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Urban resilience and the neo-liberal subject of climate change in Thailand

Robert A. Farnan

Abstract—This paper analyses the ideology of resilience, as it is manifested in Thailand, through the relationship between urban climate change security and the neo-liberal subject. The neo-liberal project of resilience that is commonly advocated by ideologues and policy makers in response to catastrophic events, such as floods, has generated considerable debate in architectural and urban design circles but has largely failed to consider the ontology of vulnerability that underwrites neo-liberal notions of political responsibility and its attendant practices of (in)security. Although the literature in political ecology has fruitfully interrogated urban climate change resilience from the point of view of disaster management, this paper elects to forgo this trend by demonstrating how the neo-liberal subject of climate change is implicated in processes of global governance that take bio-spherical life as their referent object. As an incarnation of neo-liberalism’s doctrine of sustainable development, the concept of resilience—scripted in the 1990s and early 2000s by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and financial institutions such as the World Bank—has increasingly come to posit human exposure to risk as positively fundamental to the adaptability and self-reliance of so-called vulnerable populations. Focusing on Bangkok’s 2011 floods, this paper therefore scrutinizes this ideology of resilience by exploring how the environmental uncertainties and social dangers associated with urban climate change—in particular severe flooding—are in fact aggravated and overdetermined by an ideology that disavows any notion of a subject with the promethean potential to change the world, in favor of one that merely conforms to his or her surroundings. As this paper will show, in Bangkok the critical infrastructure and urban spaces that are protected from the threat
of global climate change are closely connected to discourses of resilience that strategically depoliticize and ultimately seek to contain already marginalized communities.

**KEYWORDS:** urban resilience, climate change, security, neo-liberalism, development.

**Introduction**

In 2011 Thailand experienced its worst monsoon floods in over half a century. During October, months of accumulated rainfall and a deluge of discharged water from the Bhumibol and Sirikit Dams rushed southwards towards the capital. Bangkok's Metropolitan Administration (BMA) built a series of massive sandbag defenses, designed to secure the core of the city's critical infrastructure. The national authorities also sealed shut a series of water gates that had been designed to secure the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) after its boundaries in the capital's central districts had failed in a previous flood. Although these defenses protected the core of Bangkok keeping its denizens dry, for those living beyond the sandbag walls, the plan had the opposite effect as it exacerbated flooding and left whole communities inundated for weeks. As I will show, the uneven vulnerabilities that were so starkly endured by different segments of Bangkok's urban population reveals, in microcosm, the agenda of climate change adaptability underwriting the project of resilience in Thailand.

This paper analyzes what I call "the resilient subject of neoliberalism." What I endeavor to do in this discussion is investigate the manner in which the ideology of resilience, as constitutive of the neo-liberal subject, is beholden to an ontology of vulnerability that promulgates human exposure to risk as a necessary component of neoliberalism's late modern fixation with sustainable development. The project of urban climate change resilience, as we shall see, is part of neo-liberalism's valorization of adaptability and self-reliance insofar as it is discursively implicated in governmental practices that disavow the subject's promethean capacity to secure itself from catastrophic events it may face in the future. This uncertainty underwrites an epistemic modality that is central to the governance of the resilient subject of neoliberalism, particularly as it is manifested in the context of Bangkok's
2011 floods. As such, this paper investigates the ideological co-option of resilience within neo-liberal security discourses, in order to show that the governance of urban climate change cannot be sufficiently understood through the conceptual framework afforded to us by the liberal tradition’s bio-political account of resilient life. Indeed, this discourse of resilience and the technocratic “rule of experts” (Mitchell 2002) supporting it has not only exaggerated the role played by nature in Bangkok’s 2011 floods but it has also depoliticized the marginalized populations which it deems most vulnerable to climate change. Ultimately, I claim that in the epoch of the Anthropocene, resilience and the neo-liberal subject need to be critiqued from the fundamentally non-liberal position suggested to us by Foucault and others (Chandler and Reid 2016; Evans and Reid 2014).

