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A sovereign illusion: On the political theology of border walling

1 Introduction

The chapter investigates the phenomenon of border walling as a peculiar yet oppressive – and increasingly widespread – form of political violence. As of early 2022, almost eighty countries across the globe were surrounded either by a wall or a fence, which means that more than a third of the world's nation-states are currently bordered with some sort of a barrier. Compared to less than a dozen walls at the time the Iron Curtain fell (1989), the number has multiplied over the last two or three decades on an unprecedented scale.[1] From just twenty kilometers of fortification between Malaysia and Brunei to more than three thousand at the border of India and Bangladesh; from the barely known buffer separating Zimbabwe and Botswana to the globally discussed and highly polarizing Israeli West Bank barrier or Mexico–United States (US) border wall, and from unsophisticated barbed wire fences to massive concrete blocks accompanied by a complex surveillance apparatus of cameras, sensors or drones, all these constructions mark the process of harsh reterritorialization at the very heart of the "global village." More and more barriers even arise on the territory of the European Union (EU) – reputedly a home to the idea of free, unrestricted flows – both at its external borders (for example fences on the Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian borders with Belarus) and within the EU (for example fences on the Croatian borders with Hungary and Slovenia). This increasing reinforcement and fortification of borders made some scholars and journalists announce the coming of "the age of walls"[2] or even "the second great age of walls,"[3] roughly seven hundred years after the end of the first one, which marked the twilight of the Middle Ages and the advent of Modernity.

One cannot help but ask if there is any rationale for erecting such untimely physical structures at the turn of the third millennium, an era of ultra-modern biopolitical technologies like spyware or biometric databases? Declaratively, bor-

1 Élisabeth Vallet, "The World Is Witnessing a Rapid Proliferation of Border Walls," *Migration Policy Institute*, accessed August 27, 2022, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rapid-proliferation-number-border-walls.

2 Tim Marshall, *The Age of Walls: How Barriers Between Nations Are Changing Our World* (New York: Scribner, 2018).

3 David Frye, *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Brick* (New York: Scribner, 2018).

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der walls are mainly aimed at preventing terrorist attacks, illegal immigration and trafficking, or even – most recently – the spread of a pandemic. Practically, they not only prove to be cost-ineffective but, as pointed out by a number of researchers,[4] produce even more instability, for example, by fostering a borderland black market and intensifying tensions between neighboring nations. Instead of solving the problems they were supposedly intended to address, they merely act as a manifestation of brutal political violence and oppression, grotesque in its spectacular excessiveness yet posing a real threat to both local communities and global individuals: desperate economic migrants, would-be asylum seekers or a growing number of "climate refugees."

This border walling paradox was extensively theorized by Wendy Brown whose *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* offers a powerful argument that today's nation-state barriers are first and foremost "theater pieces for national populations [. . .] providing a visual emblem of power and protection that states increasingly cannot provide, and generating an imagery of stable and homogeneous nationhood concretely eroded by global flows."[5] As the function served by walls and fences is symbolic rather than actual, their manifest inefficacy is not an issue: "Walls constitute a spectacular screen for fantasies of restored sovereign potency and [. . .] function brilliantly as icons of such potency and protection, even when they fail."[6] With reference to both Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, Brown further interprets this paroxysm of enclosure as a captivating illusion of purity, impermeability and containment in the world of unbearable interdependence and vulnerability; a phantasmatic regress to the good old repressive power which "stand[s] as a kind of rebuke to every poststructuralist theorization of power as well as to every liberal hope for a global village."[7] The puzzling phenomenon of today's border walling is explained by her theory as a powerful compensation of declining sovereignty and

4 David B. Carter and Paul Poast, "Barriers to Trade: How Border Walls Affect Trade Relations," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2009): 165–185; Anna Gemantsky, Guy Grossman, and Austin L. Wright, "Border Walls and Smuggling Spillovers," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 3 (2019): 329–347, http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/100.00018094; Said Saddiki, *World of Walls: The Structure, Roles and Effectiveness of Separation Barriers* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017).

