

**Jeffrey T. Nealon**

***Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life***

**Stanford University Press, 2015.**

Pulse: A History, Sociology  
& Philosophy of Science  
Journal, 2016, Issue 4

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Already for long, animal studies have ordered the day; animated the heart of philosophy of nature. Nealon's work on plant studies arrives as a fecund contribution to the growing shift of emphasis on the call to think of life at its 'lowest' instance, as such, *from the ground*. *Plant Theory: Biopower & Vegetable Life* is a topical book that places itself in the midst of a compelling theoretical landscape.

Announced in the subtitle, the vantage point of this undertaking will be the intertwining of life, the life that plants show forth and which they problematize vis-à-vis power structures, with these very structures—the common name of this intertwining being *biopower* (xv). Duly, Foucault enters stage. The charge against the thinker of biopolitics, of an exclusive interest in humans at the expense of animal life, is set into relief (3). Nealon is prepared to look closer. With Foucault, he observes: “biology *creates*, rather than *discovers*, this object of study called life” (5). This nineteenth century creation does not jettison the animal; rather, it incorporates animality into the core of biopower “*as the template for life itself*” (7). Accordingly, the exclusion of life at work operates at the expense of animals, rather than plants.<sup>1</sup> “The tabulated space of [the] order”<sup>2</sup> of plants is appropriated by wild animal desire, that force of life that biopower will have to control, structure, organize, manage.

Following thus the logic of biopower, we discover in animals ‘life companions’<sup>3</sup> rather than ‘others’ (“those figures excluded, forgotten, wholly unlike us but that we still depend on absolutely”) (11). In this logic, plants delimit the true horizon of otherness. Yet the limit is hard to sustain. Another human, an animal, or a plant, appears *at once* both other and a companion. Soon indeed, the figure of a companion who is not other, and an-other who is not a companion, emerges as the impossible task of thought. Certainly, limits, thresholds and boundaries must be thought anew. It is not *merely* deconstruction, thoroughly misunderstood, but science itself, which makes a clear cut divide between the animal and vegetal ever-more problematic, and which asks us to rethink, sharpen, and reconfigure, our categories in order to ask the “open and hazardous” question: “what counts as an ethically compelling form of ‘life’?” (12)

Here, Nealon pauses to counter Agamben's appropriation of Foucauldian biopower. Modern capitalist democracies are not concentration camps. However while the fates of men are decided by bureaucratized biopower, the lives of animals seem subject indeed to Agamben's holocaust biopolitics: "the feed animals are made to die, while the dwindling populations of 'wild' animals are merely left to live" (23).<sup>4</sup> Vegetable life provides for Nealon a step beyond this violent antinomy. Agamben himself discovers in plants the barest of bare life, yet abandons his discovery (25).

Nealon returns thus to Plato's *Timaeus* and soon Aristotle's *De Anima* to retrace the history of this life. Aristotle denies plants a *telos* or finality. Plants grow without a higher purpose, until they can grow no more; they strive towards no ideal form (32). The function of this blind life however is not restricted to plants. A certain reading of Aristotle divides the human soul into three: the vegetative soul of growth, the animal soul of sensation and the sentient soul of reason (35). Accordingly each one of us is plant, animal, and human, at once: each one, within, companion and other.

Aristotle and Plato counterpoint Foucault's reading of modernity where plants appear as pure exteriority. The Aristotelian interiority that constitutes the vegetable soul posits the plant as the grounds of human soul. This interiority, which structures the continuum of man and plant, Nealon rediscovers in Heidegger (45). Curiously however, Heidegger's notorious distinction of the world-less (*weltlos*) stone, the world-poor (*weltarm*) animal, and the world-forming (*weltbildend*) man, leaves plants without a proper ground, without a proper relation to the world. Still, the world-poverty of the animal, which guides its behavior "within an environment, but never within a world,"<sup>5</sup> the animal's captivity in this environment, seems a sufficient temporary abode for the plant. Alive, yet captive, the plant questions, no less than the animal, our alleged freedom: the freedom to form a world. After Derrida, we seem to say: "The plant that therefore I am" (45). Nealon presses the question of captivity through the parable of the cave in the Platonic *Republic*. How are humans in this allegory of captivity different from plants and animals? (45) Is the philosopher the only true human? Postulating a specific difference won't suffice. At the very least the philosopher should manifest more than the essence of humanity, arriving, that is, as the hidden essence of all life. This won't suffice either.

