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Understanding Why People Die:
The Role of Borders in Contemporary Capitalism

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Master in Political Economy

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CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS
E HUMANAS

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To all the people on the move.

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Resumo

Legislação, discurso e violência de fronteiras explodiram nos últimos anos naquilo a que Mezzadra e Nielson chamaram uma proliferação de fronteiras (2013). Contudo, as fronteiras não diminuem os fluxos migratórios. Não são barreiras à passagem de pessoas, mas formas de determinar as condições dessa passagem. As fronteiras alocam direitos. Em particular, alocam o direito a trabalhar legalmente, assim facilitando a subjugação de quem é obrigado a fazê-lo ilegalmente. Assim, as fronteiras podem ser vistas como instrumentos estatais de acumulação de capital que tornam uma secção da classe trabalhadora mais disciplinada e a sua força de trabalho mais barata.

Nesta dissertação, ligando o trabalho de David Harvey (2003) ao de Nancy Fraser (2022), argumento que as fronteiras funcionam como mecanismos de acumulação de capital através da expropriação de trabalhadores construídos como estrangeiros. As fronteiras organizam a migração de forma a apropriar o seu potencial produtivo. É este o seu papel no capitalismo contemporâneo.

Como corolário, argumento que a proliferação de fronteiras teve início na década de 1980 como uma forma de o capital colmatar os efeitos da crise que o capitalismo global está a atravessar desde o início da década de 1970. Faço-o recorrendo a dados sobre a violência, discurso e legislação de fronteiras referente ao período entre a Segunda Guerra Mundial e os dias de hoje, de modo a localizar a proliferação de fronteiras na história de crise na Europa e utilizo os modelos teóricos de Fraser e Harvey para estabelecer uma ligação entre essa proliferação e as crises do capitalismo.

Palavras-chave: proliferação de fronteiras, expropriação, crises de sobreacumulação.

Abstract

Border legislation, discourse and violence have all exploded in recent years in what Mezzadra and Nielson call a proliferation of borders (2013). However, borders do not reduce migration fluxes. In fact, rather than act as barriers to the passage of people, they determine the conditions of that passage. Borders allocate rights. In particular, they allocate the right to work legally and thus facilitate the subjugation of those forced to do it illegally. From this point of view, borders can be seen as state-sanctioned instruments of capital accumulation that render a section of the working class more disciplined and its labor power cheaper.

In this dissertation, connecting the works of David Harvey (2003) and Nancy Fraser (2022), I argue that borders function as instruments of capital accumulation through the expropriation of workers deemed foreign. Borders organize migration so as to seize its productive potential. This is their role in contemporary capitalism.

As a corollary of this claim, I argue that the proliferation of borders began in the 1980s as a way for capital to stifle the effects of the crisis that global capitalism has been going through since the beginning of the 1970s. I do this by using data on border violence, discourse and legislation referring to the period from WWII to the present day in order to locate the proliferation of borders in the history of crises in Europe and I go on to apply Fraser's and Harvey's theoretical framework (2022) to connect the former to the latter.

Keywords: proliferation of borders, expropriation, crises of overaccumulation

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Preface
Understanding Why People Die

Over the last 10 years, I have taken part in civil sea rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean sea. These operations always begin with a week or so during which we undergo an intense series of meetings, briefings and trainings, with the goal to make sure that the new crew has all the practical and theoretical knowledge they need to conduct a rescue operation in the safest possible manner. That includes, for instance, practicing the handling of the equipment both on and offshore, and discussions on the current political situation and the risks we may come across when we are at sea.

There is one particular briefing with a slide called “Understanding Why People Die”. The content is essentially an infographic with a list of all the potential causes of death of migrants crossing the Mediterranean sea. It reads “drowning”, “crushing”, “dehydration”, “smoke inhalation” and so on. This slide always gives way to long discussions about the best practices to prevent death for the greatest possible number of people, because, as anyone who is involved in this type of humanitarian work knows, we cannot rescue everyone. In fact, one of the first hard truths one learns at sea is that sea rescue is no solution to the problem it addresses. We are an emergency response to a problem that is much larger than us. A quick fix, at best. This is why the principle that guides every operational decision is the resigned, utilitarian phrase “we do what is best for most”.

So why do people actually die? “Drowning”, “crushing”, “dehydration”, “smoke inhalation” and so on, constitute an answer too narrow to be satisfying. While they may be the immediate causes of death, they cannot hope to explain why at least 30 thousand people have lost their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean sea only in the last decade. Nor can they explain why that tragedy keeps unfolding, even as I write this, with no end in sight. Our answer must be broader.

After many years of civil sea rescue, I have come to realize that the root causes of so much drowning cannot be found at sea. People do not die because of some natural disaster, against which there is nothing to be done, but as the direct result of human-made institutions, policies and practices. Therefore, the root causes must be sought elsewhere, in our borders, in our economic system, in the way our society is organized, in our collective beliefs, and wherever power lies. To a large extent, this question is what led me to enroll in a master’s degree in Political Economy, and this dissertation is intended as a modest first step in the quest for an answer. My hope is that, in seeking to understand why borders are the site of all this death, we may one day be able to end it.

Introduction
Borders Are Not Closing Down

"Fog and dirt, violence and magic have surrounded the tracing and institution of borders since late antiquity. Sources from around the world tell us wonderful and frightening stories about the tracing of demarcation lines [...]. These stories speak of the productive power of the border – of the strategic role it plays in the fabrication of the world."

Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson, Border as Method or The Multiplication of Labor

Turn on the news or open a newspaper in any Western country today and you are almost certainly going to see a piece related to borders and migration. Moreover, that piece will likely be about some state official trying or vowing to implement some new form of restriction to the movement of people. Whether it is the United Kingdom (UK) government wanting to send asylum seekers to Rwanda (BBC, 2024), the Italian prime-minister fighting with judicial courts to send migrants to detention centers in Albania (Amante and Fonte, 2024) or Donald Trump promising to erect a "big fat beautiful wall" along the border with Mexico (Finnegan, 2016), the media is flooded with politicians' promises and attempts to "close the borders". Border policy has risen to such a high level of importance that many elections are now largely fought in the arena marked out by politicians' positions on the need to control immigration. Phrases like "take back control of our border", "stop the boats" and "crack down on illegal immigrants" have become commonplace campaign promises. Right-wing and left-wing governments differ in the arguments and language they employ but largely agree that borders must be strengthened and illegal migration must be curtailed (Natter, Czaika and de Haas, 2020).

On the opposite side of the debate, we often listen to the outrage of humanitarian workers or human rights advocates about those detention centers and walls, who generally denounce the violence inherent in such structures through effective and self-explanatory concepts like "Fortress Europe" or slogans like "Build Bridges Not Walls", that have by now become familiar. Indeed, it has become common to see images of brick walls or barbed wire around depictions of Europe to highlight its exclusionary nature. Seemingly with the same goals in mind, several scholars have coined terms such as "Fortress World", "Fortress Capitalism" and "Gated Capitalism" (Tehranian, 1998; Raskin, Electris and Rosen, 2010; Georgi, 2019).

Different in intent and narrative tools as these approaches may be, they are all erected upon an assumption repeated to such an extent that it has become somewhat an unquestionable truth: *borders are closing down*. Whether it is interpreted as the result of an

attempt to protect citizens from foreign invasions and crime or as a manifestation of a racist Western-centric vision of the world, countries have supposedly become more closed to the passage of people. Borders across the world have hardened and migration has never been so restricted. Moreover, the thousands of deaths in shipwrecks in the Mediterranean sea every year, images of overcrowded refugee camps in Greece, as well as occasional reports of torture and slavery in EU-sponsored detention centers in Libya all seem to corroborate this idea.

This is grossly misleading. In fact, available data suggests quite the opposite. As frequently happens with such broad political statements, 'borders are closing down' is quite an equivocal one, but let us try to pin down its meaning. The most immediate interpretation is the easiest to disprove. Let us suppose the statement means that governments, determined to reduce migration flows, as their rhetoric seems to imply, implement measures that effectively achieve that goal. A look at the evolution of migrant stocks across the world shows that they have remained remarkably stable over the past decades (de Haas, 2023), contrary to what anyone solely paying attention to European political discourse would be inclined to believe. If we focus our attention on the European Union (EU), migration fluxes actually increased from the 1980s onward, as we will see in Chapter 2.

A more nuanced interpretation would take into account that these measures may not be very effective in reaching their stated goal. In that case, migrants would presumably still cross borders in similar numbers but would find it harder to do so or, more specifically, they would have less rights to enter or stay in the host country than before. Data suggests that this is also not the case.

Drawing from the DEMIG POLICY database, that encompasses 6,500 border policy changes in 45 countries, de Haas and his collaborators showed that, from the end of World War II (WWII) to 2014, border policies have consistently been dominated by *changes towards less restrictiveness* (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli, 2014; DEMIG POLICY, 2014). A given policy is categorized as towards less restrictiveness if it extends the rights of migrants to move and settle within a country. This means that there have been more policy changes that extend the rights attributed to the targeted migrant groups than changes that restrict them[1]. This holds not only for the set of 45 countries the database covers, but also for specific regions such as the European Union, and it suggests that border policy is not "closing down". As a matter of fact, it seems to be opening up, contrary to what some scholars have suggested[2]. Crucially, this is not to say that the extreme violence that migrants

[1] One example of a border policy change towards less restrictiveness is the labor agreement that Germany signed with Turkey in 1961 in order to recruit guest workers. An example of a change towards more restrictiveness is the Italian 2009 law that increased the maximum period for which irregular migrants may be detained (de Haas et al., 2015).
[2] See, for example, Georgi (2019).

are forced to endure in their confrontation with border enforcement is not real or has not increased. Indeed, it is and it has, as I argue in Chapter 2. But this does not mean that borders across the world have become more restrictive towards human mobility. Notably, the only group for whom border policies have become more restrictive over that period is undocumented migrants[3].

The attentive reader may be wondering whether the moral panic about the so-called refugee crisis around 2015 might have changed this trend, as more than a million Syrian refugees fleeing war sought safety in the EU amid inflamed political rhetoric and growing obstacles imposed by the member states. On this note, another study, hinged on an updated version of the DEMIG POLICY database, drew similar conclusions up to the year 2020 (Czaika *et al.*, 2024). Borders may have become more restrictive for specific groups of people and, in the case of Syrian refugees coming to the EU, they definitely did[4], but here I am interested in whether borders are opening up or closing down for migration as a whole, not for specific groups.

Broad in scope as these studies are (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli, 2014; Czaika *et al.*, 2024), they have two shortcomings that should be acknowledged here. The first is that the DEMIG POLICY database refers exclusively to national policy. Supra-national institutions such as those that compose the EU also implement border policies. However, those policies are usually integrated into national laws, which means that the error introduced by ignoring EU policy is minimal. The second is that it refers exclusively to policy. This means that it does not account for systematic border practices that are not written into laws or decrees, for instance the widespread practice of drift-backs by the Hellenic coast guard and Frontex in the Aegean sea (Forensic Architecture, 2020) or the illegal pull-backs by the Libyan coast guard in the Central Mediterranean (Oltermann and Giuffrida, 2022).

Strictly speaking, we cannot say with certainty that borders are not closing down just by looking at policy, since there is more to borders than just that. However, it would be rather absurd to claim that governments are truly as determined to reduce migration flows as they claim to be while they keep passing laws, the majority of which extend the rights of people to move and settle into their respective countries. What we can say with certainty is that border policy is becoming less restrictive.

But let us, for a moment, entertain the possibility that borders are actually closing down in the sense that more and more restrictions are being imposed on the movement of people. We are used to thinking of restrictions to freedom of movement as deterrents to potential

[3] By definition, migrants only become undocumented as they come in contact with border restrictions, and those restrictions are ever-changing. This means that when we say that restrictions have increased for this particular group over the years, we must keep in mind that those who fit into that group are also ever-changing.
[4] See, for example, the rollback of family reunification in Germany in 2016 (InfoMigrants, 2020).

migrants. The greater the barriers, the less people will move. Intuitive as that may sound, data suggests something different. Empirical studies show that, rather paradoxically, border restrictions generally backfire, that is, they tend to be accompanied by higher levels of migration. And what is maybe even more puzzling is that they seem to trigger more migration particularly from the groups targeted by those restrictions (de Haas *et al.*, 2019; de Haas, 2023). A clear-cut illustration of this "migration paradox", as de Haas calls it, was given to us by Brexit. The UK decided to leave the EU in 2020 as the result of a referendum largely influenced by widespread dissatisfaction regarding the perceived permissiveness of the country's immigration laws (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). The net migration[5] to the UK just before the referendum was around 275,000, a number that jumped to 764,000, the highest in history. The example I just laid out, by itself, does not prove that levels of migration rose *because* of Brexit, but there are many examples of this correlation in the literature (de Haas, 2023, p. 328). As is the case with most apparent paradoxes, this one just stands to show that our intuition is misleading. Studies show that rather than simply deterring migration flows, border restrictions trigger reactions that typically end up either boosting the numbers or keeping them the same.

Hein de Haas categorizes these reactions in four different effects. The first is called "the waterbed effect" and it refers to the fact that restrictions to freedom of movement tend to reroute the target groups who, instead of deciding not to migrate, pick other routes to do so. Much in the same way as when one sits on a waterbed, the other sides tend to rise, restricting one route will increase the number of people seeking alternative ones. Depending on the situation, alternative routes may also be illegal ones, that is, border restrictions may have the effect of "driving migration underground". To put it crudely, making it illegal to migrate makes people migrate illegally. In certain cases, this has the result of boosting cross-border smuggling businesses, for example[6].

The third effect is called "now or never migration" and it refers to the fact that announcing the imminent introduction of new restrictions tends to have the consequence of triggering people who were considering to migrate but had not actually moved yet to feel pressured to do so before it is too late. Finally, "border restrictions turn temporary into permanent migration". In conditions of freedom of movement, migration tends to be strongly correlated with business cycles. In times of economic expansion, there is higher demand for labor, which generates a greater influx of migrants. Conversely, in times of economic

[5] Net migration is defined as the difference between the number of people entering a country and the number of people leaving.

[6] Note that this is yet another point where political discourse on migration is misleading. Heads of state across the EU, for instance, regularly blame and vow to fight "criminal smuggling networks" for irregular migrants while ramping up the very restrictions that sustain their entire business model (Home Office, 2024; Guerette & Clarke, 2005; Triandafyllidou, 2018).

recession, fluxes tend to reduce. Also, in those conditions, the same people show a propensity to travel back and forth in what is usually referred to as circular migration. Border restrictions break this cycle. Rather than stopping people from migrating, they encourage them to settle for fear that, if they travel to their country of origin, they may not be able to come back. Therefore, counterintuitively, restrictions implemented with the professed aim of deterring the movement of people end up deterring their return instead, thereby increasing the overall migrant stock. These last two effects, encouraging 'now or never' migration and deterring returns, are likely to have been the main causes of the high numbers of pre-Brexit immigration mentioned above.

We have seen that, according to available empirical data, borders do not seem to be closing down and, even when they do, that does not imply a reduction in migration fluxes. I will not delve deeper into this. My insistence on analyzing the relationship between the character and the effects of border policies is not exactly to settle once and for all the discussion of whether borders are closing down more than they are opening up. I do not find that discussion particularly fruitful as statements as ambiguous as 'the borders are closing down' do not warrant a great deal of scientific rigour. My aim is rather to point out that there is a contradiction between the professed purpose of borders and their effects in material reality. Politicians across the Western world promise to reduce migration fluxes but that has not happened. One could conjecture that this is due to inefficient policies, but that would still not explain why border policy has been dominated by changes towards less restrictiveness since the end of WWII. That suggests intentionality, rather than ineffectiveness.

The need to restrict migration has become one of the most important topics within the contemporary political debate, but borders do not seem to be getting more restrictive. How do we make sense of this? This problem is far from trivial and, as I will argue, it forces us to reject the border policy restrictiveness framework altogether. As we shall see, solving this problem will provide us with an answer to the fundamental question that this work aims to answer: *What is the role of borders in contemporary capitalism?* Before we get to that, let us turn to a more basic, though essential, question.

"What is a border?"

Borders are often depicted as solid walls or thin lines on a map that unequivocally divide nations' territories, and hence jurisdictions and political economies. These simplistic representations obscure the true nature of the modern border. If we are to understand the role of the modern border, we must first see it as a complex and ever-changing set of structures that extends far inside and outside countries, manifesting in the form of denial of freedom and threats of detention and deportation.

To define a border is a complex task for a number of reasons. The first of them is the very practical fact that borders have evolved through time and space to the point where two different things we call borders may have very little in common, rendering the writing of a definition that encompasses both a rather futile effort. A more philosophical reason, pointed out by Étienne Balibar in his well-known essay whose title lends its name to this section, is that the very attempt to define anything presupposes some conception of what a border is, since to define or identify something is nothing other than to trace a border around it, to assign a boundary separating it from everything else. In his words, "the theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition" (2012, p. 76).

Balibar describes the equivocal character of borders in three major characteristics that I consider to be an enlightening way to conceptualize the complexity of defining borders in any meaningful way: overdetermination, polysemy and heterogeneity. Borders are overdetermined in the sense that they are intrinsically sanctioned and reduplicated by other geopolitical divisions, whether these are linguistic, cultural, political or otherwise. "Without the world-configuring function they perform, there would be no borders - or no lasting borders" (2012, p. 79). They are polysemic in the sense that they affect different people differently. For some, the border is a mere formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgment of social status. For others, it pervades every aspect of their lives, ultimately even resulting in their death – the tragic fate met by countless lives in the waters of the Mediterranean sea. Finally, borders are heterogeneous in the sense that the tendency of linguistic, cultural, political borders to coincide, that was once more or less achieved through the rise of the nation-state, is breaking up. Externalization agreements have effectively pushed the influence of European border controls well into Africa and Asia, at the same time that the highly differentiated allocation of rights among distinct social groups has rendered the border ubiquitous within national territories. Indeed, "some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all" (2012, p. 84).

