

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*,
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The world hovers on the brink of total destruction—or so we're told by commentators ranging from esteemed scientist Stephen Hawking to pop star Bob Geldof. A plethora of threats haunt the public conscience: radical climate change, nuclear warfare, pandemics, artificial intelligence run amok, even asteroid strikes or other cosmic events (Bostrom and Circovic 2008; Rees 2003). So how should humans cope with the constant threat of total annihilation? According to Brad Evans and Julian Reid, we need to get over it.

Resilient Life is a new addition to the emerging literature that urges humans to come face-to-face with finitude. Other recent works in this genre include Claire Colebrook's (2014) *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, Timothy Morton's (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, and Slavoj Žižek's (2010) *Living in the End Times*. These works are characterized by the rigorous application of continental philosophy to the contemporary struggles of humans with the possibility of their own extinction. Their confrontational and polemical style works on the affective register, seeking a basis for radical politics in the face of nihilism. Within the genre, Evans and Reid's contribution is distinctive in its sustained focus on the practices and circulations of globalized liberal power, and their convergence in the concept of 'resilience'.

According to Evans and Reid, being 'resilient' means demonstrating one's capacity to 'live dangerously': that is, to cling to life in decreasingly liveable conditions. According to them, resilient subjects live in a context of constant anxiety, accepting that security is an impossibility, and that insecurity is a necessary condition

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of existence. They dwell in the (fore)shadow of a catastrophe that denies them the revelatory or redemptive dimensions of apocalypse. And they must contemplate extinction—of humans and of life in general—with no hope for meaningful retrieval. Not only does resilience reduce human life to a bare and endangered existence; it also “cheats us of the affirmative task of learning how to die” (p.13). Indeed, it suspends human (and other forms of) being between life and death. Collectively, this binds ‘humanity’ into a sense of “community based on its own endangerment” (p.4)—a phenomenon that Rosi Braidotti (2013) has referred to as ‘negative solidarity’, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) has called a ‘negative history’. The purported species-being of humanity is strongly asserted in discourses of resilience, but as a negation, in such a way that humans “lament [their] very existence” (p.12) whilst clinging desperately to it.

This, Evans and Reid argue, provides the perfect fodder for regimes of biopolitical power and control. The figuration of ‘humanity’ as a negation engenders “a political will to nothingness” (p.37) and a sense of lethargy as humans’ wait for a catastrophe defines their subjectivity. The authors also outline how liberal power has assumed new atmospheric-aesthetic-affective dimensions. Assuming qualities of ‘atmosphere’ or ‘climate’, this form of power is not an external force acting on the subject, or even the commandeering of processes internal to the subject, but rather a ‘sticky’ substance that wholly interpenetrates it (see Morton 2013).

In this quite literal climate of catastrophe, the metaphysical significance of human being is obliterated by pre-emptive mourning for the death of ‘humanity’. This, Evans and Reid contend, actually “thwart[s] a genuine love for the biosphere” (p.191) and dampens political action. To live outside of this form of power, they claim, humans need to “articulate a politics of the welcome” in relation to catastrophe (p.165). Here, they are echoed by Colebrook (2014), who argues that the extinction of

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the Western secular *figure* of ‘humanity’ may be nothing to mourn, since it enables us to question the value of human existence and to conceive of being other-than-human. Evans and Reid urge humans to embrace this kind of change: “[a]fter all,” they ask, “how can we even conceive of different worlds if we cannot come to terms with the death and extinction of this one?” (p.170).

There is much to applaud in this unabashedly polemical work, which pushes fatalism to the brink of hope (and, occasionally, vice versa). It makes an impassioned and informed case for the dominance of resilience culture, and its fluid style is capable of generating powerful emotive responses to it. Importantly, it moves the debate on biopower and liberal governance in a new direction by tracing its transformations in an ‘age of extinction’. In so doing, it constitutes a timely and novel intervention in several current discourses in critical geography. By illuminating the socio-political-economic processes that fuel the Anthropocene, *Resilient Life* contributes to debates about the spatio-temporal dimensions of extinction, insecurity and planetary change (see Clark 2011; Yusoff 2013). Moreover, it constitutes a significant step away from notions of ‘resilience’ in geography that treat ‘society’ and ‘environment’ as separate entities and focuses on sudden external shocks exchanged between them (see Adger 2000); instead, it demonstrates how resilience saturates space-time in ways that render such boundaries and relations of externality impossible. It also builds significantly on geographies of contemporary (colonial) violence (see Gregory and Pred 2007; Opondo and Shapiro 2011) by highlighting the ‘atmospheric’ nature of liberal power and the new distributions of violence, fear, and insecurity it produces.

