



Book Review

Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously

Evans, Brad, & Reid, Julian. (2014). Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press. ISBN 139780745671529 (cloth) US\$76.95; ISBN 139780745671536 (paper) US\$26.95; ISBN 9780745682839 (e-book) US\$21.99. 208 pages.

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Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously (2014) by Brad Evans and Julian Reid, interrogates the political consequences of the adoption of resilience discourse. They argue that new liberal regimes engender a type of politics that moves beyond security and community towards a “catastrophic imaginary that promotes insecurity by design” (p. 2). This neoliberal concept of insecurity by design, they argue, stems from ecological and biological theory, which suggests that living systems often survive because of their ability to adapt to their environment as opposed to securing themselves from the environment. This “insecurity” is reinforced by resilience discourse, which convinces people that there is risk in believing in security. Under this conceptualization, instead of securing oneself from changes, one should instead accept that life is an unending process of surviving and adaptation in the face of change. Thus, human capacities are expected to mimic other living systems which “develop not on account of their ability to secure themselves from danger, but through their abilities to absorb the perturbations on account of their necessary exposure to them” (p. 62). It is this application of the ecological to the realm of the social that is particularly disturbing for the authors because it suggests that this necessary exposure to risk prevents the subject’s ability to resist or demand security from the regimes that govern them (p. 62). In our contemporary neoliberal moment, resilience presents itself as the ideal mechanism that individuals must possess to survive a life of insecurity. This insecure life is one in which it is necessary for individuals, especially the vulnerable, to adapt to a continually-shifting baseline of acceptability of economic, social, cultural and environmental disaster. In short, insecurity is the new normal and resilience is the strategy for coping.

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In Chapters 1 and 2, Evans and Reid contend that there is a new political present emerging and within it a “different kind of liberalism” (p. 1). Where once it was integral to the modern liberal state to believe in the possibility of security, liberalism’s new belief in the “positivity of danger” and the “suspicion of security” has given rise to a new ideal: resilience (p. 2). In the age of the Anthropocene and neoliberalism, they contend, humans must become more accustomed to living in complex and dynamic systems. What does this mean practically? For the authors, it means that the poor are “taught” how to be more resilient and more flexible. Indeed, in the context of international organizations, the United Nations (UN) and World Bank (WB) both use resilience in numerous ways, often through resilience programs that ensure market mechanisms are maintained. It is convincing to see why, in this context, Evans and Reid argue that the resilient subject is a neoliberal one. They assert that there is a “valorization of adaptability” among neoliberal policy makers, where resilience is “neoliberal interventionism” that places the “burden of the crises directly on the shoulders of the globally impoverished” (p. 47). They are careful to point out that connections between life and danger hold some validity (especially in biology and ecology) but when such connections are transferred into the human world, “the results are politically debasing” (p. 62). This is so because the subject is denied the ability to demand security from the regime that governs it (p. 62). As such, resilient (neoliberal) subjects accept the imperative “not to secure themselves from dangers they are faced with but instead adapt repeatedly” much in the same way that other life forms do (p. 63).

In Chapter 3 and 4, the authors’ concern is with sustainable development and resilience’s affective consequences. Since the late 1980s, sustainable development has offered a neoliberal counter-critique of earlier modernization strategies that criticized state protectionism and regulation while advocating for community-based self-reliance. Such skepticism of the state means that sustainable development policies and practices focus on individuals, namely the poor, learning to become rational, economic actors who must ensure their own self-sufficiency and survival (pp. 74-75). Resilience discourse therefore becomes a necessary part of sustainable development, because actors must increase their capacity for resilience to survive. Despite this, Evans and Reid do concede that there is a difference between the autonomy of the resourceful and the interventionist strategies of the resilient. In Chapter 4, they argue that the “prevailing mode of contemporary affect is a state of normalized anxiety” (p. 92). In (normalized) unstable neoliberalism, anxiety and vulnerability are the default and necessary sentiments and positions. It is through one’s exposure to anxiety that one learns to cope with and even embrace the anxious state rather than rid oneself of it. However, they are not suggesting that anxiety and trauma are not results of life changing events, but question what it means to be anxious for events that have not yet materialized. They argue that “adaptation in the face of the catastrophic is not the same as political transformation” (p. 119). The former

accepts its vulnerable and insecure position “conflat[ing] resilience with resistance such that politics become a sheer matter of survivability” (p. 119). This argument is just one of a few that leave the reader wanting. Surely those whose lived (everyday) realities include adapting in the face of catastrophes live more complex lives than simply “survivability.”