Despite these obstacles, it is important to put forth a working definition. For the purposes of this research, borders are all institutions, policies and practices with the professed purpose of regulating the movement of people between countries. To be sure, this definition rules out important barriers or dividing lines that characterize our time, such as the territorial borders between city and suburb or the ideological ones between racialized and non-racialized people, but these are not the ones I want to analyze throughout this work. Furthermore, note that I am including in my definition practices that aim to regulate the movement of people. This encompasses, for example, political discourse on borders and migration, as we will see in Chapter 2.

The need for a structural explanation of the politicization of migration

The strand of literature on the politicization of migration aims to understand the reasons that made migration a topic so intensely debated in today's political discourse. Authors generally agree that there has been an increase in the salience of the topic over the last decades, but the factors that contributed to this state of affairs are disputed. These factors include aspects directly related to migration, like the number of migrants and the characteristics of those migrants, socio-economic aspects like the levels of unemployment, and political aspects like the specific characteristics of party leaders, the type of policies they implement and the coalition dynamics between parties (Berkhout, 2012; Brug *et al.*, 2015; Grande and and Fatke, 2019; Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2019). While the factors analyzed in this strand of literature vary significantly, the methods rely overwhelmingly on comparative analysis between countries.

Important as these studies are in explaining country-specific variations in the way the politicization of migration takes hold, they cannot hope to explain it as a whole. The very fact that so many different countries are studied suggests precisely that the causes of this phenomenon cannot be found in any one specific country. Comparative analysis cannot provide information on the root causes of phenomena that affect all the units of analysis being compared. The apparent globality of this phenomenon rules out country-specific explanations and suggests that something more structural is at stake.

Throughout this work, I want to avoid the all-too-familiar nation-states as standard units of analysis in order to grasp the deeper logics or, in Saskia Sassen's words, the "subterranean trends", that are responsible for the great increase in the salience of migration over the last decades (2014). Only through this lens can we assess whether the problems we see today are manifestations of old trends or something completely new. This is why I believe a political-economic explanation is in order, one that looks into the workings of capital accumulation and the global development of capitalism itself.

A sketch of the argument

A productive way of approaching the question of the role of borders is to look carefully at how they changed over time and what forces were involved in those changes. For this reason, my argument begins by answering the following, somewhat preliminary, question: if borders did not get more restrictive over the last decades, what exactly changed? I take Sandro Mezzadra's and Brett Nielson's concept of *proliferation of borders* and propose an analytical model that allows us to assert what proliferated and when. Focusing on the EU, I show that a proliferation of border legislation and discourse began in the 1980s, and a

proliferation of border violence began around the end of the 1990s. As we have seen, this proliferation of border legislation was dominated by changes of border policies towards less restrictiveness, contrary to what the proliferation of border discourse would have us believe. This suggests that borders do more than exclude certain people from national territory. In fact, it suggests that the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion may not be the most enlightening way to look at borders. Instead, I consider inclusion and exclusion to be both ends of a spectrum of *differential inclusion* and, most importantly, that mechanisms of inclusion can be just as violent as those of exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Following the works of Mezzadra, Nielson and Nicholas De Genova, I regard borders as instruments of control and filtration, rather than exclusion, that allocate rights and constrain the freedom of those deemed foreign. In some instances, borders include foreigners with little damage to their freedom, as compared to those attributed to citizens. This is what happened across Western Europe between WWII and the beginning of the 1970s. In this period, guest worker programs brought in vast numbers of migrants to fill the labor shortages caused by the postwar economic boom. By employing workers brought in via these programs, capital was able to accumulate through their exploitation. In other instances, borders include while withholding freedom, for example by making it more difficult for migrant workers to regularize their status or by legally preventing them from changing employer, region or sector. The result, in this case, is the subjugation of a part of the workforce which, due to legal conditions that separate it from the paradigm of the 'free' worker, becomes willing to work for lower compensations, often less than its costs of reproduction. Inclusion, in this sense, is to be seen as devoted to the subordination of labor (De Genova, 2002). This way, borders lower labor costs, and thus lower production costs. By keeping migrant workers in conditions of irregularity or by coupling their right to legally stay in national territory to their work contract, to give just two examples, these workers are made unfree and, therefore, the appropriation of the product of their labor cannot be considered exploitation, in the traditional Marxist sense. They are expropriated through processes of subjugation of labor akin to those described by Marx in his account of so-called primitive accumulation (2019). This is what has happened ever since the beginning of the proliferation of borders in the 1980s. Through the proliferation of border legislation, discourse and violence, migrant workers have been rendered increasingly expropriable.

Here I draw on Nancy Fraser's theoretical framework, based on a conceptual separation between exploitation, meaning the appropriation of the surplus value produced by 'free' workers, and expropriation, capital accumulation through other, often more overtly violent, means (2022). Crucially, I will argue, this separation is dependent on the naturalization of the difference in treatment of foreigners and nationals.

This leads us to the main claim I want to put forth in this work: borders function as instruments of capital accumulation through the expropriation of workers deemed foreign. In moments when migrants' freedom is less infringed upon as compared to that of nationals, they include in such a way as to render migrants exploitable. In moments when migrants' freedom is more limited, they include in such a way as to render them expropriable. Borders organize migration so as to seize its productive potential. This is their role in contemporary capitalism.

As many authors have pointed out, processes of expropriation, far from having been restricted only to an initial moment in the constitution of the capitalist mode of production, are still very much alive (Arendt, 1951; Luxemburg, 1951; Harvey, 2003). They are a necessary form of accumulation of which capital has particular need whenever it encounters obstacles to accumulating through exploitation, that is, whenever a crisis of overaccumulation takes place. As a corollary of the main claim in this dissertation, seeing the proliferation of borders as a form of enhancing expropriation provides us with a historical explanation for it. In the postwar economic boom, a time of unprecedented economic expansion, capital required large numbers of workers to exploit. Quantity was given priority over quality. Ever since the onset of the crisis of overaccumulation many authors have argued we have been living through since the 1970s (Arrighi, 1994; Harvey, 2003, 2007; Brenner, 2006), capital has required not just any kind of workers, but expropriable ones. Quality was given priority over quantity, and borders proliferated in order to provide capital with just that kind of worker. Therefore, the proliferation of borders began in the 1980s as a way for capital to stifle the effects of the crisis that global capitalism has been going through since the beginning of the 1970s.

In what follows, I outline the contents of each of the four chapters that compose this dissertation.

Outline of the dissertation

The first chapter establishes the bulk of the theoretical tools that I will need in order to answer the main question of this dissertation. I begin by briefly introducing the autonomy of migration literature and adopting its key assumption that human mobility is a primordial factor in the construction of capitalist social relations. Using David Harvey's analysis, I describe Marx's theory of crisis of overaccumulation and its complex relationship with exploitation and other forms of capital accumulation. Then, I discuss Nancy Fraser's theoretical framework, in particular the concept of expropriation, which she uses to refer to those alternative forms of accumulation akin to the processes involved in primitive accumulation. I analyze, and adapt to the analysis of the proliferation of borders, her

theoretical framework, as well as her insights on capitalism's structural need for racial oppression.

As we saw in the beginning of this introduction, the ways in which borders have evolved over the last decades is a contentious subject. I dedicate the second chapter to discussing the question of what exactly took place that we may call a proliferation of borders. I begin by proposing an analytical model based on three axes: the proliferation of border legislation, discourse and violence. This three-way separation is not prompted by any belief in the meaning of any of these axes by itself. Instead, the three axes are to be seen as purely analytical categories motivated by their measurability, as mere indicators of the more fundamental phenomenon that underlies them, the proliferation of borders.

I analyze the proliferation of border legislation through an analysis of the evolution of the number of border policy changes registered in a subset of EU member states over the years and the number of mentions of migration in conclusions issued by the European Council since its founding. In the former, data shows a sizable increase beginning in the end of the 1980s, whereas in the latter, it reveals an increase from the beginning of the 1990s. The proliferation of border discourse is measured through the salience of migration in both electoral manifestos and political discourse in the media. A visible increase in both is registered from the 1980s onward. The final axis, the proliferation of border violence, is measured through an analysis of how the number of recorded deaths at the EU borders and the funding for border enforcement at the EU level have evolved over the years. In both, I find an increase starting in the early 2000s.

The third chapter is dedicated to showing that the proliferation of borders can be seen as a form of expropriation. I begin by using Mezzadra and Nielson's concept of differential inclusion to replace the usual dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion and restrictive/non-restrictive with which borders are typically characterized (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli, 2014). By drawing on Fraser's theoretical framework, I show that each of the axes of proliferation results in the expropriation of migrants.

I propose that we regard the proliferation of border legislation as an attempt to control and organize migration. Through a vast array of policy changes that include foreigners differentially, states attempt to seize their labor power. Then, I argue that the proliferation of border discourse slowly naturalizes the difference in treatment between national and migrant workers and therefore their contrasting rights and vulnerability to violence. This naturalization renders migrants politically exposed, defenseless and liable to violation and, in so doing, it makes their labor expropriable. I conclude by showing that the proliferation of border violence has, over the past decades, served as a disciplinary force not only to those who suffer that violence directly, but on every migrant who is vulnerable to it. That violence and, in particular, its spectacularization, turns individuals into expropriable subjects.

In the fourth and final chapter, I tell the history of crisis in Europe, together with the history of its borders. I divide these histories in two moments that span the contemporary era. The first moment is the roughly two and a half decades of extraordinary economic growth that followed WWII, along with the rise of the guest worker as the paradigm of labor migration to the biggest European economies. The second moment is the years between the beginning of the 1970s and today, marked by what Robert Brenner termed “the long downturn” (2006), an extended phase of slow economic dynamism and performance from which we are yet to emerge (will we ever?). Along this period, the European border was primarily characterized by the proliferation of borders.

Relating the history of crisis to that of the border, I show that times of economic growth were accompanied by border policies that allowed in migrant workers that capital could exploit, and that times of crisis went hand-in-hand with changes in borders that rendered these workers expropriable. With this, we are finally ready to answer the question implicit in the subtitle of this dissertation: In contemporary capitalism, borders function as instruments of capital accumulation through the expropriation of workers deemed foreign.

Chapter 1
The Workings of Capital Accumulation and Crisis

"In the capitalist core, dispossessed artisans, farmers, and tenants became exploitable citizen-workers through historic processes of class compromise, which channeled their struggles for emancipation onto paths convergent with the interests of capital, within the liberal legal frameworks of national states. By contrast, those who became ever-expropriable subjects, whether in periphery or core, found no such accommodation, as their uprisings were more often crushed by force of arms. If the domination of the first was shrouded in consent and legality, that of the second rested unabashedly on naked repression."

Nancy Fraser, Cannibal Capitalism

The aim of this Chapter is to establish the theoretical framework through which I will analyze the proliferation of borders. In Section 1.1, I introduce the autonomy of migration literature and adopt its principle of considering mobility to be a primordial factor in the creation of capitalist social relations. In Section 1.2, I go over Marx's theory of crisis of overaccumulation and its relationship with different forms of capitalist accumulation. Section 1.3 is dedicated to explaining Nancy Fraser's concept of expropriation and how it relates to accumulation. Finally, in Section 1.4, I establish the connection between expropriation and capitalist crisis.

1.1 Autonomy of migration

The autonomy of migration literature regards migration as irreducible to structural factors, thereby allowing it to retain a certain independence from economic considerations. This implies rejecting attempts to pin down push and pull factors that supposedly determine migration fluxes, as well as recognizing that they are not containable by border policy. This is not to say that migration does not react to those factors. It certainly does[7]. Instead, considering migration as an autonomous force means to regard it also as a cause, rather than just an effect, of those very structural factors and of capitalism itself. Human mobility is to be seen as having its own dynamics and therefore as an instigator of broader long-term change (Mezzadra, 2010; Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2025).

[7] In fact, it has been shown countless times how numerous cases of forced migration were primarily caused by forms of accumulation by dispossession. See, for example, Whitehead (2022) and Chowdhory & Mohanty (2023).

Note that autonomy is not the same as agency. Insisting on the autonomy of migration might come across as an attempt to emphasize the capacity of the individual migrant to make their own decisions based on their constraints, risks and potential benefits. While not denying that capacity, that is not what this strand of literature is about. Applying the principles of the Italian autonomist movement to migration (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2025), it seeks to give human mobility *as a whole* a new analytical importance in the construction of the present.

Yann Moulier-Boutang, an economist well known for his contributions to French autonomist theory, promotes migration to the role of the "primum mobile" of the development of capitalist production, that is, the primordial factor that shapes the history of capitalism (2002). In his important, if little known, book *De l'esclavage au salariat: Économie historique du salariat bridé*, Moulier-Boutang traces the history of the emergence of wage labor from the institution of slavery. Giving human mobility an unprecedented analytical importance, he points out that the slaves' constant attempts to escape the plantations in the American continent from the very onset of transatlantic slave trade forced slave owners to adapt the ways in which they seized labor power. In fact, he argues that it was the certainty of flight or desertion that, by its shear scale, produced the need for capitalism to modify its social relations and eventually lay the foundations for 'free' wage labor. In other words, the creation of the 'free' worker was the result of the process by which capitalism fundamentally changed its social relations in order to seize the productive potential of human mobility[8]. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos write that "the establishment of wage labor is the attempt to translate the freedom of the vagabond masses into a productive, utilizable and exploitable workforce" (2008, p. 203).

In migration studies it is common to adopt as a research goal the assertion of the causes of the movement of people and, in particular, how different types of border restrictions affect that movement. In trying to find the conditions that made the border what it is today, I draw inspiration from the autonomy of migration literature to turn this problem upside down. I will look at migration as a fact of life, as much influenced by other factors as it is part of the structure shaping the world as we see it. With this lens, I will consider that it was migration primarily that made the borders, and not the other way around. I do not mean this in the restricted, short-term sense that governments put up barriers as a response to the increase in fluxes. I mean it in the sense that the modern border was the result of capital's need to adapt to the movement of people in order to seize its productive potential.

Like Moulier-Boutang and other authors in the autonomy of migration literature, I will promote migration to the role of a primordial factor in the construction of borders as they

[8] For an explanation of this in English, see Tomich (2016).

exist today. However, unlike him, I will not consider it to be the primum mobile of the development of capitalist production. That is because there is a second factor that I believe my argument puts on a par with migration in the construction of borders: crisis.

1.2 The workings of capital accumulation

Capitalism, according to Marxist theory, is characterized by the accumulation of capital through continuous reinvestment of surplus value. Capital must perpetually be invested in the production of commodities which, in turn, must be sold for a profit. In Marx's labor theory of value, profit originates from the difference between the value generated by labor and the production costs (Marx, 2019). If that difference is positive, then the investment was profitable or, said another way, capital was realized, in a process usually referred to as expanded reproduction. However, in moments when capital runs into a lack of opportunities for profitable investment, an excess of capital might exist side by side with an excess of labor with no way to combine them. In those moments, capital undergoes a process of devaluation and a crisis of overaccumulation takes place.

Rosa Luxemburg, in her book *Accumulation of Capital* (1951), argued that such crises could be seen as crises of underconsumption. In her view, if capitalist social relations were built upon the premise that what workers received in wages was less than the value they produced, then all commodities put together would amount to a value by definition greater than the sum of all wages. Therefore, in the long run, there could never be sufficient demand for all the commodities. Workers could never buy everything that their labor produced. Because of insufficient effective demand, profit rates would eventually fall. This, in her view, was a fundamental contradiction in the capitalist system.

Elegant as her argument sounds, it does not seem to agree with the experience of the second half of the 20th century. While lack of effective demand may be an issue in certain cases, decades of postwar Keynesian consensus have shown us that demand can be managed. David Harvey articulates this in the following way: "the gap that Luxemburg thought she saw can easily be covered by reinvestment which generates its own demand for capital goods and other inputs" (2003, p. 203). His concept of spatio-temporal fixes also points to the fact that geographical expansion may be used to stabilize the capitalist system precisely because it serves as a way to create demand for both investment goods and consumption goods elsewhere. He claims that it is therefore a mistake to overemphasize underconsumption and that overaccumulation, that is, the lack of opportunities for profitable investment, is really the crux of the matter.

Notwithstanding this caveat in Luxemburg's interpretation of the origin of capitalist crisis, Harvey recognizes the need for capitalism to find ways to stabilize itself. This, according to

Luxemburg, could be done by pushing down the costs of production which, in turn, could be achieved by tapping into new reserves of cheap raw materials and labor or by gaining access to new markets. An example of this that was thoroughly examined by Luxemburg was the British Opium Wars against China, which had the clear intent and result of opening the Chinese market to British opium (1951). That, for Luxemburg, was the connection between capitalism and imperialism. So long as capital met obstacles to its own realization, it required the appropriation of territories external to itself just in order to keep profit rates from declining. Capitalism demands imperialism. These processes of expansion were, in a sense, capital's condition of possibility.

