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## The Culture of the Fence: Artifacts and Meanings

Studying the history of the fence poses some ontological and epistemological problems. On the one hand, fences are tangible objects that have been put to use at all times for definite purposes. On the other, they are artifacts having meanings in the cultural systems they have been employed in. A functional analysis should involve studying both the virtual ramifications of a medium on people's way of life and its symbolic usage in their societies. The fence only exemplifies the role of technologies in culture. As Marshall McLuhan ([1964] 2001) showed, while technologies enable us *to do* things, i.e. to act or behave in certain ways, they also make us *think* about what we do in certain ways, thus creating habits of thought. Hence, our practices, built upon the media we use, shape up our conceptualization of the world. With continuous usage technologies highlight what is important to think about in our lives thus establishing cultural values. Culture then perpetuates itself by employing practices as symbols.

From this perspective studying the history of the fence is at the same time studying the culture of the fence. While the volume of this essay allows me to offer no more than fragmented evidence from a small number of societies, epochs and locations, I will attempt to show how the use of fences in human societies has generated myths we live by and ideologies we now take for realities.

### First order meaning of fences

The history of civilization is closely tied with the history of the fence. Human civilization is conceptualized as emerging from agriculture, family and property. All of these evolved with the fence.

In the early stages of settling human tribes tended to till the land in a group. Caesar, in Gallic War ([52 BC] 1996) describes how amongst the ancient Germans "there were no separate estates or private boundaries." Tacitus ([98 AD] 1999) elaborates that the Germans practiced the so-called "shifting cultivation" -- making a plantation, reaping the crop and then moving on. This kind of land usage does not need fences but in the long run it leads to wide-range destruction of woods and severe soil erosion so it is usually called "predatory cultivation" or "land-mining" (Liversage, 1945.)

The appearance of the fence in human societies marked the transition from a pattern of looting nature to taking care of it. It was with devoted agriculture that fences came about. While it is impossible to name the inventor of this technology back in Ancient Mesopotamia, Rousseau ([1762] 1994) curiously alludes to him saying: "The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society." The fence helped institutionalize one of the most important elements of the social contract – the collective recognition of private property.

Being instrumental in the culture of property, the fence fostered long-term thinking and constructive effort. As the great English agriculturist Arthur Young ([1792] 1929) said commenting on eighteenth century French peasants' toil on their small patrimonies, "Give a man the secure possession of a bleak rock and he will turn it into a garden. Give him a nine years' lease of a garden and he will convert it into a desert."

Land-ownership demanded lasting commitment and care that were beyond the capacity of a single individual, so since very early on land was attached not to the individual but to a family. In early Hindu and Greek law land could not be sold or transferred to another family, either by bequest or as a dower. A father who had land was compelled to leave it to his sons. If he had no sons he must pass it to the nearest relation (Coulanges, 1927.) Since no one could take away family land upon marriage, the fence was associated with native home and was historically embedded in a patriarchal domestic context.

Having a strong visibility bias, the fence is an open declaration of intention. It says on the part of an occupant "I am here and planning to stay." This makes it an appropriate device to be associated with law.

Numa, the second king of Rome laid down in 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. that each man should surround his land with a boundary and set up landmarks of stone. He dedicated these landmarks to the god Terminus, and ordained that sacrifices should be offered up to him every year, appointing the festival of the Terminalia (Coulanges, 1927.) This worship of boundaries was meant to celebrate the conquest of the land of Rome from the Latinians and the Sabines originally occupying the region. In the Roman context, the victory would not have been possible without the will of the gods. The symbols of this victory had to be honored in appreciation of the gods' benevolence. Thus the fence was invested with meaning and gained value.

