on public opinion, yet in these uncertain times, for the press and politicians alike, the true “ethic of responsibility” demands that they turn their back on false prophecies couched in pseudo-scientific language.



First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 18 September 2018.

Translated from the French by Catriona Dutreuilh with the support of the French Institute (Institut français) and of the Institut Convergences Migrations.

Published in *Booksandideas.net*, 5 November 2018.