Marx saw that capitalism required violence to establish itself. At the end of Capital Volume 1 (2019), in the famous chapter entitled "On the so-called primitive accumulation", he sets out to sketch the origin story of the capitalist system with the premise that the conditions that rendered expanded reproduction possible, logically could not have been produced by expanded reproduction. He then narrates the process by which English agricultural land was enclosed and the peasants who drew their subsistence from it were expelled. The masses of the dispossessed, in the face of starvation, were forced by economic necessity to sell the only thing they still held: their labor power. This gave rise to the two most important prerequisites for the development of capitalist social relations. The concentration of vast amounts of wealth in few hands and the existence of a great number of people willing to work in exchange for wages. The latter process is frequently referred to as proletarianization (Marx, 2019). This could not have happened without the violence of depriving people of their sustenance. In fact, not even the outright deprivation of people's means to sustain themselves was sufficient to force them to work. In *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that the class of dispossessed peasants became "dependent on the sale of its labour capacity or on begging, vagabondage and robbery as its only source of income. It is a matter of historic record that they tried the latter first, but were driven off this road by gallows, stocks and whippings, onto the narrow path to the labour market" (1993, p. 896).

Marx attributes to primitive accumulation, capital's "original sin", a foundational role (2019, p. 873). He confines it within a particular historical period when capitalist relations were being established and then discards it as no longer necessary. In his view, from the moment that conditions were ripe for accumulation to proceed through expanded reproduction, that original violence would cease to exist. This was decidedly not the case.

Countless authors have shown that the type of processes involved in Marx's account of primitive accumulation have taken place rather uninterruptedly, throughout the entire history of capitalism, from the moment of the first enclosure until this very day[9]. The first among

[9] See, for instance, De Angelis (2001) for a summary of the discussion on whether or not primitive accumulation should be seen as a persisting phenomenon.

these may well have been Luxemburg. Because capital needed to continuously expand through non-capitalist territories simply to quell its own internal contradictions, Luxemburg argued that the founding violence that Marx had sketched out at the end of Volume 1 had to keep happening at the edges of the capitalist world in its encounter with the world outside of it. Insomuch as capital had this inherent tendency to fall into crisis, the continuation of this violence was essential for its survival. Rather appropriately, she named this process continuous primitive accumulation.

These often overtly violent forms of accumulation that cannot be subsumed under the category exploitation have been described differently by different authors. David Harvey introduced the concept of dispossession (2003), Nancy Fraser used the term expropriation (2022), Mezzadra and Nielson used extraction (2019) and Saskia Sassen used the dichotomy expulsion/incorporation (2014), to name only some of the most well known[10]. At least in emphasis, all these concepts have important differences that should not be overlooked. But they do have one crucial thing in common. They all attempt to make visible the forms of capitalist accumulation that are not explained, and have perhaps even been neglected, by orthodox Marxist theory. Perhaps most importantly, they aim to come to terms with how and why capital is pushed to accumulate in this or that way according to variables such as geography, demography or capitalist development.

Other authors prefer to keep using Marx's primitive accumulation, albeit with the added insight that it is not anymore to be understood as a process that is limited in time, but as a continuous one (De Angelis, 2001; Sassen, 2010; Saito, 2021; Frydenlund and Dunn, 2024). I lean towards reserving that term to denominate a more restricted set of phenomena. Following Marx when he wrote that "so-called primitive accumulation is nothing else than the historical process that divorcing the worker from the means of production" (2019, p. 874), I will use this term to denote only processes that achieve both vast concentrations of wealth and proletarianization. On the other hand, for the forms of capitalist accumulation, even overtly violent ones, that do not separate the worker from the means of production (for example when they are already separated) and cannot be described as exploitation, I will use Fraser's expropriation (2022).

Note that this notion of primitive accumulation is still more encompassing than Marx originally intended, since it includes, for example, Luxemburg's ongoing primitive accumulation. After all, when capital expands through non-capitalist territory, it must separate (soon to become) workers from the means to sustain themselves. Another example that fits into this notion is the 16th and 17th century witch hunt in Europe, theorized by Maria Mies and Silvia Federici as a way to appropriate women's control over their own bodies. This

[10] In their book *Politics of Operations*, Mezzadra and Nielson (2019) introduce the term extraction and discuss the three other approaches.

is because the reproductive capacity of women's bodies is seen by these scholars as the means of production of workers, or the means of reproduction (Mies, 1998). In Federici's words, "The body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers" (Federici, 2021, p. 16). Violent forms of accumulation that I think should not be included in primitive accumulation are, for example, the roll-back of European workers' rights since the 1980s or, as we will see in Chapter 3, the limiting of migrants' freedom through illegalization, detention and deportation. That is because these forms of accumulation do not contribute to proletarianization, as the workers they affect were already deprived of access to the means of production.

I do not claim that this conception of Marx's original term fundamentally changes our perception of what is going on. However I think it is useful to separate primitive accumulation from other violent forms of capital accumulation like dispossession or expropriation, because it allows Marx's term to retain some of its foundational role when it comes to establishing the conditions for capitalist relations to arise. This way, not just any form of expropriation, primitive accumulation is the process by which a working class is generated. It is a special case of accumulation through expropriation.

David Harvey seems to have changed his view on this over the years. In *The New Imperialism* (2003) he explains his use of accumulation by dispossession instead of primitive accumulation as simply because "it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process 'primitive' or 'original'". Years later, in one of his *Anti-Capitalist Chronicles*, he distinguishes the two precisely in order to attribute the "creation of a wage labor force" only to the latter (Democracy At Work, 2019).

Luxemburg's framework relied on an inside/outside dichotomy. Capital not only required the existence of something outside of it, it also needed to perpetually transgress the limit between the two. Likely as a result of the times of intense colonial expansion in which she lived, Luxemburg interpreted that expansion in literally territorial terms. Capital would simply incorporate more and more territories understood as somewhat pre-capitalist[11]. This interpretation led her to prophesize that capital would eventually run out of new land to conquer and would then face its inevitable demise.

The history of the XXI century invalidated this prediction. Capital would not necessarily die out after engulfing the entire world. With the advantage of hindsight, this led scholars like Harvey, Mezzadra and Nielson to reinterpret Luxemburg's outside in a broader sense.

[11] The word 'pre-capitalist' presupposes an evolutionist view of history very common in orthodox Marxist theory, whereby all societies must undergo the same stages, including the capitalist stage. This is what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian termed "denial of coevalness", the practice of representing groups and cultures as belonging to a different epoch, rather than as part of the same interconnected system (Fabian, 2014). For this reason, I will henceforth adopt the more ontological (rather than temporal) term 'non-capitalist'.

Harvey, for example, considers worker's rights, regulatory frameworks and welfare to be part of this outside (2003). Mezzadra and Nielson propose explicitly that we regard it as "non-literal and non-exclusively territorial" in order to encompass specific forms of economic activity and social arrangements that can serve as the necessary external environment (2019, p. 77). If we consider all these non-territorial outsides that capital can expand through by, for instance, privatizing public healthcare or rolling back collective bargaining laws, then we see that crises of overaccumulation can be stifled even if there is no new land to subdue.

This forces us to drop the claim that capital's outside is in any way necessarily non-capitalist. While we could argue that to be the case when we were considering China's defeat in the Opium Wars against the British, it would make no sense when discussing the hard-won workers' rights of the postwar European working class. In fact, not only were these workers' rights very much part of the capitalist system, they were also essential components of capitalist accumulation because they secured effective demand. Harvey goes even a step further and argues that "capitalism can either make use of some pre-existing outside or it can actively manufacture it" (2003, p. 141). So, this outside is not necessarily non-capitalist and capital can even create it. That raises the question: outside of what?

Mezzadra and Nielson provide a potential answer to this question by mobilizing Marx's concept of real subsumption of labor (2019). Real subsumption takes place when productive processes are organized in a specifically capitalist way, that is, via the establishment of wage labor relations. Formal subsumption, on the other hand, happens when capital appropriates pre-existing processes without directly intervening in them. In this categorization, the outside that capital needs to perpetually expand through would be defined as whatever is outside of real subsumption. The welfare state in the core of capitalist societies, for instance, has not been subjected to the real subsumption of labor (or formal, for that matter) and is therefore ready for capital to subsume it, that is, to privatize it and subject it to the logics of capitalist wage relations.

Another way to go about this problem is to build a theoretical framework that accounts for capital's need to expand while dropping the inside/outside dichotomy entirely. This is one of the features of Nancy Fraser's analytical model, which she lays out in her acclaimed book *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It* (2022), to which I turn in the next section.

1.3 The abode behind the abode

Fraser proposes that we take as a point of departure Marx's critique of the classical political economy focus on the realm of exchange as the privileged standpoint to analyze the capitalist system. In her view, and in Marx's, focusing on what happens in the market gives

the illusion of equality among its participants. Take the example of the labor market. A worker in need of a job enters in a consensual, and therefore 'free', contract with a capitalist, who is in need of his labor power. Everything looks fair because both parties are free to walk away if they consider that the contract does not advance their interests. Marx proposes that we move our focus away from exchange into the *hidden abode of production*. From this standpoint it becomes clear that the supposed 'freedom' the workers enjoy is nothing but an illusion. In reality they have no choice but to sell their labor power in conditions completely outside of their control. They do not own the value created by their labor and hence they are exploited. This exploitation, Marx sustains, is a fundamental (if hidden) precondition for the realm of exchange to even exist.

Fraser proposes that we make another epistemic move, analogous to the one Marx did in his critique of political economy. She claims that if we look deeper yet, behind what takes place at the factory, we find the "abode behind the abode", the realm of expropriation. This, in her view, is the only standpoint from which we may begin to understand the "hidden barbaric underside of capitalist modernity" (2022, p. 33). Expropriation is the confiscation and conscription of human capacities and natural resources into the circuits of capital accumulation. Among the confiscated things there is land, minerals, energy deposits, labor and sexual and reproductive capacities. Chattel slaves, dependent or unfree workers, colonized subjects and the like, whether they are indigenous peoples in the periphery or members of subjugated groups in the core, are all providers of labor that is expropriated rather than exploited, because it is unmediated by a 'free' work contract. "The effect" of considering this broader conception of capitalism, Fraser writes, "is to cast a new light on exchange and exploitation, which now appear as the tip of a larger, more sinister iceberg" (2022, p. 33).

Exploitation and expropriation are not simply two separate forms of capital accumulation. Rather, expropriation is a precondition for the very 'freedom' that constitutes the nature of exploitation. By injecting cheap or free raw materials and labor into the system, capital is able to lower the costs of production both directly, by lowering the cost of material inputs, and indirectly, by lowering the reproduction costs of the 'free' workers.

> *Expropriation thus underlies exploitation and makes it profitable. Far from being confined to the system's beginnings, it is a built-in feature of capitalist society, as constitutive and structurally grounded as exploitation* (Fraser, 2022, p. 15).

For Fraser, a major cost of excluding the mechanisms of expropriation from one's analysis of the capitalist system is to lose the ability to understand the deep structural connection between capitalism and racism. If too much attention is focused on how capital reproduces itself via its encounter with 'free' wage labor, then the racism that was, and still is, an instrumental part of making labor unfree, runs the risk of going unnoticed. Then, both racism

and unfree labor begin to seem like mere remnants of the past, doomed to disappear as capitalist relations progress. However, as Nandita Sharma pointed out, unfree labor power is no less essential to capitalism than free labor (2006, p. 72). Different forms of labor coercion have coexisted side by side throughout the entire history of capitalism and there is no reason to elevate 'free' labor to the role of its defining characteristic. It is only when we analyze the realms of exploitation and expropriation together in their interdependencies and overlaps, that we begin to see that racism, far from being a somewhat accidental feature of the capitalist system, is an essential part of its functioning. More specifically, it is the separation between exploitation and expropriation that contains the root of capitalism's entanglement with racial oppression.

Viewed economically, expropriation is a form of accumulation. Viewed politically, it is a form of domination. Unlike exploitation, this particular form of domination is based on political exposure, meaning "the incapacity to set limits or invoke protections" (Fraser, 2022, p. 39). In Fraser's words,

> *It is expropriability, the condition of being defenseless and liable to violation, that constitutes the core of racial oppression. Thus, what distinguishes free subjects of exploitation from dependent subjects of expropriation is the mark of "race" as a sign of violability* (Fraser, 2022, p. 40).

While I accept Fraser's analytical model, I believe that it is more than just the mark of "race" that distinguishes expropriability from exploitability. It is difference that truly matters, and the separation between exploitation and expropriation is just the productive organization of that difference[12]. Granted, border restrictions, by targeting racialized people disproportionately and mobilizing conceptions of race in order to justify themselves, deepen the mark of race. However, they also produce difference based on factors that cannot be reduced to race, such as nationality, vulnerability, gender and class.

Consider once again the false promise that globalization would bring about a borderless world. Focusing on the realm of exchange, as classical political economists did, there is no reason why a capitalist system would, in the long run, require border restrictions. Presupposing the freedom of individuals to enter into contracts with one another, the production of unfree individuals seems like an unnecessary delay in the development of capitalist relations. If, on the other hand, we reject this simplistic view and move one step deeper, into the realm of production, we see that this 'freedom' is nothing but an illusion. We see that the 'freedom' to begin or end a contract only hides away the unequal nature of capitalist relations. As capitalism progresses, more and more of the world is subsumed

[12] Sharma distinguishes between difference and diversity. For her, "diversity is the tangible existence of heterogeneity and mutual reciprocity" while difference is defined as socially organized inequality (2006, p. 26).

under these relations of apparent freedom. Here too, borders appear as unnecessary, a thing of the past. No wonder that the promise of a borderless world took hold.

It is only when we go even deeper, into the "abode behind the abode", that it becomes clear that borders, like racism, are more than an incidental feature of capitalism. Limiting our focus to the realm of exchange or that of production makes us think that borders are external to capitalism, but they are essential to it. They produce difference that is a necessary condition for the very existence of the 'freedom' that characterizes exploitation[13]. Borders are fundamental mechanisms of contemporary capitalist accumulation and it is only when we move our focus to the "abode behind the abode" that we may begin to see it. Mezzadra and Nielson put it in the following way:

> *Capital, then, does not simply reckon with difference. Rather, difference is an internal feature of its operations* (2019, p. 37).

1.4 On expropriation and crisis

As mentioned in Section 1.2, crises of overaccumulation are described in Marxist theory as moments in which capital cannot find sufficient ways to realize itself through expanded reproduction. In other words, investment in the exploitation of labor is no longer sufficiently profitable[14]. In these moments, capital has no choice but to accumulate through other means, namely expropriation. Although, in her book, Fraser is primarily concerned with investigating how the separation between exploitation and expropriation changes with race and the different stages of capitalism than with crises of overaccumulation, she writes that,

> *advantageous even in "normal" times, expropriation becomes especially appealing in periods of economic crisis, when it serves as a critical, if temporary, fix for declining profitability* (2022, p. 35).

David Harvey made a very important contribution to our understanding of how different modes of accumulation relate to crisis. Using his concept of accumulation by dispossession, defined analogously to Fraser's expropriation (albeit with differences in emphasis), Harvey explains how accumulating in ways that are not exploitation can delay the effects of crises. He writes that overaccumulation

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[13] It is important to note that authors from the Black Marxist tradition have long ago pointed out that difference, and the production thereof, is an essential component of capitalist development. Cedric Robinson, for instance, wrote that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was [...] not to homogenize but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones" (2005, p. 26).

[14] Notice that I do not adopt Fraser's definition of crisis as manifestations of contradictions between the economic system and its background conditions of possibility (Fraser, 2022, p. 24). The definition used here is the one used by Marx and laid out at the beginning of this chapter.

> *is a condition where surpluses of capital (perhaps accompanied by surpluses of labour) lie idle with no profitable outlets in sight. The operative term here, however, is the capital surplus. What accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Overaccumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use* (2003, p. 149).

The author points to the fact that capitalism has faced chronic problems of overaccumulation arising within expanded reproduction since the first oil shock in 1973 to make the argument that "dispossession, rather than exploitation, has now come to the fore as the primary contradiction within the imperialist organization of capitalist accumulation" (Harvey, 2003, p. 172). This, I believe, is the greatest strength in Harvey's contribution. Regardless of whether we consider that dispossession has overtaken exploitation when it comes to accumulation, this scheme provides us with an explanatory model for capital's deployment of its "gallows, stocks and whippings". This will be a central piece of my argument.

Although both Fraser's and Harvey's frameworks attempt to explain the factors that lead capital to accumulate in one way or the other, and Harvey's puts the role of crises of overaccumulation at center stage, I will use the term expropriation to refer to the forms of accumulation that exceed exploitation for two main reasons. The first is Fraser's emphasis on capital's need for the social construction and naturalization of certain differences between people in order to justify the separation between exploitability and expropriability. The second is the importance she attributes to considering unfree labor as expropriated labor, carried out by expropriable, that is, inherently violable, subjects. This realization, I will argue, can further our understanding of the role of borders in contemporary capitalism.

Chapter 2
The Proliferation of Borders

"[Borders] are no longer at the border."

Étienne Balibar, Politics and the Other Scene

In the Introduction we saw that border policy has not become more restrictive over the past decades. So what exactly changed? The aim of this chapter is to specify what I mean by proliferation of borders. Here, I propose an analytical model to conceptualize the proliferation of borders based on measurable indicators whose variation can be assessed over time. This model is divided into three axes: proliferation of border legislation, proliferation of border discourse and proliferation of border violence. I begin with a note on methodology in Section 2.1 and I analyze each of the axes of the proliferation of borders individually in Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4, respectively.

2.1 A note on methodology

The promise that globalization would herald a world without borders never came true. In fact, quite the opposite took place. Over the last decades we have witnessed what many scholars and activists have called a proliferation of borders[15]. However, the term is yet to be rigorously defined and measured. Here, my aim is to provide a framework that allows one to attribute measurable quantities to this widely used concept, with the ultimate goal of answering the question: *what exactly proliferated?*

There are many ways to categorize the different manifestations of global phenomena, but I believe it is productive to focus on measurable or quantifiable changes. This is a rather constraining choice to make, but it allows us to do two important things: to assert what proliferated and to position that proliferation within a specific time-frame. Only thus can we find the conditions of possibility of the proliferation of borders and credibly place it within the context of the historical development of global capitalism.

