1. In the beginning there was "the Wall."

In the beginning there was the “Wall.” Meaning, the Berlin Wall. You talked about “the Wall” and people understood. There were other similar barriers of course, but up to 1989, it seemed to be the only one in the world. Even after that date, for a few years, historians continued to focus their attention on that symbol of the cold war, though there were many other walls, in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Gorizia and elsewhere. It was not only historians but the people in general who were obsessed with that symbol of a warless conflict, the barrier that had symbolically severed the world in two for such a long time. When the Wall fell, all walls seemed no longer to make sense and a wave of optimism spread throughout the Western world. All walls, all borders were about to come down: we started looking for the smallest cracks, we listened closely for the tiniest sound, we intensely scrutinized all walls for signs they were about to give. But the walls did not give. They became stronger and multiplied.

Not all walls are created fsdaaequal. If we consider the walls built in the recent period, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we find they often differ in terms of their function even while sharing many features. There are walls built as part of a ‘preemptive’ national defense strategy, like the Maginot Line, and walls built as an act of war against a known enemy, like the Atlantic Wall; for practical reasons but also as an ideological symbol, like Gorizia and Berlin; to separate communities that share the same national soil but differed in terms of their ethnic origin, religion, politics like Cyprus and Ireland, and in part the West Bank, or to protect wealthy populations against immigrants, like that between United States and Mexico; the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla; the berm between Morocco and Subsahara).

But while the reasons for these barriers vary, they have one element in common: the apparent 'neutrality' of the medium, a neutrality which through the years has been reinforced by the adoption of increasingly sophisticated technology, so that it is no longer force that 'repels' the 'intruders,' but simply the passive nature of the obstacle itself, which in time comes gradually to be perceived as a natural feature of the border landscape.

The decision to build walls is often a response to a perceived request of a community to be protected against a threat or an adversary. Sometimes the reason is not so much the reality of the threat but only the desire to reassure the community. What is often underestimated is the possibility of re-establishing a dialog, within a reasonable timeframe, with the society of those who have been excluded and the institutions that represent them.

In historical studies there have been a series of works on individual cases, such as Charles Mayer's well-known study on the Berlin Wall and the end of Eastern Germany, but it was only after the year 2000 that more general studies of physical barriers among States or within certain important cities were published. It is beyond the scope of the present work to provide a full survey of these studies, which exceed the disciplinary boundaries of historiography, therefore I will limit myself to the short list of titles provided in note.

1 Ch. S. Maier, Il crollo. La crisi del comunismo e la fine della Germania Est, Bologna, il Mulino, 1999.
2. The national enemy

The discussion of walls in contemporary history should begin, in my opinion, with two constructions that are only apparently similar: the Maginot Line and the Atlantic Wall. The Maginot Line began to be built towards the mid-1920s and cost about 5 billion 1930 franks. Was it truly necessary to defend France from the Germans? It began to be built long before Hitler’s rise, in a peaceful period, with the German army down to 100,000 units, while Germany was experiencing its most severe economic crisis since the country had been united. All this, however, was not enough to reassure the French, who worried about Germany’s potential hostile plans. The still fresh memory of the destructive power of the war was evidently stronger than that of the final victory. And even that victory had been unable to erase the memory of the humiliation of Sedan, in 1870, which had been the result of the German’s unexpected blitzkrieg. The Maginot Line gave the French that sense of security that even the harsh conditions imposed on Germany at Versailles had been unable to provide. The euphoria of the victory was evidently inferior to the trauma of the war itself, a trauma that had to be removed, even if it meant a colossal public expenditure. The Maginot Line is the greatest fortification ever built in Europe. It did not reinforce only the French border, it reinforced French identity making the French feel protected and secure. Built in the service of a democratic nation, it was presented almost as a manifesto of pacifism. It was described routinely described as an ‘impenetrable’ line in the literature and newspapers of the time, as the French military force in general was described in terms of military technology rather than the physical prowess of men, thus providing a more aseptic image of war. The construction a modern, ‘monumental’ army was part of the same public discourse that supported the construction of the Maginot Line, a discourse that imagined a war without men and without blood, as Joëlle Beurier notes, endowed with the aseptic character typical of modernity.

On the other hand, albeit its apparent specularity, the Atlantic Wall was in many ways the opposite of the Maginot Line. The German’s defensive line was built when the war was already started, and started by Germany. It had a similar defensive purpose but it was obviously an aggressive act. Built between March 1942 and the end of 1943, the Atlantic Wall was meant to stop the Allied counteroffensive. While this was its specific purpose it was presented to the German people in more general ways that were consistent with ideology of the regime. The Atlantic Wall was the defense of the fortress of Europe, manned by the III Reich, against the attack of Judaism and Bolshevism. Unlike the Maginot Line, the enemies were known and the fortification was designed to make them bleed. Its construction was part of a discourse centered on the notion of a New Europe based on military might.

