DEMOGRAPHICS AND MIGRATIONS

Old imaginaries, new migrations

Tania Adam



Cua de migrants als ports europeus

“Every day, young people arrive in African cities. They have abandoned school and the family home to try and enter the modern world. A youth stuck between tradition and modernity, between Islam and alcohol… seduced by the modern idols of boxing and cinema” [1]. Thus starts *Moi, un noir* (1958), an experimental film in which Jean Rouge shows the daily life and difficulties of Nigerien youths who have emigrated to Treichville, a suburb of the Ivory Coast capital, Abidjan. Fifty years later, Ousman Oumar, seduced by the aeroplanes piloted by whites over his Ghanaian village, decides to set out on the journey described in the book *Viaje al país de los blancos* (Plaza Janés, 2018). Ousman’s vulnerability, an unaccompanied immigrant minor (UIM), left to fend for himself on the streets of Barcelona, differs little from that of the Nigerien adolescents.

The distance in time, geography and ideology between both migratory processes is striking. In 1958, at the height of the African decolonisation process, the idea of travelling to the West was a distant one. Today, children and youths abandon their villages to head for *paradise*, the *white man's country*, without knowing if they'll ever get there. Ousman, aged only 12, spent five years crossing cities, deserts and seas before he reached his destination. He witnessed too many deaths along the way. Like many African youths, this boy's determination to reach Europe whatever the cost seems incomprehensible when we see lifeless bodies lying on the shores of the Mediterranean. It is difficult to understand such determination when faced with the possibility of death.

Understanding the mental and social mechanisms involved is hard. It is undoubtedly a strange cocktail of economic inequalities and political and cultural causes. It is also worth assessing the responsibility of colonialism and 'Western' power discourses in the feeling of inferiority among 'non-Westerners', established over centuries through the impact of colonial grammar. If we fail to incorporate epistemologies of the South and forms of observation other than paternalism, we can never understand the life of Oumar or the Nigerien youths.

The era of migrations

The teacher, researcher and specialist in human rights and conflicts in Africa, Mbuyi Kabunda Badi, has for some time claimed that 'thinking in terms of a homogeneous nation-state with borders is an anachronism, we have already entered the era of migrations'. UN data support this view: in 2017 the organisation calculated that over 200 million people were no longer living in their country of birth, representing approximately 3.5% of the world population. If all these people were brought together in a virtual country, it would be the fifth largest in the world. Clearly, the twenty-first century is the century of peoples in movement.

People move for economic, demographic, political and environmental reasons and due to war, driven by the development of telecommunications and transport. But not everyone can travel by plane and with a visa. Ousman Oumar had no choice other than to give himself over to vultures to reach *paradise*. Every day, deaths in the Sahara and on the southern border remind us of this. The Mediterranean, an idyllic sea for many, has become a mass grave. The International Organization for Migration states that in 2018 alone, 2,300 people died in the Mediterranean.

We are all witnesses, not just to the human drama, but to how anti-immigrant rhetoric (amplified by the media and vote-hungry political parties) is incubating an unsustainable environment. Yet data refuting this rhetoric must be stressed: trends in *South-South* migrations are higher than those in *South-North*; most entries into Europe are by air; immigration has a positive impact on the receiving country; and, finally, poorer countries are taking in most refugees and immigrants.

Denying the right to migration, choosing one's own life plan and free movement has

generated an enormous crisis in the rule of law. The expert in migration policies, Catherine Wihtol de Wendenn, states that 'the right to mobility is one of the greatest inequalities in the world today, when it should be one of the fundamental rights of the twenty-first century'. What Whithol means is that rich people from poor countries can migrate: the best qualified, athletes, professionals, artists and students, but not the poor. States want to choose 'immigrants *a la carte*', while migrants arriving by boat, or Muslims, people with 'non-Western' cultural baggage from the lowest social classes, are not welcome.

There is enough evidence for us to take a more objective view. The first major lesson for the present is that we are not facing a crisis in human mobility, we are facing a structural problem: we have entered the *era of migrations* and the flow of goods, capital and information, where migrants have become a new political subject. The second is that migrations are part of the logic of supply and demand in a large labour market. The European economy and demographics call out for the labour required for development, thus the problem is not so many immigrants but surplus migration. The third is that the humanitarian and ideological challenge created by migrations is as pressing as climate change and cannot be solved by increasing border controls; it requires political and social agreements of enormous complexity. Finally, the fourth lesson is understanding that migrations work in the same way as a large multinational. Behind each boat, border control, residence permits or human drama is someone trying to get rich.

