Wendy Brown on “Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy” (2008 Katz Distinguished Lecture)

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This episode is part of a special series for 2023-2024 featuring some of our popular talks from our annual Katz Distinguished Lecture series. This month’s episode features Wendy Brown’s talk from 2008 titled “Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy.” Wendy Brown is a distinguished American political theorist and Professor Emerita of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. Her most recent book, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, was published in April 2023. Other prominent books include *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* published in 2019, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2010), and *States of Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995), Her work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

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Wendy Brown:

What we have come to call globalization harbors fundamental tensions between opening and barricading, between fusion and partition, between erasure and reinscription. These are tensions that materialize as increasingly liberalized borders on the one hand and the devotion of unprecedented funds, energies, and technologies to border fortification on the other.

Globalization also features a host of related tensions between global networks and local nationalisms, between virtual power and physical power, between private appropriation and open sourcing, secrecy and transparency, territorialization and deterritorialization.

One place that these tensions nest is in the new walls striding the globe. These are walls whose frenzied building was underway even as the crumbling of the old Bastilles of Cold War Europe most notably the Berlin Wall and of apartheid South Africa, even as the crumbling of these walls was being internationally celebrated.

Among the best known walls of these recent walls proliferating, of course, are the United States built behemoth along its Southern border. And if completed this wall will be the longest wall in the history of the world an ironic successor to the recently toppled status of the US as host to the world's tallest building.

And of course, the Israeli built wall snaking through the West Bank. These two projects share technology subcontracting and also reference each other for legitimacy, but there are many other walls. Post-apartheid South Africa features a complex internal maze of walls and checkpoints and it maintains a controversial electrified security barrier on its Zimbabwe border.

Saudi Arabia recently finished constructing a 10-foot high concrete post-structure along its border with Yemen, which Saudis say may be followed by walling their whole country. And longer though cruder walls have been built by India along its borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In the context of a land dispute, but officially built in the name of interdicting Islamic terrorists, Uzbekistan fenced out Kyrgyzstan in 1999. Botswana initiated the building of an electric fence along its Zimbabwe border in 2003, again, ostensibly to stop the spread of foot and mouth disease among livestock, but also aimed at interdicting Zimbabwe humans.

Brunei is walling out immigrants and smugglers coming from Limbang and there are walls within walls. Gated communities in the United States, of course, have sprung up everywhere, but are especially plentiful in Southern California communities and Arizona communities near the wall with Mexico. Walls around Israeli settlements in the West Bank abut the security fence.

And if you look closely actually you can count five walls between the wall closest to you and the wall around the settlement. Walls around these are Israeli settlements abut the security fence as walls around the disputed museum of tolerance site in Jerusalem nestled next to walls partitioning that city.

The European Union sponsors triple-layer walls around Spanish enclaves in Morocco even as Morocco itself maintains a lengthy berm aimed at securing the resources of the long disputed Western Sahara.

And in the name of preventing what he termed French situations in Padua, referring to the uprisings in the suburbs of Paris, the socialist mayor of that city recently built the Via Anelli Wall to separate white middle class neighborhoods from the so-called African ghetto where most new immigrants live. Then, of course, there's the recently infamous wall between Egypt and Gaza infamous because we all watched it being torn down a few months ago.

This recent spate of wall building adds to stocks of walls left over from 20th century conflicts, scores of British built walls comprising the so-called peace lines of Northern Ireland, the barrier at the 38th parallel dividing Korea, and this one is hard to get a good picture of for various reasons we can't talk about, the separation barrier along the 1974 green line in Cyprus that still divides Turkish from Greek areas. And there are more walls in the planning stages.

Notwithstanding the dust up last spring over a proposed Baghdad wall, the US military still endeavors to wall the territory marked by the green line in that city. Israel is considering replacing an old fence with a security barrier along its Sinai desert border with Egypt.

Thailand is planning a concrete wall along its Malaysian border. And the United Arab Emirates is designing a wall for the Oman border. Kuwait wants a wall in the demilitarized zone approximating its border with Iraq. And Pakistan intends to wall off its border with Afghanistan.

Serious proposals have been floated to follow completion of the US-Mexico wall with a wall along the US border with Canada, that would truly be the longest wall in the world. Now, if these walls vary in what they aim to deter, poor people, workers, asylum seekers, drugs, weapons, other contraband, smuggled taxable goods, kidnapped or enslaved youth, terror, ethnic or religious mixing, peace and other political futures.

Surely there are common dimensions to this proliferation of walls at this particular moment in world history, begin with a series of paradoxes. First, even as those across a wide political spectrum anticipate a world without borders. Nation states, rich and poor exhibit a passion for wall building.

