Migration, Europe, and the Question of Political and Economic Sovereignty in Africa[1]

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Africa-Europe migration in perspective

The large majority of African migrations remain within the continent.[i] However, Africa-Europe migration has far more social significance than appears at first sight, particularly for West and North Africa. There are billions of euros deployed by the West for militarised systems of deterrence and the neocolonial reinforcement of Africa's internal borders. A safety valve has been denied and this contributes to the disappearance of thousands of people in transit. Europe's selective labour regimes expand inequalities between the regions and are closely tied with racism and working class division within its borders. , while wage differentials inflate the relative importance of remittances sent from Europe to Africa. .

Migration represents the diversity of humanity and human experience and does not singularly define people or their life trajectories. There is an arbitrary element in the outcomes of intended migration journeys and in the longer-term consequences, wherein people confront the constraints of the state and markets but also find autonomous paths beyond the chaotic and contradictory agendas of borders and labour mobility. With this said, the vast majority of migrants in the world do not become so by choice and their trajectories cannot be reasonably compared with the relative free movement experienced by the citizens of core countries. As regional and intra-continental integration projects continue in Africa, there is an institutional recognition that the 86 percent of migrants who have not been displaced by conflict are particularly linked with uneven development and poverty (UNECA 2021, 4).

Capitalism places patterns of migration and labour mobility at the centre of domestic and international inequalities. The extreme market orientation of the neoliberal era and the expansion of authoritarianism, militarism and fascistic tendencies in its later stages have shaped a global apartheid system with legal-bureaucratic structures that create cheap labour and inequality of movement between regions, sustaining racialised labour markets.

[1] This paper builds on a presentation from the Danish Institute of International Studies' Borderwork colloquium on 'The End of Externalization? Migration, Politics, and the Border Spectacle', and a keynote at SOAS and migrationcontrol.info's workshop on 'De-centring and Contesting Externalisation in West Africa and Beyond', both in 2022. It also draws on many of the arguments made in my recent book, *Migration Beyond Capitalism* (Polity 2022). I am grateful to the organisers and participants of both workshops. Thank you also to Ray Bush, Peter Lawrence and Noam Chen-Zion for their comments on the first draft.

In order to give a materialist foundation to an anti-racist defence of migrants, our struggles need to be founded on labour-internationalism and anti-imperialism. This anti-imperialism is substantiated by a focus on economic and political sovereignty in countries of the global South that continue to be dominated by foreign powers and interests. As Marx (1870) modelled when he explained the need for English workers to stand for a free and independent Ireland, capitalist imperialism creates cheap labour when land and resources are expropriated and profits sent to the capitalist centres; people are evicted by this process and then forced to move also to capitalist centres. The ruling class subsequently profits from cheap labour and intentionally aggravates the divisions between migrant workers and those who are native-born, allowing its illegitimate power to continue unchallenged.

It is not that entire populations are upended and seeking to cross borders under capitalist destruction of the national and local economy. Rather, these structural conditions make it increasingly difficult to sustain households at their normal level: shocks concerning family health, livelihood destruction, redundancy, or the intolerability of 'bare life' combine with the possible gains of higher wages in wealthy countries that would overturn household insecurity (Cross 2013, 58). The wage difference is sufficiently vast to be considered against the risk of migrating through dangerous and hostile channels, which can be available to a range of people with assets or labour to sell, personal connections and various individual or family circumstances that encourage emigration.

The military industry of border systems, which originate in the First World War, and the role of borders in organising labour are both growing sources of corporate profit. Rosa Luxemburg saw militarism as a 'capitalist malady' with its own 'internal, mechanical motive power' (2006, 29). It represents imperial competition between states, a way to impose financial and industrial capital, and a means of class domination. With the profit motives embedded in border systems themselves added to these interests, the war against migrants has become an essential feature of free market capitalism. There are numerous market logics representing various fractions of capital, meaning that contemporary migration regimes are not only a product of labour arbitrage, the state-territorial logic of borders and the changing flows of people. As Ruben Andersson (2022) illustrates, there is also a bioeconomy, a market where primitive accumulation extends beyond resources and labour to life itself. There is 'a (quasi) "science of the human" situated at the confluence of algorithms of artificial intelligence; advanced mechanisms of finance, risk management and surveillance; and the multipolar geopolitical world emerging amid the Western project's demise'. Globally, tens of millions of people who are prevented from staying home by conflict and capital-driven displacement have their movement heavily policed and controlled.

