



The Biopolitics of America: Bodies, Environments, and the Liberal Imagination

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Sandow Birk. *Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP) - Soledad, CA*. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

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Biopolitics Beyond the Body

This talk explores a direction in biopolitical theory discernible in Michel Foucault's originary work on that subject. Biopolitics has emerged as a theoretical master paradigm in twenty-first century critical theory and social analysis, and while it comes in many varieties, a certain meaning has come to predominate for many scholars, namely the study of the management of humanity's biological life by political and economic power. Without question, the appeal of this line of biopolitical inquiry has everything to do with its timeliness in an age of expanding drone wars, body organ trade, refugee camps, and big pharma. But this focus has made biopolitical theory somewhat less capacious than it could be. To the extent that the targets of biopower might be irreducible to biology or the bodily, they could include a diverse modalities of non-bodily dimensions to life, from our mentalities or net worth to our ecological footprint.

The talk proceeds in three sections. First, it reviews the biopolitical paradigm with an eye to the more expansive approach beyond the body that was latently available in Foucault's discussion. Second, it present two modalities of life—interiority and abstraction—that seem critical to any fuller investigation of modern power. Finally, it analyzes a recent novel, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as a specifically post 9/11 American case study in the operation of biopolitics beyond the body.