

Is migration good for democracy?

Some observations from Mali, made in its 50th year of independence

By Charlotte Wiedemann

Is migration good, just because the European Union is fighting it so hard? This is a political and a moral question. More often than not, it will be answered in moral terms; in particular by those, whose response to fortress Europe is a different understanding of the globe, a conception of universal freedom of travel and of open borders. Indeed, the benefits of migration seem obvious. Foreign workers send home large amounts of money; they combat poverty by their own effort.

But the implications for those migrants' home-countries are rarely addressed. How are they affected? What are the consequences for their domestic politics, when millions of their citizens are, as it were, posted abroad as cash machines? How does a society change, when its youth more and more comes to see migration as the only viable way of life? Put differently: Can a widespread orientation towards migration be part of a progressive conception of society? And to be sure, "progressive" here refers to the countries of origin; in contrast to a small, white, moral progressiveness for us, who are wishing for a Europe that is more open.

To raise the question of migration as a political question is all the more appropriate in the very year in which several African countries celebrate their 50th anniversary of independence. Notwithstanding the numerous individual differences, these celebrations are in general accompanied by two phenomena: a desire of many young people just "to get out, no matter how", and an obvious lack of identification with the own state, with its constitution, its institutions and representatives.

Consider Mali: This large state, occupying a vast area in the Sahel, is in many respects a telling example for our topic. On the one hand, even the pessimists deem Mali one of the few role models – democratic, peaceful, without ethnic conflicts, culturally rich (well-known for its music) and therefore also an attractive holiday destination. On the other hand, Mali has not just recently become a typical source of migrants. About one fourth of the population is living abroad, four million of 14 million nationals. Only a small percentage is staying in Europe, mostly in France, where Malian sans papiers are at the forefront of those squatting and striking for their legalization. A remarkable side-note: Due to ongoing pressure from the Malian civil society, President Amadou Toumani Touré so far refuses to put his signature under a so-called repatriation agreement with France, effectively declining to accept any deportations from Europe.

Mali is also a transit country for migrants of different African nationalities, since the east of Mali, bordering on the Sahara, is the gate to crossing the desert. Because they allow for travelling through larger parts of Western- and Northern Africa without visa, counterfeited Malian passports are highly sought-for.

For all these reasons, Mali has been chosen as a focal area for the newest European combat against migration. Painted in rose, like a symbol for empty promises, the first "centre for migration management" on African territory is located in the most modern quarter of the capital Bamako. It is a pilot project of the European Union. Even though being funded completely by the EU, it is assured to be a "purely Malian institution". Its purpose was, however, defined in Brussels: "To facilitate legal immigration to Europe, by containing illegal immigration". Not everyone in Africa is familiar with this Orwellian diction; during the inauguration, but only for a

fleeting instance, the funny misconception occurred that Brussels would set up a job centre right inside the Sahel.

We must preclude another misconception at this point: Despite the dramatic images of sinking ships and despite the high numbers of casualties, Africa is by no means the most important source of migration to Europe. This finding of the International Organization of Migration is also confirmed by the figures that Frontex has assembled. Even in Spain, which probably has the highest quota of irregular labour, most migrants do not originate from Africa, but from Latin America, by tourist visa. Even so, in Europe's public perception, irregular immigration wears a black face.

Transit country or destination country – these are categories used by the fighters of migration. The reality of life is more complex. Africans looking for work have always traversed Mali's northern neighbour, the vast and sparsely populated Mauritania. In sub-Saharan Africa, 17 million people are counted as migrants, but most of them are not heading for Europe. In West Africa, for instance, 7.5 million people are living outside of their country of birth but remain someplace else within West Africa.¹ Many are circulating for a certain time in a territory that could as of now be accessed without restrictions. They follow an "inner" map of migration routes that is constantly updated by the reports of fellow migrant workers. The assumption that Europe will never be able to "steer" the sum of millions of these individual decisions has a lot to commend it.

