

THE GLOBALISING WALL

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Our theme is a wall. A wall that is neither some ordinary physical structure located at a specific site, nor a symbolic wall. It takes a material form in a number of sites around the globe while transcending locations and leapfrogging whole continents as if in a queer quest to globalise itself; to infect our supposedly unifying world with a sinister, impenetrable division. A wall that is so familiar and yet so inconvenient that most turn their gaze away from it.

The seeds of our wall were sown in the Balkans, in Yugoslavia and in Greece under the Nazi occupation. The harvest began in the streets of our hometown, Athens, in December 1944, yielding a Civil War of an awfulness and global significance that went almost wholly unnoticed. The world began to pay attention:

- when, from the streets of Athens in December 1944, it moved to Berlin, which it partitioned in the following June
- when it produced two Koreas in that August
- leapt to the mountain ranges of Kashmir exactly two years later, on 15th August 1947, as the new fledgling nations of the subcontinent clashed instead of celebrating independence
- when it flared up in 1948 in the guise of ethnic cleansing and in the midst of all-out-war in Palestine
- when it made its mark in the streets of Nicosia with a green line, drawn innocuously by a British general in 1956, before returning in the form of barricades in 1963, two years after the similar soft division in Berlin had been transformed, within four short days, into the Wall's most famed incarnation.

When the *Troubles* broke out in Belfast, and Sunday 30th January 1972 was indelibly bloodied by the British Army, it was there to embellish the pre-existing discontent with euphemistically called *Peace Walls*. Two years later, in 1974, the barricades along Nicosia's Green Line, as if in a bid not to be outdone by Berlin or Belfast, grew also into a fully-fledged wall.

Then, in 1989, while the Berlin Wall was falling, and the world was turning, supposedly, into our global playground, something remarkable happened: Instead of disappearing, these walls grew taller, more impenetrable, longer, stronger, uglier. They invaded disintegrating Yugoslavia, stood tall in the midst of hitherto unified communities in Africa's Horn (where they claimed grey zones from the rugged tablelands between Ethiopia and Eritrea), turned more insidious and fiendishly complex in Palestine, along the US-Mexico border, in the streets of Bagdad, in Georgia, in the Ukraine, in our own cities, their shopping malls and gated pseudo-communities.

Our journey along this Globalising Wall began in 2005, as part of an art project that led to two installations. Danae's idea was to travel to seven of the worst dividing lines (Cyprus, Kosovo, Belfast, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Palestine, Kashmir, and the US-Mexico border), stand right

on the division, photograph each side, then print the images of each side on large transparencies, hang them from the ceiling facing one another, and in so doing construct a corridor (made of these seven pairs of large counter-opposing images) that the viewer would walk through it as if in a unifying, healing act.

For a year we travelled together to these divisions which globalisation was making obsolete in theory but, in practice, it was reinforcing. During those travels a Great Paradox hit us: The *more* globalisation was meant to develop reasons for dismantling the dividing lines, the *less* powerful the forces working to dismantle them were proving. Deepening divisions, patrolled by increasingly merciless guards, and convoluted architectural techniques, roads, tunnels and fortifications, appeared to us the homage that globalisation was paying to organised misanthropy.

Modernity's fence

Before our travels, we had reflected on the role of fences and walls in Modernity as well as their philosophical reflection in liberal individualism. Our starting point was the hunch that, in the era of globalised financialisation, divisions were not what they used to be. In times past they simply fended off the enemy, and lightly imprinted the Empires' footprint on the land. Before the 'discovery' of the autonomous individual, the ancient polis constantly dreamt of demolishing its walls or, at least, of never having to keep its gates closed. When a son of an ancient Greek city won an Olympics event, the elders ordered the demolition of part of the city walls. Only at times of crisis or degeneracy were the gates ordered shut. Unlike today in North Korea or the southern states of the USA, open gates were, then, a symbol of power. Hadrian and the Chinese Emperors built great walls, but never with the intention of freezing human movement. They were porous walls, mere symbols of their Empires' self-imposed limits, and a form of early warning system.

Fences took on a new role and character at the time European feudalism was running out of steam. Under the strain of the commodification made possible by the new trade routes that linked Southampton with Calcutta, Macao, Japan and the ever increasing number of colonial outposts strewn all over the globe, the English commons were cut up, fenced off, privatised. Thus the *Enclosures* 'liberated' the peasants from access to the land of their mothers and the free labourer was born.

