

Antonio De Lauri

Times of walls: The politics of fencing in the contemporary world

March 10, 2017

In his well-known poem "Mending Wall" (1914), Robert Frost effectively depicted the act of walling:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
...
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

In Joy Kogawa's "Where There's a Wall" (1985), we can recognize the multidimensional social architecture of the wall.

Where there's a wall
there's a way
around, over, or through
there's a gate
maybe a ladder
a door
a sentinel who
sometimes sleeps
there are secret passwords
you can overhear
there are methods of torture
for extracting clues
to maps of underground passageways
there are zeppelins
helicopters, rockets, bombs
battering rams
armies with trumpets

The wall is a paradigmatic object in understanding social differentiation and geopolitical configurations of the contemporary world. Yet it is also an artifact rooted in ancient times that has worked to claim territories, separate populations, govern mobility, and categorize individuals and groups. Political concerns about putting limits to the circulation of people, defining an "inside" and "outside," and manifesting actual power are major elements to be identified behind the decision of enclosing territories. Today, in their declared political intentions and purposes, walls are the factual, material response to the quest for collective protection. Through a chemical metaphor, we could argue that the wall is the solidification status of the liquid idea of protection, which ranges from geopolitics to biopolitics. Since the

dawn of civilizations, walls were built to demarcate borders and defend territory and spatial identities against “Others”: fencing off enemies and defining a specific worldview (as in the case of the Great Wall of China) or delimiting proto-administrative and military units, as in the case of the Roman *limes* (Momsen 1894; Quétel 2012).



Arizona border, Douglas Sector, November 2017 (© Elisabeth Vallet)

Classical historiography has traditionally approached *limes* as a limit of the “civilized world.” This approach has been more recently questioned by a more nuanced understanding of the *limes*. If Romans saw Northern populations as Barbarians, the construction of physical barriers was in any case meant not as “the end of the world” but rather as strategic demarcations. The Roman Empire was not technically exclusivist: potentially, everybody could be conquered and, as historian Claude Quétel has reminded us, the *Imperium Romanum* coincided with the *orbis terrarum*. The main functions of the *limes* were, therefore, to both materialize the imperium and protect it.

The most important *limes* was the Northern one, which assumed a strong military connotation as a defense to the perceived aggressiveness of Northern tribes. Nonetheless, the barrier moved northward, and the formerly feared populations were slowly integrated into the Empire. The Northern wall was a bio-dimensional, proto-frontier fiscal limit and in turn shaped Vikings’ walls. If the Northern *limes* was the more fortified, in fact, Vikings built their own barriers to protect local populations from Southern populations; this is the case, for example, of the Danevirke, a system of fortifications in Schleswig-Holstein commanded by King Godfred of Denmark in AD 808 in order to protect his kingdom. Danish tribes

confederated in the eighth century and thereafter felt the urgency of defending their territory from the expansionist plans of the Franks.

The Danevirke was at the same time a proto-frontier and a bastion. It shaped and limited territorial identity and lately played an important role in nationalist discourses (Quétel 2012). The role of the wall as an agent of identification and exclusion has always been central to the concerns of nation-states and empires (Chaichian 2014). The act itself of seizing land has often been accompanied by the use of barriers (examples are the *pomerium* founding Rome or barbed wire progressively moving the American frontier westward) (Razac 2003; Simonelli 2001). But spatial and territorial control is not the only task ascribed to walls and fences, since they also prove functional to disciplining populations and to the application of biopolitical governance in citizens' everyday lives: governing mobility is the most effective way of governing bodies.

According to recent surveys and [reports](#), at least 65 countries now have border walls or barriers, and the rate at which they are springing up is unprecedented. The past three decades have seen an astounding rise of books, articles, and new journals focusing on the issue of "security" ranging from urban security to surveillance technologies, from international relations to microlevel forms of human security, from counterterrorism to the current refugee crisis. In fact, the proliferation of security publications in scholarly arenas resonated to some extent with the explosion of insecurity debates in the public sphere. Intrinsically connected to regimes of security/insecurity, borders control and management have instilled a large number of ethnographic and more theoretical analyses that definitively confirmed Étienne Balibar's (2003) hint that borders are at the center of human experience. Far from being instruments to simply block the transnational movement of people, borders are central devices of people's lives trajectories and thus represent a crucial angle from which to observe the way in which human mobility interacts with and confront nation-state politics of protection and rejection.