Second, despite the ostensible post-'89 triumph of democracy as a universal political form, we confront today not only barricades, but passageways through them that segregate high-end business traffic from ordinary travelers from aspiring entrants deemed suspect by virtue of origin or appearance.

Third, paradox. In a time featuring capacities for destruction historically unparalleled in their combined potency, miniaturization, and mobility from bodies wired for explosion to nearly invisible biochemical toxins, these deadly but incorporeal powers are perversely answered by the stark physicalism of walls.

So three paradoxes. One featuring simultaneous opening and blockading, one featuring simultaneous universalization with exclusion and stratification, and one featuring networked and virtual power met by crude physical barricades. The lens through which I want to consider these paradoxes and the phenomenon of nation state walling today is sovereignty.

I've been working on the theoretical problem of late modern sovereignty for several years now as have been many other political theorists, but I'm just at the beginning of thinking about walls in this context. So in lieu of a sure footed argument, what I'm going to do is articulate some tentative theses about the relation of walling and sovereignty today I'm going to be refracting walling through sovereignty and sovereignty through walling.

So to do that let me first give you the briefest possible version of an argument that I have elaborated elsewhere about the late modern detachment of sovereignty from nation states. Drawing a composite figure of sovereignty from classical theorists of modern sovereignty, including Hobbes, Bodin, Schmidt, and others, I take the indispensable features of sovereignty to be the following, supremacy, no higher power. If there's something higher than a sovereign power then the sovereign power isn't sovereign.

Perpetuity over time that is no term limits. If there are term limits to sovereignty then again, sovereignty isn't sovereign, something else controls it. Decisionism, that is the capacity to decide in a way that is detached from law. If sovereignty is bounded by law, if it's constrained by law then, again, it's not a sovereign power.

Completeness, partial sovereignty is a contradiction in terms as we're learning in Iraq. Nontransferability, that is sovereignty can't be transferred or conferred to another entity without canceling itself. And specified jurisdiction, territoriality, sovereignty always works in terms of a certain space or zone over which it is sovereign, which could be infinite as in the sovereignty of God or it could be more finite as in the sovereignty of the US. We hope it's finite.

Now, if nation state is always something of a fiction, nation state sovereignty is always something of a fiction in its aspiration to all of these qualities, supremacy, perpetuity over time, decisionism, completeness, non-transferability, and specified jurisdiction, it's a potent fiction and that fiction has suffused the internal and external relations of nation states since its consecration by the 1648 peace of Westphalia, that's when the system of sovereign nation states was officially inaugurated.

But over the past half century, the monopoly of these combined attributes by nation states has been severely compromised by a number of things, growing transnational flows of people, capital, ideas, goods, violence, and political and religious fealty, flows that tear at the boarders that they cross, and also crystallize as powers within. So these flows both erode the borders that designate sovereignty and also take shape as powers within, so they compromise sovereignty both from its edges and from its interior.

Nation state sovereignty has been undercut as well by neoliberal rationality, which recognizes no sovereign apart from entrepreneurial decision makers large and small and which also displaces democratic legal and political principles such as universal inclusion equality, liberty, and the rule of law, it replaces those with market criteria.

Nation state sovereignty has also been eroded by a quarter century of international assertions of law, of rights, and of authority, which sometimes openly challenge or supersede the sovereignty of nation states. My argument is that the effect of these combined developments is not to eliminate sovereignty from the political map and not to enter something like a post-sovereign era.

Rather as nation state sovereignty wanes, many characteristics of sovereignty appear today in two domains of power that are not coincidentally the very domains of power that the peace of Westphalia emerged to contain and subordinate, political economy on the one hand and religiously legitimated violence on the other.

So my argument is that key characteristics of sovereignty are migrating from the nation state to the unrelieved domination of capital on the one hand and to God sanctioned political violence on the other. Neither capital nor religiously sanctioned violence bows to another power, both are indifferent to and tactical domestic and international law, both spurn juridical norms, and both recuperate the promise of sovereignty E pluribus unum.

Now, what is this argument, which I've given you the really capsule version of suggest about the new walls? And how might it be extended by thinking about walls? Here are the tentative theses that I want to pursue today.

First, contemporary walls, I will be arguing, are less as some thinkers have suggested resurgent expressions of nation state sovereignty in late modernity than they are icons of nation state sovereign failure or to the extent that they are hyperbolic tokens of nation state sovereignty like all hyperbole.

They reveal a tremulousness a vulnerability, a dubiousness, and an instability at the core of what they aim to express. And those very qualities, tremulousness, vulnerability, are themselves antithetical to sovereignty and thus part of its undoing.

