Imperialism and labour: why global migration governance is unnecessary and why it works

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ABSTRACT

In West Africa, the Maghreb and elsewhere, regular livelihoods and patterns of circulation have been uprooted, while migrants are terrorised by state policies in Africa and Europe. Global migration governance is apparently failing to encourage 'safe, orderly and regular migration' despite its rhetoric of human rights, African integration, free circulation and policy harmonisation. This article compares migration governance with structural adjustment in order to evaluate and expose the impact of its hegemonic policy frameworks. A political economy analysis of the historical formation of global migration governance and its current policies in Africa shows how European states and the USA contribute to the imperialist redivision of territories, the continued polarisation of wealth and destruction of the productive forces in African societies, both directly and via organisations like the International Organization for Migration. As they organise and regulate labour within and beyond their borders, these states reproduce social hierarchies and structures of exploitation in the service of capital. This contradiction of capitalist imperialism with the policy goals of global governance demands a radical approach to migrant solidarity which centres on an internationalist class response and continued pressure for justice in the international system.

KEYWORDS

Migration; imperialism; borders; West Africa; Maghreb

Introduction

> We are educated. We are united among us … but what the European system is doing is to divide … [us from being] able to rule among ourselves. It is not that this thing is done … outside of our understanding, but inside our understanding. But the power that makes them hold this force among us is only cruel, cruel force … Not the brain, not knowledge, not love!
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> – Senegalese migrant organiser in Barcelona, Spain, fieldwork interview, 21 February 2009

This article analyses imperialist power in the international migration regime, with a focus on Europe, West Africa and the Maghreb. It shows how European consolidation,

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buttressed by US power, has reinforced military and economic domination in African territories through divisive territorial and social policies that closely interact with the migration regime (Cross 2021, 52–54; Davis 1976; Lenin 2008). In doing so, it demonstrates what Amílcar Cabral (1966) described as imperialism, namely the migration regime's relation to, and role in, the 'violent usurpation of the freedom of the process of development of the productive forces of the dominated socio-economic whole'.

The article has a twofold argument: first, that the global governance of migration is dominated by Western states as they maintain the social relations of capitalist production on an international and domestic scale. Consequentially, the overtures of migration governance towards the harmonisation of African and European policies, African regional integration, cooperation and coordination between different governing actors contradict the role of the capitalist state in organising and regulating labour. This state role extends to the reproduction of the social and territorial divisions that sustain the polarisation of wealth and capitalist structures of exploitation in Africa and Europe. Second, I argue that contemporary global migration governance can be usefully compared with structural adjustment in a political economy analysis. The former is in itself a socio-political form of structural adjustment, as a package of neoliberal border and development policies that sustain dependent relations between the elites of indebted African countries and the international capitalist class. The institutional parallels between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on one hand, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank on the other, implore us to understand global migration governance as a hegemonic political choice that has created widespread chaos and displacement in the service of finance capital.

Three main sections follow. First, the article outlines the historical complementarities of global migration governance and structural adjustment, drawing on the analytical frames of the debate between Gavin Williams (1994) and Sarah Bracking (1999). Second, it examines the making of the international migration regime, from V.I. Lenin's insight into the trajectory of Western Europe and the violent redivision of territories, to the development of a world system that reconstructed the white supremacism of European empires (Getachew 2019). In this context, the ideological foundations of Malthusian population fanaticism and the market principles of US and Western European development have created the class character of the international migration regime. Third, the article analyses contemporary migration governance in Africa, led by IOM and dominated by Western states in the interests of finance capital. A policy analysis shows how the expansion of European borders into the continent and a neoliberal approach towards growth, remittances, trade integration and labour mobility undermine endogenous programmes of pan-African unity, regional integration and the free circulation of people. I argue that the governing motto of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' is fundamentally incompatible with the policy frameworks of global migration governance. It will continue to be so for as long as the Western political classes destroy regular patterns of circulation and exercise unaccountable state power against people displaced from the societies that face the highest levels of exploitation and destruction in the imperialist world system.

Global migration governance and structural adjustment

Thirty years ago in the *Review of African Political Economy*, Williams (1994) started a debate, followed up some years later by Bracking (1999), about the necessity and efficacy

of structural adjustment in Africa and elsewhere.[1] It is worth recalling the timing and logic of this debate to analyse today's international migration regime. In January 1994, France and the IMF imposed a devaluation of 50% on the CFA franc in West and Central African member countries, while the US, Canadian and Mexican governments established the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). These programmes of accelerated neoliberal reform created widespread economic and ecological shock in Mexico and in African franc zone countries. More young people were forced to migrate into super-exploitative labour markets to provide for their families. Within regional histories that included circular migration and restricted types of labour mobility established by colonisers, households became dependent on remittances.

