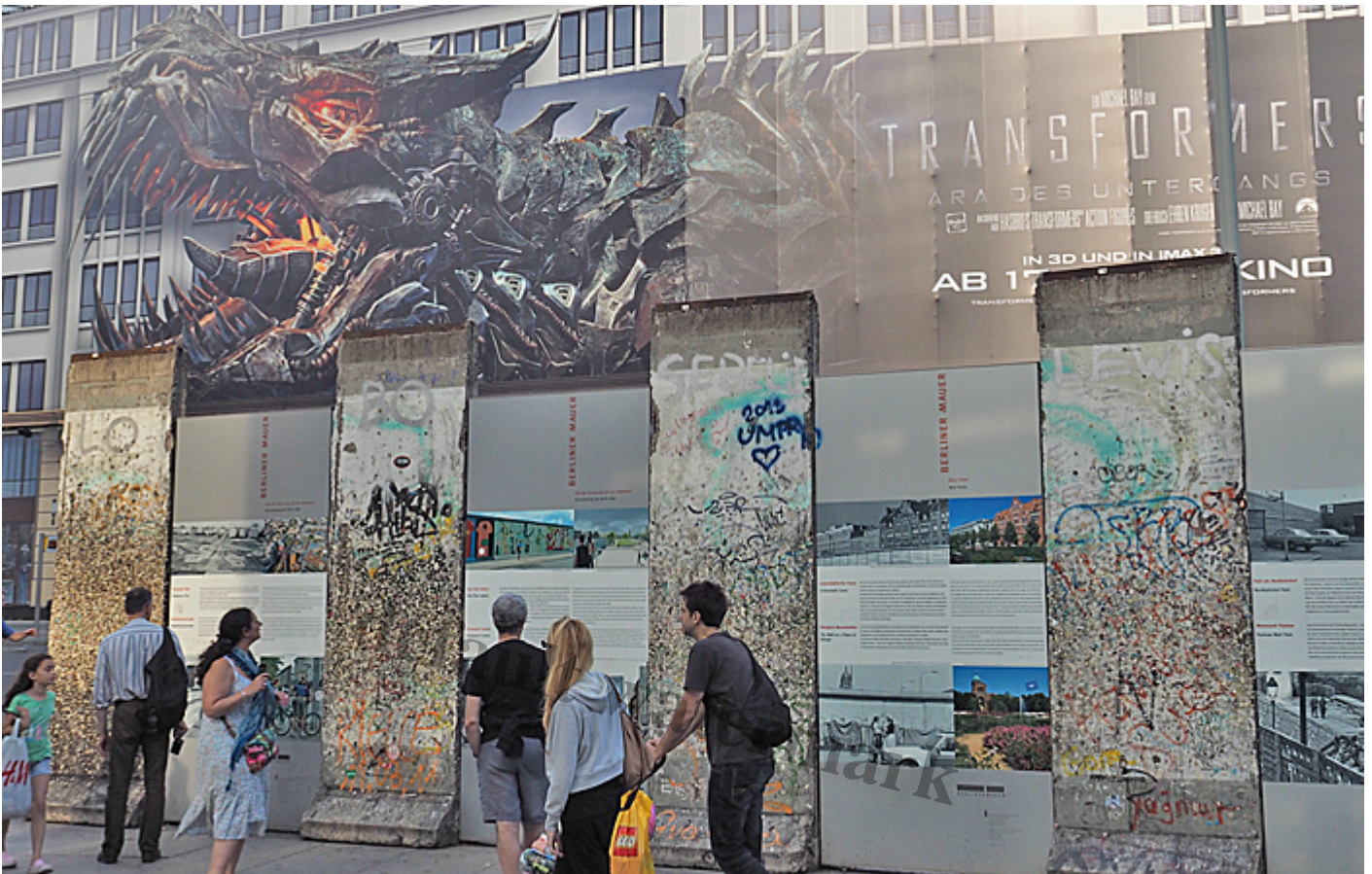


What's the point of symbols?

