

Economic and Demographic Change in Africa
Edited by Archie Mafeje and Samir Radwan,
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Edited conference collections often err on the side of permissive generosity by binding under the same covers papers feebly connected to each other. And given Africa's propensity to encourage superficial generalisations from brief and partial encounters, the latitude for license is great indeed, as is amply evident in this book in which disparate and uneven discussions are cobbled together, unconnected by any systematic and sustained theoretical or thematic threads, except the most flimsy references to something about demography somewhere in the title. Much has been written about the demographic dimensions of Africa's economic performance, problems, and prospects. This collection is among the latest to traverse this well-trodden analytical path. Little that is stated is new. In fact, many of the authors mostly summarise their previous publications, a tribute perhaps to how conferences encourage the environmentally friendly art of intellectual recycling. To be sure, as in most such collections some contributions are better than others.

As is common in Africanist scholarship, Africa in this collection is truncated to the sub-Saharan concoction on the dubious grounds that, in Caldwell's words:

Anyone attempting to relate cultural and demographic change would be well advised to treat North Africa with the Middle East, for historically the Sahara Desert has proved to be a greater divide than the Red Sea and, in some respects, the Mediterranean (p. 11).

Then he proceeds to discuss sub-Saharan Africa as a homogeneous entity, presuming, of course, that melanin mysteriously bonded and bounded the histories and cultures of the Zulus at the southern tip of the continent with

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those of the Hausa on the edges of the Sahara. High fertility in this region is explained by the persistence of polygyny and 'the enormous male demand for sex' (p. 17), the premium put on children in traditional religion or the 'ancestor cult' (p. 26), all underpinned by a communal land system and the absence of 'draught animals and ploughs, [so that] the only way for a man to get a large share of land and a great deal of agricultural produce is to have many wives and children' (p. 18). Thanks to the liberating influences of European settlerdom and Christianity, Southern Africa deviates from some of these demographic irrationalities and pathologies. And Africa may be saved from the scourges of ballooning population by AIDS, which may kill between 100 and 200 million people. Caldwell's chapter loudly wears the inanities of self-referential analyses (a third of the references are to his previous publications) based on a little anthropology, no history, and a lot of racist speculation. This is truly 'science that colonises' to use Riedman's critique of fertility studies on Africa.¹

Thébauld in Chapter 2 tells us the obvious fact that pastoralists in the Sahel try to maintain a balance between herd and family size, while Collier and Horsnell in the next chapter use tortuous economic models to arrive at the rather bland conclusion that the rural economy in Kenya has been able to absorb rising labour-force and population growth, and in their chapter Becker and Morrison inform us that patterns of urbanisation vary both within and among countries and that, based on regression analysis of Zambian data, urban growth has less to do with the bright lights of industrialisation than the urban biases of public expenditure. Alexandratos takes this fetish for modelling to its extreme to reach a conclusion, quite reassuring in these times of unrelieved Afropessimism, that sub-Saharan Africa has ample land resources which, 'depending on the level of technology used, enough food could be produced to sustain between 1 and 12 billion people at 2,300 calories per caput per day' (p.143); never mind the treacherous marshland in the political economy of potential and actual land use.

¹ Agnes Riedman, 1993, *Science That Colonises: A Critique of Fertility Studies in Africa*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press.

More satisfying in my view, for different reasons, are the chapters by Yousif and Weeks. Yousif presents a detailed empirical study of the socio-demographic aspects of rural labour markets and labour migration in the giant Gezira Scheme of the Sudan. It demonstrates the diversity and complexity of these markets, and the different strategies deployed by landed and landless households and how these intersect with their respective generational, gender, and locational dynamics. Weeks broaches the larger picture showing that the real wages and employment security of urban workers in most sub-Saharan African countries have fallen in recent years due to the demand constraints of falling export prices and the distortions of structural adjustment programs. This has led to a declining income gap between urban wage earners and the rural population and the decomposition of the distinction between formal and informal sectors. Yet migration from rural to urban areas continues and falling real wages are accompanied by rising unemployment, thus casting doubt on conventional theories of rural-urban migration and the neoclassical hypothesis that falling real wages will clear labour markets. Unfortunately, his explanatory model only provides partial answers and his argument that the generality of the African economic crisis is such that 'only the most myopic would seek explanations particular to each country' (p. 70) is the equivalent of the careless, if not contemptuous, colonial adage that 'all natives look the same'. It cannot be belaboured that the 'African crisis' has not been immune from the messy particularities of national history, spatial and social differentiations, state policies, and the structural and conjunctural patterns of each country's incorporation into the world economy.