

Understanding Resilience through the Rudiments of Biopolitics

Written by Tudor Vilcan

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TUDOR VILCAN, JAN 12 2015

In this short intervention, I want to draw out some of the conceptual links between the Foucauldian ideas referring to biopolitics and the new discourse of resilience, which is becoming increasingly popular in both academic debates and policy making. Biopolitics is a broad field of theoretical inquiry, so I will be specifically looking at the two conceptual cores that lay its foundation: the anatomo-politics of the body and the bio-politics of populations (I also call them rudiments of biopolitics). I will argue that they remain relevant for understanding contemporary discourses of resilience, and detail some of the insights this kind of analysis generates. At the same time, I suggest a few new avenues of research that the linking of resilience to biopolitics promises.

Resilience, a Popular and Timely Idea

Whether deservedly or not, resilience is shaping up to be an important idea in recent times and subject to much academic and policy engagement. Its proponents insist that it is a timely solution adept at responding to the changing nature of threats and catastrophes that characterises our contemporary condition, from environmental change to financial crises. Definitions and conceptualizations of resilience are numerous (see an inventory in Bahadur et al, 2010), but in essence it can be said to mean the 'capacity of a system [or community, group, society, etc.] to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks'.

Starting from relatively humble origins in ecology, where it proposed to conceptualize of ecosystems in a more dynamic manner, resilience has grown in scope and magnitude and informs not only academic debates across the board, but it is increasingly presented as a way of governing both society and the environment. Many have seen resilience as the harbinger of a new mode of thinking that regards humans as embedded in their environment, the world as essentially complex or proposing new kinds of materiality or materialisms (see Chandler (2014) for a good summary of these approaches). Within the remit of these paradigms, resilience becomes a way of instrumenting new types of relations and ontological categories, suggested as more appropriate for capturing the essence of contemporary challenges.

Biopolitics, or Power over Life

I want to return to more 'old-fashioned' socio-political concepts and seek to understand what the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics can tell us about resilience, its development and effects, with a focus on policy making. Foucault conceptualizes of biopolitics as a technology of power that replaces sovereignty and discipline as the main ways of controlling masses of people. Prior to the seventeenth century, societies were ruled through sovereign power, where the sovereign (prince, monarch, etc.) held power of life and death over the populations. The mechanism of power in such societies was one of deduction where the sovereign could subtract and seize anything from its subjects (wealth, time, their bodies, etc.) with the explicit purpose of preserving its rule. With the advent of medicine and a series of other transformations that to some extent freed populations from the shackles of sheer necessity (mostly agricultural improvements), a new technology of power, grounded by the scientific discourse of biology, pushed the biological existence of humans into political existence. Deduction is no longer the main

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mechanism of power, but just another one that works to generate order while inciting the forces under it rather than destroying them (Foucault, 1998: 136).

Two Poles of Power over Life

In other words, what Foucault is signalling is that, beginning with the seventeenth century, populations become the principal target of power. This is a power over life, constituted by two intertwined poles. The first one Foucault calls the *anatomo-politics of the human body*, which centred on the body as a machine: 'its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility'. The second pole he calls the *bio-politics of population* and targets the body of the species (or population) with all its aggregated biological process: births, deaths, levels of health, longevity, reproductive health, etc. These processes are subject to a series of interventions whose purpose is their regulation and control. Through the combined effect of these two poles, the goal of power was no longer to seize, deduct or kill, but 'invest life through and through' (Foucault, 1998: 139).

Bio-politics and anatomo-politics are invested through the whole of the social body at all levels and in the structures of the state. They are becoming utilized by diverse institutions, ranging from the school to the police to the administration of collective bodies, and operate in the sphere of economic processes as well. But they also act as factors of segregation and hierarchization, underpinning relations of dominations and effects of control (Foucault, 1998: 141). While the thought that biopolitics is part of a technology of power that seeks to foster life and targets the growth, productivity, or health of populations may appear *prima facie* benign, biopolitics remains a system of control, founded on the basis of discipline (Kelly, 2014). Discipline provides the micro-scale interventions in individual lives that become the basis for large scale control of populations.