In Chapter 5 and 6, the authors look at how resilience fits into what they see as a new liberal biopolitics – one that is vulnerable and littered with catastrophes. In our contemporary catastrophic mode, to ensure resilience it is necessary to prepare for the catastrophes before they happen. Climate change, for example, is a “slow catastrophe” as many scientists believe we have passed the tipping point of environmental sustainability. Thinking in a time of catastrophes where liberalism dominates means that we live in fear and spend our lives adapting to the slow demise of human and ecological existence. They question what it might be like to live in a way that does not fear the end, but instead formulates new ways of being while accepting that an end is coming. However, they do not make clear whether or not this political trajectory will end up speeding up our “slow catastrophe” to our own demise. Arguably, this slippery slope might be a risk one must contend with to think past (neo)liberal vulnerability.

The book ends with Chapter 7, where the authors contemplate what might be beyond the resilient subject. They argue that the debasement of the subject through resilience strategies puts death into question by removing death from the gaze. Resilience, to them, is about surviving – not dying nor thriving – and thus threatens the ability to think beyond the catastrophic and conceive of different worlds (p. 170). They question how to revitalize the meaning of the political out of the catastrophic condition, and do so by looking towards art, poetics and the imagination. They argue that it will be necessary to learn to live with a disposition where instead of seeing the future as pre-conceived catastrophes to which we must adapt, we look to the future with the confidence to understand new ethical relationships between humans and the world. What they call the poetic subject “seeks to have a faith beyond that which arises simply from endangerment, as well as rekindling long diminished understandings of political subjectivity” (p. 195). Their hope is that by revalorizing the imagination in tandem with political reason, we can announce the death of liberalism and “welcome with confidence a more poetic subjectivity” (p. 203). Why they see the poetic as inherently positive, they do not say.

Evans and Reid capture the consequences of resilience in a wide range of disciplines. Social justice scholars might find this critique particularly useful given how dominant resilience features in the practices of international organizations like the UN, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, such broadness inevitably will not be able to seize some of the complexities that surround the politics of resilience, its usage and meaning of the word, as well as resilience’s relationship to resistance. For instance, because the work’s focus is on western-centric and male-centric theory and

criticism, it does not engage with the complicated and ambiguous understandings of resilience and resistance that are present in post-colonial or feminist theory. Post-colonial scholars have, without necessarily focusing on the word resilience, discussed the ways in which adaptation to slavery, colonialism and contemporary neoliberalism and neocolonialism have affected and continue to affect Black and Indigenous lives. Indeed, such an assumption that resilience rhetoric has the power to demand both an ethos and behavioral capacities of subjects seems to suggest little agency of the subjects themselves or the cultural politics that occurs on the ground in the specificity of context and place. It has been documented that both Black and Indigenous peoples utilize resilience as a form of survival and resistance to oppressive regimes from colonialism to neoliberalism. While Evans and Reid try to make the case that there are differences between resourcefulness and resilience, this distinction needs to be fully investigated to be more convincing. Left unexplored, the distinction appears to be a question of semantics, and as such ends up suggesting that different types of resilience at play may not be negative at all. Indeed, there are numerous scholars who disagree with understanding resilience as wholly negative. Some scholars, such as Grove and Adey (2015) and Rogers (2015), posit that excluding different forms of resilience, especially in different contexts, universalizes resilience and the outcomes of being resilient. To be fair, some of these nuances are outside the scope of Evans and Reid's work, but even so, acknowledgment of the multiplicities of resilience might strengthen their argument to show just how far nefarious liberal-driven regimes go to co-opt the meanings of resilience and resistance of the vulnerable and marginalized. This would provide more traction for those who engage with or study social justice movements and who must confront the complicated lived experiences of resilience. Finally, there are some editorial challenges (copy-editing for one) that leave the work feeling rushed and unpolished. However, many of the authors' criticisms of resilience are persuasive and provide pertinent contributions to both social justice and resilience studies. This text is most suited to upper level undergraduates and graduate students, as the subject matter is expansive, requires prior experience with theory, and at times is written in overly academic vernacular.

References

- Grove, K., & Adey, P. (2015). Security and the politics of resilience: An aesthetic response. *Politics*, 35(1), 78-84.
- Rogers, P. (2015). Researching resilience: An agenda for change. *Resilience*, 3(1), 55-71.