Breaking Down Walls: A Historical and Philosophical Response to Xenophobia

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Barriers to diversity are real, and they carry significant consequences for our nation’s cultural consciousness. Throughout history human societies have taken to rejecting the beliefs of other cultures for the primary purpose of preserving their own cultural integrity. It is this xenophobia, or fear of other cultures, that drives society to do this without recognition of the potential consequences. A holistic look at varying cultures over the course of time will demonstrate a consistent theme of xenophobia, manifesting in physical and metaphorical walls used to keep out foreign cultures. However, this resistance to culture ultimately results in a loss of the potential that a particular group of people might have. In this way, by denying other groups of people the ability to integrate into a society, we are in fact denying ourselves the benefits that they may be able to offer us. Xenophobia is detrimental to the progressive advancement of a society. In order to prevent this, we must tear down the walls that already exist, and prevent the construction of new ones.
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Humans have a basic need for shelter. In fact, many people consider the design and creation of shelters to be one of the staples of a civilization. From the most basic of structures we have come very far to form the towns, cities, and international metropolises that we see today. While there are many individual components that make these structures up, the one critical part to all constructs are the walls. It is the fact that space can be enclosed that makes it a shelter and not just a plot of land. The dictionary defines a wall to be “a usually solid structure that defines and sometimes protects an area.” Ergo, we as people put up walls to define us or protect us. The primary purpose of a wall, then, is not to keep something in, but rather to keep things out. We may construct walls to keep something specific out, say the cold weather, but there may be things we also keep out without realizing it, such as sunlight. While walls can be intended for a singular purpose, the ramifications of these barriers can reach far beyond what was originally intended.

This brings me to my point. For millennia humans have built walls with the express purpose of keeping something out, and many of those times have been to keep out people. In doing so, they have kept out not only those people, but also what those people believe. Everything that those people bring with them, their fears, dreams, jobs, thoughts, ideas, all of that is kept out with the use of these walls. Entire cultures can be shut out with the use of walls. Traditionally, when we as Americans do not understand something, we tend to shut it out; we shut things out because we fear them. As a result we utilize walls to shut out cultures that we fear. For centuries the United States has been putting up walls to shun other cultures, and if we continue in this trend we are likely to lose out as a society on what other cultures can offer us.

The term for shutting out cultures based on fear is xenophobia. The technical definition for xenophobia is an unreasonable fear of foreigners or strangers or of that which is foreign or
strange. This should sound familiar to us because it echoes the cliche that as humans we fear what we do not understand. In lieu of understanding, we build walls.

Putting up walls to keep out other cultures is not uncommon in global history. One of the earliest examples of xenophobia came in the form of the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall was constructed in various sections between the 5th and 16th century. The main perception that we have of the wall today is of a peaceful Chinese people seeking to defend themselves from “evil invaders,” (I blame the Disney movie *Mulan* for this false notion).

In reality, while the Chinese did use the wall as a defensive line, one of the greater motives behind portions of the wall was to secure valuable trading routes, and to enforce Chinese policing power over other peoples (Lovell, 2006). Not only did they believe that they could claim the land, they also felt that it was their right to keep it from peoples they considered to be “less” than themselves. This xenophobia lead them to grant parts of the wall names like, “Tower for Suppressing the North,” “Fort for Suppressing the Border,” and “Fort Where Barbarians are Killed,” (Lovell, 2006) (eventually though, the Chinese did change that name for one more neutral in stance). We should not be mistaken, however. It was not a desire for seclusion that the Chinese built the wall; the xenophobic ideals of each dynasty drove them to shut out other cultures. In some ways, they were even resentful of those cultures for having ideologies that differed from their own, thus threatening the status quo they had become accustomed to.

These feelings of resentment are very similar to those in Rwanda in the year 1994. An estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed over the course of 100 days. We need to remember that those killed were predominantly of the Tutsi descent, while the ones perpetrating those murders were predominantly of the Hutu descent. Albeit this genocide happened over a
relatively short amount of time, the tension and resentment that precluded this event had been building up for decades (Rwanda, 2008). It started with Belgian colonialism in the early 20th century. The Belgians, recognizing the lighter skin of the Tutsis, felt that they were superior to the Hutus. As a result, they provided them with the better jobs in society, as well as other advantages like higher political status. While the Tutsis were enjoying their elite status, the resentment from the Hutus gradually grew until it exploded in riots in the late 1950's.