Firstly, I will explain resilience in relation to the liberal tradition’s formulation of security, focusing my attention on the long conceptual shadow the modern state’s security imperatives have cast over our understanding of political subjectivity. In particular I will explore how the doctrine of sustainable development, as it resonates in the Anthropocene epoch, has been central to the ontology of vulnerability underlying the ideology of resilience. Secondly, I will describe how the life sciences, exemplified most notably by the sciences of biology and ecology, have reshaped liberal modernity’s knowledge of the human in terms of bio-spherical catastrophe, species survival and complex adaptive systems, and how this shift in focus has been constitutive of the ontology of vulnerability upholding the resilient subject of climate change in Thailand. In doing so, I will also characterize the ontological resolutions that makes such a resilient subjectivity beholden to the crude imaginings of catastrophe and risk that remain ever present features of late modernity’s age of adaptability. Thirdly, I will analyze the response to Bangkok’s 2011 floods to show how these ontological resolutions, as constitutive of the Thai state’s critical infrastructure protection, are implicated in a project of urban containment, which discursively disavows the infrastructural violence generative of Bangkok’s climate change resilience. Lastly, I will discuss how such a project of resilience, as constitutive of the neo-liberal subject, depoliticizes poor and abject populations that are already marginalized by entrenched socio-economic structures of domination and inequality.
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Transforming security: the resilient subject of neo-liberalism and the doctrine of sustainable development

In order to understand what distinguishes the neo-liberal ideology of resilience from earlier liberal formulations of human life, it is necessary, in the first instance, to discuss the unique manner in which the latter conceptualizes security and the implications this has for political subjectivity. As neo-liberalism enters the late modern era, the security imperatives, which from the time of the French Revolution onwards were faithful cogs in the machinery of liberal modernity, have increasingly shown signs of wear and tear. For instance, where previously the idea of security had been indebted to the imaginary of the territorially delimited nation-state—and to the communities of racialized difference this aroused—it has now become apparent that such an image is increasingly being buttressed by an ontological scaffolding that endorses insecurity as a necessary condition of human life and politics. Investigating the social construction of security, in this respect, has been a long held political concern for those interested in critiquing the development-security nexus (Duffield 2001) engendered by neo-liberalism’s seemingly unwavering adherence to technocratic modes of governance.

The technocratic solutions generative of such a development-security nexus, divorced as they often are from the messiness of politics, have in fact compelled various scholars (Dillon and Neal 2008; Jabri 2007) to expose the ways in which security has necessarily been bound up with governing technologies fundamental to liberal subjectivization. This critical orientation towards the liberal tradition helps us see the contemporary co-option of resilience by neo-liberalism as problematic for “the political” as a space of contestation and, indeed, for the viability of “older” forms of security vested in the peculiarities of the liberal democratic state. Undeniably, the morphology of late modern neo-liberalism is ontologically distinct from antecedent liberal schemas (see in this volume, for a comparative example, Parfitt’s insightful discussion of liberal developmentalism in Asia). This ontological variation, manifest within the liberal tradition, obliges us to carefully reconsider how the security imperatives, which had previously been crucial to modern sovereignty and the Westphalian system of states, are now progressively being superseded by neo-liberal
governing rationalities and modes of rule (Larner and Moreton 2016, 38). These modes of governance, embodied in the BMA’s critical infrastructure protection are, problematically, putting in doubt modernity’s concept of security in favor of a catastrophic imaginary that valorizes not only uncertainty and the necessity for human exposure to risk but also the supposed universality of resilience as the dominant political technology of our time. While the neo-liberal project of resilience has been extensively critiqued in international political theory (Chandler and Reid 2016; Evans and Reid 2014; Dillon and Reid 2009), particularly through the lens of critical security studies (Aradau et al. 2014), little reflection within the scholarship on urban climate resilience has been given to how the ontology of vulnerability underpinning such a project impoverishes debate around the politics of sustainable development in Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular (Pelling 2011; Elliot and Caballero-Anthony 2013).

Positing resilient adaptability as the dominant feature of biospherical life necessitates that we take the ideological transformation of development discourse seriously as a problem for thinking through the relationship between resilience, neo-liberalism and security in the Anthropocene epoch (Schwagerl 2011; Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017). What is crucial then for understanding the ideological import resilience has had on our contemporary political imagination is the shift from development to sustainable development.¹ The former, modern development discourse of the earlier post World War II period comprised inbuilt assumptions of unlimited economic growth but this shifted with the emergence of the doctrine of sustainable development, which would insist instead upon the need for societies to put limits on economic expansion (Chandler and Reid 2016, 57-9). First expounded by the Brundtland Commission of 1983 and further fostered by global financial institutions throughout the 1990s, this doctrine of sustainable development came to dominate public awareness following the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 (Pelling 2011, 4). It contended that for human societies to develop viably without destroying the biosphere,

¹ Here I am viewing the project of sustainable development as a specific driver of neo-liberal ideology. While there are certainly other factors, there is not the scope in this paper to expand on such a discussion.
it was necessary to temper the rampant economic exigencies of late modern capitalism, not only to ensure the state’s security but also to further the resilience of the earth’s myriad living systems (Evans and Reid 2014, 32).

