The Wall and the Mobile Phone. Organising, Governing, Resisting.

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1. Facing Walls, Calling Out

In this chapter I would like to explore the *continuum* that stretches between two 'uncanny' objects: the wall and the mobile phone. The wall is an apparently trivial object, and one long neglected by social theory. The practicalities of the social life of walls are largely under-researched compared to their symbolic value(s). Walls stand for the universal symbols of separation and division, but from this perspective they are rather univocal and do not have much to say: they are, as Simmel (1994[1909]) first put it, 'mute'. Additionally, in hi-tech contemporary Western society walls appear to be rather low-tech devices when compared to smarter social control devices, such as the 'surveillant assemblage' (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000), increasingly based upon immaterial, digital flow tracking (Lyon, 2001).

While old brick walls are neglected, there is a lot of hype (and business) about mobile phones and the other new mobile media. By and large, the majority of sociological research on mobile communication, and more broadly the new media leans toward the techno-enthusiast side. There is a discourse of empowerment that goes with the celebration of such empowerment. Representatives of techno-enthusiasm tend to stress a number of features of mobile phones, first of all flexibility, and ubiquitousness. Mobility plays an extremely important role in such an empowerment. The fact that you can now make plans for meetings on the go allegedly allows for a new kind of sociality, essentially an urban sociality that is highly flexible (Kwan 2007). In short, to their advocates mobile communication means total accessibility and provides the ultimate form of the network society (Castells *et al.* 2004).

So, the apparent antithesis could be put as follows: walls do not communicate, while mobile communication does not know walls since it has little or no material constraints at all. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2003: 7) put it synthetically, 'walls, fences, and skins divide; paths, pipes, and wires connect'. My aim here is to challenge this view. Consequently, in this chapter I propose to look comparatively at how both walls and mobile phones organise space in the city through their specific, often criss-crossing and overlapping combinations of 'mobilities and moorings' (Urry 2009).

2. City Walls, Cities of Walls

In both imagination and practice, walls are boundaries. Kevin Lynch (1960) famously described boundaries as one of those essential elements people use to make sense of urban space in navigating it. Together with paths, districts, nodes and landmarks, boundaries or edges define the image of the city in the imagination of their users. Architects usually say that boundaries create places and container spaces in which social situations occur.

Historically, walls emerged as boundaries *of* the city and subsequently turned into boundaries *in* the city. The walls that surrounded medieval towns were walls of protection. In his classic history of urban culture, Lewis Mumford (1996[1938]) observed that the capitalist economy overcame medieval restrictions pushing towards an unprecented spatial expansion of cities. As cities spread in every direction in the mainland as well as overseas, the walls that surrounded the medieval town centres were demolished both practically and symbolically.

Once removed as boundaries of the city, walls became boundaries inside the city. For instance, segregation processes can be described as walling different communities instead of the whole city. Such an enclosing function is present for instance in the late-medieval Jewish ghetto (see Calimani 2001 on the Venice ghetto) and prolongs into modern ghettoes and their self-reproducing dynamics. As Louis Wirth (1964: 92) remarked, 'though the physical walls of the ghetto have been torn down, an invisible wall of isolation still maintains the distance between the Jew and

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his neighbors'. The Chigaco school of human ecology, interested in studying how the selective, distributive and accommodative forces of the environment produce and affect social life, argued that spatial differentiation and spatial segregation in the city emerge from below, in a spontaneously patterned way. Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925: 56) considered that:

> This differentiation into natural, economic and cultural groupings gives form and character to the city. For segregation offers the group, and thereby the individuals who compose the group, a place and a role in the total organization of city life. Segregations limits development in certain directions, but releases it in others. These areas tend to accentuate certains traits, to attract and develop their kind of individuals, and so to become further differentiated.

