Introduction. Walls: Ways of Being, Ways of Functioning, Ways of Being Transformed

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The reality contained within a wall, and a border, is very complex, as is the context in which it is embedded. This introduction analyses that complexity and examines practical examples of walls which are still highly visible in the towns or cities crossed by, or located close to, a border but which are also present in rural or other non-urban settings.

Walls Hard and Soft: Images and Historical Experiences

The idea of a wall evokes classic models such as the Great Wall of China, the Roman limes, the modern fence, the ghetto, the metropolitan banlieue, the favela, the gated community. Walls thus conceived generally function for empires and (less frequently) states and within cities; they are built by wealthy social groups and nations to protect themselves from or marginalise the poor and the different. There are also ethnic and ideological groups which erect walls or see them erected around them. Walls have been present in every age and every society; although they may be metaphorical and invisible, they are no less effective than physical walls.

Such walls abound in descriptions in the literature and in personal experience. I am put in mind of the invisible wall between Jews and Christians in a village street near Manchester described by Harry Bernstein (2006). I recall the state of affairs in a country village (population 2,000) in Emilia (Italy) in the 1950s. It was divided into two impenetrable parts; what might today be called ‘no-go areas’. Communists on one side and Christian Democrats and Catholics on the other. On one side people gathered in the social centre (casa del popolo), children enrolled in the Pioneers and the cinema showed socialist films. That part of town had its own bakery and its own bar, and everyone shopped at the cooperative. Weddings were held in the Town Hall and funerals were non-religious. On the other side people went to church, belonged to Azione cattolica and other Catholic associations, and watched films at the parish cinema. That side of town had its own bakery, its own bar and its own...

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1 From personal experience.
general store; weddings and funerals were held in church. Crossing the wall between the two sides was not an option. If a Communist wanted to attend Mass s/he had to go to another town, and the further away the better.

One feature distinguishing the various types of wall is the form of protection it is supposed to provide. Protection against the loss of freedom is the type characterising empires which have achieved an external-internal balance and seek to assure their global position and at the same time prevent the immigration of the world’s poor, who would jeopardise their internal social equilibrium.

The Chinese and Roman empires built walls as a protection against barbarian invasions, to defend their territorial and political integrity. Modern “empires”\(^2\) such as the United States and the European Union protect themselves against immigrants from impoverished countries seeking a decent life and an escape from war, terrorism and persecution. They either prevent such immigration or adopt quota-based regulations. The justification given for quota systems (in use at Ellis Island from 1892 to 1954) and closure to the outside is the need to prevent the poverty imported by immigrants from disrupting the balance between the indigenous classes living in the empire.

Put otherwise, walls are erected to preserve (defend) the social, economic, cultural and political equilibrium within the empire, the state, the metropolitan city and every town.

Not only are there highly visible and extremely long walls between empires, between states lying on imperial borders (North and South Korea, Greece and Turkey, the Berlin Wall) and between large states with unresolved border problems (India and Pakistan); there are also walls around poor or rich minorities, between different cultures and different ethnic groups within states or more often within towns and cities. They produce ghettos, refugee camps, slums, favelas, gated communities, lazar houses and metropolitan banlieues.

The ghetto (from the Venetian “geto”—meaning an iron foundry—which the local German-born Ashkenazi Jews pronounced “ghèto”) was the name given to that part of Venice from the 14th century (Calimani 1995;\(^2\) The term “empire” is used here in a sense more metaphorical than with regard to earlier empires (Chinese, Roman, Persian, Holy Roman, Spanish, Habsburg, German, and so on), which were marked by territorial continuity and one overarching state power. These modern empires are an expression of the current process of globalisation of states. They are empires in which a dominant state lies at the centre of an international system which exercises its imperial function through political and economic power but also cultural and ideological power, and through circles of states which coalesce around the dominant state. In truth something of the kind developed under the Roman empire with the formation around it of client states such as Judaea, Commagene, Pergamon, Armenia and others in Anatolia.