

Walls! Walls! Walls!

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Idomeni makeshift camp, May 2016

Source: author's collection

["I will build a great wall -- and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me -- and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words."](#) (Donald Trump, US President elect, June 2015)

["Our borders are under threat, our life based on a respect for laws...and the whole of Europe. We are being run over."](#) (Viktor Orban, Hungarian Prime Minister, September 2015)

Washington: January 25th, 2017. Newly elected US President Donald Trump signs an executive order aiming at the construction of the so often announced 3,200km long wall along the Mexican border, adding to the existing hundreds of km of material barriers already in place. Trump declares that ["a nation without borders is not a nation. Beginning today, the United States of America gets back control of its borders, gets back its borders."](#)

However, in ‘wall announcing’ and ‘wall building’ President Trump is certainly not alone. In September 2016, [the UK government has announced](#) the intention of building a £1.9m wall along the highway bordering the infamous ‘jungle’ in Calais, in order to block the ‘residents’ of the makeshift camp from entering the highway and attempting to hide on the lorries waiting for the ferry to cross The Channel. A few weeks later, despite the jungle having been entirely dismantled, [the French authorities have unveiled](#) plans to extend an already existing wall in the same area.

These recent plans for new walls follow numerous other walls built in Europe since 2015, materially rewriting some of the most controversial borders in the Balkan region. Whilst some Schengen borders have been walled for decades, such as the Spanish border with Morocco (as illustrated by abundant existing academic work: see, among others, [Buoli, 2014](#); Mutlu and Leite, 2012; Saddiki, 2010; and [Van Houtum and Pijpers, 2007](#)), the ‘new walls’ are located deep inside the European territory. For example, the highly contested (also by the EU authorities) [fence-wall built by Hungary](#) on the border with Serbia to block the flow of migrants along the so-called West Balkan Route and the walls marking key sections of the borders between Hungary and Croatia, Slovenia and Croatia, Macedonia and Greece, Austria and Slovenia. More walls have been announced to separate Hungary from Romania, and Austria from Slovenia and Hungary itself (and possibly Austria from Italy).

‘Wall announcing’ and ‘wall building’ have thus become popular practices among some politicians in Western liberal democracies, in Europe and far beyond, practices that are presumably also appreciated by a growing part of the electorate. The proliferation of walls in the past decade or so – the most famous and possibly most studied of which is that built by Israel in the [Occupied Territories](#) to control the movement of Palestinian residents ([Alatout, 2009](#); Handel, 2009; [Jones et al., 2016](#); Weizman, 2007; [Yiftachel, 2005](#)) – seems to confirm a new global tendency to invest in very large, very visible and very expensive infrastructures of this kind in order to contrast the penetration of the national territory on the part of undesired subjects (Jones, 2012; Jones and Johnson, 2014; Vallet, 2014).

But why such a brutal return, in the age of Schengen, to old fashioned materializations of borders in Europe? Is the so called ‘refugee crisis’ the actual drive of such anxious walling of many European borders? Is the terrorist threat a good reason to build walls for hundreds of kilometers, while intelligence services are normally much more interested in tracing the fluid and immaterial mobilities of the networks financing and organizing the related attacks? Or is there a deeper and different rationale behind the popularity of these walls?

The new walls in Europe, with their rich dotation of electronic and biometric devices, have converted many borders into ‘war zones’ of sorts, resembling strange monuments to past landscapes dominated by the logic of the barbed wire (see Netz, 2004), landscapes we thought (and hoped?) belonged to a different century. It is thus important to interrogate this disturbing cartographic and material presence in many European territories, precisely in a historical moment in which many were expecting the gradual disappearance of physical state borders ([Johnson et al., 2011](#)), or at least their substantial incorporation into the mostly invisible and pervasive biometric systems of bordering ([Amoore, 2006](#)). We reflect on the longer history of these “new walls” in the context of [the populist wave calling for more real and metaphorical walls](#) to counter the upcoming ‘invasions of irregular migrants’ and the impending terrorist threat.

Walls are simultaneously material and symbolic manifestations of political boundaries and designated configurations of state power ([Till et al., 2013](#)). As illustrated by rich academic work (see, among others, Leuenberger, 2014; [Vallet and David, 2012](#)) the walling of borders to block the arrival of 'alien' bodies of all kinds and provenience has a long history - one has only to think of the famous Hadrian Wall built by the Roman Empire or the Chinese Great Wall or, more recently, the global Cold War divide represented by the Berlin Wall. However, despite these numerous and relevant precedents, there seems to be a general consensus about the fact that the post 9/11 years have witnessed a true proliferation of new walls (Vallet, 2014).