A very different perspective on separation and segration has been elaborated by Michel Foucault. Foucault regarded walls as architectural arrangements for exclusion and isolation. On his account, segregation and separation do not emerge from below, rather are planned from above and, more precisely, are part of certain *dispositifs* of government. The shift from the medieval bellic wall to the governmental wall leaves in the cities an ominous presence, the wall of the prison and of the other enclosed institutions:

> The high wall, no longer the wall that surrounds and protects, no longer the wall that stands for power and wealth, but the meticulously sealed wall, uncrossable in either direction, closed in upon the now mysterious work of punishment, will become, near at hand, sometimes even at the very centre of the cities of the nineteenth century, the monotonous figure, at once material and symbolic, of the power to punish. (Foucault 1977[1975]: 116)

The modern city transforms walls into elements of a *spatial political economy of government*. The outer boundary and its capacity to protect the city from external invasion is no longer what really matters, instead it is the capacity to manage enclaves and islands within the city. Walls are turned into tools for the government of the population. Consequently, it is the power to control settlements and fluxes of people in the urban space that becomes essential. Housing and logistics (stockage,

transport, distribution, and delivery) become prominent goals for planners from both economic and political perspectives. The Fordist industrial economic model corresponds to such spatial organisation, in which walls separate classes, *qua* large occupations groups, that have clearly differentiated lived experiences of the city.

With the crisis of the disciplinary model, the history of the governmental wall enters a third stage. After the medieval walled urbs and the urban wall of the enclosed institution, a further trend towards pluralisation and dispersal takes place. It is a process which can be understood through the Foucaultian notion of 'capillarisation' of power. New forms of segregation emerge, based on new 'smart' technologies that increase selectivity in individual access. Walls become virtual: they are pluralised and potentially everywhere. Once the technological infrastructure is implemented, it takes no more than an instant to actualise an *ad hoc* wall. We seem to be faced with a new 'partitioned city' (Marcuse 1995; Caldeira 2001), or dual city. As observed by Stavros Stavrides (2006), 'in today's partitioned cities thresholds are rapidly being replaced by check-points, control areas that regulate encounters and discriminate between users'. Lianos (2001) sums up the features of new 'post-industrial' social control as consisting of three major aspects: *privatisation* (fear of 'exposed' public space), *cindynisation* or dangersation (the city interpreted as a field of threatening potential events), and *periopticity* (social control enacted no longer through panoptic surveillance, rather through autonomous and differential individual motivation grounded in competition for access and inclusion).

The impact of governmental diffusion, together with the capillarisation and infiltration of power devices at every scale, entail a concurrent multiplication of walls and wall-like artifacts (Brighenti forthcoming). Therefore the dissemination and the scattering of walls in urban space does not mean their disappearance, least that the materiality ceases to matter. In this sense, Alsayyad and Roy (2006) have spoken of the contemporary urban condition as a 'medieval modernity': contemporary urban geographies appear to be constituted through a constellation of fragmented spaces, as embodied in the exemplary cases of the gated enclave, the squatter settlement and the camp. Similarly, Weizman (2007) has described the complexities of walling

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strategies in the Israeli 'architecture of occupaiton' in the Palestinian occupied territories. In all these cases, walls are still among the most widespread and effective devices for the government of populations around the world, especially in urban environments. Arguably, it is so because walls impact so forcefully on the material and sensorial environment. Walls are among the primary boundary-creating objects, but their contemporary use is not as monolothic as it used to be. The general category 'wall' includes, in fact, a wide and increasingly diversified set of separating artefacts, such as barriers, fences, gates, parapets, wire, and so on, each of which is endowed with its own specific boundary-making features.

In order to carry on the analysis the pluralisation, dispersal and ubiquitousness of walls in contemporary urban space, it can be helpful to develop an analytic scheme to address the materialities, functionalities and affectivities of walls.

