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**Book Review of: BRICKER Darrell, IBBITSON John,
2020, Planète vide : le choc de la décroissance
démographique mondiale [French translation of Empty
Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline], Paris,
Les Arènes, 336 pages**

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BRICKER D., IBBITSON J., 2020, *Planète vide: Le choc de la décroissance démographique mondiale*, Paris, Les Arènes, 336 pages.

This is the French translation of *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*, a highly accessible book written by two Canadian journalists and aimed at a general readership. In it, Bricker and Ibbitson take the reader on a journey around the world, replete with observations, anecdotes, and interviews. The book delves into the current debate on the slowing of population growth in the coming decades. It is also a plea for better integration of migrants and for more international migration between countries of the Global South and North. Such migration, they argue, could play a rebalancing role—one made all the more important as the challenges facing countries of the North include not only population shrinkage but also demographic ageing and shortages of people of working age. This is already illustrated, for example, by certain Eastern European countries.

The rate of global population growth has long been a focus of anxiety and debate, particularly due to the unprecedented increase in population since the Industrial Revolution. A catastrophist vision of growth re-emerged during the 1950s–1970s in neo-Malthusian circles, who argued that the challenge is to curb it. Jacques Véron's latest book (2020, *Faut-il avoir peur de la population mondiale? [Should We Be Afraid of the Global Population?] Le Seuil*), surveys the debate. Recently, fears around climate change have once again brought it to the fore. But various aspects of the issue are already well established, i.e. that the rate of growth will gradually slow in the decades to come, for example, or that little can be done to control it in the short term while respecting fundamental rights.

The latest estimates indicate that the world's population is currently growing at 2% per year. This rate has been declining for several decades. The United Nations projections are adjusted every 2 years, but the latest round has been delayed since 2019, a combined effect of a change in methodology and the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted both forecasts and the organization of the work itself. The median scenario in the most recent projections, published in June 2019, has the world population peaking slightly below 11 billion around the year 2100.⁽¹⁾ But these results—the fruit of decades of work on refining models and improving knowledge on countries around the world—are currently under debate. The projections of a team from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis and the University of Vienna, based on assumptions of high rates of urbanization and education, are lower. They predict a reversal of the trend around the year 2060,⁽²⁾ which corresponds to the lowest-growth scenario in the United Nations range. The debate on the future of the world population has recently been revived, with various articles published in *The*

(1) UN-DESA, 2019, *World Population Prospects 2019*. <https://population.un.org/wpp>

(2) Lutz W., Butz W. P., Samir K. C., 2014, *World Population and Human Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford University Press.

Lancet and *Nature*.⁽³⁾ Critics of the United Nations projections accuse them of catastrophizing, and sometimes argue that they represent prejudice against the Global South. This is the position taken by Bricker and Ibbitson in this book.

Future population growth will mainly be driven by the African continent. Bricker and Ibbitson's chapter on Africa is fairly characteristic of the book, with its rapid sweep across a range of highly varied situations, interspersed with generalizations on the functioning of society and its transformations, notably on education, marriage, and procreation. The example of Kibera, a district in the capital of Kenya, one of the continent's emerging countries, is used to present the analysis of the dynamics of poverty, migration, identity, and, ultimately, fertility. The argument suffers from an overt tribalism and leans heavily on a celebratory view of the African family. The examination of the case of Kibera is accompanied by an analysis of figures and trends that mixes observations from international circles in the Kenyan capital (airports, NGOs, business, private clubs) and anecdotes provided by other journalists. Along the way, the authors introduce topics such as the development of smartphone apps for managing matrimonial compensation, questions of fertility, and gender relations in rural Benin, etc. Their main conclusions are that increasing numbers of girls are in education and that, ultimately, the predictions of the University of Vienna are better founded than those of the United Nations.

Much of the book is devoted to travel stories (in the manner of past explorers) and anecdotes that are admittedly of some interest in the context. The analyses, based on figures from international reports, are sometimes correct, but the book is not always persuasive. The authors sometimes resort to caricature or seek to shock. This lack of nuance, along with a tendency to plunge into what in some cases are obsolete debates, greatly undermines their argument. It is also too early to know whether the shifts in demographic trends that began in the last 2 years with the COVID-19 pandemic (which began after the writing this book) will persist over time.

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(3) See Vollset S. E., Goren E., Yuan C.-W., Cao J., Smith A. E. et al., 2020, Fertility, mortality, migration, and population scenarios for 195 countries and territories from 2017 to 2100: A forecasting analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study, *The Lancet*, 396(10258), 1285–1306 ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30677-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30677-2)); the critique of these scenarios in Gietel-Basten S., Sobotka T., 2020, Uncertain population futures: Critical reflections on the IHME Scenarios of future fertility, mortality, migration and population trends from 2017 to 2100, *SocArXiv* (<https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/5syef>); and Adam D., 2021, How far will global population rise? Researchers can't agree, *Nature* (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02522-6>).