3. Ideological Enemies joined by the ‘Wall’ The West and the Wall

The day the construction of the Berlin Wall began, 250,000 people gathered in front of the Town building in Schöneberg to demand that the nations whose armies were in Berlin put pressure on


4 J. Beurier, Immaginari della linea Maginot, in Muri in età contemporanea, cit., pp. 36-40.

5 Ivi, pp. 34-36.

6 C. Quétel, Muri, cit., pp. 51-52.
Eastern authorities to stop the construction. Western newspapers too attacked the horror that was rising, brick after brick, under the eyes of the Western world. Western leaders firmly rejected all the reasons adduced by the Eastern bloc. Ideological tension was at its peak and the Cold War had found a new and eloquent symbol. In reality, in spite of all this turmoil, Western governments “had no intention or risking another world war because of the building of a wall. All agreed that, in order to survive, the German Democratic Republic had to stop the escape of millions of citizens. It the solution was a wall, wall it was.”

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy, two years after the construction of the Wall, on June 26, 1963, famously proclaimed himself to be a Berliner he was probably sincere. However, personal feelings and realpolitik are two different things. While on July 24, 1963, the US presented a firm protest, in Moscow, the US ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, noted that the US and Western Germany would derive ‘advantages in the long term’ if Eastern Germans were prevented from leaving their country. In the meeting with European ambassadors held in Paris on August 9, 1961, Secretary of State Dean Rusk also privately observed that the Wall was not a threat to the vital interests of the West and that indeed it would lead to a more stable situation, by removing one of the main causes of tensions with the Soviet Union. The necessity to establish normal relations between the two German nations became increasingly a conviction common to the various governments involved. This was particularly true of the Western German government. To help his Ostpolitik, the social-democrat Willy Brandt stopped using expressions like ‘the wall of shame.’ The premise of the Constitution of Bonn, which spoke of a united Germany, was increasingly interpreted in ideal rather than concrete terms; re-unification was no longer an objective and political dissidents in Eastern Germany were no longer celebrated as heroic figures. On the other hand, the political sacrifices imposed by the Realpolitik had little influence on the internal policy in Eastern Germany and indeed helped it isolate dissidents. The change began, many decades later, when the risk of a new hemorrhage of citizens became once again concrete for Eastern Germany. The examples of other Eastern countries, Poland foremost amongst them, had given rise to new expectations in many of its citizens. But it was the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria, decided by the Hungarian government on August 23, 1989, that spurred a new massive wave of exits from the DDR and it was this fact that conditioned the policy of the government. Egon Krenz, who had replaced the old Honecker as leader of the communist party, was not a convinced reformer. Once again the decisive input came from Moscow but in this case it went opposite to those given to his predecessors. In the past Soviet leaders had ‘helped’ Eastern-German ones find the ideologically ‘correct’ solution. This time Krenz discovered reform after a trip to Moscow and a meeting with Gorbachev. Up to then, not only there had been no significant reforms but the media of Eastern Germany had even avoided covering Gorbachev’s glasnost, while the rest of the world was debating it. A reform, albeit a weak one, was necessary to respond to the pressure of the citizens who intended to escape, but also of those who demonstrated every Monday in Leipzig and other towns shouting ‘we’ll stay here.’

Just as in the past, in spite of official indignation, the West had done little against the construction of the Wall, this time it had a limited on its fall. On November 1989, Helmut Kohl visited Poland and offered reassurance that the 1970 borders on the Oder-Neisse line would remain. Years later, in 2010, Helmut Kohl himself stated: ‘nobody any longer believed in the possibility that the Wall would fall and

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7 P. Schneider, C’era una volta il Muro, in “Corriere della Sera”, 7 agosto 2011, p. 31.
9 According to Rusk it was important «to draw a line between what was vital to our interests and [what was] important but not worth risking the precipitation of armed conflict». Ivi. Document 9.
11 Ch. S. Maier, Il crollo, cit., pp. 207 ss.
in a re-unification. In Eastern Germany, too, however, the free circulation of people through the border took many political leaders by surprise. The Central Committee of the Eastern Germany communist party had decided to open the border in principle, but it still had not decided the how and when of it. The one who actually declared the border open was a spokesman of the government who had not even participated to the meeting of the Central Committee. What happened was simply that during a frenetic news conference, in response to a question by a journalist the spokesman imprudently stated that the border could be considered open starting from that moment. A few minutes later, thousands of people started climbing over the Wall, welcomed by the citizens of West Berlin.

