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WHAT IS A WALL? TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF POLITICAL
ARTEFACTS

Abstract

The paper deals with the problem of the ontology of political artefacts. A political artefact is a material object that produces certain effects on the social and political environment. The philosophical question I would like to answer is if such an artefact is political because its materiality imposes a social or political norm, or because it simply describes and reproduces certain relations of power. Therefore, I discuss and criticize some of the most relevant theories (technological determinism, social constructivism, Actor-Network-Theory) that deals with the problem of political artefacts and the relation between humans and things. After that, I defend an approach that I define “material contextualism”. In the conclusion, I show why a philosophical theory of the wall, namely a material object that inscribes on the space a relation of power, must be grounded on the material contextualism.

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to provide a useful philosophical framework for the analysis of one of the most discussed political tools of our time: walls. Even though the post-1989 era has been considered as a period where state boundaries were starting to fall and becoming more porous and accessible,¹ in the present day it is possible to witness the re-emergence of walls as a concrete way to regulate and shape the areas and spaces that are within a State. David Carter and Paul Poast have attempted to give a precise numerical account that shows how this kind of strategy of the organization of space has become a well-established trend:

¹ See Bauman (2000).

there are 62 unique instances of man-made border walls from 1800 to 2014. Some of these walls, such as the Berlin Wall separating East Berlin from West Berlin during the Cold War or the Maginot Line between France and Germany during the 1930s, are quite famous. Others are more obscure, such as the Morice Line between French-Algeria and Tunisia from 1957 to 1962. However, well-known historical examples can obfuscate an important fact: out of the 62 total man-made border walls constructed since 1800, 28 have been constructed since 2000².

Other scholars have calculated the number of existing walls and their political impact in a different manner by considering other parameters, such as their measurements, the quantity of daily crossings, etc. In any case, it is an almost universally accepted claim that governments are building walls more frequently as a political tool for the administration and control of space that is used especially for the organization and the supervision of migratory flows.

Be that as it may, this paper does not intend to argue whether the construction of walls must be judged positively or negatively, or to investigate the arguments, the rhetorical devices or the ideological assumptions that underlie the different and opposing views on these matters. Rather, our aim is to analyse walls considered as political artefacts from an ontological perspective, by demonstrating for which reason the assumption of a certain ontology of artefacts implies attributing determinate political properties to technological objects.

First of all, we will briefly examine the contemporary debate concerning the nature of walls; second, we will provide a definition of 'political artefact' on which our following analysis will be based; third, we will present and criticize some of the most relevant theories that have discussed the relationship between artefacts and power; fourth, we will provide an ontological framework that will permit to consider walls from a philosophical point of view; and in the conclusions we will revise the central arguments of this essay.

2. *The present debate*

Our main goal in this essay is to create an ontological framework capable of founding the present debate concerning the analysis of contemporary teichopolitics. The term 'teichopolitics' invented by the French scholars Florine Ballif and Stéphane Rosière comes from the ancient greek word *teichos* which was the wall surrounding the *polis*. Ballif and Rosière define teichopolitics as "the politics of building walls for various security purposes".³ Therefore, teichopolitics is a political technology whose material elements are all of those objects that shape the state borders and which aims at controlling the movements between one state

² Carter and Poast (2017: 240).

³ Ballif and Rosière (2009: 194).

and another by creating a concrete impediment to any kind of access. For this very reason, there is a fundamental securitarian approach behind contemporary teichopolitics.⁴ According to those who are, directly or not, in favour, this way of obstructing migratory movements implies the possibility to better control who enters, thus preventing anyone who is considered as a dangerous subject from entering. The problematic nature of these securitarian ideologies, that rest mostly on the unfounded equivalence between migrant and dangerous individual, is one of the most researched topics on the subject.⁵ In this perspective, this kind of analysis of teichopolitics questions the ethical legitimacy of walls, resulting in a moral and political judgement that considers walls as devices for political domination.⁶

In this way, even though many elements do suggest that modern teichopolitics have to be seen negatively, the main goal of this essay is not to give a moral or political assessment on this political phenomenon, but rather to try to step back and conceive a philosophical foundation for its analysis. Such philosophical grounding is, as we will argue, an ontology of artefacts.