Second thesis, notwithstanding their strikingly physicalist and obdurate dimensions in many ways the new walls function theatrically. They project power and efficacy. They project a theological dimension of sovereignty that they do not actually exercise.

To literalize walls as pure interdiction is to occlude their production of an imago of sovereign state power in the face of its corrosion, it's to miss out on the way they consecrate the corrupted and violated borders that they aim to fortify.

To take walls literally as expressions of sovereignty is to miss the way they stage a false image of sovereign protection to those living on one side of the wall and sovereign aggression to those on the other side. Power is limited by modern technologies of infiltration and by the dependence of various so-called national economies for much of what these walls purport to lock out, especially cheap labor.

In short, to literalize walls is to miss the wizard of walls quality in them, the way they echo the coded yellow, orange, red security threat levels that stage an image of state intelligence and control in the face of the opposite.

My third thesis and I'm going to be developing these over the next half hour, rather than iterations of nation state sovereignty, the new nation state walls are part of a haphazard global landscape of flows and barriers inside nation states, surrounding post-national constellations, and above all, dividing richer and poorer parts of the globe, the first from the third world.

This landscape of flows and barriers together signify the ungovernability by law and by politics of the many powers unleashed by globalization and they signify as well a resort to policing and blockading in the face of this ungovernability.

Insofar as the new walls at the edges of nation states articulate with other barriers and forms of surveillance private and public. They signal a collapsed distinction between internal and external policing.

Indeed it collapsed distinction often between police and the military, a collapse that in turn suggests an increasingly blurred distinction between the inside and the outside of the nation itself and not only between criminals within and enemies without, a blurring that's emblematized by the growing move to criminalize and imprison rather than deport undocumented workers.

Indeed one irony of late modern walling is that a structure that's taken at face value to mark and enforce an inside outside distinction, a boundary between us and them, between friend and enemy starts to appear as precisely the opposite when it's grasped as part of a complex of eroding lines between state and citizen, police and military, subject and patria, law and lawlessness.

One last note before I begin developing these theses, none of these theses dwells on the frequently devastating effects of the new walls, devastating effects on the communities, livelihoods, and ecologies they traverse, effects that include lost lives, lost family members, orchards, incomes, hopes, and political futures, divided communities, devastated ecosystems.

Reckoning this damage however important is different from trying to understand the relationship of these walls to crumbling or eroding nation state sovereignty. So this project is not so much for or against walls, or analyzing, or proposing border policy policies as it is a project that aims to try to reveal certain political predicaments, and especially predicaments of state power at this moment in history through the contemporary phenomenon of walling.

OK. So to the first thesis, sovereign failure, walls as icons of sovereign failure, as I've already suggested at first blush, what's really striking about the walls proliferating at the dawn of the 21st century is their seemingly pre-modern signature in the context of a late modern world in which power is increasingly networked virtual, microphysical, even liquid and in which peoples are increasingly linked if not hybridized.

However accustomed we've all grown to check pointed passageways striding everyday life at the entrances to museums, and sports arenas, and concerts, and schools, and airports, there's still a markedly archaic quality to the slow manifest construction of walls fashioned from concrete, steel, brick, iron, barbed wire, or even synthetic mesh.

Compared to the incessant, and protean, and depthless, and facade traits of late modern culture and politics, walls seem solid and permanent. They appear absent for capacities for guile and dissimulation as well. The nomenclature, of course, often aims to dissimulate.

We have the Israeli security fence, or the US border marker, or Northern Irish peace lines. But such nomenclature is easily and openly mocked by the unmaskable characteristics of the referent and also by the protest murals and graffiti that relentlessly adorn that referent, and I'll just show you a few examples of these. The first few are all of the Israeli wall.

And then the next few are all of the US-Mexico border wall. These coffins are regularly increased in number that you see numbers on the coffins themselves. They're marking the number of dead who are found attempting to cross the desert as a result of the wall that pushes that crossing deeper and deeper into the desert, and makes it rougher more mountainous, and so forth.

And then in Northern Ireland, of course, any of you who know anything about Northern Irish politics and the Northern Ireland wall tradition, there's a huge and elaborate practice of mural marking on the walls from both sides. And I'm just giving you a little example that also has some graffiti mixed in with it. OK, that's it for this set of slides. We can put the lights back up.

So the point is that walls in general appear absent the capacity for guile and dissimulation even if the nomenclature engages in that dissimulation or guile. The graffiti and the protests that go up on these walls quickly brings back the character of the referent.