The wall that had been so carefully built, controlled, on which so much money had been invested, was knocked down politically before it was knocked down materially, and all due to a misunderstanding. The first mattock blows were dealt in the night of November 9 from the Western side. The official demolition began three days later. However, those who had worked for decades to prevent the Wall from severing all ties between the two German nations, was not there to knock it down.

In this new climate, even an ‘older’ wall, the one of Gorizia no longer seemed to make sense. The border town of Gorizia had been returned to Italy in 1947, but several peripheral neighborhoods had been assigned to Yugoslavia, the urban area that was later named Nova Gorica. In this Berlin in 16mo, the old railway station “Transalpina” functioned as a little Magdeburg gate. Gorizia was not so much a city split in two, as much as two adjacent cities whose urban layout radicalized an ethnic division which, until the mid-nineteenth century, had been ignored. The ideological emphasis with which the division had been established was well represented by the red star on the roof of the Transalpina station with the words in Slovenian: ‘We are building socialism.’ This sort of socialist ‘men at work’ sign had marked the beginning of the edification of Nova Gorica. The end of the cold war led eventually to the barriers being removed but the process occurred rather slowly between 1990 and 2004, due to the difficulty of reconciling the divided memories about the period of World War I.

4. Divided identities: Ireland and Cyprus

The first wall, the Berlin Wall, was also the one who had seemed the strongest. Other walls seemed more fragile, temporary solutions adopted in the face of emergences, yet they ended up enduring and becoming part of the urban landscape. Once a physical barrier is constructed it become harder to solve the contrast that engendered it. Even when a truce, a dialog, or even a definitive reconciliation is achieved, the scar of the division remains. A scar that divides people, one generation after the other, including those that were not yet born when the walls were erected to partition their world. The walls sediment mistrust and misunderstandings and make pacifying processes more difficult.

The case of Northern Ireland is an clear example of this. The barriers erected in Belfast, in Derry and Portadown to separate Catholics from Protestants were called ‘peacelines.’ The ‘troubles’ that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s led the authorities to establish barriers that would make contact between the two communities more difficult. The barriers were up to 5 km. long and consisted of blocks made of iron, bricks, steel up to 7.5 m. high. In 1994, there was a first ‘armistice’ between the two sides, followed by the agreements of 1998, which put an end to thirty years of bloody confrontation. At this point, one would have thought that those barriers would come down, albeit slowly and cautiously. Instead, the barriers grew from 18 in 1990 to 40 in 2002. In Belfast, in particular, they went from 12 in 1998 to 17 in 2006. Not only did the barriers multiply, also the threats, the

13 P. Schneider, C’era una volta il Muro, ivi, 7 agosto 2011, p. 33.
14 Ch. Maier, Il crollo, cit., pp. 249-250.
16 K. Škrlj, All’ombra del Muro di Berlino. (De)costruendo la memoria di una città divisa a Gorizia e Nova Gorica, in Muri in età contemporanea, cit., pp. 52-53.
violence, the clashes continued, albeit in a more sporadic fashion,\textsuperscript{18} almost as if to demonstrate that a true reconciliation was impossible. Even they younger generations, who have no direct memory of the old grievances, share the attitude of their elders: ‘Prejudice on both sides was so marked among the 18 to 25 – years old that 68% had never had a meaningful conversation with anyone from the other community.’\textsuperscript{19} Everything is separated: the houses, the job market, the health care system. The divisions cut through the whole society and on both sides the people perceive themselves as victims and justify they violence of their side as retaliation for past aggressions. According to Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, inside the city the apparent normality of politics hides a fierce competition for resources that is fueled by the division itself.\textsuperscript{20} In 2008, the possibility of removing the barriers was discussed but no decision was reached. It is generally believed that the removal of the peacelines would lead to an increase in violence, due to greater contact between the two sides. In general, authors who have discussed the situation in Northern-Ireland are pessimistic about the barriers being removed.\textsuperscript{21}

To think that in 1969, when one of the first barriers in Belfast was being built, Ian Freeland, an optimistic commander of the British Army predicted: «The peace line will be a very, very temporary affair. We will not have a Berlin wall or anything like that in this city»\textsuperscript{22}. The future proved otherwise.

The problem of ensuring the representation of the Turkish minority in Cyprus rose immediately when the island became independent from Great Britain, in 1960. The solution was what the UN mediator in Cyprus, Galo Plaza, called ‘a constitutional oddity.’ It consisted in reserving to it a disproportionate amount of seats in the state administration, police and army.\textsuperscript{23} The problems between the two sides began already three years after the independence, with the first massacres.\textsuperscript{24} The resignations of the Turkish-Cypriot ministers and the creation of a prevalently Turkish-Cypriot area in the North-East.\textsuperscript{25} The vice-president of Cyprus, the Turkish-Cypriot Fazil Kutchuk declared the Constitution illegitimate in 1963. The statement had been agreed upon with the Turkish minister of foreign affairs, Feridun Cemal Erkin, who argued that the best solution was to separate the island into two parts under Greek and Turkish influence.\textsuperscript{26} As Alexis Rappas notes, this led to the de facto division of the country in 1974, when in response to an attempted take-over by the Greek-Cypriot right-wing, which had strong ties with the Greece of the colonels, Turkish invaded the country with 40,000 soldiers who occupied 38% of the territory.\textsuperscript{27} The division between the two communities was thus further crystallized as Greek-Cypriots fled from the invasion towards the southern part of the island. The Turkish retired after the UN and its Security Council passed the resolution of December 31, 1974, but it was too late to go back: in February 13, 1975, the Turkish side proclaimed the creation of the ‘Turkish Federate State of Cyprus.’ The radicalization of the ethnic division continued with the deportation of Greek-Cypriots from the northern part of the island, who were replaced by about 60,000 Turkish colonists, mostly from Anatolia.

In the negotiations the division was accepted by international authorities and sanctioned by the famous ‘green line’ drawn on a map. Thus Nicosia, or Lefkosia, depending on the language, became the juncture between the two communities, the symbol of a division resulting from tensions that had never
been solved.
The fact that Greece and Turkey are both members of the NATO, the numerous UN resolutions, the presence of a UN peacekeeping force, the efforts of the EU, which treats Cyprus a single nation without recognizing the self-proclaimed Turkish-Cypriot republic, all push in the direction of a reunification. At the same time, one has the impression that a division between the two sides, including the ‘green line,’ is considered by international diplomacy the most rational solution, at least for the time being.
The profound division between the two communities is also reinforced by the larger contrast between Greece and Turkey. 28 A general skepticism seems to characterize the comments of experts towards the possibility of actually achieving a united and peaceful Cyprus, a mood summarized by the title of a study of a few years ago, which saw the island as ‘An Hostage of History.’ 29 In general, Cyprus seems to function as a buffer between Greece and Turkey. The dependence of the two ethnic groups on their mother-nations makes it hard to imagine a reunification. The meeting organized in 1999 by the general secretary of the UN in Buergenstock, Switzerland, which called for a single nation with two autonomous regions seemed promising, but in the following referenda, while the agreement was approved 65% of the voting Turkish-Cypriots, it was rejected by the Greek-Cypriot side, with 75% of the votes. Today, we continue to have a complicated situation which was not resolved even when Cyprus joined the EU, in 2004. On March 9, 2007, the bulldozers of the Greek-Cypriot government proceed to knock down part of the wall in Nicosia but a large part still stands. In the meantime, the Turkish side has also shown good will by opening five gates; people can go freely across the line, but the two communities still face problems notwithstanding the prospect of Turkey joining the EU and the years gone by since the attempted Greek coup and the Turkish invasion. Notwithstanding the efforts by the general secretary of the UN and meetings between the two leaders, Demetris Christofias and Dervish Eroglu, in 2011, one has to agree with “The Economist”: ‘The “green line” is coming to look like permanent partition.’ 30

5. The African adversary

The enthusiasm for the fall of the Berlin Wall and the satisfaction for Gorizia was accompanied by a perception that the EU had played a fundamental role: not only Western Europe was no longer opposed to Eastern Europe, the EU itself was expanding to the point that political Europe was increasingly approaching the confines of geographical Europe. It was the EU that baptized the new pacified communities which had been divided by the cold war.

Yet, less than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU, the direct descendant of the European Community that had celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall as a victory of European values and civilization, financially contributed to two more barriers: the fences around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which established a new symbolical division, a new symbolical scar in a land that was physically Africa and politically Europe. 31 This, as it is known, was response to the problem posed by immigration. The system used for the barriers was called SIVE, the System of Integrated External Surveillance, described in an official report of the EU Council. 32 An Agency for the management of borders was also created. 33 The ‘adversary’ the EU was facing was initially mainly represented by North-Africans. An army of desperate people attracted by the promise of a European Eldorado, who in time was joined also by

people from the sub-Saharan regions and Algeria, whose borders with Morocco are easily passable. 34. Maghrebians, sub-Saharan migrants, all had to face the 3 to 6 m. high fences of Ceuta and Melilla. Up until recently, these people continued to reside near the fence, living for months in the forest of Bel Younec, near Ceuta, or near mount Gourogou, not far from Melilla, in the hope of finding the right opportunity, the loophole through the system, that would allow them to get through.

The apparent neutrality of these barriers, based on the use of advanced technology, though reinforced by armed vigilance, and the years of Euro-African meetings, conferences, interactions between institutions and organizations, were not enough to prevent a tragic clash a few years ago. On September 28, 2005, tired of their long wait in bad weather conditions, 600 people camping near the barriers tried to scale the fence using improvised ladders. Few managed to get over: the Moroccan police and the Spanish border patrol reacted violently: fifteen people were killed and a large number wounded. 35

Moroccan and Spanish authorities accused one another of being responsible for the shootout. The captured illegal immigrants were arrested and deported into the desert. 36 Realizing the difficulty of going over the fences, some people resorted to more extreme measures. A few months later, a child was discovered inside a suitcase at an airport checkpoint in Ceuta.

Rather than stopping at the obvious condemnation of the excessive use of force, one can also pose a seemingly cynical question concerning the best use of financial resources. The EU contributed about 30 million euros to the barriers. It is still not clear how much the Spanish and Moroccan government have spent, but it must have been at least how much the EU spent To this we must add the cost of repatriating illegal immigrants by airplane faced by the Moroccan government (in 2006, 14 flights, each costing 200,000 euros). 37 All these sums were spent to forcefully repel the unarmed people trying to enter Europe. One can legitimately suspect that if these sums had been used more wisely they would have produced better results.

The EU has evident contradictions. On the one hand, it has kept Turkey in waiting line for Europe for years. On the other hand, it has given in to the temptation of taking measures against Turkish illegal immigrants. Some government also fall victim of the ‘wall building’ syndrome. An example is the barrier between Greece and Turkey raised to deal with an increase in entries of 369% in 2010, according to the Greek government, 38 though obviously, especially with the current crisis, Greece is not the ultimate destination of the Turks crossing the border. Greek government first thought of building a wall along the river Evros, but was stopped by the objections of the EU. It then thought of building instead a ditch alongside the river, 120 km. long, 30 m. wide, and 7 m. deep. This would have allowed it to find a way about the objections of the EU and cut expenses. Yet, after the EU stopped objecting, the original project was the one implemented though on a smaller scale than initially planned. The barrier consists of twelve kilometers of shiny metal, poles, nails, cement, blades and barbed wire..., four meters high, at a cost of four million euros. 39 An expenditure that was evidently deemed necessary to welcome Turkey inside the Union.

These barriers are generally turned South even when they are erected between northern countries. In August 2011, the Danish government discussed a project that entailed building a barrier on the border with Germany. The center-right wing government of Copenhagen, pressed by the rightwing of the Popular Party, considered the possibility of building a barrier consisting of surveillance places, walls...
and other security measures on the border with Germany. The purpose was that of reducing the entrance of criminals from Eastern Europe. Behind this practical motivation, lay the less explicit xenophobic, euro-skeptic and anti-muslim tendencies of the country. The building of the barrier went of course against the spirit of the Schengen treatise and was promptly condemned by the German government. In the end, the Danish government decided not to go ahead with the project for the time being, but who knows whether one day the toll booths on the highway will be replaced by a steel and concrete barrier.

