

A walled world*

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The current transformation of many of our borders into walls is a clear indicator of the ambiguity of the process of globalization, which combines opening and fragmentation, delimitation and closure. This issue places crucial aspects of our humanity at stake since borders and boundaries are linked to the realities of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, questions of identity and difference. The current tendency of multiplying strategies for closure reveals that we have significant difficulties when it comes to different ways of configuring everything that has to do with the legal-political realm, citizenship, identity, or security. Perhaps it is time to consider the opportuneness of a different way of conceiving the border. We could stop thinking of it

* Translated by Sandra Kingery.

as a wall and let it be a place of recognition, communication, and demarcation.

1. The multiplication of walls

We were so absorbed with celebrating the coming of an unlimited world, the open spaces of globalization, the indeterminateness of the internet, the freedoms of movement and communication, the new language of interdependence and soft power that we have been slow to recognize the flip side of this reality: a reterritorialized or even walled world, the fragmented space of multiculturalism, protectionisms, the proliferation of gated communities, and physical barricades. Our tributes to the memory of borders should consider whether we are not in fact facing their multiplication and displacement. The world that we label as global reveals a strange ambiguity since it is, on the one hand, open, liberalized, and without boundaries, but, probably as a reaction to the foregoing, it also employs strategies of retreat, vigilance, and protectionism.

It is also true that the experience of boundaries and the transgression of boundaries is shared very unevenly, in an asymmetrical fashion. First of all, entering or leaving a territory, which is a mere formality for some citizens, can for others be a true impossibility or a struggle against the instruments of scrutiny and control. Different people have different experiences with borders depending on who they are, where they are coming from, where they are going to, and the reason why they are traveling. All of this allows us to deduce that the rhetoric about a “borderless world” re-

veals the fantasies of the minority who enjoy a digital existence in a world in which existence itself is a constant struggle for many.

This contrast is most notable in the proliferation of walls after the end of that long physical and ideological barrier that was the Cold War. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the construction of new walls has multiplied, as if it were a frenetic race to respond to a new lack of protection: between Mexico and the United States (in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas), on the West Bank, between India and Pakistan, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, between South Africa and Zimbabwe, between Spain and Morocco (encircling the cities of Ceuta and Melilla), between Thailand and Malaysia, etc. The list could be expanded if we count the walls that are being planned, such as the wall Greece wanted to construct on their border with Turkey. In spite of the predictions announcing that globalization would lead to the creation of a world without borders, the United States, India, and Israel alone have built a total of 5,700 kilometers of security barriers (Jones, 2012).

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What are these walls? What is their purpose or, at least, the reasons why they are built? These barriers are not meant to prevent the attack of other sovereign powers or enemy armies but to impede the movement of people; they are meant to confront persistent and disorganized forces rather than military or economic strategies; they are more post-, sub-, and transnational than international; they are a response to the disconnected flows of state sovereignties. Current walls do not respond to the logic of the Cold War;

they are walls of protection. They indicate, more than anything, a lack of confidence in the face of the other, the foreigner, and in that way they say a great deal about the ambiguities of globalization. Barriers “do not separate the ‘inside’ of a sovereign, political or legal system from a foreign ‘outside’, but act as contingent structures to prevent movement across territory” (Weizman, 2007, p. 172). They are directed at the movement of goods and people; this movement is not generally spurred by external invasion, but by internal demand: labor, drugs, prostitution, etc.

168 In this regard, I fully share Wendy Brown’s thesis and her paradoxical explanation: what has led to the frenetic construction of walls is not the triumph but the weakening of state sovereignty (2009). This observation contradicts the traditional dogma of sovereignty. From Carl Schmitt to Giorgio Agamben, sovereignty has been defined as the power to establish a state of exception, and a wall would be the most expressive image of this. This conception is based on the idea that extralegal or exaggerated forms of exercising power are expressions of sovereignty, when it is really just the opposite: they are manifestations of the failure of sovereign power. Today’s walls do not indicate a strengthening of the nation-state of full late modernity; they are icons of its erosion. Like all hyperbole, they reveal perplexity, vulnerability, and instability at the very heart of what they are attempting to defend. They signal an incapacity to govern the powers freed by globalization. Resorting to the barrier and the blockade is a desperate attempt to remedy this ungovernability.