Thus Nealon turns to Derrida's under-examined *Glas*, where the two columns of the text create a mutual challenge of infinite tension. On the left, Hegel's animal desire effectuates dialectical sublation against Genet's plant desire on the right, which seems to lead nowhere (69). Derrida accordingly places the discourse on sexual difference at the heart of the Hegelian philosophy of nature. In this reading, the undifferentiated pre-sexualized human, as much as the human female *as* female, shares in the peaceful substance of vegetation. "So for Hegel the plant must be 'animalized' in the same way that the woman must be manned, the family must be nationed, and mere matter must be lifted up by spirit: without that sublating moment there's nothing but cancerous 'natural' growth, without regard to betterment or higher ends, nutritive life without a 'world'" (68-9).

For Derrida the peace that pertains to the refractory growth of the plant turns it into “a kind of sister” (70). Neither the woman of desire, nor the brother of revolution,<sup>6</sup> the ‘sororal’ plant stands for a life bereft of *eros* and politics. The fullness of the analogy’s implications is hard to maintain. In Nealon’s reading, the employment of Genet against Hegel in *Glas* constitutes a rare moment in Derrida’s work where the plant turns against the animal, not for a share of attention, but in order to claim the totality of life, challenging the dominance of the spirit, born of animal-human desire, by transforming vegetal innocence into a sovereign force (71). Among the countless implications, a question takes centre stage: is it possible to imagine an innocent sovereignty, a sovereign innocence? (71)

Nealon discovers instead a violent vegetable sovereignty in Derrida’s last lecture. At the end of the cycle of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida reads *physis* with Heidegger as *Walten*, rather than *Wachstum*. Nature manifests itself as the sway of an originary violent presencing, rather than mere growth (73). Accordingly, nature constitutes a world which philosophy tries to wrest from literature, or at least a certain literature, for which there are only islands; no nature as such, no animal or plant in general, only specific beings. Nealon does not tarry with Derrida’s double, impossible, commitment both to a world and to absolute singularities.

Prefiguring the passage to Deleuze, *Walten* comes to comprise both the absolute past and the posthuman future, when *physis* will eventually usurp the throne of humanity, which has violently displaced nature to enter the Anthropocene. *Walten* comes to designate thus the potential hidden aspect in the critique of correlationism, a critique leveled not least against all forms of biocentrism. Nealon accepts the premise of speculative realism in order to show that a certain correlation of (animal-human) life and world is disturbed by the vegetative in Derrida (80). This interruption of the correlation assumes its force from the fact that plants are denied a singular phantasmatic world, and accordingly are excluded from life (74-8). Ultimately, “plant life does not name the specific kingdom *Plantae* for Derrida, but plant life functions as an intense figure for this disturbed, violent power of emergence on which everything depends.” (79) Plants become another name in the Derridean series of the X of the real (*différance*, *pharmakon*, *chōra*, the trace, the *always already*, the performative, auto-immunity, originary technicity, the event, and so on), manifesting “the impossibility of transcendence, atemporal, ‘full’ presence.” Plants are here a conceptual figure “for the power of emergence,” the power that initiates the production of a world (79).

This production follows a different trajectory in Deleuze and Guattari, who both urge us to “follow the plants.” Nealon’s final move will be to follow precisely this “vegetal model of thought.” True to Deleuze and Guattari’s intention to abolish all metaphor, Nealon thinks anew the vegetal nexus of the rhizome, which “has become a template for discussing virtually everything *except* plant life” (85).

The non-metaphoric function of the rhizome becomes apparent in its contrast to the figure of the tree which (albeit at times actually rhizomatic), becomes the metaphor of metaphor: the metaphor of the movement from the sensible to the intelligible, that reduces life to organisms and worlds, the essence of which is hiding in a root or origin (92). While the tree imposes the verb *to be*, the rhizome produces the series of “and, and ...” that process of life that forms individuals and their territories (93), exposing the lie of unity, the lie of a “world as a series of hidden possibilities” (88), in favour of multiplicities (93).

Deleuze and Guattari draw on Simondon’s notion of individuation; becoming (becoming-animal, becoming-plant...) does not set the individual free from determination, but rather determines it *as* an individual. Becoming is thus not opposed to being: it is, rather, the way in which being structures itself (86). Individuation doesn’t emerge from or relate to a prior phantasmatic world, but takes place as the shaping of an environment in which the territory and the individual emerge together (86-7). Accordingly, “the self does not undergo modifications; it is itself a modification” (93). Life does not progress in accordance to a hidden, originary pattern “of mass evolutionary descent,” but each time “through the singularities of filiation” (94). Life is thus not the generality of an ‘itself’, but always a singularity, an individuating striation (96), which produces at once the territory and the individual which inhabits it (96). Life does not emerge from an access to a hidden world, yet neither is it contained in the individual organism, which could be in possession of its singular world and its own individuation. Rather, life is dispersed across everything, beyond organisms, along the interstices of their interrelations; life in this sense is inorganic (95). Here the aporias of interiority are abolished along with the hope of exteriority.

