



Timothy Snyder

The Wall around the West

Globalisation along rich–poor divides is less the swan song of state power than its siren song, writes Timothy Snyder.

As the twenty–first century begins, as the Cold War recedes into memory, as economic integration and the process of "globalization" advances, what is the significance of borders dividing rich states from poor? Rather than to speculate about the implications of these trends, the following tries to attend to state policies in Europe and North America that seek to control the movement of people across borders. As the military and economic functions of borders lose some of their significance, the traditional police function of borders has been reasserted in both Europe and North America. As the instant transmission of images across borders becomes a cliché, and the free trade of goods becomes more of a reality, human beings who have not the good fortune to be citizens of rich states are confronted with more barriers in their attempts to cross borders. As rich states seek to control the movement of such people, they confirm and reinforce traditional state territorial functions. These notes will concentrate on Europe, and then suggest what the wall around the West means for the future of state power and the idea of globalization.

Whereas the consequence of border control policy in the United States is a shift of the resources of an existing national territorial state to its periphery, the consequence of European border control efforts is the creation of police resources at the new common external border of the EU. In North America, the irony is that economic integration has coincided with stronger measures to prevent Mexicans from entering the United States. In Europe, the irony is that the success of a far more ambitious project of regional integration has required the creation of a hard external border dividing rich EU members from their poorer neighbors. The EU has built a wall around its periphery precisely because it has succeeded in removing border controls among its members.

"Schengen" is the name given to the common external border of the continental members of the EU, and to the absence of border controls among them. The former was a logical consequence of the latter. The intention of the French, German, Belgian, Luxembourgish, and Dutch governments who signed the original Schengen treaty in 1985 was not to create an external border, but to remove border controls among themselves. They meant to set a good example for other European Community (EC) members by fulfilling one of the main aspirations of European integration, the free movement of people.¹ Although they rightly anticipated that west European citizens would favor easy movement for themselves, they also understood that state borders play an enormously important psychological function in west European societies.

These governments understood that west Europeans deprived of the sense of security arising from national borders would have to be "compensated" by the creation of an external frontier comprising all participating states.² As the Schengen zone grew to include all of the continental members of the EU, and was incorporated into the EU's institutions, the coupling of the removal of internal borders with a strengthened common external border was unquestioned by all participants.³

For two major reasons, allowing the unhindered movement of people within the EU has unintended consequences quite distinct from allowing the free movement of goods. First, although Schengen (like European integration in general) began as an elite project, it is one of the few EU initiatives that harmonizes with public opinion. Once in place, both internal freedom of movement and the hard external frontier became untouchable at the level of the domestic politics of participating states. Second, more than other projects of European integration, the creation of an external frontier directly requires the EU to take on state-like functions, assume statelike roles, and acquire state-like capacities. The theories of European integration held by most European elites contend that the creation of European political structures will emerge from governmental cooperation, social interaction, or economic integration. Border control is the unplanned but irresistible shortcut: it is the policy that demands that the EU behave like a territorial state.

Present developments suggest that the EU, as a state-like entity, is in the process of being born at its borders. The main point bears repeating. The EU, like a modern territorial state, now has an external border. Anyone seeking to enter a continental EU member state now confronts a common border regime, regardless of point of entry. Moreover, from the moment that the Treaty of Amsterdam entered into force in May 1999, the provision of freedom of movement within the EU and the control of its external frontier is the job of the EU. Even in areas where the EC is not formally responsible for border policy, the venue of the EU allows national governments to coordinate policies. Throughout the 1990s "more and more decisions on how to fight the influx of illegal immigrants were made at the EU level by agreements among national governments in the European Council."⁴ As a result of the common external border, national governments have harmonized their asylum policies.

Important consequences include increased police cooperation, new initiatives in information gathering, and emphasis on state secrecy. First, cooperation among national police forces was not initiated by the Schengen regime, but has been noticeably accelerated by it. The same can be said for the official European police organization, EUROPOL. Second, in order to control its new border, the EU has undertaken for the first time to collect and coordinate personal information on a massive scale. The Schengen Informational System, an index of at least ten million entries of "undesirables" and suspected criminals, is physically located in Strasbourg. But its computerized database is available to police officers and border control agents of all participating states. In other words, agents of national states are enforcing a European border with the help of European resources. (Resources that, in this case, are already more imposing than their U.S. counterparts.) Third, and perhaps most telling, the common external border is the first major EU policy whose outlines have been shrouded in secrecy. It has been difficult, even for national governments, to establish just what the Schengen system is. This is partly because the incorporation of Schengen into the EU was enormously complicated, but also partly a result of the logic of ambitious projects of state control of borders.

