

# Why Walls Won't Work

By Michael Dear

Oxford University Press, 2013

Reviewed by Daniela De Leo

Michael Dear's<sup>1</sup> latest book offers a new reading of the vast territory along the US–Mexico border, which he describes as one of “the most misunderstood places on earth” (p. xi). In his first nine chapters, the author describes the main purpose of the wall recently installed on the border. This wall was created with the aim of countering illegal immigration and containing the drug wars fomented by the Mexican cartels. The author then explains “why walls don't work,” arguing that such borders can be considered largely ineffective and indeed destructive for the space that surrounds them.

Professor Dear and his students carried out research for the book while traveling up and down both sides of a border that runs 1,969 miles from Tijuana to Brownsville, focusing on the people who live within this “defensive/offensive system”<sup>2</sup> rather than upon the physical reality of the wall itself. Dear refers to the people who inhabit the “in-between” space between two nation-states as a “third nation” and argues that this third nation, which preexisted the wall, has its own economy, environment, law, politics, and culture. His book is the story of this complex transitional area that may be considered a “nation” despite the fact that it does not itself constitute a nation-state<sup>3</sup>.

In his conclusion, Dear notes that people always find ways around the walls. Literally, they pass over them, through them, and around them. This is due to the fact that governments and private interests continue to open passages and gaps in the wall. In order to support his thesis, he reminds us that the demographic composition of the United States has long-since been characterized by a substantial Hispanic population, despite the periodic “resurgence of racism,” while Mexico, despite its many problems,

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  2. Considerable literature exists on this issue. Peter Marcuse, “Walls as a Metaphor and Reality,” in S. Dunn, *Managing Divided Cities* (Ryburn Publishing, 1994), 41–52, or Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Press, 2000), give an idea of the debate.
  3. But one of the critical questions might be whether this third nation can do anything without being a State?

is increasingly “global and democratic”(p.176). The author concludes his volume by stating that the most important reason “why walls won’t work” may be that they represent “the crudest tool in the armory of geopolitics, an overt confession of failed diplomacy” (p.177).

Instead of accepting Michael Dear’s perspective that meritoriously lingers on the potential of in-between people, I look at the wall from a different perspective: I believe that *walls work, and they work well, at that*. Walls work by serving as *devices of power*—devices of power that can shift policy and public debate. In fact, if it is difficult to support or dispute the costs of such a complex structure, it is even more difficult to develop or oppose government immigration policies.

Walls function primarily as extraordinary *regulators of flows of money and people*. They result in a system that continuously redefines the relationship between those who are “legal” and “illegal,” where “the illegal” are the *disposable labor force* of the production system: those without rights who are forced to repay high travel costs to cross the borders. Walls also work as *economic and cultural devices*; they create a discontinuity of flow that facilitates “accumulation by dispossession”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, they develop and strengthen reactionary identities, and often enforce the false dichotomy of “us” against “them.” In this sense, the wall can be understood as a device of power that is regulated by the sovereignty of the strongest.

In conclusion, ignoring the role of the wall as a power device does not allow for an understanding of its effects on people who live with as well as alongside the wall. In fact, a wall may create hostility, new enemies, and even more victims. Traces of this growing distance between the two nations can be read, for example, in the bitter irony of the iron barrier that goes down to the sea, around Tijuana. Or consider what happens at the “belly of the wall,” if you attempt to cross without the “appropriate” documentation (for instance, if you do not bring your DS-2019 form<sup>5</sup> with you and the J1 on your passport is not sufficient to show that you do not intend to enter the United States “illegally”). In that case, while your friends are kept in the holding area, and the car in which you were traveling is scanned, you could observe the domination of one state over the other. For example, if you watch a Mexican family gathering their belongings and returning sadly to Mexico because they are not allowed to enter in the US. Simple stories such as these testify to the large and perhaps insurmountable difficulties imposed by the wall on this “third nation” that lives walled-in-and-out, between the United States and Mexico, despite

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4. Very briefly, from the perspective ranging from Marx to Harvey.

5. Form DS-2019, “Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J-1) Status” is the basic document required to support an application for an exchange visitor visa (J-1).

the long shared history and cultural inseparability of the two sides of the border along which this nation is formed.

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