The political significance of the rhizome becomes evident in Žižek’s criticism, which locates in it the capitalist logic of flows of capital, goods, and labour (101). Indeed, if we follow Deleuze’s reading of Foucault, it becomes clear that the passage from societies of *sovereignty* to *disciplinary* societies is only temporary. The societies of *control* that constitute our immediate future will comprise of evermore open-ended, flexible forms of power (102). Capitalism is much more effective in and through societies of control, which instead of forming the individuals into specific roles, through institutions, re-territorialize human assemblages, operating on people’s relation to themselves, in every possible micro-action (103). Clearly, “neoliberalism is a much more effective means of social control, than sovereignty or discipline ever was precisely because of its commitment to ‘openness’ and flexibility” (103-4).

At the same time however, the self can function as the privileged locus of political and ontological resistance. If life tends to resist its appropriation, it will resist nowhere more strongly than in the self: *here*, anarchists and finance executives have equal access to strategies of deterritorialization (104-5). The significance of rhizomatics rests thus first and foremost in its diagnostic potential (105). The rhizome offers the best way to think about the capitalist territory it intends to transform. Although “Walmart takes territory from mom-and-pop stores in precisely the rhizomatic way that switchgrass

overtakes a meadow [...] as a diagnosis it doesn't seem to follow that rhizomatics is an inherently dangerous political notion" (105). In turn, Nealon summarizes the diagnostic contribution of this project. "In the end *Plant Theory* will perhaps have argued nothing other than this: the vegetable *psukhe* of life is a concept or image of thought that far better characterizes our biopolitical present than does the human-animal image of life, which remains tethered to the organism, the individual with its hidden life and its projected world" (106).

What happens when life opens to the vegetable soul seeking a plurality that, for Michael Marder, constitutes "a political space of conviviality" (91)? Rather than expanding "humanism's noble aims of liberation for all beings," that is, for all singularities, Nealon seeks to recast biopolitical and environmental impasses, by thinking the functions that structure life into such singularities (107).

A series of specific biopolitical considerations configure the coda of *Plant Theory*. First, if plants share with animals almost everything that is invoked to grant the latter rights, how can one decide on the protection of animals over and above plants? How does this sharing of life functions translate into politics and ethics? How should, for example, one eat anything, if no moral ground supports vegetarianism anymore? Second, how is one to think of the disappearance of phytoplankton, not out of the anthropocentric fear that Nealon evokes (111), the fear of a collapse of earth's total ecosystem, with its implication of the end of man, but with regard to the phytoplankton *itself*: precisely as all the questions of the vegetal self return. Third, the largely unknown horror of vegetal biopolitics is juxtaposed with the familiar horrors of feed-animal abuse (112). Among the countless cases of manufacture, possession, and marketization of plant life, Monsanto's is invoked. "The company doesn't sell seeds, it just rents them, for one season, and it remains the permanent owner of the genetic information contained in the seed, which is divested of its status as a living organism and becomes a mere commodity" (113). A new biopolitical thought is needed for capital's ever-deepening investment of life.

Ultimately, Nealon confronts Cary Wolfe's question: "Do we extend [Derridean] 'unconditional hospitality' to anthrax and ebola virus, to SARS?" His response recognizes the impossibility of an immediate answer. Unconditional hospitality, like the structure of the Derridean trace, is not something to be simply decided. "The challenge is to account as fully as possible for various forms of violence, not to renounce the violence of choice or life altogether" (117). The immediacy of decision is complicated, but not precluded. Its possibility presupposes, for Nealon, following Foucault, a break with the "blackmail of the Enlightenment" between submission to a sovereign calculation of life and the reign of chaos. After Simondon, Deleuze, Guattari, and Esposito, take on this false bifurcation of finished singularities and the abyss, which must give way to a thought that examines the ways in which trans-individuation is already invested with power (118). To the bleak paraphrase of Fredric Jameson: "right now we're far better equipped to imagine extinction—the end of the world—than to

imagine an alternative to global neoliberal capitalism” (121), *Plant Theory* arrives as an alternative of imagination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> With Derridean reticence, the generalizing, perhaps totalizing, words ‘animal’ and ‘plant’ are used provisionally and tentatively, attentive to claims of singularity.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault M., *The Order of Things* (London; Routledge, 2002), 277.

<sup>3</sup> The work of Donna Haraway is here in view. Cf. *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Charles Patterson’s *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York; Lantern Books, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger M., *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Indianapolis; Indiana University Press, 1995), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida J., *The Politics of Friendship* (London; Verso, 2005).