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Walls, bridges and the company political role

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Men build too many walls and not enough bridges
Isaac Newton

Abstract: The mode of governance that has dominated the management of enterprises since the 19th century based on the concept of “homo economicus” has reached its limits and must now be considered as obsolete in front of the evolution of the social, economic and natural environment. Then, the time has come to reconsider radically the role of enterprises in the economic and business environment in order to restore their legitimacy. Unfortunately, many governments are pursuing policies resulting in isolating enterprises and people from each other, which have been proved by economic and management history to be bound to fail. These governments build walls with the illusion of protecting their countries whereas people and enterprises need bridges to develop knowledge, innovation and common wellbeing. This paper analyzes how the option of walls is a dead-end street and the option of bridges is the way to take up the lethal challenges that men are faced with.

Type of paper: Conceptual

Keywords: walls, bridges, company political role, harmonious enterprise

1. Introduction: The backdrop

The market economy since the Second World War has generated a big wealth thanks to its enterprises and the rules that guide them. It has also spread a great wellbeing. Suffices to think of the comfort of

houses, the systems of mobility, the domestic equipments such as refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, dishwashers or ovens, which have been more and more automated, the communication technologies, education and health services. This extraordinary development has of course primarily been beneficial for the economically developed countries of what is commonly called the ‘Western World’ (Europe, North America, Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, representing a little less than 20% of the world population). Nevertheless, a number of countries have ‘emerged’ as middle-income ones (e.g. China, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, Chile) and less developed countries have also benefited. 1.3 bn people have come out of the extreme poverty zone, defined as a daily income of 2.15 USD, and about the same number at a daily income of 3.65 USD more representative of a decent living standard (World Bank 2025).

All this has happened with a speed and acceleration never seen in other periods of human history. It has happened thanks to a synergic convergence of various mutually reinforcing innovations. Of course, each step must be evaluated in the environmental context in which it occurred. How can we measure the speed of change and the complexity generated by the invention of the wheel?

In order to have an idea of this speed, we can take the example of telecommunications. In many areas of countries in Europe, such as Italy, France or Spain, until the mid-1970s, telephone numbers were submitted to contingents for lack of lines. Today, about 50 years later, the networks of voice and data transmission are present everywhere with a flow of communication unheard of (Contri, 2007).

However, this fantastic diffusion of wellbeing has been achieved at the price of an increasing inequality as regards the populations with a weaker development. It is estimated that 10% of the people detain 76% of the world wealth (World Inequality Database, 2025). There are also large inequalities within countries, as measured by the GINI coefficient. Apparently, the bigger inequalities are in newly economic developed countries due to an unbalanced development (<0.5 for the ‘Western World’, higher for more recently developed economies – e.g. Mexico, Brazil, China; ourworldindata.org, 2025).

This inequality in wellbeing between people is also found inside rich countries, with a handful of ultrarich and many sections of the populations living in – relative – poverty.

“If the 5 richest men in the world spend 1 million US dollars per day, it would take 476 years to exhaust their wealth. It would take a woman working in healthcare or social work 1,200 years to earn as much as the average CEO of one of the 100 largest companies on the Fortune list, earns in a year, according to a report by Oxfam in 2024. . Even if those calculations must be taken with precaution, there is no doubt that gaps, whatever the method of calculation, are absolutely huge.

But this inequality is not the only price to pay for the wealth generated by a market system guided by the maximization of short-term profit, in line with the theory of the ‘homo economicus’.

Indeed, at the root of these dynamics, there is also the false and comforting belief that natural resources are infinite, and that man can master nature. This belief was widespread until a few years ago and has now been demonstrated to be unfounded by almost all scientists. It is a belief that has generated an unreasonable use of resources at low costs (for example the cost of depletion of resources is nowhere considered whether in private or public accounting) for the benefit of enterprises, largely contributing to a climate and environmental crisis, notably through the burning of fossil fuels, whose point of irreversibility is getting closer and closer, and has already been reached for some aspects (Pope Francis: *Laudato si*, 2023).

In this context, an environmental inequality has grafted itself to the economic inequality causing mass migrations of people abandoning their countries in search for a place where they hope to enjoy a better quality of life, either for reasons connected to climate change, to extreme poverty or local wars and conflicts caused by the struggle for political and/or economic power sometimes fed by religious pretexts. On average, more than 15% of workers in OECD countries are immigrants (OECD, 2025). This figure is bound to increase with the effects of climatic changes in the coming decades (Martin J., Brunetti F., Baccarani C., 2025).

