

## Review

**Bernau, Olaf. 2022. Brennpunkt Westafrika. Die Fluchtursachen und was Europa tun sollte. München: C.H.Beck Verlag. 306 Seiten. ISBN 9783406782466**

*reviewed by*  
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Olaf Bernau begins his book by indicating the most common stereotypes and myths that are present in European public discourse: While many argue that Africa as a continent is full of opportunities, these opportunities are mostly defined from European perspectives and often quite ignorant of the African countries' needs and their inhabitants' wants (10). Reflecting on Achille Mbembe who claims that the introduction of 'race' by the colonial powers created, on the African continent, a maelstrom alienating people from their past, present and possible future,<sup>1</sup> Bernau argues that "Africa" is subjected to processes of racist objectification and treated as a blank space as people are concerned – "a continent without people" so to speak (13). The book is based on an extensive study of literature and recurrent short descriptions of the author's own experiences and travels in West Africa, intertwined between statistical data from various international organizations like UNOCHA (*United Nations Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*) or IOM (*International Organization for Migration*) and combined with insights from recent developmental research. In accordance with the book title's promise – literally "Focus West Africa", Bernau highlights the different living realities ('Lebensrealitäten') and the fluid borders between migrants and refugees, as well as the strong sociological place

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<sup>1</sup> Mbembe, Achille. 2021. *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 91.

migration and movement itself play in the history of Western Africa. His intention, well conveyed by the subtitle's questioning of the "causation of flight/escape/migration" ("Fluchtursachen") "and what Europe should do about it" ("und was Europa tun sollte"), suggests the responsibilities of Europe. When speaking about migrants, refugees, or people engaging in a circular movement across current borders, Bernau presents an unembellished view of Europe's part in supporting corruptive, autocratic, and brutish regimes, as long as they remain in line with European political and economic interests (29). In Bernau's view, these neo-colonial policies – combined with the permanent lack of knowledge about the continent, the presence of false myths, and blunt disinterest from European policymakers in African every-day challenges – cause the current havoc African people face in their everyday lives. Historically, he sees such neo-colonial policies and relations in continuity to Europe's commercial and imperial expansions into Africa. Bernau specifically scathes those who try to glorify or neglect Europe's role in Western Africa during the colonial era, as he traces the origins of present problems back to the negative socio-political, economic, religious, and political effects of the last several centuries.

Bernau does not only try to make his readers familiar with the colonial past and its crimes, but gives an account of the pre-colonial context of Western Africa as well. Here he introduces the concept of 'complementary diversity' (75). Whereas permanent sedentarism of the majority of people became the norm in Europe already at the beginning of the Early Middle Age (81), in Western Africa this was and remained the exception. Instead, high degrees of mobility prevailed. Hence, Bernau argues, mobility forms an integral part of sedentary life in West Africa, firmly rooted in a history *de la longue durée*. In this context, Bernau debunks the unfortunately widely held opinion of migration as a direct consequence of rivalries between antagonistic ethnic groups. He shows instead that, quite to the contrary, cultural diversity and mobility were meant to ease cultural tensions and enhance social interactions: "The essence of migration is not a change of place, but an expansion of the family's radius of action." (91).<sup>2</sup>

Europe's migration policy is meant to fail, not only because it neglects social, historical, and economic facts, but also because it supports interests which massively foment additional migration dynamics in West Africa. Europe's political unwillingness to reflect on these issues produce constant hardship on the lives of West African people, but also on West African governments. For Bernau, the primary concern of European policy and decision makers seem to be security matters such as border enforcement and the 'war against terror'.

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<sup>2</sup> The original runs as follows: "[Die] Essenz von Migration [ist] nicht Ortsveränderung, sondern Ausweitung des familiären Handlungsradius."

Unfortunately, he only briefly mentions the so-called “resource curse” factor (the correlation between the presence of natural resources and a decline in democracy, economic growth and the spread of corruption and violence) and does not offer any idea as how to overcome or escape from it. Additionally, Bernau presents the role of non-European partners such as China in a too positive light. Indeed, the new ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ – a project initiated of Chinese president Xi Jinping to connect China with large parts of the Euro-Asian continent and Africa – clearly benefits its initiator, but its beneficial effects on African countries are more contested.

To sum up, Bernau offers a clear and comprehensible guide through West Africa’s pre-colonial and colonial past, and uses the implications of past disruptions to put current migration politics and economics into perspective. In his effort to shift not only focus but perspective from European points of view to those of West Africans, past and present, he is perhaps not successful in any case and throughout the book, but always stimulating. One personal regret is the shortness of the final chapter, which contains propositions to European policymakers on only three and a half pages. There Bernau presents ten important recommendations how to ease the burden on West African states. This chapter could have been the answer to the question of ‘what Europe should do’ but is definitely too short to fulfil that promise, and the book ends somehow abruptly. Although those seeking practical political answers will perhaps feel a bit disappointed after finish reading the book, to those readers interested in the complex historical and actual interconnection between Western Africa and Europe it will be informative and instructive.