More broadly, *Resilient Life* makes a substantial contribution to the radical social sciences and humanities. In particular, it does an excellent job of demonstrating how contributions from the Left, in an effort to respond ethically to disaster, often

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collapse into a mood of mourning and become (unintentional) accomplices of liberal rule. But does *Resilient Life* itself escape this trap itself?

In order to avoid fuelling nihilism, a project of this kind needs to confront its readers face-on with the enormities that poison the backgrounds of their lives, which the book does quite effectively. However, it also needs to bring its readers through the ‘wall of fear’ and activate within them a genuine sense of the possibility of radical change. In other words, it needs to give concrete indications of how humans might ‘live dangerously’ in the second sense of the term: that is, in defiance of resilience, and in the embrace of becoming-other. This does not necessarily require prescriptions for action, but it should entail a strong sense of what alternatives might look or feel like. As it stands, the invocations of affirmative sensibilities come across as largely rhetorical, and do not seem strong enough to counter the weight of the analysis that precedes them. Here, the authors could have drawn more on the work of authors such as William Connolly (2011), who gives a much more detailed (if still abstract) account of the micro-politics of responsiveness, attachment, and becoming that might help humans to overcome *ressentiment*. In the latter sections of the book, Evans and Reid make appeals to imagination, the artful cultivation of the self, an ethos of ‘welcoming’ catastrophe, and a poetic sensibility; but what might it be like to exist in this way? Are there any examples actually existing in the world that we might draw from? And what might it feel like to ‘live dangerously’ in this second, more affirmative sense?

The authors also give the wide-ranging discourses of ‘posthumanism’ a rather thin treatment. They are absolutely right to point out that some forms of posthumanism—especially those concerned with transhumanism, technophilia, or the alteration of organisms—can function as powerful extensions of biopolitical control (see also Haraway 2008). But they fail to explore the potentiality of *diverse*

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posthumanisms (see Mitchell 2014) to offer modes of resistance to biopolitics. For instance, rather than staking a firm boundary between ‘reduced’ and transcendental conceptions of life, the ‘new materialisms’ focus on the vitality of matter in diverse processes of becoming (see Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010); since matter and its properties cannot be fully apprehended by humans, these processes will always exceed and disrupt biopolitical apparatuses, despite the fact that they may be (partially) channelled to biopolitical ends. Furthermore, the authors say little about the growing literature in the ‘posthumanities’ (see Braidotti 2013; Colebrook 2014; Morton 2013), which, although wary of the human propensity to instrumentalize vital processes, casts doubt on the ability of the subject to grasp and control the climates in which they are entangled.

In a related sense, several invocations of transcendentalism throughout the book seem to clash with the immanent ethics and politics it promotes. First, Evans and Reid are deeply concerned with the loss of a transcendental figure of ‘humanity’ in conditions of resilience. Within Anthropocentric thinking, they claim, “life is inevitably reduced to the level of a natural force...Gone, then, are any claims that human life is uniquely endowed with the capacity to think and act metaphysically, *i.e.* that there may be something more than human to life” (p.63). This passage seems to call for a re-entrenchment of the kind of transcendental humanism that the authors critique throughout the book. Moreover, Evans and Reid frame ‘security’ as a higher good which humans need to recapture. Indeed, the book begins by lamenting the loss of security in a number of senses—economic, intellectual, social, and physical. Security is a metaphysical concept based on the notion of permanence, or at least stability. It seems to clash with the authors’ call to embrace change, evolution, and becoming-other-than-human. Moreover, insecurity need not *necessarily* be the basis for liberal governance. It has been historically and contingently channelled in this

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direction, but its use as a fuel for biopolitics does not exhaust the possibilities of insecurity. Rather than attempting to retrieve the concept of ‘security’, it seems a more promising strategy to re-envision insecurity as a vital and potent condition of existence, and as a source of the ruptures and aporias that make new worlds possible. Invoking ‘security’ as an endangered good compromises the most important contribution of the book: its account of how humans can learn to live and die at the end of the world—and the beginning of new ones.

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Audra Mitchell

Department of Politics

University of York

audra.mitchell@york.ac.uk / @AudraLMitchell

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