In his masterful treatment of the history of state immigration controls, John Torpey provides a neo-Weberian definition of the state as an entity that monopolizes the legitimate control of the movement of human beings across borders.⁵ In this sense, the EU is taking on state-like attributes. Torpey also exploits the Arendtian notion of the state as a membership organization. In this sense as well, the Schengen regime is rendering the EU more like a state. Those who are citizens of EU member states enjoy the benefits of easy travel. In a part of the world where vacation is a central pleasure of life, this appeals to societies at large as well as business elites. For the average EU citizen, freedom of movement is perhaps the most easily perceived benefit of the European project. On the other hand, Europeans who are not citizens of EU member states are no longer simply excluded from a set of nation-states: they are excluded from a unit which goes by the name of "Europe."⁶ When the Schengen wall was raised in 1995, Hungarians and Slovenes who were used to easy access to the EU were suddenly required to obtain visas. Although their countries, like most other plausible future EU members, now enjoy visa-free regimes with Schengenland, elites and businesspeople from most Balkan states and most of the former Soviet Union find it extremely difficult to enter "Europe." This sense of exclusion is problematic, since these elites are expected to spread Western ideas of integration and globalization. A prominent Bulgarian intellectual speaks of "a Schengen majority, people who cannot travel freely, who have thus ceased to believe the promises of the West."⁷ The expression "Schengenized," meaning excluded from Europe, is heard more and more often. However exaggerated such rhetoric might be, one should not underestimate the effect that physical exclusion has upon the identities of the excluded.

But as the recent enlargement process showed, it should not be imagined that states negotiating to join the EU are a chink in the Schengen armor, nor that their negotiators enjoy any leverage on the question of border control. Membership in the EU is so attractive that serious candidates will not hesitate to implement the elements of the European project that they are instructed to apply. EU directions on this point are unambiguous: candidates unable to implement Schengen will not be admitted.⁸ Since enlargement is a difficult and contested process, and since immigration is the aspect of it that raises the greatest concern in west European publics, the new members could afford no false steps. Their negotiators as well as their societies must first earn trust in the eyes of their EU counterparts. To convince the EU that they "belong", they had (among other things) to show that they understand that other states, such as Belarus and Ukraine, do not.⁹

By its enlargement, the EU's hard external frontier enlarged along with it. The new member states have been obliged to drop visa-free regimes with their eastern and southern neighbors, and had to demonstrate that they are capable of Schengen-style border enforcement. A more easterly border of Schengenland will bring the same regime to the frontiers of the former Soviet Union. One could even provocatively argue that the new eastern border of an enlarged EU will also correspond to a "Huntington border": a division of civilizations.¹⁰ There is nothing inherently illiberal in the notion that civilizations exist and are home to incommensurate values. Perhaps the twentieth century's leading liberal thinker, Isaiah Berlin, believed that "What is clear is that values can clash – that is why civilizations are incompatible."¹¹ Berlin's solution was what he called pluralism: the intellectual recognition that differences in value judgments cannot always be reconciled, the political implication that attempts to implement perfect solutions are bound to fail, and the practical recommendation of humility. In our context, the concern is that

the construction of the wall around the West – the overlap of economic, political, and cultural divides—transforms disagreements about ideas such as "European integration" and "globalization" into certainties about what is right and wrong.

The Siren song of state power

In a final attempt to grasp the link between border controls and disagreements about globalization, let us follow the trespasses and transgressions of a globalized symbol. The wanderings of the image of a "siren", linked to travel, and associated with both the irresistible and the forbidden, will perhaps lead us to identify what barriers to movement have to do with perceptions of world order. In Greek myth, the lovely music of the sirens calls sailors to their doom. The image of Odysseus lashed to the mainmast as his sailors, ears plugged, row past Sirens' Island was a favorite of antiquity.¹² Medieval sculptors favored the image of the siren herself, with scaly legs spread. An updated version of this latter image is the "Starbucks Siren," the corporate logo of the Seattle-based coffee importer and globalization poster child.¹³ (Neither its friends nor its foes usually notice that the Starbucks logo suggests impulses stronger than the caffeine habit.) As it happens, the "syrena" is also the coat of arms of the Polish capital of Warsaw.¹⁴ Polish mermaids adorn the trains that bring petty traders from Ukraine or Belarus to the Polish capital, as well as the buses you might take to buy (for example) pirated music from Ukrainians or Belarusians at Warsaw's suburban bazaars. (These Warsaw sirens, as dignified as their Seattle cousins are inviting, bear swords and crowns.)