And if we navigate scores of virtual walls every day, firewalls, spyware, spam filter on our computers, automatic alarm, and locking systems in cars, homes office buildings, briefcases, passcodes everywhere, there's still something about the spectacle of these actual walls that remains distinctive.

Their physicality makes them seem like a literal throwback to another time, a time of fortresses and kings of militias, and moats of Guelphs and Ghibellines rather than a time of smart bombs, and missile shields, and space, and global warming, and digital touchpads, and peoples and dangers so literally on the move and so radically miscegenated as to be no more containable by a physical land barrier than our air pollution or a new strain of influenza.

Moreover, contemporary critical theory has attuned us to modalities of power that are radically at odds with the symbolic or literal prophylactic represented by walls. We've learned, especially from the French, to keep our eye on power's discursive operation, its non-centralized habitus, its noncommodifiable dross.

We've become attuned to modern powers disciplinary and networked qualities, its rhizomatic irrigating or circulatory movements, its light and vaporous qualities even as it orchestrates unprecedented effects of domination. And by contrast, walls appear to hearken back to a power modality that is sovereign, spatially-bounded, territorial, power that's material, corporeal, centralized, exerted through overt force, fencing, and policing.

But the relationship of nation state walls to checkpoints, viruses, and prophylaxis, to the dissemination of political power in networked bodies, and to security apparatuses in homes, vehicles, schools, and airports, these are themselves the first clue to the epidemic of wall building today.

Far from defenses against invasions by other state powers, and it's really important to remember this, what distinguishes these walls is they are not built by nation states against other nation states. Something else is going on with these. These are not walls blocking invading armies, they're doing something else.

21st century walls articulate a spiral complex of economy and security concerns in relation to non-state actors, what political science has named clandestine transnational actors, that's one political science lesson for the day, and two mass population movements themselves responding to war, ethnic persecution, and economic dislocation or desperation.

The dangers that walls are figured as intercepting are not only of the would be suicide bomber, but mass immigration, not only overt violence to the nation, but imagined dilution of national identity through transformed ethnicized or racial demography, not mere illegal entrance, but unsustainable pressures on national economies that have ceased to be national or on welfare states that have largely abandoned substantive welfare functions.

As such the new walls defendant inside against an outside in which these terms are not fixed by nation state identity or fealty that is in which otherness and difference is often quite detached from nation state jurisdiction and membership.

They articulate an inside outside distinction in which what's being kept out is not other nation states nor even particular citizens indeed in which political power, and subjects, and violence are territorially detached from states and sovereignty often on both sides.

Put a little differently, the new walls respond in part to a permanent lawlessness both lapping the edges and streaming across nation states today, a continuous contestation of nation state sovereignty that is being met by intensified police and military as opposed to legal or normal measures.

Rather than emanating from the sovereignty of the nation state then these new walls often signal the loss of nation state sovereignty as a priori status, it's easy link with authority, unity, and settled jurisdiction. And you can see the sovereign failure as well in the ways that the new walls codify the conflicts that they respond to as permanent and unwinnable. They permanently militarize these conflicts with walls themselves.

It's apparent too in the fact that many of the new walls do not merely bound, but invent the societies they limn. The consociations and divisions that the new walls identify, or mark, or produce at times correspond to certain state interests, but they cannot always be precisely identified with settled sovereigns or nation states as such.

So the wall at the Southern border of the US divides it not just from Mexico, but from the whole Southern hemisphere and would be entrance through that wall. The Israeli wall marks neither two states nor one, nor is it a self-consistent bid for either just as the walls of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa or the peace line stride in Belfast and Derry aim neither to divide nor unite those cities or Ireland itself.

Rather these walls are monuments to unsettled and unsecured sovereignty, regulatory and control technologies for coping with a condition that simultaneously institutionalizes this condition and hence institutionalizes contested or eroding sovereignty.

So rather than signs of sovereignty, the new walls appear as a symptom of its erosion. And if they stand for a contingent decisionism that exceeds law, it's a local dispersed decisionism that detaches from the state, that further disseminates state power, and hence, as we'll see, further weakens the link between the state and sovereignty.

That is if the walls are in part weapons against a permanent enmity or illegality both at the boundaries of nation states and coursing through them, if they're among the new technologies of power responding to these limitations or even to the breakdown of the rule of law in sovereign nations, they're also continuous with the extra juridical practices springing up everywhere today.

Those concerning enemy non-combatants, or structuring the Guantanamo Gulag, or renditions of captured prisoners to countries willing to use torture for interrogation, those permitting the building of the Israeli wall in Palestinian territory despite verdicts against its current route delivered both by the International Court of Justice and by the Israeli Supreme Court.