This transformation of neo-liberalism, from the discourse of development to the doctrine of sustainable development, is paradigmatic of a more general reconfiguration of the political rationality around climate change in the 1990s. This entailed not only a messy politics of climate change at the intergovernmental level but, of particular interest for this paper, the abandonment of security imperatives and notions of unlimited economic growth underlying the modern development project. With this came a more specific shift from an agenda of mitigation to one of adaptation. The doctrine of sustainable development that came to prominence following the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed upon in Brazil focused on mitigation, while adaptation remained ill defined. But with the Second Assessment Report, the social and environmental impacts of climate change were brought more readily into focus with a specific emphasis on the need for adaptation. In subsequent assessment reports, this concern with adaptation continued, incorporating strategies that would supplement mitigation policies so as to raise the profile of the adaptation agenda within the UNFCCC project. In the Fourth Assessment Report, adaptation was declared the fundamental strategic response to issues of climate change (Pelling 2011, 8-9). Moreover, the report placed human vulnerability to climate change at the very heart of the sustainable development debate and this eventual move towards an emphasis on vulnerability, as we shall see, had significant ramifications for the ideology of resilience and the constitution therein of the neo-liberal subject.

Importantly, the ontology of vulnerability associated with resilience not only implies the need for adaptation but also necessitates the embrace of risk and danger as being a fundamental condition of human life. As Brad Evans and Julian Reid observe:

Life quite literally becomes a series of dangerous events. Its biography becomes a story of non-linear reactions to dangers that continually defy any attempt on its behalf to impress time with purpose and meaning… In a certain sense, the resilient subject thrives on danger.
It lives in a condition of perpetual wakefulness to its reality. It is for these reasons that resilience is very rapidly reshaping the age-old concept of security that has been so fundamental to the policies, international and internal, of liberal states and governments. While the logic of security works on the principle of achieving freedom from dangers, resilience assumes the need to engage with them because their realisation is unavoidable (Evans and Reid 2013, 87).

With this newly dominant ontology of vulnerability, the concept of security, once firmly aligned with sovereign power and the juridico-institutional imperatives of the modern state, has steadily receded, to be replaced by a notion of resilience that valorizes vulnerability to danger as an unavoidable feature of human life. Put another way, resilience is championed in part because its political efficacy is said to lie in its ability to recognize the potentialities of life (Evans and Reid 2014, 32-3), conceived as a game of risk and survival.

**Learning from catastrophe: vulnerability and the (in)security of resilience**

Before I move on to show how this ontology of vulnerability underwrites the resilient subject of Thailand’s 2011 floods, I will discuss how the life sciences, particularly the sciences of biology and ecology, have reshaped the liberal tradition’s understanding of the human in terms of bio-spherical catastrophe, species survival and the adaptability of complex systems. The Cartesian imaginary once endowed liberal modernity with knowledge of the human based upon rationality, predictability and the divinely ordained capacity of people to master and hubristically secure themselves from nature and the vagaries of the biosphere. This has gradually given way to interpretations that view reason and security with suspicion. When liberal modernity’s philosophical center of gravity shifted from the human to the biosphere it precipitated a move away from the concept of security and towards the idea of resilience. For instance, as the development project gave way to the business of sustainable development, bio-spherical life came to supplant human life as the principle object of development. Having accepted the catastrophic uncertainties entailed by this rearrangement, the flourishing of human life and liberal modernity’s age-old problem
of governance and security are no longer seen as merely economic questions, but rather viewed as fundamentally entwined with the biological notion of human subjectivity (Evans and Reid 2014, 32-3), understood on the basis of species existence and survival (Foucault 1978, 133).

