



Debate Article

Border walls, imagined and real

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Hanscam and Buchanan (2023) give us an insightful comparative analysis of Hadrian's Wall and the US/Mexico border wall. Their analysis shows how critically to study and use these long walls in an explicitly political archaeology. I have engaged in archaeology as political action (McGuire 2008), and have researched the materiality of the US/Mexico border while doing humanitarian work along that border (McGuire 2013). Hanscam and Buchanan deftly employ archaeology as a political tool to challenge capitalist ideologies about borders. They plead for a politically relevant archaeology that engages the past to address modern issues. Without such relevance, they fear that archaeology will be made redundant. I emphatically agree with them that an activist archaeology makes our discipline more relevant. I fear, however, that these politics may be our demise rather than our salvation.

The US/Mexico border wall and Hadrian's Wall are long walls (or long barriers). Governments built these structures over long distances to control the movement of people, collect taxes, mark social inequality and privilege, monumentalise the frontiers, and as powerful symbols of identity, wealth and sovereignty (Brown 2010; Spring 2015: 7). Both walls are part of larger efforts to wall people in and to wall people out (McAtackney & McGuire 2020). Hadrian's Wall was the northernmost section of a larger Roman frontier system, or *limes*, around provincial borders. The US/Mexico border wall is but one of more than 63 national border walls built around the globe in the twenty-first century (Benedicto 2020). In a world of walls, politicians evoke these structures as solutions to complex social problems—solutions that fail. Barbarian hordes bent on death and destruction threatened the ancient empires; the 'barbarians' of the modern world, however, are the 'other'—a desperate, ragtag mass of non-Whites, refugees, the unemployed and the poor seeking security, refuge and economic opportunity (Nails 2015).

Modern walls respond to these new 'barbarians' differently from the ways that ancient/historical barriers confronted invaders. Architects designed the old walls to drive off and annihilate the invaders. Modern walls obstruct and deter the masses that press against them. Modern walls usually do not include inhumane features, such as minefields and electrified fences. Ancient/historical walls usually developed from wars between peoples, and enemies built comparable structures. Modern long walls tend to be unilateral, the construction of a single nation built to keep others out.

All walls embody paradoxes. On the one hand, walls demonstrate the power and domination of the people who build them. On the other hand, walls materialise the builder's

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insecurity and fear of the other (Chaichian 2014:1). Walls materialise power and wealth, yet they reflect the failure of other efforts, and they are a last resort when all else has failed (McGuire 2020). The Romans began building the limes after Germanic peoples slaughtered three legions in the Teutoburg Forest. Construction of the US/Mexico border wall began in the mid-1990s, when the volume of migrants soared, and the US Border Patrol could no longer stem the tide of desperate people crossing the frontier.

Nothing makes ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ quite like a wall (Dey 2011: 1). For this reason, walls tend to amplify and polarise social problems. Long walls give a false concreteness to national boundaries and national sovereignty (Brown 2010). Most citizens of contemporary nation states assume that national boundaries are clearly defined, like the lines on their maps, and are a solid reality, like the concrete or steel in a wall. Politicians exploit these conceptions and claim that walls will solve complex social problems, such as undocumented immigration, drug smuggling, poverty, climate change, human trafficking and weapons traffic. They won’t, but they do amplify racism. Most citizens do not understand that the people who live on the border, live there to cross that border. They have connections (legal and illicit) on both sides of the line—families, friends, jobs, goods and so on—and they will transgress that line to maintain those connections and economies (McGuire 2013).

Hanscam and Buchanan charge us to engage actively in political action by critically analysing the realities and the popular imagination about these walls. In this way, we can challenge the racist myths that politicians promulgate about borders, walls and forced migrations. They also warn that unless we explicitly engage in the political struggle and show that archaeology “has critically independent value and meaning” (Hanscam & Buchanan 2023: 1013), the powers that be will make our discipline redundant because it is irrelevant in the modern world.

I unequivocally and wholeheartedly support the practice of archaeology as a form of political praxis (McGuire 2008), but I have little faith that such practice will save our discipline from redundancy. In the United States, politicians have attacked anthropology (the disciplinary home of archaeology) as unnecessary and irrelevant. Unfortunately, the same politicians would reject a political archaeology as ‘woke’, and probably throw in accusations of critical race theory and intersectionality, to justify the elimination of the discipline. I welcome Hanscam and Buchanan’s call for an explicitly political archaeology. I have been practising such an archaeology for more than 30 years. But the reason to practice archaeology as political action is not to save our discipline from irrelevance. Rather, we should chip away at the ignorance, alienation and oppression of the contemporary world. We will certainly be attacked for doing so and may be made redundant. Engaging in this struggle will not directly change the world. But, as Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire once said in an interview, “Education does not transform the world. Education changes people. People change the world.”

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