This extra juridicism pertains not just to wall building that substitutes for law, it pertains as well to the blurring of military police and citizen prerogatives at the site of these walls, a blurring that challenges not just the criticism, but the monopoly of violence that traditionally anchors state sovereignty.

Let me give you a concrete instance of this blurring of police and citizen of military and vigilante prerogatives at the site of walls. One concrete instance appears in the recent construction of a piece of the US-Mexico border wall in Naco, Arizona by the Minutemen. And the Minutemen, of course, are a well-known, well-organized US vigilante group.

On private property in this little town 75 miles east of the secured port of entry at Nogales, the Minutemen themselves funded, designed, and built a mile long barrier made of 15-foot high heavy gauge welding mesh, a substance that can neither be climbed nor cut with conventional saws or wire cutters.

Now, in part this endeavor, this private funding and private building of a piece of the barrier along the route that the border wall would go on except more on private property, this private endeavor to build a piece of the wall seems aimed at showing an inept and inefficient department of Homeland Security how to do its work. And in this regard it expresses a certain anti-statism traditionally associated with vigilantism or at least a disdain toward the bureaucratic and legal weightedness of liberal democratic states.

But of course, the Minutemen don't merely deride, but also aim to shore up state power and what's more. The state turns out to be a willing partner with this outlaw group. Significantly, atop the fence that the Minutemen built, the vigilante group mounted video cameras for spotting illegal immigrants, cameras that stream directly to the Nogales dispatch offices of the border patrol.

So here we have one instance of a fusion of vigilante group private and public border patrol state and so forth that actually as I'm going to suggest aims on one level to prop up state power, but actually precisely by taking that power into its own hands does the opposite.

Now, reversing this directionality in early 2007, the governor of Texas authorized a $5 million project to place video cameras on sections of the federally built Texas-Mexico border wall. And these video cameras stream directly to an open internet site so that, and I'm quoting the governor, web users worldwide can watch the border and phone authorities if they spot apparently illegal crossings. There's a way to spend your insomniac nights.

Now, the point, again, is that what one has is the state essentially confessing its inability to do the job, it's franchise of insomniac crazies in the middle of the night, and again, that fusion of citizen state, citizen police, police military power that suggests the loss of a strict inside outside set of distinctions, as well as a set of distinctions between sovereign power and its subjects.

Now, in addition to the vigilante activity supplementing and even merging with state authority along certain walls, there are other telling emergencies on the web. We can leave the lights up, it's OK. I'm just going to do this one slide.

Oh, well, there are other telling emergencies on the web that embody this blur. Consider a usborderpatrol.com whose name, logo, and web design make it appear at first blush as the official website of the border patrol.

In fact, as the .com should tell you, it's maintained by anonymous quote supporters of the US border patrol patently frustrated by that agency's insufficient attention to public relations, political mobilization, as well as frustrated by some Homeland Security policies and technologies related to border security nor is the personification of sovereign authority limited to website, graphics, or design.

Rather US border patrol.com features among other things, an extensive account of the duties and practices of the border patrol, but it does so in a voice resonant of a certain police bravado and authority.

That is the site addresses its reader in a menacing and snide style, the sort that's peculiar to power that has contempt for its subjects, and likes toying with them a little bit, and isn't being monitored for its professionalism or conduct. In short, the style of power one can well imagine at the gateway between the first and the third world.

Interestingly though, while this website text is addressed to an alien, you, who's trying to gain illegal entry into the US, it's written entirely in English. Thus it would appear not to be warning or educating this you, that is the direct subject of the discourse, but rather to be performing the power of the border patrol for US citizens who might be dubious about the validity or effectiveness of that power, but it's also performing that power in a fashion that the border patrol itself cannot do publicly or officially.

And here's another instance of a new form of political decisionism or extra legality emerging in the wake of nation state sovereignty, a practice of vigilantism that inadvertently undoes its aim to supplement the state's faltering power to defend the nation.

OK. In a much shorter fashion I'm now going to turn to the second, to the other two theses I mentioned one on theatricality is the one I'm going to talk about next. If the new walls sometimes effectively interdict the foreign bodies deemed dangerous to what they limn, these walls are often, but elaborate political gestures and symbols.

They are often simply SOPs to certain constituencies, they're signs of what distresses, but can't really be contained, they're often as irrelevant to the project of national security as the scrupulous wanding and suitcase disemboweling of an elderly couple in a Midwestern airport.

Consider at the Tijuana-San Diego border the US-Mexico wall consists of three layers of 15-foot high steel walls, adorned with sensors and video surveillance technology, and monitored by hundreds of border patrol in Jeeps and helicopters.