Northern investors enjoyed extended access to land, markets and a flexible labour force, implemented through structural adjustment, while the consolidation of the European Union (EU) from the mid 1980s and the establishment of NAFTA brought border closures against impoverished neighbours in the South, whose agricultural livelihoods they destroyed. The strategy of migration was necessary, unstable and sometimes deadly. In this setting, global migration governance,[2] with its motto of 'safe, orderly and regular migration', requires an analysis on similar lines to the 'development' programmes of international financial institutions, in recognition of their institutional parallels and complementarities. Coordinated by the US- and Europe-led IOM and ultimately governed by states, is the global framework of migration governance necessary, and does it work?

In 1994, after the George H.W. Bush regime bombed Iraq, it was already clear that the promise of a democratic and economically open 'new world order' would not materialise (Williams 1994, 214). For Bracking (1999, 208), structural adjustment 'closed a brief historical chapter when political independence partially disrupted the dependent economic linkage between the countries of Africa and the core creditor states of global capitalism'. In this sense, it 'worked' – for the 'holders of international money' were reunited with the domestic elites in Africa's governance structures. Structural adjustment did not work, in the sense that it did not 'create the conditions for the repayment of debt, but defined the conditions under which countries will be permitted not to repay their debts' (Williams 1994, 225). As for the necessity of structural adjustment, Bracking (1999, 215, citing Marazzi) argued what is today a maxim for many progressive movements: austerity is a political choice, in which financiers manage and constrain markets behind the veil of rational and inevitable economic laws.

By this logic, I argue that global migration governance is a political choice, guided by the dominant capitalist states as they produce the social and political conditions that capital needs to thrive. It manages and constrains people's mobility under the guise of rational and inevitable laws of population. It is a socio-political form of structural adjustment that defines the conditions under which countries in Africa are permitted not to repay their debts and it reinforces the dependent linkages between domestic elites in Africa and holders of international money.

Global migration governance does not create the conditions for safe, orderly and regular migration for people who are subordinated in the West's racialised hierarchy. In West Africa and the Maghreb, among other regions, regular and diverse migration routes have been progressively blocked and destroyed since the 2000s: from the arc of the US-led 'War on Terror' to the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) invasion of Libya, the subsequent movement of armed groups to Mali and regional circulation of arms, the EU's divisive incorporation of North African countries in its migration politics, European border

enforcements between African countries, and the French militarism that has been rejected by coups and popular movements in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal.

The international migration regime has created chaos and displacement, not only because of its alignments with military and economic imperialism but also as a direct consequence of the border regime itself. It supports the capitalist class in its domination over a weakened and divided majority, within and between Africa and Europe. A brief overview of just over a century of international migration control will show how European capitalist interests are imposed in Africa, generating and constraining mobility within and outside the continent. An analysis of migration governance and the battle it wages against regular patterns of circulation reveals the brutality of the contemporary regime. Its fate is interlinked with that of Western imperialism and the struggles against it.

Imperialism, population fanaticism and the formation of migration policy

While global migration governance can be usefully compared with structural adjustment, a hegemonic order in its domain, led by the West via international organisations, that must at some point be rounded on as a disaster, it must first be analysed as part of a longer world capitalist history. The policy interventions of structural adjustment and migration governance, with their shared political outcomes of conflict and political emergency, authoritarian neoliberalism and social abandonment, and economic dependency and polarisation with Europe, facilitate the market-led economy in the interests of finance capital.

In 1917, Lenin advanced Hobson's theoretical insights into the future trajectory of capitalism – from Western Europe's inter-imperialist conflict, towards its eventual regional consolidation and a renewed role in the violent, militarist division and redivision of a world that was already divided into occupiers and occupied territories. The ruling classes would continue to extract wealth from the territories they dominated, Europe would deindustrialise, and its working classes would be neutralised under a new financial hierarchy (Cross 2021, 52–54; Lenin 2008). As Adom Getachew (2019, 38) outlines, W.E.B. Du Bois had traced the First World War to the desperation of European colonialists addressing their national crises through 'the ownership of men and materials in the darker world'. The Bolshevik government, critics of empire like Du Bois and pacificists in Europe all demanded self-determination as a revolutionary principle, yet this demand was reconstituted in the service of empire by Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts as they formed the League of Nations (Getachew 2019, 40).

The European powers instilled xenophobic nationalism in their societies and introduced the bureaucracy, policing and borders of a future immigration regime. In Africa, they imposed migration systems which were not only a consequence of imperialist plunder but were also enforced in regional colonial policies. These included the restructuring of western African production and mobility from the interior to the coast, while in eastern and southern Africa, enclosure acts created mining labour regimes (Amin 1972). In 1945, Smuts, having favoured the extension of apartheid labour from South Africa to Kenya, contributed to the UN Organization Conference and its ideological foundations in San Francisco. The Fifth Pan-African Congress, led by George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah, responded to this white supremacism in the international system that, Du Bois observed, persisted in

imperialist control over colonised territories despite Germany's defeat (Getachew 2019, 72). The globalisation of migration control connected genocide, starvation and displacement with population management and problem-solving strategies to migration, to develop a regime ultimately oriented to the productivity of capitalist societies (Düvell 2003).

