*Kevin Thompson*

# RESILIENCY AND FREEDOM: RESPONSE TO PAT O'MALLEY'S "FROM RISK TO RESILIENCE"

What does it mean to exercise 'reasonable foresight' in the post 9/11 world? How is the conduct of populations and individuals, of 'each and everyone', to be shaped and molded, to be rendered ever more governable, in a time where we are threatened by the prospect of such uniquely human created catastrophes as global warming, global terrorism, and nuclear meltdown, to name but a few of our present dilemmas? If risk is indeed not a property of things—as Ewald has famously claimed, "there is no risk in reality"—but instead names a category and an attendant array of techniques that seek to render events and the world as a whole, even, fundamentally calculable so as to make them accessible to various types of intervention, then it would seem that we are increasingly living in a world in which the very threats at issue exceed the domain of the calculable, a space where probabilities are giving way to bare inestimable and radical uncertainties. Perhaps, then, what is most threatening for us now is not really a set of risks for the magnitude of catastrophe exceeds the domain of the measurable. But how, then, are political rationalities, 'reasonable foresight', to operate in the absence of a calculable future? Societies are still being administered. So how are we to be governed and even to govern ourselves when that which confronts us—at what is admittedly the extreme limits of our lives, but that nonetheless

shapes the mundaneity of our existence—appears to be beyond valuation or assessment of any kind?

In "From Risk to Resilience. Technologies of the Self in the Age of Catastrophes", Pat O'Malley offers us an important contribution to these fundamental questions. O'Malley profoundly and subtly sketches  several basic strategies of governance that have emerged, especially in the last decade, all of them, though in different ways, seeking to grapple with the dilemma of reasoning about and with uncertainty. At the core of each, O'Malley contends, is the problematic, in the brilliant formulation that he mines from the 2004 report of the US National Commission on Terrorist Attacks,  of finding "a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing imagination". Which is to say, the imperative for political rationality today has become to think what appears, at first at least, to be the unthinkable: political rationality must be a fundamentally fictive process, creating complex and intricate scenarios (narratives) that challenge and exceed the limits of  not just what seems plausible, but what is even currently thought possible, and it must do this in ways that readily feed into the networks, forums, hierarchies, and feedback loops of information collection that are at the heart of modern governmental bureaucracies. But this, of course, poses another problem: how to integrate innovation and creativity—what might be called, following O'Malley, a kind of entrepreneurial spirit of artistic invention—into systems of administration?

O'Malley insightfully analyzes for us three basic strategies and attendant techniques that seek to grapple with these dilemmas: precaution, preparedness/enactment, and speculative preemption. And he also locates a fourth approach—resilience—

that, he claims, has grown up alongside these bureaucratic technologies, but that, importantly, does not operate according to the logic of "bureaucratizing imagination", but rather, as a more truly neoliberal form of entrepreneurial governance, what he terms "enterprising imagination". The key to drawing this distinction—between the first three forms and resilience—is, O'Malley argues, the type of freedom that each seeks to inculcate. Precaution, preparedness, and pre-emption all strive, in varying ways, to forge an agent—whether as a citizen, a consumer, a family member, or otherwise—that is the contemporary embodiment of Bentham's thrifty, self-denying, diligent worker, the prudent risk avoider. O'Malley argues that these are all forms of negative freedom, whereas, the techniques of resilience seek to constitute those under their sway as Bentham's other favored model for the subject of true prudence, entrepreneurs of the self, which O'Malley takes to be a form of positive freedom. O'Malley concludes, however, with an important caution: resilience as a line of flight in an age of catastrophes may seem, and may in many cases in fact be, innocuous—instilling us, as he says, with "optimism, resourcefulness, enterprise and social networking [in the face of radical uncertainty] is no bad thing"—but for all that it is nonetheless still fraught with all the dangers of reductive utilitarian calculus, of rendering human life nothing more than another form of utility, another kind of capital into which neoliberal regimes may invest and from which they may profit.

