

# When culture plays its part: the biopolitics of resilience on the small island of Barbados

## Introduction

In recent years resilience has emerged as a quasi-universal strategy for solving the world's problems (Aradau, 2014). Resilience is contested but can be broadly defined as "the capacity of a system, community or society to resist or change in order that it may obtain an acceptable level of functioning and structure" (UNSDR, 2009, p. 24). One area where resilience has emerged as a key concept is environmental management. Yet resilience has recently been under increased scrutiny from critical scholars. The most persuasive of critical accounts derives from Foucauldian theoretical frameworks which analyse resilience through the lens of biopolitics. Biopolitics refers to a form of power which promotes the security and wellbeing of collective life (Foucault, 1978). Biopolitical analyses of resilience have recently outlined how resilience in environmental policy can maintain the political status quo (Reid, 2012) and create subjects unable to conceive of changing the world (Evan and Reid, 2013). However such research is currently purely theoretical.

This research used biopolitics as a theoretical lens to analyse how resilience is currently being operationalised by environmental practitioners in Barbados. Barbados is used as an empirical case study because small islands are currently a key concern globally due to climate change therefore resilience programmes are rising. Barbados is also at the forefront of regional policy in the Lesser Antilles.

## Research Aims

This research aims to answer the following research question:

- What can a biopolitical perspective tell us about the use of resilience frameworks by practitioners of such discourses in Barbados?

Two sub-research questions have been identified to answer this question:

- What does a Foucauldian approach of resilience tell us about how practitioners conceptualise and operationalise resilience in Barbados?
- How does culture affect the operation of resilience programmes in practice?

## Methodology

This research was based at a Barbadian research centre 'Bellairs Research Institute'. It adopted a mixed methods approach. 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key practitioners of resilience and environmental policy. This was supported by ethnographic research generated from working directly with Bellairs Research Institute in preparation for World Environment Day which was hosted on the island by the United Nations on the 5th June 2014. Textual analysis of relevant resilience policy on the island supported these primary research methods. I analysed the data using grounded theory. I coded the data collected and picked out key themes for discussion.

## Discussion

The discussion is separated by the two sub-research questions. The first sub-research question made the following findings. By analysing resilience through a biopolitical lens it was outlined how resilience policy uses data, collated through scientific monitoring, to frame nature as a risk. The framing of nature as a risk creates a sense among practitioners and the population of Barbados that the only thing to do now is to adapt. All 20 interviewees can be quoted with similar remarks to "we have no other choice".

Politically this is of concern and was suggested to provide evidence of arguments that resilience can maintain the political status quo (akin to Reid, 2012). It was evidenced how resilience mirrors neoliberal ideals. Practitioners and environmental policy in Barbados framed resilience not out of necessity of ecological security but based upon economic security, "achieving resilience is key for our economy". Achieving resilience was said to be based upon "creating entrepreneurial subjects" and "individuals who challenge risk". Such Resilience programming therefore in some way can be seen as aiming to condition subjects to become neoliberal subjects who are individually, rather than collectively, responsible for achieving resilience.

The second line of discussion outlined how there are some discrepancies between resilience policy and the way in which practitioners conceptualise and utilise resilience policy in Barbados. Although on the surface resilience appears to be a neoliberal concept, practitioners in Barbados did also conceptualise resilience in terms of unity, social cohesiveness, and brotherhood. These ideals have historically been key to Barbadian life and culture and sit in contrast to neoliberal conceptualisations of the concept. This offers an opportunity for a different form of resilience to exist, one organised around security of life rather than neoliberal order. The mechanisms through which these alternative visions emerge in practice

needs further development.

This study did outline how colonial mimicry could be one mechanism. Mimicry is a historically embedded process, and relates to the idea of Barbadian people mimicking the colonial masters but making something new in the process. This study used one particular example to demonstrate how Barbados could be mimicking global policy in their written material but in practice applying resilience programmes in different ways. The Barbadian way is a resilience organised around cohesiveness rather than individualism. As one participant stated "you tell a Barbadian to do something, they don't say anything, so you assume they will, but they won't".

The contesting ideas generated from the two research chapters reveal the complexity of resilience dialogue and the importance for embarking on more empirical research. To offer a way of summary it was concluded that resilience as a term does not really mean very much. Rather, it is a concept which is representative of the broader political ideals of our time. This is a world which is recognised to be so complex that we can no longer offer grand solutions to our problems of uncertainty. Resilience fits our current way of thinking as it offers a broad and fluid concept which can be used to fit individual beliefs, needs and requirements.

## Future Study

Future work needs to focus upon the mechanisms individuals and populations use to subvert dominant discourses of power. As Ben Anderson argues there is a need to focus upon "the surpluses of life that Foucault invoked in the concept of biopower" (Anderson, 2011, p. 29). This requires exploring power's failures in the face of life.

Future studies can identify points of transgression, and start to think about how to reconfigure the techniques and rationalities of climate change adaptation towards more radical aims. In this respect it would be useful to conduct more in depth ethnographic research which appreciates the cultural contexts of places.

## References

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Press Conference on World Environment Day, Bridgetown. From left: the Minister of Environment Barbados, the Executive Director of UNEP, UNEPs Goodwill Ambassador