5 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 9.

6 Brown, *Walled States,* 9.

7 Brown, *Walled States,* 93. As far as poststructuralism, Brown argues that border walling mostly challenges Michel Foucault's thesis of the transformation of an early modern repressive power into a late modern biopower: "*Pace* Foucault's critique of the 'repressive hypothesis' and emphasis on the productive, rather than the repressive or censorious aspects of power, walls would seem to embody precisely the power of the 'no,' physically proclaiming and enforcing what is *interdit*," Brown, *Walled States,* 93.

a defensive retreat to hyper-territorialism which poses a serious challenge to the progressivist imagery of a borderless, post-sovereign world.

In what might be the most original bit of the book, Brown also adopts the discourse of political theology to argue that walls constitute a theological remainder of diminishing sovereignty, "the power-form that works by overawing us."[8] The divine reverence these constructions claim to inspire is grotesquely excessive because they are a highly decadent embodiment of sovereign power and, as such, they cannot help but realize its godlike attributes (of the supreme protector and punisher) in a perverted, disproportionate manner. But the exposure of this theological background of today's border walling is not all: Brown further offers some powerful criticism of those theories of sovereignty which tend to overestimate its supposedly godlike nature and are thus partly responsible for its "sanctification," so illustratively represented by the phenomenon of walling. This accusation is directed not only against the prominent advocates of sovereignty from Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) to Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), but also against their fierce liberal and leftist critics who, argues Brown, are so infected with the Schmittian over-appreciation of sovereign power that they end up falling into the trap of conservative political theology. Be it Michel Foucault (1926–1984), for whom sovereignty is "nearly impossible to escape," Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "for whom sovereignty only and always suppresses the multitude" or, last but not least, Giorgio Agamben's "formalistic account, in which sovereignty [. . .] [is] as timeless and eternal as the Latin Mass,"[9] Brown accuses all these (declaratively) anti-Schmittian thinkers of a morbid fascination with the supreme, ultimate power over human life; the fascination which ends up reinforcing the phantasmatic, godlike image of sovereign power as an overwhelming, invulnerable entity that might only be challenged by some intricate messianic operations.

What Brown's bold critique lacks is a philosophical counterpoint to these "religious modalities"[10] of conceiving sovereignty. Despite multiple references to such prominent critics of biopolitical violence as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Brown fails to offer a convincing illustration of the phantasmatic nature of sovereign potency. Such an illustration could be found, for example, in Walter Benjamin's (1892–1940) powerful refutation of Schmitt's political theology which is, however, not once mentioned in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. This absence is surprising if we realize the importance of Benjamin's critical theory for poststructuralist thinkers (Foucault, Derrida), its noteworthy

8 Brown, *Walled States,* 72.
9 Brown, *Walled States,* 73.
10 Brown, *Walled States,* 73.

application in Brown's other books and articles, and the Benjaminian lineage of Agamben's biopolitics, which are a major object of Brown's polemics.[11]

I argue that Benjamin's critique is a significant element missing from Brown's argumentation against the theological overtones of nation-state walling and offers a slight yet meaningful adjustment to her theory. Whereas Brown diagnoses the phenomenon of walling as a "fantasy of restored sovereign potency," Benjamin exposes the very idea of sovereign potency asa quasi-theological fantasy. To prove my argument, I first analyze the idealized image of sovereign potency found in Schmitt's theory of political decisionism, and confront it with Benjamin's deconstruction of the theological core of sovereignty. I then refer to Agamben's misreading of Benjamin's critique in order to illustrate Brown's thesis of the over-appreciation of sovereign power in contemporary political criticism. Last but not least, I use Benjamin's anti-Schmittian theory to expose the shortcomings of Brown's own interpretation of the wall as a symptom of "waning sovereignty."