Now with this outline of one of the central lines of argument that O'Malley makes, I want to articulate a concern that this analysis raises. It revolves around the claim about the kinds

of freedom that these strategies are said to instill. Let me, then, pose two questions.

The first has to do with whether or not Berlin's infamous model of negative and positive liberty is the most adequate or even most advantageous conceptual framework with which to get at what I agree is the real distinction between precaution/ preparedness/pre-emption and resilience. Negative freedom is, of course, freedom from extrinsic encumbrances. Its only historical reality, it has been argued, is the liberation of someone from a condition of enslavement, but even this is contested. But my question here, simply put, is: is this really the form of freedom that precaution/preparedness/pre-emption seek to instill? Is each not, instead, actually a way of representing and managing uncertainty, of reasonable foresight, that enables those under their sway to make genuinely prudential choices?

Consider again, for example, precaution. Take it in its more extreme (quasi-Ewaldian) version: imagining the worst possible, the serious and irreversible consequence that only a malicious demon could/would devise. O'Malley claims that this "requires the *curtailing or cessation* of action".[1] It is, O'Malley says, "removing some of freedom—by closing down enterprise and discovery—in order to protect what is imagined as more important". But even if we accept the contention that precaution (and preparedness and pre-emption as well) curtails enterprise (which, as I have noted, is itself contestable), why is this a form of negative freedom? Doesn't imagining the worst entail the pursuit of certain ends over and above others and, as such, is it not acting precisely not free from extrinsic encumbrances, but in service to the demands and dictates of utilitarian prudence? Why then would we want to call this negative free-

dom? Isn't it rather just another form of instrumental rationality, which, let us remember, is still a matter of setting and pursuing ends and thus a form of self-governance, that is, what is typically said to be a model, albeit base or banal, of positive freedom?

My second question is, I think, more significant. It concerns the supposed entrepreneurial nature of resilience. If the technique of resilience is indeed, as O'Malley contends, a set of practices for instilling a mindset or set of skills for thriving in and through chaotic uncertainty, a technology for constituting a truly non-neurotic subject—that is, I take it, one not governed in and through their own anxieties about the uniquely incalculable threats of the post 9/11 world—a strategy for constituting ourselves as true entrepreneurs of ourselves, then in what sense is this the constitution of a form of 'freedom to'?

Resilience, we are told, demands of us that we "embrace risk", that we see uncertainty not just as threat, but, more fundamentally, as "opportunity and challenge" and that to do so we must cultivate and exercise effective communication, decision-making, and goal-setting skills and be open to learning from both our successes and failures in life, the development of a whole range of affective and cognitive powers that purport to enable us to succeed in situations of radical uncertainty. But how exactly does the development of these sorts of skills actually constitute agents capable of investing in their own (human) capital, the core, according to Foucault and others, of the neoliberal model of subjectivity?

Clearly resilience is a process of learning new skill sets. But they appear to be somewhat elaborate and perhaps even essen-

tial *coping* mechanisms for dealing with situations of extremely high uncertainty. None seek to develop the risk taking initiative and innovativeness that seems so central to entrepreneurship. But if this is correct, then they are techniques, it would appear, of *surviving* chaos and risk, but not of *thriving and prospering* from it. In this sense, they would be necessary, but not sufficient conditions for counting as a true (under neo-liberal conditions of acceptability and veridiction) entrepreneur of oneself.

In what sense, then, does resilience seek to instill a distinctly *neoliberal* form of positive freedom? And finally, might not the danger of *that* form lie *not* in its utilitarian reductiveness of human life, as O'Malley,  following others, argues, but rather in the more insidious fact that it instills a disposition of governance that could deny us precisely the possibility of finding a way to forge ourselves, in and through the political rationality of neoliberalism, otherwise, that is, in a way that would affirm the creative core of neoliberal constitution and not just its docile products?

NOTES

1  Ewald, it should be noted, only claims that precautionary practices result
    in the *devaluation* of enterprise, creation, and innovation, not their
    wholesale *elimination*, as O'Malley seems to imply here.