According to a legend that is hard to uproot, the effects of flight and migration are the "white man's burden". The progressive version of this myth goes on like this: Immigration, especially from Africa, is a retribution for colonialism and has thus to be accepted. But those who take refuge in Africa, usually stay in Africa. According to UN data, 83 percent of about ten million African refugees stay on the continent. There are already seven million "illegal aliens" in the republic of South Africa alone, pursuant to government reports, three million coming from Zimbabwe. With its 47 million denizens, South Africa hence accommodates approximately as many irregular residents as all member states of the European Union taken together! In addition, many more boat people are actually running ashore in poor Yemen than in Lampedusa. Every day, desperate refugee venture the dangerous crossing from the disintegrating state of Somalia; and every day, guards collect and bury the corpses of those washed ashore the Yemenite beaches.

Nobody can tell how many migrants lose their life on the way to Europe. According to an estimation, there have been 20 000 casualties in the last decade. Some assume that one in three dies; one in eight, others believe. The Spanish government has given an estimate of 6000 persons who have drowned or have died by dehydration near the Canary Islands. In contrast, the numbers from the latest yearly FRONTEX report seem grotesquely inappropriate: In 2009, 71 had died and 87 had gone missing between Africa and Spain – as if, before embarking, migrants would send a copy of their passport to FRONTEX.

Watching the boats founder, even the least sensitive person will feel ashamed – ashamed about European politics, but also feeling partly culpable for this disaster. Both feelings often combine to produce a certain moral reflex: the idealization of migration and the idolization of migrants, in particular those from Africa, whose needs are deemed well known. This reaction is understandable, but it is fed by myths, and these myths are the same that are also harmful for the African societies.

Sometimes migrants are seen as "the best" and "strongest" of their societies, and sometimes as the continent's "poorest" or "most desperate". Few of these superlatives stand up to scrutiny.

The poorest and most desperate are those who never even come close to one of the expensive "tickets" for being smuggled to Europe. They end up in one of the intra-African migratory treks, without any alternatives to choose from. By contrast, who nowadays embarks on the perilous journey to the North has made a decision. The idea of anonymous external constraints that force people into migration "because otherwise we are going to starve" is only an artificial staging geared towards white camera crews.

Claiming that only the strongest and the best go away moreover amounts to insulting those who carry on tilling the fields – the majority of African people. It is also a problem for migrants who return empty-handed. Despite thousands of deportations and the hundreds who drown, unfortunate repatriates are treated as deadbeats. Their failure means embarrassment and blame, even when they are repatriated in handcuffs.

"The expulsion is not understood by their social environment", says Mamadou Keita, secretary-general of Association Malienne des Expulsés, a self-help organization of deported persons. "The home comer is regarded as criminal or incapable. Or the return is even interpreted as escape. The community's reaction can be dramatic." Many repatriates do not want to return to their homes due to stigmatization. Some even take their own life.

Why this contempt? Why the lack of compassion and solidarity with the sad repatriate? How is it possible that after the trauma of deportation another trauma follows on arrival?

The material reasons are the easiest to grasp: When a family has sold their few cattle to raise travelling expenses, the migrant's failure ruins the whole family. Often, however, the reasons are rather cultural; they are rooted in social psychology, in the values and the societal notions of honour and reputation, especially where – like in Mali – temporary labour migration is part of the rhythm of life of the families, villages and communities.

The adventure of migration in these places used to be a rite of passage for the male youth. But since irregular travelling has become so expensive, today's migrants are lagging behind already.

Returning without success, they have, as it were, never grown up.

The idealization of migration, the parallelization of virility and migration occupies an important place in folklore. Recently, a well-known Griot died in Mali after praising migration for 30 years. Griots have always eulogized the heroic deeds of the living men (sometimes also of women) and of the ancestors. They shape the perceptions that people hold of their history, and in the past, they also escorted the fighters into war. In the case at hand, the Griot pushed many into migration who were still hesitant to go. In his songs, staying seemed just too disgraceful. A man who does not want to migrate is a coward, a couch potato. In the Sonike language, they are called "stick-arounds"; they are immature, lazy and wimpy. It is no wonder that they are never going to find a wife.

Family-structures: In a typically large Malian family, there is not only the celebrated necessity of showing solidarity, but also much rivalry. A migrant's success and failure directly affects the social status of other family members. Everyone who placed a bet on him can lose with him, too. This concerns in particular the women, mothers, and sisters. Since for them it is most difficult to raise their status through individual achievement, it is above all the female disappointment that, once unleashed, transforms the unfortunate brother or cousin into an object of derision. It does not count very much what risks he took, that he even ventured his life, survived by a whisker and ultimately ended up in detention, waiting for his deportation. Credit is given only to those who are able to support their family.

