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INTERVIEW

Julian Reid on Foucault – Applying his Work on War, Resilience, Imagination, and Political Subjectivity

Kristian Haug

Introduction

In this interview Julian Reid, distinguished author and professor of International Relations at Lapland University Finland, elaborates on his use, continuation and alterations of Michel Foucault's work. Reid being his entire academic career – which includes the publishing of six books and co-editing the journal, *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* – heavily inspired by Foucault, especially 'the late Foucault' efforts on analyzing liberalism, neoliberalism and its integral biopower, explicates – for the very first time – how his examination of the subjects from war to resilience and sustainability to imagination to political subjectivity relies on, continues and diverts from Foucault's own thinking. By taking off in Foucault's thinking, one of Reid's ambitions – besides relentlessly criticizing illegitimate forms of use of power – has always been to push the borders of how we can think and create a healthy and justifiable human subjectivity.

Kristian Haug: What is Foucault's distinctive contribution to your analysis of discourses and practices of resilience?

Julian Reid: It's his concept of biopolitics, which I take up, and apply to make sense of the emergence of resilience as a discourse in international politics, especially in the field of development. When Foucault deployed the concept of biopolitics, in the 1970s, he was using it to look at the ways in which the biological life of human beings became politicized and utilized, from the 17th century onwards to his present, as a result of the distinctive approaches which liberalism took towards problems of governance. It seems to me that while that concept is still key to an understanding of the politics of our present, and the nature of neoliberalism, the life at stake in biopolitics today has changed. It seems to me that liberalism no longer governs with a view to making its techniques of governance compatible with human life, but with non-human living systems. The human is now posed as a threat to the wellbeing of those systems rather than being positioned as an object of care. So there's a shift in the order of biopolitics which has taken place, and which

Foucault was not able to see, because he's not been around to witness it. I think that my work on resilience operates therefore as a kind of critical updating of his theory and analytic of biopolitics, which I believe to have been the major breakthrough in political critique of the 20th century, and which I have otherwise sought to update and inflect in other fields also, especially war.

KH: What is Foucault's distinctive contribution to your analysis of the dynamics between liberalism, neoliberalism and the resilient subject?

JR: Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, as he sketched it in his Birth of Biopolitics¹ lectures, was very helpful for me in approaching and making sense of the forms of subjectivity this apparently new discourse of resilience is today producing. There is something new to resilience, in so far as it represents a shift in the order of biopolitics, but there is also something very classically liberal to it – which is that it preaches the incontrollable nature of the world, the powerlessness of the human subject, and the nihilism of living. Foucault found this type of liberalism in Condorcet, in Smith, and it is to be found in pretty much the entire range of liberal thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries; the basic idea that the world is a dangerous place, and that in being dangerous, it outstrips our capacities for security, leaving us, when we face up to the truth of it, to accept the reality that we can never hope to secure ourselves from it, and must instead get used to a life of adapting to continuously changing topographies of danger. None of these are attributes that we have traditionally been taught to ascribe to liberalism, but they are revealed as such by Foucault in his lectures. So in that sense I have borrowed a lot from Foucault's analytic of liberalism in order to provide the diagnosis which I have, of the relations which run through the entire history of liberalism, leading to the contemporary natures of neoliberalism, and their causality in accounting for resilience and the resilient subject, as it were. Certainly, I believe, as Foucault did, that we won't understand what neoliberalism is without grasping what liberalism is. And grasping what liberalism is requiring us to look at it as a theory of subjectivity rather than simply a regime of political economy. This is something I draw out in my new book, written with David Chandler, called *The Neoliberal Subject*², and which was published last year by Rowman and Littlefield.

