

Walls

Hanna Mamzer

What is it about the word “wall” that makes it so fiendishly compelling and reflection on the theme so important to work on contemporary life in the humanities? The freighted and multivalent term crosses disciplines freely, joining currents emerging from various scholarly fields as well as some from the considerations of non-academic thinkers. “Walls” appear in all areas of the humanities. That fact in itself may be viewed as reason enough to reflect on its universality. It is a kind of “tool” that can be used for a variety of purposes, because after all, the raising of walls makes life easier for certain social groups while complicating other groups’ lives. The building of walls has its roots in the human being’s psychological and biological inheritance. Along the path of evolution, we learned that in order to be safe, we must fence ourselves off from threats, and in order to be able to do that, we must learn how to construct walls—indeed, even building oneself a home entails setting up at least four walls.

The word “wall” can sometimes be a metaphor: it then connotes the creation of divisions, stereotypes, closing ourselves off from contact with others. A wall essentially orders reality, selecting information and enabling its reception: the process of stereotyping allows quick decisions to be made based on divisions into categories (we then sometimes speak of “mental walls”). The ambiguity of the word means that it is more often used in texts that are literary or, as some would say, “journalistic” – because it is not a “firm” concept and does not hold up in traditional scientific categories, unless we are dealing with particular and concrete examples.

Many traits and behaviors that we consider to be typically human do not belong exclusively to the human being but, on the contrary, can be encountered among other species. I therefore propose to look at the human being as a species that creates culture and cultural behaviors but is, at the same time, indivisibly linked to the natural world that surrounds it. The most famous representatives of world ethology believed this,¹ as did the thinkers who developed evolutionism,² but the belief has also been held by psychologists,³ sociologists and philosophers.⁴ Accepting such a premise makes

¹ See. K. Lorenz, *Tak zwane zło*, trans. A.D. Tauszyńska, Warszawa 1972; N. Tinbergen, *Badania nad instynktem*, trans G. Bujalska-Grüm, Warszawa 1976.

² C. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals*, London 1872.

³ A. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, New York 1954.

⁴ F. de Waal, *Małpy i filozofowie. Skąd pochodzi moralność*, trans. B. Brożek, M. Furman, Kraków 2003.

possible a broader view of the contexts within which the phenomenon of building walls appears. This is also important because at least some of the needs experienced by human beings are shared by other species as well (at times this is the source of truly staggering similarities—for example, in the areas of exploration and play⁵). We assuage these needs in similar ways, though many of us would surely prefer not to believe so.

Erecting walls performs many functions. The predominant motivation behind such activity is, of course, the need for security. That need is primarily served by fencing off the outside, though depending on the sociocultural context, separating ourselves from others can be done by a number of different methods.

Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs illustrates the prioritization of human motives, though to some degree it also applies to animals. The need for security I mentioned above figures as one of the most basic needs in the hierarchy, one whose satisfaction makes it possible to register and meet needs of a higher order (for example social needs, for interaction with others). This appears to be a universal rule, true for the entire animate world and felt more intensely in proportion to increasing complexity of the nervous system. The life and preservation of the species is, essentially, only pos-

⁵ See W. Pisula, *Psychologia zachowań eksploracyjnych zwierząt*, Gdańsk 2003.

sible when the organism feels at least a minimal level of safety.

In the natural world, animals satisfy their need for shelter, which serves the maintenance (reproduction) of the species, by designating territory with their odor, color or the construction of physical barriers such as nests, beaver lodges, dens and other protective zones (whether organized for the individual or the group). Such phenomena may, in a sense, be called “walls”—they are barriers whose construction sends a message to intruders to keep away. In fact, there seems to be no way of assuaging the need for physical security other than by building walls. This applies to both individuals and groups (some examples familiar from history might include the Berlin Wall or the Great Wall of China). We should nonetheless consider some other functions that can be executed by a physically erected wall. It represents an indication of how to behave, of what cultural models are prevalent in the designated area, and is a field of self-identification and self-expression (murals, graffiti); it constitutes an instrument of oppression and social stratification (the building of ghettos and the designation of areas where certain groups are prohibited from entering, as well as the demarcation of “superior” areas, for example, gated communities), but can also bring people together (or can enable their coming together through the placement of doors or gaps within it).