If we look at the most recent and important studies on walls, it is easy to notice that they lack a philosophical approach. Surely, there is a large number of studies carried out by prominent scholars in the fields of sociology, geography, history, urban studies, economy, psychology and anthropology, thus showing that walls tend to be open to an interdisciplinary approach. This does not mean that we claim that philosophical research has underestimated the relevance of walls in the contemporary world. Olivier Razac,⁷ for example, has given a genealogical analysis of the use of barbed wire, arguing that it is a form of power that tends to fragment the objects on which it is applied, in order to allot them even in the smallest corner of the social milieu. The political philosopher Wendy Brown, who has written one of the most cited and discussed texts on this topic⁸, has emphasized how many of the aspects concerning the construction of walls raise crucial philosophical and political questions regarding state sovereignty in the age of globalization, and how it is related to many other issues such as the connection between space and power, the role of public opinion in legitimizing political decisions, the visibility of power, the theological nature of politics, etc.

However, it seems that these studies and researches still omit a crucial point. We think that what is never profoundly discussed and analysed philosophically is the part that the wall *as such* plays in the organization of certain social and

⁴ Rosière (2011); Rosière and Jones (2012); Pallister-Wilkins (2016).

⁵ Nail (2016).

⁶ Oles (2014); Paz (2016).

⁷ Razac (2000).

⁸ Brown (2010).

power relations. To put it in different terms: the question that in our opinion should be asked at first and from a philosophical point of view is the one concerning the political functions of a material object considered as such. Do walls, construed as objects that materialize a state border, imply necessarily certain political consequences? Do they impose power relations, or do they merely describe them? Can a material object have in itself a certain normativity? And if that is the case, what role does the human social agent have in its relation with other things? In order to answer these questions, we will propose a theoretical framework that can be defined as an ontology of political artefacts.⁹

3. *Artifacts and politics*

3.1. The distinction between artifacts and social objects

What is a wall? First of all, it is an artifact, that is, an object whose effects largely depend on its material constitution. If we follow the definition given by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, an artefact is “an object that has been intentionally made or produced for a certain purpos”. Clearly not all philosophers that have reflected on artifactuality agree on this definition, since, for example, some doubt that there is a purely intentional element in the construction of an artefact, or that they are built in order to meet an end, or if it

⁹Even though we do not intend to address the topic at large, a quick observation on the connection between artifactuality and materialism is necessary. The ontological question we raise in this paper is not exclusively related to the nature of teichopolitics, but to materialist approaches to power in general. As a matter of fact, any materialist analysis of power necessarily has to clarify the ontological assumptions on which it rests. Nevertheless, it would be highly inaccurate to think that this kind of inquiry is purely analytical (as stated by Frassen 2014) or that it can't be carried out within the so called “continental tradition”. Many philosophers in the 20th century present a materialist approach to the nature of power that do actually possess various ontological assumptions and implications which can be object to further philosophical investigation. To name a few, Marx's reflections on the relationship between industrial machines and the way it affects the workers actions written in the well-known *Fragment on Machines*; Benjamin's description of the hausmannian urban architecture in the *Arcades*; Foucault's detailed account of the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* whose architectonic structure effectively produces a form of disciplinary power on the human body. In these and in other cases, a preliminary ontological framework can be useful to clarify issues that otherwise may not find a suitable answer or may not have been asked in the first placed. For instance: does the architectonic structure of the Panopticon *considered in itself* already impose certain forms of power? Did the barricades designed by Hausmann concretely impede the creation of a revolutionary spirit, thus having a specific normative effect on people? All of these issues are part of a wider question that has been largely overlooked which is the one concerning the kind of political relation existing between objects and human subjects and the different ways in which the former determine the experience of the latter. These questions will not find an answer in this paper, but only a theoretical frame in which they can be adequately formulated.

is even possible to classify them.¹⁰ All of these different aspects do not interest the purpose of this paper. What has to be kept in mind is that an artefact is a made object (*ars factum*), in the sense that it is something that the human hand has shaped from “raw matter”. This material element cannot be ignored and has to be taken in account when analysing the nature of artefacts. To say it with a pun: matter does matter.

