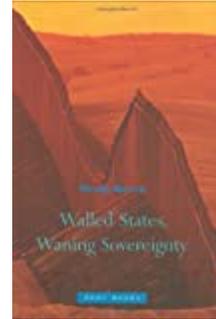




Wendy Brown. *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty.* London: The MIT Press, 2010. 167 S. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-935408-08-6.



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W. Brown: *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*

From fencing along the Greek-Turkish border to calls to construct a wall along the entire US-Mexico 3,100-kilometer-stretch, walling of national borders has become a prominent topic in political debates across the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Certainly, the walling rhetoric, if not the actual constructions themselves, reverberates well with nationalistic psychosis against migrant and security threats. Seemingly then, walls serve multiple purposes. They are not simply prohibitive — as means to stop and filter out unwanted invaders; walls are also productive — they are means to fortify the national identity and provide security and defense. In Wendy Brown's words, walls "confer magical protection against powers incomprehensibly large, corrosive, and humanely uncontrolled"; they produce not the future of an illusion, but the illusion of a future aligned with an idealized past (p. 133).

Yet, contrary to their purported purposes, these new walls have another level of signification: they showcase the waning of state sovereignty. To quote Brown again, "it is the weakening of state sovereignty; the detachment of sovereignty from the nation-state, that is gen-

erating much of the frenzy of nation-state wall building today. Rather than resurgent expressions of nation-state sovereignty, the new walls are icons of its erosion" (p. 24). That massive fortifications at the border signify the dissolution of state power is in fact part of Brown's central claim in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. In a neo-liberal, globalized world the state is losing its grasp over and association with the key features of sovereignty: i.e. its claim to supremacy, perpetuity, decisionism, absoluteness and completeness, nontransferability, specified jurisdiction (p. 22). Transnational flows of people and ideas, and the primacy of capital have undermined traditional state supremacy. Walling projects display the state's inability to deploy the aforementioned attributes of sovereignty. As Brown confers, "one irony of late modern walling is that a structure taken to mark and enforce an inside/outside distinction — a boundary between 'us' and 'them' — appears as precisely the opposite when grasped as part of a complex and eroding lines between the police and military, subject and patria, vigilante and state, law and lawlessness" (pp. 22-25).

Despite different historical, sociological, political,

and economic contexts, Brown also makes a theoretical proposition that there is a universal commonality to wall building in the past fifty years, with key distinguishable characteristics present globally, in all wall-building projects â i.e., the new walls are a single historical phenomenon (pp. 26-7). Among others, the most prominent characteristics of this phenomenon include: a) similar domestic pressures exerted by processes of globalization; b) similar counter effects â walls donât âworkâ in the sense of resolving or substantially reducing the conflicts, hostilities, and traffic at which they officially aim; c) common linkages to circuitries â technology, subcontracting, graffiti, etc. (p. 27). The âparadoxical splitting of fencing and sovereigntyâ in the past fifty years is borne out of disaggregate phenomena â while in the past fencing was a means to delineate and mark the territorial presence of sovereignty (fencing prior to the state); nowadays fencing is used as a last attempt of the state to secure and delimit its territory and population (fencing after the state) (p. 71).

Much of the aforementioned claims are developed in chapter 1 of the book as means to define sovereignty, and to explicate the paradox of walling and the extent to which it showcases the waning sovereignty of the state. The rest of the book turns to theoretical formulation of the link between sovereignty and enclosure and the coming apart of sovereignty and nation-states (chapter 2); followed by a discussion of the ways in which walls address the mutually imbricated threats to the identity and powers of states and subjects (chapters 3 and 4). Brownâs empirical evidence focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian and US-Mexico border walls.

In addition to theorizing walls as the icon of waning state sovereignty, a major theme in the book is that the desegregation between the nation-state and sovereignty has led to the migration of the key characteristics of sovereignty to the realm of âunrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned political violence. Neither capital nor God-sanctioned violence bows to another power; both are indifferent to and/tacticalize domestic as well as international lawâ (p. 23). Although Brown does not see capital as replacing the state and fully occupying the seat of sovereignty, it has nevertheless become âalmighty, limitless, and uncontrollableâ (p. 66)

Although many of Brownâs theoretical claims could appear plausible, there is little historical or empirical evidence to support the timing of her argument or the claim to universal validity. It is unclear, for example, how the combination of globalization, neoliberal politics, and

walling explicate a particular waning of sovereignty in the past fifty or so years. From a historical perspective, how is this waning of sovereignty different from comparable attempts at curbing globalization effects and migratory flows in the late 19th and early 20th century? How to interpret previous attempts by the state to curb migratory flows: Would, for example, the US Chinese Exclusionary Acts of the late 19th century qualify as a sign of waning US sovereignty? Similarly, the long historical and political tradition that precedes the establishment of the Israeli-Palestinian wall, make the latter an improbable paradigmatic case for walling in the past fifty years. In more recent times, waning of state sovereignty will also find little support if considering the massive deportationsâ record of the latest US administration or the fact that more and more states now choose to deal with external threats through various means that are not limited to the construction of physical walls at territorial borders (consider for example deportation facilities outside territorial borders, sea and air check points, etc.). State sovereignty in other words has expanded beyond its territorial limits and can produce barriers and boundaries of the inside-outside distinction everywhere.

The latter point brings another tension in Brownâs work â i.e. her theoretical conceptualization of sovereignty. While drawing masterfully on absolutist theories of sovereignty starting from Bodin and Hobbes, Brown undertheorizes another aspect of sovereignty â itâs productivity. As Brown states throughout the book, sovereignty is âsomething of a fiction.â Yet she never considers the fact that in order to be tangible and sustainable, this fiction needs to be productive, inventive of new realities, meanings, and identities. To be fair, and as mentioned earlier, Brown does touch upon the aspect of productivity â e.g. her discussion of walls as productive of new subjectivities and new identities. Yet, perhaps where Brown sees inefficiency and lack of control (i.e. walls donât âworkâ), one can instead delineate a new form of control. The latter stems from the capacity to structure and subordinate these new subjectivities to new frames or different categories. The proposed walling of the Greek-Turkish border is telling in this respect: the project stalled when the European Union exerted (sovereign) authority over a member state and re-designed the type of actions to be conducted at the border. Arguably as a new sovereign entity, the European Union engenders a new fiction that binds its members together. Coincidentally, while (new) borders and territories remain part of the fiction, walling is not a key element in this sovereign narrative.

In spite their limitations, *Walled States Waning Sovereignty*'s provocative and bold arguments are sure to appeal to those interested in theoretical formulations of sovereignty and questions concerning neoliberalism, capital, state of exception and transnationalism.

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