With this in mind, I propose that we analyze the proliferation of borders based on an analytical model that is split in three axes, which I will henceforth refer to as the proliferation of border legislation, discourse and violence. The proliferation of border legislation refers to an immense increase in the sheer amount of border policies passed[16]; the proliferation of border discourse corresponds to an expansion of the presence of migration as a topic in

[15] See, for example, Mezzadra (2015), Milivojevic (2019) and Polkowski (2014).
[16] This includes all border policy changes, towards both more and less restrictiveness.

political discourse and agenda; and the proliferation of border violence refers to an intensification of the violence perpetrated by border institutions and suffered by the migrants who cross those borders. Note that this model does not exhaust all the measurable aspects of the proliferation of borders. Nonetheless, it will already provide us with a more concrete description of what the proliferation of borders is and when it took place. While analysing these three axes individually throughout this chapter, I adhere to a more descriptive, data-driven tone and leave a more theoretical analysis to Chapter 3.

In order to analyze the proliferation of borders, I chose to focus on data related to the borders of European countries. There are two reasons for this: the first is that most, if not all, authors who use the term proliferation of borders draw on examples that are mainly connected to Europe (Polkowski, 2014; Mezzadra, 2015; Milivojevic, 2019); the second has to do with availability of data. Because the European borders and their effects have been more extensively studied than most others, there is a wider variety of databases from which to draw relevant data. Note that this should not be understood as implying that the proliferation of borders is a European phenomenon. In fact, as mentioned in the Introduction, results from the strand of literature on the politicization of migration suggest that it is not. Therefore, the proliferation of borders in the European context is to be regarded as a mere illustration of a wider phenomenon, the full extent of which I must leave to be assessed elsewhere.

In the next three sections I analyze data that points to a proliferation of border legislation, discourse and violence. I draw data on policy from the DEMIG POLICY (2014) and the Comparative Agendas Project (2014) databases to plot graphs that show an increase in border legislation in Europe. Because of the extent to which the salience of migration is studied in the literature on the politicization of migration, rather than drawing data directly from databases, I use graphs from scientific articles that show an increase in border discourse in Europe. Finally, I draw on data regarding Frontex's budget from the agency's website and on border deaths from several databases whose relevant data is gathered and summarized in (Last *et al.*, 2017). Further details on methodology will be introduced within their respective sections.

2.2 Proliferation of border legislation

Drawing from the DEMIG POLICY database (2014), I counted all border policy changes registered in every five-year period between 1945 and 2014 in all the countries whose data is in the database and that are, or were at some point, part of the European Union (including countries that do not exist anymore, e.g. Czechoslovakia, and countries whose territory became a member of the EU only in part, e.g. Yugoslavia). These are: Austria, Belgium,

Czechoslovakia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, German Democratic Republic, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Yugoslavia, United Kingdom. The DEMIG POLICY database does not include every one of the member states, but these are nonetheless sufficient to illustrate the main point of this section. Note that this accounts for all changes to national border policies enacted, both towards more and less restrictiveness. Figure 2.1 shows the total number of policy changes in each five-year period[17].

The first thing that stands out in this graph is the fact that the number of policy changes in most of Europe was kept approximately constant from WWII until the end of the 1980s. Then there was a sharp increase and the number did not come down until around 2010. This suggests a proliferation of border legislation around the 1980s.

However, looking only at the sum of the policy changes is insufficient, since the number could be driven up by special conditions in specific countries. To rule that out, analogous graphs were made for each separate country[18]. In order to illustrate this, on Figure 2.2 I show the analogous data for the five most populous countries within the set of those represented on Figure 2.1.

A certain variation among different countries was registered both in intensity and in specific location of the first large increase. However, this increase is there in every single case and always located between the end of the 1980s and 2010, with no exceptions. This already suggests something more structural is at stake in this proliferation of borders, something that cannot be fully understood by looking only at any one particular country.

In order to better understand the scale of this phenomenon, note that the highest point on Figure 2.1 is 9 times higher than the lowest one. In other words, there was a 9-fold increase in the number of border policy changes per 5-year period from 1955 to 2004. This denotes an unmistakable shift in the importance of the issue of migration in European policymaking. It went from being very low on the list of topics in the political agenda to becoming one of the main issues to address through legislation.

As a final illustration of the proliferation of border legislation in Europe, I drew data from the CAP database on the number of mentions of migration in all conclusions issued by the European Council since its first meeting in 1975 and until 2014. Note that the European Council is the body that defines the overall political direction and priorities of the European Union. It is composed of the heads of state or of government of the EU member states, the President of the European Council, and the President of the European Commission. Figure 2.3 shows the results.

[17] All figures can be found at the end of this chapter.

[18] I chose not to show them all here. That would take up too much space and would not be particularly enlightening, as the same general conclusions can be read off the graphs that correspond to each country.

We can clearly see that migration was a subject almost completely ignored by the members of the European Council for the first fifteen years of its existence. Then there was a sharp increase in the presence of the topic along the 1990s and it reached a peak in 2003.

One would expect that the rise of the topic of migration in the level of political importance would be due to an increase in the share of migrants within the territory of the European Union. In a sense, this may be true. Though not in the way one would expect. On Figure 2.4 we see the evolution of the migrant stock in the EU as a percentage of its population from 1960 to 2015 (Eurostat, 2025; World Bank Data, 2025). The visible increase that began in the mid-1980s shows that there is indeed a correlation between the migrant stock in the EU and the salience of migration in political debate.

Just by following the political debate sketched out in the Introduction, we would expect that the type of legislation that spiked around the end of the 1980s, according to Figure 2.1, would be dominated by changes towards more restrictiveness. The more migrants came in, the more restrictions the receiving states would impose in an attempt to quell the numbers. But, as we have seen, data suggests the opposite. As more migrants came in, states implemented more policies towards both more and less restrictiveness, though still dominated by the latter.

2.3 Proliferation of border discourse

The importance of migration and borders in political discourse has risen drastically over the years. This growth in preponderance is well documented in the fast-growing body of literature on the politicization of migration (Berkhout, 2012; Brug et al., 2015; Grande et al., 2019; Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019).

Empirical research in this field proposes, among other things, to assert the salience of the issue of migration in political discourse typically by resorting to either media or political manifesto analysis. In either case, salience is defined as the number of statements on migration as a share of total statements analyzed. While the former tends to focus on newspaper statements, the latter mainly uses electoral manifestos. Widely used databases include Support and Opposition to Migration (2012), Comparative Agendas Project (2014) and Comparative Manifesto Project (2024).

Analysing media claims on migration from the SOM database, a 2012 study calculated the salience of the topic by counting the number of political claims found in randomly sampled days in newspapers in Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and UK from 1995 to 2009 (Berkhout, 2012). Figure 2.5 shows the moving average number of claims per day (dotted line) and a polynomial trend line (solid) calculated on the basis of the underlying observations from the regular sample.

The trend line clearly shows a significant increase in salience in the last half of the 1990s that reaches a peak around 2004 and then decreases. The author then analyzes each of the countries separately drawing similar conclusions for every single case. Namely, every one of the countries shows a steep increase in salience located between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

Remarkably, the research that focuses on electoral manifesto analysis shows almost identical results. Using the CAP database, a 2019 study calculated the salience of migration in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and UK (Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2019). Figure 2.6 shows the evolution of the salience of migration in each of these countries from 1980 to 2010. Similarly to the case of salience in the media, in all these countries we can see a significant increase in the salience of migration in political manifestos between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s[19].

Comparing Figure 2.4 to Figures 2.5 and 2.6, we see that the salience given to the topic of migration in the media, party manifestos and the European Council largely correlates with the increase in the migrant stock within the EU. More migrants entering the EU was accompanied by increasing salience given to the topic of migration. This, by itself, is hardly surprising. What is perhaps surprising is that this salience did not at all mirror any measurable attempt by governments to reduce migration fluxes or even to increase restrictions.

2.4 Proliferation of border violence

The last axis of the proliferation of borders is that of border violence. It is a hard job to clearly define what we mean by violence, and that presents a set of difficulties for scholars. Usual definitions focus on forms of direct violence, the responsibility for which can be traced back to specific perpetrators. When speaking of border violence, because borders usually rely on complex bureaucratic systems, that responsibility can easily become elusive. We must then depart from these notions of direct violence and acknowledge that the type of violence at stake when it comes to borders is necessarily structural.

In his book, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, Reece Jones proposed to include five different categories in the definition of border violence (2016). The first and most obvious is the overt use of force by border security; the second is the threatened or actual use of force “that increases the chances of injury, death and deprivation” (Jones, 2016, p. 29); the third is the threat of punishment or arrest for entering or staying in a given territory without the right papers; the fourth is the violence of contributing to unequal access to

[19] For a discussion focusing on the special case of Denmark see Green-Pedersen & Otjes (2019).

economic conditions by barring certain people from certain opportunities, and the fifth is related to the damage that border infrastructures inflict on the environment. In Chapter 3, we will see in detail that the fourth type of border violence is a result of the first three. That relationship is a central part of my argument. The fifth type, as it is very difficult to quantify, I will not address here.

What fits Jones's notions of border violence and, at the same time, consists in measurable quantities whose evolution along the last decades we can track? I will consider all detentions, deportations and pushbacks as forms of overt use of force by border security. Another quantity that I will consider to be an indicator of this type of border violence is the level of funding dedicated to border enforcement. This is because border enforcement is usually responsible for those very detentions, deportations and, as we will see, even pushbacks. This being the case, that augmenting the capacities of border guards and infrastructures also augments the type of violence they are mandated to inflict seems like a reasonable assumption to make. Of course, all the reported beatings of migrants by border guards in detention facilities (BBC, 2021), for instance, also constitute overt use of force, but there is a much more severe lack of data about those types of violence. So, in order to assert a measurable increase in violence, I will focus on forms of violence that are more traceable.

I will consider border-related deaths as consequences of Jones's second category of border violence. For instance, deaths by drowning in the Mediterranean sea have happened largely because the safer legal ways to travel are inaccessible to most migrants. In other words, the prohibition to cross the border, rather than deter would-be migrants, ends up forcing them to take other more dangerous routes, thereby causing an increase in border-related deaths. Notice that this can be interpreted as a manifestation of what de Haas calls driving migration underground (2023). This type of violence does not have a clear and specific perpetrator and so must be considered of a more structural nature.

Additionally, it is important to mention that detention and deportation are forms of violence that are inflicted not only upon the detained and deported, but on the much wider group of all the migrants who are undocumented. The fact that people are vulnerable to this type of violence, even if they never experience it, is a form of violence in itself, namely as an example of the third of Jones's categories. This vulnerability is what De Genova calls deportability and we will return to it in the next chapter (2002).

Besides the difficulty in defining border violence, another obstacle that presents itself when analysing it is the lack of access to reliable information. While data such as funding for border enforcement is generally public and easily accessible, numbers of border-related

deaths, for example, are scarce and unreliable[20]. This makes the task of tracking the evolution of border violence in the EU a very demanding task.

To the extent of my knowledge, the most methodic and encompassing database on detention and deportation across the world is the Global Detention Project (2024). However, complete as it seems to be for recent years, it contains almost no information on these issues prior to 2009. The data I already showed in the sections on the proliferation of border legislation and discourse both seem to point to the end of the 1980s as the crucial moment in which that proliferation took place, so the number of deportations, important a manifestation of border violence as it is, cannot serve as one of the indicators of a proliferation.

An indirect indicator of the scale of the violence at borders that is easier to measure is the amount of funding that is devoted to border enforcement. This is because the border police and the coast guard are the institutions that are tasked with enforcing much of the said violence. Detentions, deportations, pushbacks[21] and beatings of border crossers[22] are examples of legal and illegal practices that are done systematically by border guards. For this reason, and in light of the difficulty in finding reliable data on these kinds of violence, I will consider border enforcement budget as an indicator. In the particular case of the EU some of the border enforcement responsibilities of the member states have been passed to an agency that is funded at the EU level, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, also known as Frontex. The annual budget of Frontex,. Figure 2.7 shows Frontex's budget from its foundation in 2004 until 2024 (Statista, 2024). It is rather obvious from this graph that the investment of EU member states in border enforcement has increased enormously since 2004. For clarity, Frontex's budget is now more than 150 times higher than what it was in 2005.

The first attempts to systematically register border-related deaths in the EU were started by groups of activists in the 1990s. Later on, large international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) also took up that task. Nowadays there are several databases spanning different periods and using different sources and indicators, which leads to a certain level of disagreement between databases. A critical analysis of each of them is beyond the scope of this work, so Figure 2.8 shows the number of registered border-related deaths in the Southern borders of the EU from 1993 to 2016 according to five different databases. The source of the data is Last et al. (2017).

[20] For discussions on this see Brian & Laczko (2014) and Heller & Pécoud (2020).
[21] See, for example, Moraru (2022).
[22] See, for example, Augustova & Sapoch (2020).

The graph shows a very small number of deaths in the beginning of the 1990s with an increase around 1995, then a series of oscillations with peaks reaching ever higher numbers. Unfortunately, there is no data prior to 1993, but Figure 2.8 already shows dramatic increases in border-related deaths along the following two decades[23]. The main reason why the numbers from the Deaths at the Borders Database are so consistently low relative to the other databases is that it is the first collection of official evidence of deceased border-crossers. While UNITED list of deaths and Fortress Europe blog, for instance, source their information from the news, this evidence-based approach provides a completely reliable minimum for the numbers in question.

[23] In the 1990s, many countries in Europe began adopting tougher asylum policies and introducing carrier sanctions that obliged airlines to check passengers' immigration status prior to flying (de Haas, 2023, p. 253). The sudden increase in border deaths may be partly a result of these restrictive policies having driven migration underground (see Introduction).

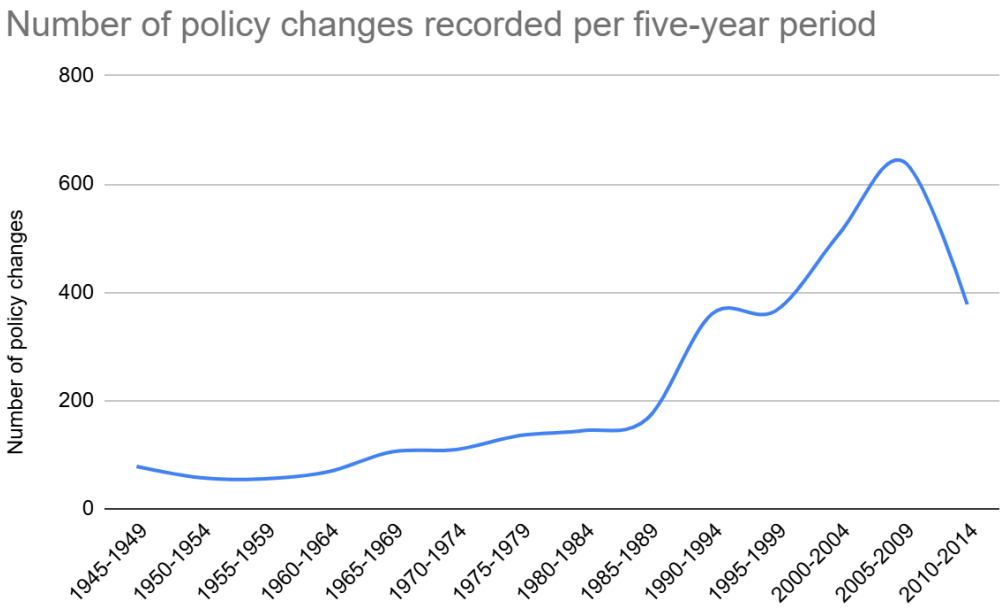

Figure 2.1. Number of border policy changes recorded per 5-year period from 1945 to 2014 in Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, German Democratic Republic, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Yugoslavia and the United Kingdom. Source: DEMIG POLICY database (2014).

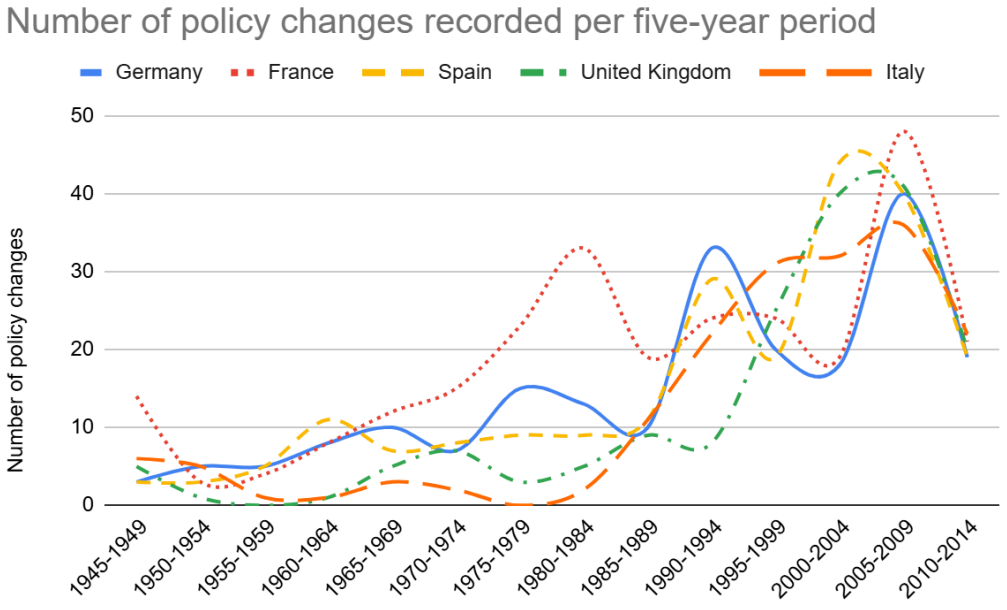

Figure 2.2. Number of border policy changes recorded per 5-year period from 1945 to 2014 in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Source: DEMIG POLICY database (2014).

