Interventions on the state of sovereignty at the border

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Corridors, camps, and spaces of confinement

Reece Jones and Corey Johnson

Recent events have put human encounters with state sovereignty at borders under intense scrutiny from governments, media, and academics alike. Over 40,000 people died attempting to cross a border from 2006 to 2015 and a record 65 million people were displaced by conflict around the world in 2015 (http://missingmigrants.iom.int/). These 40,000 + deaths are not the direct results of wars where humans become the casualties of state-to-state conflicts or internal strife. Rather, they are a consequence of states expanding the reach of their security and detention practices to capture, intercede, or make intentionally perilous the movements of people in search of better opportunities—or often just basic safety and human dignity—for themselves and their family. There are almost 70 border walls around the world, up from 15 in 1989 (Vallet, 2014), and these are just the most visible physical manifestations of what is much wider set of state practices to control movement such as deployments of more border guards, seaborne patrols, and investments in new technologies to monitor more comprehensively events within state space, at the edges of their territories, and beyond.

These proactive and reactive exercises of state power mirror, and likely also help stir up, nationalist political rhetoric that emphasizes the rights of the in-group of citizens at the expense of non-citizens. The election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, who called for finishing the wall on the US-Mexico border and banning Muslim immigration, and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom that was fueled by a fear of migrants and a desire for more national control over economic decisions are but two examples of anti-migration sentiments seeping into mainstream politics. Against this backdrop, and inspired by recent scholarship in political geography, political science, and border studies, these interventions spatialize the sovereignty of the state at the border by considering how scholars should interpret the global expansion of security infrastructure ranging from new walls to the deployment of drones and military hardware to monitor and secure space. The interdisciplinary group of scholars was asked to intervene on the question: *What is the state of sovereignty at the border?*

The common thread throughout the intervention is that while borderlands and borderlines remain significant, a series of new locations—what we term corridors, camps, and spaces of confinement—have emerged as key sites to understand the practice of sovereignty through borderwork.

The first common theme is the emergence of new *corridors* where people on the move use technologies to subvert authority and survive the transit through dangerous and unwelcoming places, while the presence of state and non-state actors funnel people to particular routes. As Polly Pallister-Wilkins argues in her contribution, non-governmental aid organizations are increasingly implicated in humanitarian borderwork, which produces the border at multiple scales of sovereignty as individuals and organizations shape the spatial extent of the state. Similarly, Emily Gilbert's contribution details the role of individuals and organizations that create corridors through which resettled refugees find their way to Canada.

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Just as states and affiliated organizations attempt to impose sovereign control over people on the move, people use new corridors and informal camps to refuse to submit to sovereign state control. Recent work has placed emphasis on the growing digital divide—in this case between the digitization of human life through what Gabriel Popescu in his contribution calls "a portal-like logic" of border busting digital technologies on the one hand, and the persistently territorialized spatialization of sovereign state power on the other. Witness refugees' negotiation of border controls by means of GPS, Facebook, and crowdsourcing in Southeastern Europe and you have a good sense of the "non-linear territorial logics" that make this refugee crisis so different than past ones, albeit with similarly all-too-frequent tragic outcomes.

Alison Mountz's contribution points to another new location of borderwork: *camps* on islands. Mountz echoes Lauren Benton's (2010) work on the practice of sovereignty during the period of European Colonization, which was not a uniform expansion of colonial sovereign control, but rather a fragmented and piecemeal effort characterized by nodes of power emplaced in settlements, islands, and sea lanes. Contemporary border enforcement and mobility management increasingly happen in a similarly uneven geographical configuration of island camps and corridors where movement occurs and where the practice of sovereignty is tactically intensified to manage flows of humans through space.

Wendy Brown's groundbreaking book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* argued that the walls and fences that were built in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were not necessarily a sign of strength and state power, but a last vestige of a dying system of territorially bounded sovereignty (Brown, 2010). Since the publication of the book, events have occasioned a rethinking of the significance of walls. In her contribution, she still sees a symbolic value in the construction of walls at the edges of sovereign territory, but points to a new geography of migration that focuses on *spaces of confinement* shaped by government management, non-government organizations, and the agency of people on the move.