6. Calming conflict, fueling conflict: the wall in the West Bank

The almost 730 km. wall built in the West Bank, had the official purpose of reducing the possibility of infiltrations and attacks by the more radical Palestinians. It certainly has not served to solve the conflict and bring peace. The construction of the wall began in 2002 and continued in the following years, according to phases that have been well-described by Alon Confino and Meir Wigoder – sparking a lively debate non only in the Israeli public opinion and judicial system, but also in international institutions. In response to the wall there was a first UN resolution on October 21, 2003, a ruling of the International Court of Justice of July 9, 2004, and a second UN resolution, based on this ruling, on July 21, 2004. The relative speed of the international response was a consequence of both the objectively dramatic situation engendered by the building of the wall but also of the indignation of international public opinion. The wall isolated tens of thousands of people, curtailed their freedom of movement, subtracted vital resources, diminished their economic possibilities. In Israel, however, the population is mostly in favor of the wall. Though the wall was built under the Ariel Sharon government, the proposal dates back to the time of the Labour government of Ehud Barak. The reason for building the wall is the idea that it would help controlling entrances in Israeli territory and reduce terrorist attacks against the civilian population. Indeed, since 2003 attacks on Israeli soil have diminished drastically. On the other hand, the wall has exacerbated the hostility of the Palestinian population, due to the deterioration of their everyday life, of health care, of schools, suffering increased by the fact that the wall has been deliberately designed so as to prevent their access to most of the wells and water basins. As for the decrease in attacks on the Israeli civil population, the Palestinian authorities maintain that the decrease is due to the influence of moderate Palestinians on the more radical wing. The different perception of the wall from the two sides is semantically translated into its different definitions: ‘security wall’ for the Israeli, ‘separation wall’ for the Palestinians. Some scholars, journalists and international observers have equated the building of the wall to the establishing of a de facto apartheid system. Indeed, the route followed by the wall raises doubts on the claim that its sole purpose is to contain anti-Israeli activities. According to certain representatives of NGOs, ‘the Wall does not separate Israel from Palestine and does not protect it from terrorist attacks, otherwise it would have been built on the 1967

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border with the West Bank, instead it goes inside the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, irreparably separating the inhabitants of villages from the fields they cultivate, the fields from their water sources, agricultural centers from the markets, villages from main towns and other urban centers, children from their schools, workers from their workplaces, patients from their hospitals, families from their relatives... the Wall... running inside the West Bank like a giant snake, isolates Palestinian towns and annexes to Israel more than 50% of their land with all the Jewish colonies. 46 Seen from this perspective, the wall seems consistent with the old project of annexing to Israel 'the maximum of land with the least of Arabs,' which helps Israel avoid having to offer services to the territories, leaving the job to the international community, and drastically reducing the need for direct political and military control. The wall in the West Bank is not the only permanent barrier between Israel and the Arabs: there is 'the Western one towards Israel, that shifts the border of 1967 many kilometers towards the interior of the West Bank, the eastern one, parallel to the first, but on the side of the West Bank, which will annex to Israel the entire valley of Jordan.' A barrier also surrounds the Arab part of Jerusalem, the disputed capital, which until 1987 enjoyed a relatively high level of integration. This separation makes it more difficult to return to the cohabitation of the past and more in general overcome the impasse in which the two communities are locked. 47 Territorial continuity is interrupted for the Palestinians also in Bethlehem and in the center of Hebron. Then there is the wall surrounding the Gaza strip which connects with the barrier manned by Egypt, 48 isolating the Palestinian territory. Then there are the walls that completely surround towns like Qalilya or Jericho, 'transformed into closed ghettos, with a single entrance controlled by Israeli soldiers.' 49 The walls seem thus to predetermine the borders of any possible future Palestinian State, subtracting land from it, parceling what is left, denying it any possibility of territorial continuity. 50 The walls, the controls, the ghettos may bring benefits to Israel but reinforce and sediment the motivations behind the conflict. 51

7. Technology in the service of the El Dorado

Sensors and photoelectric technology are part of the US system to control its border with Mexico. The mixed system based on direct vigilance and technology is constantly being developed. The intensification of armed vigilance has been gradual 52 and has followed the various phases in the history of border relations between the US and Mexico. 53 There have been various security projects, from “Gatekeeper” to “Hold the line.” 54 Recent systems involve the use of ‘video cameras, seismographs, observation turrets, powerful floodlights, and barbed wire;’ 55 current projects entail extending the barrier all the way into the ocean. 56 This development has been accompanied by harsher laws, larger budgets, an increase in the number of agencies devoted to vigilance immigration; the adoption of advanced surveillance technologies goes hand in hand with laws reinforcing prevention and the work of institutions in charge of national security. 57 The official motivations behind the wall are the control of illegal immigrants, the fight against crime and drugs. In this case too, criticism on an international level is balanced by a substantial internal approval, fueled by the anti-Mexican prejudices of a large part of the US population and helped by the relatively non-violent way in which this form of prevention

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46 S. Chiarini e G. Lannutti, Prefazione, in Perigon (Rete delle Ong palestinesi) (a cura di), Stop the wall, Alegre, Roma, 2006, p. 5 (trans. mine).
47 M. Allegra, Divisa, contesa, ineguale: Gerusalemme e la sua area metropolitana, ivi, pp. 98-108.
49 S. Chiarini e G. Lannutti, Prefazione, cit., p. 6.
52 T. J. Dunn, The Militarization, cit.
54 P. Andreas, Border Games, cit., p. 4.
55 Ch. Elia, Un muro tra due mondi, in “peacereporter.it”, 12 dicembre 2003.
57 P. Andreas, Border Games, cit., p. 4.
functions. The barrier does not currently extend along the entire border. If the Obama administration decides to do it, the entire border could be sealed off at an expense of 6.7 billion dollars.