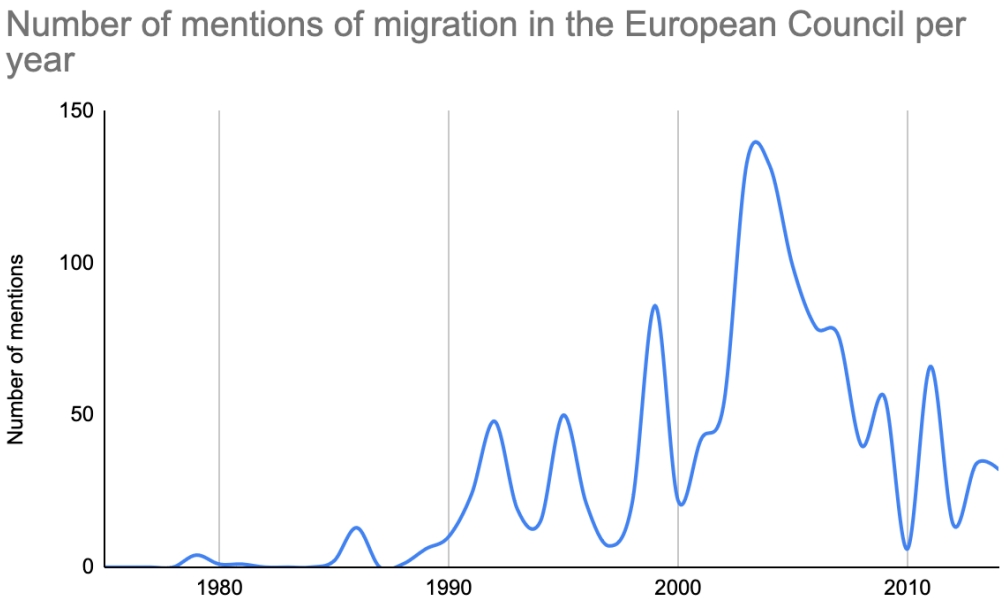

Figure 2.3. Number of mentions of migration in all conclusions issued by the European Council from 1975 to 2014. Source: CAP (2014).

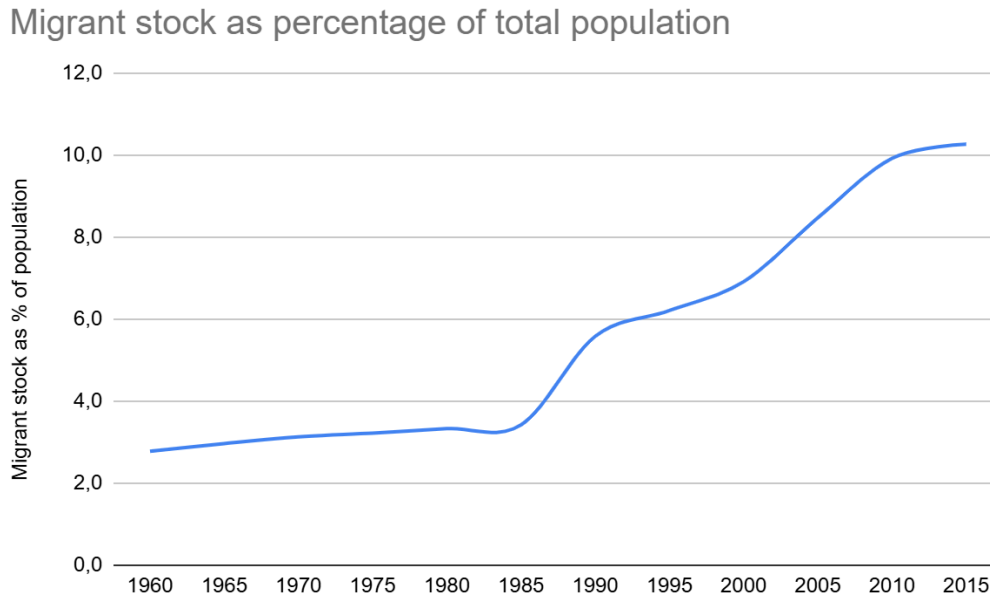

Figure 2.4. Migrant stock in the EU as a percentage of its total population from 1960 to 2015. Source: total population of EU from Eurostat (2025) and migrant stock from World Bank data (2025).

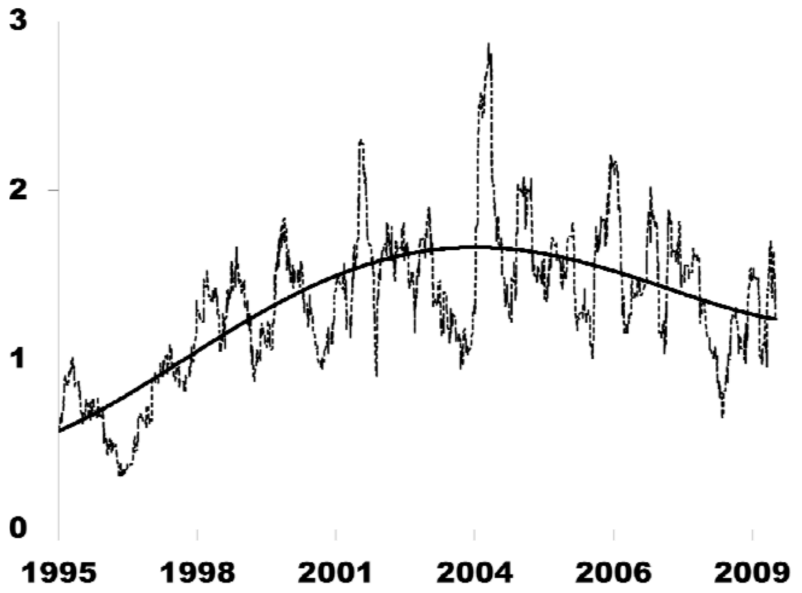

Figure 2.5. Salience of migration in Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and UK from 1995 to 2009 calculated as share of media claims that are about migration. The dotted line shows the moving average number of claims per day and the solid line shows the polynomial trend line calculated on the basis of the underlying observations from the regular sample (n=7114). Source: Berkhout (2012).

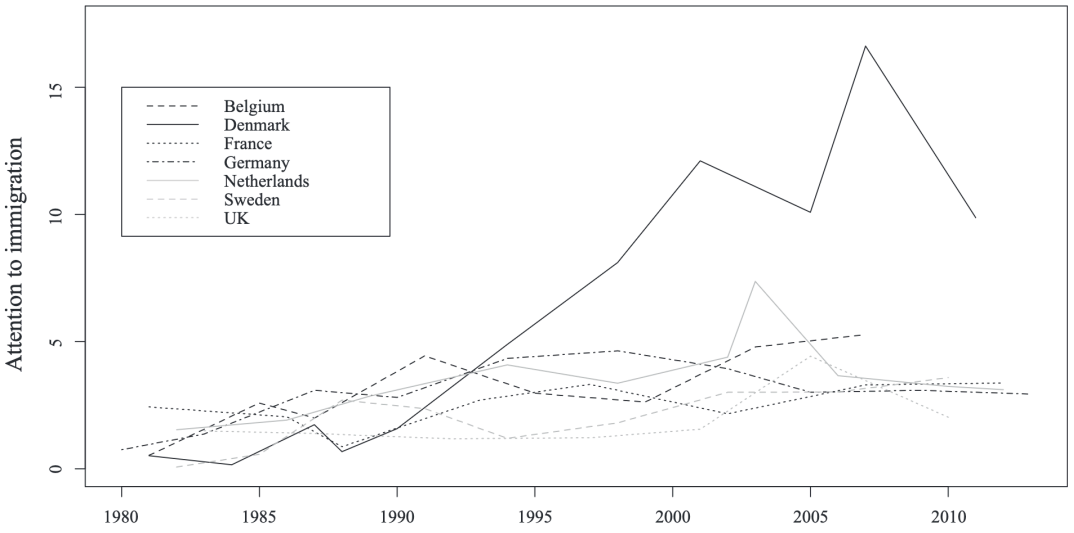

Figure 2.6. Salience of migration in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and UK from 1980 to 2010 calculated as share of electoral manifesto statements that are about migration. Source: Green-Pedersen & Otjes (2019).

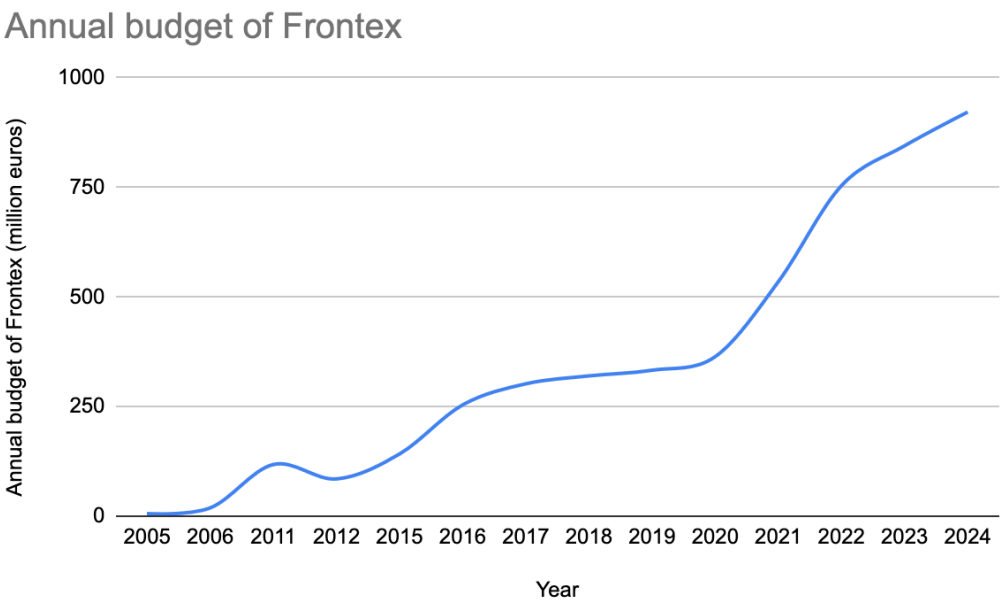

Figure 2.7. Annual budget of Frontex in millions of euros. Source: Frontex (2024).

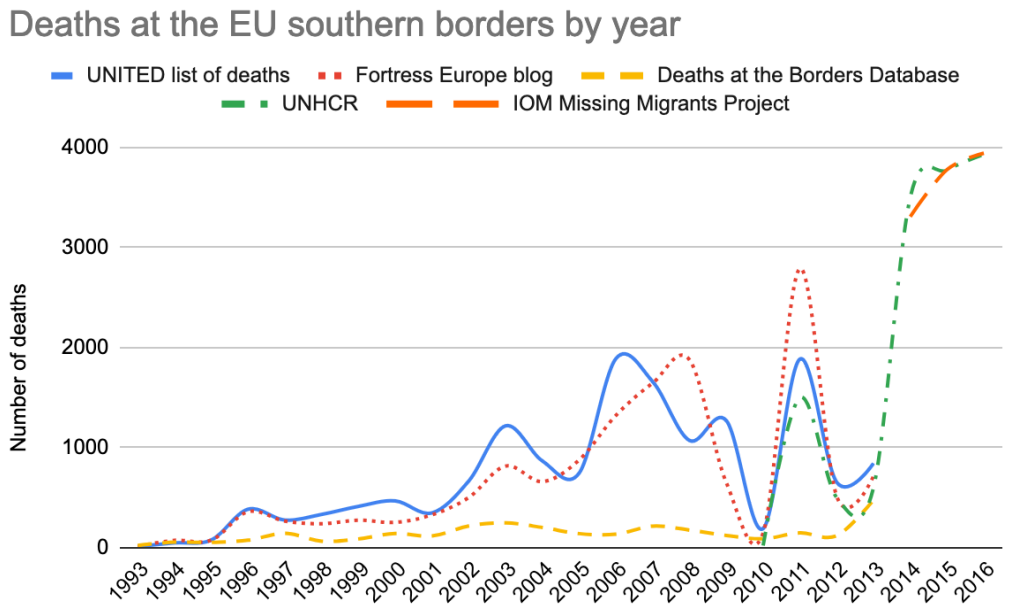

Figure 2.8. Number of people who died attempting to cross the EU southern external borders without authorization from 1993 to 2016. The data plotted are sourced from UNITED list of deaths, Fortress Europe blog, Deaths at the Borders Database, UNHCR and IOM Missing Migrants Project. Source: Last. et al (2017).

Chapter 3
The Proliferation of Borders as Expropriation

"Borders cease to be purely external entities. They become also – and perhaps predominantly – [...] 'inner borders'; that is to say [...] invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere."

Étienne Balibar, Politics and the Other Scene

This chapter is dedicated to interpreting the data on the proliferation of borders, analyzed in Chapter 2, in light of the theoretical discussion laid out in Chapter 1. The aim is to interpret the proliferation of borders as a form of expropriation of migrant workers. I begin with a discussion of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielson's concept of differential inclusion and argue that it opens the door for us to unveil the contradiction between political discourse on migration and the reality of the modern border. Sections 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 are dedicated to showing that the proliferation of borders that was described in Chapter 2 can be seen as a mechanism of expropriation. They refer to each of the three axes individually: proliferation of border legislation, discourse and violence, respectively.

3.1 Differential inclusion

So far we have seen that an increase in the migrant stock in the EU in the mid-1980s was followed by three axes of proliferation of borders: legislation, discourse and violence. We have also seen that, although the dominant political discourse advocated for, and promised to, quell the numbers of migrants, the opposite happened. Not only did the flows slightly increase, but also the legislation that was passed was dominated by changes towards less restrictiveness. So again, we must ask, how do we make sense of this? This section is the beginning of the answer.

Over the last decades, innumerable campaigns, demonstrations and movements for migrants' rights mobilized depictions of walls, fences or barbed wire to refer to the proliferation of borders. Terms like Fortress Europe, by now widely recognizable, came up to draw attention to the fact that borders exclude. While this is certainly true, exclusion is only one of the functions of these institutions. Mezzadra and Nielson, in their book *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, warn us against the use of visual metaphors like

fortresses and walls[24] because they overemphasize the rigidity and, perhaps most importantly, exclusion (2013). In their own words,

> *The image of the border as a wall, or as a device that serves first and foremost to exclude, as widespread as it has been in recent critical studies, is misleading in the end. [...] We claim that borders are equally devices of inclusion that select and filter people and different forms of circulation in ways no less violent than those deployed in exclusionary measures* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p. 7).

They take a critical stance towards inclusion by proposing that we consider it to exist in a continuum with exclusion, rather than in opposition to it. Moreover, inclusion is no longer to be deemed inherently good. Notice the emphasis given to the potential for violence that the authors attribute to inclusionary measures. This aspect will be crucial throughout this chapter. To account for this interpretation, rather than using two words that would reinforce the idea of a dichotomy, they coined the term *differential inclusion*.

This concept puts us on the right path to unveil the contradiction between political discourse on migration and reality, and really grasp the nature of the modern border and its role in contemporary capitalism. If we look at borders as instruments of differential inclusion we see that, rather than act as barriers to the passage of people or commodities, they determine the conditions of that passage. Mobilizing their potential for violence, they select and filter. They allocate rights on the basis of factors such as nationality, income and vulnerability. Perhaps most significantly, they allocate the right to work legally and thus facilitate the exploitation of those forced to do it illegally, as well as of those constrained by that same legality to take only certain jobs, in certain regions, from certain employers.

Nicholas De Genova draws attention to the fact that 'illegality' is the product of immigration laws, not only in the sense that it would be absurd to call something 'illegal' if there was no law in the first place, but also in the more profound sense that "the history of deliberate interventions that have revised and reformulated the law has entailed an active process of inclusion through illegalization" (2002, p. 439). De Genova calls this the "legal production of illegality". Importantly, from the point of view of an undocumented migrant, overcoming 'illegality' equates to attaining the right to have rights. Coming back to the false dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion, he writes rather eloquently that migrants'

> *'inclusion' is finally devoted to the subordination of their labour, which is best accomplished only insofar as their incorporation is persistently beleaguered with exclusionary campaigns that ensure that this inclusion is itself a form of subjugation. At stake, then, is a larger sociopolitical (and legal) process of inclusion through exclusion. This we may comprehend as the obscene of inclusion* (De Genova, 2013, p. 1180).

[24] For other criticisms towards the term Fortress Europe that I will not address here, see Scheel (2018).

Exclusion is only one end of the spectrum of what constitutes the role of borders and, in that sense, rather than *restrict* mobility, they attempt to *control* it, to *organize* it. Borders organize the productive potential of migration, and it is the aim of this chapter to see how[25]. That potential, along with the means to seize it, is contingent not only on migration fluxes but also on the development of global capitalism itself.

Subjugation of labor is not an accidental feature of border policy. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this in academic writing was given to us recently by historian Laura Robson's *Human Capital: a History of Putting Refugees to Work* (2023). Robson traces the history of what she calls refugee regimes from their origin in the 19th century Ottoman practice of careful placement of refugees wherever their labor could be used to kickstart economically stagnant regions to the present-day internationally administered refugee regime, designed to allocate refugees to wherever private capital requires menial labor, all the while under the guise of humanitarian altruism. Robson's point resonates with the argument in this thesis: from its very onset, refugee regimes were designed to guarantee a workforce that is mobile, cheap and apolitical, that is, less likely to join the ranks of national workers' movements. Managed at the highest level (United Nations, International Labor Organization, etc.), these regimes harnessed human mobility in order to turn a profit for capital.