The claim that liberal modernity is first and foremost bio-politics should not, then, be unfamiliar to those aware of the lessons of Michel Foucault. As he made clear in his series of lectures at the College de France (Foucault 2010), the liberal tradition’s far-reaching emphasis on life—as the primary target of political intervention—has indelibly marked out its strategies of human governance as bio-politically distinct from other, prescientific modes of rule. The knowledge practices of liberal and neo-liberal forms of bio-politics are intrinsically linked here, not so much to the political or moral sciences but to the modern life sciences, particularly the science of biology (Chandler and Reid 2016, 51). In the latter half of the 17th century the science of biology emerged to examine the physical circumstance that secured the developmental growth of living organisms. The positivity of this scientific investigation resulted in the biological realization that it was conceivable and indeed, desirable, to classify forms of life in terms of their productive and/or destructive capacities—that is, to differentiate between living organisms and systems on the basis of whether or not they were deemed to endanger or secure the potentialities of life broadly conceived (Evans and Reid 2014, 39).

Nevertheless, the liberal tradition’s formulation of “life-preserving/life-destroying” forms of life is not as straightforward as the biological sciences would have us believe. Life, despite the proclamations of modern science, is not so easy to secure. Delving deeper into this problem, we can begin to see that the ontology of life being rendered by liberal modernity’s fidelity to the science of biology is in fact constitutive of human vulnerability (Chandler and Reid 2016, 52) insofar as it posits species existence as a kind of struggle for survival. Therefore, the horizon of death (or species extinction) that liberal modernity’s account of life confronts enables it to postulate an understanding of bio-spherical finitude that is ultimately based upon competition between the earth’s myriad living systems. As a result of this ontology, vulnerability and resilience become mutually constitutive of bio-physical life; adaptable, in this sense, to the catastrophic uncertainties of the
natural world inasmuch as both phenomena are concurrently bound up with the realization of the other. Significantly for the development of neo-liberal ideology, liberalism’s latent devotion to understanding human life in terms of vulnerability and resilience has problematically deprived humans of the agency and/or capacity to attain security by overcoming the sheer biological necessities of nature. It is for this very reason that neo-liberalism has had to proffer a distinct bio-politics in which security is paradoxically based upon its own inability to realize itself as such (Evans and Reid 2014, 40).

Although this paradox acknowledges the inbuilt insecurity underlying neoliberalism’s account of bio-politics, it is also important to recognize that it corresponds with Foucault’s now famous claim regarding the foundations of liberal subjectivity more generally. As he taught us, the subject of liberal modernity is characterized not by his or her rational autonomy or self-determining qualities but by his or her irreducible predilection for pleasure and against pain. Conceived accordingly, the resilient subject of neo-liberalism can be distinguished from the autonomous subject of liberalism by its pursuit of adaptation against those forces of nature that have the potential to induce catastrophic human suffering (Chandler and Reid 2016, 51). Moreover, the project of resilience is not only about alerting humans to the risk of bio-spherical catastrophe or species extinction but it is also about inculcating in people a readiness to draw lessons from their own exposure to life’s uncertainties. This feature of resilience posits that social collectivities are fundamentally individuated, having an inbuilt insecurity as well as an inbuilt capacity to learn from nature’s calamitous events so as to develop greater adaptability in the future (Duffield 2011).

The vulnerability-resilience dialectic that I have described above is advanced and realized through practices of adaptability. These practices enable certain features of life to strive to the detriment of others, serving the human wrecking ball. The ontology of vulnerability constitutive of resilience is here co-extensive with ideas stemming from another life science: ecology. Resilience, as ecological thought suggests, is constitutive of a kind of open feedback loop in which the information and ideas generated about resilience reinforce the normative biases and habitual practices of neo-liberal lifeworlds. Key to this ecological influence was the development of complex systems theory.
This emerged in the 1970s, with the recognition of the non-linear dynamics and open systems that underlie the biological adaptability of living systems in the natural world (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). For complex systems thinkers for example, a living biological system such as a bog will adapt to other living systems (such as a forest) and out of this process of absorption and adaptation there emerges an ecological tipping point, in and through which an altogether new system and set of variables is formed.

