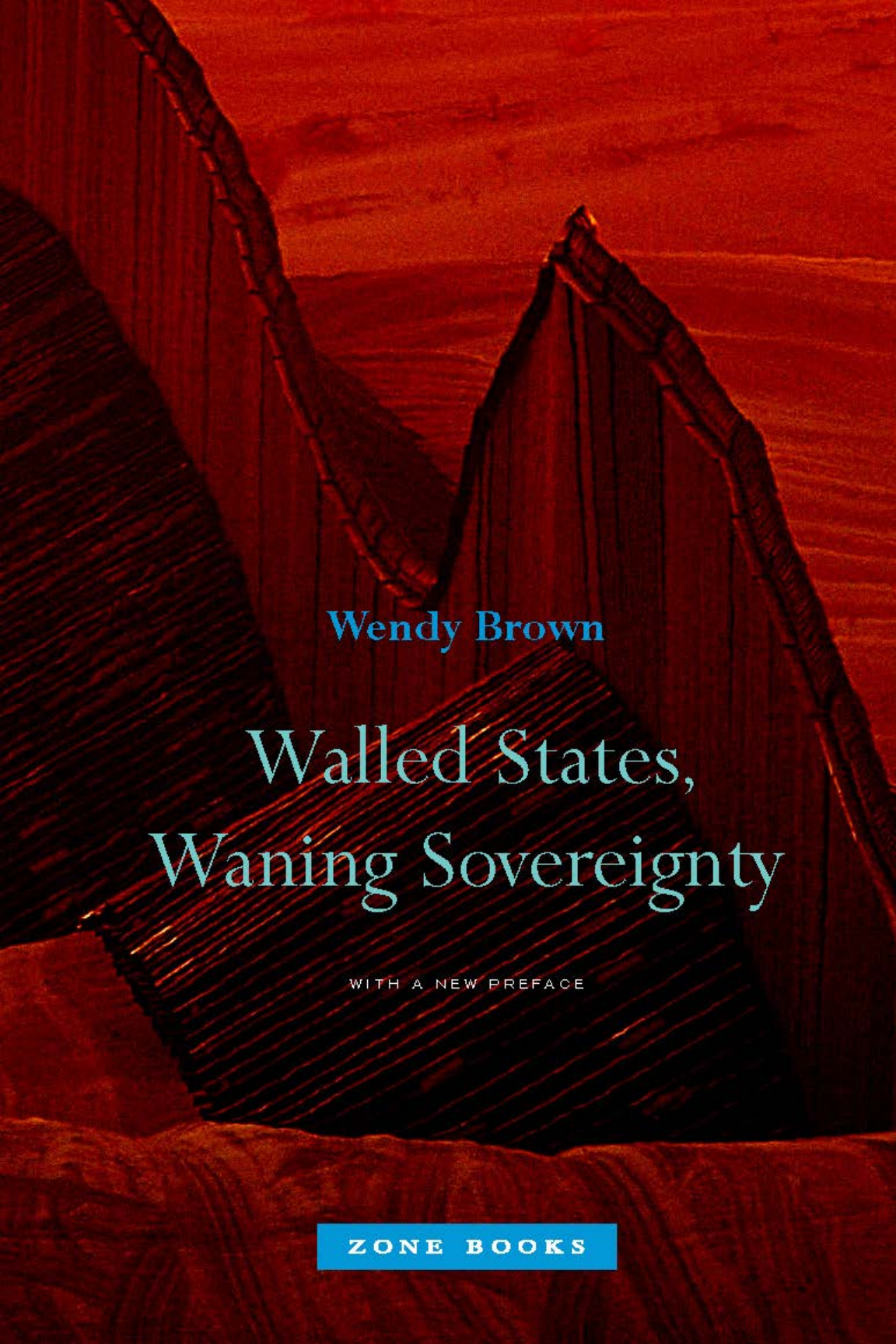




Wendy Brown

Walled States,
Waning Sovereignty

WITH A NEW PREFACE

ZONE BOOKS

Walled States, Waning Sovereignty

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Waning Sovereignty

Wendy Brown

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Preface to the New Edition

Vote Leave! Take Control.

—Brexit slogan, 2016

Make America Great Again! Build a Wall!

—Trump campaign slogan, 2016

Mut zu Deutschland.