Borders and their adjacent industries of control and surveillance maintain the hierarchies between North and South, between different types of migration, and ultimately between workers as they determine the citizenship and labour rights of the people who cross them and enable super-exploitation in key industries that cannot be relocated to the periphery (Cross 2021, 71; Amin and El-Kenz 2005, 81). In the service of free markets and the chauvinistic nationalism that enables the imperial model to persist, borders are opened and closed

selectively. They are denounced and promoted by the capitalist class according to its whims, while the deepening crisis of neoliberal capitalism expands the state's scapegoating of migrants for the private drain on public wealth that it has facilitated. This creates 'immigration choisie', as former French president Sarkozy called it, which sustains the polarisation of wealth between sending and receiving countries.

Within Europe, NGOs and social movements demand the rights, equality and dignity of people who are fleeing conflict or economic disaster and who face a cruel state apparatus of raids and deportations, withdrawal of basic support and protection, racist hostility and abusive labour practices. The post-materialist nature of European left-liberalism risks reinforcing the separation of working class migrants from the native-born working class while sustaining the normality of cheap labour (Cross 2021, 15; Buckel et al. 2017, 29-31). Common arguments that migrant labour is necessary to address labour shortages in aging populations or to keep the health services going, or that migrants are more hard-working and accepting of 'unskilled' work than the native-born population, lack ambition for the labouring classes at a time of sharpening class conflict. The pandemic and lockdowns have highlighted the importance of cleaning, care work, food production and other services that are racially segmented and cannot be done by remote work. Yet this popular consciousness rarely expands to questioning the displacements that make people willingly work in exhausting, precarious and unsafe conditions or the ways their essential, society-sustaining work has become so devalued in the capitalist economy.

The more radical approaches to migration in the global North focus on structural and institutional articulations of racism, the brutality of neoliberal globalisation and its modes of control, and the patriarchal, racist nature of the state (Anderson et al. 2009; Walia 2021). The strategic question remains, and is the core focus of this debate: *how do migration and border politics integrate with structural transformation in these times of socio-ecological emergency?* In regarding the struggle against EU and member states' 'externalisation' of borders and migration policy as part of a wider project for political and economic sovereignty in Africa, I argue that the national question is inextricably linked with the destruction of apartheid labour practices.

Calls for independence and sovereignty in Africa

During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, an open letter from leading African intellectuals to the continent's leaders sought transformation of the state and emphasised the continuing importance of national liberation (*Al Jazeera* 2020). The dozens of signatories, including Amy Niang, Wole Soyinka, Makhily Gassama, Cornel West and Kwame Anthony Appiah, observed that:

civil society organisations have shown tremendous solidarity and creativity. Despite however the great dynamism of individual actors, these initiatives could in no way make up for the chronic unpreparedness and structural deficiencies that states themselves will have to mitigate.

They called for a 'second wave of our political independence', the renewal of Pan Africanism and endogenous development, which would break with the orthodox model of growth and with the 'outsourcing of our sovereign prerogatives'. A further open letter in September 2020 was led by Fadhel Kaboub, Ndongo Samba Sylla, Kai Koddenbrock, Ines Mahmoud and Maha Ben Gadha, following a conference in Tunis that focused particularly on the monetary imperialism of the CFA franc in West and Central African countries that were mostly former French colonies. With the International Monetary Fund and international creditors continuing to encroach on the economies of African countries, they were trapped in austerity and environmental destruction. The letter noted that the economic model of export-oriented growth, liberalisation of foreign direct investment, privatisation and the promotion of tourism 'further exacerbates Africa's "brain drain", which tragically, in some cases, take the form of death boats and death roads for economic, health, and climate migrants'. Economic and monetary sovereignty must be the priority, they argued, inclusive of food sovereignty, (renewable) energy sovereignty, industrial policy and regional trade partnerships aimed at expanding industrial linkages in strategic areas including public health, transportation, telecommunications, research and development, and education (*Brave New Europe* 2020).