Description

Symbols are getting a bad name. More precisely, symbols of bad things are gaining more airtime than symbols of good things lately. Take for example *walls*. Last month Andrew Solomon wrote in [the Guardian](#) "Walls are concrete symbols of exclusion, and exclusion is seldom a diplomatic move." There's the prospect of a wall at Calais to curb the transit of refugees to the UK, and the less plausible prospect of a 35 foot high barrier along the Mexico-USA border.

The symbolism of that particular wall says something powerful about symbols in general. As I noted in the context of [post-truth politics](#), according to a [report](#) in the *Washington Post* one Trump supporter remarked: "I think if he strengthens the borders it will be the same as building the wall the wall can be built even without having to be built." Things like walls function as symbols even when they are not a thing.



Such post-truth symbolic wall building reads as a contemporary version of religious historian Mircea Eliade's (1907-1986) speculation on the original symbolism of the city wall:

It is very probable that the defences of inhabited areas and cities began by being magical defences; for these defences—ditches, labyrinths, ramparts, etc.—were set up to prevent the incursions of evil spirits rather than attacks from human beings. Even fairly late in history, in the Middle Ages for instance, the walls of cities were ritually consecrated as a defence against the Devil, sickness and death (39).

He adds that attacks against the city amount to the same thing, whether by demons or armies. They result in ruin, disintegration and death (39).

So the contemporary paradox of a wall that gets built without having to be built looks and sounds magical. Such a symbol also defines and excludes a demonic outside: illegals, job stealers, and drug peddlers.

Centre

The circumference of the mythic wall hosts its sacred and generative *centre*. For Eliade and the mythic tradition, the centre carries the entailments of a more benign and positive set of symbols than the wall. The centre draws on symbols of the pillar, ladder, gateway, navel, mountain and tree, through which humans and gods communicate, linking the earthly cosmos to the divine. Benevolent nature features prominently as a source of such symbols that substitute something tangible in place of the

inexpressible.

Now we seem to have lost the symbols of the centre, but the boundary, the wall, and the conviction persist that there is evil that lies beyond. I'm tempted to say, 'let's bring back the centre.'

Far right of centre

On the subject of the centre I was interested to read the introduction to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's new book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* in which she confesses to her exclusive allegiance to an academically-oriented, left-leaning, liberal emotionally-toned enclave (241) and the 'empathy walls' she had put up against people in the 'deplorable,' so-called alt-right, ultra-conservative, tea-party communities. As a Berkeley resident she would never have cause to meet such people face-to-face anyway.

In anthropological mode she ventured into the 'heart' of US conservatism in a quest to break out of her prejudices and to understand and appreciate *the other*. She describes this as a 'journey to the heart of the American right' (125), which implies a journey to an emotional heartland, but it is also a geographical journey with its centre for her in Louisiana.

She finds the heart, the empathy, and the complexity, and manages to find reasons for the alt-right's disaffection with the 'political elite' and to break down other political barriers. She met Hillary Clinton's designated 'deplorables' wearing shirts branded 'adorable deplorables.'

Filmmakers such as Louis Theroux have also undertaken such odysseys with skill. People who venture over the wall, into the heartland, into the centre, out of it, and along the margins contribute to a zoo of symbolic gestures. Symbols can be direct, but I think that their main strength lies in the paradoxes they entail and reveal. For Eliade, 'All symbolism of transcendence is paradoxical, impossible to conceive at the profane level' (83).

References

- Eliade, Mercea. 1961. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Harvill Press
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press

Notes

- Words and images matter, and they catch up with you, not least as we saw and heard a slightly younger Donald Trump on the news this morning pouring out his trademark misogyny as he descended from a courtesy bus at a celebrity gig. It would only take a bit of basic Freudian analysis to unpack what the language of so-called 'locker room' banter reveals about symbols and sex. See Freud, Sigmund. 1991. Infantile sexuality. In Angela Richards (ed.), *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 7: On Sexuality*. 88-126. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- The picture is of remnants of the Berlin Wall.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. alt-right
2. nature
3. politics
4. symbol
5. trump

Date Created

October 8, 2016

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark