

Political Preconditions *An Interview with Julian Reid*

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

Julian Reid is Professor of International Relations at the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, Finland. His research interests include the biopolitics of warfare, critical security studies, neoliberalism, and political aesthetics. Reid has published two books on biopolitics and security, *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror: Life Struggles, Liberal Modernity and the Defence of Logistical Societies* (2006) and *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (2009, co-authored with Michael Dillon). He also co-editor of the forthcoming *Deleuze and Fascism: Security, War, Aesthetics*, which employs Deleuzean thought to problematize modern relations between fascism and liberalism.

In your first book, "The Biopolitics of the War on Terror," you contend that the failure to problematize liberal accounts of humanity, and life itself, explains the currency of "terror" as a form of resistance. Given what's happened since the book was published in 2006, how has your thesis been accentuated or reinforced?

The entrenchment of liberalism in rationalities claiming to protect life itself has only become deeper in the time that has passed, and the pathologization of subjects and dispositions defined by their supposed antipathy to life itself has only become more vicious. One aspect of this entrenchment I have become interested in during the years since writing *The Biopolitics of the War on Terror* is the increasing grounding of neoliberal regimes of governance in claims for legitimacy on account of their abilities to protect the life not of human populations as such, but of the biosphere. Neoliberalism, it seems to me, has broken from earlier liberalisms in that it correlates claims for its legitimacy not simply with practices for the development of the species life of humanity, as Foucault directed us to recognize, but with biospheric life. These correlations of governance, development and biospheric life in and among neoliberal regimes of practice and representation increasingly comprise the foundation of its biopolitics. I have been saying for some time now that we cannot understand how liberalism functions, most especially how it has gained the global hegemony that it has, without addressing how systematically the category of life has organized the correlation of its various practices of governance. But this contemporary and ongoing shift in the very locus of the life that is at stake for liberal governance, from the human to the biospheric, seems to me profoundly important for anyone concerned with resistance to liberalism. When we look

at how this shift is impacting the life of peoples worldwide, we can see that it is 'the poor' who are being targeted, and said to be the greatest threat to the degradation of biospheric life. Alleviating threats to the biosphere requires targeting the poor because it is precisely the poor that are said to be the most 'ecologically ignorant' and, thus, most prone to live in non-sustainable ways. Thus, does protecting the life of the biosphere require targeting the poor and relieving them of their ecological ignorance. The means to that removal is argued to reside in building neoliberal frameworks of economy, governance, and subjectivity, and within the poor it is most often women who are the principal target population. "I will transform my lifestyle in the way I farm and think" has become the mantra that poor women farmers in the Caribbean region are demanded, for example, to repeat like Orwellian farm animals in order to receive European Union funding.

But while there are these shifts in liberalism, it is important we retain the knowledge that the liberal project, the form of humanity it seeks to constitute, and the strategies with which it targets life have their origins in war. Our life is its target, and the logistification of our being is its means. In terms of resistance to liberalism, this is a problematic of intelligence. We lack a political intelligence that would enable us to articulate another politics of life. I wrote *Biopolitics of the War on Terror* partly to make people think about the intelligent and vitalistic attributes of terror that get lost in the biopolitical discourse of pathologization it has been systematically subject to over the years. Terror has strategies, but they are not martial. It has an account of life, which is not liberal. It has powers, one of which is the power to wait. Terror waits. It steps back, it evades, it practices the art of the oblique. We could do well to remember that and learn from that in thinking about how to wage war against life's reduction to the logistical schema, both in terms of our own life, as well as that of the planet. It is not simply a problem of the commodification of life and world, but the rendering utile of life and world which continues to permeate liberal visions of how we ought to live and relate to other life forms.

On a related note, how would you interpret the events of what's been termed 'Arab Spring'—namely, the protests in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya—given your analysis of the martial proclivities underscoring liberal modernity. Western governments and media tend to view the uprisings as a victory for liberal modernity, while concurrently bemoaning the possibility of anti-Western actors being given agency. Can this be read as anxiety about whether or not new political formations will challenge the West's ability to suborn other societies to the martial organization upon which its own conceptions of humanity rest?