30 miles east there are huge gaps in a single layer fence. The border operation at El Paso, Texas is similar for it would be migrants, whether temporary or permanent, the effect of these fortifications, as I mentioned earlier, is to require a longer, more expensive, and more dangerous journey, a journey through mountains and deserts, a journey that's much more difficult than the one undertaken before the walls were built.

And the effect of that in turn is to produce a more sophisticated and expensive smuggling industry and a much greater likelihood that illegal entrants will stay in the US permanently rather than risk semi-annual crossings.

So if illegal entrance is not deterred by the wall, why build it? As border expert, Peter Andreas, argues, these walls often have much less to do with actual deterrence and much more to do with managing the image of the border.

Border policing, he adds, is a ritualistic performance. When the failures of the deterrence effort lead to a performance crisis, the performers save face by promising a bigger and better show. Now, consider in this regard Operation Gatekeeper, that section of the US-Mexico wall I just mentioned. It was built in the early 1990s, just south of San Diego in California. Many of you have probably seen it.

This piece of the wall was undertaken by the Clinton administration at the instigation of Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in order to wrest the border issue away from California Republicans. Militarization of the border was designed to send the message that Democrats were not soft on illegal immigration.

And Feinstein at that time made frequent use of the steel wall as a backdrop for press conferences. She's since ceased doing that for a variety of reasons, including the discovery of an elaborate set of tunneling operations complete with air conditioning, and refrigerators, and other things under the wall, as well as the boat trips around it.

But crucially the tripling of the wall under the GW Bush administration was an up the ante move by conservative San Diego Congressman, Duncan Hunter, who was then chair of the House Armed Services Committee to show he was even tougher on the border than Feinstein.

The same constant jockeying over who wants a bigger better wall, of course, plagues the contemporary US elections. Everybody is for the wall and everybody is going to strengthen and toughen it. Even though any serious student of that wall knows it is a piece of an elaborate cat and mouse game between smugglers and Border Patrol on the one hand and at best a way to regulate rather than eliminate supplies of undocumented laborers on the other. More about that in a moment.

But walls not only provide spectacular backdrops for politicians and parties facing quagmire immigration, and amnesty policies, and concern to cultivate racialized constituencies on both sides of the immigration divide, walls also resurrect an image of the state as sustaining the very powers of protection and self-determination challenged by terrorist technologies on one side and by neoliberal capitalism on the other.

Walls are figures of such protection and self-determination. More generally, they're figures of the resolve and capacity for action identified with the political autonomy generated by sovereignty. So I'm going to talk a bit about this in a moment, but they have that theological dimension of sovereignty that awe inspiring powerful dimension that sovereignty requires.

Now, if this figuration of resolve capacity for action, political autonomy, and so forth, is an illusion that doesn't cancel its importance in offering an appealing political self for an extraordinarily difficult set of problems with no easy short-term solutions.

Indeed walls may be politically salient to the very degree that they're relatively ineffective. Indian economist, Jagdish Bhagwati puts this matter quite baldly. He says this, while late prime minister Indira Gandhi's decision to construct a fence along the enormous India-Bangladesh border was an ineffective policy, it was nevertheless a splendid policy. For to be seen to be doing nothing at all even though one could not really close the border would have been politically explosive. And building the fence was the least disruptive way of doing nothing while appearing to be doing something.

Now, the performances that Andres and Bhagwati describe importantly do not simply exploit existing xenophobia or racism. They actively produce such xenophobia, and racism, and rekindle a certain nationalism in the face of an unsolvable nest of economic and political problems that themselves, as I'll suggest in a moment, issue from contradictory imperatives with regard to borders.

That is in addition to staging sovereign integrity and force, the walls performatively produce a xenophobic nationhood and an imagined sovereignty and of course, often generate as well a new set of facts on the ground that call for evermore walling.

To see more clearly how this performance operates, I want to turn finally to my third thesis about the economy security nexus within which walls are staged and to which they contribute. Conventional wisdom about neoliberal globalization is that it produces opposing economy and security imperatives.

The conventional wisdom is that a globalized economy drives toward the elimination of barriers while security imperatives requires the fortification of boundaries and borders. So the economically driven erasure of distinctions between peoples, cultures, states currencies, and so forth, is countered by a security-motivated press for boundary and closure.

But I want to suggest a more complex story told by the mobile porous and regulatory dimensions of the new walls. First, what the conventional narrative articulates as security concerns are often themselves the effects of neoliberal economics. Second, security and economy concerns each, I will argue, contain contradictory imperatives with regard to barricades and bordering.

