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The (re)building of the wall in international relations[i]

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Since the Great Wall of China, construction of which began in the 3rd century BC under the Qin dynasty, the Antonine Wall, which the Romans began building in Scotland in the 2nd century AD to support Hadrian's Wall, the Roman "Limes," the Anastasian Wall, built in the 5th century by the Byzantines west of Istanbul to protect the city from barbarian raids, the *genko borui* built by the Japanese on Kyushu Island to guard against invaders, and city fortifications ranging from the Aurelian Walls around ancient Rome to the Vauban fortifications in 17th century Europe, the "wall" has been a recurring feature of states, East and West.

And yet, in the collective imagination, the end of the Cold War had signalled the end of a world split into two blocs and divided between two allegiances, an opposition played out in countless conflicts and border disputes. The fall of the Berlin Wall was emblematic of the disintegration of state sovereignty, the obsolescence of the nation-state and the emergence of new trans-national and supra-national groupings in which NGOs would play a decisive role. This reordering of the world seemed to open a new era without borders or limits, in which globalization would supersede the kingly functions of states. Nevertheless, some 26,000 kilometres of new political borders have been established since 1991 (Foucher 2009), and states have declared their intention to dig in behind fences, barriers and built structures which could extend over 18,000 kilometres (Foucher 2008). Moreover, the post-Cold War and post-9/11 periods have seen the rise of border walls, symbols of separation which seemed to be on the way out in the wake of decolonisation (with the dismantling of the Morice, Challe and Pedron lines in the Maghreb, the McNamara line between the two Vietnams, and the *cordon*

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sanitaire [Corsan] along Rhodesia's border) and were believed to be entirely finished and done with after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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Working hypothesis

A wall, the physical embodiment of a border, can take different forms: electrified fences, concrete blocks, wire fences, barriers, palisades, thermal, metric and biometric detection systems, sensors. In 2004, the International Court of Justice noted the ambivalence of the terms used to describe these built structures. Gheslin notes:

> Israel uses the term "fence" and disputes the use of the word "wall," which it considers to have negative connotations. The UN General Assembly uses the term "wall" without discussion, as do the Palestinians. In his report, the Secretary General opts for the word "barrier," on the grounds that it is a more general term. The representative of Belize, one of the few who referred to the terminological dispute, uses the word "wall" while maintaining that the distinction among the three terms is not relevant, given the material consequences involved. The Court has decided to use the terminology adopted by the General Assembly.

While there is agreement that a wall is a built work (i.e. it has a foundation and is a permanent structure), Latin made a distinction between *murus* (the root of the modern word for wall in most Romance languages; e.g. French "mur," Spanish "muro"), which referred to a wall around a city and consequently also meant defence or protection, and *paries, parietis*, which referred to the wall of a house. Therefore, in its etymological sense, "the wall is a political object, a social object" (Gheslin).

Our discussion will focus on inter-state or inter-national walls. Clearly, infra-national walls are also becoming more common, but they cannot be classified in the same category, for they differ in purpose, applicable law, and political function. Infra-national barriers, such as those in Egypt around the city of Sharm el-Sheikh, in Baghdad around areas such as the Sunni Adhamiya district, or in Northern Ireland in the recent past between the Protestant and Catholic communities (the "Peace Lines"), and infra-municipal barriers (such as gated communities in the U.S. or the separation wall between two neighbourhoods in Padua), are interesting indicators but not part of our analysis.

The emergence of an international system in which, according to the literature, the state is of secondary importance in international relations and mobility is a defining feature of the global environment (Balibar and Badie 2006), coupled with the obsolescence of the principle of sovereignty (Badie 1999) and the concomitant disappearance of physical borders, left little reason to expect the return of the "wall," but it has come back with a vengeance since 2001, along with the state, and in a paradigm shift that is impacting border studies (Newman, 2006), the wall has become a key instrument for safeguarding sovereignty. Our purpose here is to raise the issue and to analyze the factors that have led to the resurgence of the wall, if not in fact at least in discourse.