KH: In your previous work on war you criticize Foucault for failing to pursue the biopolitics of war to its limits and you develop the concept of biopolitical war quite far beyond where he left it.³ You leave the reader in no doubt that liberal ways of war are biopolitical, in contrast with Foucault's more circumspect treatments of the relations between liberalism, war and biopolitics. Are

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

² David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

³ Julian Reid, "Life Struggles: War, Discipline and Biopolitics in the Thought of Michel Foucault," in *Foucault on Politics, Security and War*, edited by Michael Dillon and Andrew W. Neal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 90-91.

there further shortcomings you have encountered in Foucault's work, and how have you responded to them?

JR: Foucault's projects were left full of open ends. And that was a deliberate ploy on his part. I don't always think about them as shortcomings, even if, sometimes for the sake of rhetoric, I might describe them that way. They are often entrances, folds in the skin of the work, which allow me to penetrate further, deeper, and in new directions, making other spaces within the body of a given problem. But right now I'm working on developing a Foucauldian approach to images and imagination. Ideas about images and the limits and powers of the imagination run throughout Foucault's works from beginning to end. In fact his very first essay, published in 1954, was itself titled 'Dream, Imagination and Existence'.⁴ The essay amounted not only to a scathing critique of psychological and especially psychoanalytical treatments of the image and imagination, as well as Sartre's philosophy of imagination, but an argument for a revalorization of imagination as an experience of transcendental knowledge. The common assumption is that the essay was a starting point for a project he simply abandoned and moved on from. I disagree with that and am interested in how we can synthesize the various different elements of the theory of imagination buried in his work. He also wrote and spoke, at times, alluringly of his own desire for new forms of the critique of power; forms that would draw on the powers of imagination at the expense of its more customary armories. 'A critic' indeed of 'imaginative scintillations' rather than the sententious types which tend to monopolize the art of critique. Imagination runs right through Foucault's analytic of power as well as being at the center of his concerns when it came to thinking about the method of analysis itself, and thus the outside of power. On the one hand it can be observed that the West has long since maintained a deep suspicion towards imagination, and that a good deal of Foucault's work on the matter is dedicated to revealing the different ways in which that suspicion is sedimented in the regimes of power and knowledge he analyses. On the other hand, his own critique of power functions, by way of method, as a kind of un-masking. That is to say, it is itself immensely fuelled by a suspicion of the image of power, and desire to tear the mask from it to reveal the true face of power. The liberation of imagination requires a seemingly paradoxical hostility to the function of the image in the constitution of regimes responsible for its subjection. This latter recognition – the idea that power itself is fundamentally dependent on a deployment of imagination and the manifestation of a mask – is as important for a full understanding of the nature of Foucault's critique. This applies especially to the struggles of individuals and collectivities with the powers of liberalism. The images liberalism manifests of itself, and those with which we identify, are the sources of our struggle with and against it, Foucault main-

⁴ Michel Foucault, "Dream, Imagination and Existence" in *Dream and Existence*, Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, edited by Keith Hoeller (Atlantic Highlands (N.J): Humanities Press, 1993).

tains. Comprehending liberalism as a regime of power requires that we recognize, firstly, the unprecedented scale of the imagination at work in its development, as well, crucially, as the function of its ability to mask itself in hiding the work of that imagination. Masking plays a crucial role in the political functioning of imagination. This is a feature of power that Foucault recognizes but ultimately fails to address. Foucault's aims with respect to liberalism were precisely to un-mask it. To tear the mask which hid the intolerable face of liberalism behind it, and in a certain sense to show us the reality of its face. But such an approach to the mask of liberalism showed a certain naivety in understanding of the nature of masks themselves. A mask does not simply hide; it also displays, makes an image, and performs a presence. Even the face itself, beneath the mask, has to be addressed as a kind of image. The mask of liberalism in other words has to be addressed as a product, even the fundamental creation, of its own imagination; an expression of its own way of caring for itself. This is the great paradox of the function of the image in liberalism. It strips the image from its subjects, demanding that they care for themselves by telling the truth, living unmasked lives, while caring for itself through the careful construction of an image which serves as a mask for itself. Masked, it also unmasks. Does one do justice to Foucault's aspirations to ally imagination with critique simply by aiming, as he did, to strip the mask away from the subject of power, or is there another possibility? Does the Foucauldian critique meet the criteria of critique he dreamed of himself? Is it a critique, in other words, of imaginative scintillation, or does it remain at the level of sententiousness? These are inviting shortcomings in Foucault's work on imagination I am now interested in exploiting.

