



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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A Vegetative State? Plant Biopolitics

This paper makes an intervention into recent literatures in “critical plant studies” in order to develop a specifically biopolitical understanding of the ways in which plants are bound up in neoliberal capitalist renderings of life. It also asks us to think beyond recent works on plant intelligence in order to respond ethically to/with plants, in a context in which humans and plants alike increasingly find their vegetative capacities for birth, growth, and decay the objects of biopolitical intervention.

Specifically, the paper explores the concept of vegetation in three, interrelated ways. First, it considers the apparent contradiction between vegetation as a description of lack of liveliness in human beings (e.g., “vegetative state”), versus a description of proliferation in plants (e.g., “vegetative growth”): a return to the classical origins of the concept reveals a great deal about how life continues to be understood in Western politics. Second, the paper considers the ways in which vegetation can be understood as a model for “bare life” under neoliberalism: not just a category of beings always already rendered standing reserve, but a quality of living shared among people, plants, and animals that is increasingly open to intervention and exploitation (which casts a new light on “plant intelligence”). Finally, the paper considers vegetation as a potentially restorative relationship between people and plants, in which the point is not to imagine that plants are “like us” but rather to practice relationships with plants that respectfully orient our capacities toward mutual flourishing rather than instrumental use