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On the disappearance of borders

In the 1990s, when the talk was of globalization and peace dividends, borders as such seemed to be becoming illusory. Analysts observed the declining importance of the border (Morley and Robins 1995) or its growing irrelevance (Mlinar 1992, Kuels 1996); indeed, some foresaw its disappearance and the advent of a borderless world (Allen, Hamnett 1995, Badie 1995). The literature posited a growing challenge to the state-centred world order (Cooke 1993, Van der Veen and Boot 1995) which would wipe away the perimeters of the state. However, geographers and border scholars Michel Foucher and David Newman argue that the dominant discourse did not fully reflect reality. David Newman (Newman and Paasi) convincingly attributes this vision of the inevitability of an open world to the dominance of neo-liberal economic discourse, which was promoted by the leading economic forums such as Davos, the GATT, and then the WTO. Moreover, he suggests, the idea of the end of borders is geographically skewed: this philosophy prevails primarily in two dynamic economic zones, North America (with the adoption of NAFTA) and Western Europe (with the development of the EU). But for border scholars it is clear that “we live in a hierarchical world of rigid ordering” organized around borders (Newman 2006). The “clash between the securitization and the economic discourse in relation to borders” (Newman 2006) is evident in the functional evolution of some borders.

These observations notwithstanding, the influence of globalizing discourse has been such that there has been little analysis in the literature of the rebuilding of the "wall" in the post-Cold War period, aside from a few journalistic articles (Jackson 2004; Paquot 2006; Ban 2007) and special issues (Hennebellesand and Tsikounas, Géopolitique 2009). The analysis of borders, and hence of walls, has essentially been confined to the realm of political geography (Newman and Paasi): while border studies have become a “transdisciplinary field,” their development still betrays the central influence of the geographers (Kolossov), who have borrowed from recent debates in international relations to introduce concepts related to discourses from and about the border (Newman and Paasi).

On walls in international relations

The omnipresent “borderless word” discourse has therefore led many analysts to sidestep the issue of walls and the building of walls during the last decade. There are some polemical case studies of walls (Encel 2008) but no comprehensive theorization of the phenomenon. However, a quantitative analysis is, in and of itself, an indicator of a widespread phenomenon that merits attention. In addition to existing border walls, such as the one along the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas or those Morocco has built in the Western Sahara, plans for more than 20 structures have been announced since the end of the Cold War. If all are built, they could total more than 18,000 kilometres in length (Foucher 2009).

Thirteen walls were built between 1945 and 1991: between East and West Berlin (the “inner German border”), in Bavaria between Czechoslovakia and Germany, around the U.S. enclave in Panama, in Algeria (the Morice, Challe and Pedron lines), and between the two Vietnams. All have been dismantled. The walls between South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, between Syria and Turkey, along China’s borders with Hong Kong and Macao, between Rhodesia, Mozambique and Zambia, in the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas, along the demarcation line in Cyprus, and Morocco’s wall in Western Sahara survived the end of the Cold War.

In a sign of the times, only four walls were added between 1991 and 2001 to the seven that emerged from the Cold War: between Kuwait and Iraq, between the U.S. and Mexico, between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and along the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

2001 was a turning point: 17 walls (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan; Uzbekistan-Afghanistan; Israel-Palestine; India-Pakistan; Botswana-Zimbabwe; Pakistan-Afghanistan; China-North Korea; Saudi Arabia-Yemen; Saudi Arabia-Iraq; India-Bangladesh; Egypt-Gaza Strip; Thailand-Malaysia; Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan; Iran-Pakistan; Israel-Lebanon; India-Burma, United Arab Emirates-Oman; Brunei-Limbang, Malaysia) were added to the 11 still-extant walls. Clearly, walls are, at the very least, a current fad, and may be making a permanent comeback in international relations.

A number of states have erected walls for the purpose of protecting themselves from their neighbours. In 2003, Botswana built a 500-km electric fence along its border with Zimbabwe, ostensibly for health reasons, an argument rejected by the Zimbabwean regime. The barrier along Kruger Park between Zimbabwe and South Africa (and Mozambique) still stands, despite the treaty signed on December 9, 2002, which provided for its removal. Brunei has built a security fence along its 20-km border with Limbang (to control smuggling and immigration). China, which has already built internal barriers (between Guangdong Province and the Hong Kong and Macau areas), began erecting a security fence along its border with North Korea in October 2006. Other examples include the 300-km green line that splits Cyprus in two, and two security fences under construction in India (one in Kashmir to separate it from Pakistan and the other around Bangladesh to curb smuggling, immigration and potentially terrorism). Morocco has built a wall in Western Sahara to isolate the Polisario Front guerrillas and two barriers inside the country, around the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, to stem migratory outflows. In Spain itself, there has been a wall around the neutral territory at Gibraltar since 1908, built one meter inside British territory to separate it from Spanish territory. In Asia, Thailand has constructed a concrete wall