The few rich, on the one hand, the many poor, on the other, are pushing, inside and outside the developed regions, for a rebalancing of a situation becoming more explosive by the day. It is clear action is necessary, but how?

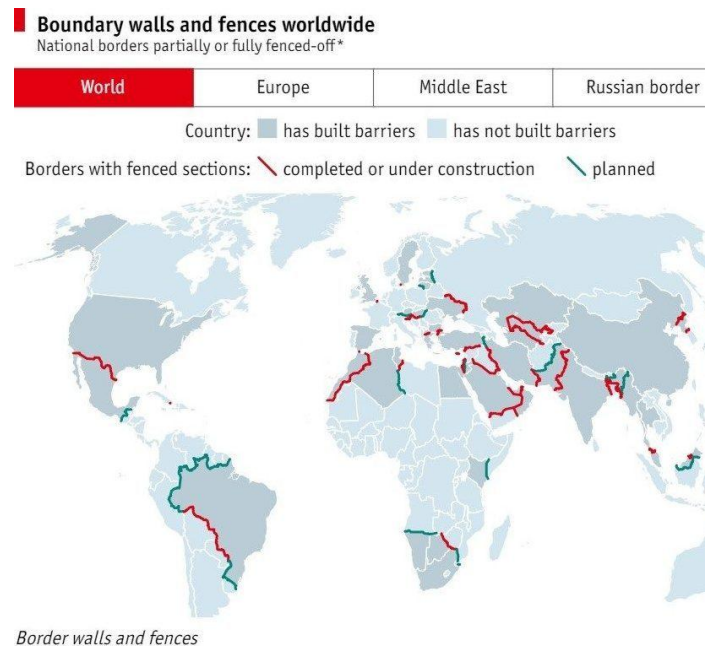
2. The path of the walls

A path that seems to be outdated in view of historical developments, has unfortunately been taken by a significant group of countries to improve their level of wellbeing, even if it is low compared to rich countries, but still higher than those living in conditions of extreme poverty. It is, *lato sensu*, the path of the ‘homo economicus’ followed by economically developed countries since the 19th century.

With the fall of the Berlin wall on 9 November 1989, it seemed that we were in front of an historic occasion to create open and peaceful relationships, albeit genuinely competitive, between men and, moving up to the meso and macro levels, between organizations and nations.

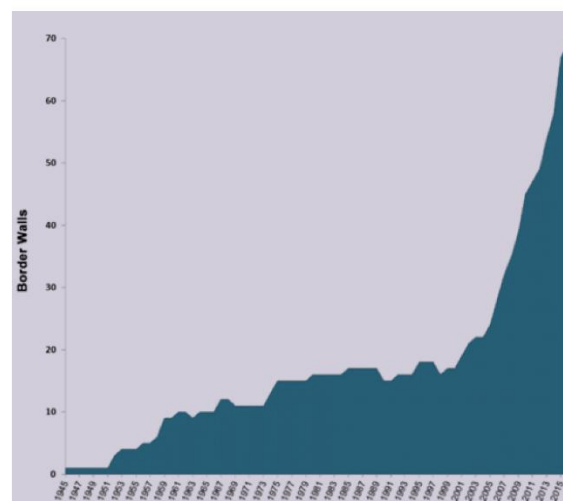
Today, in the image of the Great Wall of China, a precious historical monument, which in fact was never of a positive use, and a meaningful symbol for today, there is in the world an unimaginable number of walls between countries, notwithstanding a number of scenarios hypothesized in the 1990s. These walls, because of their rapid growth, tend to outpace scientific scrutiny and are largely ignored by the mass media. We are not speaking here of “good walls” which protect us from climatic severe weather phenomena or criminal behaviours of some groups in the population. We are speaking of “bad walls” which enclose the population as in a fortress to prevent people from other regions to come in order to enjoy what they think is ‘civilization’, moved by extreme poverty, wars or climate disasters.

It is difficult to say how many of those walls there are today. The sources available lead to retain that, at the world level, there are 70 to 80 such walls (the most famous one being the wall along the US-Mexican border, but there are also some around the European Union – Hungary, Poland, the Baltic States both for economic and security reasons) for a length of more than 40,000 km, that is the circumference of the earth. At present the most complete research in this respect is that of Elizabeth Vallet of the University of Québec (Borders, Fences and Walls, 2018). According to this study, only one continent has no walls, Oceania. But in that case, the ocean can be the wall.



The growth of walls has known a rocketing increase since 2000.

Figura 2 – Confini protetti da muri nel mondo, 1945-2015



Fonte: Elizabeth Vallet, *Borders*, cit.

