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## MIGRATION & SOCIAL CHANGE: IS DEMOGRAPHY DESTINY?

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Dr. François Héran spoke at the Tower Center September 17, 2018.

“Demography is not destiny” is a common say in the US. It is not in France, at least not yet, although the public debate on immigration in Europe is strongly driven by this idea.

A first example is the widespread belief that the countries with the lowest birth rates are the natural outlet for countries with the highest fertility. This is a myth, based on a model of communicating vessels, but not all confirmed by the the Bilateral Migration Matrix constructed over the last 15 years by the World Bank, the OECD, and the IMF. The metaphor of population movements inexorably pushing from areas of demographic “high pressure” to areas with “low pressure” does not stand up to scrutiny.

A second example is the false conclusion drawn from the last demographic prospects released by the UN Population Division. The 2017 Revision confirmed the surge in the population of sub-Saharan Africa. It is projected to rise from 970 million inhabitants today to 2.2 billion in 2050. There has been a great temptation, in the French public debate, to combine the question of the “Sub-Saharan explosion” with another hot topic: the “migrant crisis”. The fear is growing that Sub-Saharan migrants, due to population growth alone, will eventually overwhelm the French native population. In a recent best-selling book, publicly lauded by President Macron and several pundits, Stephen Smith, an American journalist who headed for years the African section of Le Monde, claims that “young Africa is going to storm the Old Continent” and that at this rate “a quarter of Europe’s inhabitants will be ‘African’ in 2050”, and even “more than half of under-30s”. I shall examine the facts and the perception.

If economic arguments are still frequently used in the public debate to justify restrictive immigration policies, arguments related to population growth and/or climate change become increasingly important. The sight of young sub-Saharan Africans stuck in Morocco working together to force their

way through the fencing of the Spanish enclave of Ceuta seems to illustrate, along with other images, an irresistible migratory pressure that it is tempting to attribute to causes that are more demographic than political.

Four categories of policies are competing with each other in the French political arena: a demographic policy (dreamed of yesterday by Alfred Sauvy but non

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applicable and never applied), an economic policy (which accounts only for 10% of the inflows since the prohibition of work immigration in 1974), a legal policy (“politique juridique”) developed by a complex coalition of public and private actors in defence of human rights (90% of the inflows), and an opinion-driven policy (“politique d’opinion”), deemed as “populist” and constantly growing.

France is confronted to the “liberal paradox” (James Hollifield). The vast majority of the 250.000 non-European migrants who obtain each year a permit of stay do benefit from a rights-based policy but, in a second phase, they enter the work force in a wide spectrum of activities which are crucial for the economy. In diametrical contrast with Germany, France takes little action in favour of asylum seekers but applies the system of rights which fuels the ordinary forms of immigration. How long will it be possible to maintain this orientation?

**Questions? Reach out to François Héran directly:**

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