2 Sovereign potency

Sovereignty is a concept that ranks prominently high on a scale of terminological ambiguity, but regardless of all its obscurity, it always expresses "the idea that there is a final and absolute authority in the political community."[12] That is why, ever since sovereign power emerged in modern political theory (if not earlier), it has been extensively conceptualized in the image and likeness of divine omnipotence. As Brown puts it:

> Ontologically, sovereignty is the unmoved mover. Epistemologically, it is a priori. As a power, it is supreme, unified, unaccountable, and generative. It is the source, condition, and protector of civic life and a unique form of power insofar as it brings a new entity into being and sustains control over its creation.[13]

A paradigmatic representation of these attributes in the modern theory of sovereignty is Hobbes' Leviathan, the monstrous being which embodies the supreme powers of the state. Although human-made and legitimized by the citizens, it is essentially meant to imitate God's potency and induce godly awe in subjects. Through this symbolic representation, argues Brown, "Hobbes reveals a funda-

11 Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 19–27.
12 F. H. Hinsley, *Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26.
13 Brown, *Walled States,* 70.

mental trick of sovereignty: We generate and authorize what then overawes us and is unaccountable to us because of its divine status."[14]

Yet the philosopher whom Brown makes primarily responsible for the sanctification of sovereign might is Schmitt, the icon of twentieth-century political theology and the author of the highly influential thesis that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[15] For Schmitt, the supreme attribute of sovereign power is not so much its majesty but absolute, godlike potency: the only political leader that can be called sovereign has an autonomous will and actions unrestricted by legal norms or any other external regulations. In daily political practice, such voluntarism (especially in liberal democracies, which Schmitt famously despised) is obviously unattainable but, he argues, there is at least one sphere of the political where sovereign power materializes and bows to no-one: the state of exception, "analogous to the miracle in theology"[16] in its powerful suspension of the law by a single political decision. In this regard, Schmitt's theory of the sovereign exception articulates a certain political self-dependence, "both a cleansing or purification of the political and the supreme reign of the political,"[17] which unconditionally dominates other fields of life in a moment of higher necessity.

The autonomy of the state, its supreme status in international relations and political decisionism of state leaders are exactly those characteristics of sovereign power which seem to be abruptly shrinking in the times of unrestricted global flows. This cannot help but generate a nostalgic longing for political self-agency and effective decision-making, or at least for their evocative substitutes. One of them, claims Brown, is the border wall: the construction which acts as a "theological remainder" precisely because it offers a crude, material symbol (or imitation) of the uncompromising potency whose image was so successfully inseminated in our collective mind by Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. Following his definition of decisionism as "pure will that bows before no sovereign truth,"[18] the wall represents the ideal of supreme voluntarism as it embodies the one and only sovereign: a political decision, perfectly self-centered, "accountable to nothing else and derived from nothing else."[19]

14 Brown, *Walled States*, 72.
15 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.
16 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
17 Brown, *Walled States*, 68.
18 Brown, *Walled States*, 67.
19 Brown, *Walled States*, 67.

Once we are tempted to follow this idealized image of sovereign potency, Brown's thesis of the wall as a phantasmatic restoration of political sovereignty in a globalized world seems convincing. The wall would, then, be a symbol of the longing for the Westphalian era which evokes the image of solid nation-state supremacy and the political decision-making uncompromised by any contingent external factors. But what if it is precisely the idea of sovereign decision-making which is a prime fantasy here? What if the autonomy of the political has always been an illusion, even long before the "global village"? Brown implies this illusionary nature of sovereignty when she characterizes Schmitt's theory of decisionism as "extremely consequential, despite being aspirational, ideological, even mythical, rather than literal."[20] However, she fails to elaborate on this "mythical" core of sovereignty, as if assuming that its phantasmatic nature is self-evident. It is not, which Brown herself makes clear when she exposes the symptomatic overappreciation of sovereign potency even in such harsh critics of political theology as Agamben or Negri.