But walls are not only physical, they are also normative, economic, social and psychological.

The main reason advocated for walls is to check the arrival in various developed countries of people moving along migratory routes from Southern countries to Northern countries, where they hope to find an acceptable quality of life.

The economic reasons basically reside in protectionist policies, such as tariffs, inspired by 17th and 18th mercantilism, supposed to reduce imports and favour local production. Although such policies have been proved to be ineffective and counter-productive since Adam Smith (1776), they are pursued with the belief that reducing international trade can be advantageous for rich countries. The historic reality is that they are detrimental both to “rich” and “poor” countries. In “rich” countries, they hinder

innovation and cause inflation, and in the “poor” countries they slow down their economic development.

Social and psychological walls manifest themselves in a variety of behaviors, from discriminatory or racist ones that marginalize people of different ethnicities, to those that spread attitudes of indifference among individuals, organizations, and States toward the conditions of inequality. Even from a purely economic point of view, these walls do not make sense. The present rulers of the USA for example seem to forget that the country was built on immigration and faintly realize that the policy of expelling immigrants has begun to have adverse economic consequences. The same goes for many “rich” countries, such as Germany, Spain, Italy, the UK or Japan. The negative implications in the short and medium term are and will be more and more evident as these countries’ populations are steadily decreasing.

Fear, selfishness, greed, and ignorance are the drivers of these choices, which represent the most blatant political and social failure of communities that consider themselves progressive. Communities that think they can defend the privileges they enjoy by isolating themselves, as if on an island, in the belief that their fortunate condition can be defended, are misled. Communities that live in denial of dialogue, in fear and contempt for those who are different, fail to realize that normality is nothing other than the sum of our diversities, since everyone is different and everyone, through their diversity, contributes to the common progress.

From a social point of view, these policies of walling oneself are in fact a sign of renouncement. People do not trust each other, they are scared of the future, they have no more faith in anything as diagnosed and evidenced by Pope Francis (Fratres Omnes, 2023) and become less and less happy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

It is obvious that these positions of privilege cannot be defended and maintained forever, because like all walls, these too, sooner or later, will collapse under the pressure of change which, like a mighty wind, like typhoons and tsunamis, both in real and metaphorical terms, will tear down these defenses under the pressure generated by need, desperation, and demands for social justice.

Walls are the obvious prelude to the fall of a market system that thrives on immediacy and short-termism, heedless not only of the present of the underprivileged, but also of the future of its own generations. In short, a system that, enclosed within the walls it has erected, is heading, more or less unconsciously, toward the abyss.

3. The path of the bridges

The path of the bridges is harder to follow. Even from a purely engineering and architectural point of view, the building of a bridge is more difficult than that of a wall.

Similarly, building social bridges that unite people is more complicated than shutting oneself in an egoistic self, because it requires dialogue with others and with diversity; it requires comparing ideas, accepting the ills implied by being in contact with others (Bruni, 2010), it requires feeling *part* of the world and not feeling being *the* world, it requires listening.

But listening, which is one of the greatest forms of respect, represents one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome for those who think they are self-sufficient and fail to realize the shortsightedness this attitude generates in their own horizons by shutting themselves off from exchanges with others.

Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the need to build bridges rather than walls. Bridges where people can meet to dialogue and engage in mutual comparison, even if only to get a sense of one another and understand the choices that can help build a society capable of growing in the pursuit of harmony among its diverse parts.

In his encyclical “*Frates Omnes*”, Pope Francis writes.

“Paradoxically, we have certain ancestral fears that technological development has not succeeded in eliminating; indeed, those fears have been able to hide and spread behind new technologies. Today too, outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the “barbarian”, from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only “my” world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only “them”. Once more, we encounter the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land, in order to prevent this encounter with other cultures, with other people. And those who raise walls will end up as slaves within the very walls they have built. They are left without horizons, for they lack this interchange with others” (page 8).

Art also demonstrates how bridges can foster relationships, enthusiasm, and the pleasure of collective encounters and mutual understanding. In 2016, Christo designed and created an installation of piers several kilometers long on Lake Iseo to connect different points of the basin, allowing people to "walk on water" (Floating Piers). In just 16 days of opening, these piers were visited (for a fee) by over 1,200,000 people, intoxicated by experiencing a new situation made up of so many components, from the sensation of moving through space in a way never experienced before to the joy of being part of a collective event. There are bridges that can be built even from the simple exchange of a smile, a handshake, or from fixing one's gaze on someone who demands attention, agreeing to slow down in a rush imposed by a society that sees in a selfish efficiency its primary reason for existence, thus courageously accepting the challenge of seeing what happens outside one's own life routine.