And third, the performance of certain security and economy functions actually incite, instrumentalize, and legitimate each other. So I'm going to briefly elaborate each of these. First, the merging of economy and security issues.

The violent effects of economic globalization are evident in the production of central Americans so desperately poor that they would risk their lives, those of family members, or permanent absence from families to become woefully paid illegal day laborers in the US. It's evident as well in Bangladeshis who trudge to the slums of Calcutta for better prospects.

Neoliberalism's lightning fast relocations of scenes of production rapidly rising and falling currencies, and prices, and other vicissitudes of economic life together produce what Hannah Arendt analyzed 50 years ago as masses of stateless peoples reduced to what she called bare life, so politically untethered, so politically disqualified hence so little anointed by political markers of humanness that the new walls appear as a cage against their animal-like invasion. And it's telling that Pat Buchanan's screed against immigration and on behalf of the wall was called the Third World invasion.

Indeed if there remains any validity to the humanist and especially Democratic conceit about speech, and recognition, and law, and freedom as markers of the distinctively human, these mute barricades today, issue of these capacities both in the beings that they would repel and in the power that they represent.

They tacitly snubbed the universal humanism promulgated by a putatively global moral discourse of democracy and human rights. Now, if walls respond to certain unintended effects of neoliberal globalization, they are also importantly part of its regulatory apparatuses.

Far from being antithetical to economic concerns, the new walls embody the ideal regulatory scheme for global capital. They govern flows of labor and goods and they permit the unrestricted flow of capital. As I've already suggested, even the most physically ominous new walls regulate rather than bar illegal and legal immigrant labor.

Consider, for example, the variation in the numbers of undocumented Mexican immigrants and the numbers of enforcement actions against US employers who employ them according to expansions and contractions in the US economy.

During the recession of the 1990s, what was then called the INS, now department of Homeland Security, issued tens of thousands of sanctions against employers of illegal immigrants and the undocumented immigrant population in the US numbered approximately 3 and 1/2 million.

In 2001 during the boom, notwithstanding a frenzy of highly publicized enforcement operations and the building of Operation Gatekeeper along the San Diego border, 150 employer sanctions were issued and illegal immigration was pegged at approximately 9 million.

Israel too still daily admits tens of thousands of legal, as well as illegal Palestinian workers, workers with and without permits, a flow that both economies rely on and both polities decry. So walls produce the very liminality between law and non-law that is required by flexible production.

The intersection of sovereign law and sovereign exception in the wall exemplified in inconsistent dealings with illegal immigration along with the walls inconsistent texture, that barricade here and then 30 miles east the easy way to get through, these together facilitate an organization of labor worldwide that's neither organized nor corrected. It increases literally the number of usable and disposable subjects who are not citizens.

Now, if neoliberal economics a world of free trade requires regulated rather than unrestricted flows of everything except finance capital, does security really drive toward barriers? That's the common wisdom, security drives toward barriers, globalization drives toward openness.

I'm suggesting the first thesis that globalization drives toward openness is not quite right that walls are part of its regulatory scheme. Does security drive toward barriers? This too is questionable. Security today requires not just containment, but movement, flow, openness, availability to inspection.

Nothing is more dangerous than potential sedition or insurgency hidden in closed cells on the one hand or then a stubbornly immovable in assimilable or otherwise fixed and insulated minority population on the other.

So security requires not just the ability to survey, and inspect, and process, and count, and record, but also to channel, to transfer, to relocate, or simply drive out certain populations. Now, if both economy and security concerns require porous barriers and regulated flows through them.

These two sets of concerns also interpenetrate as legitimating discourses in the production and promotion of walls. To begin with, as I suggested earlier, the dissemination of a neoliberal rationality that overtakes liberal democratic values, political values, and institutions with a singular calculus of profitability and efficiency, that new rationality itself facilitates the legitimacy of walling and encampment across putatively democratic societies.

We put up with walls even though they violate our sense of inclusion, and universality, and equality, and rule by law precisely because they meet a certain criteria of effectiveness and efficiency that is the political rationality by which decisions and policies are measured today.

So when commitments to universal equality and liberty seed two cost benefit accounting and political and legal life, not only does world democracy cease to offend the vanishing core values of the society it claims to protect, the hypocrisy of walls that themselves organize illegality as the US-Mexico wall does, for example, that hypocrisy is barely registered as such.

If you add to this post-9/11 concerns that allow security to increasingly trump liberal Democratic principles and commitments from North America to Fortress Europe and if you add to this the wall's fusion of permanent policing and militarization racial profiling and extra legality, all become assimilable if not affirmed in societies calling themselves democracies.