KH: What is the relation between your efforts towards creating a new ethics, which views the human as an irreducible being in its atmospheric–aesthetic–affective register⁵ – the poetic subject – and Foucault's notions of aesthetics, care of the self, and his claim that the human has to create itself as a work of art?

JR: As you know, Foucault's approach to the aesthetics of subjectivity, and care of the self, has a long history, reaching back to the Ancient Greeks and the Romans where the latter practice originated. It was there among the Greeks and the Romans that this elusive concept of the self first made its emergence, as well as the notion that the self is somehow something dangerous. At least something which we have to care for, and work on, in order to ward off the dangers which it will otherwise pose for us, if it is left to live, unguarded as it were, within us. Technologies of the self described for the Ancients those practices by which the subject learns to move to the summit of itself, and to see the self by looking down, surveying it, and becoming its master from above, taming it, and rendering it conducive to his own needs. They are, in other words, tools of climbing, of ascent; an apparatus of ascension, by which we subject the self from on high, drawing the vertical

⁵ Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge (UK) and Malden (USA): Polity Press, 2014), 136.

division between subject and self, becoming as subjects, a kind of summit, in submission of a self which is made to live in the valleys of our experience, as the sheep does when tended to successfully by the shepherd of its herd. Poetic subjectivity remains for me, fundamentally, the outcome of practices in support of the process of subjectivation by means of which we ascend to an imaginary summit above our selves and submit the self to the mastery of our reason; a technique which links the faculty of imagination with that of reason, and enables reason to legislate.

But I also maintain that within this practice there are numerous different methods of mobilizing both imagination and reason. Just as there were for the Ancients. The self, it is obvious, or it should be obvious at least, is an imaginary construct. We talk about it, discuss it, call it forth, as if it were real. As is necessary for all imaginary constructs which we desire to take seriously, and give weight and body to. That it is imaginary, and does not exist, is not in any way a sufficient condition for a critique of it. Few things seem to me more tiring than the criticism that because some thing does not exist in the real as it were that we ought to do away with it, no longer speak of it, or turn our attention elsewhere.

You are familiar with Foucault's critique of the critique of the state? Well suffice to say that what Foucault said of the state may as well be applied to the self. The fact that the self does not exist, that it is an imaginary construct, makes all the more important the weight of emphasis which it has been given within the western tradition, from the classical era onwards. In any case there is a vast difference between things that exist 'in the real' as my psychoanalyst colleagues are wont to say, and things that have reality or belong to the real. Between having and belonging and being-in there are also vast differences of relation to be discussed. To have reality is not the same as to belong to reality, and neither having reality nor belonging to it have very much to do with being-in the real. What can we say, or what should we say, of the relation of the self to the real? Is the self something that has reality or belongs to the real? Or does it exist in the real, and if it exists in the real, who has and gets what? Is something that exists in something else also by necessity something that is had by that something else? You know in English we use this phrase to 'be had', which I like very much. To be had, when used as the English like to describe it, is not simply to be taken, consumed, or exist in the possession of something else. It is absolutely not a question of belonging to something else. If you have been had, *au Anglais*, you have been tricked and you have been conned. You have been *taken in*. By which I mean you do not simply belong to that which has taken you in. You have not entered into and become an internalized part of something that you were previously on the outside of. To be taken in is absolutely not a question simply of entering and becoming a part of something from the inside. For when you are taken in you are subject to the cruelest of double movements. You are, when taken in, led to exist on the outside-in.