This premise allows us to distinguish on an ontological level walls and state borders. Without doubt they do have the same function, as John Searle argues,¹¹ but there are very good reasons to consider them as objects belonging to different categories. A state border is not a material but a social object,¹² an object whose existence and causal properties do not depend merely on its material constitution. For example, the border between France and Italy exists and produces real consequences on peoples’ lives because it is considered as such on the base of certain agreements and documents and not because there is an artefact that separates concretely France and Italy.

Therefore, it is possible to say that there can be material objects which are distinct from social objects that even though they are used in social contexts (like a coffee machine that is used in a context where it is common knowledge what is coffee, how it should be prepared, etc.), they nevertheless possess causal properties that are only partially dependant on the properties of social agents, such as intentionality, the ability to make an agreement and to create a form of reciprocal trust capable of maintaining such agreement, etc. These material objects, that may be defined as artefacts, have causal properties that are implied in their very own materiality, that is, the various elements of which they are concretely made of, the way in which they are assembled, etc. In this perspective, a social object functions, acts and has real effects mainly¹³ because it is the product of social agent, a material object on the other hand functions, acts and has real effects mainly¹⁴ as a result of its materiality. In other words, in

¹⁰ Franssen *et al.* (2013).

¹¹ Searle (1995: 39-40).

¹² For this very reason, we do not agree with Ferraris’ ontological theory according to which artefacts are a subcategory of social objects. See Ferraris (2009: 36-50).

¹³ We say ‘mainly’ because the nature of a social object does not depend entirely on the social context: just think, for example, how the coin’s physical structure influenced its use as currency. Hypothetically, nothing prevents to use trees as currency; but even if this may be the case, the coin’s small round shape may have suggested that it could be much more useful than other objects in creating a system of economic exchange.

¹⁴ Indeed, there can be artifacts that have greater effects for the social meaning they convey rather than their materiality. An example of this may be the Berlin Wall, an object that is so culturally and socially relevant that its artifactual is practically indistinguishable from its social significance (see Grasso 2007).

the first case the actions of the object largely depend on the human element; in the second case on the non-human element.

3.2. What is a political artefact?

Even though the definition of artefact may not be too problematic, the question concerning the existence or the nature of political artefacts is much more tricky. This topic has been present in debates on artifactuality since the 1980s when Langdon Winner in a well-known essay attempted to assign political properties to artefacts, suggesting in this way that there may be artefacts that have an intrinsic political meaning.

A political artefact can be defined as a material objects that produces certain effects on the social and political environment. The very possibility of conceiving a political artefact, implies that not all artefacts have such political properties. Certain artefacts – a prison, a missile launch system, a wall covered in barbed wire or an atomic bomb for example – do seem to convey a certain political relation more than others (like a teacup, a pen or a light bulb). This does not mean though that they are political for their artefactual nature as such. For this reason, when we relate artefacts to political power it is crucial to try to understand if we are dealing with political artefacts or with a political analysis of artefacts. In other words, what has to be understood, and what makes this issue so intricate, is what makes an artefact ‘political’: their material nature or the way in which they are represented by other human agents?

In fact, it seems intuitively acceptable that there are political artefacts in a broader sense, that is, material objects that determine social and political relations in virtue of their physical properties. But the real question is why these artefacts can be considered as ‘political’ on an ontological level.