Roman law affected medieval Europe. Burgundian law of 12<sup>th</sup> century stipulates that even the lands given by the king to his servants should be marked off by definite boundaries. "These boundaries are sacred and any one who removes them shall lose his hand." Boundaries constituted an improvement on the land and went with it in the deed of gift or sale: charters written in Gaul contain the phrase *cum omni termino suo* or *cum omni marca sua*. So tight was the link between boundary and property that the word "mark" came to mean real estate. Thus, in a deed of 711, the German Prince Ermanrad gives away in perpetuity "thirty acres which he owns in the *marca Munefred*," that is, in the Munefred real estate (Coulanges, 1927.)

In England, the Laws of Ine, King of Wessex (7<sup>th</sup> century), added to the function of the fence the business of protecting crops from cattle. "A ceorl's homestead must be fenced winter and summer. If it is not fenced and his neighbour's cattle get in through his own gap, he has no right to anything from that cattle; he is to drive it out and suffer the damage" (Pollard et al. 1974.) The fence thus came to signify commitment to the land, proprietor's self-regard and responsibility.

## Theoretical framework

Based on these briefly reviewed uses of fences, a question arises: Did cultures employ the fence *to barr* access to land, or did they use it to *mark* the land, i.e., to convey ideas - of property, control, commitment, responsibility, legitimate occupancy, unwanted presence and so forth. The fence problematizes the habitual dichotomy between the physical and the mental reality. On the first glance it is a physical barrier. But whenever it serves only as a notification – i.e., is not an insurmountable wall we are trying to climb – it triggers “meaning-making” in Postman and Weingartner’s sense (1969), or it works primarily as a sign that we interpret with our minds, rather than as a physical object we experience with our body. Considering human propensity for symbolic transformation that Langer (1951) pointed out, the practical purpose of the fence immediately extends into symbolic function. But going just one step further, we can speculate that even a cow that sees a fence and chooses to pull away from it instead of bumping into it – is already making some meaning of the fence as a sign that says “You can’t go there.” This problematizes further the definition of sentient beings and the boundary between the mode of thinking and the mode of perception. Or, the fence demonstrates how the physical and the mental meet on the level of the senses where intelligent activity begins.

Artifacts trigger thought and use of artifacts fosters cultures. The fence played a role, for example, in building the culture of the family. Since fences were used to divide families from each other but *not* to divide the members of a family from one another, *nor* to divide one neighborhood from another, they continuously sent out the message that the family was a more important social unit than the individual or any other social group. The medium implied an idea that was continuously emphasized by the care and effort invested in the medium thus facilitating the institutionalization of the idea as a cultural value.

## Second order meaning of fences

Affecting us in our physical reality, or the way we live, technologies inevitably affect us in our mental reality, or the way we perceive the world and behave rationally. Stone fences built in the Bronze Age in Cornwall established the pattern of fields to this day when they are still in use, particularly in the Penwith peninsula (Pollard et al. 1974.) Thus the material used in the construction of a technology often determines the duration of its culture. We can suppose that if the fences had been made of wood, the boundaries of the fields might have changed a long time ago. But the material of stone added a curious time bias to this largely space-biased medium - by Innis (1951) - enhancing a tradition of valuing the past and fostering conservative behavior.

The Anglo-Saxons, who grew hedges, produced a significant ecological effect providing a natural habitat for many species, preventing soil erosion and softening the microclimate for the growth of early vegetables (Pollard et al., 1974.) The first settlers in America made the so-called Virginia worm fence – a zigzagging structure of rough wooden rails crossed at an angle, which did not require driving posts into the ground and was particularly labor- and cost-effective. European travelers marveled at the invention (Dreicer 1996.) Being sturdy, rough in appearance, ingeniously built and implying abundant resources, the worm fence became one of the first iconic symbols of America in the European mind.

Playing with shapes and materials, fence-builders have added various connotational meanings to the fence throughout time. Victorian houses display a lacework of wrought iron grids and garlands ending in scrolls, leaf-ends or fishtails, offering a paradox of solidity and daintiness. In the Victorian code, ironwork sent out the message of a significant social power - confident in its stronghold, parading expensive artwork with a view of its property behind (Southworth 1992.)