3 Sovereign impotence

The lack of reference in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* to Benjamin's critique of Schmitt is so problematic because it is precisely the decisionist and voluntarist nature of sovereign power which he contests in the first place, thus offering both a powerful counterpoint to the religious representations of sovereignty and a thought-provoking supplement to Brown's own theory. Benjamin's critique is mostly to be found in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel,* his original and highly extravagant history of the baroque mourning play, finalized in 1925, at the epicenter of the Weimar Republic's political chaos and only three years after the publication of Schmitt's influential theory of sovereign exception. Although there is no straightforward reference to Schmitt's decisionism in Benjamin's book, and it remains unclear if his remarks on sovereignty were meant as a direct challenge to *Political Theology* (1922), from today's perspective the main object of Benjamin's criticism is not hard to identify.[21]

20 Brown, *Walled States,* 68.

21 That Benjamin's theory of sovereignty is a camouflaged critique of Schmitt's political theology was first implied by Jacques Derrida in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion,* ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228–298, and elaborated by Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception (Homo sacer II, 1)*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005) who argued that the intellectual entanglement of Benjamin and Schmitt is much greater than previously thought.

Benjamin follows Schmitt practically to the letter in emphasizing the state of exception as the core of sovereignty and scrutinizing the formation of its modern paradigm throughout the seventeenth century.[22] However, instead of reinforcing the image of the Westphalian times as the "golden age" of nation-state political decisionism, he unveils the unwanted consequences of the decisionist formula. To do so, Benjamin concentrates mainly on those plays which showed the functioning of the princely court in the face of political and military challenges. Paradoxically, he argues, although they were intended as loyalist appreciation of the monarch, the mediocre skills of German playwrights rather exposed the monarch's embarrassing ineptitude. The most fateful vice of the baroque sovereign as illustrated in *Trauerspiel* is his pathological indecisiveness, which discloses the puzzling gap between the absolute power of the prince and his absolute inability to enforce it: "The more power he has, the more he demonstrates his incapacity to arrive at an effective decision."[23] This gap is especially conspicuous in emergency situations, which call for extraordinary measures and efficient decision-making; although the baroque sovereign has the authority to suspend law and implement the state of exception, this radical perspective makes him so paralyzed that any binding decisions are practically frustrated. He is "a victim of a theologically founded politics, which allows for no distinction between the person and his authority and therefore knows no limit."[24]

It is worth noting here that Benjamin makes two modest but weighty adjustments to Schmitt's theory of sovereign exception. First, while Schmitt concentrated on the sovereign's formal *entitlement* to decision-making, for Benjamin it is only the very *act* of deciding on exception that matters. Second, whereas Schmitt argued that sovereign power is conditioned by the *implementation* of the state of exception, for Benjamin it is only the capability of its *exclusion* that decides on sovereignty. Suspension of the law, argues Benjamin, generates no less turmoil and unrest than an emergency situation, so only the successful termination of both may eventually harness the chaos and thus testify to sovereign power. Why are these adjustments so relevant? Because they expose a fundamental contradiction inscribed in Schmitt's formula of sovereignty: "The antithesis between the power of the ruler and his ability to rule."[25] Confronted with the realities of the seventeenth-century monarchy, claims Benjamin, the formula only highlights the

22 Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 48–52.

23 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 188.

24 Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 55.

25 Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 56.

shameful fact that "the prince, with whom rests the decision concerning the state of exception, shows that, as soon as the situation arises, a decision is nearly impossible for him."[26]

If the actual decision-making process does not overlap with the formal decision-making authority of the sovereign, his supreme power fails to meet the demands of the decisionist ideal type. Thus, the "human, all too human" baroque monarch as illustrated by Benjamin unveils the phantasmatic nature of Schmitt's theory which overestimates the autonomy of the political and ignores such uncomfortable, upsetting factors as simple affectivity. Consequently, Benjamin's theory of "sovereign indecision"[27] dismantles the decisionist apparatus from the inside: instead of trying to systematically refute Schmitt's argumentation, Benjamin mischievously puts a wrench in its works to demonstrate that "between *Macht* and *Vermögen,* between power and its exercise, a gap opens which no decision is capable of filling."[28] The very notion of sovereignty itself is thus put radically into question.