Samir Amin was a key influence for many signatories of both letters and was well-connected with the demands for economic and monetary sovereignty (Ben Gadha et al. 2022, 2). He viewed the 'Sovereign Popular Project' as a necessity for moving beyond the imperialist international system, to advance the interests of labour against the capitalist class. In Amin's analysis, national sovereignty in capitalist societies promotes the interests of the dominant class, enabling the exploitation of labour domestically and reinforcing their oppressive position in the global system. With this said, he also considered that 'the rejection of any nationalism annihilates the possibility of moving out of the global liberal order' and the global apartheid it creates (Amin 2017, 8).

Amin acknowledged that the struggle for an auto-centred national economy would be 'contradictory in every aspect' (Amin 2017, 9; Cross 2021, 168). The nationalisms of the periphery could be anti-imperialist, progressive and anti-capitalist, while political economy understandings had ignored the limitations found in states' 'authorised action margin' within the global system; at least as significant to the outcome as the quality of the national project in itself. Hence a multipolar world would need to advance, which incorporated popular, democratic relations between countries of the South, and which required Europe's move away not only from bourgeois nationalism and fascism but also from the social imperialism that inhabits social democratic parties (Amin 2017, 16).

Migration and border policy against sovereignty

European integration advanced from the mid-1980s on a racialised, exclusionary basis, with expanding controls at its external borders and increasingly limited channels of migration towards its deindustrialising economies. At the same time, neocolonial relations with African countries have driven displacements through military imperialism, financial and monetary

dominance, the corporate hold over land, labour and resources. Members of European Parliament have criticised the Economic Partnership Agreements, externalisation of EU borders, the prominence for (European) multinationals and the expansion of public-private partnerships found in the Africa-EU strategy. A member of the Communist Party of Spain and the United Left, Marina Albiol, highlighted the role of the EU's foreign, economic and trade policies, illegitimate debts, its arms deals and support of tyrannical regimes, in creating poverty and forced migration. French MEP Younous Omarjee argued that free trade agreements 'empty Africa of its own possibilities, organise the plunder of its resources and trap it in the macabre game of multinationals' (Left.EU 2017).

If such attention to the consequences of European policy in Africa seems overly centred on European power and to remove agency from African governments and societies, a materialist analysis bears out the demands for sovereignty as outlined in the previous section. In this issue, Noam Chen-Zion shows how migrations of Senegalese fishermen living in Badalona, Catalonia, were driven by the ecological drain of European industrial fishing fleets in West Africa. Odious debts led African coastal states to sign bilateral agreements that allowed foreign fishing fleets to overfish at the expense of local sea life, artisanal fishing and national food sovereignty. Chen-Zion explains:

Poverty in Senegal cannot be divorced from the drain of Senegalese resources for European consumption. Ironically, if such imperialist plunder is the major cause of migration, then 'push factors' of migration should not be linked to migrant-sending countries, but rather to migrant-receiving countries whose companies profit from the destruction of West African ecosystems.

In the wider Sahel region over the past decade, NATO's destabilisation of Libya, which had been an important destination as well as transit country for West African migrant workers, also destabilised Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The continued pursuit of clientelist relations at a time of geopolitical struggle over natural resources between the West and Russia has contributed to monumental uprisings and coups against failed civilian politics. France's military interventions in Mali enforced a buffer zone in the north of the country, which would secure its supply of uranium and other minerals (Niang 2022). Amy Niang explains:

It would be a mistake to see in the thousands of young Africans occupying the streets of Bamako, Kayes and Ouahigouya or blocking French military convoys anarchic crowds that are neither rooted in a solid political culture nor hold a clear vision of what they are yearning for. It would equally be a mistake to see in the popular protests against French military presence in the Sahel as some kind of reactionary resentment of the subaltern or a revanchist postcolonial fury. Underlying the protesters' outburst is a widespread pursuit of a sovereignty most imagine to have been lacking in their countries since the time of independence. Young people's demand for 'meaningful sovereignty' is explicitly framed against a postcolonial condition that maintains their countries under neocolonial control. Theirs is a struggle for a second independence (Niang 2022).