Considering the empirical studies cited in the Introduction (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli, 2014; Czaika *et al.*, 2024) in light of Mezzadra and Nielson's concept of differential inclusion, we are now forced to look at the less restrictive policy changes*,* as well as the more restrictive ones, as positioned somewhere on this spectrum between inclusion and exclusion. No longer understood as mechanisms of exclusion, borders should be seen as institutions, policies and practices that include differentially. Additionally, less restrictive policy changes should be regarded as potentially just as violent as their counterparts.

After concluding that border policy changes across the world, and the EU in particular, have been dominated by changes towards less restrictiveness ever since WWII, Hein de Haas asks the question "how useful is it to talk in terms of general levels of border policy restrictiveness?" (2014, p. 4). My answer is two-fold. It is useful only to the extent that it exposes the fundamental contradiction between the professed purpose of borders and their effects in material reality. Indeed, speaking of borders in these terms allows us to understand that borders do more than exclude. Simultaneously, however, without due caution, we run the risk of equating the decrease in policy restrictiveness of the last 70 years with a decline in border violence. That did not take place. For this reason, in order to understand why the proliferation of borders began taking place in the 1980s, we must go beyond a framework

[25] One could also say that borders organize the *reproductive* potential of migration. If borders subjugate migrant labor, they appropriate the reproductive work that went into making the migrant worker and that was done elsewhere. Though this is an important issue, it is far too complex to be addressed here.

based on levels of restrictiveness. Only by doing so can we understand the true role of the borders in contemporary capitalism.

3.2 Proliferation of border legislation as expropriation

We saw in Chapter 2 that there was a proliferation of border legislation across Europe from the end of the 1980s until around 2010. We saw that that is true for a large group of European countries, but it is also true for each of those countries individually. I made the point that this observation suggests that there is something at stake in this process that cannot be explained by looking at any individual country. This proliferation seems to correlate rather well with an increase in the migrant stock in the EU that began around 1985. While that seems intuitive considering the dominant political narrative regarding the need to reduce migration fluxes, that intuition does not seem to be able to explain the fact that the majority of border policy changes since WWII has been towards less restrictiveness.

I propose that we regard this extraordinary build-up in the importance of border policy for the political agenda as an attempt by states to *control* migration fluxes. Not to stop or restrict, but to sway and organize. Migration seems to be a fact of life[26]. Not only in the sense that it has always existed, but also in the sense that there does not seem to be an effective way to stop it. As mentioned in the Introduction, data shows that even when policies become more restrictive, that does not, in general, reduce migration fluxes. They change, admittedly, especially in qualitative terms. People choose other legal or illegal means of crossing borders, some riskier than others, they hasten or delay their travelling but, in general, they do not seem to be deterred by those restrictions. Migration thus acts like an unstoppable force, an “incorrigible” movement of people (De Genova, 2017).

States attempt to sway these fluxes and direct them in the ways that are most productive. The consequence is an explosion in the number of policies that make up an ever more thorough mechanism of filtering and selection that assigns rights on the basis of skills, vulnerability, nationality and other factors. In other words, a mechanism that includes differentially. As de Haas et al. put it, “the essence of migration policies since WWII is not a growing restriction, but an increasing sophistication of policy instruments” (2014, p. 17).

The fact that the state limits the freedom of certain groups functions as a disciplinary measure upon the workers that constitute those groups. Take the example of temporary migrant worker programs. States sign bilateral agreements to import workers from abroad with the aim of filling labor shortages in their own national industries. These programs, nowadays found everywhere in the Western world, usually tie the temporary visa to the work

[26] This is not to say that migration takes place completely independently of political and economic factors. It does not. See Introduction.

contract, which means that the worker is no longer ‘free’, in the sense that they cannot simply choose to change their job, region or employer, at the risk of having their very right to stay in the country revoked[27]. Additionally, these workers are far less likely to organize politically to claim their rights, given the added risks that that might entail. Analysing temporary migrant worker programs in Canada, Nandita Sharma writes that,

> *It is the fear of deportation if the employer is displeased in any way that is the overarching factor controlling these workers’ militancy and should not be underestimated, particularly given the conditions that force many of these workers to migrate in search of employment abroad in the first place* (2006).

Migrant workers brought in by this type of program are, in this sense, disciplined by the threat of losing the possibility of staying. They are unfree workers whose ‘freedom’ is taken away by border policies. ‘Free’ here means free to change jobs, employer or sector, evidently not free from the economic need to sell their labor power.

The very concept of labor shortages that these programs intend to solve must be problematized. They should not be regarded as quantitative shortages, but qualitative. Sassen notes that “shortages are often defined not by the absence of actual workers ready and able to work but by the existence of particular characteristics of the labor supply that impede the process of capital accumulation” (cited in Sharma, 2006, p. 108). “In other words”, Sharma adds, “there are shortages of cheapened and politically subjugated labor power”.

Through temporary migrant worker programs, states are able to guarantee a stable workforce that is sufficiently disciplined and whose costs of reproduction are entirely externalized. Harsha Walia puts it as clearly and as concisely as possible: “Migrants are temporary, temporary migration is permanent” (2021, p. 30).

These programs illustrate perfectly what Mezzadra and Nielson mean by differential inclusion. From the point of view of each individual migrant, they were given the right to travel to and work in another country. In a sense, they were included in the national labor market. From the point of view of capital, this type of migration amounts to the release of cheap, disciplined labor into the system which, in turn, facilitates capital accumulation. So, by depriving temporary migrant workers of the freedom they would have if they were fully included as citizens in the host society, capital accumulates. It is a clear-cut case of accumulation by expropriation.

The proliferation of border legislation is connected to the multiplication of different experiences of exploitation (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). By including people in national societies while refraining from considering them to be full citizens, worthy of rights, the state

[27] See, for example, Okólski (2012), Rass (2012) and Ruhs and Martin (2008). I will analyze this in more detail in Chapter 4.

creates in the workforce a spectrum of unfreedom. On one end of this spectrum we have the 'free' worker who enjoys legal protection, access to public services and is under no immediate threat of any type of violence inflicted by border institutions. On the other end of the spectrum we have the irregular migrant worker, who is constrained by his very condition of irregularity to take only certain jobs, in certain regions, from certain employers, usually prevented from accessing most public services and perpetually crushed under the weight of the threat of detention and deportation (De Genova, 2002, 2019; Sharma, 2006). Between the two ends there is a fast-growing array of different relationships with the law. Here we can find everything from temporary migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees and beneficiaries of temporary protection to digital nomads, intra-schengen immigrants and golden visas. These groups have vastly differing relationships with immigration law and the state, the first being deprived of many rights in host countries while the last is often welcomed with tax breaks and encounters with border enforcement so expedited that they become nothing but mere formalities[28].

This is a manifestation of what Mezzadra and Nielson call heterogenization, a process that they consider to be taking place alongside the proliferation of borders (2013). It refers to the creation of legal and social regimes that stratify the working class and multiply the ways in which surplus value is extracted from it. It is a term that is of particular interest when addressing borders, because the categorization of workers along the lines of their nationality is precisely a state-imposed form of heterogenization. Different workers are made to undergo different levels of job security and different relationships with the state and capital, giving rise to different experiences of exploitation. Those differences, which are, in a sense, produced by capital, then serve the purpose of capital accumulation. Capital can thus be seen as a "difference machine", which goes from the production of difference to the productive exploitation of that difference (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019, p. 65).

3.3 Proliferation of border discourse as expropriation

We saw in Chapter 2 that the salience of the topic of migration and borders in European countries had a massive increase starting at the end of the 1980s. As is the case for the analogous increase in border policies, this strongly correlates with the migrant stock within the EU. It is no surprise that a greater percentage of migrants would result in a higher level of importance given to the topic in political discourse, but there is a great contradiction

[28] Étienne Balibar describes the experience of crossing a border for a rich person from a rich country as "an embarkation formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgment of his social status, to be passed at a jog-trot" (2012, p. 83).

between discourse on the need to quell migration fluxes and the type of policies that are implemented.

In her book *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada*, Nandita Sharma analyzes the construction of the migrant in political discourse (2006). She shows how state actors mobilize notions of national identity and belonging in order to create an idea of the foreigner as an outsider and hence unworthy of the same rights and benefits.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, domination, that is, the keeping of a social order that benefits some individuals to the detriment of others, is reproduced through values, classifications and concepts that serve the interests of the ruling class, but are presented as spontaneous, disinterested and natural (Rosa, 2017). In this sense, ideologies are collective mental constructions that are naturalized so that their character of social constructions remains invisible. For Bourdieu, as well as for Marx and Engels, ideologies are material forces, because they not only organize information about the world in our imaginations, but also construct reality itself. Categories we use to group certain aspects of life become so naturalized that they end up replacing the aspects they aim to describe. For example, "naming someone a migrant worker is no longer seen as a social process but as an embodiment of what that person actually is" (Sharma, 2006, p. 54).

The values, classifications and concepts that end up naturalized, far from being random, tend to be those that serve the ruling class because it controls what Bourdieu, following Weber, calls the monopoly of the legitimate use of symbolic violence, that is, the power to arbitrarily impose instruments of knowledge and expression of social reality (1989).

> *The dominant culture contributes to the real integration of the dominant class, to the fictitious integration of society as a whole, hence, to the demobilization of the dominated classes, to the legitimation of the order established through the creation of distinctions (hierarchies) and to the legitimation of those distinctions* (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 10).

Sharma sees border controls and immigration restrictions as "thoroughly ideological", because they are imagined as natural and are crucial manifestations of state sovereignty, all the while being extremely ineffective at actually stopping people from moving from one place to another. In this regard, all the "big, fat, beautiful walls", offshore detention centers and all the other spectacular displays of violence against those constructed as migrants do very little in the way of reducing migration fluxes. Instead, they are intended to reinforce the naturalization of the separation between nationals and foreigners.

Interestingly, De Genova describes the events at the border between Mexico and the USA as a "border spectacle" (De Genova, 2013). In his description, undocumented migrants were regularly caught and arrested at the border and encouraged to waive their right to a deportation hearing and swiftly return to Mexico. They were released immediately and in the

vicinity of the border, which they tried to cross again. The process was repeated like a "revolving door" until they finally succeeded. The result was a mass-mediated spectacle of border enforcement that gave the appearance of control while concealing the true ineffectiveness of it all.

Sharma is very much in agreement with the features that the term differential inclusion attempts to emphasize when she points out that the discursive construction of the migrant does not exclude them from society. In her view, migration restrictions aim not so much to restrict people's mobility, but their freedom, once they are already within the national labor market. In the words of Ghassan Hage, "anti-immigration discourse, by continually constructing the immigrants as unwanted, works precisely at maintaining [their] economic viability to [...] employers. They are best wanted as unwanted" (cited in Sharma, 2006, p. 25).

Borders construct not only the migrant but also the national, since the naturality of their distinction is learnt, internalized and acted upon by the latter so as to strengthen the idea of national identity and hence the power of the state.

> *The existence of foreigners, especially within, can even be said to be necessary for the reproduction of nationalized forms of consciousness and therefore of the existence of national state forms of ruling: as the foreigner is made, so too is the national subject* (Sharma, 2006, p. 59).

The naturalization of the difference between national and foreign subjects also has the effect of impeding an alliance between the two. This, of course, is also beneficial to capital and ultimately contributes to capital accumulation by both exploitation and expropriation. See, for example, Cedric Robinson's account of the failure of the Irish migrant workers' movements in the 19th century to coalesce with their English counterparts due, in part, to perceptions of race animated by the rise of nationalism on either side (2005, pp. 39–41).

In sum, the enormous increase in the salience of migration and borders has the effect of naturalizing the difference between national and migrant workers and therefore their contrasting rights and vulnerability to violence. This naturalization renders migrants politically exposed, defenseless and liable to violation and, in so doing, it makes their labor expropriable.

3.4 Proliferation of border violence as expropriation

It cannot be overemphasized that the fact that borders are "thoroughly ideological" or that state authorities put on a "border spectacle" does not mean that the violence is not real. It is very real, and the increasing number of lives lost in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean sea and under the scorching sun of the Arizona desert only stand to prove it. Far from

invisibilizing the brutality of the modern border, what Sharma's and De Genova's expressions quoted above aim to do is to highlight the fact that there is a discursive aspect to that brutality whose effects extend to far more people than only its direct victims.

Note the significant overlaps between what we consider to be a proliferation of border discourse and a proliferation of border violence. The violence that is inflicted upon migrants has the discursive effect, arguably its most important one, of naturalizing the difference between migrants and nationals. That effect is productive for capital. This makes it clear, once again, that the categorization of the proliferation of borders in three separate axes is to be regarded only as an analytical model motivated by the possibility of measurement. In reality, we cannot separate legislation, discourse and violence. They are all deeply intertwined and, in the case of the proliferation of borders, visible manifestations of the same phenomenon.

Deportations largely fulfill this discursive role. They only affect a tiny minority of the people who are eligible for it, but the possibility of being deported affects every single one of those people. In this regard, deportations are not so much about who is deported but who is deportable. Deportability, or the vulnerability to deportation, becomes an oppressive force that is continually inflicted upon all undocumented migrants, affecting their behavior and disciplining them[29].

> *What makes deportability so decisive in the legal production of migrant "illegality" and the militarized policing of nation-state borders is that some are deported in order that most may remain – as workers, whose particular migrant status may thus be rendered "illegal"* (De Genova, 2002, p. 439).

We can see deportability, and even illegality, as a kind of political meaning that is attributed to certain bodies so as to render them productive. Here, i useful to bring in Michel Foucault's conception of the production of governable subjects (1982). For Foucault, power is not simply restrictive or repressive, but productive, in the sense that it turns individuals into subjects.

> *This political investment of the body is bound up [...] with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body* (Foucault, 2024, p. 55).

It may sound paradoxical to regard either deportations or border deaths as ultimately stemming from an attempt to seize labor power. If capital is in such desperate need of labor,

[29] See also the analogously defined concept of detainability in De Genova (2019).

removing workers from national territory or outright killing them might seem counter-productive. It is not. And there are examples of this all around.

In her acclaimed book *Caliban and the Witch* (2021), Silvia Federici makes the point that the witch hunt in medieval Europe was a way of disciplining women in order to seize control over the reproductive capacity of their bodies. This served the purpose of ensuring the sufficient reproduction of the working class. As with most forms of primitive accumulation, the witch hunt could not have taken place without extreme violence. But how could the slaughter of tens of thousands of women guarantee the effective reproduction of the workforce? In Federici's words,

> *The promotion of population growth by the state can go hand in hand with a massive destruction of life; for in many historical circumstances — witness the history of the slave trade — one is a condition for the other. Indeed, in a system where life is subordinated to the production of profit, the accumulation of labor power can only be achieved with the maximum of violence so that, in Maria Mies' words, violence itself becomes the most productive force* (2021, p. 16).

We already knew from the history of both the witch hunt and that of slave trade that there is no contradiction between the "accumulation of labor power" and the "massive destruction of life". This is because capital does not need just any form of labor at any given time. It needs labor that is subjugated and disciplined in ways that it can organize productively. "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault, 2024, p. 55). The forms of subjection that can be organized productively are historically specific, as is the degree of violence that they require.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault puts together a genealogy of punitive power, which evolved from being "an art of unbearable sensations" to becoming "an economy of suspended rights" (2024, p. 28). Describing the nature of punishment before modern times and, in particular, the public execution, Foucault emphasizes precisely the ceremonial character of this punitive act. In his words,

> *The public execution, then, has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular (2024, p. 97).*

Indeed, the spectacularization of violence is an essential aspect of this ritual, not only because the visibility of the inflicted pain serves to deter other potential criminals, but also because it allows for the sovereign power to affirm itself once more.

For Foucault, this "spectacle of the scaffold" lost its importance and was eventually replaced by more discreet, yet ubiquitous, forms of social control, based upon the perfecting and sophistication of the technologies of power. The media-intensive violence that is typical of De Genova's "border spectacle", through the naturalization of difference between

foreigners and nationals, produces governable subjects. However, its effectiveness as a mechanism of discipline has not done without visibility in favor of inevitability, a transition that Foucault describes as characteristic of Modernity. The opposite is true. The “border spectacle” is made to be seen and, as we saw above, those who are deported are but a tiny fraction of those who remain deportable. This violence thus stands as an exception to the type of power that, for Foucault, is dominant in modern times[30].

Over the last decades, the proliferation of border violence has served as an instrument of disciplination of workers, both national and foreign, through the naturalization of concepts that serve the ruling classes. This way, the difference between the former and the latter appeared as spontaneous and disinterested. The naturalization of that difference turned migrants into expropriable subjects and nationals into exploitable ones.

Violence is a productive force even if, approached from the perspective of individual cases, it seems like it is inflicted rather arbitrarily. In his 2022 paper, Barak Kalir analyzes the brutal killing by the Spanish police of Mame Mbaye, an irregular migrant working as a street vendor (2022). Although Kalir recognizes the importance of what he calls ‘racial cruelty’ in the extraction of labor power, he insists that this violence inflicted upon irregular migrants, that he sees as irrational and excessive, “exceeds and defeats the logic of instrumental racism” (2022, p. 76). In his view, “it cannot be claimed that anyone has directly or indirectly benefited from the death of Mame Mbaye”. In order to make his case, Kalir argues that it made no economic sense to send a police unit to raid the street where Mbaye was working, because the economic damage of his activity was minimal, the things he sold were important for the tourism industry and these raids tend to be costly and ineffective. He then concludes that the ultimate goal of this violence is to “keep animated the racist notion that the lives of some people matter less than others” (2022, p. 86).