Recent academic debates have responded to the current increase in wall building by asking 'why is this happening now?' and 'what are the most immediate effects?'. For example, authors such as Elisabeth Vallet (2014) and Wendy Brown (2010) suggest that post 9/11 walls are different from those of the past, which were often built by nation states to claim territorial sovereignty and refrain other countries from invading their territory. The new walls are instead largely built as a response to the uncontrolled movement of individuals and non-state actors. In fact, the 9/11 attacks in New York, and later the attacks in Madrid and London, or more recently in Paris and Brussels, have shown how non-state actors may intervene violently in our cities as 'enemy-others'. This fear of the 'enemy-other' is connected in particular by Brown in her *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010) to the increased difficulty on the part of nation states in governing their sovereign territory. Accordingly, the calls for new walls may be understood as a response to the decline of sovereign power in a "globalized world [that] harbours fundamental tensions between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription" (2010: 7). Such 'enemy-others', in these narratives, materialize in the figure of terrorists, but also of irregular (and errant) migrants. The walls are therefore meant to (presumably) control these uncontrolled movements and prevent unwanted enemy-others from 'entering' (on this, see, also Jones, 2012, 2014; [Vallet and David, 2012](#)).

As Reece Jones argues in *Border Walls* (2012), with the implementation of the War on Terror and the fear for uncontrollable 'enemy-others', walling has become an expression of many nation states' urge to promote and enforce the management of a population as homogeneous as possible, and located within clearly demarcated borders. An urge that predates several post 9/11 political landscapes ([Feigenbaum, 2010](#); Jones, 2012). Also according to Silberman et al. (2012), 'walling' is a material manifestation precisely of this wish to constantly and repeatedly reproduce a clear line between who belongs and who does not. Remarkably, despite these new walls consisting of intricate combinations of visible techniques – such as bricks, chain link fences, barbed wire – and less visible ones – such as infrared cameras and underground sensors – in practice they often remain rather porous and relatively unsuccessful in fully controlling the movement of such real-and-imagined-enemy-others (see, Jones and Johnson, 2014; [Till et al., 2013](#)). As noted already in 2005 by Dean MacCannell, building impregnable fortifications is only possible in the imagination. The 'effectiveness' of the new European walls in fencing off 'migrants' remains indeed questionable, since any reduction of the registered presence of refugees – highly publicized by pro-wall governments - normally corresponds to an increase of unregistered passages via

the smugglers' routes or, alternatively, the deflection of the migrant routes towards more viable itineraries ([Topak, 2014](#)).

However, whether or not walls are porous seems perhaps less important than understanding how they operate as *dispositifs* conceived to materially and metaphorically perform the supposed radical difference between 'inside' and 'outside'. In fact, when leaders emphasize in their speeches the powerful materiality of the wall, they convey almost an epidermic sense of reality to their constituencies: the wall will be there, visible, touchable, real, impenetrable, monumental. If we try to look at the proliferation of walls from the perspective of their visual but also almost tactile presence, we wonder whether these 'assemblages' are actually about 'migrants' and 'refugees'; or, rather, if they represent a spatial technology aimed at symbolically governing the body politic of the concerned countries; a sort of 'self-fencing', an immunitarian practice to preserve the idea of a possible and final territorial integrity.

Taking this one step further, we would like to provocatively argue that the relative porosity of the walls is key to their functioning. 'Walled states' in the Balkan region, for example, do not really want to *entirely* block the migrants' flow. The migrants' mobility and the related 'crisis' is in fact what legitimizes more walls, more walling, more security interventions, more violent borderings, more biometrics, and more money invested in such infrastructures and the related personnel. For the walls to work, we suggest, they need to remain relatively porous; and while their very existence and workings are at the origin of more deaths-at-the-border in Europe (see, [Kovras and Robins, 2016](#)), the current management of walls is also keeping alive the possibility of penetrating, illegally, or under strict and limited control of the authorities, the immunized territorial body of some of the 'walled' nation states.

Walls, from this perspective, can be a theatrical performative presence of a strong, protective nation state, claiming to be capable to keep the enemy-others out. During a time when the media frames [migrants as 'flooding Europe'](#), and Europe is often accused to have [lost control of its borders](#), walls become the ultimate representation of a specifically exclusive and delusory understanding of the state and its actual spatialities—specifically enacted on the bodies of migrants.



*Idomeni makeshift camp, May 2016
Source: author's collection*

Let us problematize the official narratives about the necessity and the utility of these assemblages of technologies of surveillance, control and biometrical intervention that we call 'walls'.

First, the new European walls are not merely objects, material devices placed on some border to refrain (certain) people's movement. They are rather a process *and* a practice: walls 'do things', they produce effects on the subjected populations, including those regularly living under their putative 'protection'. Walls are therefore a technology that is part of a broader 'politics of walling' alimeted by populist and exclusionary ideas of danger and (in)security in the age of biometrics, or perhaps we should say, *despite* the pervasive implementation of biometrics.