For the first time in history, they became free to choose and, equally, free to lose. Free to rove unimpeded, free to sell their labour, time, body, and spirit to whomever, and equally free to starve, enter into desperate contracts with strangers, become a sad part of some productive machine owned by a faceless shareholder. Thus the Era of Reason and Liberty was ushered in, hot on the trails of the globalisation drive that, on the one hand:

- *fenced the peasants out* of their ex-commons at home and, on the other,
- *fenced the slaves in ships* that transported them to *newly fenced off land* in the Caribbean and elsewhere, where they were put to work, producing the massive surpluses that funded the industrial revolution.

From this wealth emerged the castles that Englishmen called home and for whom the fence separating their property from the next one down the road became a symbol of freedom, good neighbourliness, and of course subjectivity under their Sovereign. The accumulation of this wealth was the predecessor of

- the fenced sovereign nation
- the gated neighbourhood
- the notion of home as one's castle
- the idea that the enemy of autonomy is the 'other', either as an individual or, even worse, as a collective, a State, the IRS...

Once the American Revolution had ridden the ex-colonies of the transatlantic Sovereign as surplus to the requirements of the New World's drive to accumulate, the American Constitution revelled in the light of Reason and Liberty while erecting all sorts of fences whose purpose were to cast in legal stone rights of man defined purely in terms of freedom from interference; fences that would keep the riff-raff out and, of course, keep the State and the executive at bay; constitutional fences marking the autonomous realm of the liberal bourgeois individual. Border fences, in this manner, became synonymous with Modernity in Europe, while in Africa, in the Caribbean, in parts of the American West, and of course in Australia, the fence remained for decades the handmaiden of slavery, expropriation and genocide.

Meanwhile, at the level of Theory, for at least three hundred years now, Reason is being defined as the absence of Unreason; *as if* a mighty fence is separating the two, with Reason maintaining a unique narrative to offer on Unreason – courtesy of, on the one hand, economics and, on the other, psychiatry. In the same manner, Freedom is defined almost instinctively as the instrument that demarcates the self and pushes back the interfering others; whether they are foreign armies, migrant workers, one's own employees, the homeless, even one's nearest and dearest.

The very notion of personhood that emerged out of Angloceltic capitalism hinges on the idea of 'well-defined' spaces within the 'walls' that exclude. Our new-fangled concept of Liberty and Progress is, thus, contingent on the prior colonisation of 'alien' others, while our splendid cosmopolitanism is bought at the price of parochial divides that mindlessly cut the Earth's face, giving shape to the map of a world divided, supposedly neatly, in nation-states.

Modernity, in short, spawned fences, walls and fortifications fit for an exciting variety of new roles:

- they liberated the individual from the tyranny of the 'other'
- replaced love for one's neighbour
- gave rise to the proletariat, thus massively expanding the productivity of labour
- pacified the colonised
- marked the nation-state's territory
- imprisoned the alien
- exterminated inconvenient peoples
- institutionalised the weird.

The Fence helped destroy the silly old world and gave a hand to the construction of Modern Empires that the Romans could not have imagined.

Postmodernity's globalising wall

During our travels, our faces pushed up against those hideous fences, the reality of the new phase of globalisation hit us more powerfully than ever. Re-reading our diaries, one page sticks out – written in March 2006, in Juarez, Mexico, while ‘studying’ perhaps the most sinister segment of the US-Mexico border:

“It is not just that the walls are getting stronger, rather than more brittle. It is also that they are globalising. The reason seems to be because the importance of deep divisions for stabilising a grossly unstable world order is growing by the day. The *raison d' être* is the same. *It affects different Walls in similar ways. They start resembling each other.* Both in terms of the social forces that huddle in their shadow but also physically. Aesthetically. A Mitrovica Serb would feel more at home in Nicosia than in Belgrade. An Eritrean residing in Tsorona will feel a sense of familiarity, despite the intense cold, near the Line of Control in alpine Kashmir than she would in Asmara. An Ulster unionist will have no trouble coming to grips with the reality of the ghost city of Famagusta, in Cyprus, whereas he may well feel a stranger in London. A Palestinian from Qalqilia will discover strange bonds with a resident of Juarez; bonds that she may not feel in Cairo. The mere fact that Israeli engineering teams have been employed by the US government to help transplant Sharon's Wall to California, New Mexico, Arizona and Texas speaks volumes.”