3. For an Analytic of Wall

From a sociological point of view we can, on the basis of what said above, identify a series of analytic qualities of walls, which also represent a series of aspects upon which an enquiry can be based:

Materiality. 'Wall' is in fact an umbrella term and a shorthand for a series of wall-like artifacts, i.e. objects that are primarily aimed at creating and sustaining some sort of boundary. This type of object includes a group of separating artifacts, such as barriers, fences, gates, parapets, barricades, barbed wire (on the latter, see in particular Netz 2004), and so on. Overall, these objects certainly rank as low-tech devices compared to smarter population management devices – used for both human and animal populations. The undeniable effectiveness of walls, however, is due to the fact that they impact directly on bodies, on the materiality of the social. Originally, boundaries act upon bodily movements, hampering some trajectories and facilitating others. This explains why walls are still among the most effective and direct devices for the government of populations around the world. Thus, wall-like artifacts should firstly be classified and studied

comparatively, on the basis of the differential degrees of superability they have, but also permeability, transparency, and so on. Materials technologies and building technologies – more precisely, the relationship between these technologies and bodily movements and the mobilities they enable – are the point of departure of our study. Materials range from stone, through glass (a crucial mid 19th century innovation in architecture), to smart electronic movement-sensitive devices. In any case, it is clear that fixity cannot be taken as a defining feature of walls, given that tactical uses can exploit movable surfaces such as trains, lorries, and so on as visible walls (see the points on visibility and uses below).

Territoriality. Taking the material dimension seriously does not mean discarding the immaterial, but instead studying precisely the points of convergence between the two layers. Walls' territoriality is a case in point because every territory is in fact a mixed entity, material and immaterial at the same time. What territories do is inscribe relationships into a given material support. Territories are better imagined as processes than objects. In fact, making territories equates to drawing boundaries and sustaining the relationships that are defined by and depend upon those boundaries (Brighenti 2006). In this respect, walls are fundamentally vertical, and the first meaning we can give to verticality is *impediment*. As vertical boundaries, walls constrain people flows transforming a smooth space into a striated one. As we have seen above, the well known historical example is urban residential segregation, which begins in the form of the walled Jewish ghetto. Incidentally, walls are not the only tools of segregation. Shantytowns and favelas are segregated without being walled, as not many people from the outside wish to go there. More generally however, urban space would hardly be conceivable without wall-like artifacts and to all appearances, the history of the city is a history of boundaries no less than a history of flows. Most importantly, boundaries are not all-or-nothing barriers, but always a matter of degree and relative speeds. On the basis of a processual and relational view on territory, walls should be studied not so much in terms of their physical extension and location, as much as in terms of the affects that they create. Here, we can also appreciate that the difference between a wall and a door is in fact quite relative. People who are not admitted will experience the wall-like quality of doors and, for

some, taking walls as doors can even become a personal, political, or economic challenge. Walls demarcate a within and a beyond and, by doing so, they define flows of circulation, set paths and trajectories for people and, consequently, determine the possibilities and impossibilities of encounters.

Visibility. As soon as we analyse the territoriality of walls, we realise that not only are walls boundaries between territories, but are themselves territories. To people, they are meaningful, not only for what they separate or hide, but also in themselves. Consequently, we encounter a second meaning of verticality, namely *surfaceality*. *Logically* speaking walls are in-between people, vehicles, etc. – yet *phenomenologically* speaking they constitute a horizon, however relative, which is meaningful in itself. In a significant sense, architecture is the science and the art of this relative and close horizon. If for Simmel walls were mute, 1968 – Guattari reminds us – taught us to read desire on the walls. Although not in a politically explicit way, a whole generation of graffiti writers and street artists understood quite clearly the lesson of walls' visibility – as did advertisers, at least since Simmel's times. Urban walls are surfaces of projection. As Iveson (2007) remarks, they deliver a sort of constant 'public address'. Outdoor advertisement and graffiti are both part of such process of attention claiming that represents an essential part of the new type of urban capitalism and entrepreneurialism (Chmielewska 2005; Cronin 2008). From this point of view, walls are to be studied in terms of the differential visibilities they possess and consequently confer, as well as in terms of the social effects of such visibility. Walls create *a public* in Gabriel Tarde's (1901) sense: as visible surfaces, they define a public focus of attention for a number of viewers and actors who are spatially dispersed. Each wall also collects a *temporally* dispersed audience that, at some point, have transited nearby. Hence, the wall becomes part of the struggle for public attention and key element in the configuration of an urban regime visibility (Brighenti 2007). A politics of visibility – which, with Tripodi (2008), we may also call a *politics of verticality* – is crucial to appreciate the stakes of the social life of walls: corresponding to every definition of a field of visibility are demands and tensions which endeavour to establish a connection between the possible and the proper, between what can be seen and what should or should not be seen, between who can and who

