

Our New Walls: The Rise of Separation Barriers in the Age of Globalization

Written by Julia Sonnevend

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JULIA SONNEVEND, MAY 25 2017

Separation barriers might seem archaic in a “globalizing” world, but they are increasingly popular worldwide. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, at least forty countries have built new walls. There are *more* separation walls now than there were in the fateful year of 1989, the year that had symbolically ended the divisions of the Cold War. Contemporary separation barriers include the United States’ separation barrier at the Mexican border against illegal immigrants and drug trafficking; Saudi Arabia’s fence against terrorism on its border with Yemen; Israel’s fence on the Egyptian border in order to prevent the infiltration of asylum seekers from Africa who were smuggled to Israel from the Sinai peninsula; the Botswana-Zimbabwe fence against migration and the spread of foot and mouth disease among livestock; and Hungary’s fence on the Serbian and Croatian border against migrants. French political scientist Alexandra Novosseloff, who conducted a thorough comparative analysis of recent separation walls, argued that “[t]he novelty of today’s walls is that they are built on recognized borders in response to the new challenges and fears related to globalization—and issues like terrorism, poverty, organized crime, and migration movements.”

As I have argued in my book, *Stories Without Borders*, the conceptual link among these separation barriers seems to have been established with the help of an international icon: the Berlin Wall. The mythical story of the Berlin Wall clearly does *not* prevent us from building new walls, but it enables us to talk about them using a common vocabulary. For instance, many political leaders have framed their countries’ separation barriers as “fences”: temporary and permeable. In contrast, the activists opposing those separation barriers, recalling the Berlin Wall, tend to frame them as “walls”: permanent and impermeable. The Berlin Wall thus offers us a framework of thought and a related vocabulary to classify separation barriers. In this classification fences are more accepted than walls.

American presidential candidate Trump has recently broken this tradition in a very visible fashion with his proud announcement on the construction of a “wall.” “Build the Wall” signs were standard features of his rallies, the slogan also appeared on baseball caps, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. In combination with “Make America Great again,” Trump’s promise of a completely sealed US-Mexico border, paid by the Mexican side, were the central imaginaries of the 2016 US elections. The geographical impossibility of completing this mission and the cost of around 21.6 billion dollars did not deter voters: the desire to be protected won out over all other considerations. The recent European “refugee crisis” has also weakened Europe’s memory of the Berlin Wall. While the European Union maintained its interest in people’s free movement within the Union, it has increasingly protected its borders from those outside of the alliance.

For a long time it seemed that the keyword of globalization was bridge, not wall. The rhetoric of globalization emphasized the benefits of a free flow of people, goods and ideas. But this imagery ignored the reality that some people do not want to be connected with others, and some connections make relations worse, rather than better. The current belief in walls as long-term solutions for global conflicts similarly ignores that “good fences make good neighbors” is true in some cases, but not others. Clear borders sometimes calm tensions, in other cases they exacerbate minor misunderstandings. And quite often, expensive walls and barriers serve mostly a symbolic function, they are used in speeches and on photographs to promote an isolationist message, but do little to actually stop the movement of people. Just think about the countless images of Mexicans scaling the already existing segments of the US-Mexico barrier or Palestinians using ladders to climb over the West Bank barrier to report to work every day.

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Even in the case of the Berlin Wall, it was not the “wall” that prevented crossing, but hundreds of armed border guards and an elaborate system of watchtowers, electric signaling fences and obstacles.

Despite the separation walls’ rising costs and frequent impracticality, they will continue to rise all over the world, creating a global reality of simultaneous connection and disconnection. It is easy to dismiss many people’s desire to live in seemingly safe and homogenous communities. Labeling this desire as xenophobic or racist is even easier. A harder task for all of us is confronting the question: why are there so many people who would like to see a massive border control regime that seals their borders? It seems that processes of globalization, which were connected to ideals of openness and connection, have made a lot of people deeply anxious about the future of their communities and the sustainability of the environments they once lived in. If we want to combat the reality of a future world in which communities are sealed behind impermeable walls and barriers, we need to think hard and deep about why many imagine that to be the ideal world.

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