

DON'T FENCE US IN

by Naomi Klein

A few months ago, while rifling through my clippings searching for a lost statistic, I noticed a recurring theme; the fence. The image came up again and again; barriers separating people from previously public resources, locking them away from much needed land and water, restricting their ability to move across borders, to express political dissent, to demonstrate on public streets, even keeping politicians from enacting policies that make sense for the people who elected them.

Some of these fences are hard to see, but they exist all the same. A virtual fence goes up around schools in Zambia when an education 'user fee' is introduced on the advice of the World bank, putting classes out of the reach of millions of people. A fence goes up around the family farm in Canada when government policies turn small-scale agriculture into a luxury item, unaffordable in a landscape of tumbling commodity prices and factory farms. There is a real invisible fence that goes up around clean water in Soweto when prices skyrocket owing to privatization, and residents are forced to turn to contaminated sources. And there is a fence that goes up around the very idea of democracy when Argentina is told it will not get an International Monetary Fund loan unless it further reduces social spending, privatizes more resources and eliminates support to local industries, all in the midst of an economic crisis depend by those very policies. These fences, of course, are as old as colonialism. 'Such unsurprising operations put bars around free nations', Eduardo Galeano wrote in *Open Veins Of Latin America*. He was referring to the terms of a British loan to Argentina in 1824.

Fences have always been a part of capitalism, the only way to protect property from would-be bandits, but the double standards propping up these fences have, of late, become increasingly blatant. Expropriation of corporate holdings may be the greatest sin any socialist government can commit in the eyes of the international financial markets — just ask Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or Cuba's Fidel Castro. But the asset protection guaranteed to companies under free trade deals did not extend to the Argentine citizens who deposited their life savings in Citibank, Scotiabank and HSBC accounts and now find that most of their money has simply disappeared. Neither did the market's reverence for private wealth embrace the US employees of Enron, who found that they

had been 'locked out' of their privatized retirement portfolios, unable to sell even as Enron. Executives were frantically cashing in their own stocks.

Meanwhile, some very necessary fences are under attack: in the rush to privatization, the barriers that once existed between many public and private spaces — keeping advertisements out of schools, for instance, profit-making interests out of healthcare, or news outlets from acting purely as promotional vehicles for their owners' other holdings — have nearly all been levelled. Every protected public space has been cracked open, only to be re-enclosed by the market. Another public-interest barrier under serious threat is the one separating genetically modified crops from crops that have not yet been altered. The seed giants have done such a remarkably poor job of preventing their tampered seeds from blowing into neighboring fields, taking root and cross-pollinating that, in many parts of the world, eating GM-free is no longer even an option — the entire food supply has been contaminated. The fences that protect the public interest seem to be fast disappearing, while the ones that restrict our liberties keep multiplying.

When I first noticed that the image of the fence kept coming up in discussion, debates and in my own writing, it seemed significant to me. After all, the past decade of economic integration has been fuelled by promises of barriers coming down, of increased mobility and greater freedom. And yet thirteen years after the celebrated collapse of the Berlin Wall, we are surrounded by fences yet again, cut off — from one another, from the earth and from our own ability to imagine that change is possible. The economic process that goes by the benign euphemism 'globalisation' now reaches into every aspect of life, transforming every activity and natural resource into a measured and owned commodity. As the Hong Kong based labour researcher Gerard Greenfield points out, the current stage of capitalism is not simply about trade in the traditional sense of selling more products across borders. It is also about feeding the market's insatiable need for growth by redefining as 'products' entire sectors that were previously considered part of the commons 'and not for sale'. The invading of the public by the private has reached into categories such as health and education, of course, but also ideas, genes, seeds, now purchased, patented and fenced off, as well as traditional aboriginal remedies, plants, water and even human stem cells. With copyright now the US's single largest export (more than manufactured goods or arms), international trade law must be understood as taking down selective barriers to trade but more accurately as a process that systematically puts up new barriers around knowledge, technology and newly privatized resources. these

Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights are what prevent farmers from replanting their Monsanto patented seeds and make it illegal for poor countries to manufacture cheaper generic drugs to get to their needy populations.

Globalisation is now on trial because on the other side of all these virtual fences are real people, shut out of schools, hospitals, workplaces, their own farms, homes and communities. Mass privatization and deregulation have bred armies of locked-out people, whose services are no longer needed, whose lifestyles are written off as 'backward', whose basic needs go unmet. These fences of social exclusion can discard an entire industry, and they can also write off an entire country, as has happened to Argentina. In the case of Africa, essentially an entire continent can find itself exiled to the global shadow world, off the map and off the news, appearing only during wartime when its citizens are looked on with suspicion as potential militia members, would-be terrorists or anti-American fanatics. In fact remarkably few globalisation's fenced out people turn to violence. Most simply move: from countryside to city, from country to country. And that's when they come face to face with distinctly unvirtual fences, the ones made of chain link and razor wire, reinforced with concrete and guarded with machine guns. Whenever I hear the phrase 'free trade' I can't help picturing the caged factories I visited in the Philippines and Indonesia that are all surrounded by gates, watchtowers and soldiers — to keep the highly subsidized products from leaking out and the union organizers from getting in. I think too, about a recent trip to the South Australian desert where I visited the infamous Woomera detention center. At Woomera, hundreds of Afghan and Iraqi refugees, fleeing oppression and dictatorship in their own countries, are so desperate for the world to see what is going on behind the fence that they stage hunger strikes, jump off the roofs of their barracks, drink shampoo and sew their mouths shut.

These days, newspapers are filled with gruesome accounts of asylum seekers attempting to make it across national borders by hiding themselves among the products that enjoy so much more mobility than they do. In December 2001, the bodies of eight Romanian refugees, including two children, were discovered in a cargo container filled with office furniture; they had asphyxiated during the long sea journey at sea. The same year, the bodies of two more refugees were discovered in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in a shipment of bathroom fixtures. The year before, fifty-eight Chinese refugees suffocated in the back of a delivery truck in Dover.