Yes, certainly, there is a fear and anxiety which characterizes the reactions of Western governments to these revolts, born of the will to subdue them, control and striate them, governing the ways in which they will turn out, the political forms that will result, and so on, to ensure their liberalization. That was entirely predictable. But as problematic is the anxiety of the European left to make historical and political sense of these still nascent

projects before they have had sufficient autonomy to develop their own imaginaries and become according to their own potentialities. Look at the ways Badiou and Nancy have lined up to pronounce the truth of these revolts.¹ That, too, is a phenomenon of liberal governance. And I don't want to be a part of that economy. There is something like a desire to speak on behalf of the present, in order to possess it, which I hear and see in the response of thinkers who ought to know better. The desire to reduce it to this or that political matrix, especially one's own pre-established framework of interpretation, on the basis of scant experience. It's a mug's game intellectually. I prefer to let the dust settle. But there is a deeper political problem. The mediation of the revolts has been so heavy, they were networked before they could properly begin. How would Mao's Long March have turned out in a context of internet coverage? Let these emergent peoples be, for now, in order that they become.

In "The Liberal Way of War," co-authored with Michael Dillon, you discuss the informationalization of biopower and the consequences of this process for liberal governance. Can you discuss some of these consequences?

The informationalization of biopower originates in the Second World War, with the birth of cybernetics, and the work especially of Norbert Wiener, who declared that the "power to learn" through the exchange of information is the fundamental feature that distinguishes a living from a non-living system. It is well known that his ideas framed a revolution in the understanding of what life consists of, but what interests me more is it how it has changed the understanding of what threatens life; the emergence of technoscientific, but deeply political discourses on 'poor learners', the 'informationally illiterate' or 'information poor' which quickly gained currency internationally and remain in play alongside those discourses concerning the 'ecological ignorance' of the 'global poor', the outcome of which has been the pathologization of anyone deemed poor at producing information, as well as learning from its exchange. This is what accounts for the stress placed on the necessity of informationally driven learning in the transformation of the life of populations locally and globally in recent years, and the never-ending presentation of 'learning' as a skill and freedom without which we, 'the living', cannot prosper. Capacities for good governance have become identified with the performance of informationalized learning capacities and bad governance with the failure to produce and exchange information, as well as learn well. The failure of a society or subject to exhibit the requisite learning capacities becomes the measure by which the danger they are said to pose is evaluated. This has led to the birth of a new technologically determined era of

1 Following the 2011 intervention in Libya, French philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy argued in *Libération* (March 28, 2011) that "It is up to the people in question and to all others, including us, to ensure then that the oil, financial, and arms dealing game that installed and maintained this puppet...does not start over. It is the responsibility of the peoples, yes: and it is also of course to us, the peoples of Europe or America, that this is addressed." Disagreeing, post-Continental thinker Alain Badiou responded that "it makes no sense for you or me to go with the grain of the Western consensus that says: 'we absolutely have to remain in charge of everything happening'. We have to make a stand against the grain, and demonstrate that the real target of Western bombers...is definitely the popular uprising in Egypt and the revolution in Tunisia, it is their unexpected and intolerable character, their political autonomy, in a word: their independence."

racism—only subjects which interact and connect with other subjects through the exchange of information are said to display living properties, the great 'Connected'. A subject which learns and connects poorly is also by definition a non-living entity, and, thus, an entity which can be killed with impunity, an entity to which one no longer owes responsibility to on account of its non-living nature. This way of thinking about information, connectivity, and learning has become the grid of intelligibility through which fear is modulated and danger is perceived globally by liberal regimes, determining who may live and who may die in the necropolitical economy of life-as-information.

