

I have previously blogged about one of Tim Marshall's other books, Prisoners of Geography, this can be read [here](#). He has also published another book Worth Dying For: The Power of Politics and Flags; I have read this but not put my notes on the blog. Over half term I devoted some to reading his most recent novel - Divided: Why we're living in an age of walls.

This book, like Tim's other books, is a great primer in global geopolitics. It is an accessible global tour which looks at walls through the theme of walls. Although the focus is on walls (both physical and virtual) the novel explores wider themes of togetherness and the identity of the nation-state.

In the paragraphs that follow I have attempted to summarise some of the key points of the article.

"Today, no walls can separate humanitarian or human rights crisis in one part of the world from national security crisis in another. What begins with the failure to uphold the dignity of one life all too often ends with a calamity for entire nations." - Kofi Annan

There is a surge to build more walls. 'In recent years, the cry 'Tear down this wall' is using this argument against 'fortress mentality'. It is struggling to be heard, unable to compete with the frightening heights of mass migration, the backlash against globalisation the resurgence of nationalism, the collapse of Communism and the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. These are the fault lines that will shape our world for years to come. Thousands of miles of walls and fences have gone up around the world in the twenty-first century. At least sixty-five countries, more than a third of the world's nation-states have built barriers along their borders; half of those erected since the Second World War sprang up between 2000 and now. Within a few years, the European nations could have more miles of walls, fences and barriers on their borders than there were at the height of the Cold War.

Division shapes politics at every level – the personal, local, national and international. It's essential to be aware of what has divided us, and what continues to do so, in order to understand what's going on in the world today.

The book takes a regional approach and looks at a number of different case studies.

China

Let's say your family is registered as non-agricultural Shanghai. This immediately gives you access to a wide range of health and education services in the city. For example, according to a paper in the China Economic Review, funding per pupil in Beijing in 1998 was twelve times greater than in Guizhou province, the ratio then increases to fifteen in 2001. On the other hand, if your family is registered as agricultural from a farming region 1,000 miles west of Shanghai, the schools have access to are way below the standard of those in Shanghai, as is the limited range of social services. Moreover, your work consists of back-breaking labour, which sometimes results only in subsistence farming.

As recently as 2005, only 10 percent of the population had access to the internet. Now, however, the figure is 50 percent and rising. That's about 700 million users, which is roughly a quarter of the world's online population. And that is harder to control. The level of censorship varies between the regions; for example, in Tibet and Xinjiang the firewalls are both higher and deeper. A university student in Shanghai might get away with using a VPN to access a banned foreign news source, but no one in the Uighur capital of Urumqi would probably receive an invitation to discuss the technology at the city policy HQ.

United States

For months, Mr. Trump has been promising to build a wall on the US-Mexico border to help curb illegal immigration into the USA. Though he appears mostly to 'consult his own genius', even before he entered the White House he was informed of the expense of wall building, the political opposition to it and, of equal importance, the terrain upon which the wall was to be built. Speeches about 'a wall, a great big beautiful wall' played well with his core support, but that is a poor basis upon which to found a massive engineering project, and the plans in his head soon ran into a wall of reality - and the quicksand of Washington DC.

The Great Wall of China aimed to separate the civilized world from the barbarians; Trump's wall aims to separate Americans from non-Americans. It's the concept of the nation that unites Americans- and now, for some, Trump's wall signifies the preservation and sanctity of that concept. It ensures the idea of making 'America Great Again' and symbolises the support that exists for putting 'America First'.

Ultimately, very few barriers are impenetrable. People are resourceful, and those desperate enough will find a way around, under or over them. Extra barriers simply push would-be illegal immigrants further and further into unguarded, unpopulated areas. These are often in the desert and usually have to be crossed on foot, meaning that thousands of people die from exposure as they attempt to make it to the Promised Land.

Other presidents have fortified the border with Mexico, but Trump's wall is particularly divisive because it represents a specific moment in US history. The politics of building the wall isn't just about keeping Mexicans out. A border defines a nation, and Trump's wall is attempting to define what America is - both physically and ideologically.

The chapter on the United States ends when Tim Marshall quotes Barack Obama at the 2004 Democratic National Convention:

‘The pundits like to slice and dice our country into ... red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats ... But I’ve got news for them ... We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don’t like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states, and yes, we’ve got gay friends in the red states ... We are one people”.