—Alternative for Germany slogan, 2015–16

As I finished writing *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* in fall 2009, post–Cold War nation-state walling was still a faint and somewhat vexed feature of the global landscape, in tension with widespread investments in global connectedness and traversal. Europeans were celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and were generally sanguine about Europe’s internal open borders. “Fortress Europe” was mainly the Left’s derogatory term for restrictive EU immigration policy toward non-Europeans. The United States was reckoning with the failures of costly fortifications of its southern border and was also moving toward bipartisan support for granting legal status to millions of undocumented residents.¹ Certainly, nations everywhere were struggling with immigration policy, and the Euro-Atlantic world featured acrimonious domestic debates about multiculturalism, assimilation, and especially the place of religious Muslims in the West. However, huge migrations of Central American youth to

North America and of Syrian war victims to Europe were still on a distant horizon. Virulently racist, xenophobic, and nationalist rancor, while tingeing national politics, was largely confined to the fringes of political debates and campaigns.

How different the landscape looks seven years later. A U.S. president has just swept to power on a promise to “Build a Wall!” and to deport the undocumented . . . notwithstanding the impossible expense and inefficacy of walling the nearly two-thousand-mile-long border with Mexico and the dependence of the American economy on millions of undocumented low-wage workers. “Festung Europa” (Fortress Europe) has become the affirmative rallying cry of a growing European right, and walls and fences have sprung up to divert refugees fleeing wars and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Europe itself is rapidly disintegrating into walled states as Brexit voters pulled up the narrow drawbridge that Britain had to the continent, more national rejections of the increasingly fragile union are imminent, and the 1985 Schengen Agreement, which led to twenty-six European nations abolishing their borders with other member nations, is in tatters. We appear to have entered an era of intensive nationalist rebordering secured through both literal and figurative nation-state walling.²

Yet the question originally animating the book persists: Why physical walls in the twenty-first century? These structures rarely succeed at interdiction, nor do they pose an economical, effective technical response to the most menacing kinds of contemporary powers flowing across borders or threatening political communities. Whether intended to prevent terror and crime or to play a part in a racialized biopolitics, other means of policing, monitoring, and governance are cheaper and more effective. Individual or small groups of bodies on the move can be more efficiently detected and deflected by surveillance technology and patrols than by walls. And great floods of migrating humanity, like any other kind of flood, inevitably breach or flow around walls and dams.³ Moreover, the contemporary walls often dramatically

intensify criminal smuggling industries, gang control of borderlands and their proximate communities, and conflicts or tensions between neighboring nations, thus constituting new threats to and erosions of nation state sovereignty. Yet walls continue to be called for and built. Why?

Machiavelli reminds us that politics, even and especially Realpolitik, is always heavily theatrical, a staging of danger or resolve, power or possibility, that involves deliberate manipulations of space and time, cause and effect. This theater is dissimulating, yes, but also generative—political theater is never merely theater and is not equivalent to simple deceit. Rather, theatricality is the frame for political action and its interpretation and for political affect, allegiance, and identity. Theatricality is thus an intrinsic, rather than extrinsic feature of politics, impossible to expunge or even academically factor out in order to find the truth or essence of a political development or action. Understanding nation-state walls today depends on a deep appreciation of this distinctive feature of political life.

Walled States, Waning Sovereignty treats contemporary wall building as theater pieces for national populations specifically unsettled by global forces threatening sovereignty and identity at both the state and individual level. Thus, while nation-state walls are far from historically novel, they carry a unique function and signification today, staging political sovereignty that globalization is draining out of state institutions, providing a visual emblem of power and protection that states increasingly cannot provide, and generating an imaginary of stable and homogeneous (and sometimes white supremacist) nationhood concretely eroded by global flows of capital, power, people, finance, ideas, cultures, religions, goods, and terror. As political responses to what is psychically, economically, and politically unmanageable in a globalized world, walls constitute a spectacular screen for fantasies of restored sovereign potency and national purity. They function brilliantly as icons of such potency and protection, even when they fail. If they also intensify conflicts and compound problems ranging

from organized crime to broken national budgets and strained ecosystems, this does not make them less politically effectual.

