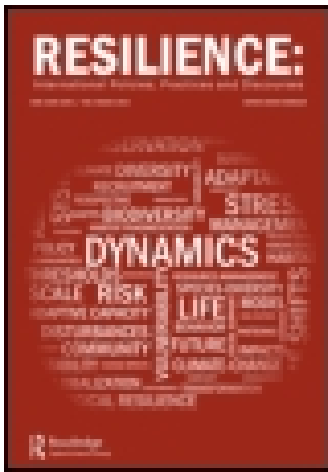


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Brad Evans<sup>a</sup> & Julian Reid<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

<sup>b</sup> Department of Politics, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

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

### Exhausted by resilience: response to the commentaries

Brad Evans\*<sup>1</sup> and Julian Reid<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK;*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Politics, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland*

Writing our response to the commentaries featured in this volume proved more difficult than either of us anticipated. Not that we are unappreciative and humbled by the positive reception the book has received since publication. Nor that we do not want to encourage others to engage our arguments and condemn the debasement of the political subject in whatever form it takes. It is however difficult to respond to a problematic the writers feel to be politically and intellectually exhausted. Our journey across the resilience terrain forced us to appreciate the hidden depth of its nihilism, the pernicious forms of subjugation it burdens people with, its deceitful emancipatory claims that force people to embrace their servitude as though it were their liberation, and the lack of imagination the resiliently minded possess in terms of transforming the world for the better. We too have become exhausted by its ubiquitous weight and the chains it places around all our necks.

Thankfully, the positive reviews we have received by the contributors in this volume and elsewhere have made our task easier. Not only do they each affirm to us the importance of our critique of the resilience doctrine. As each of these contributions share our suspicions of the doctrine as a new form of political nihilism that forces us to accept the inevitability of the liberal politics of catastrophe, we are encouraged that prominent academics from the fields of development, anthropology, political theory, sociology, architecture and criminology appreciate the political and philosophical stakes of our critique. Indeed, it comes as no surprise to us that the only field where a review of the text is absent remains International Relations. This is of little consequence, in all seriousness, for the discipline remains isolated, policed by dogmatic 'theorists', beset by the reductionism of its sovereign gaze, entrapped in a worldview long since abandoned by those in power or those who appreciate there is a critical world beyond the times of Arendt and Heidegger.

However, instead of labouring on the inadequacies of a discipline for allowing us to interrogate power and violence in the contemporary period, we would like to talk to some of the main themes identified here and raised elsewhere by addressing why we believed that such a devastating critique was necessary; what this means for the question of biopolitics as understood to be the governance of planetary life complete; and where this might lead us in terms of moving beyond modes of liberal subjectivity that have exhausted their emancipatory potential. What the doctrine of resilience ultimately points to are endemic terrains of inevitable catastrophe and destruction that are leading us to political ruin.

Corresponding author \*Email: [be12174@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:be12174@bristol.ac.uk)

Let us take a step back for a moment and imagine a new nation is born out of the ashes of an unprecedented disaster. You are part of it. Following some initial consultation, the most established and respected political, legal and socio-economic experts form a committee tasked with devising a constitution on your behalf. They have already agreed it must be suited to the global times in which we live. Previous systems have, after all, proved ineffective at dealing with planetary forces for change. Before drafting this new framework, the committee releases what it terms a 'citizen charter' that needs to be accepted *before* any discussion about the political content or the character of the new founded nation is allowed. The principles enshrined in this charter are non-negotiable. Its assumptions are irrefutable. And so are its assumptions about the quality and meaning of lives.

