

## Chapter 2

# Healing the Scars of History: Borders, Migration, and the Reproduction of Structural Injustice



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*Social injustice still needs to be denounced and fought. The world will not get better on its own.*  
Hobsbawn (2002: 418)

**Abstract** The suppression of trade barriers and liberalization of financial flows inherent to the expansive dynamic of globalization have not extended to international flows of workers. To impede the free movement of workers, restrictive migratory policies have been implemented, and borders have been fortified with walls and fences. In the face of this widespread phenomenon, this chapter presents an alternative consisting of three steps. First, it is noted that in the current migratory context, borders play a key role in reproducing inequalities between countries. Next, it is argued that given the incompatibility of this function with global justice, it is necessary to seek some remedy to put an end to the suffering caused by this structural injustice, a suffering that is endured by an immense number of people unlucky enough to have been born on the wrong side of a border. After presenting a conception of borders that, unlike walls, would enable the movements of people, finally, a scenario is proposed in which the rights of political membership would be reassigned in a cosmopolitan manner and in which borders would usually remain open. Although this does not entail a radical suppression of the aforementioned injustice, its implementation would contribute to not only its reduction but also to the compensation of victims.

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## 2.1 Introduction

It is no great stretch of the imagination to picture the borders that politically divide up the surface of the planet as “the scars of history.” This old metaphor, endowed with a powerful heuristic capacity, suggests a conception of borders as lasting signs that maintain the memory of a wound. Once formed, scars can continue to cause severe pain, even to the point of requiring the administration of analgesics. Some borders are recent and still ooze as if they were open wounds, others are older and appear as scars that continue generating rather acute discomfort. In any case, the genesis and imposition of the majority of borderlines involves grievances, suffering, violence and even cadavers. They are the result of bloody wars or unequal agreements promoted by nationalist ambitions or imperial powers that sought to seize the space and wealth deposited in a territory and to dominate the population established there.

Over time, borders become consolidated and are usually formally recognized and even internalized by all parties affected, and yet they still cannot hide their condition of imposed scars. Borders are human creations, not inventions of nature (Foucher 2012).<sup>1</sup> However, this artificial character is sometimes camouflaged, like so many objects of the social construction of reality, by an intense process of naturalization. Borders, like States themselves, are imposed on the consciousness of individuals and appear before them as given and immovable realities. Moreover, borders are frequently presented as a phenomenon beyond politics about which questions cannot be asked or alternatives considered, as if, for example, in the face of a tsunami.

That borders are the product of human action does not mean that all individuals or States actively participated in their creation. Few States have been able to establish their own borders; many are forced to endure them as the inheritance of the past. As a result of asymmetrical power relations, many borderlines are the object of endless litigation. Their existence is experienced as arbitrary, even random, at least by those who suffer their effects for the simple fact of having been born on one side or the other (Velasco 2016). While it is true that nobody chooses where they are born, nor on what side of a border, everyone should have the possibility of choosing where to live. While the former –the place of birth– is a question of necessity, the latter –the place where one lives– should be the result of the exercise of freedom.

Borders are the products of history, and therefore, they are contingent. Although they are not strictly necessary, they are, however, extremely functional. They obey practical interests and constitute powerful mechanisms for the organization and self-preservation of societies, for the distribution of resources and services, and for the management and maintenance of political power. They are functional as well, and this will be the object of special critical analysis in this chapter, to an unequal distribution of wealth within the global socio-economic system that is the source of

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<sup>1</sup> Nature knows no political borders: neither winds nor desert sands nor birds stop for them, nor do toxic clouds such as those that drifted from Chernobyl (Ukraine) across the Iron Curtain toward the countries of Central Europe.