In 1896 Constantine Cavafy wrote a poem encapsulating the experience of social isolation:

**TEIKH**

Χωρίς περίσκεψιν, χωρίς λύπην, χωρίς αίδω
μεγάλα κ’ ύψηλα τριγύρω μου έκτισαν τείχη.

Και κάθομαι και απελπιζομαι τώρα έδω.

'Αλλα δεν σκέπτομαι: τόν νους μου τραγέι αυτή η τύχη
διότι πράγματα πολλά έξω νά κάμω είχου.

'Α άκαν βαθύνα πάντα τα τείχη πώς να μην προσέξω.

'Αλλα δέν άκουα ποτέ κρότον κτιστών ή ήξου.

'Ανεπαίσθητος μυ’ εκλείσαν από τόν κόσμον έξω.¹

Most often this poem is interpreted as the homosexual’s ostracism in 19th century Alexandria. But like most of Cavafy – and this is, of course, what makes him such a good poet, and what makes his poetry so translatable – this poem is not confined within the limits of its author. It expresses universal human experiences: of all of those deliberately cut off from society. This is a poem that could just as easily have been written today, by any one of millions of people in a whole range of shamefully isolating scenarios, across the globe. This paper will touch on just a few of these.

Historically, our walls had kept us in and the Other out, their defensive properties of superior concern. We marked our space in policeable quarters, patrolling the interior. Threats were, by definition and practice, confined to the outside world. Post-Enlightenment bravado has us gather the Other and wall them in. So convinced are we of our ability, our right, to control the world, we believe that every threat can be corralled behind bars, leaving us outside in safety.

It doesn’t work, of course. The truth is, we don’t actually wield that much control. For all our science and knowledge and wealth and insurance policies of superior concern, we marked our space in policeable payments, life still surprises us. Disease, accidents, acts of God and the weather and other people catch us constantly unawares. But we keep on trying; and in our desperation, reach ever new irrationalities.

Proof of the dangerous nature of those behind the walls is in their being on the other side – even though we put them there. Thus, for example, the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay have been deemed guilty, by definition; even though there’s nothing as yet with which they’ve been charged. This was illustrated most poignantly in John Howard’s persistent refusal to agitate for the two Australians held there to be tried on home turf; his refusal based on the fact that they had committed no crime under Australian law, and would, therefore, be released. Evidently mistaking Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 for reality, Howard held the men’s incarceration as demonstration of their guilt. If they weren’t guilty they wouldn’t have been incarcerated. Since they were incarcerated, they were clearly guilty – of something. If there was nothing in Australian law with which to try them, then they must be left to some other legal system, which will find something of which they can be convicted.

Such illogic leads to our investing the boundaries between Us and Them with unreasonable properties: Them on the other side dehumanised, distinct from Us in fundamental ways, purely because of their being on the other side. We see this across the board, from international politics to popular culture. Big Brother contestants around the world are Them in a televised zoo. With the move to the other side of those locked doors, fundamental rights are renounced. We remove their autonomy, divesting them of all control over food, space, leisure activities, self-expression. We commodify their humanness, including their sex lives and relationships. In 2003, the The Sun offered £50,000 to the first (heterosexual) pair in the UK house to have sexual intercourse on camera. In the American house, former partners of five of the contestants were suddenly moved in, without those contestants’ knowledge or consent. In 2005, a baby was born in the Dutch house. Monitored twenty four hours a day, the contestants’ self-exposure becomes our entertainment, in ways we consider intolerable – indeed illegal – treatment of Us outside. The simple step from one end of the television camera to the other has become a stupendous move in social identity, from part of the collective subject to alienated object.

they’ve built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.

Such alienation of object from subject is a basic transaction in fear; and therefore power. Patriarchal systems – of which just about every human structure has been built – depend upon fundamental rules of divide and conquer. The Other is objectified, dehumanised, commodified;
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constructed as _absent referent_. And above all vilified, as malevolently competitive.

The more successful the objectification, the greater the disassociation from the Other. When the walls of division themselves have become the very demarcation, then our alienation is complete. We find ourselves again in Heller Land, believing that an alteration of enemy lines on paper will change the realities of war. The signifier has become all important, and the signified effectively disappeared.