At first, it may seem that there can only be two possible solutions, each entailing a certain ontological assumption that in turn has a moral and political consequence: an artefact is political because *as such* it *imposes* a social or political norm, or an artefact is political because it merely *describes* this norm according to the role assigned to them by the human agents. In the first case, we have a radical realist position, in the second we have a kind of radical constructivism. These two positions are only the opposite poles of a wide range of theoretical possibilities that have tried to find a compromise or a mediation between them.

4. *Political artefacts and human agents*

If we assign political properties to artefacts it means that we attribute them the capacity to concretely and materially organize the space where social agents and human beings act. This assumption questions the humanist and anthropocentric view according to which only human beings strictly have agency. In reality also material things and objects act, even if it must be clarified to what

extent they do and what this does actually mean. As a matter of fact, things shape and modify the space humans inhabit and, as we shall soon see, they sometimes even have a normative effect on their lives. For instance, they can allow or impede certain actions from taking place. This means that they do not merely describe or suggest certain social norms, but in certain cases they concretely influence and determine the behaviour of humans. In this paragraph we will briefly discuss some of the most relevant theories that have questioned the way in which artefacts are able to establish or describe social and political norms.

4.1. Doing things with things

In John Austin's¹⁵ well-known book on the analysis of performative languages he shows how it is effectively possible to *do things with words*, in the sense that there are certain expressions ("I pronounce you husband and wife") that, in the very moment in which they are spoken, do have a real impact on social reality. Austin's conclusion was that language is not merely descriptive, but in certain cases it produces effects in virtue of its purely linguistic properties.

Those that are in favour of a radically realistic view on political artefacts basically maintain this same position, shifting it on the material plane of things. In fact, radical realists argue for an artefactual determinism according to which *things do things*, in the sense that they bring about real effects on the world for the very reason that they are things and not because social agents attribute them certain values or functions.

Langdon Winner, probably one of the most influential philosopher of technology, is highly representative of this kind of realist position. In 1980 he wrote an essay entitled *Do Artifacts Have Politics?*, where he argued the possibility of the existence of technologies that he defined as 'intimately political'. There are different cases of artefacts that effectively possess intrinsic political qualities, in the sense that the political consequences they produce depend entirely on their material nature and not on the way they are represented by other social agents. In his essay, Winner focuses mostly on the Long Island Bridge, which was supposed to connect Long Island with New York. The bridge designed by Robert Moses according to Winner represents a clear case of an artefact that is intimately political. It was built in order that its height would not permit the passage of buses beneath it. At that time cars were a commodity that only the white middle class could afford and for this reason black people moved from one place to another mostly by bus. This meant that the very physical structure of the bridge made materially impossible for blacks the access to Long Island. Therefore, Winner concluded that the bridge was an artefact that had intrinsic political qualities because it effectively produced a norm that resulted in the exclusion of black people:

¹⁵ See Austin (1962).

Poor people and blacks, who normally used public transit, were kept off the roads because the twelve-foot tall buses could not get through the overpasses. One consequence was to limit access of racial minorities and low-income groups to Jones Beach, Moses's widely acclaimed public park.¹⁶

Such radical realist position has the theoretical advantage of focusing on the active role of physical objects in the shaping of the political landscape. For this reason, it may be useful in overcoming an anthropocentric view where man is still "the measure of all things" exactly in the same way as Protagoras intended back in ancient Greece.

Be that as it may, this view entails an exaggerated understatement of the role of human agents in the construction of the social reality that, as many have noted, is simply implausible from a philosophical point of view¹⁷. In particular, Winner's thesis implies the idea that artefacts have such political normativity to the point that they deterministically influence the actions of human beings. If taken seriously, Winner's position does not permit to individuate the active role of the social agent in the fabrication of the social context and the way they produce relations with other objects. This also eliminates the possibility that human agents do have moral qualities: since artefacts entirely determine all social relations, the single individuals cannot be considered responsible for their actions anymore, thus not permitting any kind of moral judgement. As Sally Wyatt wrote: "One of the problems with technological determinism is that it leaves no space for human choice or intervention and, moreover, absolves us from responsibility for the technologies we make and use".¹⁸

Apart from this, the Long Island Bridge, which is presented by Winner as final evidence, in reality does not prove his thesis as it already presupposes a precise social context where there is class distinction and an income gap where blacks are so poor that cannot afford a car. This means that not all of the political relations that are in play can be effectively described by the materiality of artefacts.