For ecologists working out of this new set of scientific paradigms, living systems were viewed not from the modern vantage point of their autonomy, inasmuch as they were closed off and securable from the dangers posed by nature, but from the perspective of their innate capacity for adaptability. Indeed, rather than be weakened by systemic, even cataclysmic events, living systems are emboldened by them where they are able to adapt and thus evolve in the face of such exposure. Crucially, it is in this notion of the ability to adapt to danger that the ontology of vulnerability meets with the project of resilience. As such, the project of resilience is intimately connected to the co-imbrication of the life and human sciences, expressed by the conceptual affinities drawn between ecology and economics. This ideology, as noted in the previous section, came to prominence in the late 1990s with the doctrine of sustainable development and with the financial support of global institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. These bodies have enthusiastically (and uncritically) adopted the agenda of resilience as part of their approach to climate change governance and urban design and planning.

Drawn more broadly from the reversal of state-society relations advocated by the Austrian economist Friedrich Von Hayek in the 1950s (Hayek 1952; 1960), neo-liberal understandings of resilience largely derive their societal importance from the conceptual equivalences that were laid out between economic and ecological thought during this period. In this respect, the subjective understanding of reason championed by Hayek places internal limits on human knowledge and is based upon the subject’s allegedly deep-seated inability to navigate the externalities of the natural world and hence, its systemic failure to predict the onset of future insecurities. What gradually became influential is the ecological notion that systems of human governance, as a whole, should necessarily be constructed, like complex adaptive
systems (such as the bog) on unstable or insecure grounds. It is crucial, then, that we highlight how the shifting status of political responsibility, as a burden of security, is transferred from state to society, with the latter ultimately being understood in terms of market-based individuation. This move is enabled, in part, because the human individual is conceived by Hayek in fundamentally psychological terms, thus becoming the subjective limit by which the insecure foundations of all societal systems can be gauged. This may be taken as indicative of Hayek’s larger challenge to the traditional depiction within liberalism of an autonomous rational subject. His view of the human as a cognitively complex system can be said to foreground the internalization of societal resilience and individualized adaptation within neo-liberalism (Chandler and Reid 2016, 34-6).

If we perceive resilience from this neo-liberal horizon it becomes evident that the adaptation agenda it is furthering is not simply a reactionary appeal to mere human survival but rather a deeply ideological undertaking that undercuts the promethean subject of modernity. This characterization of resilience, as an essentially market-driven form of neo-liberal development, resonates with Parfit’s discussion of trusteeship (this volume), inasmuch as both positions view neo-liberalism as being detrimental to development planning. This project of resilience (and the neo-liberal subject it inculcates) is underpinned by an account of vulnerability, generated by distinct rationalities of rule, that conceive of life first and foremost as a question of ontology. In other words, human life is problematized in terms of vulnerability and depicted as a vast series of contingent and potentially catastrophic events, whose epistemic uncertainty necessitates scientific responses that view societal resilience as a kind of foregone conclusion. The contemporary ideology of resilience has thus come to constitute a fundamental strategic discourse for neo-liberal regimes. It serves to legitimize the perpetuation of stark socio-economic and political disparities in human society. As such, it is not hard to imagine why resilience and vulnerability are so intertwined; resilience has become invested in targeting those most vulnerable and at risk to climate change. This strategy of containment points to how the insecurity constitutive of neo-liberalism functions to depict already marginalized populations as dangerous to the security of those segments of society adequately insulated from the inevitable perturbations of late modern
Before introducing some empirical detail, it is useful to break-down the analytic principles that together underpin this ontology of vulnerability, that I argue is constitutive of the resilient subject of climate change in Thailand. The approach can be distinguished by the following interconnected conceptual characteristics:

a) Reconfiguring social responsibility
The way that political responsibility for societal security has been divested under neo-liberalism from the state to society, with the latter rendered individuated and vulnerable as a result. Such a technocratic maneuver is manifested in an abdication of political will and a narrowing of the collective political imagination according to the neo-liberal logic of markets. This shift in culpability is often achieved through governmental appeals to natural as opposed to social phenomena.

b) Reifying adaptability
When this shift occurs, traditional notions of security underwriting liberal modernity—such as autonomy, self-determination and freedom—are no longer imaginable; undermined and replaced instead by neo-liberalism’s reification of adaptability as the dominant mode of human subjectivity. The project of resilience, conceived in terms of adaptability, thus becomes the sole possible response to insecurity.

c) Embracing risk
Finally this characteristic pertains to the imperative of danger that is thereby constructed by the agenda of adaptability enforced upon the populace. The implication of this resilient subjectivity is not only that it is no longer conceivable to avoid danger and attain security but that the human is actively compelled to embrace risk. With this comes the expectation that people accept danger as inevitable and take responsibility for it. But some have a greater capacity to secure themselves from risk than
others, since the exposure to danger is uneven. It is those who are most vulnerable who are compelled to embrace risk the most.

