

This article was downloaded by: [University of Westminster]

On: 15 April 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 773574790]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Conflict, Security & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713411970>

Review article: Risk and the biopolitics of global insecurity

David Chandler

Online publication date: 01 April 2010

To cite this Article Chandler, David(2010) 'Review article: Risk and the biopolitics of global insecurity', Conflict, Security & Development, 10: 2, 287 – 297

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14678801003666024

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14678801003666024>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

CSD resources

Review article: Risk and the biopolitics of global insecurity

David Chandler

The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live

Michael Dillon and Julian Reid

Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 196.

ISBN 978-0-415-95300-9

War in an Age of Risk

Christopher Coker

Polity, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 211.

ISBN 978-0-7456-4288-8

Introduction

Both of these books make valuable reading for those attempting to understand the shift from 'modernist', 'Westphalian', 'statist' or 'rationalist' discourses of international security to the post-modern, post-political discourses of global insecurity. Both books provide differing but very important insights into the blurring of traditional categories of international politics, international law and the understandings of war and conflict. Dillon and Reid draw out the problematic of war and intervention shaped around the protection, or securing, of life that has become dangerous, both to itself and to others: the framework of 'liberal' humanitarian interventions and of broad-ranging discourses of human security, setting up the problem of 'resilience' as the framing

David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster and founding editor of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*. His recent books include *Hollow Hegemony: Rethinking Global Politics, Power and Resistance* (2009, Pluto Press), *Empire in Denial: The Politics of Statebuilding* (2006, Pluto Press) and *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond: Human Rights and International Intervention* (2006, Pluto Press).

through which biopolitical power is exercised internationally. Coker, on the other hand, focuses on the problem of war and interventionist policy-making in the context of the self-awareness of Western policy-makers that the life that has become dangerous is that of their own power in an age of complexity and globalised modernity, making any policy interventions likely to produce further destabilising or unintended consequences. Both framings reflect today's world of global insecurity where war is no longer a discrete act with clear goals through which security can be obtained but part of a process of risk or security 'management', where both 'war' and 'peace' have become outdated categories.

While both books deal adeptly and insightfully with the core problems at stake in the transformation of security discourses, they do so from very different perspectives. Coker attempts to develop a historically specific grasp of the changing practices and meanings of security policy-making, suggesting that this can be grounded in the paradigm of risk and risk management, understood as a radical loss of the aspiration to control and of strategic ambition. Dillon and Reid suggest that technological advances and the end of the Cold War have enabled liberal discourses of securing life to take new and extreme forms of control and strategic intervention at a global level. The same reality of the shift from limited war to 'unending war' is described so radically differently that it is difficult not to be engaged by the problematic at stake here, especially when, descriptively, both books share a similar set of predilections.

For Dillon and Reid, governing interventions, including the waging of war, have become 'biopoliticised', constructing all behaviour in 'complex adaptive emergent terms, common to [...] network-centric doctrines', which has enabled the intensification of 'liberal' contradictions where war is waged to secure life, understood as under a greater range of threats from the complexities of globalised existence (118). For Coker, similarly, it is the fact that policy is confronted with 'complex adaptive systems', highlighting the complexity and networked nature of life with its 'emergent properties' of crisis, which leads to the limiting of interventionist aspirations and the rejection of 'noble causes' such as the liberal 'war on inhumanity' (35). Both books rely heavily on conceptual framings taken from outside the discipline of international relations: Dillon and Reid, on the work of Foucault, especially his path-breaking conceptualisation of 'biopolitics'; Coker, on the work of

sociologists, Giddens, Beck, Bauman, Luhmann and Furedi, in order to develop the problematic of 'risk'.