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cannot see others. Thus, the symbolism of the wall as an exclusionary and containment device can be better understood as a single specific arrangement in a wider field of the politics of visibilities.

Rhythm. A sociological study of walls cannot abstract itself from the fact that walls possess rhythms. As any other boundary artifacts, walls have life cycles, which correspond to successions of points and moments of concentration and dispersal of people, objects and events. Rhythms occur at different time scales, ranging from temporary, occasional, and emergency-related (e.g. *cordon sanitaire*, police no-crossing line etc.), through regular (to retrieve Simmel once again, a door can in fact be observed and described as a rhythmic wall) and cyclic (circadian, hebdomadal, monthly, seasonal, and yearly cycles – like the medieval city gates but also the Jewish *eruv*), to generational (with the Berlin wall providing a clear example of generational wall), historic, and 'immemorial' walls. All these different rhythms are not simply successive or alternative to one other, rather coexistent, stratified, modulating each other. Urban renewal megaprojects, for instance, can be observed from the point of view of the heavy impact they have on the rhythms of walls in the affected zones. The social life of walls also includes conflicts over the rhythms of these artifacts. Thus, in our study of walls we need to include an analysis of rhythms, based on the factors and determinants of each rhythm, its scale, variance, predictability, and so on.

Uses. By far the most complex dimension is related to the different uses of walls. In the political economy of urban spatiality, walls appear as governmental objects. Foucault (1991 [1978]) describes governmentality as comprising three interlocked elements: a set of institutions and procedures for the exercise of power over a population, the emergent historical configuration of such governmental *savoirs*, and the application of these tools to political institutions, in particular the administrative state. Within this broad framework, one can appreciate the fact that walls are planned and built as part of a strategy aimed at controlling people by means of controlling spatial displacement. A vision, or plan, is at the core of wall-building sciences. From the strategic point of view, walls appear as useful separators and flux managers. Further, not only must walls be built, they must also be maintained, repaired, reconfigured. However, walls do not lend themselves only to strategy. While they are introduced as strategic, they are also always subject to tactical uses.

Both strategies and tactics (as classically described by de Certeau 1984) can be regarded as territorial endeavours (Kärrholm 2007). Notably, the classical distinction between strategy and tactics does not mean that established power is only strategic and the powerless are only tactical. On the contrary, social movements, oppositional and subcultural groups often develop strategic lines and, conversely, we often see situations in which the establishment acts tactically. In any case, situational interaction constantly modifies and reshapes the significance, impact and meaning of walls. For instance, graffiti are tactical interventions upon walls, in the sense that walls are built by day and painted by night. Whereas strategy aims at naturalising walls, pushing them to the background, tactics re-thematise them in various guises, pulling them towards new foregrounds. From the tactical perspective, the most remarkable feature of walls is that they offer a visible surface, which becomes a surface of inscription for stratified, criss-crossing and overlapping traces. Such traces are highly visible interventions that define a type of social interaction at a distance. Besides immediate direct interaction between people, urban environments are full of, and sometimes saturated with, such types of mediated interaction. The sociological study of walls must then account for the strategic and tactical uses of walls. It is necessary to tackle how they define, not simply closures, but also fixtures, interstices, and all sort of mediated interaction.