The passing of tougher legislation and an increase in surveillance personnel is accompanied by the development of technological means that will make the contrast less physical, more ‘neutral.’ This is typical of more recent generation of barriers, adopted also in the West Bank and around Ceuta and Melilla. Sensors, floodlights, increased height, walls that cannot be perforated, all these advances serve to reduce the need for active physical violence. The contrast remains but it becomes less obvious and less physical. Sensors and walls work silently without stirring public opinion, like violent clashes do. The measures taken over time have indeed succeeded in reducing the number of Mexicans entering the States illegally. This is shown for example by the number of people stopped in one of the key points of the border, El Paso: 30,312 people stopped in 2008, only 7,777 in 2009. However there are still victims. In June 2011, a man and a boy were killed leading the Mexican president Felipe Calderon to ask that the US border patrol agents be taken to court.

Every barrier sends two messages: it reassures those who are inside and it intimidates those who wish to enter. The first message is usually successful, whereas the second one, the one addressed to the adversary, often fails to achieve its purpose. Notwithstanding the increasing difficulty of the journey, the hope of a better life proves often to be stronger, even when the economic crisis is plaguing the imagined Eldorado. Along the border of the US and Mexico, along the borders surrounding Ceuta and Melilla, people scrutinize the barriers, looking for a loophole, hoping to seize the right moment. Walls have a long history and the most recent adversary, the immigrant, faces a heritage of arguments that have historically supported their construction. The most recent people against whom walls are erected are not simply would-be immigrants, they are a religious, cultural, social, national, and, obviously ethnic adversary. Any advantage that a controlled immigration might bring is ignored in the face of an irrational preemptive condemnation that predates any actual wave of immigration. Yet, while traditional wars can always be dated; while even the cold war had a beginning and an end, though the exact dates vary based on the interpretation, phenomena like religious diversity, the existence of different ethnic groups with their different cultures, customs and habits, the existence of migratory patterns, all these are such an enduring feature of human history that it seems truly extraordinary that one may think of dealing with these phenomena by erecting barriers.

8. The success of walls

What the Maginot Line, the Berlin Wall, the wall in the West Bank, the fences of Ceuta and Melilla and the barriers between the US and Mexico have in common is the effort to provide deterrence through a passive physical medium rather than through open violence. Impassability and neutrality are two increasingly prominent aspects of modern walls which perform the three functions for which walls are built: separating, protecting, containing. These three functions are obviously performed simultaneously. The separation serves to protect the inner population and to contain the flow of immigrants. Protection requires containment. Immigration is therefore comparable to an armed threat and, notwithstanding our millenary experience of this phenomenon, we have often resorted to an ancient remedy.

Differences among walls also lead to semantic slippages of the concept of fatherland: from the national fatherland of the Maginot Line, to the ideological fatherland of Berlin and Gorizia, from the rebirth of the nationalist fatherland in Cyprus, to the religiously reinforced fatherlands in Belfast, from the defense of a life-style symbolized by the fences erected in Ceuta and Melilla and on the US-Mexican border, to the mixture of national and religious fatherland that the wall of the West Bank protects, while ensnaring precious water resources. While these defense are erected to protect the national spirit, the enemy that is besieging communities seems increasingly to be the poverty of the world beyond the barrier. Yet while this activity continues unceasingly, the ruling classes of the protected communities

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58 G Olimpio, Muro virtuale e pattuglie indiane, cit., p. 19.
59 Messico, sale la tensione con gli Stati Uniti per un’altra sparatoria al confine, in “peacereporter.net”, 23 giugno 2011.
seem to have and less and less to offer the communities themselves, and therefore less and less to defend. The economic crisis in Europe and the US, and the parallel development of other industrial, financial, and commercial powers, make these barriers seem the image of a bygone time, obsolete in a world that is increasingly integrated in terms of communication and increasingly disintegrated in terms of social and economic relations. All these Walls are a paradoxical presence in an age in which the overused term ‘globalization’ underlines the vacuity and fragility of physical borders.

The need for protection that the national state is often unable to offer in any other terms than a defense against a real or imagined adversary, is fueled the growing impoverishment of the middle and lower classes, the lack of public safety, sometimes only imagined, sometimes resulting from cuts to the police budget. The internal insecurity is projected out an external world, which is basically unknown yet despised and feared. Thus the very political forces that are largely responsible for the internal problems and the growing social inequality strive to regain public consensus through measures directed against the external adversary.

