

# Africa Rising

Meaghan Emery

Stephen Smith, *The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on Its Way to the Old Continent*. Polity Press, \$23, 200pp. paperback.

**D**RAWING ON THE AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND AS A JOURNALIST for *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and RFI, *The Scramble for Europe* is marked by the same optimism about African development as a more recent article that concludes: "Far from encouraging it, one of the solutions to illicit migration flows lies in the implementation by [African] States of employment policies in favor of young people. Creating these opportunities will allow the emergence of young talent motivated by innovation and structural transformation in Africa."<sup>1</sup> Smith's book first appeared in English in 2019, a year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, when irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe was in decline due to increased border surveillance and lack of jobs needed to pay the cost of passage.<sup>2</sup> It is optimistic in its statement of confidence that increased economic opportunity in sub-Saharan Africa will not fuel more migration. Rather than giving young people the means to leave the continent, increased economic opportunity will incite them to stay.

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<sup>1</sup> By contrast, migration from the Maghreb saw an uptick during the epidemic as seasonal workers crossed the Mediterranean in higher numbers and kept European economies afloat. See Steve Tametong and Martial Fabrice Eteme Ongono, "African Migration to Europe During The Covid-19 Pandemic." *On Policy Magazine*, March 17, 2021, [onpolicy.org/african-migration-to-europe-during-the-covid-19-pandemic](https://onpolicy.org/african-migration-to-europe-during-the-covid-19-pandemic). By contrast, Smith writes that migration from the Maghreb is shrinking overall as family structure evolves.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Smith, now a professor in African Studies at Duke University, delves deeply into the situation of young people in sub-Saharan Africa and advances the argument that it is time for the principle of seniority to cede to the demands for equality made by the young, writing that “The old are the gatekeepers of a supposedly stable but actually moribund world held in place by flagrant injustices. The young yearn for equality and—propelled by constant disappointment and mounting frustration—threaten to bring the old order down on the heads of their elders.” With these elders representing 5% of the population, ancestral cultures have been reduced primarily to internationally subsidized festivals; and in their place, since “the age pyramid has been essentially flattened,” globalization has taken hold. In 2015, the population south of the Sahara was more than one billion, with half of the continent’s population connected to 4G telephony or the internet, and it is predicted that by 2050 Africa’s population will nearly double, with two-thirds of Africans being less than thirty years old.

Currently, hundreds of millions of Africans, according to Smith, live in a continuing state of dependency on their parents or religious communities. The disenfranchisement of young women is even more acute. At the same time, Europe’s population is contracting and ageing, increasing migratory pressures on countries to the north, much greater than what the United States is experiencing. However, Smith maintains that future economic opportunity is to be found in Africa. Thus, although at first glance the “Africanization” of Europe appears the subject of this book, Smith quickly flips this paradigm on its head to show that the ingredients are in place for an emergent Africa.

After providing quantitative evidence on shrinking European demographics and migratory flow from Africa in the 21st century, Smith’s investigation begins by tracing several worrisome indicators that face sub-Saharan Africa back to their foundations in colonial history. He describes how Africa’s twentieth-century baby boom had resulted from colonial development in the 1930s, reversing centuries of slow population growth, due to not only lack of modernization in personal and public health initiatives but also to the lingering trauma of the centuries-long slave trade followed by disease which accompanied 19th-century colonial exploration. In the Cold War era, following independence, exponential growth continued because family planning or demographic control were political anathema within newly sovereign African states, particularly south of the Sahara. Even today, only 15% of sub-Saharan African women of childbearing age use modern forms of contraception for lack of family planning structures. From now until 2050, the population in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to grow annually by 2.5-3% and by 2100, Smith projects that the region will be home to the majority (60%) of people under the age of fifteen.