KH: Can you give an example? What is the price of our being taken in this way?

JR: If you want to think of an example, think of Shakespeare's Malvolio. Malvolio is had because he thinks he has. What is it to have? To have is the manner of being what one is not. It is to be the one who thinks he has entered, or who acts as if he has entered. One who is on the inside, and no longer the outside, because he has paid his entrance fee. He bears the ticket. He has gone from what Lyotard called the "over there not-this" to "the here the this". He has travelled, traversed, made his way, from the over there to the here, I prefer to say, more simply. And it has cost him, this journey. He has paid his way. It costs a great much to get from the there to the here, and as we all know, there is no going back, because one does not simply go, one is spat, out into the here where it has cost so much to arrive. So imagine Malvolio's sense of the cruelty done to him when he realizes that to have he has been had and that in being had he does not have. This is the double movement by which one arrives at the outside-in. This is the double-movement through which every self is constituted. This is the double-movement, which makes Malvolios of us all. You know there is an interview somewhere where Fellini says something along the lines of 'only entrance pays'. It costs nothing to leave. The space, which the western self inhabits is deliberately labyrinthine. Without walls, without doors, without windows, it nevertheless invites us in. And at each invitation, we pay the entrance fee. But we pay in the double sense with which Fellini conferred payment upon entrance. We pay not simply to get in, but in being there. We pay in having entered. In being had and imagining that we have, we pay. What do we pay with, you ask? Yes, you are right, to pay there must always be a currency. Well, we pay with this mania for self-knowledge, the very currency on which the economy of selfhood depends. The means, the only means that the self in question can be expected to pay his way around the labyrinthine space into which he has entered. These are the conditions of knowledge in which the poetic subject has to find its poetry.

KH: In your latest book *The Neoliberal Subject*⁶ you end upon a discussion of the concept of political imagination and express the need for the kind of work you are talking about now. How does this focus of yours on imagination emerge from your previous works on Foucault, or does it represent a break of some kind?

JR: It emerges directly from where my work on resilience ends. It also represents a way of taking the critique of resilience into the directions that its limits demand. As a culture we are saturated today by discourses around the need to develop the self. The discourse on 'the resilient self' is a case in point. Leading psychologists of resilience claim responsibility not just for developing the concept from its psychological origins into the international political and social framework it has now become, but for the peace and reconciliation in former war torn countries where resilience is now said to exist. Within resilience, however, lurks another property and capacity of the self, that of imagination. Imagination is said by psychologists to play a crucial role in the recovery, for ex-

⁶ Chandler and Reid, 172-175.

ample, of human beings from traumatic experiences and their development of resilience. For abused children, especially, recovery and development is said to require the work of imagination, as hurt creates the images of a better future and the pleasure of such images becomes linked with painful realities, enabling them to withstand the present. It is even possible, some psychologists of resilience maintain, that the torment of the present heightens the need to imagine a future and thus increases the very powers and potentials of imagination itself. How, then, to theorize and understand the work which imagination performs on social and political scales? In my current work, I consider, critique and extend such psychological accounts of the function of imagination for the purpose of developing a better understanding of the politics of resilience. Images are, I argue, while untrue and in a certain sense inferior to the real, nevertheless things which human beings need in order to be able to act collectively upon the real, and to change the very nature of their political and social circumstances. While resilience provides scope for the function of imagination in enabling human beings to survive, it is nevertheless, as a discourse, also based upon a highly circumscribed imaginary, the limits of which are defined by survivability as such. Imagination can either contribute to the survival strategies with which human beings attempt to care for themselves in the face of ordeals and traumas, or it can, more ambitiously, seek to create an image of the self existing free from the possibility and necessity of a life of endless trauma and struggle. It is this latter task that I believe deserves the greater exploration today.