Thus, the spate of post Cold War nation-state walling—just over thirty post-1989 walls had been built when the book was originally published and there are now more than fifty—is vital in both making and reflecting our present. If walls are theatrical rather than mechanical in their functions and effects, the theater matters in an era in which states perdure as their sovereign powers wane and when powerful new nationalisms and reactionary citizen subjectivities are taking shape in sovereignty's wake.

The argument of the book goes further to suggest that walls do not merely index, but accelerate waning state sovereignty: they blur the policing and military functions of states; they generate new vigilantisms at borders; they expand the transnational links and powers of organized crime; they intensify nationalist identifications 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. Given the growing involvement of ISIS and other jihadist groups in migrant smuggling and the more than \$300 million that ISIS has reaped from the business, it could even be said that walls are financing terrorism.⁴ 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, walls are a kind of *pharmakon* for waning sovereignty, worsening the problems they respond to even as they throw sops to constituencies anxious or angry at nation-states' declining capacities to uphold implicit social contracts to secure order, prosperity, protection, or racial supremacy.

Certainly the thesis of the 2010 book was confirmed by Donald Trump's ability to generate enthusiasm for walling the U.S.-Mexico border in excess of the multibillion-dollar barricades and security system already in place. Especially telling is that this enthusiasm could be stirred despite evidence that variations in migrant flows from the Global South are determined less by policing or barricades than by fluctuations in demand for cheap

labor and also despite evidence that new immigrant communities in the United States feature comparatively lower crime rates and higher education and employment participation rates than those found in other urban poor communities in the country. The book's argument is confirmed as well by the surging migrant smuggling business, anti-immigrant vigilantism, and nationalism across Europe and North America in recent years.⁵ The thesis is confirmed, too, by the rise in Europe of secessionist movements motivated by desire (however impotent) to restore national power and jurisdiction over policy, demographics, economics, and borders. Return to such national control may be a fantasy, its pursuit incredibly costly for both lives and livelihoods, but such is the political life of waning nation-state sovereignty.

If the main thesis of *Walled States* holds up, it is also inadequate to some of the most recent developments in border fortifications, especially in Europe. First, neoliberalized European states dealing with new waves of immigration are responding to more than the opposing demands of deregulated capital, on the one hand, and populations angry about declining conditions for prosperity and security, on the other. They are also responding to more than the contradictory imperatives of economy and security in a globalized world, where the former is conventionally understood to push toward relaxing borders and the latter toward fortifying them.

Over 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.⁶ Rather than being driven mainly by profit or growth rates, financialized entities (including states, the largest of them all) are increasingly bound to concerns with market confidence, which is both indexed and generated by credit and bond ratings. As Michel Feher argues, every financialized actor is now tasked with pursuing appreciation of its creditworthiness—its attractiveness to investors—and avoiding depreciation of its present and future value.⁷

Financialization, in other words, changes economic conduct as it alters the ordinances of economic success and failure. It replaces old-fashioned utilitarian concerns with keeping costs low and prices high, or in the case of nation-states, maintaining a favorable balance of trade, with policy and governance strategies aimed at attracting investors and creditors through high bond, credit, currency, and human capital rankings. In addition to continuous structural adjustment (regressive taxation and stripping out what remains of public pensions, public goods and industries, union-negotiated wages and conditions, and so forth), the imperatives of financialization produce a new orientation by states toward everything from tariffs to migration. States today are concerned not only with the concrete political, social, or economic costs or benefits of immigration, but with its potential contribution to or drag on the nation's attractiveness to creditors and investors. As Feher compresses the matter: "attracting international investors while repelling undesirable migrants: since the Great Recession of 2009, these two preoccupations have dominated the European agenda."⁸

The imperative Feher describes is evident in Europe's two intersecting contemporary crises. The first is the fiscal crisis that has become an economic and political crisis and emerges from the grossly uneven debt, growth, employment, trade, and national self-determination resulting from the phenomena of a common market and common currency in the absence of a common social contract and polity.⁹ The second is the crisis related to the great tide of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, where "frontline" southern and eastern European states also tend to be among the most economically challenged. The ways that the two crises intersect at the site of walls, which produce a new theater for EU sovereignty struggles, requires some detailed explanation.