Liberal war

Dillon and Reid wish to highlight how, in modern conceptions of rule and war, the human is reduced to the biohuman (i.e., how the subject of rights is reduced to the object of regulatory intervention). This move is seen to be supra-historically 'driven' by the deep imbrication of liberal rule with the aim of promoting species or human life. For the authors, 'the biopolitical is an order of politics and power which, taking species existence as its referent object, circumscribes the discourse of what it is to be a living being to the policing, auditing and augmentation of species properties' (29). This reduction of the human to the 'biohuman'—liberalism's 'referent object of war and rule' (31) is described as facilitated by the 'informationalisation of life', with threatening implications:

It is precisely this move which marks the significance not only of the digital or molecular revolutions of the twentieth century but of the confluence of these two revolutions, to the common effect of informationalising life and order [...] a move which does not so much penetrate the mysteries of life as expose it further to a logic of relentless manipulation and re-formation. (21)

This drive of 'relentless manipulation and re-formation' establishes a liberal security order of 'unrivalled intensity and global hegemony' in which the conception of threats develops with the capacity of new techniques and technologies of surveillance able to detect 'rogue behaviour': 'In this context any action or thought that borders on abnormality is likely to be targeted as a potential source of threat' and therefore of intervention and regulation (141). Life is to be targeted and controlled not just at the level of 'rogue' or 'failing' states, but also at the level of 'risky individuals' as liberal regimes wage war to rule over and secure life extending to the 'control of life at the molecular levels of its biological functioning and existence' (142).

Dillon and Reid's book is about the 'liberal way of war' but the liberal referred to in the title remains under theorised. On several occasions the authors highlight the distinction between the liberal way of war and the general framing of war in the modern era as a geo-strategic contestation, taking the territorial state as its referent object. However, for Dillon and Reid, 'liberalism never fitted this model of modern politics and the modern

problematism of war very well' (83). They therefore seek to define liberalism and the liberal way of war as distinct from war in the modern era. The liberal way of war refers less to real wars and conflicts than to an abstract 'biopolitical' model of conflict, defined as a desire to 'remove war from the life of humanity' which 'derives from the way in which liberalism takes the life of the species as its referent object of politics—biopolitics' (84). In this framing, the liberal nature of war very much depends on the self-description of the conflict by its proponents: these range from Gladstone's occupation of Egypt in the cause of 'suffering humanity', to US liberal ideological constructions of the cause of 'freedom' in the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union up to Bush and Blair's war on Iraq in the cause of humanity (6). As the authors state, of course, wars may be fought on other grounds than universal humanity: 'liberal states may [...] also act as geopolitical sovereign actors as well [...] and may also have geopolitical motives for the wars they wage' (84).

The starting assumption, that the liberal way of war can be isolated from any other—and that its alleged specific form, of 'unending violence', can be explained by its referent of the human—produces a circular argument. At the level of abstraction at which Dillon and Reid choose to work, there is a whole package of assumptions about liberal rule and war which remain constant, the key to understanding change is therefore to be found in how we conceptualise the 'human' in need of securing:

[j]ust as the liberal way of rule is constantly adapting and changing so also is the liberal way of war. There is, in that sense, no one liberal way of rule or one liberal way of war. But there is a fundamental continuity which justifies us referring to the singular [...] the fact that each takes the properties of species existence as its referent object [...] finding its expression historically in many changing formations of rule according [...] to the changing exigencies and understanding of species being [...] (84)

Rather than start by engaging with analysis of the forms of post-political rule and post-territorial war today and then considering the extent to which this way of rule and war can be theorised, Dillon and Reid appear to start out from the assumption that we live in a liberal world of rule and war and that this can be critiqued through the development of Foucault's conception of biopolitics. In transposing Foucault's critical engagement with liberal ways of rule to an understanding of liberal ways of war, Dillon and Reid take a body of historical work about the changing political nature of liberal rule and transpose it into an essentialised and under theorised understanding of liberal war.

Dillon and Reid claim that they are developing the work of Foucault and extending his critical conception of biopolitics to the liberal way of war. However, biopolitics becomes merely a technical expression or way of viewing the world which takes humanity as its starting point. The sections devoted to the impact of the sciences—of the transformation of biology, of cybernetics, complexity and the digital revolution, and of the revolution in military affairs—highlight the deterministic and technicised frameworks through which biopolitics is grasped, in the terminology of Dillon and Reid, as the ‘informationalisation of life’. We are told that the ‘reduction of species existence to information and code become central to the contemporary expression of liberal biopolitics’ (56), providing global liberal governance with a programmatic agenda of transforming life itself.