A decade later, the Belgians left southern Africa, and relinquished control to the Rwandans. The Hutus began taking over official positions the Belgians had left. They took advantage of this opportunity to begin doling out their resentment toward the Tutsis. It was not until the death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana (purportedly assassinated by Tutsis extremists) that the Hutus had a firm enough basis to launch their campaign against the Tutsis (Rwanda, 2008).

Although this is not a physical wall, the resentment that the Hutus held for the Tutsis over the years was a metaphorical wall. Their hatred for the Tutsis only served to foster a xenophobic attitude that resulted in the genocidal travesty of 1994.

Our country also has its own special history of metaphorical walls that we put up because of xenophobia. A prime example would be the first “Red Scare” that occurred from 1919-1920. During this post World War I era, there was much fear within the nation that a communist uprising was imminent. This was spurred by the increasing social unrest among recent European immigrants (it conflicted with the surmounting feelings of patriotism in the country, post World War I). At the time, the media portrayed these different political ideologies as acts against American society, thus furthering the xenophobia that was already there. This negative portrayal
by the mass media was in fact a textbook example of xenophobia; Americans were genuinely afraid of the idea of communism and the people that seemed tied to it.

The consequence of this fear was that the government began to take its cues from the commonly held societal opinions; it started to take action against these “radical activists.” The “wall” that the government used to root out these people was the Sedition Act of 1918, which effectively allowed for the deportation of unwanted aliens because of their views or associations. Hundreds of immigrants were deported from the U.S. based on these grounds. Even more frightening, we now know that the actions by the government were wanton in nature since they, “[made] little effort to distinguish true threats from ideological dissidents,” (Cole, 2002). With each real threat to national security countless other immigrants that had unacceptable political stances were removed from American society because Americans feared these immigrants’ culture and ideas; for that, they were ostracized.

Ostracization was again prevalent in our country around 1942, soon after we entered into the Second World War. This time, however, it was not based on political or economic theology but solely on race. This rejection of culture was enforced upon Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans, both new and old to the United States. Like the Red Scare, this was also initiated by a significant event, the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military on December 7, 1942. Not since the Civil War had there been such an act of war committed on United States soil. It should not come as a surprise, then, that there was a severe reaction evoked through the anger and frustration felt by Americans at that time. That reaction officially became Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. This order made it possible to declare certain geographical areas to be regulated military zones. It prohibited people of Japanese ancestry from living in those zones. The fear of attack from Japanese spies
perpetuated the support for this order and the subsequent Japanese internment camps. From 1942 to the end of World War II, approximately 100,000 Japanese Americans were moved to these “war relocation camps.”

Politicians as well as other activists spoke out against the unconstitutionality of the executive order and the internment camps. Despite their best efforts, the Supreme Court still ruled that the use of the internment camps for those of Japanese ancestry was completely warranted (Korematsu v. United States, 1944). We now know, however, that these actions had little military value. President Reagan addressed this issue in 1988 when he signed into legislation an apology based on the nature of the camps; he stated that they were founded on, "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership,” (100th Congress, 1988). It was these three failings that ultimately caused the construction of the walls, both physical and metaphorical (the actual law), that promoted xenophobia toward the Japanese. The rejection of Japanese people helped to eliminate many of their traditions in this country. To avoid this rejection by American society, many focused on assimilating into American culture and ended up becoming xenophobic themselves.

This brings us to the major case of xenophobia that we see in our country today. This, of course, is against Hispanic peoples, primarily immigrants coming from Mexico. Immigration from Mexico, both legal and illegal, is as integral a part of our country as is the food we grow or the technology we produce. At the rate that immigration is increasing, it is predicted that by 2020, Hispanic people will make up the majority of the U.S. population. That being said, for having such a large percentage of our population consist of Hispanics, our society holds some very adamant views about using walls to keep them out.
Like the ones we used for the Japanese, these walls are both physical and legal in nature. At this point, the term “border patrol” is likely to incite an argument between any two given people. The tangible examples of walls are seen in the increased frequency of border patrol checks and the actual wall existing along some areas of the border. In fact, Texas Governor Rick Perry, during a recent Republican debate, kept pushing the issue that the U.S. needed more “boots on the ground” working in tandem with predator drones to properly secure the border. It is his opinion that before any immigration reform can be accomplished, the border has to be secured.

