

The Ontology of Danger: Recasting the Human Subject in Discourses of Vulnerability and Resilience

David Chandler (University of
Westminster) d.chandler@wmin.ac.uk

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Introduction

- The ontology of danger is the ontology of the human subject
- Today's subject is autonomous but vulnerable/dangerous and needs empowering to become resilient/secure
- The current discursive framing of danger illustrates that we have reached the end of the Enlightenment project.
- There is no longer a subject capable of transforming/securing the external world – the field of transformation/securing/developing/democratizing has shifted to the inner world of the subject

The Material and Contingent basis of our Dangerous World

- Work may have set us free in the age of modernity, or 'productivism', but today danger sets us free in our 'post-scarcity', post-political world (Giddens)
- The withering of political contestation over possible futures means we lack a positive political vision of the human. The source of meaning is a negative one: danger. The project of coping with danger through resilience/empowerment gives meaning to the post-political regulatory practices of governance
- The dangerous world is a contingent outcome of the defeat of political forces of emancipation. It is not an externally imposed 'reality' brought on by the technical processes of globalization or by the 'discovery' that the human brain is ill-equipped to deal with complexity.

Danger and the Human

- Danger is no longer a product of the external world. There is no 'outside' of human choices constructing the context of human choices (constructivist framework is dominant discourse of power)
- Post-risk society or 'manufactured risk' implies that danger is the inevitable product of human agency but a non-intentional product. We are dangerous because we act or make choices without knowing the consequences (see Hayek and others)
- Humans are dangerous subjects (animals have no choices/agency so cannot be dangerous). Our subjectivity itself makes us dangerous and provides the sphere of governance intervention to secure us (note inversion of Enlightenment understanding of subject)
- Example: global warming is not dangerous (if natural) – only 'man-made' global warming is dangerous. What assumptions are being made in the shrinking of danger to human choices and decisions?

Resilience: Danger = Freedom

- Danger liberates because we can only confront danger by transforming the inner life of the human subject – through empowerment, capability- and capacity-building: the inculcation of resilience
- The empowered subject makes less dangerous decisions and creates a less dangerous world
- The job of government is governance: creating the institutional frameworks – choice architecture – through which better decisions are made
- This is a continual process of preventive ‘results-based’ interventions – to ‘liberate’ the subject from its incapacities
- The poor, marginal and vulnerable become dangerous to themselves and to others (also note focus on child transitional stages to dangerous adult – policing/therapeutic interventions into choice-making with regard to health/education/work/family)

Conclusion

- To paraphrase Lenin's 'Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism': Resilience can be seen as the highest stage of liberalism – by 'highest' is meant 'final': the exhaustion of a project
- Foucault extensively investigated the transitions and transformations of liberal discourses of human subjectivity and gives many pointers – particularly with regard to biopolitics: the submersing of the sovereign into society making power invisible; suggesting that 'only when we know what liberalism *was*, will we be able to grasp what biopolitics *is*' (2008: 22 & 96)
- Today's ontology of danger indicates the disappearance/transformation of the sovereign: the transcendence of liberal binaries - of inside/outside, public/private, political and law/ social and economic, sovereign/citizen – on the basis of the dead legacy of the liberal subject as an autonomous choice-making agent
- The inversion of the liberal subject – its definition as vulnerable and incapable rather than as independent and rational – makes possible the highest/final sphere of liberal governmentality or governance, once the external world no longer appears subject to human mastery