You've also stated that the drive of twenty-first century liberal regimes is a governance not just, or even primarily, of life in its present existence, but in life's capacity for becoming and "breeding." What biopolitical rationalities are served by the management of life's productive capacity, and how does this amplify the instrumentalization of human suffering?

The strategic imaginaries of liberal regimes are conditioned by the fantasy of being able to govern informationalized life in its emergent processes of becoming. Another outcome of this is the doctrine of so-called preemptive war, which is defined by the idea of being able to preempt the processes by which the life of a potential enemy or threat evolves, so that one can control its future shape and development. To understand the origins of the military and strategic fantasy, one has to examine how militarily strategic doctrines of liberal regimes have been inspired by information and life sciences, especially post-cybernetics. The military discourses of preemption among liberal regimes were prefigured powerfully by accounts of how the preemption of living processes can and does work in the sciences of life, which themselves have been shaped by the demands of the liberal war machine. As such, liberalism has always operated with a militaristic understanding of the nature of life as a phenomenon defined by danger and threat, something requiring constant monitoring and intervention, on account of the fear for what life can otherwise become. It has developed to the stage where its calculus of governance depends upon the principle that everything is dangerous—no life is benign—because even that which appears benign can become dangerous. Contrary to being a political project with an aim of emancipating the human species, the nature of which is said to be self-evident, it is aimed at transforming the species through superior knowledge of the life processes through which it exists and develops over time. As such, it is concerned with establishing a knowledge of laws of creation—it pertains to become God. The entire history of liberal ways of war and violence, as well as the immediate future of liberal war and violence, cannot, in my view, be understood without addressing the biopolitical imaginary that has fueled it. It kills life and brings suffering in order to make life live. That is its governing rationale. The production of death and suffering is fundamental to its way of making life live. It is no accident that the most advanced liberal state in the world today, the United States, is also the state most militarily capable of destroying human life, not just in the present, but in the entirety of human history. It is a killing machine without precedent.

You've recently engaged in a critique of sustainable development models and the economic rationality upon which such policies are founded. To your mind, where do discourses of sustainable development and neoliberalism intersect, and how are subjectivities organized by this intersection, if at all?

Both sustainable development and neoliberalism are profoundly biopolitical projects revolving around discursive claims as to the need to protect the life of the biosphere. Sustainable development deploys ecological reason to argue for the need to protect the biosphere from human degradation, while neoliberalism prescribes economy as the very means of that protection. So 'life' offers a powerful surface of contact between them, which is problematic for all those concerned with the question of how to combine ecological and anti-neoliberal struggles today. More acutely, the surface of contact between them is manifested in their shared enthusiasm for what they both call 'resilience'. Resilience thinking developed in ecology during the 1970s to conceptualize the mechanisms with which living systems adapt to hazards and maintain their form amid disturbances. During the '80s and '90s, we started to see proponents of sustainable development conceptualizing it to describe the specificity of their concerns as distinct from traditional development practices—resilience, not security; the biosphere, not humanity, environments, not peoples, life, not economy; and so on. Over the last decade, neoliberalism has appropriated sustainable development by claiming the 'resilience' of specifically neoliberal institutions and practices, particularly markets. So, while it's a fascinating indicator of the ways in which liberal governance continues to thrive on rationalities concerned with the protection of life, it also tells us a lot about the ways in which it is changing. It no longer legitimates itself on claims simply to the promotion of human life because it's the life of the biosphere that is said to be at stake here. It's also fascinating as much for the ways in which the understanding of security is changing. Classically, security was conceptualized as provision of freedom from threats and dangers. Resilience is a different game. It's not about creating freedom from danger, but governing exposure to danger. The forms of resilient subjectivity that neoliberalism is concerned with producing are not subjects capable of securing themselves from danger, but subjects that understand exposure to danger as a necessary and positive condition of human living. The very idea of security becomes, in the process, pathologized. To be capable of 'resilience' is not to be secure from danger, but to be able to adapt to danger. And contesting this way of thinking about danger is to be at risk not only of being labeled ignorant of the very nature of the world and what is entailed in being a subject in the world—socially, individually, experientially—but a threat to life itself.