This sort of superstitious reverence for the boundary between Us and Them creates and demarcates celebrity; and it itself fed by celebrities’ apparent breaches of the line. In July 2003, the British Prime Minister’s wife Cherie Booth entertained a journalist from _Marie Claire_ inside their home.18 Through the magazine’s lens, we saw Ms Booth upon the first couple’s bed, among the jumble of family mess, hanging out in her _kinky_ boots. After a lifetime’s fearsome defence of her family’s privacy, this exposé was tendered as an honest revelation: the Prime Minister’s private life laid bare.19 Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. From designer suit to cartoon character mug, the photos of Tony with his mate Bill Clinton, and the casual mess – even a pair of knickers on the dressing table – every inch of this carefully scripted pictorial was merely deeper life laid bare.19

Them barrier, transgressing limits previously adhered to in defining the two sides, has a power of its own. Seeing the colour of their bedspread told us nothing about Mr Blair’s probity. But it did reinforce that he’s not one of Us, because none of Us have this sort of gesture at hand to make – we’ve no such boundaries to even pretend to shift.

Opening a temporary window in the wall reveals the wall’s great depth, reinforcing its impenetrability: those on the inside really are Other. In this case Mr Blair hoped his Otherness would exempt him from common censure: since he is not one of Us, he may play by different rules. An obviously desperate tactic, but not necessarily politically unsuccessful.

In other cases walls are shifted in the exercise of greater power, such as Europe’s gradual expansion. From the 1957 Treaty of Rome, we now have a twenty-five nation-state. As the boundaries stretch, they become no less formidable. In whatever form Europe is defined, internal concerns – population, trade, justice, social development – are facilitated; and external interests decreed. Increasing the members of Us brings no lessening of difference between Us and Them. On the contrary, polarities are strengthened; a wider Europe demands tighter extremity controls. For all her rhetoric of hospitality,20 Europe’s focus is on containing unwelcome Others. Plans such as asylum seeker “protection zones” in the Horn of Africa or Croatia show this emphasis on curbing perceived threat: another means to gather Them behind walls.21

Such walls, of course, have been perfected in Australia. As a fairly isolated island, we do have an unfair geographical advantage over border control.22 Even so, it’s a great deal of costly commitment to become the world leaders in walling in the Other.23

Since 1992 all unauthorised arrivals in Australia have been compulsorily detained. Currently about 900 people are held in our immigration detention centres.24 All children and family groups were released from detention at the end of July 2005.25 Prior to this, thousands of people are held in our immigration detention centres. In 1997, a twenty-five nation-state. As the boundaries stretch, they become no less formidable. In whatever form Europe is defined, internal concerns – population, trade, justice, social development – are facilitated; and external interests decreed. Increasing the members of Us brings no lessening of difference between Us and Them. On the contrary, polarities are strengthened; a wider Europe demands tighter extremity controls. For all her rhetoric of hospitality, Europe’s focus is on containing unwelcome Others. Plans such as asylum seeker “protection zones” in the Horn of Africa or Croatia show this emphasis on curbing perceived threat: another means to gather Them behind walls.21

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children had been held in detention centres. Most were locked away for years. Numerous studies have illustrated the detrimental effects of long-term detention upon mental and physical health, especially of children. Boredom, uncertainty and alienation breed depression, fear and hatred. Self-harm and serious despair are rife.

they've built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind.

One of the cruellest aspects of imprisoning asylum seekers is that it crushes all hope. Taking flight against persecution is an extraordinarily optimistic action, sprung from deep-seated belief in preferable options. Asylum seekers are, by definition, people of faith in the existence of good; and energy to apply themselves to the search for it. The demoralising resources to resist oppression and travel half the world to find a place of everything: I lost my mind, my life, my love... People are asking god hundred times, please kill me god.

I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind – because I had so much to do outside.

Mandatory detention also impacts upon Us outside. If we support the Government’s policies, then our own right to residence becomes a certification of moral superiority. If we oppose them, then a mark of shame; forced into the role of undeserving haves. The walls containing them become the founding definers of Us – as not-Them – whether we like it or not. Constructing our identities in negative comparison with the Other, detention centre walls bind Us as tightly as they do Them, since without Them there is no not-Them, and thus no Us. We are identity parasites.