India

On India’s frontier with Bangladesh is the longest border fence in the world. It runs along most of the 2,500-miles boundary which India warps around its much smaller neighbour; the only part of Bangladesh completely free of it is its 360-mile -long coast at the Bay of Bengal. The fence zigzags from the Bay northwards, along mostly flattish ground, up towards the more hilly country near Nepal and Bhutan, takes a right turn along the top of the country, then drops down south again, often through heavily forested areas, back to the sea. It passes through plains and jungle, beside rivers and over hills. The territories on each side are heavily populated and in many areas the ground is cultivated as close to the barrier as possible, which means the crops grown often touch the divide.

Despite these measures, the Indian fence fails to stop people from trying to cross. They continue to do so despite the barbed wire, and despite the fact that border guards have shot dead hundreds of people attempting to get into India, as well as many other wanting to return to Bangladesh surreptitiously after being in India illegally. (Page 124)

India is a magnet for migrants. It is a democracy, there are laws to protect minorities, and compared to its neighbours it has a thriving economy. Refugees and illegal immigrants have

flocked there from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), Tibet, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There are at least 110,000 Tibetans who have fled since China annexed their territory in 1951, around 100,000 Tamil Sri Lankans who arrived during the island's civil war earlier this century and the up heavily in Afghanistan have seen a steady flow of people to India. But by far the greatest number of immigrants are from Bangladesh, which is surrounded by India on three sides.

In the twenty-first century Indian society is far from 'deadened' - indeed India is a vibrant, increasingly important country, embracing a range of high-tech industries - and yet within it are millions of barriers to progress for tens of millions of its citizens. The walls around India are designed to keep people out, and this within to keep people down.

Africa

There's a wall at the top of Africa. It is a wall of sand, of shame and of silence. The Moroccan Wall runs for 1,700 miles through Western Sahara and not parts of Morocco. The whole construction separates what Morocco terms its Southern Provinces along the Atlantic coast from the Free Zone in the desert interior - an area the Sahrawi people call the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. It is built of sand piled almost 7 feet high, with a backing trench and millions of landmines stretching several miles into the desert on each side of the barrier. It is thought to be the longest continuous minefield in the world. Every three miles or so there is a Moroccan Army outpost containing up to forty troops, some of whom patrol the spaces between the bases, while two and a half miles back from each major post are rapid-reaction mobile units, and behind those artillery bases.

Independence movements struggle for recognition and self-determination. The idea of the nation-state, having developed in Europe, spread like wildfire in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, calling for the self-determining government for a 'nation' of people – a group who to some degree share a historic, ethnic, cultural, geographical or linguistic community.

The first generation of leaders of the independent African states understood that any attempt to redraw the colonial maps might lead to hundreds of mini-wars, and so decided they would work with the existing lines in the hope that they could build genuine nation states and thus reduce ethnic divisions. However, most leaders then failed to implement policies to unit their peoples within these borders, instead relying on brute force and repeating the colonialists' trick of divide and rule. The many different peoples thrown together in these newly minted nation-states had not had the beneficial experience of settling their differences and coming other over centuries. Some states are still struggling with contradictions built into their systems by colonialism.

Europe

Tim also presents an interesting viewpoint on the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, the wall, judged by its *raison d'être*, can be called a success. It not known how many successfully crossed, but it is estimated that the figure is only around 5,000; the mass exodus had been halted. The East German economy began to stabilise after its workforce was imprisoned, and by the mid-1960s the state had control over its trade and currency and was capable of functioning, along with the rest of the Russian empire's vassal states. (Berlin Wall)

UK

Hadrian's Wall must have been quite a sight for the 'primitive' island times. Built-in 122 CE, it was m73 miles long and parts of it were 15 feet high and 10 feet deep. A 13 foot deep, 30

foot-wide-fighting fetch was dug in front of it. Between the two were thickets of spikes. Over the course of 1,500 years, Hadrian's Wall, a symbol of the great reach of the Roman Empire – as well as its limitations – almost disappeared. After the Romans left, it fell into disrepair. Farmers took bits of it to build house and sheep pens, the burgeoning Christian communities took more for churches, and little by little, as the memory of the Romans in Britain faded, so did their wall crumble into the landscape they had sought to conquer. And even now, in the twenty-first century, with much of the wall long gone, even though most of it actually lies south of the Scottish border, the Roman fortification still symbolises one of the main divisions in what, paradoxically, remains the United Kingdom.

The book concludes with a proverb 'Good fences make good neighbours'. We are planning for a future in which we hope for the best and fear the worst, and because we fear, we build walls. Tim Marshall concludes by saying "so although at present the nationalism and identity politics are once again on the rise, there is the potential for the arc of history to bend back towards unity."

"Each man is an island unto himself. But thorough a sea of difference may divide us, an entire world of commonality lies beneath." – James Rozoff