Ideally, the oldest son used to return from abroad to take over his father's position as the male breadwinner. At this point, the younger brothers were permitted to leave the country. Today, this tradition has stopped working. The African family structure resembles a puppet. Its strings pulled by consular officers, visa suppliers and the middlemen of illegal employment.

Is this the reason why the archaic ideas about honour and reputation are so vehemently and remorselessly defended? A chef de famille who cannot support his offspring has no right to exist. A repatriate who has not made good and yet must become the family patriarch is caught in a psychically desperate situation.

Two things, it seems, are coexisting in many minds, yet completely detached from another. On the one hand, the knowledge (and outrage) about Europe's high barriers against migration is widespread. On the other hand, it is the individual migrant who is blamed when he fails to overcome these barriers. A once-successful model has lost its validity; but this abstract knowledge is not implemented and transformed into new values and orientations. Emotionally and socially, the society has not adapted to a reality that has changed. To be sure, this phenomenon is not purely African: other cultures in which periodical labour migration has been customary, are suffering from the same rupture.

It may however be typically African that the idealization of migration is reinforced by a fatally outward-looking psychology. All good things come from abroad, from outside Africa. Canned beans from France are better than those cultivated at home. So why cultivate anything at all? From textiles to foodstuffs, many African goods have lost their value. This inferiority complex did not result from colonialism alone. The fact that a black garbage collector in Paris or an illegally exploited dishwasher in Berlin is able to earn a higher esteem at home than he could if he were a local peasant, follows, first of all, from the income differential between the rich and poor parts of the world. But something is also wrong inside the soul of such a society.

Education loses its value. Who wants to await the slow social advancement that education facilitates? A headmaster, a profession that used to command respect in a country with low alphabetization, today earns an equivalent of 80 Euros. His neighbour's brother sells fake watches in the streets of London and sends home 400 Euros per month to his family. Who is held in higher regard?

The unlucky repatriate pays the bill for the confusion inside the society's soul. To escape social contempt, given the remotest opportunity, he will rush into new migration plans; and nobody with a sober mind and moral authority is there to hold him back. Where are the African intellectuals, the imams who stop young people from paying the facilitators horrendous prices just to follow them down the routes of death?

There are exceptions. Consider a women's initiative in Senegalese Thiaroye, at Dakar's outskirts. It consists of 375 mothers, reportedly most of them mothers of dead sons. They investigate against the facilitators and charge them with murder. They run into debts to make their case against migration. The number of such initiatives is tiny. Usually, they neither have a lobby, nor strong advocates.

A strange market has developed in Mali. Since the European Union has started programmes to fight migration, more and more organizations are founded that compete for the money. There are by now 63 groups of ex-migrants – fake and real. Some of them have returned already a decade ago. A climate of competition and denunciation has emerged among the groups. To be ancient migrant, ex-migrant, is now treated like a title, a status that qualifies for financial benefits. The youth has yet little chance to acquire the status of ancient migrant. To them, once

again a model is presented from which they cannot benefit, and the terms of which are dictated by the North.

The Italian journalist Gabriele del Grande inquired into the personal circumstances of migrants who were killed in accidents. When he was investigating the social milieu for possible reasons to go abroad, he wrote about a 22-year-old African: "He is done with Africa". Corrupt and incapable governments are glad about young men like this. Migration compensates for rebellion. A fatal alliance is nourishing the desire to get out of Africa: Nefarious people smugglers, greedy Marabouts selling lucky charms for survival, a lachrymose upper-class, and self-important village presidents craving for additional migration money in order to build an even more pompous mosque than that of the neighbour village.

But certainly there must also be many positive sides to migration; one may be tempted to ask. The money that migrants have wired home in 2009 amounted to 308 billion US-Dollars worldwide. These transfers are nourishing millions of families; they are supplying the basic needs of whole villages. But their contribution to combating poverty is chronically overestimated, and the figures are easily misleading, because the amount of money that is transferred to Europe exceeds fourfold the sum that goes to Africa. Not more than roughly ten percent of the above mentioned sum actually reaches Africa: just 30 billion US-Dollars. There again, the poorest benefit least from it. In the international ranking of the countries to which the most money is transferred back, there is no African country until the seventh position; and this, of all countries, is the oil-rich Nigeria.

