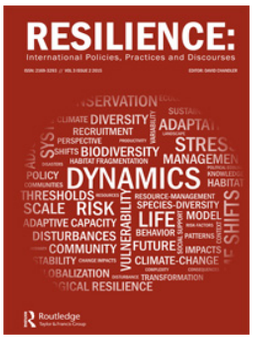

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FORUM ON BRAD EVANS AND JULIAN REID'S *RESILIENT LIFE: THE ART OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*

Resilience and uninsured risk

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In one of his late seminars, *Security, Territory and Population*, delivered at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1978, Foucault traces the liberal art of government back to the infrastructural, demographic and environmental problems that confronted the commercial states of early modern Europe. It is here that he locates the crystallisation of the security-risk-probability nexus that he sees as constitutive of liberalism – a nexus of pragmatic concerns that were as crucial to a liberal art of government as the more familiar juridical instruments of contract and tort law (Foucault, 2007; see also the two final chapters of Foucault, 2003). But it is perhaps to François Ewald, a student of Foucault's, that we owe the most sustained historical treatment of the relationship between liberalism, risk and security. Foucault's lectures constitute a treasure trove of future programmes of research, only some of which he had time to realise in full. Ewald's 1986 publication, the monumental *L'Etat providence* (reprinted in abridged version as *Histoire de l'état providence* in 1996) can be read as a response to the suggestive but ultimately underdeveloped material that Foucault presented in his late lectures. Ewald's history begins by examining the constitutive role of the 'accident' in classical liberalism, where insecurity and freedom were thought to imply each other, and goes on to show how the accident was gradually constituted as a social problem by the nineteenth century labour movement. In the process, he explains how the classical liberal presumption of absolute freedom and irreducible risk gave way to the social philosophy of the welfare state, with its insistence that all risks should be collectivised, standardised and rendered insurable.

Ewald's point of terminus is the mid-twentieth century welfare state. His work is unable to tell us how the rise of neo-liberalism will profoundly refigure the nexus between risk, security and insurance, although he does offer some tantalising comments on changing conceptions of risk in environmental politics (Ewald, 1993, 2002). Even Foucault's prescient lecture series on neo-liberalism, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, fails to consider the neo-liberal critique of social insurance as outlined in the work of Milton and Rose Friedman (Foucault, 2008; Friedman & Friedman, 1980, pp. 91–127). And yet the defining feature of Chicago school neo-liberalism is its attack on the very principle of Social Security – the logic of statistically calculable and insurable risk that was foundational to the 20th century welfare state (see Hacker, 2006).

Brad Evans' and Julian Reid's *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, can be read as a sequel to this conceptual history. It brilliantly analyses the rise of 'resilience

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thinking' as the conceptual expression of a liberalism that distinguishes itself both from the social state and the classical liberal tradition. Neo-liberalism is 'new' in the sense that it no longer believes in the possibility of security but instead promotes the positivity of danger, the catalytic effects of catastrophe and the subjective necessity of exposure. Neo-liberalism, they argue, promotes exposure 'by design': it demands that the possibility of danger be built into social policy, the urban environment and environmental risk management; that it be acknowledged as an ineluctable element of policy design; that it be embraced as inherently unpredictable. As a prescription for action, what neo-liberalism demands is continual adaptation to unpredictable risk – resilience – rather than a posture of active prevention. In the words of Evans and Reid:

> The very concept of security itself is being shod by liberalism as it embraces not simply forms of endangerment, but a new ideal of *resilience* … Our critique of resilience … begins from the premise that liberalism is aimed today not at solving or preventing the manifestation of dangers and threats to security, but at making us forgo the very idea and possibility of security, through the embrace of the necessity of our exposure to dangers of all kinds as a means by which to live well. (p. 2)

I would add that this expression of neo-liberalism testifies to the profound influence of Friedrich von Hayek, whose later work celebrated the limits of predictive science and state management against the certainties of neoclassical and Keynesian economics alike (Hayek, 1974). Modern liberal institutions, note Evans and Reid, seem to have embraced the 'Nietzschean imperative to "live dangerously"' – an observation that might lead one to further explore the affinities between Nietzsche and Hayek (p. 2).