How does this proliferation of the discourse of resilience affect the ability of people to practice politics?

This is disastrous for politics. The resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world; not a subject which can conceive of changing the world, its structure, and conditions of possibility, but a subject that accepts the

dangerousness of the world it lives in as a condition for being in the world and accepts the necessity of the injunction to change itself in correspondence with dangers now presupposed as endemic. Resilient subjects are subjects that have accepted the imperative not to secure themselves from whatever dangers they are faced with, but instead adapt to their enabling conditions via the embrace of neoliberalism. A vernacular discourse on security, here, it seems to me, may actually function as a useful counter-discourse in movements and struggles for which neoliberalism is not simply a danger, but potential disaster, to be defeated and overcome. Foucault once berated the 'simplicity' of some 'anti-security' lines of political critique. I think he was right, and a more serious problem today is how to revalorize security so as to reconstitute a different political vision.

What impact, if any, has the sustained prioritization of security concerns had upon the dialogic function of political narratives, particularly in light of the security measures implemented in recent months to protect Western states against the revolts of economically depressed populations?

It would be easy to presuppose a narration of the revolts of last year, in London especially, as arising from an experience of increasing economic depression and deprivation, anger at the inequality between classes, and hatred of the stupidity of capitalism, and so on. And it would be equally easy to then point at the attempts to stifle such ways of 'telling the truth' of those revolts perpetrated by Western governments and their media proxies through the proliferation of their discourses of criminality and terrorism. But I think the problematic is much more complex than that. The idea that the revolts arose in response to an experience of economic depression has itself to be questioned. For such ways of telling the story of revolts, diagnosing their roots in economic conditions especially, has a long history within liberal thought and practice. It is not that such forms of revolt do not exist, or that such ways of telling their story are untenable, but that the story itself is constitutive of a particular kind of subject of revolt, which as it happens, is utterly amenable to liberal governance. Economic subjects are always appeasable. In a fundamental sense the challenge of the production of a true politics is to tell a story about oneself that does not come from elsewhere, and the telling of which does not testify to one's colonization by somebody else, existing elsewhere, for whom one ends up speaking. A story that is told purely from 'here', however difficult it may be to lay claim to a possession of the 'here', because the 'here' has always to be created, in relation with an outside to the discourses which would otherwise determine the narration through which we come to be. So there's a problem here, in so far as, engaging in the narration of the revolt is itself the fundamentally political moment. It is not that revolts happen and then we determine what their stories are, and develop a politics in their aftermath. Story-telling is itself the fundamentally political practice; difficult, vexed, and full of art. So we should avoid at all costs telling bad stories about what accounts for the realities of these revolts, what is at stake, and what has to be done etc. And there's a lot of bad story-telling going on, believe me; 99 percent of the Left is

performing the function of the state, already, by telling bad stories, recuperating old and hackneyed plot-lines, exhuming dead characters better off left buried. The 99 percent needs to find its 1 percent. In every instance of revolt there lives an element that is profoundly spiritual, unnamable, inexplicable, that cannot be reduced to the order of economy, and which has no *raison d'être* other than a pure refusal. Yet at the same time it invites a naming, an act of fabulation, out of which it can give expression to a people which is simultaneously new in a qualitative sense, no longer bearing the hallmarks of peoples old and buried, but also real and powerful, in a constitutive sense. The task of the story-teller, he or she concerned with the narration of revolt, is to give voice to that spiritual element, to name it, create for it a memory, a myth, out of which it can emerge and declare its truth, however violent and animalistic it may be; each of which are of course qualities, fundamentally, of truth, politically speaking. But that task of story-telling is better left to art. I am a political theorist and my job is only to determine the preconditions for politics. I am not interested in telling political truths as such. I'm here to help others understand how better to do so, as well as recognize such a truth, when it emerges.