

# **Borders: The Global Caste System**

**Illustrating Why People Migrate, the Risks They Face, and Who Benefits**

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The border does not divide one world from another. There is only one world, and the border is tearing it apart.

## **Borders: The Global Caste System**

The border is not just a wall or a line on a map. It's a power structure, a system of control. The border is everywhere that people live in fear of deportation, everywhere migrants are denied the rights accorded citizens, everywhere human beings are segregated into included and excluded.

The border divides the whole world into gated communities and prisons, one within the other in concentric circles of privilege and control. At one end of the continuum, there are billionaires who can fly anywhere in private jets; at the other end, inmates in solitary confinement. As long as there is a border between you and those less fortunate than you, you can be sure there will be a border above you, too, keeping you from the things you need. And who will tear down that second border with you, if not the people separated from you by the first?

## **Defying Global Apartheid**

Speak of freedom all you like—we live in a world of walls.

There used to be few enough that we could keep up with them—Hadrian's Wall, the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall. Now they're everywhere. The walls of the old days have gone viral, penetrating every level of society. Wall Street, named after a stockade built by African slaves to protect European colonists, exemplifies this transformation: it's no longer a question of fencing out the natives, but of a market economy that imposes divisions throughout the entire world.

These divisions take many forms. There are physical boundaries—the walls of detention centers, the fences of concrete and barbed wire, the perimeters that enclose private campuses and gated communities. There are boundaries controlling the flow of information: security clearances, classified databases, internet firewalls that cordon off entire countries. There are social boundaries—the privileges of citizenship, the barriers of racism, all the ways that money calibrates what each person can and cannot do.

All of these divisions are predicated on ceaseless violence. For some, this means imprisonment, deportation, torture, solitary confinement, vigilante attacks, state-sanctioned murder. For others, it means police patrols, security checkpoints, traffic stops, background checks, street harassment, surveillance, bureaucracy, propaganda.

Borders don't just divide countries: they exist wherever people live in fear of immigration raids, wherever people have to accept lower wages because they have no documents. The world isn't just divided horizontally into different jurisdictions—it is divided socially into different zones of privilege, of access. The US-Mexico border is part of the same structure as the chain-link fence that keeps homeless people out of an empty parking lot and the price bracket that keeps day laborers from buying the "organic" option at the grocery store even if they were the ones who picked the vegetables.

The purpose of the border is not to regulate migration. It is to control communities on both sides of the wall. The border regime enables the authorities to force down wages, suppress dissent, and channel resentment towards those who have the least power in society rather than those who have the most.

We're told that borders protect us from outsiders. But how did they become outside in the first place? We are all joined in a single worldwide economy, in which resources are extracted from one country and sent to another, in which profits made in one country are hoarded in another. This isn't new—it's been going on since the colonization of the Americas.

So who is invading whom? The corporations that plunder the south, or the migrants who go north, following the resources and opportunities that have been taken away? If anyone has a right to cross these lands, isn't it the descendants of the peoples who lived here before European settlement?

There are 11 million undocumented people living in the United States today. They are essential to the functioning of the economy; without their cheap labor, agriculture and construction work would grind to a halt. Many of them have lived in the US for many years or decades. Of those who cross from Mexico without papers, fully half of them are deportees attempting to return to their families in the US.

The border is not intended to keep undocumented people out. The goal is to make sure that entering the United States without papers is dangerous, traumatizing, and expensive—but possible. The point of deportations is not to empty the US of undocumented people. It is to terrorize those who live in the US with the threat of deportation. This serves to maintain a caste system by blackmailing a captive population.

So long as a massive part of the US population lives in constant danger and without any rights, employers have access to a vast pool of disposable labor that is easy to exploit. This drives down wages for workers with US citizenship, too. But it's not undocumented immigrants who are "stealing their jobs"—it's the border itself.

Accusing migrants of stealing jobs from US citizens is blaming the victim. If everyone were accorded the same rights, if national boundaries did not artificially create impoverished populations in countries that are stripped of natural resources and treated as garbage dumps, migrant labor could not undercut anyone else's job opportunities. If not for all the risks and pressures undocumented workers face, they would be able to obtain the same price for their labor as everyone else. Time and again, undocumented workers have demonstrated their courage in struggles for higher wages, despite having to overcome obstacles other workers do not face. But border enforcement drives down wages across the board. *That's the point of it.*

In deporting people who have lived in the US for decades, the US government is using Mexico as a concentration camp to conceal unemployment and other problems. The desperation and the firearms produced in the US reappear in Mexico in a brutal illegal economy driven by the appetite of US consumers for narcotics. This is a way of exporting the violence that is essential to maintaining such tremendous imbalances of power. And as it has become more difficult and therefore more expensive to enter the United States without documents, the cartels have been drawn into the business, creating a feedback loop of brutality that the US authorities use to justify further the clampdowns.

The cycle repeats and intensifies.

The border sends resources and profits one way, and human beings the other. This is how the rich amass great concentrations of wealth: not just by accumulating resources in one place, but also by excluding people from them.

If a prisoner is a person contained by walls, what does that make us? Prisons don't just contain the people inside them. When the border is everywhere, everyone is transformed into a prisoner or prison guard.

It's easy to be bribed by the advantages of citizenship: being able to travel more freely, being allowed to participate legally in the labor market, being able to access what is left of government assistance, being acknowledged as a part of society. Yet these privileges come at a terrible cost, for the documents one person holds only have value because others are without them. Their value is based on artificial scarcity.

As long as there is a border between you and those less fortunate than you, you can be sure there will also be borders above you, keeping you from things that you need. Some people are deported, others are evicted, but the fundamental mechanisms are the same. And who will help you tear down the borders above you, if not the people separated from you by the borders below?

Borders are just social constructs—they are imaginary frameworks imposed on the real world. There is nothing necessary or inevitable about them. Were it not for the violence of the believers, they would cease to exist.

Crossing the border without documents is a way of resisting. So is getting to know people who are affected by the border in ways that you are not, setting out to understand and share their struggles. Together, we can make the border unenforceable—a step towards creating a world in which everyone will be free to travel wherever they desire, to use their creative energy however they see fit, to fulfill their potential on their own terms.

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