(By the way, the assertion that foreign aid would render migration unnecessary is just another myth; it is well-intentioned but untenable scientifically. Migration increases with increasing development; a turning-point is only reached at a gross domestic product per capita of about 4000 US-Dollars. Sub-Saharan Africa is not even close to this number.)

The transfers of Migrants are an aid without political mandate. They do not establish a sustainable perspective for the next generation. Put differently: The transfers are an example for surrendering power. Migrants abroad are relatively well off. They are, as it were, an extraterritorial middle-class. But they are giving away their power, renouncing any influence as citizens.

Consider the example of the Philippines. The society is dependent on foreign transfers; one in four workers is employed overseas. 16 billion dollars are transferred every year, making the Philippines fourth place worldwide after India, China, and Mexico. Power and influence within the state, however, is residing with the corrupt, feudal landowners since decades.

A big and important question is emerging from all this: Is it always progressive to press for the freedom of movement? Is it possible to mitigate migration without at the same time supporting, ideologically or practically, Europe's fortification?

Europe has declared a war against migration, and some young migrants see themselves as soldiers in this war. They call their missing comrades "casualties of war". But the slogan "Europe or death!" implies and awful resignation; it is Africa's declaration of bankruptcy. The battle must be fought elsewhere. If the young people would only harness the very power, audacity and perseverance which drives them across the oceans instead to challenge their governments and to demand a life that is worthy enough of not being dumped into the sea!

No doubt: in an era when freedom of travel has largely become a privilege of the white and the rich, it is necessary to demand the freedoms of travel and of migration. But we should take care

not to worship migration.

A ubiquitous desire for migration means misery for the society wherein it occurs, because the orientation towards migration reinforces the feeling that the situation is not amenable to change. A ubiquitous orientation towards migration already is a product of political resignation, and it prolongs this resignation infinitely.

Senegal has celebrated the anniversary of its independence in April 2010. For this occasion, the 82-year old president Abdoulaye Wade has consumed a sum of 28 million US Dollars from the government coffers to erect a gruesome monument that most Senegalese reject. The 50-meter colossus of Stalinist aesthetic embodies a group of father mother and child. It supposedly represents the African Renaissance. In reality it only witnesses how an elderly spendthrift holds a whole country hostage. At the inside of the monument, an elevator carries the tourists upstairs. Wade claims one third of the admission fee for his personal benefit, since, after all, it was him who came up with the idea in the first place. How is it possible that a president is able to presume something like this, while at the same time there is hardly a single teenager who does not dream of leaving the country?

Cameroonian Achille Mbembe, one of the most renowned African intellectuals enumerates in an essay on 50 years of independence the five most important tendencies that inhibit progress in Africa. Among them, there is the desire of millions to live outside the own country. He calls this „Le désir généralisé de défection et de désertion“. Desertion, AWOL is what he calls it; an expression that we are not entitled to use.

Finally, once again Mali: A democracy, as seen from Europe; but the people feel differently. It is not their democracy, not their state. The Parliament speaks French, the language of the former colonial power and one in which only and educated Malian minority is proficient. And yet, the people are not revolting against being excluded from everything that is happening beyond their own village. It seems easier to raise enormous sums for a single people smuggler and to embark on a highly dangerous journey to Europe than to gain only a little more say in one's own country's public affairs.

Not as accusation, but as matter of fact, we must assert that there is a serious lack of self-confident citizenship, and that the orientation towards migration is part of this lack. For the society as a whole, it is the wrong way. Who plays down this fact does not take seriously the societies where migration originates.

Motivated by superficial empathy, well-meaning reports about the home countries of migrants who were killed in accidents usually cite all the reasons for quickly leaving the country. Those who are staying under these conditions have no voice. They are not asked; they are merely part of the scenery. In this, a disdain for African life finds its expression. It is an Afro-pessimism of a specific, ostensibly more progressive kind.

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