IOM, a UN agency since 2016, was established in 1952 as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), becoming IOM in 1989. ICEM, composed of Western European countries, worked with the European precursor to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in alignment with the anti-communist agenda of the US Marshall Plan of aid for postwar Europe. Positioned against the development sought by the world-majority members of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), these organisations advanced an international migration system based on the neoclassical economic model (Bernard 2023, 336). The resultant labour migration policies based on market principles aggravated inequalities between countries of the core and periphery. The dominant capitalist countries developed guestworker programmes in their national interests, with polarising consequences for origin countries that had responsibility for the renewal and social reproduction of migrant workers.

Neoclassical economics typically posit a 'win–win' situation in labour mobility and remittances, using econometric models that elude the social relations, power inequalities and dependent interconnections found in labour markets as a constituent part of the world system. The economy is understood deductively and equated with the market, centring on the optimising individual, their gender, age, skills and education. For all the talk of cooperation and harmonisation found in global migration governance frameworks (elaborated in the next section), active policies are largely unconcerned with depolarising regions or overcoming the racialised hierarchy in Europe and Africa. The dynamics of social relations are excluded from data on, for instance, the inclusion of women or young people 15 years and older as migrant workers; or the volume of remittances sent from higher- to lower-income countries. Policy frameworks exist in an abstract world where racial violence against people migrating, further pervasive instabilities of migrating and sending remittances, and the super-exploitation of migrant workers are not counted. Before turning to these concealed social foundations of the migration regime, it is worth briefly considering the alternative formulations of labour migration that emerged in the twentieth century in order to put the choices of the hegemonic regime into perspective.

Socialist countries developed agreements for the mobility of labour under the Soviet Union's Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), although relatively few workers were recruited. Lenin's view of migration was that the mobility created by industrial development could bring emancipation as working people would break down national barriers and prejudices, uniting against national bourgeois division. The COMECON agreements were based on a concept of economic cooperation and solidarity with developing countries such as Cuba, Vietnam, Angola and Mozambique. In Sara Bernard's analysis of this under-researched history, migrant workers shared equal terms with domestic citizens and were recruited in broader parts of the labour market than in Western Europe, but their working conditions eventually converged with the West under Stalin's productivist regime (Bernard 2023, 339, 343).

A recent analysis of labour migration from Angola and Mozambique to East Germany from 1979 to 1990 focuses on the aspirations and experiences of the workers who took up migration and training schemes in industries common to origin and destination countries.

They reflected Lenin's vision, where the aim was to train 'a professionally skilled and consciously socialist vanguard workforce' which could return to home countries, support industrialisation and revolutionise the relations of production (Schenck 2023, 63). It shows a paradigm of migration that had qualitative differences from mining labour in South Africa but which was not broadly realised. It included the aim to narrow the gap between African and European countries, reduce gender inequality and complement the productive aims of origin countries.

The class character of the dominant international migration regime is underwritten by population fanaticism, the Malthusian thinking that Marx condemned as false, childish, analytically weak and brutal (Cross 2021, 48–51; Marx 1973, 605). It transfers the responsibility for environmental and humanitarian disaster from the perpetrators to the evicted and dispossessed people who suffer it the most. For Marx, 'overpopulation' was a phenomenon of the capitalist mode of production, by which people faced pauperisation when they could no longer live in the same space as the material basis of property – they had lost access to whatever they needed to survive. Outside capitalism, overpopulation numbers were relatively small as different societies circulated or were sustained by surplus food. There was no natural law in the disparity between population growth and food supply, and issues of food supply would require agrarian regulation, not population control.

By a similar logic to Malthus' rationale for allowing people to starve to death in the famines caused by British imperialism, on the basis that intervention would supposedly interrupt natural population laws, a similar opportunism is applied today to the fatal neglect of refugees and forced migrants. Saving people or allowing them to travel safely will only prolong the crisis, encourage more people to exist and reproduce, to be refugees and die at the borders, politicians helplessly formulate. This populationism is not a universal law. It is applicable to racialised people, whose non-human status is twinned with the national state's imperialist domination of their societies.

Conversely, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the UK government, arming Ukraine and inclining towards conflict with Russia, created visa schemes for Ukrainian refugees. The visas were free to apply for, uncapped, and included an exemption from the Immigration Health Surcharge. Between March 2022 and May 2023, 228,300 visas were issued out of 289,400 applications, of which around 174,000 people moved to the UK under family and sponsorship schemes (Migration Observatory 2023). The government presumably understood that only a small proportion of Ukrainian refugees would take up the schemes, not only as other European countries had also removed restrictions, but also because entry to another country is an entirely specific, human process that is driven by numerous contingencies.