The figure of the *Trauerspiel* monarch is also used by Benjamin to expose a tragic paradox of sovereign power founded upon the state of exception. The baroque ruler, he argues, seeks to protect their subjects from political and military unrest, but their pathological inertia only reinforces endless chaos.[29] If the sovereign is incapable of deciding on the exception in an emergency situation, the crisis obviously unfolds, and if they somehow manage to implement the state of exception but fail to further revoke it, they end up bringing about the state of endless legal anomy. As long as political sovereignty solely depends on effective decision-making, any stupor of volition raises the risk of a permanent, pathological state of exception which "no longer appears as the threshold that guarantees the articulation between an inside and an outside, or between anomie and the juridical context," but "is, rather, a zone of absolute indeterminacy between anomie and law, in which the sphere of creatures and the juridical order are caught up in a single catastrophe."[30] Benjamin's critique thus demonstrates that Schmitt's theory works only as long as there is a structural, decision-based distinction into a rule and exception. Once the decisionist aspect of sovereignty is thwarted, nothing can stop the state of exception from getting amorphic and sliding into permanence, thereby establishing a long-lasting zone of indistinction between "legal" and "illegal" violence. It is precisely this corrupted, never-ending exception that Benja-

26 Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 56.
27 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 55.
28 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 56.
29 Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 57–58.
30 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 57.

min must have had in mind when he pointedly diagnosed elsewhere: "the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[31]

4 Sovereign fallacy

By questioning the godlike potency of the supreme decision-maker, Benjamin powerfully challenges the theological structure and overtones of sovereignty as presupposed by Schmitt. As an aside, but no less importantly, he also demonstrates how the interconnectedness of decision-based sovereignty and the state of exception makes the latter degenerate into an ambiguous instrument of oppression. And although his analyses solely concentrate on personal, affective deficiencies of power, their conclusions may well be applied to the structural aspects of politics. One such application is found in Agamben's widely discussed theory of the state of exception, where exception (with a clear intellectual debt to Benjamin's thesis) is defined as a perverted paradigm of contemporary political power.[32] Although, argues Agamben, the state of exception was originally theorized as a temporary and incidental measure of restoring social order, it has been increasingly transgressing its episodic nature.[33] Consequently, in today's political regimes – authoritarian and liberal democratic alike –we can observe a growing tendency to normalize exception or make it into a rule, with the state of exception no longer meant to bring back a "normal" state of affairs but rather replace it for good. To give just a couple of examples in support of Agamben's bold thesis: the state of exception introduced in France after the Paris terrorist attacks of 2015 only came to an end two years later, despite no other incidents of a comparable scale, and the infamous Patriot Act, adopted by the American Congress in response to 9/11, which made it possible for the US President to suspend the applicable law in any case of a terrorist threat, was in force for almost 20 years.

Even more importantly, adds Agamben, there has been an increasing trend toward the de facto states of exception, i.e., proceeding as if they were in force

31 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 392. This famous thesis was formulated in 1938 and surely inspired by the state of emergency introduced in Germany by the Enabling Act of 1933 and never officially called off. However, Agamben (*State of Exception*) argues that Benjamin's thesis, although contextualized, aptly describes a universal tendency of sovereign politics to produce permanent emergency situations.

32 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 1–31.

33 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 3–4.

but without their formal implementation, obviously in order to bypass the obstructive parliamentary procedures in political decision-making.[34] Such quasi-states of exception have been widely produced, by the institutions of the EU as a response to the financial crisis of 2008 or, quite recently, by a number of Western countries in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially to bypass the applicable environmental protection regulations. Agamben concludes, then, that the permanent state of exception (both *de iure* and de facto) is nothing aberrational; quite the opposite, the tendency to gravitate toward permanence is inscribed in the very nature of sovereign exception.[35] Sovereign power just cannot help but *except*, both itself from legal regulations, and human bodies from each other. That is why, as a result of permanent exception, some groups and individuals (ethnic minorities, refugees, etc.) are permanently excluded from participation or belonging and placed outside, be it a nation-state border or political community.

