

DANIEL LOICK

RES SANCTAE
WENDY BROWN'S CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY
OF WALLS

Review of: Wendy Brown (2010) *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. New York: Zone Books, 167 p.

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One of the good things about this book is that it has pictures in it. Already by leafing through the first couple of pages, one gets intuitively an idea of Wendy Brown's basic thesis: The photographs and diagrams of barriers and border patrols, barbed wire and barbicans immediately evoke a feeling of both the manifestly violent and the absolutely contingent character of walls and fences today. In a time where the utopia of free movement around the globe is invoked by humanitarians, cosmopolitans and neoliberals alike, attempts to fence-off a territory by randomly declaring a certain locus a 'border' seems atavistic, irrational and almost childish. Why is it that the age of globalization – a political dynamic that many sociologists associate with the decline of the nation state – is at the same time the age of increased wallbuilding and intensified fortification?

Brown takes as the starting point of her inspiring investigation the diagnosis of a concurrence of two seemingly contradictory processes (already conveyed in the title of the book): While single states, primarily due to the

dominance of global capital, have lost most of their ability to effectively govern local territories, they reinforce their efforts to secure their borders by way of the robust corporality of cement and bricks; and with the phenomenon of increasing fortification not being limited to the nation's external frontiers but also serving to protect certain communities from unwanted subjects ('gated communities'). Her basic idea now is that these two developments are precisely not contradictory, but entail each other. Walls and fences for her are not the emblematic markers of the hegemony or a renaissance of the sovereign nation state but, on the contrary, 'icons of its erosion' (24).

This analysis is based on the assumption of a sheer dysfunctionality of walls and fences. By referring both to the history of philosophy and political science (from Machiavelli to Ariel Sharon, both of whom warned that fortifications do more harm than good) and contemporary sociological research, Brown presents strong evidence for her claim that walls and fences never 'really "work" in the sense of resolving or even substantially reducing the conflicts, hostilities, or traffic at which they officially aim' (27), be it to regulate migration, keep out diseases or stop smuggling; and even more, they tend to aggravate the problems they were supposed to solve. The Israeli wall serves Brown as a particularly distinct example of how these kinds of political measures backfire: Quite contrary to its intended purpose, it did not make life more secure for the Israelis but more insecure. This can be understood as an antithesis to the frequently invoked image of a 'Fortress Europe' (or a 'Fortress USA', or a 'Fortress Israel', for that matter) and is much closer to the concept of an autonomy of migration, but Brown is less interested in investigating the motifs and strategies of the agents of trans-border traffic than in examining why states around the world hold on to these anachronistic measures in the first place. It is striking that despite their more or less obvious inefficiency, people do not cease to make remarkable, and at times spectacular, political, financial and psychological investments in these borders: the suggestion of fighting the current forms of terrorism (hijacking airplanes, suicide bombing, or the use of biological weapons) by increased and intensified border patrols, made by a number of US politicians, is one of the particularly distinct examples of how we cling to old recipes although they have been proven invalid. This shows, according to Brown, that borders

are not simply useless and thus an imprudent, ‘wrong’ means to serve their putative aims, but that they just fulfill a different function than the ones that are commonly ascribed to them. Rather than a material they have an ideological, imaginary, theatrical and indeed a theological significance.

Brown argues that it is precisely *because* the sovereignty of single states is more and more undermined by the global circulation of money and goods that the nations have to reassure and to reaffirm their power by means of intensified practices of exclusion, segregation and partition. Border politics becomes a primary source of justification for the very existence of nation states. The main function of walls today is thus neither economical, nor political, but symbolical: they produce an ‘aura of awe’ and thereby provide local regimes with the necessary legitimatory resources while their actions are less and less constrained by any positive law. This is where the theological dimension comes in: according to Brown, walls take over a theological quality that previously inhabited the decisionist state (the sovereign as having similar features as God – unity, supremacy, authority etc), endowing it with a quasi-sacred appearance. The current post-Westphalian global order is not an ‘Empire’ (Hardt/Negri) nor is the camp the ‘biopolitical nomos of the planet’ (Agamben), but we face the simultaneous dominance of global capital and God-sanctioned violence, a global interplay of capitalist expansion and the exclusionary politics of local managerial regimes that Brown coins ‘theological governance’ (23).

Brown does not simply state the persistence of political theology in the form of walls, she also backs up her claim about the independent significance of the ideology of borders psychoanalytically. The last of her four chapters is dedicated to the question of why we so passionately desire walls (another finding that has strong support in recent political examples such as the rise of vigilantes, but also in the political psychology of xenophobia and racism: the rhetoric on border issues is routinely a mere firework of paranoid fear and phobic obsession with everything alien). Referring to Sigmund and Anna Freud’s theory of defense, Brown suggests that these anxieties and fantasies are not exhausted in identifying with the state or the fear for the loss of its protection (the state’s vulnerability is experi-

enced as one’s own vulnerability), but are rooted in a deeper psychological disposition. The desire for walling thus becomes legible as a narcissistic denial of an array of world historical developments that put the concept of an independent self into question. Unfortunately, Brown contents herself with vaguely hinting at this, rendering her argument a bit superficial at times. It is, for example, ultimately not very convincing when Brown quite idiosyncratically mingles Freud with Heidegger to find out that ‘walling phantasmatically produces [...] shelter when the actual boundaries of the nation cease to be containing’ (118). On the other hand, however, her inquiry of the reverse dynamic is much more plausible: while walls satisfy an imaginary need, they at the same time also foster this very desire and thus fundamentally contaminate our subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The best parts of the book are when Brown describes how through the discourse on walls we all transmute into border guards: ‘Walls built around political entities cannot block out without shutting in, cannot secure without making securitization a way of life, cannot define an external “they” without producing a reactionary “we” [...]’ (42). Even if these explanations are rather tentative, it can be highlighted that by adding a psychoanalytical account to the toolbox, Brown avoids two very common mistakes by escaping both a juridical and an economical reductionism.

Brown’s intervention is thought-provoking and full of agitating examples, but it rather outlines a general thesis than providing a full analysis. It would especially have benefited from a more detailed and extensive genealogy of the theological dimension of walls. Already in the Roman *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, the historically first body of positive law, walls were named ‘res sanctae’, sacred things, that were withdrawn from traffic and use. They represent precisely the conjunction of a legal and an awe-inspiring function that Brown has in mind. It would be worthwhile to explore in this respect the longer and wider traditions of the sanctification of that which separates us from another, providing this inquiry with a broader historical and ethnological framework. Because Brown focuses mainly on the US and Israel, the persistence of a European notion of sovereignty is indeed plausible (and, especially in the case of Israel, disquieting, because it also means that Israel’s central political categories are not essentially Jewish, but inherently Christian), but since she aims at describ-

ing not only Western nation states but the world order in general, doubts about the universality of her findings are in order. Can the same transfer of a theological justification from decision to exclusion be assumed for the borders between Thailand and Malaysia, Brunei and Limbang, China and North Korea? And is the psychological desire for walls a transhistorical, transcultural and transethnic constant, an anthropological condition? These issues are deeply connected with our very political perspectives, because depending on how we respond to them, we might gain different perspectives on the most practical of all questions: is a world without borders possible?

Daniel Loick studied Philosophy, Sociology and German Literature in Duisburg and Frankfurt. His PhD thesis *Critique of Sovereignty* is forthcoming with Campus Verlag later this year. He is currently a junior faculty member at the Institute for Philosophy of Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany.

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