Two European Union agreements, "Schengen" (open internal European borders) and "Dublin" (refugee acceptance and processing rules undergirding the Common European Asylum System) have been in crisis ever since the Arab Spring brought thousands of Tunisians to southern European shores. Both agreements

reached a breaking point in 2015. Today, their disintegration, combined with the crisis of the Eurozone, threatens to break Europe. What has this to do with the new border barriers, such as those of Hungary at its Serbian and Croatian borders or that of Norway at its arctic boundary with Russia? Importantly, these barriers do not repel, but *divert* migration flows coming from the east and the south, pushing them toward other European entry points. Some also now link to a system channeling migrants through the Balkans and into the heart of Europe. This in turn converts whole nations into European borders—crossing zones, rather than destinations—and further challenges both the Schengen and Dublin agreements.

As Bernd Kasperek has argued, the new corridors through Europe converted what began as ad hoc migrant routes and camps for immigrant travel to western and northern destinations into both state-organized and EU-organized channels governing the movement of peoples.¹⁰ Quasi-formalized, the corridors themselves helped establish a distinction between “transit” and “destination” states, increasingly emptying of force or even coherence the Dublin proviso that the migrants’ country of entry into the EU was the country responsible for them (and to which they could be returned if they reached other parts of Europe). Border barriers, corridors, and transit camps where migrant processing occurs in this way become elements in an intricate, unplanned, yet intensely governed structuring of space that simultaneously reconfigures European geopolitics as it manages migrant bodies. It does the former by producing new fusions of and contestations among national, subnational, and postnational forces and jurisdictions, about which more shortly. It does the latter by producing new conditions and even new agencies for migrants themselves, what might be seen as a new biopolitics of migrant movement: Kasperek depicts the migrant flows through these corridors as simultaneously state organized (they are propelled) and self-organized (the migrants propel themselves). As migrants are both rushing and being rushed, protected and regulated, a

novel semiotics and physics of freedom and safety, contoured by the dangers of detention and deportation, arises in these corridors.¹¹ Here is how Kasperek describes this new order:

The corridor, stretching across and seemingly connecting many countries, has a constitution of its own. One might characterize it as “extraterritorial” to better capture the different laws and rules that apply within (as opposed to those without). That these rules and laws were written elsewhere goes without saying. The EU border and migration regime did not have the capacity to stop the extraordinary movement of people across its borders, but morphing the route into a confined corridor served to re-establish some kind of control over the movements.¹²

This very structuring of space and movement, however, through a combination of border barriers, corridors, and transit camps, also becomes a scene of EU sovereignty struggles, fought out over the handling of refugees in a post-Dublin order. The corridors reassert EU jurisdictional control over migrants’ challenge to that control, yes, but they also retort to assertions of sovereignty by the countries they bisect as they supplant national with postnational technologies of governmentality. At the same time, the creation of “transit countries” creates a new layer in European bordering, as well as a new element in negotiating sovereignty from weakness — this is the position of Greece, Macedonia, and the Balkan nations, not to mention that perennial EU aspirant, Turkey.¹³ And then there is the negotiating bid from the north: Germany’s own provisional “open door” policy was of course partly contoured by both labor needs and legitimacy deficits resulting from its merciless handling of Greece in the summer of 2015. But it is also an effort to preserve Europe from the threat of other states following either the model of Hungarian walling and brutality toward immigrants or the model of Brexit... both of which represent rising nationalist frustration with EU immigration policy and EU fiscal governance. The importance of border barriers in both expressing and fomenting the danger of European

disintegration was signaled by the gleefulness of right-wing politicians, such as French National Front leader Marine Le Pen and British UKIP leader Nigel Farage, over the walling frenzy during fall 2015: “Bye-bye Schengen!” Le Pen tweeted at its height.¹⁴

Clearly, then, the recent border fortifications that have sprung up from the Netherlands and Austria to the Balkans, Macedonia, and Turkey are more than theatrical shows of nation-state power performed for economically frustrated and xenophobic citizens, even as they are also this. They have become part of an intricate ad hoc network of spatial and governing technologies for diverting, channeling, policing, and governing migrant flows. Walls are far better at diversion than interdiction—even the “failed” wall at the US-Mexico border, while not stopping illegal immigration, has pushed it to routes and placed it in hands more dangerous and costly than before. Europe’s new border walls in this way make manifest an obdurate physicalist fact about “flows” on land: they cannot be stopped, only routed. The seas, of course, are another matter: there, migrant flows can be dissolved, dissipated, even disappeared, as evidenced by the tens of thousands of migrants allowed to drown in the Mediterranean since the Arab Spring.¹⁵