Radical realism in the end does not seem to be a viable option for the construction of a philosophy capable of individuating the existence or non-existence of political qualities in artefacts.

4.2. Doing words with things

Contrary to Winner's radical realist ontology of artefacts, there are other theoretical views that insist primarily on the role of social agents in assigning certain functions to physical objects. According to this thesis, artefacts act exclusively as a physical support for the different representations that humans

¹⁶ Winner (1980: 28).

¹⁷ Joerges (1999); Brey (2005).

¹⁸ Wyatt (2008: 169).

attribute to them. In this perspective, social reality is composed entirely by social representations which are the various ways in which human social agents build social and political connections. Consequently, these representations alone cause the existence and the functioning of the artefacts that are part of the social environment. For this reason, this thesis can be seen as a “social constructivist view of technology”.¹⁹

Steve Woolgar is one of the most influential authors that has argued in favour of a constructivist conception of the nature of political artefacts, according to which it would be possible to interpret technological artefacts as if they were texts. This would mean that Woolgar’s perspective is nothing more than a classical hermeneutical view applied to the philosophy of technology: what really counts in the fabrication of social reality are the human representations of the elements that compose it.

At first sight, Woolgar’s thesis seems plausible. After all, we experience the world and the material objects of which it is made of through epistemic practices, which “include visual and textual representation, argumentative discourse, making interpretations, knowing, being certain, explaining, understanding, using evidence, reasoning, and so on”.²⁰ Since our epistemic capacities encompass all of the experiential field, they must include also the world of artifactual objects. If our experience is made of representations of objects and not by the objects themselves, this means that at the level of an ontology of artefacts we are actually dealing with a form of radical constructivism. What makes or acts upon the social field is never the artefact itself, but only the capacity of social agents to represent this kind of objects in multiple and variable ways, according to the differences between cultures and, ultimately, individuals. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the main target of Woolgar’s philosophy of technology is precisely the “objectivist philosophy”²¹, namely the idea that there is an external reality that has its own laws and that does not depend on the subjects’ agency.

The aim of such constructivist theory is to connect “the content of a technological artifact to the wider sociopolitical milieu”.²² Even technological artefacts have to be considered as texts that can be investigated by literary criticism, philosophy, literature, sociology, etc. For the followers of this theory, artefacts are conceived as socially constructed to the point that their only role is to support social representations. In this way, their physical properties become completely irrelevant. Consequently, the artefacts’ materiality is reduced to a hermeneutical

¹⁹ Pinch and Bijker (1987: 405).

²⁰ Woolgar (1991: 25).

²¹ Ivi: 29.

²² Pinch and Bijker (1987: 423).

practice and the artefact itself becomes nothing more than a text. The analysis of the external world – the world of objects inhabited also by artefacts – is therefore isomorphic to the analysis of a literary text that is subject to an indeterminate number of interpretations.

What makes social constructivism so convincing when applied to artefacts is that, as we have shown before, these types of objects are the result of human action, making them objects that are capable of bringing any kind of epistemic value assigned by human agents. Since these objects express the very intentionality of the human being, their normativity then appears to be completely extrinsic to their physical qualities; therefore they merely describe certain social and political relations precisely because they reflect the social and political relations of the context in which they are perceived by other social agents. The normative value of an artefact – in other words, its political nature – is the result of its interpretations, just in the same way as a literary text: in a different time and in a different place, the same artefact will produce different effects because there will be different social agents, each possessing his own particular worldview that will attribute different functions and representations to that same object. Following Woolgar's semiotic metaphor, what they 'signify' is not implied in their being 'signifiers'; just in the same way as there is no pure text that does not need a subject that reads it or interprets it, there is no artefact that does not possess properties that are not assigned by other social agents.