But the main lesson from the *era of migrations* is that you cannot fight migrations; they are irreversible and follow patterns integrated into specific historical phases, as Saskia Sassen argues in her book *Inmigrantes y ciudadanos. De las migraciones masivas a la Europa fortaleza* [2] (S.XXI, 2013) European Union Member States realise this is not a passing phenomenon, it is a lasting one. The turning point came with the 2015 refugee crisis, one of the worst humanitarian crises since the end of the Second World War. The episode revealed deep divisions among the Member States with regard to migration, preventing the joint decisions needed to resolve the situation from being made. In the words of Yves Pascouau, the Director of Migration and Mobility Policies at the European Policy Centre, 'the circumstances are fertile ground for groups hostile to Europe and foreigners'.

The West: the great dream factory

This era of migrations requires analysis in its own terms, exploring the micro-historical peculiarities that hide the historical macro-data, and avoiding sensationalist approaches like the one in Stephen Smith's controversial book *The Scramble for Europe* (Polity Press, 2019), where he makes a biased and fearmongering analysis, despite using solid demographic data.

According to the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, the West is a historical, not a geographic, construct, a formulation that emerged in western Europe but is no longer limited to the Old Continent, as not even the whole of Europe is the West. In Hall's opinion, the West is a geographical fact and an idea, a tool for thought that can be used to classify and categorise societies. Thus, the West is associated with modernity and development,

while the non-West is associated with under-development, danger and the unknown.

Furthermore, the West has the capacity to generate needs, myths and fantasies like any marketable product. Ousman describes this very precisely throughout his novel: 'We saw how planes crossed the African sky and they told us they were manned by whites, who were all pilots, engineers, doctors… I wanted that, I wanted to be white […]. I was told that the whites lived far far away, they were gods. A challenge to that world was what reached us in film… Watching those films of whites often generated in us the false need for many things we could not get, nor which we needed…'. The expectations of the new world built through satellite channels, mobile phones and the Internet just cause frustration and the urgent need to reach that paradise on earth. 'If you don't know that these things exist, you don't feel the need to have them. But, at the same time, you can't expect to hide Africans from what there is in the world. It is not fair, and what's more, it is impossible'.

Pausing over Oumar's words, one begins to glimpse the imaginary that began with the imperial colonisations, the slave trade, imperialism, capitalist domination…, the whole social history that Western hegemonies have created in the world. But the most moving part of Oumar's account is not the need to 'be white', but the fact that whites were considered 'gods'. Thus the West is no longer a geographic place where living conditions can be improved, but a place inhabited by superior beings who are also convinced all 'Others' are inferior.

Human zoos, exhibitions on so-called primitive societies, colonial administrators, missionaries and ethnographers have over time developed this imaginary, full of prejudices and exotic, incriminating and colonial stereotypes, which in the collective unconscious are associated with blacks and the African continent, with indigenous peoples and the American continents, the other in diaspora.

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The imaginary engendered in the West drives many societies to aspire to become 'Western', at least in terms of obtaining Western standards of living, a discourse which is undoubtedly embedded in many migrants. However, an unstoppable line of dissident thought challenging the Western imaginary has arisen. The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, in his book *Crítica de la razón negra* (NED, 2013) [3]; argues that we are living through a paradigm shift in the world order, which he terms 'Europe's twilight'. According to Mbembe, this is creating an awareness among 'subordinate humanities' and a decentralisation of the Eurocentric approach to universal history, giving rise to a plurality of historical approaches. The 'non-Western' world has begun to reject the rules imposed up to now and made the decision to (re)write its own narrative. Adopting the idea of Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o, it has chosen to free culture from Eurocentrism, moving the centre away from the space occupied by the West to a multitude of spheres including all the world's cultures.

Towards a mixed, hybrid Europe

European cities are increasingly home to people from other places. In our daily lives, at least in working-class neighbourhoods, diversity is an irrefutable fact. However, this is met by a disturbing rejection of difference. Identity- and class-based conflict is the order of the day. The construction of national identities in nation-states faces limits and challenges with regard to identity.

As Mbuyi Kabunda Badi notes, the idea of homogeneous states with closed borders is an anachronism. There is no point considering Europe in these terms because even its ageing population works against a homogeneous national identity. The UN calculates that between 2000 and 2050, Europe will need around 50 million immigrants, half a million a year, to stabilise the number of inhabitants. States face two major challenges that cause divergence: controversial border controls and changing national identities among an ever more plural citizenry in terms of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity.