I believe Kalir’s analysis was misled by the fact that he was analysing one individual case. By looking at the horrid details of Mbaye’s death it is easy for one to see this violence as irrational and excessive. After all, it is difficult to argue that anyone took any immediate advantage from this incident. But if we are to really understand it, Mbaye’s death cannot be regarded alone. It is merely one manifestation among countless others of a set of institutions, policies and practices that mobilize violent means to render the working class more expropriable. We cannot understand it individually anymore than we can understand the witch hunt by analysing the burning of one woman or the slave trade by analysing the whipping of one slave. Brutal as it was, this killing was “thoroughly ideological”. Real as it was, it was another scene in the “border spectacle”. The result, not of this particular act of extreme violence but of all border violence put together, is that migrants internalize the fact

[30] Note that not all modern border violence is spectacularized. See, for example, the case of migrant detention in Portugal (Esposito and Caja, 2025).

that they are ‘killable’, at the same time that nationals naturalize the idea of the foreigner as an outsider and hence unworthy of the same rights and benefits.

I do not reject the possibility that the killing of Mame Mbaye stands in excess of what could be attributed to the productive exploitation of difference. As Kalir acknowledges, migrants, and irregular migrants in particular, are construed as a threat to the host country so that the state can then present itself as the only possible way to fight it. By inflicting visible violence upon migrants, state actors achieve two goals simultaneously: they consolidate power by manifesting it, and they keep alive the perception of a foreign threat (just another naturalized difference), which opens the door to yet more violence[31].

It may be that the purpose of this violence cannot be reduced to its economic use, even if, as I have shown, it is useful in that sense. But it does not follow that its ultimate purpose is to “keep animated the racist notion that the lives of some people matter less than others” (2022, p. 86). That is looking at the problem the wrong way around. There is no reason to consider that to maintain racist notions is an end in itself. It is best viewed as instrumental, regardless of whether those who stand to benefit from it are state actors, who get to consolidate their power, or capitalists, who acquire cheap and disciplined labor.

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I have shown how each of the three axes of the proliferation of borders can be seen as forms of expropriation. Fraser’s theoretical framework allows us to understand that borders, rather than being a remnant of the past, are an essential part of how the capitalist system works. Through the passing of border legislation, they control and organize the productive potential of migration. Through the proliferation of border discourse and violence, they naturalize the difference between migrants and nationals hence contributing to the expropriation of the former and the exploitation of the latter while, at the same time, impeding an alliance between the two. As we saw above, focusing solely on the realm of exploitation, we would have missed the importance of difference for capitalist accumulation. It is only when we analyze exploitation and expropriation together that we see that one is the condition for the other and, most importantly, that borders are *internal* to capitalism.

[31] So far, I have treated the state as a mere instrument to further the interests of capital. Human mobility guarantees a regular release of labor power into host countries, while the state, via the border, makes that labor power cheap and disciplined. Borders function as the intermediary between capital and migrant labor, shaping the latter to the tune of the former. The question of why states, by constructing the modern border, continuously uphold the interests of capital is an important, but complex, one. For this reason, I must leave it to be addressed elsewhere.

Chapter 4
A Short History of Crisis and the European Border

“The decisive point about the depressions of the sixties and seventies, which initiated the era of imperialism, was that they forced the bourgeoisie to realize for the first time that the original sin of simple robbery, which centuries ago had made possible the "original accumulation of capital" and had started all further accumulation, had eventually to be repeated lest the motor of accumulation suddenly die down.”

Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

In Chapter 1, I introduced the theoretical tools that allow us to understand the fundamental role of borders within the capitalist system. In Chapter 2, I proposed an analytical model that helped us determine what exactly proliferated when it comes to the proliferation of borders. Chapter 3 was dedicated to showing that the proliferation of borders is a form of expropriation of migrant labor. The principal aim of this final chapter is to put all this together within the history of long-term economic growth and crisis in Europe, as well as the history of the development of the European border. Section 4.1 goes through the economic history of the so-called “Golden Age of Capitalism”, between WWII and the 1970s, and describes the functioning of borders in European countries amid this period of unprecedented economic growth. In Section 4.2, I examine the decades that followed, between the early 1970s and the present day. Here, I make the claim, with Robert Brenner and David Harvey, that capitalism began to undergo a long-term crisis of overaccumulation and trace the major changes in the European border, namely what I called, in Chapter 2, the proliferation of borders. In Section 4.3, I lay out the main differences between the guest worker programs in their heyday during the postwar boom and the current ones. Finally, in Section 4.4, I argue that the crisis of overaccumulation that Europe fell into in the 1970s that forced capital to expand its capacity to accumulate through expropriation resulted in the proliferation of borders. I conclude by proposing that we look at the European border as a set of institutions, policies and practices that are shaped primarily by two forces: migration and crisis.

4.1 The postwar boom and the rise of the guest worker

Between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, the Global North enjoyed a time of prosperity and unusually high economic growth. The Keynesian consensus of the time led governments to implement policies of full employment and large scale public spending that enabled effective management of aggregate demand (Blakeley, 2019). Whenever there was

an overaccumulation of capital[32], the state would avoid its devaluation by investing in public infrastructure and welfare. This had three desired outcomes: the first was that such investment would provide employment directly; the second was the provision of infrastructure for capital (e.g. conditions for the mobility of labor power and other commodities); the third was that, once finished, the enterprise would presumably fulfill some need within the population (e.g. facilitated access to healthcare or transportation), allowing people to spend less on that particular need. All three outcomes, directly or indirectly, would lead to an increase in the purchasing power of the working class which, in turn, would stimulate demand for unrealized capital in the form of unsold commodities. The management of aggregate demand was the primary way of stifling the effects of potential crises.

Keynes showed that the less money people had, the more likely they were to spend any extra income (2016). In other words, poorer people are less likely to save money. This meant that any increase in the purchasing power of the masses would result in a predictable increase in the effective demand. That, in turn, would eventually soak up any overaccumulated capital, thus preventing its devaluation. Thus, the state managed capital's intrinsic tendency towards crisis by managing aggregate demand through public spending.

During this period, labor saw unprecedented levels of unionization which, together with full employment policies, allowed it to claim growing shares of the return on investment. Notwithstanding, during that time, profit rates also grew. This was only possible due to the fact that economic growth was both unusually high and unusually stable.

The unprecedented economic expansion that characterized this Golden Age of Capitalism triggered an equally high demand for labor that European national labor markets could not supply. At the same time, Southern and Eastern European countries, as well as North African ones, faced with higher levels of unemployment than their Central and Northern European counterparts, began facilitating the movement of workers across borders in order to export unemployment temporarily, stock up on foreign currency via remittances and get qualified returnees in the long run. These factors contributed to a substantial flux of migrant workers into the largest European economies.

Christoph Rass (2012) argues that protectionism towards wages, working conditions and domestic workers' rights prompted fears that large influxes of cheap labor would erode those hard-earned benefits and thus motivated the large-scale involvement of the state in the management of these new migration routes. The European answer to this was state-led temporary labor migration based on bilateral agreements, perhaps better known as guest workers programs. These agreements between labor-sending and labor-receiving countries provided the latter with much needed foreign labor power while, for the most part, avoiding

[32] See Chapter 1.

permanent settlement. Western European countries were “trying to import labor but not people” (Castles, 2006, p. 742). With this solution, European states created a new migration channel that was regulated by both the sending and the receiving countries, in the sense that authorities from both filtered and selected potential workers attempting to match specific labor shortages with profiles and skills even before the journey began. In many cases, the travel costs and accommodation were partially or totally covered by the employer (Rass, 2012). The majority of the workers brought in via guest worker programs was unskilled or low-skilled, sought for labor-intensive Fordist production processes like mining and manufacturing (Penninx, 2018).

Guest worker programs only reached their highest prominence after WWII, but the first of these had already been drawn up in the interwar years[33]. Roughly at the same time, the International Labor Organization (ILO) was founded as the culmination of the attempts of workers’ movements to establish internationally recognized social rights and labor standards for all workers, independently of nationality. In Rass’s words,

> *Selective recruitment, the temporary character of labour migration, and the principle of equal treatment of foreign and domestic workers emerged as key elements in correspondence with the ideas of the ILO, which stated an improvement in the situation of international labour migrants as one of its central aims. The result was an internationally rooted and commonly practised European model of regulated temporary labour migration which promised to solve the key problem of combining protectionism with labour migration while avoiding permanent settlement and immigration* (Rass, 2012, p. 195).

The ILO formulated the standards that would, after WWII, become the blueprint for regulating these bilateral agreements. The reader may be wondering about the “equal treatment” aspect of Rass’s description of guest worker programs as it compares to my account of the disciplinary character of today’s temporary migrant worker programs in Section 3.2. I will address the differences more carefully in Section 4.3. For now, it suffices to stress Rass’s point that “these agreements installed and protected certain minimum standards to migrants and led to a general improvement of the rights and conditions offered to temporary labour migrants in Europe” (2012, p. 191).

Rass argues that the improvement in migrant workers’ rights was not only the result of labor standards internationally established by the ILO. The high levels of economic growth drove the demand for migrant labor to such heights that receiving states actually had to compete for labor power. Representatives of countries like Germany, Belgium and France in

[33] Strictly speaking, bilateral agreements to manage migration have existed at least since the 19th century, but these were mostly designed to fix the terms of settlement migration, rather than temporary (Rass, 2012).

labor-sending countries had to put up aggressive advertising campaigns and greatly improve the conditions they offered just to secure a sufficiently large influx of foreign labor, especially as the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria joined the race to receive migrants.

Migrant labor was a much sought-after commodity in Europe. After WWII, guest worker programs became not only a very important part of European border policy but an essential factor in the prosperity that characterized that period. Sustained economic growth largely depended upon it. For this reason, states did not leave it up to firms and migrants themselves to determine migration fluxes. State intervention became crucial in making sure industries had a steady supply of labor power. For a sense of scale, estimates of the number of workers from Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal between 1950 and 1970 seeking employment through guest worker programs vary between 7 and 10 million (Okólski, 2012, p. 33). Analogous estimates for the number of Yugoslavian guest workers are of the same order of magnitude (Penninx, 2018).

These decades of extraordinary economic growth were characterized by the prominence of the paradigmatic figure of the citizen-worker. White and male, endowed with political rights and protected by labor laws, the citizen-worker was the epitome of the exploited worker during what Nancy Fraser calls “state-managed capitalism”[34] (2022). His rights protected his ‘freedom’ in the labor market, that is, the freedom to sell his labor power to whomever he decides. The fact that the workers who fell into this category were exploited means that the majority of the capital accumulation to which their labor contributed was appropriated in the form of surplus value. This does not mean, however, that there was no expropriation taking place at this time. Large parts of the Global South were still colonized and the expropriation of colonial subjects that had characterized earlier periods of capitalist development was alive and well. Even in Europe, there certainly was expropriation of the labor of minoritized groups, whose political exposure made sure that the remuneration for their labor would not cover the costs of their reproduction. However, the fact that migrant workers, in particular, were coming in primarily through guest worker programs, protected by international labor standards, meant that there was at least a tendency for equal treatment. This means that there was a tendency for migrant labor to approach the condition of exploited labor, rather than expropriated.

In the beginning of the 1970s, this long period of economic expansion ended abruptly, and the guest worker programs did not last long after that.

[34] Fraser separates the history of capitalism into four stages according to the relation between exploitation and expropriation that characterizes each of them. Collectively, she terms them “historical regimes of racialized accumulation” and they include “commercial or mercantile capitalism”, “liberal-colonial capitalism”, “state-managed capitalism” and “financialized capitalism” (2022). My analysis refers to the latter two.

4.2 The long downturn and the proliferation of borders

The postwar economic boom ground to a halt in the beginning of the 1970s, amid the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and the recession that followed the first oil shock, in 1973. Productivity slowed down and profit rates in manufacturing (and then everywhere else) fell abruptly, as the global economy faced a combination of stagnation and rising inflation that defied the tenets of the Keynesian consensus of the time. Between 1970 and 1990, the rate of profit in manufacturing in the seven largest economies in the world[35] was about 40% lower than in the previous two decades (Brenner, 2006). The prosperity that had characterized the previous decades was gone for good.

The Marxist economist Robert Brenner dubbed this economic period "the long downturn", understood as "the extraordinarily extended phase of reduced economic dynamism and declining economic performance" (2006, p. xix). In his view, the decline in the rate of profit was the main cause for the ensuing decline in the rate of growth of investment, especially in manufacturing, which led to a problem of chronic overcapacity. This is because, as Brenner argues, the rate of profit is the best possible predictor of the future rate of return that firms can expect. In his words,

> *The average rate of profit expresses the economy's capacity to generate a surplus from its capital stock and therefore constitutes a good first approximation of its potential to accumulate capital (invest), and thereby increase productivity and grow* (2006, p. 6).

Therefore, as profitability fell, so did capital investment in production. The lack of opportunities for profitable investment then resulted in an increase in unproductive investments such as finance which, at least in part, explains the intense period of financialization that began in the 1970s. It also explains why the intensification of overcapacity in manufacturing did not immediately lead to a sudden recession. Stagnation all across the largest economies in the world could have led to a sharp decrease in aggregate demand. However, states began making sure that new credit was issued in such quantities that firms and families could keep buying by incurring debt. Aggregate demand which, during the postwar boom, had been managed through public investment, was now largely driven by an explosion in private debt. Note the striking shift in the ways in which the state managed crises. As a consequence, what followed the decline in the rate of profit of the 1970s was not another Great Depression, but a long period of low economic performance that stretched throughout the following decades.

> *For the advanced capitalist economies (the US, the EU, and Japan) taken singly or together, economic performance has worsened, business cycle by business cycle, since*

[35] USA, Germany, Japan, UK, France, Italy and Canada.

> *the end of the postwar boom in terms of all of the main macroeconomic indicators: the growth of GDP, capital stock, labour productivity, and real compensation. Economic performance was less good during the 1990s than the 1980s, which lagged the 1970s, which was, of course, far worse than the economic performance of the 1950s and 1960s* (Brenner, 2006, p. xxiv).

Additionally, the fact that aggregate demand was now managed by resorting to debt was far from innocuous. In fact, soaring private debt gave rise to asset price bubbles and financial busts, of which the financial meltdown that rocked the world in 2008 is the prime example. In a sense, debt disguised the downward pressure on wages, while rising financial profits disguised falling returns on investment in production, an illusion that was violently exposed in the years after 2008 (Blakeley, 2019). After the financial meltdown, businesses adapted their productive investment once more to the low profit rates, which meant more idle capital and the extension of the (already) long downturn.

The ever-increasing regularity of recessions that characterizes the current state of affairs raises the question of time scale when we talk about crises. Indeed, crises of overaccumulation can be found in restricted periods of time and even in specific sectors, but that is not the type of economic phenomena that interests me here. What matters for the purposes of this work is not the economic recessions that come at the end of every business cycle, but the long-term trend that manifests in the fact that the economy seems to have been performing worse and worse, business cycle after business cycle, ever since the early 1970s. Regardless of short periods of expansion and recession, there seems to be an inescapable downward trend in profit rates since an overall peak around the end of the 1960s (Brenner, 2006; Basu *et al.*, 2025).

Several authors have argued that global capitalism has been undergoing a crisis of overaccumulation since the 1970s (Arrighi, 1994; Harvey, 2003, 2007; Brenner, 2006). They differ in their accounts of the causes of such a crisis, as well as in the predictions of what comes next, but they agree on the diagnosis: capital has been facing a chronic lack of opportunities for profitable investment.

As global capitalism underwent a crisis of overaccumulation, European labor power was still a relatively expensive commodity due to the share of the return on investment that labor movements were able to claim throughout the postwar economic boom. Unions across Western Europe had so much power that crushing wages in order to maintain profit rates was no simple task, which made the need for subjugated labor power even greater. The inversion of migration flows from outward to inward then provided a possible solution. All that was required was that the incoming workers were subjugated, or rather expropriated, enough to render them profitable. All that was required was a proliferation of borders.

The first oil shock, in 1973, was followed by the abrupt cancellation of the guest worker programs in Western Europe. The largest economies in Europe withdrew from their role in active recruitment abroad, a political move that prefigured an unprecedented overhaul of the European borders. In the 1980s, there was a surge of legislation that attempted to regulate the movement of people across national borders. This holds for Europe in general and for most countries in particular. Hand-in-hand with this proliferation of border legislation, there was a sudden increase in the salience of the topic in both political and media discourse. This was followed by a spectacular increase in funding for border enforcement and in deaths of migrants at Europe's Southern borders. Borders proliferated in legislation, discourse and violence[36].

The changes were so sudden and so extraordinary that politicians, activists and scholars alike rushed to proclaim that Europe was scrambling to "seal off its borders" (Rass, 2012, p. 223), that states would resort to ever more violent measures in order to stop migrants from coming in. This analysis seemed to be confirmed by politicians' vows to respond to an increase in the migrant stock of the EU by closing the borders. As I showed in the Introduction, this did not happen. Not only did the proliferation of borders not reduce migration fluxes, the majority of the policies approved were actually towards less restrictiveness rather than more, making it abundantly clear how uninterested governments really were in curbing immigration. That was not the role of borders in postwar Europe and it is not their role now.

The proliferation of borders disciplined workers through legislative and discursive means, as well as by the threat of imminent violence, and so generated the type of subjugated labor power that capital requires for its realization. As we saw in Chapter 3, the proliferation of borders is a form of accumulation through the expropriation of migrants.