In order to better clarify this position, let us consider for example the wall that divides Israel from the Palestinian territories. It is possible to say that such wall for the Palestinians denotes economic deprivation, oppression, the feeling of being colonized; on the other hand, the same wall for the people of Israel indicates a feeling of security, a form of protection against possible threats. From this example it is not difficult to see how the same artefact is subject to radically diverse representations.

Even for those that are close to this hermeneutical view, not all interpretations are the same. As a matter of fact, some 'texts' – in other words the numerous and different ways in which artefacts are represented by humans – are less plausible than others. For example, it is very difficult to interpret the atomic bomb as an object that conveys an idea of peace and non-violence. Nevertheless, this is precisely what makes the constructivist view problematic, because the plausibility of such interpretation ultimately depends on the object itself, that is, an external reality to the subject that represents it and that resists to what is defined as an infinite semiosis. Even though it is possible to have numerous and different interpretations of the same artefact, for the very reason that it is an artefact it has *in itself* certain causal properties that create an internal normativity that impedes and renders impossible an infinite hermeneutical process. As we have seen with the issues concerning Winner's theory, it may be possible that the normativity of artefacts does not determine the entirety of the social field, but

this does not mean that on the contrary it is determined exclusively by human relations without the objects having any kind of active role.

Just as radical realism fails to acknowledge the role of social agents, in the same way constructivism is incapable of considering the agency of artefact as material objects. This particular philosophy of technology ends up in being exposed to the risks of logocentrism and textualism, namely that of confusing epistemology (what is known and how something is represented) with ontology (what something actually is) to the point of making them practically indistinguishable. From this point of view, even if a strict determinism of objects, where social relations are produced solely by the artefacts that are part of them, may be avoided, nonetheless the effective political role of an artefact depends entirely on which of the different interpretations prevails. In such world, though, only one kind of logic would be possible: that of the thrasimacean might is right.

Ultimately, constructivism suffers from a problematic that is opposite, but for this reason complementary, to that of radical realism: it puts too much normative weight on human subjects alone, without considering the fact that even objects and the other material components of reality too have an active role in the construction of the social world. As we have just shown, this theory has political and philosophical implications. First, it risks reducing the debate of what should be the political role of artefacts to a mere conflict of nietzschean wills to power. Second, constructivism fails to realize that the physical properties of artefacts do effectively resist to the different representations offered by social agents: for example, a wall will concretely impede a person to trespass a certain border, regardless of how that same wall may be seen or interpreted by other human agents.

3.3. Symmetry between artefacts and humans

From what we have seen until now, social constructivism and radical realism both seem untenable. On one hand, constructivism implies the idea that man is the measure of all things and underestimates the role of physical objects in the construction of the social space inhabited by man. On the other hand, realism puts too much emphasis on the causal properties of objects, resulting in an ontological theory that not only is philosophically untenable but also politically dangerous since technology would then be considered as having an internal logic that proceeds and develops completely autonomously and separately from human intervention.

An interesting attempt to overcome the shortcomings of both of these positions is the so-called Action-Network Theory.²³ This theory is based on what is usually defined as the “principle of generalized symmetry”. According to

²³ Latour (1987, 1992, 2005).

its supporters, an accurate analysis of social reality does not need to conceive humans or objects as the main and sole agents. For ANT, both are in the same way actants, in the sense that both equally act in a network made of their own interactions. Consequently, there is no space for any kind of hierarchy between humans and non-humans where one or the other has a major active role²⁴.

From this point of view ANT can't be reduced neither to a realist or to a constructivist position. It can't be considered as a form of realism because it does not admit objects that possess causal properties that are independent from the interactions with other actants; but it can't also be considered as constructivist because it denies that human interpretations or representations have a primary role in the fabrication of social reality. For these reasons, according to ANT the artefacts' agency has to be considered the same as humans and not merely as a product of symbolic projections and representations. The methodological principle behind ANT can be summarized in the following manner: «we don't want to accept the respective roles granted to things and to humans»²⁵.

At this point, let us consider briefly some of the major critical issues of ANT²⁶. First, the principle of generalized symmetry does not permit to identify what social and cultural components are effectively in play in this network of humans and non-humans. Second, by admitting a purely relational reality, ANT fails in recognizing that actants may have properties that are not relational and do not depend on other actants. Third, ANT is incapable of admitting relations between social agents that are not part of a much larger network of things. Finally, the principle of generalized symmetry seems to come with a high moral cost, because it does not allow to identify any kind of responsibility for the humans' actions.

4.4. Material contextualism

After having considered some of the most relevant ontological theories of political artefacts, we would like to propose a theory that may represent a mediation between all of them that we define as “material contextualism” (MC), of which this essay we will only present a brief sketch. MC attempts to admit that both human and non-humans have agency, but without considering them symmetrically. Social agents possess certain qualities like intentionality and responsibility that can't be found in non-human agents. This does not

²⁴It must be noted that the absence of a hierarchy does not imply any kind of ethical or moral judgement on the nature or functionality of objects, but it aims solely at giving an analytical description of the interactions between human and non-humans capable of overcoming both radical realism and social constructivism.

²⁵Callon and Latour (1992: 355).

²⁶Hassard and Law (1999).

imply denying a performative function that is distinctive to artefacts. As a matter of fact, MC takes from the realist position the idea that artefacts have their own normative capacities. However, MC differs in that it considers these capacities as variable: an object has a certain influence on the lives of the other social agents according to the context which it is part of and that it contributes to create. At the same time, social reality is conceived as an arena where social agents discuss, negotiate and are in conflict according to their different worldviews. What MC takes from social constructivism then is the idea that artefacts are part of a wider context where they subjected to negotiation by different worldviews.

Differently from the preceding theories, MC emphasizes the relation of mutual dependence of the object with its milieu. According to MC the context in which artefacts actively produce effects or where social agent exert they hermeneutical or representational capacities can't be separated from the artefacts that compose it. From this point of view, the context is not the totality of interpretations given by social agents, but rather the material setting in which social reality is structured. For the promoters of MC, artefacts do have political properties, for they are able to establish, promote or suggest social and political relations within the context they contribute to create precisely because they are objects with physical and material qualities.

The main consequence of this theoretical standpoint is a form of nominalism regarding both artefacts and contexts. If the wall that divides the USA from Mexico may be considered as a political artefact, it is because in that particular context it involves and produces determinate social and political relations as a material object, since it is something that has a concrete physical structure, and as an object on which social agents can projects different and conflicting worldviews. Not the wall itself has political qualities, but rather a certain wall that is in part responsible for the creation of a certain context.

An example may help clarify this position. Let us imagine a wall that was built before the human race was extinguished by a lethal virus. We will call C1 the context preceding the extinction and C2 the one following the viral breakout. The wall in C2 will without doubt continue to have certain causal properties that do not depend on C1 even though it will lose its political qualities; for instance, the wall will continue to be an impediment for the movements of the surviving animals, forcing them to follow different paths. In other words, the wall in C2 will still have effects on the surrounding environment as an object with material qualities, even though these effects will not have any cultural and political meaning, because these depend on the context (C1 in this case) where certain social relations are present. In fact, the same wall in another context, namely the one preceding the extinction of the human race, may be considered as a political artefact in part for its physical structure and partly because it is subject to the hermeneutical and representational capacities of social agents.

5. *The wall as a political artefact*

Formulated a suitable framework for an inquiry on political artefacts, it is now possible to see how it may be applied to walls. At the beginning of this paper, we addressed the question concerning the artefactual nature of those barriers that are so frequently subject to teichopolitical analysis. By considering this novel ontological framework that we have just traced, at this point it may be possible to try to answer such question.