The film *East is East* (1999), directed by Damien O'Donnell, describes the clash of culture and class in a family made up of a Pakistani, resident in England since 1937, and an English woman with 7 children, 6 of them boys. Although humorous, this story is a paradigm of the negotiation processes that began in the 1960s in Great Britain with the growth of groups of people, associations and communities (Afro-Caribbean, African and South Asian), including feminist and gay movements, whose aim was to demand political recognition of differences and establish the foundations for equal opportunities (Aixelà – Cabrer, 2019: 40). Negotiations arise wherever there appears the *outsider*, *the foreigner*, and above all when their nature is not *circular*, but based on *permanent settlement*, i.e. in Diasporas that eventually establish minorities within a nation-state.

These minorities are plural and consist of men and women of different origins, ages, religious affiliations and sexual orientations, who often clash directly with the notion of national identity. In this context, the United Kingdom was the forerunner to the tensions that arose with the new migrations to various European states. As the philosopher Will Kymlicka warns, ethnocultural conflicts have become the most common source of violence, and migrants (or minorities) are clearly the scapegoat. These struggles are no more than a smokescreen hiding economic power relations and the privatisation of the world under the auspices of neoliberalism, where hegemonic structures use increasingly powerful tools to mould people's awareness, which, as Ramón Grosfoguel states, work under racial principles, as they tend to inferiorise 'alternate' cultural practices to Western ones: forms of existence, thought and action that differs from the dominant culture.

In addition, in the words of the writer Donato Ndongo, Spain is a 'monolithic' country, initiated after the expulsion of the Moors and Jews during the 'Reconquista', when the idea of a uniform nation was imposed. This was further strengthened under Franco's

dictatorship and has lasted up to the present. For instance, black communities were barely represented, although it is true that after the independence of Equatorial Guinea (the only former Spanish colony in Africa) in 1968, there was a rise in the number of black citizens, which had previously been limited to Guinean students, Cuban exiles and African Americans in the US bases in Torrejón, Rota and Zaragoza. It was not until the 1990s that Spain (mainly for economic reasons) started to become a receiving country for immigrants, many of them Africans coming to work in the fields and who started to settle and have an increasingly significant presence in the cities.

The challenge for the future: revising national identities

The creation of the idea of the West not only impregnates migrants in their decisions to move, but also affects their lives in their place of arrival. Reports of racism and xenophobia are increasing and policies for managing religious, ethnic and cultural diversity in places like France, Great Britain, the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Portugal, which are a reflection of colonialism (Aixelà – Cabrer, 2019), are becoming obsolete. European cities are turning into turbulent territories with rising inequalities of opportunity and inherent differences in the very notion of national identity. Conflicts between majorities and minorities, or among minorities, can be seen in physical and virtual territories as never before.

Emancipated minorities are changing and intensifying their presence in the public sphere and demanding an end to the essential division between hegemonic and subordinate cultures. The rise of collectives and groups of antiracist and migrant resistance and the inclusion of people with diverse cultural baggage (immigrants or their children) in politics herald the arrival of new patterns in the way European civil society operates.

In this changing and uncertain panorama, management of the citizenry could foreseeably take precedence over management of diversity. It is therefore essential to create mechanisms of common memory and shared citizenry, as well as finding means to put a stop to anti-immigrant rhetoric. Bringing an end to stereotypes, reductionisms and essentialisms associated with migrant populations is an urgent and crucial necessity. This work must be carried out jointly, from within institutions and systems of social representation. Both the new population and their descendants must be represented, not reflected, which implies working in multiple fields, far removed from the new culture wars.

A break with European determinism and culturalism is needed if a state of justice is to be created that includes plural citizenry and ensures equal opportunities. This plurality requires a shared project of diversity which revises the idea of national identity.

Migration is inherent to humanity; it arises as a response to living conditions, job prospects and historical imaginaries. It is a choice that crosses the limits of borders and national spaces to come up against other types of barriers, this time social, cultural and political ones.

REFERENCES

1 — All quotes are translated by the author.
2 — Original title: Migranten, Siedler, Flüchtlinge: Von der Massenauswanderung zur Festung Europa (FISCHER Taschenbuch, 1996).
3 — English version: Critique of Black Reason, (Duke University Press, 2017)



Tania Adam
Tania Adam is a journalist and a cultural producer. Founder and editor of Radio Africa Magazine, she works as a presenter at Radio Africa Betevé (91.0 FM) and also at African BubbleGum Music in Radio Primavera Sound. She has hosted the interviews program 'Terrícoles' in Betevé. She is focused on African Societies, Migrations and Interculturality. Her work analyses the thinking generated around the black diasporas in the world, with special emphasis on Spain. She has also been exhibition curator in several public programs such as 'Microhistories of the Diaspora' (La Virreina centre de la Imatge, 2018-2019) or the Exhibition 'Making Africa' (CCCB / ICUB, 2016)