The xenophobia and the rejection of Hispanic culture and ideas ultimately culminates in the lack of understanding of a specific group of people. From this, a sense of resentment is made. These feelings are manifested in movements like ones that are pushing for a mandated U.S. history test as part of the application for citizenship, or the disallowing of bilingual education to be a part of public school curriculum. Each is an example of a xenophobic barrier, attempting to disavow Hispanic culture.

The most recent and prominent example of a metaphorical wall is the 1070 Bill Passed in Arizona on April 23, 2010. One of its most controversial stipulations requires that during a lawful stop or arrest, if police officers have a “reasonable suspicion” that someone might be an illegal alien, they are required to check that person’s citizen status (Arizona, 2010). While the Supreme Court upheld the Appeals Court’s decision to strike this part of the bill, the intent of the legislation is very much intact. It is apparent that the state of Arizona has chosen to deal with their immigrant problem with an outright system of profiling those that it deems not to be suitable to live within its borders. The consequences are still somewhat murky, and not yet fully
understood, but the embracement of xenophobia will eventually result in some kind of loss for our American culture, if it has not already.

During my time in Arizona, in the Fall of 2011, I attended a panel hosted by swath of experts regarding the effects of the 1070 bill. Among them were a State Senator, an anesthesiologist familiar with the State’s healthcare system, a prominent Arizona businessman, and someone who was an expert on Arizona’s societal conditions before and after the law came into effect. The panelists confirmed for me that, despite their personal beliefs, there will be direct and immediate impacts on local and national communities as a result of the Arizona 1070 bill.

The courts of the United States have ruled numerous times that a government has no power to restrict the rights of a protected class, unless it serves a legitimate governmental purpose. This is known as the principle of strict scrutiny. With it, a court can rule on the legality of law put forth by states that might limit or put restrictions upon a people or group. An example of this strain of ruling is Romer v. Evans (1996), a case from Colorado in the mid 1990’s. Urban communities like Aspen, Boulder, and Denver were writing laws to protect gays, lesbians, and transgendered people from being disenfranchised in areas such as housing, education, and even jobs. At that point in time, these people were not considered a protected class, but the urban centers of Colorado were beginning to see that there might be problems if steps were not taken to safeguard against the potential problems. However the laws were undermined in 1992 when the state of Colorado voted into law Amendment 2. This amendment effectively made it illegal for any local body of government to put forth a law that would grant special protections to homosexuals, lesbians, or transgendered peoples. The amendment also retroactively negated all of the laws that were previously set in place. The legal back and forth
went on for four years; it finally reached the Supreme Court in 1996 where the justices ruled that the law itself served no legitimate governmental purpose, thus it violated Title IX of the Civil Rights Act.

This situation applies directly to the 1070 Bill coming out of Arizona. As of right now the Supreme Court has ordered an injunctive relief (essentially ordering the amendment ineffective) on half of the Bill’s provisions, while the justices debate over their ruling. Ultimately, the State of Arizona has to be able to prove that the bill, in fact, benefits the government in some way. But unless they can do that, the bill will be declared unconstitutional, and stricken down in its entirety. It seems this will likely happen, not only because of the bill’s lack of benefit, but also because of the damage it incurs upon society. The Supreme Court is often very hesitant to actively make decisions that create new law, thus they offer rulings that coincide with legal precedent, as well as dominant societal views. The amendment proposed by Arizona clearly falls outside both of these avenues for decision making.