A wall is not so much a material thing as a mental reality that traces a line of separation between an “inside” that feels threatened and a threatening “outside,” which is seen as an enemy, global, stereotypical, ubiquitous, and sometimes ghostly. Walls function as tranquilizing icons to the extent that they reestablish a clear distinction between the interior and the exterior, between friend and enemy, which is often made to coincide with national borders. All the processes of ghettoizing make use of this same logic when they segment the city in an invisible manner, thus destroying the city’s ability to bring its inhabitants closer. Barriers restore a type of sovereign, visible, material, and delimited power in an environment, unsettling for some, in which power is presented as a weak, diffuse reality. Walls are a psycho-sociological answer to the blurring of the distinction between the interior and the exterior, accompanied by other distinctions that have become problematic, like the difference between the army and the police, criminals and enemies, war and terrorism, legality and non-legality, public and private, self-interest and general interest.

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The building of walls not only illustrates backward movement in the dream of a “global world,” but it testifies to underground tendencies of globalization that foster the return to certain types of “neo-feudalization” in the world. A world in which the simultaneity of the global economy and psycho-political isolation is surprisingly compatible. It could even be argued that the defense of this compatibility has become an ideological goal of that synthesis between political neoliberalism and state nationalism found

in certain new right-wing groups whose project could be summarized in the double goal of “the denationalization of economics and the renationalization of politics” (Sassen, 1996, p. xii). We do not live in a limitless world, but in the tension between a geography of open markets that tends to wipe out borders and a territoriality of national security that tends to build them. There is no consistency between geo-economic and geo-political practices to balance the different agendas of business and security.

2. Psychopathology of boundaries

170 We have known since Machiavelli that fortresses tend to be more harmful than useful (1987, II, p. 24). Walls project an image of jurisdiction and assured space, a spectacular physical presence that is contradicted by the facts: in general, they do not help resolve conflicts, and they hardly prevent movement. They complicate goals, they force the modification of itineraries, but as for prohibiting movement, they tend not to be very effective.

The proliferation of walls in the era of limitless spaces is another manifestation of the degree to which human beings cling to strategies that are historically outdated but that continue to be practiced in spite of their uselessness. We can think of fortifications that continued to be built as if no one was aware that new methods of warfare had made them completely superfluous. There are, for example, citadels that were constructed at times when they no longer make sense. One of the most absurd examples is Antwerp, which built an exterior wall surrounding the city at nine

miles of distance and this barrier ended up limiting the city's space. In this way, the city found itself penned in by its own defensive zones, lacking sufficient soldiers to defend the stronghold itself.

Of course, walls cannot help restore a weakened sovereign state in the heart of the international system. To their minimal effectiveness, one would now have to add their anachronism in the age of climate change, intelligent bombs, digital attacks, and global epidemics. Walls have an archaic nature in a fluid world; they are a monument to solidity in the midst of evanescence, a delimitation that contrasts with the indetermination of financial and communicative spaces, a static affirmation against generalized mobility, a gesture of isolation in an environment of interdependence, a simulation of a protective niche that seems to ignore everyone's common exposure to the same global risks. From the point of view of security, it has been especially clear for some time now that fortifications are completely obsolete as defensive measures (Hirst, 2005). Security experts advise against the closure of territorial space. Therefore, strict delimitations, of which walls are the prime example, display sovereign power and control that they do not exercise, especially now.

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The most telling example of this is found in immigration control, which increases or decreases based on factors that are not connected to the rigidity or porousness of borders. Immigration exists because there are differential opportunities or, if one prefers, because inequalities are currently perceived in a global context (Beck, 2008). When

one thinks that the establishment of barriers is the solution to the increase in the number of immigrants and refugees, it is because it was previously believed that the cause of these displacements was the flexibility of borders, which is fundamentally false.