These ontological resolutions are observable in the discourses of resilience around the 2011 floods in Bangkok. We will see in the following section how Thailand’s urban milieu became inflected by practices that represented and indeed, securitized, the urban population within the framework of resilience. The project of resilience generated by the ontology of vulnerability resulted in the depoliticization and strategic containment of already marginalized communities.

**Urban climate change resilience and Thailand’s 2011 floods**

As one of the most rapidly urbanized cities in the world and one of the most low-lying, Bangkok is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The city lies on a flat plain of the Chao Phraya river delta, an average of 1.5 meters above sea level and has been sinking annually since the 1970s. With this geographical orientation the omnipresence of water, alongside occasional floods, has been a feature of Bangkok city life since its inception in 1782 as effectively a “floating society.” Throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries, flood damage was mitigated by irrigation trenches, absorbent rice paddies, and the development of a series of interconnected waterways (*khlongs*). These were used in trade and transportation around the region and were also the central spaces of livelihood and habitation for Bangkok’s residents, which developed flexibly to manage the variability of water flows. This balance was disrupted from the early 20th century onwards in the face of population growth and urban migration, poorly planned infrastructural development, the introduction and mismanagement of land tenure systems, the paving of *khlongs* and rice paddies and attendant economic policies, which moved away from agriculture and encouraged an influx of foreign direct investment (Marks 2015, 629).

As Marks notes, poorly regulated urban development of the BMR\(^2\) from the outset came to be “influenced as much by ‘who owns land

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2 This consists “of the metropolis of Bangkok and the five surrounding provinces.” See Marks (2015, 631).
where’ as by any sound urban planning principles” (Marks 2015, 632). This mix of factors has contributed to an increasingly vulnerable physical environment in Bangkok, exacerbated by the city’s rate of subsidence. Studies predict that by 2050, 26 per cent of the BMR will be submerged, as the sea level in the Upper Gulf of Thailand rises by 32.3 centimeters from a combination of anthropogenic and climate change related causes (Marks 2016, 7). The city is at risk more than ever from catastrophic natural disasters, particularly floods, and ill equipped to counter them. Converging with this negative overall outlook is the fact that this fragile city houses thousands of low-income communities consisting of 2.1 million people, with 700,000 of the poorest and most vulnerable living in slums (Saito 2014, 95). As I will elaborate below, these are marginalized groups dwelling by the banks of khlongs or in outlying areas, lacking flood protection and solid housing infrastructure, political representation, financial means and often land tenure security. Against this backdrop the floods of 2011 were both predictable and disastrous, and representative of the wider ontology of vulnerability that is often overlooked.

The floods were brought about by an unprecedented amount of monsoon rainfall, which inundated central and northern Thailand, including the Chao Phraya and Mekong river basins, over a period of approximately six months from late July to early December 2011. Abundant rainfall in pre-monsoon March and April had already led to severe flooding across the country’s south, which once joined with anomalously high sea level increases in the Gulf of Thailand in October (Marks 2016, 16), resulted in severe flooding that affected 13.6 million people (Promchote et al. 2016, 367). These high tides along the coast blocked monsoonal runoff from the central plains, impeding its ability to sufficiently drain into the sea, culminating in the swollen Chao Phraya River bursting its banks in and around Bangkok, as 20 per cent of the city was put on evacuation notice. In addition to rainfall, specific issues related to urban planning and design, such as flood protection infrastructure, and more general problems associated with rapid urbanization, such as basic subsistence, were all factors that exacerbated the magnitude and impact of the flooding (Aon Benfield 2012, 10). Out of Thailand’s 77 provinces, 65 were affected and more than 800 deaths resulted from these rising waters, with millions more being forcibly displaced or left homeless (Ghaderi et al. 2015, 402).
Alongside the harsh human cost of the floods there was a considerable economic impact on Thailand’s key manufacturing sectors, as a total of 470 high profile industrial estates in 32 areas of Bangkok were submerged and their businesses brought to a standstill. The floods were the most catastrophic that Thailand had seen in seventy years and, in total, it has been estimated that they cost 1.4 trillion Thai baht (USD 45.7 billion) or 14 per cent of the country’s GDP (Ghaderi et al. 2015, 402-3).