Second, while walls cannot be analyzed as separated from the walling processes taking place, the actual materiality of these walls, with their barbed wire, bricks and chain-linked fences, and their fortified, monumental and immanently biopolitical dimension, should not be overlooked. By taking further Louise Amoore's claims that the border has increasingly become the migrant body itself (2006), we argue that the brutal force that these walls exude and the deaths-at-the-border that result from their presence are real effects and not merely symbolic interventions. As Özgün Topak (2014) has suggested, borderzones and the spaces at the edges of the nation states, especially the 'walled' ones, remain sites where the crude effects of these processes of territorial immunization can be seen most clearly, and where they should be studied – precisely for their immanent political (and sometimes vital) implications for those who are presumably kept separated by these very walls.

Third, narratives and practices of porosity are inherent to this walling process. For example, the International Organization for Migration reports that since walls have been built on the

Hungarian borders, [the number of refugees entering the country has dramatically dropped](#), especially when compared to neighboring Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. One has only to think of the images in the media of [makeshift camps on the Serbian side of the Hungarian wall](#) to see the efficiency in refraining people to trespass the border. However, during our fieldwork in the region we learned that the passages, while numerically reduced, continue unregistered despite the higher risks implicated and the need to recourse to illegal means on the part of the migrants. Again, what clearly emerges from recent statistics (and fieldwork evidence) about migrations and refugees in Europe, and in Eastern Europe in particular, walls do not block the migrants' mobility; they rather make these people evaporate and reappear elsewhere, where another wall may soon be erected. Our point is that not only migrants endlessly trespass the walls built to stop them, but that trespass is an inherent part of the walling processes.

What is more, the porosity of the new walled borders of Europe does not materialize in the same way for everyone, neither it is static. While according to Till et al., "[state borders have long been selectively porous](#)" (52), such selective porosity in Europe has become all the more visible since 2015 and the biopolitical interventions to confront the so called 'refugee crisis'. For example, during a window period between 2015 and 2016 [only refugees with the correct documents from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were let in by FYR Macedonia](#) along the Balkan Route. The other migrants suddenly became stranded and left in a spatial and juridical limbo in Greece. However, this open window for refugees hailing from these countries did not last long, with [FYR Macedonia forcibly returning thousands of them](#) to Greece in March 2016, including Syrians and Afghans. This selective porosity is precisely what gave origin to [the infamous makeshift camp of Idomeni](#) where, from March to the end of May 2016, thousands of people-in-waiting resided, hoping for the legal or illegal possibility to cross the (walled) border.

Finally, if the walls are officially erected to block the movement of migrants, but unofficially kept somewhat porous, it is because they respond to a fundamental immunitarian imperative of the state, a state that is still conceived as an organic territorial body to be protected from the real or imagined contamination of alien bodies (on the immunitarian imperative in politics see Esposito, 2011; also Campbell, 2011). This imperative is reflected in a twofold objective on the part of some European state authorities: on the one hand, to aliment the constant fear of penetration of the national territorial body by 'nonbelonging' uncontrolled subjects (the majority of which, however, wish to go to Germany...); on the other, to reassure the citizens/electorate that the wall will represent the final and definitive device necessary to control precisely those uncontrolled mobilities. In this sense, the walls are the true materialization of a specific military biological rhetoric, based on references to invasion, flooding, contamination; a defensive line, protecting with its barbed wire the territorial body presented as constantly at risk. The interplay of opening and closing, of porosity and presumed immunity, is thus not a contradiction in these narratives of border politics.

On the contrary, this is precisely how walled borders are meant to work: by sealing off their internal population to reassure that no foreign body will invade their presumably homogeneous spaces, while at the same time keeping that very possibility open so that more migrants will try to go through and... more walls will have to be built and managed by increasing human and non-human surveillance assemblages.



*Makeshift camp Northern Serbia, January 2017
Source: author's collection*

Belgrade: January 25th, 2017. A freezing winter morning. More than a 1000 stranded unidentified 'migrants' dwell in [the makeshift camp created by occupying a few abandoned warehouses behind the bus station in the core of the Serbian capital](#). They live in dire conditions, exposed to extremely cold temperatures with almost no protection, other than blankets and random fires alimeted by whatever materials they collect in the areas surrounding the warehouses. They have constituted a sort of no man's land in the core of the Serbian capital. No water to wash, nor shelter to protect their sleep. Like ghosts coming from nowhere, they roam the nearby city center and the warehouses, with their faces darkened by the fumes and seemingly no purpose or direction, stuck behind the walls built by some of the countries bordering with Serbia. They refuse to be incorporated by the Serbian hospitality system and be registered in the related camps. They wait for something to happen that will take them to the other side of the Hungarian wall or the Croatian border. They speak of the existing 'holes' in the fence, and they fantasize of worlds on the other side of it. The networks of smugglers, the only ones who are able to penetrate the assemblage of human and non-human materialities making the wall, have attracted the refugees to Belgrade. And the promise of moving onward keeps them in this urban 'jungle' in such dire and precarious conditions. Many show the signs of failed attempts to pass the border; the broken legs, the scars, the frostbites. The walling dispositif is clearly marked on their bodies. But they still hope to go through and they know that it is possible; they know that this is precisely how walls work.

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