4. Walls and mobile phones as horizons in the life-world

From both strategic and tactical perspectives, the wall is an urban object that constitutively calls into play the interweaving of space and social relations. Walls, like other territories, are material and immaterial at the same time: they manage space, command attention, and define mobility fluxes that impose conduct, but they are also constantly challenged because of the meaning they assume: they can be reassuring as well as oppressive, they can be irritating as well as inspiring. Marcuse and Van Kempen (Eds. 2000: 250) claim that 'walls, literal or symbolic, prevent people from seeing, meeting and hearing each other; at the estreme they insulate and they exclude'. In parallel to the modern history of governmentality, which has diffused, capillarised and infiltrated power devices at each social scale, it is possible to diagnose a concurrent multiplication of walls

and other wall-like artefacts. In the modern city, walls correspond to planned zoning, according to a politics of connection and separation which has been described by Caldeira (2001) through her metaphor of the 'city of walls'.

At the same time that walls set up such perceptual limitations, however, they also tend to become part of the unquestioned, naturalised background of the here-and-now of a given urban environment. Urbanites do not stare at walls, but that does not mean that walls are unimportant: people look at walls only *a contrario*, so to speak, as dead ends to avoid, literally as *impasses*. Walls are perceived as stable boundaries (Lynch 1960). Consequently, the feature of in-betweeness that characterises the wall constantly shifts towards the horizon of the life-world. Alfred Schütz (1970) described the social *Lebenswelt* as something that constitutes an unquestioned, taken for granted horizon of experience. Experiences take place *within* such frame. Visible, actual problems and issues are placed within an unproblematic background. The phenomenological perspective allows us to make sense of the intrinsic vagueness and 'unmappability' of spatial experience (Miller 2006). It should be added that, if this is the case, it is at least in part because in the majority of occasions one accepts to confine one's spatial experience within a horizon which is never fully or exhaustively interrogated. In a sense, in many situations, walls belong to such unquestioned, invisible horizon.

Mobile phones and, more generally, new media confront us with a similar situation. Phenomenologically speaking, they cannot be adequately understood as mere tools but must be appreciated as whole *environments*. Mobile media are not objects, rather environmental infrastructures. Just like a sociological analytic of walls, the conceptual repertoire for the sociological study of mobile communication should include at least a media ecology, an urban ecology and an ecology of attentions. An ecological perspective does not prevent a focus on power relations in that concepts like 'control' and 'freedom of movement' can themselves be interpreted as ecological concepts. The ecological perspective is useful to explain why it is so easy to concede that mobile phones have changed our sociality but it is so hard to tell whether it was for better or worse. Most new media literature leans toward the techno-enthusiast side. A sort of 'iCan-YouCan'

discourse, which is the new media advertisement ideology pivoted around the so-called 'user empowerment', seems to pervade the scholarly literature.

Because of this, two crucial elements are largely underestimated in the existing studies: first, the extent to which new media can become means of control rather than emancipation; second, the degree to which new media can directly and indirectly foster existing social inequalities. While ubiquitous computing and the diffusion of locative media in the city are often emphasised as empowering effects, what is often overlooked is the fact that urban spatial motility is predictably going to become a crucial factor of social stratification in the next future. A number of reasons contribute to this trend, including factors such as the cost of fossil fuel, restrictions to international migration and the increasing partitioning of the city with its associated residential segregation ('hyperghettoes') and self-segregation ('gating') processes.

Paradoxically, even studies explicitly concerned with the political significance of the new media, like Fenton's (2008), are markedly more focused on the ways in which new media allow for a reimagination of hope rather than the ways in which they may turn out to be an additional factor of social differentiation and inequality. Awareness of this 'dark side' of new media – which basically consists in its wall-like qualities – is essential to examine the place and the scope of governmental and resistance practices in the contemporary city. The phenomenological experience of media-saturated spaces is perfectly capture by Adey (2008: 443) in his Deleuzian-inspired description of modern airport travellers as 'ticks':

> Passengers follow the usual procedures of checking-in, going through security control, waiting in departure lounge, going to gate, waiting in gate, boarding plane. Between these processing sites, corridors and walls are constructed to limit possibilities. Such designs are premised upon the imagination of the passenger-as-tick; rendered with a limited set of actions and reactions by the building.