From the EU's perspective, as its core member states militarily, economically and politically undermine the full potential for self-determination in former colonies, the displacements of people in the Sahel are less a humanitarian disaster than a security threat. Militarism has advanced under the guise of protecting people on the move from criminal networks. 2015-16 saw a series of new measures representing 'the challenge that the Sahel region represents for the African continent, [the] EU's ambitions there and [the] so-called migration crisis calling for European action' (Cuny 2018, 4).

A briefing from Hans Luchte (2019) shows that in Agadez, Niger, an EU-driven crackdown on cross-border routes to Libya led drivers away from the caravan route and towards multiple dangerous routes in the desert. They were now driving alone, at night, and avoiding distress calls in the case of breakdown. Migrants could be left in the desert at the sight of police or military vehicles and also risked being ambushed or robbed and deserted, while women faced sexual violence from armed bandits. While officially migration from Niger to Libya dropped by 90 percent, many young men in the region continued to transport migrants. There have been estimates of more deaths from desert crossings than from those in the sea, with some indication of numbers in the UN's assistance to 20,000 migrants lost in the desert in 2016. Moreover, the externalisation of the EU's borders aggravated the division between Niamey and the Tuareg-dominated northern region and sharpened the conflict and environmental harms linked with the gold rush, French military intervention, and the increased circulation of weapons from Libya (Luchte 2019).

Beyond militarism, the EU's externalisation strategy has emphasised return policy for migrants who are irregularised as a consequence of its failure to cooperate on a European asylum system. Mali's political tensions rapidly escalated following the NATO intervention in Libya, leading to more than 500,000 displaced persons and refugees in 2012 and hundreds of thousands more in the following years. The EU's training and equipping of the Malian armed forces for border control and surveillance, and further self-centred stabilisation and development strategies have been divisive in the politics of the country and its diaspora (Cuny 2018, 14-20). Externalisation has also constituted efforts to deter and control migration through programmes of assisted voluntary return and information campaigns, mainly associated with the EU and International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The incorporation of migrant intermediaries of West and Central Africa in these programmes, doing 'borderwork', has reinforced a racialised association of 'sub-Saharan' mobility as illegitimate while also generating social tensions and contradictions (Maâ, Van Dessel and Vammen 2022).

If the EU's attempts at a comprehensive approach to migration incorporate humanitarian and development agencies with a measure of democratic scrutiny, an apparent motive for the far-right's project of Britain's exit from the EU was to do away with such codes and multilateralism.

In Calais, Northern France, people forced to leave countries in conflict or political emergency - Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad, Gambia, Cameroon, among the largest numbers of Afghan and Syrian asylum seekers - continue to live in terror. Their shelter, water supplies and ability to live in dignity are periodically destroyed by local police. This state

harassment and vandalism in France adds to years of traumatic journeys to find safety. With intentions to go to the UK, not even the notification that arrival there by boat or lorry could lead to detention and confiscation of phones, then being trafficked by the state to Rwanda, has deterred people from onward movement.

In the months after the UK policy announcement of deporting asylum seekers who have arrived by 'irregular means' to Rwanda in May 2022, the numbers of people crossing the Dover Strait to England reached their height, including 1295 people in one day on the 22 August. The possibilities found in personal connections, a common language or better treatment pushed people onwards, while a repeated response in Calais from potential recipients of the Rwanda externalisation policy was that it would lead to their suicide if it were enforced on them. The refugees in Calais are largely men who were targeted for recruitment or conscription in armies and militias. The UK policy and the Israel-Rwanda programme that preceded it have both faced significant legal challenges from civil society (Mack 2022). It emerged in a UK High Court hearing in July 2022, brought forward by several asylum seekers, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, Care4Calais and Detention Action, that then-Home Secretary of the UK, Priti Patel, had ignored the Foreign Office warning of human rights abuses in Rwanda and the risk of refugees being recruited for armed operations in neighbouring countries. [2]