These bridges can be nourished by active hope (Bloch, 2005), the kind that makes people move on the basis of an ideal, a dream, a meaning that can be given to their lives.

What am I doing here? This is a question that could trigger a transformation, allowing us to have a glimpse of the value of bridges for ourselves and others, so that together we can raise our sights toward building a viable future.

This is, however, a question that, in its philosophical nature, could be considered capable of generating, at most, beautiful suggestions, but forgetting in this way how suggestions carry within themselves the power of that creativity that could generate unexpected visions, opening a passage for reflection on the profound meaning of one choice or another for one's life; the one that follows the path of walls or the one that moves along the path of bridges.

4. Walls that exclude, bridges that unite

In this way it would be possible to ask ourselves what the mechanisms of functioning of one or the other choice are and where each leads us.

One possibility to move in this direction resides in the reconstruction of the conditions generating the option for one or the other choice.

On closer inspection, the path of walls is founded on a diffuse perception of *fear*, the fear of the possibility of losing something which we do not want to renounce. This fear is frequently cleverly spread with news far from reality, or even completely false, by those who have the power to direct and guide in order to be able to obtain support from the community for this choice based on the defense of a privilege of a few through the diffusion of the fear in a big part of the public opinion.

The fear spreads selfishness, with self-centred attitudes that lead to behaviours of isolation toward those perceived as different. Diversity is perceived as a threat whereas the enrichment in knowledge and culture typically comes from encounters and cross-fertilization with diversity.

This generates a presumption of *self-sufficiency* which fuels attitudes of *conservation* of existing conditions which cause a drying-up of innovative advances coming from knowledge and cultural exchanges with others.

The lack of synergies from diversity leads to a *decline in innovation* and a weakening in the mid-term which will induce in those who have opted for this choice a further accentuation of the *perception of fear* in a vicious circle which reinforces the attitude of isolation, and can also lead to aggressive and even belligerent choices.

On the contrary, the path of bridges is founded on trust, on the courage of trust placed in the relationships with others. Trust brings in itself open behaviours and attitudes marked by *altruism* and *listening to diversity*. The capacity to be able to develop a dialogue with diversity opens the way to synergies based on *tolerance, knowledge and culture* that stimulate *change and innovation* spreading *trust* further in a virtuous circle that can permit to dream the progress of the community.

If this is often true at the individual level, as anyone can verify by reflecting on one's own experience, it is also true at the level of organizations, in particular the entrepreneurial ones. Thus, the enterprise is certainly part of the problem and hence it must be part of the solution.

The enterprise lives thanks to relationships and certainly does not need walls which smother it and asphyxiate it with choices of isolation. Indeed, by definition, the enterprise finds its *raison d'être* as a transformer of resources (inputs) into products (outputs) for the market. Openness, transactions, relationships are therefore intrinsic to the existence of the enterprise which without exchanges simply cannot exist.

The enterprise needs bridges on which constructive social and economic relationships can move, which can address the problem of inequality in a long-term perspective based on a vision of climate and environmental protection and rebalancing, as well as respect for the diversity of choices and roles of individuals and their organizations.

Such bridges have already begun to be built and stridden by some enterprises, albeit still few today. for various reasons. Some do it because of the entrepreneur's cultural heritage, others because of the emergence of new times, perceiving the urgency of change to fend off the risk of disappearing by losing their social legitimacy.

5. The social and political role of the enterprise: the path of bridges and harmony

What has been said in the previous paragraphs can certainly be accused of exaggerated pessimism and/or superficial analysis. But history has taught us—just think of the Roman Empire or the French Revolution—that when inequalities and crises are not addressed, change explodes in the most unpredictable ways in the search for new social forms, regardless of their actual capacity to remedy the situation from which they arose.

The all-and-immediately attitude and the maximization of profit sought by an impatient capital, have generated too much for the few and too little for the many, with the few wealthy retreating into a confinement that will eventually become suffocating for them too. Air and space has to be given back to patient and productive capital, that of enterprises that are founded not to seek immediate profit but to last over time, through the ability to respond competitively to customer and market requests and to the real needs of individuals and organizations.

If, from a conceptual perspective, it is rather clear what needs to be done, it is much harder to understand how to do it. The stakeholders involved are many and varied, ranging from governments to big financial capital holders, from individuals and their communities to the academic world with the models it designs and imagines for business action, and of course enterprises themselves.