In these examples of images and commerce, our wandering sirens retain, if faintly, the association of allure or attraction. In other cases, from the realm of state power over human movement, the "siren" takes on something like the opposite meaning. For U.S. citizens, a "siren" is the noisemaker atop a police car. To an illegal immigrant near the southern border of the United States, a "sirena" is a warning of an encounter with U.S. law enforcement. Far from an invitation to approach, such sirens are a warning that the time has come to flee. In the EU, the word "siren" has taken on a meaning even strikingly more at odds with the original. The national offices of the Schengen Informational System are known in EU jargon as SIRENE (Supplement d'Information Requis a l'Entree Nationale). This "siren" goes beyond sounding the alarm: it is the business end of a system designed to prevent "undesirable" human beings from entering EU territory. If, for example, an asylum seeker files multiple applications with different European states, this "siren" will blare. Here the "sirene" has attained a significance precisely opposite to that of the *Odyssey's* original: far from issuing an irresistible invitation to weary travelers, it categorically rejects the undesired. As if to complete the irony, "Odysseus" is the name of an EU program that trains national officers to recognize false passports.

In a globalized world, images (such as siren, sirene, sirena, and syrena) travel light and adapt well. In the right conditions, goods (such as Mexican coffee in a mermaid cup, or pirated music enjoyed while riding home in a mermaid-emblazoned bus) will also travel, and usually be easily assimilated by their consumers. People who transport goods (importers of coffee, traders in computer disks) generally fare well, depending upon the trade regime in force. The coffee importer has a bright future in North America; the trader in illegal compact disks will be banished from Warsaw the moment Poland joins the EU. People who wish to sell their labor (the migrant caught at the California or Texas border, or off the Florida coast) or wishing to leave their home and settle

anew (the double asylum applicant exposed by SIRENE) are in the most difficult position.

The United States and the EU can and do seek to decide what elements of "globalization" named in our siren stories—images, goods, traders, laborers, refugees cross into their territory. In the effort to allow most images and most goods, but to categorize and discriminate among human beings, the United States and the EU are in effect building a wall around the West. In the North American case, we observe the assertion of police power at a national border *within* a larger zone of free trade. In the European case, we see that the zone of free trade *matches* the zone of the free movement of people – tariffs and policed borders coincide at a common external border. The price of thin, NAFTA–type integration between rich and poor states is stricter border controls between them. The price of creating an EU–style zone of free movement among rich states is the construction of a wall around that zone. While the U.S. government reasserts police power at its southern border, European governments have created common state–like attributes at a new European border. In both cases, each step forward toward integration brings with it state efforts to control the movement of human beings across borders.¹⁵

This reaction to projects of integration, and this contradiction within the idea of globalization, have to do with basic differences between ideas, goods, and human beings.¹⁶ For obvious reasons human beings are not portable in the way that ideas and goods are. People within rich societies react to the influx of human beings according to impulses that are not generally aroused by adaptable ideas or consumable goods. The same holds for poorer people who wish to cross into richer countries. Their adaptations to new languages and new situations, however able on a human scale, are incomparably slower than the transmission of images or the consumption of goods.

Most fundamentally, immigrants do not regard *themselves* as images or as goods. They can have ambitious projects that can be frustrated, can embark upon ambivalent odysseys that end in failure. In this sense, the very contradiction within the idea of a "siren" describes the ambiguous experience of people confronting increasing state power as they seek to enter rich parts of the world. After all, people can be at once repelled and attracted, disdainful and desirous. (Odysseus himself wished to respond to the sirens' call, but had himself physically constrained from doing as he wished.) People can, for example, believe that their dignity is injured by the treatment that they receive as they attempt to cross borders: in being told what they are not, they may come to new ideas about what they are. At the same time, people can contemplate the power of states that prevent them from doing as they wish: and then regard this as a model if they return home. In both of these ways, as attraction and as repulsion, "globalization" at the center breeds nationalization at the periphery.