In global history, the ideology of protection (of cities, empires, nations, etc.) has often translated into the factual construction of walls and fences. In Europe, collective imaginary was molded for decades by the Berlin Wall, the emblem of separation inherently linked to the political and cultural universe of the Cold War era. As of 2013, the United States, Israel, Spain, Greece, and India had together a total of 6,000 kilometers of walls (Vallet 2014). Today, the global multiplication of border barriers (e.g., Bulgaria-Turkey, Hungary-Serbia-Croatia, Norway-Russia, Ukraine-Russia, Tunisia-Libya, etc.) may be seen as a sign of the reaffirmation of the nation-state in the transnational context. In this sense, contemporary walls and fences—notwithstanding the political, geographical, and cultural diversity in which they are today inscribed—reproduce a transversal historical feature: that of substantializing political power and, at the same time, protecting its territorial domain.

We know that borders are legal constructions, sometimes subject to different regimes of law. Yet, border walls in the contemporary world paradoxically indicate zones in which legal protection is somehow suspended. Borders are spaces of social density, and although walls and heavy militarization of borders are not leading to an overall decrease in irregular migration, their environmental and political costs are significant, while the human costs are [difficult to quantify](#). A world without borders has represented the main mantra of major exponents of globalization, be them big corporations or humanitarian organizations. And yet,

walls and fences are not in contrast to globalization borderless discourses and flows. They are rather “fault lines of globalization” (Ritaine 2009), built both against and along these discourses and flows: walls and fences symbolize the affirmation of a privileged few who actually live the promise of globalization and defend its privileges through “teichopolitics,” the politics of building barriers (Rosiere and Jones 2012). At the same time, as objects that reveal contested instances of power and sovereignty, walls are shaped by “domopolitics” (Walters 2004): they are physical limits through which notions of home and protection materialize.

In the contemporary world, walls stand between and within nations. Political scientist Wendy Brown has maintained that what characterizes border walls and fences in different areas of the world is that these fortifications respond to a specific phenomenon: the decline of sovereignty in the nation-state. Even when they demarcate nation-state boundaries, the majority of walls and fences today are not built as defenses against potential attacks by other sovereigns. Rather, Brown argues, these barriers mostly target nonstate transnational actors—individuals, groups, organizations, industries. They respond to transnational rather than international relations and react to persistent though often subterranean powers, rather than to military forces (Brown 2010).

It is true that migration, organized crime, terrorism, smuggling, political movements—all subject to the materiality of walls—are today inscribed in a post-Westphalian world order in which forms of sovereignty and governance are contested among a plurality of political and economic actors. However, it seems like the rapid reproduction of border barriers today reflect three main aspects. First, they signal a resurgence of nation-state ideologies in the public discourse. Second, they confirm that the importance of territorial sovereignty—rather than diminishing, as many have argued in the past decades—is still intimately linked to the political syllogism “identity-territory-governance” and is increasingly more dependent on nation-states capacity to simultaneously absorb transnational mobility and exercise coercive force over borderlands. Third, they clearly illustrate the strict nexus that exists between the state apparatus and its theatrical manifestations—whether a wall is useful or not, its spectacle can be seen by everybody.

Antonio De Lauri is Senior Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway. He has published on topics related to legal anthropology, war, human rights, freedom, and humanitarianism. He currently conducts research on humanitarian militarism and the global history of walls and fences.

References

Balibar, Étienne. 2003. *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on transnational citizenship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brown, Wendy. 2010. *Walled states, waning sovereignty*. Brooklyn: Zone Books.

Chaichian, Mohammad A. 2014. *Empires and walls: Globalization, migration, and colonial domination*. Leiden: Brill.

Quétel, Claude. 2012. *Murs: Une autre histoire des hommes*. Paris: Perrin.

Momsen, Theodor. 1894. "Der Begriff des Limes." *Westdeutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kunst* 13: 134–143.

Razac, Olivier. 2003. *Barbed wire: A political history*. New York: The New Press

Ritaine, Evelyne. 2009. "La barrière et le checkpoint: Mise en politique de l'asymétrie." *Culture et conflits* 73: 15–33.

Rosière, Stéphane, and Reece Jones. 2012. "Teichopolitics: Re-considering globalisation through the role of walls and fences." *Geopolitics* 17(1): 217–234.

Simonelli, Antonella. 2001. "Considerazioni sull'origine, la natura e l'evoluzione del *pomerium*." *Aevum* 75(1): 119–162.

Vallet, Elisabeth, ed. 2014. *Borders, fences and walls: State of insecurity?* London: Routledge.

Walters, William. 2004. "Secure borders, safe haven, domopolitics." *Citizenship studies* 8(3): 237–260.

Cite as: De Lauri, Antonio. 2017. "Times of walls: The politics of fencing in the contemporary world." FocaalBlog, 10 March. www.focaalblog.com/2017/03/10/antonio-de-lauri-times-of-walls-the-politics-of-fencing-in-the-contemporary-world.

Tags: [Antonio De Lauri](#), [fences](#), [History](#), [infrastructure](#), [nation-state](#), [politics](#), [protection](#), [walls](#)