When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed?
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.

These defining walls are not just stone and razor wire. Far more significant is their underpinning propaganda. In the same way as anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany was fed through public miseducation, contemporary Australian xenophobia depends upon incomplete portrayals of asylum seekers, contrived by government and propagated by media. It only serves Us to be negatively defined as not-Them if the features thus imparted are desirable; if we view Them as undesirable. Thus asylum seekers in Australia are impersonal, immoral, inhuman: “people who would throw their own children into the sea”. Containing such evil within the walls defines Us outside, in contrast, as good.

We saw the same techniques in recent public fulmination against homosexual marriage. Whereas the Pope proscribed such commitment as deviant and immoral and George W. Bush relied on the strength of his own beliefs, our Prime Minister’s opposition centred on the propagating capabilities of heterosexuality. While claiming that he is not opposed to the recognition of gay and lesbian relationships, Mr Howard maintained that marriage, “one of the bedrock institutions of our society”, is about children: “having children, raising them, providing for the survival of the species”, and on these grounds alone same-sex couples are excluded. Putting aside the obvious holes in such argument – that many heterosexual unions do not involve procreation, that many homosexuals are engaged in rearing children, and that reproductive technologies have brought a significant division between reproduction and sex – this is pure boundary-building, more Us against Them. In this case, Us who are part of the social bedrock against Them who aren’t. And following the implicit logic of such
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polarising: that those not with us are against us; against Them whose aim is to destroy the social bedrock. While specious, its effectiveness is breathtaking: with one self-professedly non-homophobic pronouncement the homosexual has become Public Enemy No 1.

But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they’ve closed me off from the outside world.

These are insidious walls: invisible, unacknowledged, and exceedingly powerful. Their effect is not only to exclude – in that homosexuals may not participate in a bedrock institution – but also to impound: the enemy amassed into a single delineated target. And all the while those building the walls asserting that they are treating their targets “fairly and with respect”.

Nor are such walls necessarily in the best interests of Us outside. Marriage, as exclusive, is made desirable, and valuable: a deft incentive to destroy the social bedrock. While specious, its effectiveness is breathtaking: with one self-professedly non-homophobic pronouncement the homosexual has become a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution? 36

In his frequently misappropriated poem “Mending Fences”, Robert Frost asserts: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out”.39 Confining the Other places limits on ourselves, in definition, agency, and behaviour repertoire; consequences often unexpected and often undesirable. The Warsaw Ghetto wall was built from Jewish labour.40 We ought to be wary that our contemporary barriers are not unwittingly restricting ourselves as well.

35 Consider these words of Queensland Senator Ronald Boswell, speaking for the Marriage Amendment Bill 2004: “The amendments to the Marriage Act contained in this Bill will make it absolutely clear that Australia will not recognise same-sex marriages entered into under the laws of another country, whatever country that may be. As a result of the amendments contained in this Bill same-sex couples will understand that if they go overseas to marry, their marriage, even if valid in the country in which it was solemnised, will not be recognised as valid in Australia.” Senate Hansard, August 12 2005: 26573: http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/ senate/dailys/dsl20804.pdf.
38 Or, in the words of Groucho Marx: “Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?”
40 See Gutman op. cit.

Half a century after the Warsaw Ghetto the world still wears its consequences, the legacies of a shattered generation. Knesset member Eitan Cabel’s equating of opposition to the West Bank wall with the murder of Israeli citizens puts him in direct succession from those who walled in his Polish kin: history’s repeating itself in the attempt to control our fears.41

The walls we build in bricks and mortar are founded in social division. Bringing down the bricks may be the work of a day. Rebuilding peoples is a different matter.

With no consideration, no pity, no caring
they’ve built walls around me, thick and high.
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.
I can’t think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind –
because I had so much to do outside.
When they were building the walls, how could I not have noticed!
But I never heard the builders, not a sound.
Imperceptibly they’ve closed me off from the outside world.