

Vienna STS Talk

Valuables in Store: the politics of diminished living things

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Bioeconomic processes thrive on the use of technical storage devices, which have unexpected effects on the economic forms that living entities can take. In this talk, I draw on insights from two deliberately contrasting case studies, the soybean bioeconomy in Argentina and the human tissue bioeconomy in Belgium, and argue that storage infrastructures are instrumental to manage and control the value and political dynamics of living entities. In the first case, I analyze the use by farmers of a cheap grain storage technology called 'silobolsas', large plastic bags with specific properties that are used to store their crop longer and hope for more favorable economic conditions. In the second case, I am interested in how biomedical scientists use biobanks, an expensive storage technology that cryopreserves tissue and functions as a repository of donated biomaterials where they are processed for future use in medical therapies or R&D. I find that the materiality of living things as well as the infrastructures used for their storage and exchange are invested with different meanings that not only serve commercial exchanges, but also offer a space for resistance on how to maintain or produce different forms of value. Both cases involve the temporary storage of fragile and mundane things that are in a liminal state that I call "diminished", and that require special care to hold together and allow for value production. I suggest that this characteristic of being diminished is a pivotal moment to observe the economic forms (i.e. gift, commodity, asset) that things can take on and abandon. I conclude that diminished things play a leading but understudied role in the complex relations between (creative) destruction and political-economic renewal.