The UK government has systematically removed the specificity of people's migration trajectories and circumstances at the France–UK border, despite their relatively small numbers, to foster public indifference. Former Home Secretary Suella Braverman declared last year that the 100 million people in the world who could qualify for protection under existing asylum laws will come to the UK if unlimited safe and legal routes are offered. That was the number of people in the world who had been forcibly displaced from their homes, of which only one-quarter had left their countries. In 2022, there were 45,774 Channel crossings from northern France to England, followed by 29,437 people in 2023 – the majority of whom could have been covered by the number of available Ukrainian visas that were not taken up. One in five people crossing into England in 2023 was from

Afghanistan, and over 70% came from Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria and Sudan combined (Refugee Council 2024). For people fleeing conflict and persecution, many as a consequence of British military invasions and arms exports, it had been impossible to find any safe haven. Following several years of brutal and humiliating treatment in transit, to find state cruelty in the north of France, they face an effective asylum ban. The previous Conservative government's long struggle, against popular resistance and various court rulings, to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda was a desperate performance but also consequential in the repeated raiding, detention and persecution of those seeking refuge.

We can pursue a clinical analysis of the production of surplus labour – and there is no question of European and North American economies' reliance on undocumented workers in many sectors, made possible by the continuous presence of a pool of labour at their southern peripheries. However, this labour theory in itself does not sufficiently explain the range and scope of state migration policies and actions that are often mystified as 'expensive', 'self-defeating', 'irrational', 'unworkable', and so on. These mystifications imply that migration could be better governed. In advanced capitalist imperialism, better governance would amount to more efficient apartheid policies, wherein soundly managed legal-bureaucratic structures create varied forms of citizenship, mobility and circulation rights according to a racialised hierarchy that falsely deskills and criminalises people from the most terrorised and exploited societies. The militarist tendency of capitalism and the neoliberal privatisation of border and detention industries, or the state-led human trafficking scheme of the UK's unrealised Rwanda Bill and active deportation agreements, are features of the migration regime that create its 'expense'. Yet our analysis must also expand to an understanding of the capitalist state and its role in social and territorial division.

The capitalist state does not only have the essential function of organising and regulating labour within and beyond its national borders but also, as Marx understood of England's colonisation of Ireland, it extends this role by reproducing intra-class antagonisms that sustain social hierarchies and the polarisation of wealth under capitalism (Marx 2010). The role of the state supplements the role of the labour markets in reproducing capitalist structures of exploitation. In African contexts, as we will see below, these processes are supported by the 'repurposing' of programmes of pan-African unity and regional integration (Getachew 2019, 40).

Contemporary migration governance in Africa

Globalised migration governance in Africa, with a target of safe, orderly and regular migration, pursues a policy rhetoric of pan-Africanist integration and free movement. Yet in reality, the mechanisms of neoclassical economic modelling and free trade, intra-African border policing and bilateral migration partnerships in the interests of donor states undermine these principles. In a recent analysis of regional integration and migration:

> the migration challenges of a 'post-colonial' Africa as reflected in the geopolitics of our times seem to be accounted to external powers that might be able to dictate to each of our fragile national states the terms and conditions under which our own people can move, including within Africa itself. The future of Africa does not depend on restrictive immigration policies and the militarisation of borders. The continent must open itself to itself. (Gumede, Oloruntoba and Kamga 2020, 78)

This is not to deny the continued significance of informal integration, the numerous patterns of cross-border mobility, complexities within the international system and the varied and changing state responses to EU coercion, nor the overlapping sovereignties in the continent. The vast range of migration channels and patterns within and between African countries defy a complete picture of the impact of European externalisation and international migration governance. One large qualitative study on the impact of policy restrictions on migrations from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and Senegal towards European countries indicated a link with increased unauthorised migration and fewer returns as people are prevented from circulating between countries (Beauchemin, Flahaux and Schoumaker 2020, 6). These findings complement comparative research on US borders in Central America and indicate that the border regime does not work in discouraging or reducing out-migration, but it does enable a dual labour market in destination countries. Some of the above migration trend data are based on migration from cities (Accra, Kumasi, Dakar and Kinshasa) which have a relatively high proportion, around two-thirds, of migration through regular channels (Beauchemin, Flahaux and Schoumaker 2020, 6, 17). Migrations towards North African countries and potentially to Europe through informal routes are likely to come from rural areas, in Senegal as in Mexico, where region-specific patterns of migration have emerged as livelihoods have become unviable (see Bacon 2013).