Governing by fear is certainly easier than governing with respect for freedom, given all that freedom entails for governments and their necessity to respond to the widest variety of situations that may arise from a community free in its thinking and rational in its choices. And in reality, it is governments that decide to erect walls and weaken the sources of culture for the critical capacity that can emerge from them. It is not from governments, obviously from a certain type of government, that the impetus for necessary change can come; we can only expect from them some small and timid attempts to stem the spread of financial power.

Of course, we cannot count on the big financial power that thrives on the inequalities it helped create and is scared of losing its privileges, which in reality are no longer such because too much deprives one of the satisfaction and happiness generated by enough, just enough. It is more than hard to imagine an altruistic financial capital. Perhaps we can count more on those who most directly warn of the risks of the situation that has arisen: people and their communities, academia, and the enterprise.

People and their communities, thanks to the significant spread of education during the 1970s and 1980s and the associated critical capacity, may be able to find the strength to break away from the mental colonization wrought by a marketing that pushes toward compulsive, almost existential, consumption for reasons of pure appearance, and from a conditioning participation in networks of virtual, non-real relationships exacerbated by attention-grabbing algorithms in a world that aspires to be increasingly digital.

The academic world, with the necessary caution and prudence needed, has begun to warn about the obsolescence of models that exclude or reduce the social role of businesses, with all the fears associated with recognizing as outdated models which have often been, uncritically, accepted. These models have reached their limits because they are dedicated to continuous growth and not to improving people's quality of life.

Finally, enterprises can play an educational role for customers regarding the use of the goods and services they produce, encouraging informed use, thereby creating a broad spectrum of freedom from needs born of futile desires and leveraging the competitive strength of reputation. Enterprises can abandon short-term profit maximization and instead opt for long-term profits and the necessity to safeguard and regenerate the environment thanks to the competitive strength of a generational respect. The enterprises that can identify with their community of people and be part of the communities in which they operate, operate not only for themselves, but for themselves through others, thus reducing inequalities and bringing them to mere physiological levels, positioning themselves as central factors for social development and progress. Then, enterprises should embrace the value of profit as a means of financing and asserting the quality of their processes, and adopt as their goal and purpose the

production and diffusion of well-being for all those with whom they interact. Thus, enterprises which operate in harmony with themselves and with others, can assume a political and social role as well as an economic one.

The enterprise, after all, is a microcosm that internally reproduces the everyday social relationships between individuals. The enterprise is a go-between linking individuals and the State (Gianfranco Rebora, 2024), and this very characteristic can lead it to assume a social and political role in supporting change. In fact, the company is based on the logic of collective action, and within it, people experience the possibility of collaborating and, in this way, learn and internalize the benefits and value of cooperation.

The choice to seek harmony in relationships, despite all its natural imperfections, could lead enterprises to initiate the change required to transform a market system now on the brink of collapse. This would initiate a social transformation based on the care of oneself and of others, capable of overcoming the greedy capitalism of walls and opening the way to an altruistic capitalism of bridges, because harmony is in itself a generative source of bridges.

Such a corporate conception is meant to establish a harmony between the needs of the stakeholders (including the natural environment) in a sustainable perspective (Martin J., Brunetti F., Baccarani C., 2025). The stakes are in fact quite simple: the survival of the human species. One way or another, nature will outlive man, but man cannot outlive nature.

6. Conclusion

The enterprise is a collective work of art made up of a system of vital relationships from whose degree of internal harmony arises the competitive and social strength it expresses. By nature, the enterprise is a builder of bridges. All enterprises build bridges. However, there are enterprises which build “military bridges” on which they launch their troops to conquer markets according to the rules of behaviour of the “homo economicus”. There are others which build “social bridges” that they use to generate harmonious relationships between all the stakeholders participating in their social and economic projects which are actively integrated in the future of the communities where they operate.

They are enterprises aware of the strength they carry within themselves as intermediary organizations between people and institutions and which to the question “what am I doing here?” respond with actions, and not with proclamations, aimed at following the paths of common progress in spreading the quality of life of current and future generations. They are enterprises that recognize themselves in a purpose which goes beyond economics to embrace a social one combining efficiency and cost-effectiveness metrics with those of well-being.

They are enterprises which carry within themselves the strength of social and territorial reputation that allows them to face the challenges of the future with serenity knowing that their strength is not only in themselves but in the network of relationships in which the energy of trust flows impetuously. They are companies that know how to nurture relationships, aware that bridges that are not taken of, can collapse.

“If you erect a wall, think of what you leave out”
Italo Calvino, “Il Barone rampante”

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