This 10-point charter is subsequently presented as the most learned and attuned vision for the future, and it must be signed to prove political acumen and sense of social responsibility. It reads as follows:

- (1) Citizens must accept that our nation is brought together by a shared sense of vulnerability. This forms the basis of our community. It is endangerment, not love, familial bonds or friendship, which is constitutive of an effective system of political inclusion.
- (2) Citizens must accept that the nation will be fundamentally insecure by design. Security is a dream that belongs to a bygone age. It is unachievable. Social responsibility is better defined by an acceptance and appreciation of what makes us vulnerable.
- (3) Citizens must be educated without exception in the study of catastrophe. They must learn that all disasters are connected. That many are unavoidable. And they must also appreciate that a truly responsible and responsive citizenry is fully aware of the insecure sediment of existence.
- (4) Citizens must accept the inevitability of future catastrophe. Our survival depends upon the need to imagine, understand and respond to those catastrophes yet to materialise. This requires exposing ourselves to their possibility even before their occurrence.
- (5) Citizens must accept that we (the human species) have become fully responsible for all the planet's ills. We have brought untold devastation. We are the authors of our own potential extinction. Everything that now occurs must be explained in terms of the collective burden we have all inherited.
- (6) Citizens must accept that anxiety and trauma are learning processes of our nation. Everybody must be willing to acknowledge and openly discuss his or her individual vulnerabilities and inherent flaws. Exposure is the best policy. The bonds of our nation will be stronger as a result.
- (7) Citizens must accept that taking care of oneself is the ultimate response. It is not sufficient to rely upon the government. That has been the source of our idleness and bred the most pernicious forms of complacency. The responsible citizen is a responsive citizen, one who must be trained in times of systemic crises to act on his or her own volition.
- (8) Citizens must accept that resistance is solely conterminous with the ability to thrive in times of catastrophe. We are continually and everywhere under siege. From terror to weather and everything in-between, endangerment is ubiquitous and woven into the fabric of all our complex systems.
- (9) Citizens must accept that the political has been settled. There is no beyond to our current predicament. The end of history is the normalisation of catastrophe. Such a condition is inescapable.

- (10) Citizens must accept that this charter is the only credible vision for social belonging and citizenship. Age-old ideas of social attachment and safety are resigned to the historic record. The enlightened accepts the need to partake in a world that is already fated.

Remarkably, by any conceivable democratic measure, this world does not need to be imagined. Nor is the question whether you would sign such a charter that is so fundamentally at odds with the social contracts that have been foundational to most Western societies. It has already been drafted, signed on your behalf and endorsed as a new political creed for contemporary liberal societies.

Outlined earlier are the key elements of the doctrine of resilience that we argued has become the new social morphology for our societies that are defined by inescapable crises of catastrophe. Although evidencing early traces in the fields of ecology, sustainable development and child welfare and support, the resilience doctrine we showed has extended into global and local forms of political reasoning in ways that are radically changing the logic of governance and political rule.

Indeed, it is all about producing new modes of subjectivity attuned to the age of catastrophe. We are all asked to think in terms of resilience. None of us can be exempt from the benevolence of its claims or the scope of its reasoning. Nor can we detach ourselves from the profound influence it is having on modes of political authentication and disqualification so central to regimes of power. Even beginning to question the logic of those who abide by the resilience doctrine now implies that a person is no longer part of the 'reasoned majority'. We would do well then to remind ourselves here of Deleuze's intervention: *those who speak for the majority are always, from the perspective of power, a minority that deploys universal language to suffocate the numerical majorities who continue to find reasons to believe in this world.*

Speaking in the most universal and empowering of humanistic tones, resiliently minded protagonists are nevertheless, we argued, rewriting the rules of the political game by appealing to the universal survivor in all of us. And by wrapping themselves in a scientific mantra that appeals to the 'common sense' of our shared perception of endangerment, what we used to call positivism has been displaced by the appropriation of once critically supposed ontologies of vulnerability to leave us dangerously exposed and accepting of our insecure predicament.

For us, the political and philosophical stakes could not have been more pronounced. Beneath the veneer of concern with security from death, violence and everyday dangers, we argued lurks a deeply nihilistic way of thinking about the very nature of what it is to live. Resilience has created an image of a world in which the very phenomena of violence and insecurity are assumed as natural and incontestable. All things are insecure by design. In a sense, then, resilience, in conceiving the world as such, does immense violence to our very sensibilities concerning the possibility of ever achieving meaningful peace and security.