Migration to Europe is not easily separated from regional migration patterns. It can be understood at times as an outcome of closed migration channels within Africa, while some households and communities have family histories of migration to Europe. In the context of Senegal's surrender of its resources, largely to the benefit of European companies in neoliberal patterns of accumulation, households in Saint-Louis and other coastal areas suffer from a depletion of fish stocks and environmental destruction. Alternative livelihoods are lacking locally or by circulating to Gambia, Mauritania or Morocco. The destination of Spain appears as the only option and this is more affordable than a flight to visa-free Nicaragua, out of bounds to most people but a popular channel from Senegal and Mauritania for those who have the means. The routes through Central America to the USA have similar risks of state violence and criminal exploitation to the Atlantic and Mediterranean routes to Europe.

Global migration governance and IOM

The formal policy frameworks of Africa's migration governance are significantly devised by IOM in partnerships that include those with the African Union Commission (AUC) and regional economic communities, UNCTAD, OECD, the EU and EU member states, including Germany and Switzerland. Such policies adhere to the Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA), the AU's Agenda 2063 and numerous other global governance instruments that are often conflicting. African positions of migration found in the MPFA or ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Common Approach on Migration are more coherent than those of Europe and reflect a position of integration, but a lack of resources limits their active role, allowing the European approach to dominate (Idrissa 2019, 39).

IOM's drive for policy harmonisation and cooperation includes the pressure for African migration governance to align with European state interests despite their incompatibilities.

Its activities include the formulation of global, regional and national migration strategies, research and knowledge management relating to migration, operations to facilitate and control migration flows, humanitarian assistance, development programmes and information campaigns against irregular migration and trafficking. Like the World Bank presidencies, Directors General, on five-year terms, have mostly entered the position from the US government. The present Director General served as Deputy Homeland Security Advisor to Barack Obama and as Senior Advisor on Migration to Joe Biden.

IOM has aimed for comprehensive and binding international migration management, although this has still not been realised in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, concluded in Marrakech in 2018. Fabian Georgi (2010, 66) argues that, despite its tagline of 'making migration work for all', IOM activities mainly benefit Western donor states, while refugees, migrant workers and the dispossessed classes of the majority world meet IOM-developed border controls and detention camps as part of a containment system that has been legitimised in IOM frameworks. Organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported on IOM's role in control and containment activities against evicted people in Zimbabwe, Ukraine, Manus Island and Nauru, Colombia and Sudan in the early 2000s. There has been a normative shift to emphasise human rights and promote alternatives to detention, yet IOM guidance tends to defer to, and even add weight to, states' prerogatives while presenting international human rights law as optional (Bradley, Costello and Sherwood 2023).

IOM hosts the Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC), which was founded in 1985 as an informal and secretive interregional forum covering Europe, Asia and America for consultation on migration management. Its chairing countries are white-majority countries in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand and it is partnered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Commission (EC), OECD, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and Frontex, the European border and coast guard agency. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) is historically linked with IOM and IGC in the Budapest Process, an eastward expansion of European migration management starting in 1993 (Düvell 2003). It is composed of European member states and has partnership facilities in Europe, Africa, Western and South Asia which focus on asylum and international protection, border management and security, integration and social cohesion.

The policy frameworks and discourses deployed by the West via IOM have overwhelmed research, scholarship and public influence on migration. This demands critique in the same way that radical political economy exposed the role and impact of international financial institutions in Africa and elsewhere. IOM's aim for hegemony is explicitly stated in its Regional Strategy for West and Central Africa for 2020–2024. It declares that, in its 'ambition … to lead the global discussion on migration, its communications and visibility efforts shall shape the migration discourse within the region' (IOM 2020, 25). Its continental strategy is based on five priorities:

> (a) Transformative inclusive economic growth, including urbanization and youth empowerment; (b) Regional socioeconomic integration; (c) Governance, peace and security and rule of law; (d) Resilience to climate change and natural resource management; (e) Human development and social services, including health and education. (IOM 2020, 7)

Gender equality, human rights and data management run through these priorities and the overarching policy is based on three pillars focusing on resilience (addressing underlying

vulnerabilities and drivers of irregular migration and displacement), mobility (contributing to African economic and social integration) and governance (improved migration management).

Like the poverty reduction strategy papers from international financial institutions, the priorities set by IOM are found across the formal policy frameworks governing migration in Africa. There are also some differences. The AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (AUC/ DSA 2018, 25), for example, in its advocacy of free movement in Africa, recognises that 'the growing trend towards the securitisation of migration and the closing of legal channels of migration forces migration underground, endangers the rights of migrants and boosts transnational crime.' The ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration, established in 2008, incorporated attention to unfavourable trade terms in member states. It also reflected an entente with the EU that mobility within West Africa would reduce migratory pressure outside the region, legal migration would be beneficial to origin and host countries, human trafficking should be combated, and member states should harmonise their migration policies while aid from EU states would harmonise both regions' migration outlooks (Idrissa 2019, 13).

