



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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The Biopolitics of Anticommunism: Pastoralism, Selfhood, and the Conservative Imagination

My paper argues that midcentury thinkers, struggling to explain the difference between liberalism and totalitarianism, turned to the pastoral to articulate linked visions of economic and cultural autonomy. Empson usefully defines the pastoral as a literary mode that represents complex social problems through simple metaphors; this simplification avoids bathos by carefully separating the idyllic setting from society. The pastoral insistence on separation proved attractive to classical liberal thinkers such as Locke and Adam Smith, who were interested in establishing the provenance of a separate economic sphere. At midcentury Hayek (among others) turned economic autonomy into an argument against totalitarianism and eventually for deregulation. It is my argument that an important strand of economic thinking is reliant on this literary mode. However, I also want to argue that the separate-sphere thinking typical of economic liberalism has also impacted literary studies, and is evident, for instance, in Northrop Frye's insistence that culture is autonomous from society, and literary studies separate from other disciplinary fields. After providing some of this background, my paper will focus on Lionel Trilling as an example of how separate-sphere pastoralism influenced midcentury theories of literary sensibility and disciplinary formation. I call this story of influence, through a deliberate pun on one of Trilling's more famous titles, the conservative imagination. By conservative I do not mean to imply a specific political program, but rather a version of liberal thinking (conservatism in the United States is arguably a version of liberalism) that emphasizes autonomy over control. In Trilling this results in a specific theory of literature, and a specific theory of modernism, that achieves disciplinary stability by insisting on the freedom from disciplinary constraints.