First of all, walls are political artefacts because they are material objects that impede certain actions and behaviours from taking place, therefore as objects they produce real effects on lives of people. Their physical mass, a property that does not depend on the action of social agents, makes them capable of acting on reality itself in a normative way.

At the same time, walls are artefacts that can assume a political meaning, because they are inserted in a wider context they have contributed to create. Within certain contexts, walls are artefacts on which social agents contend political, legal and ethical conflicts. Therefore, they are subject to various possible interpretations, thus revealing the existing tension between different worldviews – for example radical nationalists have opinions on the construction of walls that differ from those of anti-statalists because their worldviews may agree or not with the present teichopolitics. A wall that is positioned on a border where there are frequent migration flows will have a larger political impact than a wall that is crossed only by a very small group of people, because the material contexts on which they act differ.

Therefore, walls cannot be considered exclusively as physical objects, but they are also ‘texts’ that require a community of readers in order to be ‘read’ or interpreted. Related to this, Wendy Brown has shown how walls nowadays have a highly symbolic function, because they refer to the authority and the power of state sovereignty.²⁷ Clearly, such symbolic value in order to exist requires a community of readers that are conscious of living in a world divided in states and that know the consequences of state sovereignty etc. In this case, the artefact has a role in the social context that does not entirely depend on its material properties – which nonetheless continue to have quite an important role, an example of which may be what has represented throughout the centuries the grandeur of the Chinese wall²⁸ – but rather on the capacity of the social agents to ‘read’ and ‘interpret’ that particular artefact as symbolizing something else.

With this in mind, what an adequate philosophy of walls should do is to try to keep together both ontological and political levels. The normative capacity of material artefacts in distributing political power between social agents that we

²⁷ Brown (2010: 43-72).

²⁸ Waldron (1990).

have shown with the theoretical lens of ontology does not invalidate a hermeneutics of artefacts that conceives them as objects to be interpreted and that considers social reality as something that is subject to negotiation and conflict between opposing worldviews. In order to be philosophically founded, the analysis of contemporary teichopolitics cannot overlook the ontology and the political meaning of its objects, without prioritizing the social or the physical component of artefacts, but by always considering the material contexts on which the critical analysis is exerted.

6. *Conclusions*

From what we have seen in this paper, it is possible to conclude that a philosophy of walls is part not only of a wider ontology of political artefacts, but also of a political ontology of artefacts. In this paper, we have shown the differences and the correlations between these two different theoretical perspectives. In this last paragraph, we would like to summarize the two fundamental principles on which our research should be based:

- 1) There is no technological neutrality. This of course does not mean that technology is intimately evil or necessarily good or that, in other words, it possesses moral qualities. What we would like to propose is neither a form of philosophical Luddism or an acritical glorification of technological progress. Technology is simply not neutral because, since it is composed of artefacts that have causal properties according to their material structure, it is capable of shape the social landscape by producing determinate effects on the lives of the social agents;
- 2) The political consequences of artefacts do not depend entirely on their physical properties, but rather on the material context they inhabit and in turn create. There is no such thing as a radical realism or determinism, but only what may be defined as an entanglement of physical structures (artefacts) and their representations created by human agents. If it possible to conceive a political artefact that is separated from all of the other artefacts in general, it is because there is a broader social and cultural context that provides it with a certain normativity by virtue of both its materiality and the interpretations of the social agents.

In the light of these theoretical principles it is possible to make a technological-political analysis of walls: on one side it is a technological analysis because walls are material objects that as such have causal properties that rely on their physical structure; on the other hand it is also a political analysis because not only walls are objects that are used to organize politically the social environment, but also because they can be object to different conflicting interpretations.

To conclude, a critical theory of walls must be founded on determinate ontological assumptions regarding the nature of artefacts. A combined study of ontology, philosophy of technology and political philosophy may be able to develop a research program in which it would be possible to answer the crucial issue regarding the role of artefacts in the fabrication of social reality.

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