In IOM's perspective, despite the availability of extensive documentation on structural adjustment and militarisation and their recognition in African policy frameworks, there are no known causes of insecurity and instability, of political and economic turmoil, or of environmental degradation other than poor governance. Further cooperation with the EU, policy coherence, harmonisation and dialogue with unspecified partners is promoted in a problem-solving approach. IOM policy reflects US foreign policy in finding the security issue in 'porous borders, insecurity and governance deficits', pointing to the example of weak border management in Niger (IOM 2020, 11).

European borders and Africa

In 2015, under pressure from the EU, Niger adopted new legislation to criminalise migrant transport towards Libya. It received a substantial increase in EU aid, which contributed to border control apparatus, more than doubled the military personnel and funded its legal enforcement, with support from the German aid agency GIZ. Niger's role as 'Europe's immigration officer' increased the risk of death in the Sahara and isolated parts of the country from the ECOWAS free movement protocol (Idrissa 2019, 30–31; Luchte and Ranieri 2019). Sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on the new Nigerien military government included Benin and Nigeria's border closures, which limited migrant flows into Niger. As the junta has revoked the 2015 legislation, Rahmane Idrissa (2024) considers that travel will be safer for migrants in the country and that transport and related services for migrants can be revived in the Agadez region.

In Senegal, weak border management cannot be blamed for the thousands of deaths at sea last year, with the highest number of people on record attempting to sail to the Canary Islands. As a report collated by Fatou Faye (2023) at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Dakar found, Macky Sall's regime established bilateral agreements with France and Spain that 'internalised' European migration policy and its notion of irregular migrants, again undermining the ECOWAS free movement protocol and human rights conventions governing the right to leave a country. The EU and Senegal established nine new border posts in 2017 at the land and river borders with Mauritania, negotiated with Frontex and introduced the legal provision for over 800 people subsequently to be arrested, mostly charged with clandestine migration. Fishers working offshore and people gathering on beaches have also been detained (Faye 2023, 44–45). The EU-funded Rapid Action and Surveillance Group,

intended for the border zones, was even used to repress protestors as part of the state violence that killed dozens of people between 2021 and 2024 (Popoviciu and Bautista 2024).

EU borders have pressured North African regimes since the early 2000s, creating territorial division between countries and reinforcing the colonial geographies of 'Saharan' and 'sub-Saharan' Africa (Cross 2013, 89–90). Marking the expansion of deterrence and containment policies, in late 2005, Moroccan and Spanish forces killed at least 13 people and injured dozens from West and Central Africa who were attempting to enter the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (Traoré 2007, 117–19). On 24 June 2022, these border forces oversaw the massacre of at least 37 out of around 1,700 people attempting to scale Melilla's fence, most of whom were refugees from Sudan and South Sudan (Bremner 2023). A new border drive, with billions of euros of aid going to Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania and potentially Morocco, has been led by EC President Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and other European leaders. The focus on Tunisia follows Meloni's deals with Libya that led over 100,000 people to be turned back from the Mediterranean and face militias sponsored by Italy and the EU that have killed and tortured thousands of women, men and children, according to the NGO Mediterranea Saving Humans (Peretti 2024).

At a time when Greece's coastguard officers have thrown migrants into the water upon reaching land, Libya's coastguard, with funding from Italy, has been filmed shooting at vessels carrying migrants and refugees (Marsi 2023). Such vessels have carried people coming from Sudan, Syria, Mali, Senegal and elsewhere. Tunisia replaced Libya as the main transit hub for African migrants, gaining aid from the EU and its member states for radar systems, coastguard vessels, surveillance equipment and training. This partnership has increased tensions with tens of thousands of migrant workers who were exempt from visa rules, many originating from Ivory Coast, Guinea and Mali, and it has even driven them on to Europe. Tunisian interceptions of people at sea reached up to 70,000 in 2023 and under Kais Saied's xenophobic regime, black African migrants have been automatically expelled to the Libyan and Algerian borders and left to die (Kana 2023; Khan 2024). There is a persistent pattern of EU complicity and material support for these systemic abuses at the (semi-)periphery, as much as its institutions and states attempt to externalise the issues to African governments.

Migration, growth and remittances

Development policy has targeted African countries as a means of encouraging people to stay in place, but also to liberalise African markets, creating opposite effects. The paradigm of *inclusive growth* is incorporated in migration governance and its intersecting frameworks. Established in the late 2000s by the World Bank and its associates, it follows, according to Alfredo Saad-Filho (2020), a degradation of the preceding pro-poor growth debates and their possibility of an active policy towards income distribution. Inclusive growth ultimately favours a concept of growth as 'both necessary and sufficient to achieve the key goals of development', requiring competitive pressure (Saad-Filho 2020, 53). To be sustainable, growth requires 'strong political leadership' with heavy investment in infrastructure, health and education that can draw in private investment and increase the rates of return (*ibid.*, 53). Labour market flexibility is part of the model, among other measures concerning productivity, trade integration, exchange rate management, partial capital controls and (instrumental) safety nets to make reforms politically viable. The inclusiveness applies to a country's labour force, shifting the focus from the welfare of the poor towards the existence of the labour force in general in a deregulated labour market.