Food scarcity is a top concern, particularly in view of the worsening climate crisis. The figures are staggering, indicating the challenges that lie ahead in a world region dominated by small and mostly unmechanized, non-irrigated farms whose rates of food production are far below those of Western countries. By 2050, “Africa will need to have quintupled its agricultural production to guarantee its food security.” The other option will be expensive food imports, in an increasingly populous world with a struggling agricultural sector due to climate change and nutrient-depleted soils. Significantly, sub-Saharan Africa holds 60% of the world’s not yet cultivated arable land, and the proportion of city dwellers has not yet reached half of the overall population, which is expected to happen by 2030 (whereas the world crossed that threshold in 2008). Cities, however, are not oases of opportunity, and countries are still hobbled by low GDP and poverty. The numbers underpin some alarmist forecasts, which are also covered in the book, but also point to Africa’s potential. In addition to statistical analysis, Smith’s chapters are full of historical examples, which can provide either shining examples of success (e.g., Tunisia’s demographic policy, which began in the 1950s under Habib Bourguiba, and the exemplary story of Malian politician and businessman Modibo Diarra) or cautionary tales of racially and ethnically-inspired violence (e.g., the murder of white farm owners in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe’s presidency at the turn of the 21st century). The coveting of land and resources was of course built into tribal, herding culture, but intervention and more often exploitation at the hands of European colonists have created deep-seated resentments that some politicians have wielded to their advantage.

Rather than dwell on Africa’s autocratic rulers, their recriminations against the former colonizers, and the danger of violent factionalism, Smith looks to uncover the youth demographic, which is impossible to reduce to any pat description, given the numbers and sociocultural and religious complexity of their generation. With sub-Saharan Africa’s “failing states” as a backdrop, he specifically examines religious revivalism, and primarily the hold on the young of Evangelical Christianity and Islam, which respectively provide “medical care, education, and social security writ large” and the Salafist “tradition.” The former preaches “the charismatic revolution” to men and women eager to dethrone the elder class, composed of older men, in the pursuit of political influence and economic emancipation. Moved by a new personal discipline, or life ethic, built on capitalism and Protestantism, the faithful embrace change with no lingering resentment against the West. On the other hand, and notably under the Nigerian federation, the followers of Islam view Koranic law as “the last bulwark against Western corruption” as well as against rampant political and moral corruption within the state apparatus and its officials.

The desire for democracy is strong among the young both north and south of the Sahara, as manifest in the Arab Spring and in Sudan's fragile democratic coalition's calls for Western aid to quell the battling generals. Democracy requires economic stability, which makes the difficulties of the "youth bulge" even more challenging. However, authoritarian leaders satisfy the needs of the wealthy to the exclusion of the youthful masses aspiring to better their fortunes. Among the many rich illustrations woven into this book, Smith quotes political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his analysis of Africa's democratic potential and its challenges. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes wrote that the state's primary purpose is to "rescue its people from the state of nature, 'the war of all against all.'" As described by political scientist Charles Tilley, also quoted, the required peace and staying power of democracy depend on "political relations between the state and its citizens [which] feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation." Because the "principle of seniority" stands in the way of adequate representation, Smith foresees that it will take two to three generations for the consolidation of democracy to occur.

Despite heated debates between "Afro-optimists" and Afro-pessimists," or Western fantasies of "Africanness," Smith argues that future African democracies will not be markedly different from what we know in the West. Africans use "standard benchmarks" and share our "universal aspirations." However, the institutional frameworks required to establish a tax base do not yet exist to support these states from within—through investments in public education, research and development, manufacturing production, energy grids, water infrastructure, and so on—which does not preclude official recognition by the international community of a state's "sovereignty," Smith wryly adds.<sup>3</sup> His discussion of the coexistence of modern and antiquated technologies is rich for its evocation of what he calls "existential bricolage," with the young reimagining "new codes of conduct"; but it also underpins the "gatekeeper state," meaning that the state apparatus is primarily concerned with collecting fees for the transfer of imported goods, people, and outgoing natural resources through its borders. He notes that, whereas widespread poverty prevents the majority from looking beyond their circumstances, wealthy parents are able to send their children to study at Western universities, and families reunite in diasporic enclaves outside major

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<sup>3</sup> One example Smith gives of an area of underinvestment is public education. In fact, school-age children south of the Sahara are more likely to attend private school, either church-run or for-profit, the latter of which he characterizes as "factories." Energy is another example, and additionally a measure of the modern/antiquated dichotomy described in the book. It comes as no surprise to read that twenty million New Yorkers use as much electricity as almost a billion Africans living south of the Sahara. As Smith writes, "The continent is still waiting for both its green and its industrial revolution" (85). Because of the low rates of education and lack of investment in research and development, he expects that Africa will not be an active player in these revolutions.

world cities. Many of them do not return. Therefore, this “gatekeeper” system offers up the state’s human and natural resources to the outside, and the state, if not enriching its top officials and customs agents, is funded primarily through contracts with foreign companies who operate within its borders. With powerful adversaries often competing for access to raw materials, this system has led to instability and even spilled over into civil strife or war.