The real tragedy for us is the way the doctrine forces us to become active participants in our own de-politicisation. Resilience encourages us to learn from the violence of catastrophic events so that we can become more responsive to further catastrophes on the horizon. It promotes adaptability so that life may go on living despite experiencing certain destruction. Indeed it even demands a certain *exposure* to the threat before its occurrence so that we can be better prepared. Resilience as such appears to be a form of *immunisation*. We internalise the catastrophic to the creation of new epistemic communities that are more aware of their vulnerabilities. What is more, setting aside any utopian vision of a

promissory world that may be conceived otherwise, resilience looks to the future as an endemic terrain of catastrophe that is already populated by the ruins of the present.

We argued that there was a distinct lethal principle at work here, which is profoundly different to that of sovereignty. While the lethality of sovereignty is invested in the ability to annihilate the other, resilience exposes the self to a dose of lethality to stave off something altogether more terminal. In this regard, it proves to be a form of self-annihilation inasmuch as lethality is internalised to be a resource for knowledge and understanding that may be drawn upon. What does not kill you only makes you stronger, providing of course you are trained in the art of survival.

Our thesis has been that resilience now authenticates who we are as people. Adaptability in the face of crisis emphasises our resourcefulness, our abilities to thrive in times of risk and our life-affirming qualities that refuse to surrender to all forms of endangerment. Such reasoning we maintained is fully compatible with neoliberalism and its promotion of risk, along with its private commitment to the care for the self. It is precisely through the promotion of ontologies of vulnerability instead of ontologies of oppression that we learn to accept that things are simply crises ridden and ultimately catastrophically fated. In short, while globalisation comes to us in many forms, the forces that bring about change are quite literally out of our hands.

This inevitably brings us to the question of bio-politics today. Students will appreciate that we have written extensively about the bio-politics of security, war and violence. Further, as we argued in the book, the bio-politics of today is not the bio-politics of Michel Foucault. Indeed, whilst we accept that resilience is a novel form of bio-political intervention that suspends life in a system of temporal purgatory – catastrophically fated unto the end – if our concern is to rid ourselves of the nihilism of contemporary liberalism, most purposefully expressed in the logic of the bio-politics of resilience, we must look to develop new modes of subjectivity beyond the bio-political reckoning.

This is not a call to ‘forget Foucault’ (whatever that may mean). Foucault is not read widely enough. We have never been convinced by those who would reduce Foucault to the ‘question of truth’, without ever engaging with his evident *courage to truth* as aptly titled in a recently transcribed lecture series. Nor have we been convinced by those who claim that bio-politics is a reified paradigm divorced from the everyday operations of power. Power, as Foucault always maintained, is as multiple as the problem of life itself. Our deployment of the bio-political analytic has always retained this methodological commitment to address the micro-physics of power and how this builds up into universal claims to truth that are globally expansive in ambition. What is liberalism after all if not some planetary vision for political order premised upon the need to foreground ‘life itself’ as central to all political strategies?

We are however tired of addressing the political failures of liberal modernity. Its claims to improve and enrich human existence have proved to be unfounded. It betrays a terrible deceit as deliverance of security, peace and justice echoes the continued calls for catastrophe, war and profound suspicion on the nature of the subject. And to repeat, we are also exhausted by resilience. It nihilism is devastating. Its political language enslaving. Its modes of subjectivity lamenting. And its political imagination notably absent. That is why we have decided after this volume to never write, publicly lecture or debate the problematic again. We will not engage with those who would have us brought into some dialectical orbit in order to validate its reverence by making it some master signifier in order to prove its majoritarian position. Yes, the doctrine of resilience at the level of policy and power is ubiquitous. And yet in terms of emancipating the political, it is already dead.