The reduction of the human to the biohuman (to information and code) is understood as a reflection of the developments of science and technology, enabling a new understanding of what life is and therefore of how it should be governed and how it can be secured through war. While they argue that the focus on new techno-scientific advances in war-fighting risk the danger that they ‘become technicist if they do not also take into account the deep correlation which also obtains between forms of rule and forms of war’ (121), they miss the technicised way in which they themselves correlate the advances in the science of the human with forms of rule and war.

In this way, Dillon and Reid provide a genealogy of the ‘informationalisation of life’ which is highly deterministic. Here, they merely reproduce the discourses of the military and policy elites which they study, writing the human and politics out of the picture as the developing understanding of the biohuman is held to dictate the liberal way of rule and way of war. How else can they write of ‘the biopolitical drivers historically at work in liberal politics’ (53) or how ‘the properties of species life will begin to dictate the terms under which the authority and legitimacy of states will also be expressed, and state power exercised locally and globally’ (53)? If anything, this is the exact opposite of Foucault’s approach to genealogy; implacably hostile to the idealism of inner ‘logics’ of history or to its teleological ‘drivers’.¹ For Foucault, the ‘biopolitics’ of Dillon and Reid could only be a metaphysics of the realisation of what they essentialise as ‘the liberal way of war’.²

Post-liberal war

Coker shares the technological determinism of Dillon and Reid but rather than seeing technology as driving the liberal aspiration for control and the regulation of threats to

biopoliticised life, he suggests that the extension of technology and the human sciences can be understood to have created an awareness of the impossibility of liberal aspirations to control and to regulate to secure life. Rather than waging liberal forms of war, Coker argues that war has lost its liberal moorings in the search for security on the basis of rational strategic interventions to control threats. Rather than liberal aspirations of control, Coker suggests that today's practices of war and intervention should be understood in terms of tactics rather than strategic goals and management rather than control:

The logic of risk colonisation since 9/11 has fundamentally changed traditional concepts of security. It has led to the concept of a 'long' or 'never-ending war', an astrategic, tactically driven risk management policy which locks the West into an endless process of risk management. A risk society is necessarily a safety society one that is permanently on the defensive. (26)

Just as there are problems with transposing Foucault's concept of biopolitics in the work of Dillon and Reid, Coker's appropriation of Giddens, Beck and other sociologists of risk, takes a body of work, without considering the implications of transferring it to the question of war and intervention. Coker denudes the sociologists of their political insights into the changing rationalities of governance by assuming that risk can provide 'a single theory or model' capable of explaining how risk has become the dominant framework in which war is conceived and practiced (27). Here, Coker assumes that which needs to be explained, again producing an argument which is circular rather than providing a theoretical analysis.

Risk society conceptions developed as a framework describing the apparent removal of the traditional liberal barriers between the domestic and the international, with the effect being the internationalisation of the domestic sphere and of the reduction of governments' capacity to control or order society. The description is a useful one, in that it suggests that the blurring of the domestic and the international was not driven by the extension of sovereign power and the aspiration to transform and regulate beyond borders, but the retreat of government, recognising the complexities of policy-making and the unintended consequences of states expressing governing agency. Coker adequately describes the retreat from strategic goals in the wars of Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan and the desire to express concern, rather than social and political commitment, which leads to short-termist and risk-avoidance measures, such as bombing from 15,000 feet over Kosovo or the use of private contractors or local forces as war is outsourced on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Coker's use of risk analysis to understand the wars of today asserts a desire to treat war historically specifically, through the paradigm of risk, but lacks the capacity to go beyond description. The problem with the analysis is that the international sphere has never been open to control and ordering in this way. Risk frameworks are not about the international sphere per se, war has never been able to be subject to control; as Clausewitz famously argued the unintended consequences of war are crucial to understanding conflict. Coker roots risk awareness in the developments of the international sphere linked to advances in science and technology, much as Dillon and Reid, suggesting that risk became more of an issue once we realised humanity's capacity for global destruction, through the nuclear age and, from the 1970s onwards, in relation to environmental degradation and global warming (67–71). For Coker, risk—awareness that there will be unintended consequences of our actions, many of which we cannot know—is therefore grounded in the growing complexity of society and the lack of control possible over the consequences of our acting. This concern is exaggerated by the fact that these factors mean that we never really know the extent of the threats facing us, making insecurity a subjective question rather than something that can be objectively measured or addressed.