5. Circulations, segregations

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The phenomenological invisibility of walls makes it possible to reach the high levels of segregation a growing number of observers are increasingly concerned about. Social closure is a process through which communities wall themselves in while walling out the 'others' and, by doing so, destroy solidarity, fostering intolerance towards the outside. It is no coincidence that the world rise of mobile communication is contemporary to this process of fragmentation and social closure. The network age does not at all mean the end of walls, just like it did not entail the dissolution of space proclaimed by the internet prophets in the early 1990s. Rather, it entails a transformation of walling technologies. How could we describe the relationship between the connections and separations enacted through walls and the connections and separations made possible by network insfratructures (Graham and Marvin 2001)? For many, the simple opposition can be drawn: walls do not communicate, while mobile communication does not know walls. 'If your teeth carried an RFID tag – writes Mitchell (2003: 77) in one of his smart examples – you might make purchases or open hotel room doors by flashing a smile'.

However, depending on who you are, the same RFID could also ensure that it is a jail room that is being opened for you, or that will ensure that you ragged scum do not dare approach retail and consumptions zones. Then, you will certainly stop smiling. The scenery that has emerged since Foucault's and Deleuze's analyses on governmentality and control is marked by the rise of digital locative technology, like radio frequency identification tags, personal digital assistants, and other ubiquitous transponders, but the conceptual apparatus they elaborated is still extremely relevant today. Cities continue to operate as organised geographies that sort their populations and regulate flows and boundaries and, from this point of view, the phenomenological experience of urban environments is highly contingent upon this pre-phenomenological, machinic setup (Amin and Thrift 2002).

Contrary to what commonly held, mobile media do not tear down walls. Walls are still present in new technologies, not only in the form of firewalls and checkpoints, but also in a variety of software-sorted spaces (Thrift 2005). Mobile media are no less territorial than brick walls, although their territorialising devices work differently. Researches on the mediacity (Eckardt *et al.*

eds. 2008; McQuire 2008), or the interplay between the new media and the city, are increasingly revealing this. As observed by Kaufmann and Montulet (2009: 49), 'to travel fast and far does not necessarily mean that one is "freer" in one's movements in space and time.' Mobile phones can be described as actually 'immobile mobiles', if one considers that every mobility they enable is predicated upon the assumption of a series of corresponding moorings and immobilities. Perhaps, what we are seeing is an emerging situation in which networks are only for the rich and walls for the poor. The ubiquity of the mobile phone, while experienced as a private and enabling technology, is in fact inserted into a wider architecture of visibility, whereby virtual ubiquitous flows and boundaries function as wall-like *dispositifs* within the modern city.

Ultimately, both walls and the media retain a potentiality for being places not only of government, sorting and resistance, but of *public life* properly speaking (Iveson 2009). In particular, a comparative perspective on different designs and uses of walls and the media should be able to assess walls' situational capacity to *create the public*, i.e. to stir movements and affects that resist enclosure, privatisation, exclusion, and eviction (see e.g. Blomley 2004; Delaney 2004). Struggles take the form of in/visibilisation strategies and tactics. They concern precisely the threshold between sorting objects and environments. Social and political conflict is thus technological, cultural, and legal *at the same time*, as it is fundamentally articulated around the techniques or ways of making walls and wall inscriptions either visibile or invisible according to different plans, as well as around the meaning that is attributed to such in/visibility and the effects that follow from these attributions. Understood as convergence zones between the material and the immaterial, both walls and network infrastructures concern the relationship between bodies and their environment, speeds and affects, the engineering of affects and mobility through one another.

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