A peculiar case of the permanent exception (as an emergency power and a mechanism of exclusion) is the border wall. From Agamben's perspective, a physical barrier between nation-states might even be more: the ultimate embodiment of sovereign exception, both in terms of a brutal division of the inside and outside, and an unceasing "legal anarchy" that it generates in borderlands. As Brown puts it, "walls respond to and extend a condition in which the nation ceases to correspond to the border between friend and enemy and sovereignty instead declares permanent emergency powers to suspend the law and face down enemies everywhere."[36] Following Agamben, an unprecedented paroxysm of border walling would be a logical consequence of the transformation of exception into a widespread technology of power: when permanent exception becomes a new model of sovereignty, its supreme representation must be a physical structure which takes it to the extreme. However, from Benjamin's perspective (although his theory of exception is a primary inspiration for Agamben), things look clearly different. The wall is, then, a logical but *unwanted* consequence of modeling sovereignty on the theological foundation of decisionist potency. Visually, the wall might appear as the ideal of supreme political voluntarism, but essentially it is a rather sad testament to the dysfunctionality of sovereign power and a monstrous side-effect of political inefficacy. Its grotesque body implies that in a world of complex interdependence sovereign decision-makers might find it easier to erect an oppressive, costly and porous fortification than to efficiently apply nonviolent measures of facing global challenges that do not originate at the border.

34 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4.
35 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 85–87.
36 Brown, *Walled States,* 98.

5 Conclusions

What lesson, then, is to be learned from Benjamin's critique of sovereignty and how does it contribute to Brown's theory of walling? First and foremost, Benjamin exposes that the modern theory of sovereignty, because of its theological legacy, is essentially incompatible with any political praxis. The ideal of sovereign potency is godlike and thus, literally, inhuman. To treat it as a supreme end or lost essence of politics, not as a theologically-motivated fantasy, means to fatally over-appreciate the potential of politics. So as to reach the unattainable goal of sovereign might and handle with their own fallibility, political decision-makers would go to extremes, for example, slide into dictatorship, like in the German mourning plays, or erect a massive border wall, like in recent political practice. Sovereignty as the ideal type, implies Benjamin, needs to be once and for all desanctified, profaned (in Agamben's meaning of the word), and stripped of its illusive majesty. Only then might the right proportions of conceiving political potency be eventually found.

That these proportions are needed is to be seen in Agamben's critique of sovereign exception, which seems so overpowered by the grandeur of the supreme power that it ends up gravely misreading Benjamin's theory of sovereignty from which it originates. As Brown notes, Agamben's biopolitics casts "the new walls as exercises of sovereign political power, rather than failures of it," which makes her seriously doubt if "it makes sense to call hyperbolic and extralegal expressions of state power 'sovereign.'"[37] Brown rejects, then, Agamben's thesis of the wall as a new face of sovereignty, and seeks to analyze border walling both as a hopeless longing for sovereign autonomy in the world of unprecedented global flows and a desperate reaction to the fear of shrinking decision-making potency. However, although hinting at the "mythical" core of sovereignty, she fails to elaborate, as Benjamin does, on the fantasy of autonomous political volition originally inscribed in this notion, regardless of spatial and temporal circumstances. The external, nation-state framework for sovereignty might indeed be falling apart before our eyes, but, even in the idealized Westphalian era, sovereign power was never anywhere near as final and absolute as postulated by its theologically-inspired theories from *Leviathan* onwards; the theories that keep captivating even such radical critics of political theology as Agamben. That is why, while Brown concludes her book by characterizing nation-state walls as "modern-day

37 Brown, *Walled States*, 98.

temples housing the *ghost* of political sovereignty,"[38] it would be far more appropriate to speak of housing its *illusion*. Godlike sovereignty is not a dead thing that used to be living and might somehow reappear if persistently conjured up; it is the thing that had never existed the way its followers would like it to, and so will never come to life, no matter how spectacular the temples erected in its name.

38 Brown, *Walled States,* 145. [emphasis added]