New walls continue to be planned. Some plans are actually carried out, others are not, yet even the sole planning seems at times enough. The barrage of Gibuti or the separations in Sao Paulo, Brazil, are now firmly established. Morocco, not only participates in the management of the barriers of Ceuta and Melilila, but has its own experience in terms of walls. In the dispute over Western Sahara that arose when Spain abandoned the area in 1975, the clash with the Fronte Polisario led to the construction of six 2500 km. long sand barriers in an area already occupied by the Moroccan troops. Further south in Africa, in Botswana a 500 km. long fence has been erected, officially to protect livestock (Botswana is one of the greatest exporters of beef), but in reality also to separate the ‘Switzerland of Africa’ from its poor neighbor Zimbabwe. More recently, Saudi Arabia has completed the construction, started in 2004, of a 1800 km. long barrier of sand and filled-up metal tubes on its border with Yemen. In 2006, it also tried to build another barrier with Iraq, arousing the negative reaction of the US, since it suggested a lack of faith in the ability of the anti-Iraq coalition of ensuring the safety of the border. Nevertheless, the barrier is now being erected: an expensive combination of barbed ware and infrared sensors, which rich Saudi Arabia has no problem funding.

India is also reinforcing its borders with a 4100 km. long barrier on its border with Bangladesh and a 2240 km. long barrier with Pakistan. In turn, Pakistan is erecting a 700 km. long barrier of reinforced concrete, iron and rocks on its border with Iran. In Asia, a line of barbed wire and steel runs for 240 km. along the famous 38th parallel, the border between the two Koreas, which three years of war, from 1950 to 1953, left unaltered. Since the war the line has been constantly reinforced and is currently one of the most militarized barriers in the world.

The recent conflict between Iraq and Kuwait has given rise to a 215 km. long barrier made of ramparts and metallic fence. The dismemberment of the USSR also left a legacy of tensions among the ex-members and now the relation between Uzbekistan and Kirghizistan is made more difficult by a 993 km. long fence.

Other walls are being planned: a 900 km. long steel, concrete and barbed wire barrier is being built between Turkey and Syria is being built; another 240 km. long barrier of metal wire and barbed wire is finally being built between Israel and Egypt now that the US have finally withdrawn their opposition; between Morocco and Algeria there are plans for a barrier ranging from 70 to 450 kilometers, with control towers and videocameras.

In Europe, Bulgaria too is preparing to welcome Turkey with a 107 km. long wall. According to newspapers, but the figures seem reasonable, since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, more than 8000 km. of barriers have been built.

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61 Ch. Elia, Un muro nel deserto, ivi, 26 dicembre 2003.


63 I muri nel mondo/operativi; I muri nel mondo/in costruzione, in “la Repubblica”, 1 dicembre 2013, pp. 32-33.

64 Ivi.

65 Quanti muri nel mondo, cit.
In a world where many borders have been eliminated or made less rigid, those that remain seem often incapable of containing the flow of people. The global dimension of economic, social and communication phenomena is in contradiction with the effort to increase the physical barriers between states. The truth is that the global dimension has not only failed to dissolve international tensions, it has also, as a reaction, often reinforced national and ethnic identities, fueling prejudices and contrasts. The construction of barriers is often condemned by third parties, but when these third parties have to deal with their own borders, the previously condemned barriers are justified as legitimate defense. Both the walls that result from military contrasts and those meant to manage migratory flows evidence the weakness of the political sphere, which seems unable to find any other effective solution. While walls may serve in the short term to limit conflicts or control an area, over the long term the radicate contrasts, sediment contrasting identities and preventing any durable solution to these complex situations. They seem to be more a quick-fix than a real solution, certifying the impotence of the political sphere to manage conflicts with long-term policies. Based on the UN demographic predictions, which foresees a decrease of the European population from 734 million in 2015 to 691 in 2050 and a massive growth in Africa, from 1153 million to 1998 million, one wonders to what extent these barriers will function, whether they will continue to keep poverty at bay and guarantee the current life-style of the richer areas, or whether it will be necessary to find new strategies to deal with the demographic growth in these countries.

Once there was the Wall, so there were other lesser known ones. Now we have many walls, which continue to rise, to the point that it becomes even difficult to remember their names. They say that the Great Wall is the only human artifact visible from the moon. In the future, it may be joined by many other lines that will scar the face of the Earth as a reminder that all too often politics is not the art of the possible, but only of the quickest shortcut.