1070 itself is not as restrictive as any of the aforementioned examples, but it has that potential. Were we to leave the law as it stands (granted it is currently held up in the Supreme Court) there might be the impression that we are condoning what the law, as a wall, stands for. This could then lead to the construction of other walls for similar purposes. I would go so far as to deem the bill a “gateway wall.” This distinction is meant to compare the results of the bill to the drug marijuana in terms of what drugs a first time user might then be inclined to use. That is, it is the first step in cultural restriction that could potentially cause us to suffer more of a loss than we already have.
Although one would typically not want to paint the picture of a “slippery slope,” that is most likely the direction that we are heading in this particular instance. By affirming the idea of specific cultural restrictions on a particular group of people, we are saying that it is acceptable to put restrictions on any group of people for arbitrary reasons. The moment that we can make such a practice socially acceptable, we open ourselves to blatant disenfranchisement of protected classes that we have not seen since before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Attempting to quantify this loss of culture, however, is extremely difficult, since the loss itself is in human potential. What we lose is not measurable by some tangible weight or worth, rather the loss in the achievements and the deeds accomplished by the very people that we are trying to keep out of our country. How then can we hope to comprehend just exactly what we are missing? My solution to this problem is to measure the loss in terms of cultural contribution. By understanding what contributions the people of the Hispanic American’s have made in the past, we might be able to assess part of the value that they hold; a value that we as Americans would be remiss not to have.

To simplify this process, I have chosen only a handful of Mexican-Americans and highlighted their contributions to American life. First we can look at Carlos Alberto Santana. He is a world-renowned guitar player of Hispanic heritage. Both of his parents are Mexican, and he himself was born in Autlán de Navarro, Jalisco, Mexico. The family moved to San Francisco, California in the late 1950’s. At this time Carlos developed his love of playing the guitar and the violin. He honed his skills so that he might be more like his idol, B.B. King. Carlos reached critical acclaim in the 70’s and the 80’s with his complex riffs and melding of musical styles. In fact, he had a resurgence of popularity in the late 90’s after teaming up with Rob Thomas for the hit “Smooth.” While these performance contributions are truly valuable in their own right,
Santana did much more than that. He pioneered a fusion of salsa, blues, and rock, the likes of which had never before been attempted (Leng, 2000). This led to an evolution of a uniquely different set of musical genres that we would be left without today. On top of that, he also held a great influence over other aspiring guitar players, most notable among them Dave Murray of Iron Maiden. Without Santana’s presence in our country, we might not have gotten the benefit of these contributions.

We can see the same value in Hilda Lucia Solis. She was a California State Senator in the early 1990’s. Following her term in California she served in the United States House of Representatives from 2003-2009. During that time in office she put an enormous amount of effort into environmental legislation that ranged from expanding national wildlife preserves to promoting the use of alternative forms of energy. At the forefront of her efforts was the creation of green-collared jobs, an issue that Solis has pursued passionately.

Related to these achievements, Solis is also known for protecting labor rights. Not only has she been steadfast in her pursuit to ensure fair employment and safe labor practices in the United States, she has been strongly opposed to helping South American countries that actively use unfair labor practices. This ideology was instrumental in her rising to the position of Secretary of Labor under the Obama administration (Kornblut, 2008). Her insights coupled with her prevalent activism in and out of the United States, have resulted in contributions to this country that we would certainly miss. Simply put, these outstanding contributions are not something that we could easily replicate.

Ultimately, the issue of “the walls” come back to the issue of our fear of other cultures. Our fear manifests itself into the walls that we construct. This perpetual construction is what
brings us to the cycle of cultural loss that we experience on a daily basis. Walls can take a
number of forms, but regardless, their purpose remains the same. We have to decide as a society
whether or not we truly want to limit ourselves in such a way. An individual can only take one
brick out at a time, but a unified people can dismantle a wall, no matter the size.
Presentation Abstract

Xenophobia is persistent throughout our society. Paramount to its existence, is the fact that most Americans are largely ignorant to what it is, and the fact that they are contributing to it. Americans cannot be expected to change, unless they realize what they are doing is wrong. To demonstrate this I have focused my study on examples of Xenophobia, highlighting its downfalls and the harmful effects it can have. My goal then was to disseminate that information.