The speed at which the concept of resilience has travelled across multiple policy domains is extraordinary. Its influence has been felt in psychology, education, urban planning, global development policy, military strategy, disaster and risk management, social policy, central banking, financial economics, ecosystems science and resource management. While the critique developed by Evans and Reid is far-reaching and could potentially be extended to each of these policy domains, the book focuses primarily on the uses of resilience in global development policy and ecological risk management. In fact, one of the book's key arguments – a compelling one, I think – is that the 'development-security-environment' nexus represents a privileged site for the deployment of new forms of liberal governance (p. 7). At one level, this represents an empirical observation. Global development institutions such as the UN and World Bank are closely attuned to the risks (social, ecological and economic) of climate change and rapidly changing environments – and it is at the interface between global development policy and climate risk management that the discourse of resilience has been refined. But at a deeper level, Evans and Reid are arguing that ecological risk assumes a unique constitutive and legitimating role in neo-liberal discourse. Moving beyond Foucault's tantalising comments on the 'environment-alism' (2008, p. 260) of neo-liberal power, they suggest that neo-liberalism is able to justify itself by subjecting economic reason to the greater reason of the biosphere, understood as a complex adaptive system. Classical liberalism, according to Foucault, could be defined as an art of government that sought to limit the power of the state vis-à-vis the freedom of the market. Neo-liberalism goes one better and claims to subject the power of the market and the state to the greater freedom of life itself.

Neo-liberalism thus relies on a certain naturalism – but one that propels toward constant disequilibrium and adaptation rather than the conservation of order. Needless to say, this is a naturalism that has proven extremely effective in neutralising critique, since it is seemingly able to leverage all external resistance to its logic. Indeed, Evans and Reid make the compelling argument that resilience thinking emerged out of sustainable

development discourse, itself a critique of early neo-liberal development theory. The publication of the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987, introduced the concept of 'sustainable development' as a way of attuning economic development policy to the vulnerabilities of the biosphere (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). These critics of ecological modernisation called upon development institutions to look beyond the state to the local subsistence economies and household survival strategies that flourished in the wake of first generation structural adjustment programmes, offering these local survivalisms as a model for sustainable development. In so doing, they unwittingly furnished the exhausted Washington consensus with a new social and ecological alibi. The idea that the work of development should be transferred to the local and micro-level, empowering local communities, was readily seized upon as a pretext for shifting risk downward. The call to sustainable development has justified neo-developmental discourses that devolve the risks of structural adjustment to the 'household' level (most often, in fact, the emblematic female-headed household) and call on 'vulnerable' subjects to secure their own survival in the face of diminishing social welfare. The rise of resilience then, can be understood as part of the reflexive turn in neo-liberal development policy: a post-Washington-consensus adaptation to and recuperation of critique.

Evans and Reid insist that any viable critique of resilience discourse must pay particular attention to the forms of subjectivity that it mobilises and disqualifies. In a compelling passage, they note that the resilient subject is one who has forsaken security in favour of change but who is nevertheless precluded from effecting any real political change:

> The resilient subject of sustainable development is, by definition, not a secure but an adaptive subject, adaptable in so far as it is capable of making those adjustments to itself that enable it to survive the hazards encountered in its exposure to the world. In this sense, the resilient subject is a subject that must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world. Not a political subject that can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility, with a view to securing itself from the world; but a subject which accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world. (pp. 78–79)

Particularly incisive in this regard is their discussion of the role played by 'vulnerability' in global development discourse – a term that is ubiquitous in the policy prescriptions of the UN and World Bank but has not attracted the kind of critical analysis it deserves. Evans and Reid convincingly argue that neo-liberal development discourse interpellates and demands a subject who is constitutively exposed to critical events: a form of exposure that one IPCC report describes (in almost Spinozist fashion) as 'the propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected' (IPCC, 2012, p. 32). Vulnerability then is no longer figured as a weakness or indisposition of the will but a necessary predisposition to risk – whose success or failure will be judged after the fact by one's ability to adapt.

Evans and Reid are illuminating when it comes to investigating the peculiar forms of police intervention, criminalisation and triage that are legitimated by this imperative to adapt. At first blush, resilience may appear to be the most universal of qualities and a principle that inadvertently authorises the survival strategies of the poor and unwaged. In practice, as Evans and Reid observe, resilience as a form of 'neoliberal interventionism' (p. 47) rewards those who adapt to the social market strategies of the post-Washington consensus – those who take part in microcredit or household entrepreneur programmes, those who swap untitled housing for private housing – and punishes those 'actually existing forms of resourcefulness' (pp. 84–90) that elude marketisation. Terminology that designates impoverished populations as 'vulnerable' is formally neutral with respect to the

moral character of those 'at risk'. But moral valuation reasserts itself when neo-liberal development policy is confronted with populations that learn to adapt without yielding profits. At this point, neo-liberalism rediscovers the difference between the deserving and the undeserving poor: it distinguishes sharply between those who are 'at risk' and those who 'pose a risk' or perhaps those who are uninsured and *those who cannot be insured against*.

This dismantling of the truth claims of neo-liberal eco-development discourse already represents a pragmatic intervention into the field, one that in my eyes is more promising than the prophetic politics offered in the final chapter. By paying attention to the forms of population triage that are dissimulated within the universalising and naturalising framework of resilience thinking, Evans and Reid are able to discern the fault lines that inhabit the neo-liberal social. Their intervention represents a powerful and much-needed sequel to the Foucauldian genealogy of liberal power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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