It is difficult to judge whether real walls or those in the mind are more important for human beings and our existence. In postmodern societies, however, the psychological dimension is surely the most crucial one, because it constitutes a real form of support or defense, whereas the construction of physical barriers now seldom fulfils its fencing-off function. In reality, the problem thus boils down to how “the walls in people’s heads” function; those walls’ tangible manifestations are objects that serve the function of walls (fences, water, street furniture objects, and even elements of interior decoration: fabrics, plants, aquaria, etc.).

Contemporary human culture has formulated an injunction toward openness, making a negative attitude toward walls almost obligatory. It treats a wall as a barrier that results from weakness, antipathy and mistrust toward other people, perceiving it as something that should not exist, because the belief has now become widespread that we should be eager to enter into relations with other people. On the other hand, the patterns that emerge from human biological conditioning rather dictate a positive attitude toward walls. It should be noted that we tend to obsessively avoid using the term “wall,” instead resorting to such euphemisms as “boundary,” “barrier,” or “fence”... The wall is a source either of security or of oppression. It either allows intimacy or takes it away; it symbolizes either inclusion or disconnection.

In the texts that make up this volume, the phenomenon of constructing walls is located within still another context. These constructions rise up in order to ensure, through separation, not only a sense of security, but also control over “the others.” A seemingly simple situation is rich in consequences. For example, in the Slovakian village of Ostrovany, the Slovakian minority has fenced itself off from the Roma majority. In other places, the proportions may be different, though the mechanism remains the same— it involves the erection of a symbolic border to keep out cultural otherness. Solutions of this type are obviously based on a fantasy: they do not in fact separate the two groups, but force a different kind of interaction than those that would normally exist between people. This mechanism is also illustrated by the wall between Israel and Palestine— the fact of its being built provoked people to dig underground passageways and corridors allowing relatively “normal” contact between people on either side of the wall, whether commercial, familial or social. Everything goes on more or less as before, just by slightly different means. The idea of separating the Roma from the non-Roma majority is therefore similarly unrealistic. Such proposals demonstrate the utter impotence of those who put them forward: building a physical barrier does not arrest the process of the flow of information, and its accompanying mutual exertion of cultural influence between the communities thus divided. Where such a solution might possibly have made sense in

pre-modern times, in post-industrial societies based on the creation and use of information, its dissemination takes place “outside of physical divides.” Fear of the Other can lead thought toward the creation of physical obstacles and divisions. Those, however, do not remove the true cause of the fears, which lies in a lack of confidence, an instability in one’s own identity and avoidance of confrontation. As Theodor Adorno underscored in his essay on the authoritarian personality, insecurity and unconscious fears of Otherness are the sources of aggression driven by fear. This leads us unambiguously to the conclusion – a profoundly paradoxical one – that it is not raising walls, but rather creating OPENINGS, and removing walls, that should represent the antidote to society’s fears of Otherness. From this example it is clearly evident that the conception of projects of physical separation from others, in particular from unfamiliar communities, is based on their instigators’ desire to obtain an inner feeling of comfort. Such comfort is not achieved through separation, but on the contrary, by way of confrontation, learning and opening paths to strengthening our own identity, sense of security and belief in ourselves. Roma communities, like Jewish communities living in the diaspora, have always been culturally indecipherable to the host majorities. They have their own customs, language, mysterious traditions; if they did not, they would assimilate within the majority society. They have continued to exist separately up to now, but they are different and, as a result, perceived as menacing.

Hanna Mazmer, Walls

The motivation to build walls, resulting from a sense of threat, should be replaced by a feeling of motivation toward openness, knowledge, and assertive building of boundaries that allow for interaction while maintaining the integrity of the participating cultures.

translated by Timothy Williams