The interventions that follow spatialize the sovereignty of the state: locating and interrogating the sites of new sovereign practices, identifying the individuals and organizations acting as the sovereign agents of the state, and finding space for agency in encounters between people on the move and the state. They investigate different aspects of how the management of migration is creating corridors, camps, and spaces of confinement, but they also identify new spaces of connections where migration is structured by the state, often through the medium of non-state actors, and where people on the move have the ability to shape their encounters with sovereignty and the border.

Border barriers as sovereign swords: rethinking *Walled States* in light of the EU migrant and fiscal crises

Wendy Brown

Many scholars have sought to explain the proliferation of nation-state walling over the past two decades, a proliferation that may seem paradoxical given that the most potent forms of power and violence today are uncontainable by physical walling. My own contribution to this effort was a 2010 book arguing that the new walls were often a political-theatrical response to eroding nation-state sovereignty (Brown, 2010). Barriers like those at the US-Mexico, India-Pakistan or South Africa-Zimbabwe borders were generally ineffective in blocking what they formally aimed to interdict. However, contemporary border walls function as symbolic and semiotic responses to crises produced by eroded sovereign state capacities to secure territory, citizens and economies against growing transnational flows of power, people, capital, religions, ideas or terror. To say these walls are more theatrical than mechanical in their function is not to dismiss their importance: the theater matters a great deal in an era in which states perdure as their sovereign powers wane, and powerful new nationalisms and reactionary citizen subjectivities are one result.

The argument of the book went further to suggest that walls do not merely index but accelerate waning state sovereignty: they blur the policing and military functions of states and also generate new vigilantism at the border; they increase organized criminal operations (and expand their transnational links) for smuggling humans, drugs, weapons and other contraband across borders; and they intensify nationalist sentiments that in turn spur demands for greater exercises of state sovereignty, more effective walling and less flexibility in responding to globalization's vicissitudes and volatilities. In all of these ways, the new border fortifications tend to deepen the crises of sovereignty to which they also respond. Far from mere palliatives or props for degraded sovereign powers, they are a kind of *pharmakon*, worsening the problem they respond to even as they throw a sop to constituencies anxious or angry at states' declining capacities to uphold social contracts to secure order, prosperity and protection.

I don't reject this argument completely today. Certainly it is confirmed by United States President Donald Trump's capacity to generate enthusiasm for walling the U.S.-Mexico border in excess of the multi-billion dollar barricades and security system already in place. Trump stirs this enthusiasm notwithstanding substantial evidence that variations in migrant flows from the South are largely determined not by policing or barricades but by fluctuations in demand for cheap labor and also notwithstanding evidence that new immigrant communities in the United States feature comparatively lower crime rates and higher education and employment participation rates than are found in other urban poor communities. My argument is confirmed as well by surging immigrant smuggling industries, anti-immigrant vigilantism, and anti-immigrant nationalism in "Fortress Europe" in recent years. It is indirectly confirmed, too, by the June 2016 Brexit vote animated by anxiety about loss of British sovereignty and the desire to resurrect state power and jurisdiction, to regain national control over policy, population, spending and borders. Such control may be a fantasy and the costs of pursuing that fantasy may be extraordinary but such is the political life of waning nation state sovereignty.

While the main thesis of *Walled States* may hold up, it is inadequate to recent developments in border fortifications, especially in the European Union. First, neoliberalized European states dealing with new waves of immigration are responding to more than the opposing demands of de-regulated capital and anger over declining conditions for working and middle class residents. States are also responding to more than the contradictory imperatives of economy and security in a globalized world, where the former is thought to push toward relaxing borders and the latter toward fortifying them. Rather, in the past decade, financialization has significantly altered the complex thirty-five-year project of neoliberalization, producing a new orientation and mode of conduct for capital and states alike. Financialization produces supervenient concern with investor or market confidence, which are both indexed and driven by credit and bond ratings. As Michel Feher argues, every financialized actor or entity (which includes states—the largest debtors and creditors of all) is now tasked with increasing its creditworthiness and avoiding depreciation of present and future value (Feher, 2016). In short, financialization replaces old-fashioned utilitarian concerns with keeping costs low and prices high, or maintaining a favorable balance of trade, with policy and governance strategies aimed at high bond, credit, currency and human capital rankings. In addition to continuous structural adjustment (stripping out what remains of