The economic modelling of the inclusive growth paradigm undermines the aims of gender equality found in global governance frameworks and instead further squeezes social reproduction. The state's capacity to safeguard people, particularly in the less remunerated or formalised sectors where women are over-represented, is weakened in favour of the prioritisation of economic growth. Inclusion is based on narrow quantitative measures concerning the presence of women in the labour market, lacking attention to their economic security, decision-making and negotiating power (Wallace 2023, 143–144).

Regional integration and free movement of workers needs to be understood in this context. The Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action 2018–2030, developed by the AU Department for Social Affairs (DSA) with German state cooperation, incorporates a joint labour migration programme that promotes the free movement of workers to advance regional integration and development. It incorporates market-driven skills development and skills pooling across the continent, technical cooperation with other regions and data collection. The responsible entities include the DSA, International Labour Organization (ILO), IOM and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (AUC/DSA 2018, 34, 89). Migrant labour is considered to encourage trade by easing contract enforcement and increasing the manufacturing value-added in destination countries, bringing relatively higher returns to the destination country than the sending country (Belaid and Slany 2018, 23, 13).

Moreover, remittance policy in Africa's migration governance framework is overseen by the African Institute of Remittances, which was created with EU funding and with support from IOM and the World Bank. Its focus is on the formalisation and cost reduction of sending remittances, data improvement and digitisation, and the leveraging of remittances for finance and investment (Isaacs and Natali 2020, 127–128). The potential for remittances to bring an equalisation between destination and origin countries, as also envisaged in the pre-1990s socialist conception of a migration regime, is undermined by the World Bank's continued focus on leveraging remittances for financial inclusion. This policy field incorporates remittance flows and households into global financial circuits as part of a broader process of the expansion of financial markets. This means that remittances are treated as a source of capital accumulation, undermining their historic character as a collective response to underdevelopment and dependency in migrant communities (Cross 2015; Guermond 2023).

Trade integration and labour mobility

The globalised migration governance framework promotes the AU's African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), established in Kigali in 2018 and entering into force in January 2021, which seeks to boost intra-African and external trade. While AfCFTA is seemingly a pan-African initiative to encourage mobility and develop the continent's relative strength in the world system, for Ndongo Samba Sylla (2018), AfCFTA falsely ascribes the lack of trade integration in the continent to the existence of tariff and non-tariff barriers, eluding the fundamental role of structural adjustment and rich countries' protectionism in limiting African countries' trade relations among themselves. The continent still draws much of its GDP from a dependence on raw materials for export and lacks the integrated transport infrastructure, industrial policy and production capacity to accelerate the agreement (Greco 2020). It builds on a foundation of agreements between regional economic communities and the EU (Sylla 2018).

For UNDP economists Hippolyte Fofack and Ali Zafar (2023), the CFA franc countries stand to be particularly constrained by AfCFTA. While the reduction or elimination of as much as 97% of all tariff lines and the reduction of non-tariff barriers within Africa suggests a rapid industrialisation and increase of Africa's exports by US$506 billion, the most industrialised economies are expected to benefit while the more vulnerable countries face critical adjustment costs. The West African Economic and Monetary Union combined received less foreign direct investment than Ghana up to 2016 and their fixed exchange rate with the euro represents a form of financial repression that could see a widening deficit as continental free trade advances (Fofack and Zafar 2023, 45–47).

In line with the deregulatory aims of inclusive growth, AfCFTA places people 'at the service of goods and services' as the circulation of people is utilised to advance the single market (Nanga 2020). Jean Nanga (2020) draws a comparison between the potential direction of African free movement and the EU's posted workers scheme, which created new forms of labour competition and social division in Europe. When domiciled workers' wages in Britain's oil industry, for instance, were undercut due to Total's contracting of posted workers from Poland, Italy and Portugal, their union sought to standardise contracts and incorporate migrant workers in active worker organisation. The ruling class and state media used the dispute to inflame racial tensions and publicise the far right, rather than draw attention to the deficient regulatory environment and to multinational corporations' exploitation of the labour force (Cross 2021, 124–126).

The capitalist conception of free movement relies on such intra-class antagonisms to weaken the labouring classes and this holds back social development as well as creating intolerable, highly profitable working conditions. The notion of a flexible, deregulated labour market creates freedom for the holders of capital above that of circulating and settled workers. Corporations have an expanding labour force at their disposal that can be deployed to lower the general wages and conditions of the workforce, increasing productivity. In migration policy, 'free' movement interacts with selective, adaptive border regimes and circulation rights that serve the interests of finance capital. With state intervention, workers are forced into intensive competition, creating intra-class antagonisms. This disempowerment of the labouring classes can only be overcome by breaking down the national and societal divisions between different groups of workers, finding common cause against capitalist exploitation.