After our travels, the artist among us (DS), completed and exhibited her installation ‘[CUT – 7 dividing lines](#)’, while the theorist (YV) began to draft a theory of financial capital's globalisation that later became a book: ‘[The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the future of the world economy](#)’. The central argument in that book was that the globalisation of financialised capital began in 1971 with the collapse of the Bretton Woods system. It manifested itself in a vicious reversal of the flow of trade and capital surpluses between the United States and the Rest of the World. For the first time in world history, the hegemon strengthened its hegemony by wilfully enlarging its deficits while creating the conditions for the rest of the world to finance these deficits through a tsunami of capital flowing into Wall Street. This new dynamic created a semblance of global equilibrium and unification while, at the same time, generating increasing imbalances and divisions. The emergence of the Globalising Wall at a time of phenomenal globalisation was, thus, explained as a by-product of the latter's mounting financial imbalances, economic incongruities and political paradoxes. A third work also emerged at the intersection of our two narratives (‘[CUT – 7 dividing lines](#)’ and [The Global Minotaur](#)): the video installation entitled [The Globalising Wall](#).

Epilogue

Since our travels in 2005, globalisation has had its comeuppance. The perverse flow of increasingly unbalanced money and goods that underpinned the myth of a Global Village had produced a tsunami of unsustainable financial trickery. John Maynard Keynes once wrote that “speculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation.” Which is precisely what had pertained by 2007.

The steady stream of European and Asian profits rushing into Wall Street since the 1980s had, by the 2000s, turned into a tsunami of synthetic debts on a whirlpool of financial flows. Bankers were building Midas-like fortunes by inflating oversized bubbles of exotic forms of private debt which, at some point, had surreptitiously acquired the properties of private money. By the Fall of 2008 these bubbles had burst, causing our generation’s 1929 moment. For together with the financial bubbles, something else broke. It was the recycling mechanism that held globalisation together: US trade deficits generating global demand for the net exports of Europe, Japan, later China, South East Asia etc. which, in turn, were paid for by the flood of (European, Japanese, Chinese, South East Asian etc.) profits rushing into Wall Street to complete the recycling loop. In 2008, despite energetic money printing by central banks (and the Chinese authorities’ breath-taking credit and investment spree) this loop broke down. It was only a matter of time before the myth and the reality of globalisation would begin to unravel.

American deficits, even after they returned to their pre-2007 levels, could no longer stabilise globalisation. The reason? Socialist largesse for the few and ruthless market forces for the many damaged aggregate demand, repressed the entrepreneurs’ sales expectations, restricted investment in high quality jobs, diminished earnings for the many and, surprise-surprise, confirmed the entrepreneurs’ pessimism that underpinned low investment and low demand. Adding more liquidity to that mix made not a scintilla of a difference as the problem was not a dearth of liquidity but the dearth of demand. Abysmal inequality was merely the symptom.

Wall Street, Wal Mart and Walled citizens. Those had been globalisation’s symbolic foundations before 2008. Today, all three have become a drag on globalisation: Banks are failing to maintain the capital movements that globalisation used to rely upon, as total financial movements across the globe are less than one fourth of what they were in early 2007. Wal Mart, whose ideology of cheapness symbolised the devaluation of global labour and the gutting of traditional local businesses, is itself squeezed by the Amazon model whose ultimate effect is a further shrinking of overall spending. Meanwhile, the 3D printer, computer-aided design and artificially intelligent robots promise to de-globalise, and re-localise, production, denying in the process countries like the Philippines and Nigeria the advantage that young populations used to bestow upon them during the years of globalisation’s rude health.

With globalisation in retreat militant parochialism filled the space, bolstering the Globalising Wall which is now running amok, spreading further afield. The victims of globalisation, good people who believed the lie that it was a tide lifting all boats, are now turning for a false

sense of security (or, in some cases, a safe place to be angry in) to walls, to Brexit, to the bosom of a powerless nation-state. New walls are therefore rising between countries that had, until recently, proudly given up their border posts; e.g. Germany, Italy and France. The Mediterranean is being exploited purposely as a watery fence-*cum*-grave by European rulers eagerly striking deals with Libyan traffickers and the Turkish President to allow them to violate the internationally guaranteed rights of refugees. On the Atlantic's other side, a President was elected pledging to build a better, a more vicious wall anywhere he could. The longer this list of horrors grows, the greater our moral and political duty to confront this failing globalisation with a renewed, ambitious internationalism. Taking down its hideous, Globalising Wall seems like a good place to start.