No deportation flight to Rwanda has succeeded because of legal challenges from the European Court of Human Rights and the more recent high court case. The programme has, however, transferred millions of dollars of aid to the Kagame government. In these relations of patronage, Harrison (2022) identifies Rwanda's position as part of a 'transnational gulag archipelago', by which the 'global system of holding pens relies on two distinct and mutually constituted forms of sovereignty: the Western nation or region that seeks a way radically to reduce immigration and the post-colonial nation that partners with the West as a development and security solution'. The authoritarian state has asserted its sovereignty while receiving donor money and is well placed to highlight Western hypocrisy when accused of human rights atrocities. In this light, a notion of sovereignty clearly needs to go beyond the economic bargaining of heads of state and their gains in aid, military assistance and donor driven development programmes in exchange for the containment of people. The next section outlines approaches to migration and borders that are complementary to programmes of social transformation and popular forms of sovereignty.

Demands for migration

Imperialist actors, from European states to US-dominated financial institutions and multinational corporations, have commodified labour in Africa and the Global South and attempted to shape labour flows for the sake of growth. The externalisation of borders from the European core to the Sahel zone and elsewhere is coupled with its externalisation of

[2] H. Morrison, *The National*, 5 September 2022; R. Syal, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2022. Some of the points here are based on observation during a brief visit to Calais in June 2022.

environmental destruction, land, sea and resource depletion. Systems of bordering and control are also important sources of growth and profit that siphon public funds into private hands, empowering the forces of militarism to the danger of all working classes.

The argument for equality of movement with the West can be made without equivocation - not to prop up the West's degraded labour conditions and ageing populations in healthcare and other basic services, but as a matter of equality, dignity and justice that works in the interests of the international labouring classes. The demilitarisation of borders and dismantling of their bureaucracy will rely on destruction of the political logic of cheap labour, which is sustained by racist ideology and national chauvinism. Borders prevent the circulation of people who cross them by irregular means and do not ultimately deter the migrations that are forced by living conditions.

Sovereignty in migration policy in African countries of emigration and circulation would be independent of the whims of the transnational capitalist class, which represent the contradictions of labour mobility and borders in ways that restrict but also encourage flows of people as a labour resource. This leads to EU 'concessions' such as short-term restrictive visas and labour programmes, development aid, security cooperation and information programmes. This migration-security-development nexus, its criminalising effects and productivist means of offsetting migration is largely incompatible with projects of popular sovereignty even if their aims may coincide on a superficial level. By the same token, policies to discourage clandestine emigration need not be Eurocentric or neocolonial but can also aim to encourage genuine development and the 'right to stay home' alongside defence of the rights of people who have been displaced (Bacon 2013).

In facing the diverse political development conjunctures of the continent, there is inevitably a role for a reconfigured state which places the labouring classes at the centre of social change, with programmes to support independence and solidary international cooperation in energy, food and monetary systems. There is also a role for critical engagement with the UN system in the interests of international justice, health and food sovereignty, for instance in the Food and Agricultural Organisation's emphasis on small-scale farming – to the extent that it can support societies in their move away from the international law of value and international pricing mechanisms (Bush 2020; Amin 2008, 109; Cross 2021, 158-60). The use of agricultural development as a deterrent is likely to meet resistance, whether working jointly with the IOM in its complicitly with Western migration agendas, or in developing agricultural programmes that would not interest urban youth. However, in its own context, the democratic reform of food and agriculture, managed for the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, is essential to future sustainability and would prevent thousands of human tragedies.

There is every reason to expect increased capitalism-induced displacement in the coming years, whether articulated as climate emergency, conflict or economic disaster. The disgust of progressive movements in Europe towards their governments' border policies must lead, in the materialist analysis, beyond humanitarian pleas and towards the demand for the freedom and equality of the societies people are fleeing. This freedom cannot be granted by aid agencies and

think tanks of the West but emerges from popular democratic movements and working class internationalism free of paternalistic relations and narrow ideas of development. The common goal is for recovery from accelerated capitalism and from dependence on an unsustainable and socially antiquated world system of production.

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[i] For discussion of intracontinental migration patterns, see H. Cross & L. Cliffe (2017) A comparative political economy of regional migration and labour mobility in West and Southern Africa, *Review of African Political Economy*, 44:153, 381-398