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Rethinking World Borders

The redefinition of international relations after the end of the Cold War was meant to open an age of globalization in which States and sovereignty were to become obsolete, and borders irrelevant. In the wake of 9/11 however, borders came back in light and new borders were drawn – as actually they were following the fall of USSR. With this trend, border barriers, fences and walls that were expected to be a historical symbol of a collapsed bipolar system were erected at a pace that defied all predictions: with the erection of 47 border fences around the world in the decade following 9/11 – and among them, 19 following the aftershocks of the Arab spring in Europe and the Middle East plus 7 border walls in the Schengen territory in less than a year, it is clear that walls have become a normed response to insecurity.

It is not, a strictly post 9-11 phenomenon: studies have shown that borders never truly disappeared after the fall of the Berlin Wall and that the rise of border walls after 9-11 has its roots in the pre-9/11 period, for the wall-building phenomenon is fed not by a specific fear of terrorism but rather by a global insecurity bred by globalization. In other words, in a security-conscious and risk-averse world, globalization has led not to the eradication of borders but rather to the redefinition of territory where the wall defines itself as the ultimate and visible rampart to (perceived) security issues: it has become a norm of International relations, and a solution in the quest for security, sublimated through an increasingly security-centric discourse in the wake of 9/11. As a whole borders have become thicker and harder, both externalized and internalized, and mobile.

In that sense, a border wall will be understood in terms of “securitization”, namely a response to a conventional problem (migratory flows) that has come to be construed as a security issue (migratory threat): what used to be a localized risk (border violence) has become national in scope (national security). After 9-11, wall-building legitimating discourses have amalgamated both threats of cross-border migratory movements and terrorist movements, using them as interchangeable notions. And democratic governments have also appropriated this duality.

Populism has “instrumentalized” the border as a rampart for traditional values that populists claim to preserve. However the fortification of borders is more a matter of the ‘theatralization’ of the border, a ‘mise en scène’ aiming at national audiences rather than a rationalized process to secure the territory. First, border walls don’t suffice to stem the flows. Drug trafficking uses legal ports of entry, and border walls or border infrastructures can be overcome by catapults, car ramps, tunnels, ladders, drones, and scissors. Hence for both a matter of political marketing and efficiency, borders tend to be more and more militarized. This trend triggers a redefinition of the bordering process that in turn leads to more violence: border fortification fans the underground economy and feeds shadow flows, which are more difficult to monitor and police. This generates a sense of insecurity on both sides of the border and ultimately leads to the redefinition of the social structure of the border. Hence border fortification tangible impact on local societies, economies, and ecosystems, is much more than a matter of representation.

Fortifying borders or hardening borders doesn’t solve the root problems that lie most of the time at the very origin of migrations. Climate change, insecurity, war, political regimes have led migrants to go long ways to reach a safer or sounder place – via more dangerous routes whether north of the arctic circle or through hostile jungles. Therefore erecting walls and fortifying borders are no more than Hans Brinker trying to patch a dike with his fingers. Circumventing strategies are much faster than what governments can deal with and the greater risk G7 countries face is an internal radicalization due to the failure of populist discourses and electoral promises. While economies are deeply in need of manpower, and while more immigrants are the key to prosperity, states have to regain full authority over the process, which means changing the dominant discourses and defining positive leadership. Hence, there is clearly a need to assess multilaterally the triggers of future mass migrations address those issues before they reach the G7’s shores, as well as the far-right radicalization inside the G7 before it has an impact on economics determinants.