

Book review

The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on its way to the Old Continent

Smith, Stephen* 2019

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Reviewed by Jannie Malan

It so happened that I read this book and wrote this review during the coronavirus lockdown period. In these circumstances, the book and the virus took my thoughts back to my school days in the 1940s, when a song of the Andrews Sisters was a popular hit: ‘Money is the root of all evil ... Take it away, take it away, take it away’. The link is that money is a key element in this book, and that the virus is now indeed taking away not only lives, but also money. To this, however, I have to add immediately that the author specifically emphasises that he wants ‘to “de-moralize” the debate on African migration to Europe ... While there are obviously ethical

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implications, the decision for or against a migratory policy is not a choice between Good and Evil' (p. 134). His purpose is 'to provide a factual basis on which others can come to an informed view' (p. 4).

Towards this objective he takes us on an intriguing journey through staggering statistics and disenchanting discussions. He does this in an innovatively journalistic way as well as in thought-prompting metaphoric ways. He does not fill pages with statistical tables, diagrams or graphs, but he duly substantiates his arguments with tell-tale numbers, comparisons and projections.

This book therefore does not lend itself to be reviewed in a manner which includes a neatly summarising paragraph on each chapter. What I can say, is that it has an introduction, five chapters – each with about five sub-sections – and a conclusion. But I can also say that my own summary of the book covers eight pages in small handwriting. I meant it to be a synoptic aid, but it turned out to be a multi-directional guidepost. The chapter headings and the sub-headings are mostly phrased as metaphors or quotations. And the contents contribute to something as a jig-saw puzzle, which is a remarkably apt way of approaching a puzzling phenomenon about which there are apparently more questions than answers. On p. 164, for instance, the author mentions a few questions African immigrants in Europe, and their children, might ask – including the retrospectively doubtful one about 'whether it was the right thing to do'.

The author explores the views, perspectives, perceptions and illusions discernible in, especially, four directions: Africa to Europe, Africa to its own Diaspora in Europe, Europe to Africa, and the Diaspora to Africa. He shows how Africans' views of Europe include those they get on TV and cellphone screens – which attract and/or repulse them. From his own intensive and extensive reading (endorsed by a 128-entry bibliography, and 83 endnotes), he incorporates and discusses the specific views and predictions of many (about 40) writers.

The breath-taking facts are stated in a matter-of-fact way, but are often followed by a recasting into an imaginable, but startling if not discomfoting,

picture. For instance, 'By 2050 ... for every European in their fifties, there will be three Africans, two of whom will be in the prime of life' (p. 8). Also: '... in 2006, ... while the world's richest 10 per cent of adults owned 85 per cent of the world's global household wealth, the bottom half collectively owned barely 1 per cent' (p. 99). And a last example: 'In contemporary Africa, in particular south of the Sahara, world records of youthfulness have been broken' (p. 44).

Over against the harsh realities, the author time and again focuses on the aspirations and motivations of the real people who are inescapably facing the situations in which others and themselves are apparently ensnared. With regard to the lure of migration, their basic motive seems to be 'simply looking for a better life for themselves and their children' (p. 13, cf. p. 166). Such a desire obviously implies that the life situation into which they have happened to be born, is not good (enough). The author therefore unpacks the underlying causes of the everyday life situations – from disappointing to disgusting – in which Africans, from North to South, find themselves. As reviewer, I am refraining from disclosing all the causes discussed by the author, but since the two most important may anyway be common knowledge, I feel I can mention them – precisely to encourage readers to read the book. They are: self-interested ethnicity and superficial religiosity (cf. p. 91).

Such causes worsen situations and instigate conflicts. But underlying these underlying causes, there is another reality which is pivotal with regard to migration, and is part of the implication mentioned in the previous paragraph: one's life situation is the one into which *you have happened to be born*. The author devotes a chapter to 'The Law of Large Numbers' and ventures references to and discussions of family planning in five other sub-sections. In line with his de- or non-moralising approach, he does not sermonise; but on a political level, he does not hesitate to criticise the thoughtless demographic governance of both colonial *and* independent African governments (p. 44). Readers may therefore imagine themselves into both perspectives: that of the grown-ups (parents, communities,

leaders, opinion formers) about having children, and that of the children who find themselves *being there*.

The author also presents us with food for thought about culture. He writes about two heads of state who were both committed to their own cultural upbringings in which collective identity was placed first. The one maintained his aversion to European education, in which individual identity comes first, and wrote – in an expansion of his doctoral thesis: ‘this is perhaps the most fundamental difference in outlook between Africans and Europeans’ (p. 55). The other one wrote – in his autobiography: ‘I realized that my people were badly off, and I decided to educate them’ (pp. 57-58). However, apart from these two real-life examples, the author also discusses key publications on the cultural clash of civilisations, as well as cases of blending of cultures. He writes about factors that may ‘exercise a relativizing effect on some of the ideas and attitudes that are held most tenaciously in both sender and receiver cultures’ (p. 160).

Interrelated with culture is of course education, about which the author explores and discusses different policies and different realities. He describes appallingly low educational levels where 80% of teachers are without formal training, but also the low and high educational levels of southerners migrating to the north.

In most of the cases where the author describes and discusses facts, views, policies or options, he does so by necessary reference to the past (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial), the present (of independent but impetuous people) and the future (foreseeable but unpredictable). More than just applying a time-line dimension, however, he shows his skill in interweaving various dimensions: historical and geographical, political, demographical, and societal, anthropological and humanitarian. Although he avoids moralising, he does emphasise the socio-psychological – and profoundly ethico-coexistential – orientation of imagining oneself into the life-situation of another. Most quoteworthy is his sentence:

To my mind, the assumption that ‘the other is myself in other circumstances’ is a good starting point for finding common ground (p. 136).

The whole book, however, is not about such other-oriented coexistence, but about mostly self-interested scrambles to appropriate a better life-situation. The expression 'scramble for' usually functions in the semantic fields of hastily trying to get something or somewhere first, clambering over difficult terrain or obstacles, and struggling to outperform competitors. All of these notions are indeed relevant to the geographical and generational scramble this book is about. And so, as readers, we can hardly evade the obligation to form an informed opinion and radiate it through our pre-meditated words and our spontaneous body language. Political and social leaders, however, should do much more. Shouldn't they use their influence and means to possibly make a meaningful difference to a huge and imminent migration? For instance, the difference at which the author hints in the last two sentences of the book: a different Africa 'if all that energy expended to leave the continent were turned inward' (p. 167).

In my opinion, Stephen Smith's *The Scramble for Europe* can be strongly recommended. It is a book that frankly tackles an apparently unmanageable phenomenon which may bring about some advantages for some scramblers, but may also exacerbate tensions and conflicts among many more. As mentioned above, the book does indicate some conflict-preventing and -resolving options for self-interested human beings and ethnic groups. But its main thrust is to raise our awareness of and concern about the probable dramatic upsizing of the already ongoing scramble. And this message is shared with readers in a fascinating way – by an author with a talent for selecting the most apt wordings from his extraordinarily rich vocabulary. It is a book worthy to be read and to ponder about. The author dedicates it to family members, but virtually the book is devoted to 'Africa: The World's Youth' (p. 25) who are heading towards 'Europe as Destination and Destiny' (p. 132). I might add, however, that after our human scene has been disrupted by the virus, our pondering and planning may also have to address the additional challenges of threatened health and decreased money.