If they are not fulfilling this function that is assigned to them, then what good are these borders that take on the form of walls? Their statute is undoubtedly independent of their functionality. Given their lack of efficacy, we need to ask what psychological necessities are satisfied by their construction. The answer lies in the need for boundaries and protection for those who perceive themselves—often against all evidence—as “besieged societies” (Bauman 2002a). We should not be surprised in this day and age that some things serve a need other than that which is declared or other than it might seem. Regarding walls, it is clear that they immediately allude to the defense against assailants who come from a chaotic “outside,” but they serve as instruments of identification and cohesion, responding to fear in the face of the loss of sovereignty and the disappearance of homogeneous cultures. In this way, a sinister equivalence is constructed between otherness and hostility, an equivalence that is also a misperception (the majority of the attacks that have taken place in the United States have come from domestic terrorists). It reaffirms the prejudice that democracy cannot exist except in closed, homogenous spaces.

This is, then, a question of applying physical remedies to psychological problems, a theatricalization with effects that are more visible than real. A wall appears to offer se-

curity in a world in which the state's ability for protection has decreased notably, in which subjects are more vulnerable to global economic fluctuations and transnational violence. Everything that accompanies the convincing scenography of walls is simply a political gesture intended to make a segment of the electorate happy, suppressing the image of politically embarrassing chaos and substituting it with an image of comforting order (Andreas, 2000, p. 144). Although it is often impossible to completely close the borders, it is worse to give the impression of doing nothing. "Building a barrier is the best way to do nothing while giving the impression of doing something"; in this way, there is "seductive political activity directed against a group of especially complex problems, for which it is impossible to provide a short-term solution" (Bhagwati, 1986, p. 148).

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Walls would be iniquitous if they merely left unresolved the problems they attempt to delimit in such a simple fashion. But this is not the case: walls generate areas of non-law and disputes, aggravate many of the problems they attempt to resolve, exacerbate mutual hostilities, project internal failures toward the exterior, and preclude any confrontation of global inequities. Furthermore, when security is ostentatiously accentuated, a sense of insecurity is provoked at the same time. There are too many collateral damages to compensate the weak protection that walls provide.

3. Old and new security

Precise borders, presenting an uninterrupted line, were a constituent element of the modern nation state, which is de-

defined as sovereign over a determined space. The border as a fixed, continuous line creates a closed and sacred space and delimits it in the face of others, making crossing difficult or impossible. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the control of borders has become a systematic strategy. Boundaries are marked, controlled by police, and defended militarily. State power is staged on the border line, which is also the place of legitimate control even if there is no concrete reason for suspicion. It is the place where the state is entitled to place everyone under equal suspicion.

174 Bauman reminds us that modernity was an enterprise meant to colonize space, as if it could be conquered and closed off and which it was possible to guard and limit with “No entry” signs. Wealth and power have traditionally been weighty, extensive, and immobile forces. They grew with their expansion in space and had to protect themselves by defending the very space they occupied. But liquids, unlike solids, can scarcely guarantee their shape. The fact that power has become extraterritorial is seen most clearly in the fact that space has lost its classic value as a barrier and protection. With the fluidification of space, the difference between close and far, as well as the difference between civilization and wilderness, has been partially suppressed. Space is no longer an absolute impediment to action; distances hardly count and lose strategic meaning. If all areas of space can be easily reached then none of them is privileged over the others.

This is the context in which one can speak of a degree of failure or inefficiency in the politics of delimitation. New spaces and new ways of thinking neutralize what John

Agnew called “the territorial trap of the modern geopolitical imaginary,” which is constructed based on three problematic assumptions: that, as the concept of sovereignty suggests, states have exclusive power inside their territories; that domestic and international spheres are distinct; and that state borders define social boundaries (Agnew, 1994).

The growing complexity and differentiation of boundaries in global politics contrasts with the simplicity of our practices in relation to them. In contemporary society, boundaries are not necessarily found where the contemporary geopolitical imaginary established them. With the image of the net, society stops being interpreted as a machine or an organism, as was habitual beginning with Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and continuing until the end of the twentieth century. It is no longer seen as a territorial body marked by clear boundaries. Nets do not know delimited spaces, but communicative connections, the infrastructural channeling of flows. That is why we should begin to think that boundaries are no longer where they once were, in that institutionalized place where one sovereignty ended and another began. As Balibar affirms, borders are no longer at the borders (Balibar, 1998, p. 217).