Within the context of intra-African migration, competition for limited resources has in some notable instances—Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and to some degree South Africa—led to the same outcome. The route of migration is rife with dangers for the young eager to achieve a high standard of living and fueled by the spirit of adventure. Young Africans often turn their sights on Europe, though fully aware that global economic power lies with the United States and China. Enticed to hazard the journey by illegal means, migrants have faced heightened risks since the turn of the century as Europe increasingly polices its borders. Sea crossings have become more dangerous due to unscrupulous international smugglers wagering on humanitarian rescue; and retention centers in Libya are places of torture and extortion. For those who have run out of money, if their families cannot afford the ransom demanded for their release, they are auctioned off in an international slave market. Turkey, another partner in extra-European border control, provides more human rights protections. Alternative routes through Algeria are unspeakably worse. Ironically, financial aid given to African states to improve living conditions so that the young can imagine a future there provides them the means to chance an escape. “And yet, Africa is emerging!”, Smith asserts. War and victimization are not the African condition, and the pull of home is strong.

The central challenge that Smith addresses to close this ambitious, well-researched, wide-ranging reflection and sociological study is what he calls the coming “migratory encounter” between Africans and Europeans. Indeed, many of his recommendations appear geared toward Western policymakers. With the history of France’s continued influence in sub-Saharan Africa since independence, one would think that the ties remain strong. However, resentment of supposed underhanded meddling has torn them asunder, and migrants look more toward Germany, Europe’s economic locomotive, and toward the United Kingdom. Furthermore, young Africans’ religious sensibilities and Americanist modernity—more attuned to Black protest culture in the United States than to the cultures of their former colonizers—promise to make the encounter difficult. Finally, the cost of social programs for incoming families with young children, such as childcare, schools, and health care, will put further strain on their European hosts, i.e., taxpayers, whereas private employers will gain the

profits from the influx of labor. In short, the E.U.'s social democratic model will be put to the test.

Smith's frames of reference are mostly the Western countries in which he has lived and worked, particularly France and the United States in this last chapter. Tellingly, fewer immigrants become naturalized U.S. American citizens compared to those who settle in the European Union. This can be explained by the lack of a social safety net and the lack of a shared culture. There is less in the U.S. that binds people of disparate cultures together. Just as tellingly, he shares figures that show that, unless the retirement age is raised, Europe's pension systems will require a doubling of in-migration compared to numbers in the 1990s (and 400,000 higher than the numbers of 2015), resulting in three-quarters of the E.U. population being foreign-born or the children of immigrants by 2050. The story these numbers tell draws to mind France's new retirement law (enacted April 15, 2023), forcibly ushered through by President Emmanuel Macron's Prime Minister, Elisabeth Borne, using the contested constitutional right of the executive power, Article 49.3.<sup>4</sup> In effect, it seems that European leaders, with France following behind other E.U. members, are acting to protect their countries' social cohesion, much in line with Smith's prescriptions, based in an unflinchingly clear cost-benefit analysis taking into account both monetary and social capital.

On the other hand, Smith asks, what does Africa stand to gain through this encounter? Monthly remittances sent from struggling family members living abroad cannot build thriving African economies or societies. He argues that the so-called "brain drain" is devastating to already meager healthcare systems, and what influence cross-continental communication might have on cultural and sexual mores that, if altered, might stem population growth and lead to the empowerment of young adults, cannot replace the loss of the educated class. The pains of exile are not compensated by the imagined benefits of a European "paradise" either. And so, he concludes with the plea, "The massive migration of Africans to Europe is in the interest of neither Young Africa nor the Old Continent." Since the scramble appears inescapable, Smith offers five different scenarios for how the future might look. Whether "Eurafrica," a new New World styled after the U.S., or a continuing "Fortress Europe," for which he offers qualified support, or the apocalyptic "Mafia Drift" of marauding human traffickers and warlords, or "The Return of the Protectorate," which extends the hinterland of the fortress to "co-operative" African countries, or "Bric-a-brac Politics," a combination of the four previous regimes, none of them compares in his eyes to a continent of truly sovereign states, in which all the youthful energies poured into scrambling for a better chance at success elsewhere were made more productive at home. **A**

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4 However, rather than a retirement age of 64, set by this law, Smith cites the age of 69 as that which "could stabilize its dependency ratio at three working-age adults per dependent," as opposed to 4.3 in 1995.