Data and governance

Data collection is promoted vigorously throughout migration governance frameworks with a key role for IOM in its neoliberal service-provision approach (Frowd 2024, 14). Data in migration and border management include the automation of border services and use of biometrics or large-scale statistical techniques developed with OECD, other organisations and the private sector and are often treated as an end in themselves, with tautological or paradoxical claims. These include the claim that 'emphasising the use of quality data, IOM can be the objective voice on behalf of migrants and displaced populations' (IOM 2020, 20). This 'datafication' has been extensively studied as a discourse and a form of neoliberal managerialism, while Mirca Madianou's (2019) and Ruben Andersson's (2022) analyses focus on the value extracted from refugee data and the bioeconomy as a further (final) frontier of capitalism. Policies are built on data that are partial, incomplete and exclusionary and even with this knowledge, managerial governance takes these data as the reality and the basis for new interventions.

Conclusions

The Africa Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative, commissioned by IOM with the AUC and Swiss and US state bureaux, states that Africa's colonially imposed borders will not be physically removed and instead, the future is in 'seamless borders' in line with the AU's Agenda 2063 (Warn and Ali 2020, 79). African states are impelled to advance their agenda for free movement and continental integration while taking aid and lessons from the EU to build up their border management systems (Abebe and Mugabo 2020, 151).

This article has evaluated the political economy of global migration governance on the basis of its unspoken foundation of population fanaticism as a phenomenon of capitalist development. The West's racialised hierarchy creates a persistent lack of safety and enables active, unaccountable state terror against people who are prevented, often by the West, from sustaining regular livelihoods and patterns of circulation. With a managerial approach and political sleight of hand, the governance of safe, orderly and regular migration extends to only few of the most forcefully displaced people.

An understanding of imperialism in migration policy is essential to recognise how the dominant capitalist states, directly and through international organisations like IOM, deploy the governance of migration as a means of organising and regulating labour. In doing so, they sustain social and geographical hierarchies and divisions that enforce capitalist structures of exploitation and the appropriation of wealth. This profit-driven policy framework seeks to utilise and dispense with millions of displaced people, whose circulations intensify because of the development and border policies that intersect with the migration regime. In that sense, the migration regime works and sustains itself.

With this understanding, the aims of global migration governance to comply with international standards and laws and to secure migrants' rights are incompatible with the harmonisation of migration policies and cooperation between partners to include African and European states, international financial institutions, security forces and military industries. The rights discourse of migration governance sits incongruously with the deregulation of labour markets, 'free trade' policies that benefit Western corporations, and new legal frameworks that enable repressive border and migration regimes in origin and destination countries (D'Souza 2018). Until US and European leaders, financial institutions and their collaborators are brought to justice, and can emerge from socio-economically and politically regressive development programmes and outlooks, harmonisation will be unproductive from the perspective of African societies and pan-African integration. Bordering exercises will be best directed against these powers.

The coups in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are an expression of this political imperative, while the urge for accountability and justice in the international system has advanced with Israel's genocidal assault in Gaza. As the activist group migration-control.info (2024) points out, there are significant parallels in Israel's apartheid and the global border regime, in their technologies of surveillance and control, in their racial violence and legalised hierarchies, and in their assumption that 'segments of humanity can be permanently confined, contained, and warehoused, surrounded by affluence that springs from their dispossession.' International Criminal Court cases that challenge Israeli state terror against Palestinians and Libyan security forces' abuses of migrants and refugees implicate the same Western leaders in direct support and complicity in criminal violence.

An understanding of global migration governance as an imperialist endeavour does not simplify the regime to only a North–South binary framework of the oppressor and the oppressed. It includes an analysis of the internalisation of European capital's racial ideology by African states against their own citizens and guests, under threat of bankruptcy. It promotes analysis of the popular movements and regime changes that have rejected such domination and of the alternatives envisaged from the perspective of popular sovereignty. Important responses need an internationalist class analysis, with the recognition that imperialism restricts the social development of all labouring classes, including those within oppressive countries' racialised labour markets. The freedom of development and circulation and the equality of all labouring classes is centred in this analysis. International solidarity is the most powerful force against capital and this is where international migration has revolutionary potential.

Notes

1. Structural adjustment loans from the early 1980s enabled the World Bank and IMF to direct the policies of indebted client regimes, with programmes of currency devaluation, interest rate rises, reduction of the public sector and removal of subsidies, wage freezes and large-scale privatisation (see Mkandawire and Soludo 1998).
2. Migration governance is defined as 'the traditions and institutions by which authority on migration, mobility and nationality in a country are exercised, including the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies in these areas'. Global migration governance, according to IOM, is based on 'complying with international standards and law and securing migrants' rights; developing evidence-based policies through a whole-of-government approach; and engaging with partners to address migration and migration-related issues' (AUC/DSA 2018, 29–30).

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Disclosure statement

Note on contributor

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