All these fences are connected: the real ones, made of steel and razor wire, are needed to enforce the virtual ones, the ones that put resources

and wealth out of the hands of so many. It simply is not possible to lock away this much of our collective wealth without an accompanying strategy to control popular unrest and mobility. Security firms do their biggest business in the cities, where the gap between rich and poor is greatest — Johannesburg, Sao Paulo, New Delhi — selling iron gates, armored cars, elaborate alarm systems and renting out armies of private guards. Brazilians, for instance, spend US\$4.5bn a year on private security, and the country's 400,000 armed rent-a cops outnumber actual police officers by almost four to one. In deeply divided South Africa, annual spending on private security has reached US\$1.6bn, more than three times what the government spends each year on affordable housing. It now seems that these gated compounds protecting the haves from the have-nots are microcosms of what is fast becoming a global security state — not a global village intent on lowering walls and barriers, as we were promised, but a network of fortresses connected by highly militarized trade corridors.

If this picture seems extreme, it may only be because most of us in the west rarely see the fences and the artillery. the gated factories and refugee detention centers remain tucked away in remote places, less able to pose a direct challenge to the seductive rhetoric of the borderless world. But over the past few years, some fences have intruded into full view — often, fittingly, during the summits where this brutal model of globalisation is advanced. It is now taken for granted that if world leaders want to get together to discuss a new trade deal, they will need to build a modern-day fortress to protect themselves from public rage. When Quebec City hosted the Summit of the Americas in April 2001, the Canadian government took the unprecedented step of building a cage around not just the conference center, but the downtown core, forcing residents to show official documentation to get to their homes and work places. Another popular strategy is to hold the summits in inaccessible locations: the 2002 G8 meeting was held deep in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, and the 2001 WTO meeting took place in the repressive Gulf State of Qatar, where the emir bans political protests. The 'war on terrorism has become yet another fence to hide behind, used by summit organizers to explain why public shows of dissent just will not be possible this time around or, worse, to draw threatening parallels between legitimate protesters and terrorists bent on destruction.

But what are reported as menacing confrontations are often joyous events, as much experiments in alternative ways of organizing societies as criticisms of existing models. The first time I participated in one of these counter-

summits, I remember having the distinct feeling that some sort of political portal was opening up — a gateway, a window, ‘a crack in history’, to use subcomandante Marcos’s beautiful phrase. This opening had little to do with the broken window at the local McDonald’s, the image so favored by TV cameras; it was something else: a sense of possibility, a blast of fresh air, oxygen rushing to the brain. These protests — which are actually week-long marathons of intense education on global politics, latenight strategy sessions in six-way simultaneous translation, festivals of music and street theater — are like stepping into parallel universe. Overnight, the site is transformed into a kind of alternative global city, where urgency replaces resignation, corporate logos need armed guards, people usurp cars, art is everywhere, strangers talk to each other, and the prospect of a radical change in political course does not seem like an odd and anachronistic idea but the most logical thought in the world.

Even the heavy-handed security measures have been co-opted by activists into part of the message: the fences that surround the summits become metaphors for an economic model that exiles billions to poverty and exclusion. Confrontations are staged at the fence — but not only the ones involving sticks and bricks; tear-gas canisters have been flicked back with hockey sticks, water cannons have been irreverently challenged with toy water pistols and buzzing helicopters mocked with swarms of paper aeroplanes. During the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, a group of activists built a medieval-style wooden catapult, wheeled it up to the three-metre-high fence that enclosed the downtown and lofted teddy bears over the top. In Prague, during the meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Italian direct-action group Tute Bianche decided not to confront the black-clad riot police dressed in similarly threatening ski masks and bandanas; instead they marched to the police in white jumpsuits stuffed with rubber-tyres and Styrofoam padding. In a standoff between Darth Vader and an army of Michelin Men, the police could not win. These activists are quite serious in their desire to disrupt the current economic order, but their tactics reflect a dogged determination to engage in classic power struggles: their goal is not to take power for themselves but to challenge power centralization on principle.

Other kinds of windows are opening as well — quiet conspiracies to reclaim privatized spaces and assets for public use. Maybe it’s students kicking ads out of their classrooms, or swapping music online, or setting up independent media centers with free software. maybe it’s Thai peasants planting organic

vegetables on overirrigated golf courses, or landless farmers in Brazil cutting down fences around unused lands and turning them into farming cooperatives. Maybe its Bolivian workers reversing the privatization of their water supply, or South African township residents reconnecting their neighbours' electricity under the slogan Power To The People. And once reclaimed, these spaces are also being remade. In neighbourhood assemblies, at city councils, in independent media centers, in community-rim forests and farm, a new culture of vibrant direct democracy is emerging, one that is fuelled and strengthened by direct participation, not dampened and discouraged by passive spectatorship.

Despite all the attempts at privatization it turns out that there are some things that do not want to be owned. Music, water, seeds, electricity, ideas — they keep bursting out of the confines erected around them. They have a natural resistance to enclosure, a tendency to escape, to cross-pollinate, to flow through fences and flee out open windows.

It is not clear what will emerge from these liberated spaces, or if what emerges will be hardy enough to withstand attacks from the police and military, as the line between terrorist and activist is deliberately blurred. The question of what comes next preoccupies me, as it does everyone else who has been part of building this international movement. As I look again at these article clippings, I see them for what they are: postcards from dramatic moments in time, a record of the first chapter in a very old recurring story, the one about people pushing against the barriers that try to contain them, opening up windows, breathing deeply, tasting freedom.

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