Moving forward, then, the task at hand appears to be clear. Liberalism itself is facing lasting crises. Politically, economically and ethically bankrupt, what remains is a siege mentality that breeds anxiety and insecurity as the new normality for human cohabitation. This is the end of liberal times – a catastrophic unfolding that is fated to end without any hope of a better time to come. Faced therefore with the veritable erasure of the human subject as it is forcibly denied any meaningful claim beyond the level of its endangered ecology, what we already argued in the conclusion to *Resilient Life* is the need to develop a new political imagination that allows us to be liberated from the entrapments of this tragically fated and subjugating condition. Not only does this require us to rethink what a meaningful existence might entail. It demands that we reclaim from the dogmatism of political science the very idea that politics is a poetic art form that enables us to critically expose the nihilism of the present and imagine better worlds to come.

That is why we are now working on a project that demands a return to the original philosophical rupture – the poetic – to speak of a new imaginary for rethinking politics, emancipation and the formation of political communities in the twenty-first century. Moving beyond the bio-politics of liberalism and its fundamental ontology of vulnerability, which is most purposefully expressed in the context of resilience, leads to nihilistic lament and entrapments of suffering; the poetic subject demands a more confident political register that openly welcomes a more crafted art for living dangerously. This is not a call to retreat back into earlier modes of thinking on security and justice. It is a call for a different concept of the political, which disavowing narratives of survivability and endangerment, proposes a forceful account of the politics of love essential to a new consciousness for human togetherness.

Our method has always been to argue that reified approaches to politics actually prevent people from thinking. Some have accused us in turn of reifying liberalism as a paradigm for power and resilience as an epoch changing doctrine. Our response is twofold. First, pay attention to all those now connecting the politics of catastrophe to the Anthropocene at the level of discourse, policy-making, and the justificatory measures for funding and political interventions. IT IS PRESENTED AS AN EPOCH. We merely set out to critique what this means in order to expose the hidden order of its politics. And second, we would simply request that critics read the text. Nowhere do we say that everybody has become a resilient subject. The grandiose claims liberals always make about the universal nature of subjectivities have never been matched by reality. Indeed, we are not setting out to counter the nihilism of resilience with an alternative universal blueprint for more emancipated subjectivities. Such an approach echoes the violence of the most dangerous vanguardism that continues to suffocate the Left (especially in its contemporary Maoist inspired variants).

We take heart from the fact that people will resist what they find patently intolerable. And that people, regardless of what we say, continue to express truly creative and poetic modes of existence, which refuse the lament of those who would have us surrender to the mercies of the world. We are not the first to say this. It is worth pointing out if the question of truth once subjugated Foucault; those who now only read him bio-politically are equally complicit in another form of authentication that is complicit in his appropriation by power. Hence, our call to liberate ourselves from the image of thought imposed by the nihilism of the resiliently minded also calls for liberation of the ‘imaginative Foucault’ whose spectre refuses to have its poetics tamed. We could do no better in this response to conclude by citing from his once anonymously published interview *The Masked Philosopher*:

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an œuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes — all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

### **Notes on contributors**

Brad Evans is a Senior Lecturer in International relations at the School of Sociology, Politics & International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol, UK. He is the Founder and Director of the histories of violence project. In this capacity, he is currently leading a global research initiative on the theme of 'Disposable Life' to interrogate the meaning of mass violence in the twenty-first century. Brad's latest books include *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of the Spectacle* (with Henry Giroux, forthcoming, City Lights: 2015), *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (with Julian Reid, Polity Press, 2014), *Liberal Terror* (Polity Press, 2013) and *Deleuze & Fascism* (with Julian Reid, Routledge, 2013). He is currently working on a number of book projects, including *Histories of Violence: An Introduction to Post-War Critical Thought* (with Terrell Carver, Zed Books, 2015).

Political Theorist, Philosopher and Professor of International Relations, Julian Reid is renowned for his advance of the theory of biopolitics, contributions to cultural theory, postcolonial and post-structural thought, critique of liberalism and seminal deconstruction of resilience. Educated in London (B.A., First Class Honours, 1996), Amsterdam (M.Phil. 1998) and Lancaster (Ph.D., 2004), he has taught International Politics and International Relations at the Universities of London (SOAS and King's College), Sussex and Lapland, where he has occupied the Chair in International Relations since 2010.