The new walls increase the fragility of the EU as they undermine both the Dublin and Schengen agreements with gestures of sovereign state power. More than mere expressions of nation-state prerogative, however, they become instruments—even tactics—in the conflicting bids for sovereignty within the larger “crisis of Europe,” different from, but related to referendums extending from the Greeks’ rejection of the EU austerity package in summer 2015 to Brexit in summer 2016. In this respect, the walls represent reactions by nation-states against inegalitarian postnational and even global institutions on which they and their populations also depend and to which they are bound, institutions that constitute challenges to national sovereignty. Meanwhile, postnational institutions are countering with their own strategies. In addition to delivering development aid to nations in exchange for accepting immigrants, the Juncker Commission has developed “hotspots”—designated

zones (currently only in Italy and Greece) deemed to face “disproportionate migratory pressures,” triggering an EU response.¹⁶ As opposed to the crudeness of border barriers, the deprivations of the Calais camps or violent policing in the Budapest railroad station, the hotspot approach mobilizes Frontex and other EU agencies to coordinate with nations in delivering concentrated resources to process, assist, and police migrants at their points of entry into the EU. As the European Commission describes it, “the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), EU Border Agency (Frontex) EU Police Cooperation Agency (Europol), and EU Judicial Cooperation Agency (Eurojust) will work on the ground with the authorities of the frontline Member State to help to fulfill their obligations under EU law and swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants. The work of the agencies will be complementary to one another.”¹⁷ However, what sounds like free and cooperative assistance isn’t quite. First of all, the processing includes EU assignment of refugees to member nations and also rejects or abandons asylum seekers from some countries. Second, the EU can threaten to withhold development aid and also threaten exclusion from the Schengen zone to any country refusing intervention at an EU designated hotspot. Thus, Kasparek notes, while the “hotspot approach may use the language of humanitarianism and support for the frontline member states . . . it is in fact a massive vote of ‘no confidence’ concerning the ability and even willingness of these states to conform to the European rules.”¹⁸ In short, with hotspots, the Juncker Commission pushes back against assertions of nation-state prerogative with EU technocracy and biopolitics; its agencies challenge national sovereignty as they regain EU control over immigration to Europe, not to mention control over the migrants themselves. The hotspots have become a new site for EU biopolitical management of refugees, both those processed and admitted and those deported or abandoned.¹⁹

In sum, while Europe’s recent and continuing flurry of wall building expresses and indexes waning state sovereignty, the new walls are also pieces on the chessboard of complex sovereignty

contests between national and postnational powers of political determination, economic arrangements, and demographic composition.²⁰ In contrast with the border barriers discussed in *Walled States*, however, the sovereignty at stake is not simply that of nation-states undermined by global flows and powers, though certainly the migration and fiscal crises represent that undermining. It is also that challenged by *postnational* political institutions and political economic constellations.

The new walls of Europe reflect crises in Europe's relation to itself and to the world . . . its uncertain future amid a global interregnum between sovereign nation-states and whatever their successor forms might be and between a modernity and capitalism centered on Euro-Atlantic powers and whatever comes after that centering. They reflect as well a series of intersecting nationalist rejections of free trade, open borders, and multiculturalist democracies. They also reflect democracy's tremendous challenge today by two very different forces and bids for the future: reactionary nationalist populism, on one side, and postnational technocracy, on the other. The former is especially fiercely fueled by the experience of white (male) social and economic decline; it is backward looking, mythohistorical, inegalitarian, and authoritarian. The latter is animated by imperatives of finance and expectations about technology: it is wedded to expertise and steely eyed realism, forward looking, and antidemocratic. The battle between technocracy and nationalism constitutes a new theater in sovereignty struggles. Walls, corridors, and irregular zones *within* nations are not merely backdrops, but active, multiply signifying agents in this theater. That they also organize the lives and deaths of millions of deracinated, desperate people on the move or who have secured a provisional respite from danger is, within this theater, collateral damage. So is democracy.

Berkeley, December 2016