along its border with Malaysia to keep out Islamist militants. For similar reasons, following a territorial dispute, Uzbekistan put up a barbed-wire fence along its border with Kyrgyzstan, largely because of infiltration by Islamist terrorists. In the Gulf, the United Arab Emirates are creating a security barrier along their border with Oman, and the United Nations built a wall along the Kuwaiti border after the first Gulf War to discourage Iraq from invading again. Since 2006, Saudi Arabia has been building a security fence along its 900-km border with Iraq, and has begun construction of a similar fortification on its border with Yemen. In December 2005, Israel suggested to Egypt that the old barrier in the Sinai desert be restored. The concrete barrier in the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas is also a permanent fixture. Two well-known symbols of the reappearance of the wall are often mentioned together, largely because of their semantic and chronological proximity. While they are actually quite different, they do attest to new attention to the wall in theories of international relations. First, the U.S. is extending the existing 130-km wall on its Mexican border. Meanwhile, Israel has extended its separation wall in the West Bank up to the 1967 Green Line. Like the U.S.-Mexico wall, Israel's 730-km fence boasts sophisticated electronic detection equipment, which the Israeli defence ministry claims is highly effective (Israel's Security Fence, 2007).

Do these facts support the proposition that the wall is back?

Based on the changes in the trend line in the chart, we can identify four periods:

- 1952-1960: the early years of the Cold War saw an unprecedented boom in wall building, with more than a 71% increase in the number of walls in eight years, or approximately 8% per year. At the end of the period, however, there were still fewer than 10 walls in the world.
- 1960-1989: the number of walls increased by 41% in 29 years, or less than 1.5% per year. The growth was due to the entrenchment of the Cold War, the tensions between the two blocs, and the often-adversarial process of decolonization.
- 1990-2000: the end of the Cold War was accompanied by the disappearance of several major walls (including the symbolically potent fall of the Berlin

Wall) but not the disappearance of walls as such. There was in fact an increase of 7% over the entire 10-year period, or an average 0.7% per year, for the downward trend held only up to the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, this was the smallest average growth since the beginning of the Cold War, supporting the thesis that a certain disenchantment with walls had set in, a political alienation from this symbol of state sovereignty and, to some extent, of the Cold War.

- 2001-2009: the popularity of the wall was revived by the events of September 11, 2001. To be sure, with a 41% increase, the numbers fall far short of the early Cold War period, when there was almost double the increase in the same number of years, but the average 5% annual growth in the post-9/11 period was closer to the early Cold War rate than to the rest of the period under study.

Thus, while walls have been a constant throughout history, even during the second half of the 20th century, the end of the Cold War marked the end of an era and signalled the wall's fall from favour as a political institution. 9/11 appears to have brought back the wall as a political object and instrument, both in terms of quantity, since there is now an unprecedented number of walls, greater even than during the Cold War, and in terms of the length of walls built or planned.

Legitimation of fencing practices

The "fencing practices" (Foucher, 2009, 3) developed in the post-9/11 period in particular serve cosmetic, photogenic and of course political purposes.

Of the walls standing today, 6 were built to fix a *de facto* border and maintain a fragile peace (the walls between the two Koreas, in Cyprus, in Western Sahara, between Kuwait and Iraq, between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent the blue line between Israel and Lebanon) and 10 to stem illegal immigration (the walls around Ceuta and Melilla, on the U.S.-Mexican border, between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, between China and North Korea, between the

United Arab Emirates and Oman, between Brunei and Malaysia, and to some extent between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and Saudi Arabia and Iraq). In the case of the Saudi walls, terrorism prevention was also a factor. Since 2001, the purpose of new walls has been not so much to convert front lines into *de facto* borders as to curb two threats: migratory flows and terrorist groups (the reason for 10 of the walls): "Since September 2001, fencing has been stepped up because democratic states have had to demonstrate their ability to reclaim control of their borders" (Foucher 2009, 6).

While drawing a border is, by definition, a bilateral process, building a wall is a unilateral act that freezes a line of demarcation. A border can be seen as "an area of contact and influence" (Soutou, 2009, 22) but the advent of a world without constraints or standards, particularly economic standards, is leading to the creation of barricades around populations as states retreat into the security of feudal reflexes (Vittori 2007; Saint Victor), testifying to "certain undercurrents of globalization that paradoxically are encouraging a return to a kind of 'neo-feudalization' of the world" (Saint Victor), for "a wall is a sign of the end of dialogue" (Postel-Vinay). It can also be a sign of the primacy of domestic politics (the need to maintain appearances) over foreign policy (the need for diplomacy): "the image of the secure border is more important than the deterrent effect" (Andreas in Davis). For example, the militarization of the border under the Clinton administration was a way for the Democrats to prove they could be tough on illegal immigration. At the same time, the return of the wall as a political tool may be symptomatic of a new era in international relations, and this is the direction we plan to explore in our research.

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