Security and economy concerns are also forthrightly used to cover and dissimulate one another in the promotion of walling. For example, even as the US-Mexico wall is obviously aimed at impoverished Mexican, Central and South Americans lured by North American wage rates required by the North American economy, both politicians and citizen groups often promote that wall on national security grounds.

Terrorists love open borders, remember 9/11 slogans as one group on behalf of the US-Mexico wall. And one can further read on the website called weneedafence.com the following, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants from Central and South America there are several perhaps thousands of illegal aliens from countries that sponsor terrorism or harbor terrorists entering the US each year across our border with Mexico.

Similar fences in Israel have reduced terrorist attacks by up to 95%. As most of you know, that's not the route by which so-called terrorists would enter the US. They would come through Canada and there are very, very few cases of even potential terrorists who have been identified at that border. But what's telling is that the security concern is being used to legitimate an economic one.

weneedafence.com exemplifies the mobilization of security concerns fear on behalf of economic and demographic ones. But what one also can see in this merger are the operations of racism and xenophobia, operations the walls themselves mobilize in melding these two concerns.

And I want to consider now a poem that's posted on the website, weneedafence.com and the literary type shouldn't get too excited, it's not a very good poem. It's quite Dr. Seuss as you will see, but I want to read it because it's stayed on their website now for two years and it's really understood as the prize of weneedafence.com website. It was written by one of the members of this group, it's called An Open Border by Scott Rohter.

Take some bricks and build a wall, make it solid, strong, and tall. Let it stretch from gulf to sea that safer at home we all may be. Build it wide from rim-to-rim so terrorists and smugglers can't sneak in. And make it deep secure from holes through which flow the drugs that wreck our souls.

Stop the drug trade in its tracks, keep us safe from terrorist attacks, and let it stand the test of time. I pray keep safe this land of mine. So far we've got the association of terrorists, smugglers, drug traffickers, all bundled together. But now watch the address of the poem in the second stanza, it comes to directly address the state.

Consider this that it's your job to keep those out who would rape and rob, so now we have rapists and thieves added to the mix. From this great cause you cannot run while so many of us have lost daughter and son.

You ask our children to serve and fight, they trust their leaders to do what's right. And what's right is this, it's easy to see, it's plain and simple as one, two, three, this is the Dr. Seuss part. If you'll keep us safe in the war on terror, an open border is a fatal error.

Now, it's easy to dismiss as reactionary ignorance rotors metonymic chains, the chain on the one side of terrorism, smuggling, drugs, rape, robbery, and illegal immigrants and the metonymic chain on the other side, our side of solidity, strength, height, Christian prayer, and children righteously sacrificed in wars of freedom.

But such metonymy is also critical to contemporary nationalist and post-nationalist projects ranging from post-9/11 American military conquests to the Israeli occupation of Palestine to a walled European Union.

The arch and diametric oppositions here distract from the fusions and confusions of inside, outside military and police, civilians and soldiers, laborers and enemy insurgents that all occur at the site of walls and they also distract from the paradox of walled democracy that they express. Contrast this poem with the one at the Statue of Liberty. Give me your tired, your poor et cetera.

Like the old Bantustans separating White South Africans physically and ontologically from the African labor on which their existence depended, the new walls organize such dependency even as they ideologically articulate separation.

And it's with this point about the new walls dissimulation of need, and dependency, and their resurrection of certain gnomic myths about autonomy and desires for purity that I want to conclude. Mike Davis notes that the new walls resembled dams insofar as they're built to regulate rather than impede flows.

But they're like dams in another respect. The new walls are visual signifiers often of overwhelming human power and state capacity. As such, they not only recuperate a faltering distinction between us and them, between inside and outside, between law and non-law, they also distract from the reality of global interdependence by producing images of autonomy, autarky, and self-sufficiency.

Above all, they dissimulate failing nation state sovereignty with an image of its rectitude and its might. Walls borrow in this regard from the dimension of sovereignty described by Thomas Hobbes as overawing and likened by Hobbes to Gods power even as walls permit the infiltration they stand for eliminating and even as they are most significant as post-nation state regulators of global flows of people and goods.

If as scenes of or rather than efficacy, image rather than impediment, and force rather than right, they stage sovereign power in its most theological dross, this reminds us, again, that waning state sovereignty today decontains the twin powers it was originally established to contain, religion on the one hand, capital on the other.

We're reminded too of the contemporary susceptibility of politics and its subjects to theological motifs. A susceptibility inscribed on the new walls themselves as sovereignty theological faith. It's not incidental that Rota's poem is offered as a prayer addressed to the state. Thank you.