Apologia of risk and biopolitics

Coker's application of risk analysis to the conceptualisation of war highlights the lack of strategic commitment made in the projection of power in the international sphere today but there is little here which provides an avenue for critical intellectual engagement. Instead, the lack of strategy and the limited and shifting aspirations of those waging Western wars is analysed in a framework of apologia. For Coker, it appears to be inevitable that war will lose its political character: its political meaning. Agency appears to have shifted from the militarised states of the West to the unknown threats and unintended consequences of acting. The depoliticisation of war is something that Coker argues we should recognise and perhaps not give governments and militaries such a hard time. He suggests that there is no point in critiquing post-liberal war from the paradigm of liberal rationalist framings of security:

[In the past] we could build in margins of safety, distinguish between real and hypothetical dangers and draw a line between the present and the future. This is no longer true, which is why the politics of security, at its most basic, has become the politics of insecurity [. . .] The question we should then ask is not, 'What should

I be?’ but ‘how should I be? (How can we so constitute ourselves that we can adapt quickly when the unknowns become apparent?). (95)

Rather than seek to develop rational strategic approaches to security goals, we should recognise the impossibility of liberal modernist approaches to security. The apologetic content is based on the naturalisation of sociological framings of risk and the precautionary approach which Coker asserts ‘is not irrational but it is strategically incoherent’ as every attempt to minimise risks generates other risks: ‘Doing too little and doing too much can both prove equally fatal’ (101–02). We appear condemned to live in a world where security goals should be seen to be illusory and the key focus should not be how we shape and change our external environment but how we respond to the unknown threats we face by turning inwards and focusing on our own coping practices and resilience to threats.

In undertaking the task of apologia rather than critique, Coker better describes the dynamics of war in today’s era than the ostensible radical critics of ‘liberal war’, Dillon and Reid, who assert that power has greater strategic aspirations for regulation and control. The dilemma in dealing with the shift from discourses of international security to those of global insecurity is that we appear to be caught between critical approaches which seek to rationalise the operations of power (often those of post-structuralists who impose highly deterministic and essentialising motivations of control and interests) and those of apologia who seek to argue that we do, indeed, live in a post-modern world where power has been humbled and can no longer be held to account for the consequences of its actions (former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld having offered a prime list of such statements concerning the ‘unknown unknowns’ and the lack of ‘metrics’ to measure progress in the war on terror).

The irony is that radical critics find it difficult to comprehend the problems of power in articulating meaning and purpose in a world of social dislocation and disengagement where traditional liberal framings of the political subject have little purchase. One way forward could be that of rescuing Foucault’s work on the collapse of legitimacy of traditional liberal narratives of rule and state policy-making from its appropriation by those who seek to ‘develop’ his concept of biopolitics. Dillon and Reid’s forcing of Foucault’s conception of biopolitics into a framework of liberalism per se and allegation that Foucault only interrogated biopolitics at the ‘early advent of modern politics’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is disingenuous (36, 41, 47). The book that Dillon and Reid refer to—*The Birth of Biopolitics*—deals not with the eighteenth century but with post-war Germany and Foucault is keen to locate ‘the birth of biopolitics’ in the decline of

the governmental regime of liberalism rather than as codeterminous with it; for Foucault: 'Only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism *was*, will be able to grasp what biopolitics *is*'.³