This suggests that the sense of "globalization" is dependent upon perspective and experience. Whether globalization is meaningful to people in the twenty–first century will depend less upon whether their ideas or their exports can cross borders, and more upon whether they themselves can cross borders. In general, people who can physically move will find the idea comprehensible, and those who cannot will not. Whether globalization is an accurate description of the international political order will depend upon whether attempts to control the movement of people across borders continue to consolidate states as territorial and as membership organizations. Globalization along rich–poor divides is less the swan song of state power than its siren song

– to immigrants who wish to cross into "El Norte" or "Schengenland," to rich societies longing for security, and to state agents capable of providing its semblance.

The following remarks are based on the concluding chapter of the book by Peter Andreas and Timothy Snyder (eds.), The Wall around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in North America and Europe, Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

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- ¹ Cf. Malcolm Anderson, "The Transformation of Border Controls: A European Presedent?", in: *The Wall around the West*, pp. 15–29.
- ² I am describing here the anticipation of problems, and do not mean to suggest that the anticipated feeling of insecurity was not justified. The Schengen system does indeed simplify matters for drug dealers and organized criminals inside the zone.
- ³ As of this writing, Great Britain and Ireland (which themselves comprise a zone of free movement) have opted out of the Schengen regime. Norway, which is not a member of the EU, is a member of the Schengen regime.
- ⁴ Cf. Milada Anna Vachudova, "Eastern Europe as Gatekeeper: The Immigration and Asylum Policies of an Enlarging European Union", in: *The Wall around the West*, pp.153–171.
- ⁵ Cf. John Torpey, "States and the Regulation of Migration in the Twentieth-Century North Atlantic World", in: *The Wall around the West*, pp. 31–53.
- ⁶ This is true of Turks and North Africans as well.
- ⁷ Ivan Krastev, as quoted in "Wojny balkanskie 1991–1999," *Unia–Polska*, August 2–16, 1999, 20–21. This point has been made by at least one participant in every relevant east European conference I have attended since 1995.
- ⁸ See Article 8, "Protocol Integrating the Schengen *acquis* into the Framework of the European Union," Treaty of Amsterdam, Conference of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, September 23, 1997. See also Anthony Georgioff, "EU: Leaders Agree to Fight Illegal Immigration, Organized Crime," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Report, October 18, 1999.
- ⁹ Poland has taken some steps to preserve its links with its eastern neighbors. The EU preferred that Poland immediately rescinded its visa-free regime with Ukraine, but it was maintained until Poland actually joined the EU. Cf. Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, chapter 12.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Roland Freudenstein. Rio Odra, Rio Buh: Poland, Germany and the Borders of Twenty-First-Century Europe. In: *The Wall around the West*. The reference is to Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- ¹¹ "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in: Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Princeton UP, 1990, p. 12.
- ¹² See, for example, "Ulysse passant près de file des Sirènes," Plaque Campana, Second Century C.E., Département des Antiquités Grècques et Romaines, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- ¹³ Sirens have also featured in advertisements for McDonald's and IBM.
- ¹⁴ Warsaw was (according to myth) founded at the invitation of a "syrena." The Czechs also have quasi-urban mermaids: see for example "O vodni panne z Tuni," in Vaclav Cibula and Cyril Bouda, *Pražské pověsti*, Prague: Orbis, 1970, pp. 459–461.
- ¹⁵ There are other instances of enduring state structures shifting resources to their peripheries in the inherently ambiguous search for security. The "barbarian at the border," not the "barbarian at the gate," is the key figure in the long decline of the Western Roman Empire. See Brent D. Shaw, "War and Violence," and Patrick T. Geary, "Barbarians and Ethnicity," in G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity*, Harvard UP, 1999, pp. 130–169 and 107–129.
- ¹⁶ Some might find this a suitable place for a Foucaultian analysis. It would have to account for important differences between border controls and incarceration (as described in *Surveiller et punir*): that in the case of illegal immigration, bodies commit crimes primarily by virtue of where they are rather than what they have done; that in controlling borders states aim not to incorporate but to separate human beings; that people are usually simply expelled rather than punished for illegally crossing a border; that states aim not to render border violations visible but to render them invisible. Perhaps the deeper difference is that the state is attempting to affect the "souls" of its members by moving the bodies of the

aliens, rather than affecting the "soul" of the prisoner by enclosing and observing his body.

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