Fraser refers to the period that corresponds to Brenner's "long downturn", between the early 1970s and the present day, as "financialized capitalism". In her view, this stage of capitalist development is characterized by a unique relationship between exploitation and expropriation: for the first time in history, she argues, these two forms of capitalist accumulation are completely intertwined. The citizen-worker that was the paradigm of the worker in the previous period was displaced by "a new figure, formally free, but acutely vulnerable: the expropriated-and-exploited citizen-worker" (2022, p. 47). As much of large-scale industrial production left European territory in search for cheaper labor, and finance was unleashed from the shackles that had constrained it during "state-managed capitalism", the European worker, once shielded from expropriation by labor rights and regulations, became increasingly unprotected. Precarious service work replaced unionized

[36] See Chapter 2.

factory work and many workers who used to belong to the category of citizen-workers, began receiving salaries that fell below their costs of reproduction. The massive expansion of private debt then ensured the further expropriation of these workers via the charging of interest.

In Fraser's view, the sharp separation that characterized earlier stages of capitalist development, strongly drawn along Du Bois's color line (2005), began to fade and, as it did, it gave way to a spectrum of modes of accumulation that go from pure expropriation to pure exploitation. A spectrum between 'freedom' and unfreedom that encompasses both racialized and non-racialized workers. "Financialized capitalism" exploits and expropriates nearly everyone at the same time. Seeing that the line between expropriation and exploitation is blurring led Fraser to claim that "racial oppression in capitalist society is no longer strictly "necessary"" (2022, p. 50). Or, in other words, capitalism seems to have evolved to a stage of its development in which it can do without racism.

But even if the once sharp distinction between modes of accumulation is fading, Fraser recognizes that the racism that once made it possible lingers on. She then attributes this to the fact that the people who were once shielded from expropriation, now misdirect their legitimate grievances and end up joining the ranks of fast-growing far-right movements. In her words,

> *When centuries of racialized stigma and violation meet capital's voracious need for subjects to exploit and expropriate, the result is intense insecurity and paranoia – hence, a desperate scramble for safety – and exacerbated racism* (2022, p. 50).

Fraser holds that capitalism is no longer *structurally* racist based on the observation that the line that once served as a clear separation between exploitation and expropriation seems to be blurring. However, the proliferation of borders stands as a counter-example to that claim. As we saw in Chapter 3, the proliferation of borders produces difference via an abundance of legislation that generates an array of distinct relationships with the law, it naturalizes that difference through discourse and violence in order to justify the production of the expropriable subjects that capital requires. The fact that this proliferation began taking place in Europe in the 1980s, roughly the start of the period that Fraser refers to as "financialized capitalism", suggests that the capitalist system has not, in fact, evolved past its structural need for the type of difference that serves as a separation between exploitation and expropriation. The proliferation of borders has served as a way to accentuate, rather than fade, that separation. This is not to say, of course, that expropriation is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe. In fact, as Fraser acknowledges, there have always been expropriable subjects in the core. What I want to stress here is that even in "financialized capitalism", the difference that separates exploitability from expropriability is still actively produced.

Looking at the ongoing proliferation of borders, we see that capital has not ceased to need and produce inherently violable subjects, ready to be expropriated, even if the type of difference that it organizes productively is historically contingent. For this reason, there is no basis to claim that racism in these times of "financialized capitalism" is simply a result of "intense insecurity and paranoia" that finds an outlet in the hollow promises of far-right movements, even if that plays a part. The difference that provided justification for some to be expropriated and others not (or less so) was, and still is, being actively produced. Capitalism necessitates it structurally and organizes it to the tune of capital accumulation. Recall Mezzadra and Nielson's claim that difference is an internal feature of the operations of capitalism (2019, p. 37).

It is important to recognize that workers who were once "only" exploited, are now also expropriated. Crippling austerity, the erosion of the welfare state and the explosion of private debt have all trapped racialized and non-racialized subjects alike in a cycle of exploitation and expropriation. In that sense, the separation between exploitation and expropriation is indeed blurring. But it does not follow that capitalism has evolved past any need to justify the fact that some social groups are vastly more expropriated than others.

4.3 Guest worker programs: from equal treatment to expropriation

Over recent years, governments have shown a renewed interest in guest worker programs. Stephen Castles identifies two main reasons for this shift, one economic and one demographic (2006). The first was the realization by Western European states that it is not possible to export all low-skilled work to low-wage countries. While cars, computers and clothing could be manufactured abroad, construction, farming and care work had to stay. The second reason was the fact that declining fertility rates in most European countries were taking a toll on the number of available workers. This led European governments to begin implementing guest worker programs, similar in stated purpose to their 20th century counterparts, but with fundamental differences.

The revival of guest worker programs does not signal a return to a tendency for "equal treatment" between national and migrant workers. In fact, as the works of Nandita Sharma and Harsha Walia clearly point out, these programs now serve as a way for states to provide capital with a sufficiently disciplined workforce that can easily be disposed of and replaced (Sharma, 2006; Walia, 2021). Migrant workers brought in by this type of program are disciplined by the threat of losing the possibility of staying in the country legally. Additionally, in the majority of contemporary guest worker programs, the time spent as a guest worker does not count to earn permanent residence rights, migrants are legally bound to work only in certain sectors, they are not allowed to change employers and will be forced to leave the

country if they lose their job. Finally, under many guest worker programs, migrants have very limited access to welfare benefits and no right to family reunification (Ruhs and Martin, 2008).

Although current guest worker programs share some characteristics with their postwar economic boom counterparts, their effects on the exploitation of workers are remarkably different. That difference lies in the way the state intervenes. If, during the postwar period, states would, through the ILO, impose standards for labor conditions at an international level, in current guest worker programs, there is no such attempt. In fact, many differences in rights are actually inscribed in the programs themselves. The difference between the postwar programs and the current ones can also be explained, in part, by the fact that economic stagnation decreased the demand for labor, which degraded the bargaining position of migrant workers (Rass, 2012). Employers, no longer competing for access to labor power, could easily lower the standards afforded to migrant workers.

Another important difference is the fact that, while postwar guest worker programs reached such importance that they became the staple of European labor migration of their time, their 21st century counterparts never affected more than a minority of labor migrants. For this reason, we cannot draw a clear picture of the changes in border policy only from a comparison of the two. Instead, we must acknowledge that migrants bound for Europe who would have traveled via guest worker programs had they not been cancelled in the 1970s, had to choose other legal or illegal means[37]. Migration scholars have thus established other, perhaps more fruitful comparisons, in that regard.

Rinus Penninx, for example, published a detailed comparison between the postwar guest worker programs and what he termed the CEES system, the movement of people from Central and Eastern European countries to European Union member states starting in the 1990s (2018). Both, Penninx argues, involved sending countries with economies that pushed people to find jobs elsewhere and receiving countries with severe labor shortages. Additionally, they involved comparable numbers of workers. According to the author, the postwar guest worker programs began as movements of workers along informal networks in a context in which the spontaneous arrival could be legalized easily and under regular conditions of the labor market. Eventually, migration became increasingly institutionalized, which meant heavy participation of the state in enforcing labor standards. Within the CEES system, on the other hand, the regular and organized movement only accounted for a small portion of the workers who moved along this route. As such,

> *most of the movement was irregular – in the sense that a pre-organised legal frame was absent – and not officially organised – in the sense that demand and supply was*

[37] See the “waterbed effect” and the effect of “driving migration underground” in the Introduction, both consequences of restrictive border policies.

> *connected through informal networks or (often irregular) private intermediaries and agencies. The actual work obtained was often irregular, less protected and certain, and low paid* (Penninx, 2018, p. 94).

The differences between the postwar guest worker programs and the CEES system express the principal element of the proliferation of borders that took over Europe in the 1980s: a shift from a tendency for equal treatment to expropriation.

4.4 What makes the border?

We are now in a position to answer the question that lends its name to the final section of this chapter. *What makes the border?* I propose that we regard the contemporary border as a result of two powerful forces: migration and crisis. The first of these factors enters this thesis as an assumption, a perspective, from the autonomy of migration literature. The second one follows from the argument herein.

Capitalist production requires labor. We may even say that it requires labor mobility. In Mezzadra's words, "there is no capitalism without migration" (2010, p. 4). But the specific form of the required labor is highly historically contingent. In times of economic expansion, capitalist accumulation requires a growing workforce that it can exploit at the workplace. Recall that, according to Harvey, in such times, the majority of accumulation is done through exploitation, that is, through the appropriation of surplus value. Quantity of labor is given priority over quality. This explains why, during the postwar economic boom, there was a tendency for equal treatment among national and migrant workers. Sustaining capital accumulation during times of economic expansion required large numbers of workers and, since their contribution to that accumulation was done primarily by appropriating the surplus value they produced, there was no structural need for a hard separation between exploitable and expropriable workers.

In times of economic crisis, on the other hand, capital struggles to realize itself through expanded reproduction and so it must find alternative (often overtly violent) means of accumulation. It then turns to expropriation. Capital still requires labor, of course, but not just any kind of labor. It requires cheap, disciplined (or rather, expropriable) labor. Quality is given priority over quantity. This explains the proliferation of borders that began in the 1980s. Capital accumulation required a hard separation between exploitable and expropriable workers, which was achieved through an unprecedented increase in border legislation, discourse and violence. But who and in what way capital expropriates is completely dependent on who and what is available at each historical moment. This is where the autonomy of migration comes in. In times of crisis, capital must find alternative ways to accumulate and, in particular, as we have seen, it can accumulate by subjugating migrant

labor. But it is human mobility that determines what migrant labor is available and which instruments are necessary to seize its labor power. That means that migration determines the specific shape that borders must attain in order for capital to seize its productive potential. Borders function as instruments of capital accumulation through the expropriation of workers deemed foreign. Migration is happening regardless, borders render it profitable. This is their role in contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion

The Role of Borders in Contemporary Capitalism

"Capitalism cannot function if we all are allowed to become fully human."

Gargi Bhattacharyya, Rethinking Racial Capitalism

The goal of this work that was laid out in the Preface was for it to be a first step in the quest to understand the reasons for all the death we have witnessed at the doors of Europe over the past decades: *Understanding Why People Die*. Recognizing that what scholars have called the proliferation of borders is a phenomenon whose origins cannot be found in any one particular country, I searched for an explanation in the development of global capitalism itself.

Using data on policy, political discourse and border violence in Europe, I proposed an analytical model to account for what exactly proliferated and, perhaps most importantly, when it proliferated. The model is split into three axes of proliferation: border legislation, discourse and violence, and all of them suggest that this phenomenon began taking place between the late 1980s and the early 2000s. Using the concept of differential inclusion to question the frequently used dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion, I proposed to look at borders as mechanisms that serve the purpose of swaying and organizing migration, rather than acting as barriers to it. With authors such as Mezzadra, Nielsen and De Genova, I concluded that borders organize the productive potential of migration. They subjugate a section of the working class so as to subordinate their labor.

I used Nancy Fraser's theoretical framework to illuminate the ways in which borders organize migration. This framework is based on the concept of expropriation, which accounts for all the more overtly violent modes of capital accumulation that do not fit the vastly more studied exploitation of 'free' workers. In particular, it accounts for all the labor that is appropriated by capital from workers who are not 'free' or whose wages do not cover their costs of reproduction. This is how borders seize the productive potential of migration. They naturalize the difference between national and foreign workers, thereby contributing to the expropriation of the latter. Borders function as instruments of capital accumulation through the expropriation of workers deemed foreign. Migration is a fact of life. Borders render it profitable. That is their role in contemporary capitalism.

As Harvey and Fraser argued, capital is more inclined to accumulate through processes of expropriation whenever it runs into obstacles to accumulating through exploitation, that is, in times of crisis of overaccumulation. Crisis then, provides a mechanism through which the boundary between exploitation and expropriation shifts. I concluded with a short history of

crisis and the European border and argued that it was the crisis of overaccumulation that global capitalism encountered in the beginning of the 1970s that led to the start of the proliferation of borders. In times of economic expansion, the postwar economic boom, capital required large numbers of workers to exploit. Quantity was given priority over quality. Ever since the onset of the crisis, capital required not just any kind of workers, but expropriable ones. Quality was given priority over quantity, and borders proliferated in order to provide capital with just that kind of worker. The proliferation of borders began in the 1980s as a way for capital to stifle the effects of the crisis that global capitalism has been going through since the beginning of the 1970s.

Capitalism as a "difference machine"[38]

Capitalism has always required mechanisms that allow for capital accumulation in ways other than the appropriation of surplus value at the workplace. Scholars studying these mechanisms have recognized their likeness to the very processes of primitive accumulation that made that appropriation possible in the first place[39]. Using concepts such as expropriation, they encompassed a great array of phenomena very different from one another. Indeed, the mechanisms that capital has deployed in order to carry out the accumulation that it cannot accomplish through exploitation have been highly historically contingent all throughout the history of capitalism.

Following Fraser's recommendation of looking at the history of capitalism as a sequence of stages defined by their particular relation between exploitation and expropriation, we see that what separates one from the other has relied on the mobilization of evolving ideological tools such as what W.E.B. Du Bois once called the color line (2005). For this reason, capitalism has always required difference. Here, Gargi Bhattacharyya's words are of particular use.

> *The logics of racial capitalism suggest that capitalism cannot be 'fixed' or 'adapted' in a way that allows us all to be equal or all forms of humanity to be valued. This is not to say that change does not occur and that some historical disadvantages cannot be ameliorated. However, it is to argue that capitalism cannot function if we all are allowed to become fully human. Dehumanisation seems to be an unavoidable outcome of the processes of capitalist development* (2018, p. x).

If we accept the main claim of this thesis, the proliferation of borders is yet another one of these mechanisms that depends on the naturalization of difference, particularly, that between national and foreign, citizen and migrant. This unveils fundamental similarities with other,

[38] Mezzadra and Nielson (2019, p. 65).
[39] See Chapter 1.

much older and more extensively studied, mechanisms of expropriation. In fact, capital's need to produce difference that it can organize productively, has been a central realization of both the Black Marxist and the Marxist feminist traditions.

Take, for instance, Maria Mies's concept of housewifization, the process by which women were integrated into the accumulation process not as wage-earners, but as dependent housewives, that is, as unpaid workers, fully dependent on the husband's salary and relegated to the atomization and invisibilization of the house chores (1998). This process was fully dependent on the naturalization of the difference between men and women. 'Naturalization' is used here quite literally since, for Mies, women's share in the reproduction of life was defined as a function of their nature, an extension of their physiology. It is a "biologistically infected concept of nature" that mystifies the relation of domination and exploitation that subjugates women in capitalism (1998, p. 45).

Also the hunting, torturing and burning of midwives and witches in Medieval Europe, framed by both Mies and Silvia Federici as a form of primitive accumulation that consisted of the appropriation of women's control over their bodies, only became a possibility by mobilizing notions of difference that would allow for the decimation of tens of thousands of women. In fact, as Federici puts it, primitive accumulation

> *was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as "race" and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat* (2021, pp. 63–64).

The ideals of femininity that were mobilized in order to turn women into expropriable subjects were (are) highly historically contingent. Indeed, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the height of the witch hunting frenzy, women were regularly portrayed as unreasonable, vain, demonic, lusty and unable to govern themselves, whereas from the 18th century on, that ideal gave way to a female figure that was passive, obedient and chaste (Federici, 2021, pp. 100–103).

Cedric Robinson, in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, recognizing that the racism that was essential in the establishment of capitalism could not, logically, have been produced within capitalism itself, argued that the roots of that racism were in the naturalization of the difference between European peoples.

> *Thus the "Negro" was conceived. The Negro—whose precedents could be found in the racial fabrications concealing the Slavs (the slaves), the Irish and others* (Robinson, 2005, p. 4).

It was with those cultural and ideological tools that the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade, and with it the consolidation of capitalist relations the world over, was made possible. The creation of the "Negro" found its ideological roots in the racist notions already embedded

within European society. The economic need for slave labor then provided the motive for its definitive establishment.

Also the ideals of what attributes Africans were "naturally" endowed with changed significantly over time. In particular, they changed with the development of global capitalism. Here, it is worth quoting Robinson at length.

> *When manufacturing became the most advanced form of production [...], the African was represented as chattel in their economic image, as slaves in their political and social image, as brutish and therefore inaccessible to further development, and finally as Negro, that is without history. And later, during the industrialization of the country's economy, [...] the Black was a pathetic sharecropper, unskilled and unambitious—the "happy darkies" for whom the society possessed a paternalistic obligation. Finally, in our own time, with the development of corporate structures and the myth of the intensively rationalized and rational society, Blacks became the irrational, the violent, criminal, caged beast. The cage was civilization and Western culture, obviously available to Blacks but inexplicably beyond their grasp* (2005, p. 187).

What is crucial to understand is that there is nothing matter of fact about these differences except capital's need for them. What all these mechanisms have in common is that they appropriate, enhance and expand evolving difference within society so that they may, at each historical moment, produce the kind of subjects that capital needs the most. As the needs of capital change over time, so do these mechanisms. Throughout its history, capital produces difference and then organizes it productively.

Seeing the proliferation of borders as yet another mutation of the capitalist system to accommodate capital's needs allows us to carry over a lot of the work done in both the Black Marxist and the Marxist feminist traditions to the relatively recent field of critical border studies, instead of having to analyze it as an entirely new phenomenon.

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In the process of writing this dissertation, I realized that, in a sense, it is also about understanding why people *do not* die. Indeed, one cannot fully grasp the connection between borders and the subjugation of labor by only looking at border deaths. With such a narrow view, it looks paradoxical that capital, while perpetually in need of labor power, would create institutions, policies and practices that result in the death of so many potential workers. It is only when we take a step back and look at the effects of border violence in those who do not directly suffer through it that we begin to understand the reason for all that violence. Quoting Federici and Mies once more, "violence itself becomes the most productive force" (2021, p. 16).

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