Resilient Bodies

How do these tenets of biopolitics speak to resilience? Rather than seeing resilience as symptomatic of a paradigm shift in governance, whereas we have new objects and subjects to be governed, we can see resilience as part of the same technology of power over life proper to biopolitics. A first point to make relates to the anatomo-politics of the body, which appear to be congruous with the tenets resilience proposes for the individual. Whether we are talking about a capacity to bounce-back or the relational capacities of individuals to adapt to their dynamic environment (see Chandler, 2014), individuals are still being asked to discipline themselves in a form or another. The capacities and properties of their bodies and psyches are still being extorted for the purposes of being able to function within the limits of existing modes of economic, social, and political operation. Retaining the same 'function, structure, identity, and feedbacks' requires work on self, but work that is within specific boundaries. In the terminology of socio-ecological systems, individuals are to remain within a certain 'domain of attraction' (the acceptable boundaries of variability), which fulfils the same function for the individuals that the Panopticon would have done for the prisoners (Foucault, 1995). The material arrangement of the Panopticon (with a central tower having constant vision over prisoners' cells) makes the prisoners discipline themselves because surveillance can happen at any time. The prisoner then internalizes a certain range of (externally imposed) behaviours, since the threat of occurrence of surveillance is permanent. The resilient individual is disciplined by the ubiquity and inevitability of the occurrence of hazards, threats, or catastrophes. Whether these perturbations could, have, or will happen, the individuals are asked to develop and internalise sharp balancing reflexes which will help them always fall on their feet as cats do. Resilient individuals are not necessarily free individuals, in the sense that their resilience allows them to pursue any desired behaviours, since they are immunizing themselves against all kinds of threats, but they are resilient so that they can continue their lifestyle as usual and play the part in the current disposition of things. They are still expected to be resilient within a 'domain of attraction', within specific boundaries which are not imposed in advance, but given implicitly through general activities of 'building resilience'.

Resilient Populations

To understand how building resilience constitutes implicit boundaries, we need to refer to bio-politics, the other pole of this power over life which is a regulatory mechanism for the biological processes of the populations. As with

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biopolitics, target and object of resilience is the population (whether as groups, communities, societies, etc.). *Prima facie*, resilience appears to remove the regulatory aspect in the sense that populations are allowed to conduct themselves (rather than being directed) towards the goal of self-preservation. Power in this sense does not seek to intervene to control, but rather, in a benign fashion, encourages and provides capabilities for populations to build their own resilience. It might be said that rather than a regulatory logic, resilience is in fact an evolutionary one, not bent specifically on looking after their biological wellbeing, but on providing the spaces for populations to adapt themselves to the environment. In actuality, the regulatory aspect is still present when it comes to resilience policies. Rather than simply being encouraged, resilience is forced on populations. One way in which this is done is by mainstreaming resilience, so populations do not have other options. This is a more tacit form of imposition, one that attempts to convince populations that, given the current circumstances (whether austerity, climate change, etc.), this is the normal or appropriate disposition of things. But there are more active ways of intervening. The civil contingencies framework in the UK requires the so called 'Category I responders' (emergency services, local authorities, etc.) to 'carry out risk assessments, keep risk registers, produce contingency plans and take measures to ensure business continuity' (Joseph, 2013: 43; Cabinet Office, 2004). These interventions are disseminated and coordinated through so called Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), a new set of administrative mechanisms based on the boundaries of police force areas in England and Wales. Within the remit of the LRFs, Category I responders 'must collectively exercise plans [...] and learn and implement lessons from exercises, emergencies and emerging policy' and set up examples of 'good practice' (Cabinet Office, 2013: 12). All these normalize specific regulations which create certain types of subjects and guide the conduct of populations. The elements of power and control do not disappear, but are rather made increasingly invisible, enmeshed in a matrix of ever complicated but apparently benign and proactive sets of procedures.

Quo Vadis?

What I have exposed above are just the rudiments of biopolitics, through which I tried to run through the discourse of resilience. In his later works, Foucault would conceptualize of 'liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics' (Foucault, 2008: 22) and introduce the notion of 'government' to broaden the political focus, considering that his previous analysis of biopolitics was 'one dimensional and reductive in the sense that it primarily focused on the biological and physical life of a population and on the politics of the body' (Lemke, 2014:63). What I seek to have achieved in this intervention is prove that these rudiments of biopolitics remain relevant for understanding resilience. Also, opposite conceptualizations of resilience as proper to new emerging ontological categories and relations, biopolitics reminds us that resilience is enmeshed with power and control. The discourse and its practices generate specific dispositions and effects, but also alterations, negotiations, agonisms, and resistances. All of these need further analysis if we are serious about properly investigating what resilience means.

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Tudor Vilcan is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southampton. He seeks to critically investigate how discourses of resilience are put to use as ways to govern society. He is also interested in complexity theories, new materialism and critiques of neoliberalism.