Throughout history fences have been used as a tool both of defense and conquest. Early colonial Jamestown of 1610 had a palisade of planks and posts anchored to the ground

(Dreicer 1996.) Interestingly enough, the Native Americans used high stockades around their compounds too. However, it had never occurred to them to enclose the land – which was what the colonists did. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, justified his enclosure policy saying: "That which lies common, and hath never been replenished or subdued is free to any that possess and improve it" (idem.)

The practice of appropriating land through enclosure is not an American invention. It goes back to the Greeks. In ancient Athens, which was first occupied by some hundreds of independent families, there were no partitions. Each family just kept the land that belonged to it based on social recognition. The Athenians were a homogeneous culture held tight by a strong ethics code. The same pattern due to the same factors exists today in American middle-class suburbia. However, every time the Greeks ventured out of their habitat into Asia Minor, they divided the conquered territory among themselves building partitions (Coulanges 1927.) The founders of Rome repeated the pattern with the newly conquered land of Italy. The fence was instrumental in land appropriation and played a part in domination-securing processes. The enclosure movement in England triggered by the industrial revolution served as a tool of enrichment in the hands of the landlords and dispossession for the socially weak (Griswold 1948.)

Fences were used as a weapon in the population of the Wild West. In the 1880s a war of fences flared as settlers arrived in the 11 western states only to find out that rangers were fencing off huge pasture terrains they could not buy (Clawson 1951.) This conflict coincided with the boom of barbed wire, invented in 1873 and thriving as a cheap and efficient tool for enclosure. Connotatively, barbed wire made an aggressive statement. Displaying constantly a message of physical injury, it made the idea of violence habitual – perhaps more acceptable - in the culture. Indeed, settlers who disregarded the barbed-wire notification of rangers soon saw their crops burnt and their homes devastated (Peffer 1951), thus physically experiencing the message

In today's legal state fences separate various social units in space or channel human traffic in the form of railings. Going in and out of fences we constantly group and re-

group thus forming the very dynamic of society. Fences regulate our movement on the ground we inhabit and their regular patterns symbolize that. But behind all these practices a powerful myth emerges underpinning the use of fences: the need for orderly separation between humans implying control.

Our constructed need of fences can be clearly seen in the instance of New York's public parks, which are thoroughly fenced and locked up at night. It seems that the parks are protected from someone while in fact, they are public places supposed to be at the disposal of all citizens. Obviously, "the public" is not the egalitarian mass that the democratic ideology makes it seem. It is split into dominant and subordinate groups. If one part of the public, presumably the majority, wishes to enjoy safe and unpolluted parks, it has to bar off another part of the public, say the homeless minority, which is likely to interfere with the project. The local government being responsible for "the public interest", goes with the majority. Thus, fences serve for the exclusion of social minorities and contribute to the process of reducing the notion of "public" to the dominant social group.

Fences are a product of the struggle for control between humans. In any situation they ensure that someone has the upper hand. That is why they are associated with law, property, conquest, protection, separation, social division, order and regulation – all of these - ideas ensuing from the practice of dispute. Fences are a technology we have conceived as a solution to the issue of social conflict. They are a symbolic expression of our deeply nourished conviction that we should have some form of social control. People started employing fences to indicate control over land. But at the same time, the constant employment of fences has induced people to *focus* on issues of control making these an important part of the social reality. The fact that the symbols of control were substantial constituents of our immediate physical environment helped naturalize the idea of control representing it as an integral part of the world we inhabit.

While from a Barthesian perspective (Barthes [1957] 1972), the myth of the need for social control could be said to underpin the use of fences, from a McLuhanesque perspective

(McLuhan [1964] 2001) the constant employment of fences has fed this myth as a way of thinking. However, the two statements are tautological – because ultimately culture perpetuates itself through symbolic usage of practices. Fences have been the physical reminder of an idea which, while a social construction, has turned into an omnipresent reality.

At this point the history of the fence as artifacts-usage and the history of the fence as a series of meanings merge. It seems that with sentient beings, media always trigger symbolic interpretation – which is why they create cultures.

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