Foucault, in three lecture series at Collège de France (1975–79), worked through a powerful analysis of liberalism as a series of historically specific, contested and overlapping governmental rationalities, or forms of rule.⁴ In contradistinction to the scientific and technical determinism of Coker or of Dillon and Reid, Foucault builds up a powerful analysis of the drivers of shifting governing rationalities in the context of the crisis of legitimacy of liberal rule, highlighted by the discredited post-war West German state which was to develop the post-liberal framings of governance rather than government, so crucial to our current era. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault highlights the collapse of liberal aspirations to control or to order once the state lacks a strong connection to society and can no longer generate a collective legitimising project. In this case, politics is no longer goal-directed but reduced to institutional adaptation to externalities, for example, those of the market or of security threats. Governing agency is removed at the same time as the interventionist reach of power is extended. A biopolitical framing knows no boundaries and is not shaped in political or juridical terms but in terms of the regulatory framework which enables individuals (or states) to make the right adaptive choices. Rather than the *laissez-faire* of liberalism there is rather 'permanent vigilance, activity and intervention' and the problematisation of the autonomous subject.⁵

In their final chapter, Dillon and Reid reflect this process well, not through the use of the jargonised terms deployed earlier but in their appreciation of the importance of current policy framings of the goal of resilience. The goal of creating resilient states and societies sums up the biopolitics of today, where there is no imaginary global sovereign directing or controlling society—democratising, developing or securing the Other—rather there is a focus on the Other democratising, developing and securing itself under the imperative of becoming safe for itself and for others. Here the 'war of the biohuman on the human' becomes manifest, the autonomy of the Other is a threat to itself and to others; regulatory intervention is necessary to ensure that the formal blockages (of state elites) and informal blockages (of uncivil society) are removed to ensure that non-Western states and societies can secure themselves. The task of the 'biohuman' is to adapt and respond to external changes—whether in the global economy or in relation to global warming, anything more (aspirations for control and autonomy, for example) is held to be a threat to this need for adaptation and resilience.

On the whole, Coker's study of *War in an Age of Risk* captures better, descriptively, the essence of Foucault's understanding of the disappearing sovereign and the governing rationality of biopolitics, than the work of the ostensible 'Foucaultians' working in the discipline of international relations. In his Preface, Coker takes a dig at Foucaultian critics of global security discourses who stress the overarching aspirations to control and oppress, suggesting instead the 'hollow' nature of power with its 'scaled down' ambitions and lack of goals beyond 'consequence management', suggesting that discourses of global insecurity and resilience reflect Western society 'fighting with its own essence' (xi). He highlights that risk management stems less from the desire to control than from a governing rationality that asserts the impossibility of liberal framings of power as knowledge no longer leads to greater certainty about capacity to shape the future.

Conclusion

Anyone interested in engaging with the changing nature of security discourses, particularly over the last decade, would be well rewarded by reading both of these fascinating studies. The fact that they are so contrasting in their interpretations despite a similar understanding of the subject matter highlights some of the theoretical and political stakes raised in the problematic of (in)security today. Both these books provide insights into the centrality of resilience, reflecting the shift away from security as a discrete goal to a process of permanent intervention: for Dillon and Reid, resilience is the discourse of control imposed by Western powers, for Coker it is a discourse of Western self-limitation that reflects the impossibility of control. It is in this impasse that the concept of biopolitics, emerging as a response to the crisis of liberalism, could open up the problem. This would indicate the importance of using the concept not as an essentialising critique of power but rather as a framework for tracing the development of liberal discourses as apologia: as a retreat away from a subject- or rights-based framing of government, thereby reducing government to the administration of society or to adaptation to risk. The removal of the subject from our conception of the world we live in is the basis upon which we can begin to understand the dissolution of the barriers between the domestic and the international and between war and peace: without transformative aspiration derived from a positive view of human agency it is inevitable that we can only conceive of the external world in terms of permanent vigilance against global insecurities.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'.
2. See, Chandler, 'Liberal War and Foucaultian Metaphysics'.
3. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 22 (emphasis added).
4. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 313.
5. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 132.

References

- Chandler, David, 2010. 'Liberal War and Foucaultian Metaphysics'. *Journal of International Co-operation Studies* 18(1) (forthcoming).
- Foucault, Michel, 1977. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in D.F. Bouchard, (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 139–164.
- Foucault, Michel, 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.