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That explains the uselessness of maintaining the strict distinction between interior and exterior spaces that was characteristic of modern politics. The new forms of global governance minimize the distinction between inside and outside, which has made it impossible to articulate notions of sovereignty, territory, and security (Walker, 1993; Bigo, 2006). The “age of space” that began with the Wall of China and culminated with the Maginot Line began its last phase

with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The events of September 11 made manifest that territory could no longer be employed as a security resource. “Strength and weakness, threat and security have become now, essentially, extraterritorial issues” (Bauman, 2002b, p. 82).

This destabilization has led to an intuitive, but not very intelligent response in the realm of security: turning an entire territory into a border zone, as the Americans did after 9/11, accentuating the post-Cold War tendency of diminishing military expenses and increasing the budget for border control. In this way, a step was taken toward the progressive blurring of the difference between the control of boundaries and the control of the interior. Everyone becomes a security agent. What we have here are the unintended consequences of particular security policies: an increase in the area of operations turns the threat into something ubiquitous and permanent.

But then, how should we defend ourselves in a delimited world? What is the difference between old and new security? First of all, it is useful to fully understand the logic of new threats. The new type of transgressor takes advantage of the fortresses of the network-society, using its opening, its technologies, the density of its connections. Security policies are no longer dominated by a clear distinction between criminal and military threats, between enemies and delinquents. Everything revolves around the struggle against “non-conventional threats.”

In the face of this type of danger, a defense of boundaries is not very effective. Border control suffers from a weakness from the very beginning: it can only expel people at the bor-

der, which is ineffective in relation to our principal threats. In any case, the defense of boundaries is no longer the defense of a territorial line but the conquest of defensive positions that are dispersed throughout the net. In addition, security today is far from the borders, and the lines of defense can be very far from one's own territory. The lines of military defense are shifted toward a particular rearguard, reaching sources where dangers are supposedly emitted, at hot spots generated at the folds of globalization. That is why the general vulnerability produced by current global flows is not resolved by completely isolating ourselves from the outside but through procedures of cooperation and global governance that presume an active internalization of the outside.

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4. The future of borders

Boundaries and borders have not become obsolete nor has the territorial moment disappeared completely, but all of this must be thought about in a different way. First, we must understand that the concept of the border or boundary is in the legal-political realm; it is not a natural or neutral practice. This concept can be used unthinkingly, which means forgetting the contingency of the political order and reifying it. With an impervious national discourse, we lose sight of the fact that cultures and identities, far from being immutable, are historic in nature and are constantly transformed by the incorporation of new elements. We have to get used to cultural diversity by reducing the drama of its juxtaposition. We need to favor the circulation of people by relaxing the most static aspects of contiguity.

Rigid delimitations are a primitive method of providing security, and walls are ineffective. The best antidote to the wall is the border, in other words, the recuperation of boundaries that define, establish thresholds of movement, and allow for recognition. What must be fought are not borders but walls. The fact is that borders have other uses that the security obsession tends to undervalue, including: communication and demarcation.

178 Walls are more of a barrier than borders are. The border, on the other hand, is not only something that divides and separates; it also allows recognition and an encounter with the other; it is more liquid than solid, a place of movement, of economic transaction, and of exchange. Far from blocking, separating, and homogenizing, the border communicates. For some time now, all fields of knowledge (physics, biology, geography, economics, and even law) conceive of the border by linking it to an absolutized distinction between the inside and the outside.

The border is also a mechanism for establishing fields, which are not necessarily exclusive. Correctly understood, the border can be a demarcating instrument in a world that, because of its delimited nature, needs procedures for protection and balance. It is also important to apply the principle that we should defend ourselves from what it defends us from and understand that any delimitation is contingent and compatible with other fields with whose limits it overlaps.

In the face of the nostalgia for the lost order that clamors for tight limits and barriers of exclusion, the vindication of a border that communicates, demarcates, balances, and limits

can be a reasonable strategy for transforming the spaces of collision, closure, and sovereignty into porous areas of contact and communication (Martins, 2007, p. 176). The alternative, in any case, is not between the border and its absence, but between rigid borders that continue colonizing a good part of our political imaginary and a net border that would allow us to conceive of the contemporary world as a multiplicity of spaces that are differentiated and intertwined, thus creating border points that are also points of movement and communication.

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