I found the avenue to accomplish this goal with the Annual National Collegiate Honors Conference. In 2011 the conference was held in Phoenix, Arizona, and the theme was “Stewards of our Colliding Worlds: Rights, Wrongs and Responsibilities.” I could not think of a more appropriate venue with which to share my studies and conclusions. This presentation concentrates on xenophobia’s persistence in our country’s history, and the loss of cultural contributions that can result from it.
Wall Presentation

Ladies and gentlemen, for millennia we have used walls as central constructs to serve our need for shelter. As humans we have an inherent need to protect ourselves by putting up these walls. A quick look around you will demonstrate our manifestation of that desire. To that end we realize that the primary purpose these walls serve is to keep things out. What those things may be depends on the type of wall. Despite what we might intend to keep out with the walls, there is always the chance that we are keeping out more than what we intend.

It is this kind of blanket expulsion that causes us to reject certain tangible elements, but also keep out relatively intangible benefits (i.e. ideologies, innovations, public works and so on). I submit to you that our use of walls has blocked us from unforeseen benefits, and has also had unforeseen consequences. Our rejection of other cultures, specifically those from Central and South America, has promoted our fear of those cultures, and has limited the benefits that we may have gleamed from them. Today, I seek to show you just what those are.

I have identified three different types of walls that can foster feelings of xenophobia.

I. Three Types of Walls

A. Physical

1. Great Wall of China

   a. An actual wall
b. Built between 5th and 16th centuries

c. Perception only a defensive measure (Mulan)

d. Secure trading routes

e. Enforce Chinese policing power over other peoples inferior

f. "Tower for Suppressing the North," "Fort for Suppressing the Border," and "Fort Where Barbarians are Killed,"

B. Metaphorical

1. Rwanda

a. Commonly held feeling or belief

b. 1994, genocide

c. Killed 800,000 Rwandans in 100 days, predominantly Tutsis

d. Began with Tutsis having power under Belgian Rule

e. Belgians left, so Hutus came to power.

f. Their hatred and resentment was the wall that suppressed the Tutsis

g. It was an ideology

C. Legal

1. Japanese Internment Camps

a. Strongly metaphorical, but has some tangible elements
b. Pearl Harbor was the catalyst to already existing negative feelings

c. Executive Order 9066 by President Roosevelt

d. Declared certain areas to be regulated military zones

e. Japanese ancestry couldn’t live there

f. More than 100,000 were put into war relocation camps

g. Fear and anger pushed the bill into effect

h. Caused a rift between peoples

i. Encouraged xenophobic feelings

j. Shut off that people

Laws as walls can be construed to affect people both directly, and indirectly.

As you heard at last night’s plenary, 1070 is in fact one of these legal walls. 1070 itself is not as restrictive as any of the aforementioned examples, but it has that potential. I would go so far as to deem it a "gateway wall". That is, it is the first step in cultural restriction that could potentially cause us to suffer more of a loss than we already have.

And rest assured ladies and gentlemen, we have undoubtedly suffered a loss as a direct response to the walls that we have put up. It is difficult to explain that kind of loss though when what we are losing is measured in human potential. To qualify the type of loss being suffered, imagine it in the form of cultural contributions that we may never receive, due to our xenophobic tendencies.
II. Loss through cultural contribution

A. Carlos Alberto Santana

1. Active musician since 1966
2. Family migrated in the early 50's
3. Pioneered the fusion of salsa, blues, and rock unlike any other
4. Influenced many modern guitarists (ex: Dave Murray of Iron Maiden)
5. Rob Thomas would suck in smooth without him

B. Hilda Lucia Solis

1. Originally a California State Senator
2. Then in the U.S. house of Representatives from 2003-2009
3. Better known for being the current Secretary of Labor under President Obama
4. Avid environmental and women's rights activist
5. Also has worked to preserve and in some cases improve workers rights

C. César Estrada Chávez


2. Originally an American farm worker.

3. Co founded the National Farm Workers Association (now United Farm Workers).


5. Now his birthday, March 31, is a state holiday in three states.

Ultimately a cultural loss that we cannot begin to imagine since we have no idea what the possibilities for loss are. I would also contend that we might lose a bit of ourselves in doing this. To talk more about this is my partner Jason Powell.
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