In this context I'm especially interested in taking on the dangers posed by neuroscience. For neuroscientists images are simply the tools with which we manage our survival in subordination to the creative forces of reality. Neuroscience has sold itself on the claim to be able to unveil the fundamental functioning principles of the brain and the central nervous system. But it is just another discourse with no more integrity than any other approach to imagination and human subjectivity. Neither the natural sciences nor the social sciences or the humanities can claim any greater or deeper grip on the real. I argue we need to challenge and reverse neuroscientific formulations of the relation of the imagined to the real; this notion of the functionality of imagination, of the reduction of the image to resource in a life of endless survival, and ultimately of the subordination of the image to the real. Images are of many kinds. In effect there is no such thing as 'the image' or 'the imagination' in the ways that neuroscience and its ideologues, so powerful today in the social sciences and in the framing of governmental policies, suppose. Instead we need a typology of the many different kinds of images that exist, and the many different types of movement of which imagination is capable. Most importantly we must recover the profoundly human power to subordinate the real to the image, such that it is made to conform to what we imagine.

Bio-bibliography: Julian Reid

Julian Reid is Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Social Science, at University of Lapland, Finland. He undertook a PhD⁷ at Lancaster University on the philosophy of war in the work of Foucault. His first book from 2006, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror*⁸, drew heavily on Foucault to make sense of the changing character of war since the 9/11 attacks and American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2009 he wrote *The Liberal Way of War*⁹, in collaboration with Michael Dillon, and developed Foucault's ideas on war and security yet further. In 2010 he was appointed to a permanent Chair and Professorship in International Relations at the University of Lapland. It was during this period that Reid developed his pioneering critique of resilience, which led to his co-founding of the journal *Resilience: Policies, Practices and Discourses*¹⁰ in 2013 and which was published, in collaboration with Brad Evans in 2014, in a book titled *Resilient Life*.¹¹ Reid recently published *The Neoliberal Subject*¹², a book co-authored with his friend David Chandler, offering a damning critique of the function of resilience discourse in constituting regimes of neoliberalism worldwide. Reid is now writing a book on the philosophy and politics of imagination in the work of Foucault. Practically all of Reid's work has been characterised by deeply interpretive uses of Foucault to make sense of contemporary political problems. Global interest in his work is still growing and he has been translated into many languages, including Bulgarian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.

Bio-bibliography: Kristian Haug

Kristian Haug has a Masters in Sociology and Philosophy from Roskilde University (Denmark). He wrote his Masters on Danish municipalities' use of robustness and resilience strategies and analysed these very strategies from a governmentality perspective. Haug has previously interviewed Julian Reid about his work on resilience for the broader public¹³ and reviewed Reid's books; *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (co-other Brad Evans)¹⁴ and *The Neoliberal Sub-*

⁷ Julian Reid, *Wars Without Ends: Power, Modernity, and Counter-Strategy* (Lancaster University, 2004).

⁸ Julian Reid, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁹ Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰ *Resilience: Policies, Practices and Discourses*, edited by David Chandler, Julian Reid, Melinda Cooper and Bruce Baun. <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/resi20>.

¹¹ Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*.

¹² Chandler and Reid, *Neoliberal Subject*.

¹³ Kristian Haug, "Julian Reid on the Rise of Resilience," *Truth-out*, April, 27, 2016, accessed October, 13, 2016, <http://www.truth-out.org/speakout/item/35816-julian-reid-on-the-rise-of-resilience>.

¹⁴ Kristian Haug, "Det Resiliente Liv," review of *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, by Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Slagmark*, June 17, 2016, Book Reviews, <http://www.slagmark.dk/anmeldelser-73>.

ject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability (co-other David Chandler)¹⁵ in the Danish journal *Slagmark*.

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¹⁵ Kristian Haug, “Det Neoliberale Subjekt,” review of *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, by David Chandler and Julian Reid, *Slagmark*, October 29, 2016, Book Reviews, <http://www.slagmark.dk/anm-the-neoliberal-subject>.