Aggravating this outlook were factors related to Thailand’s fragmented political landscape, institutional power struggles and incompetence in disaster response. Thai politics and society rests uneasily on deeply embedded divisions between political factions that loosely represent different domestic interest groups; most prominent being the longstanding conflict between the “red shirts” (drawing support especially from the rural poor) and “yellow shirts” (drawing much support from the Bangkok establishment). These colorful monikers mask the damaging effect of such divisions, struggles for political control in Thailand, particularly since the 2006 military coup, having infected key state institutions including those tasked with responding to disasters. Disaster governance is thus deeply politicized and subject to wider political machinations in which the primary motivation is not saving lives and ensuring equitability. Indeed this might be viewed as a reversal of Klein’s “disaster capitalism.” Rather than use the opportunity of the flood crisis to enforce societal shifts (by binding it more rigidly to neo-liberal ideology), various stakeholders, including the government, tried to use it as a buttress to their power and legitimacy, thereby maintaining the status quo (Chintraruck and Walsh 2015). The disaster response was dogged by misinformation, in-fighting between government agencies and political point-scoring, highlighted when Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra refused to accept the central government’s offer of 800,000 sandbags. The relative inexperience of the new prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra only exacerbated this incompetence. While these intersecting factors have been well covered in academic literature, the task is now to bring to the fore the ontological dynamics that arguably embodies them. The disaster response, I argue, exhibited characteristics of the resiliency ideology.
Reconfiguring social responsibility

When we look at the divergent reasons given for the flood by scientists and the government respectively, we can see what I argue to be the primary ontological characteristic of vulnerability noted above. This is the shift in political responsibility from state to society (as comprised of individuals), underpinned by an emphasis on the culpability of natural rather than political factors. Scientific findings following the floods have shown that climate change constituted only a minor component of the extreme rainfall that fell in 2011. Indeed, as Van Oldenborgh et al. report, rainfall levels in the BMR could not even be classified as “unusual” since they accorded with meteorological forecasts derived from data spanning the last century. Anthropogenic factors therefore played a significant role in causing and exacerbating the impact of the floods. However, the government downplayed this influence: deputy prime minister Kittiratt Na-Ranong stated that the rise in water levels had “to be the result of climate change and global warming” (NBC News 2011). While this can be seen as an effort on the part of governmental authorities to shift blame for the floods away from themselves, I argue that this singling out of natural phenomena such as climate change, instead of assigning culpability to governmental mismanagement, also coincided with the more ideological shift in political responsibility I have outlined. It expressed the manner in which the neo-liberal doctrine has insidiously reconfigured the loci of political responsibility from state to society.

Despite evidence to the contrary in intervening years, in December 2013 the permanent secretary of the Royal Irrigation Department claimed, “The major cause of the floods was excessive water. It was natural” (Marks 2015, 625). The government line on the events of 2011 has remained remarkably consistent in perpetuating this shift in political accountability to blame external natural forces. In October 2014 for example, the senior rural development irrigation officer remarked, “The main causes of floods is climate change or climate variability” (Marks 2015, 624-5). This ideological consistency in assigning culpability to natural over political factors does not only indicate the

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3 As Van Oldenborgh et al. (2012, 1049) note, “the amount of rain that fell in the catchment area was not very unusual.”
government’s desire to shift blame but underlies the more general and insidious divestment of security provisions from the state to society in Thailand. This has opened the way for the reification of adaptability as a necessary consequence. In a Bangkok Post article aptly entitled “Plodprasop: Accept the Reality,” science and technology minister Plodprasop Surasawadi declared that the populace “must continue living with the flood for now” and “accept that climate change is occurring” (Bangkok Post 2011a). As we will see, this shift in political responsibility towards an imperative of adaptability as opposed to security is expressed on two interconnected levels, firstly, through a reliance on a localized form of “folk politics,” which turns political problems into ethical ones for the individual to solve through small-scale changes in behavior and everyday habits and, secondly, through the advocacy of “smart” urban planning and design, preparedness and water-related sustainable resource management.

Reifying adaptability

Localized “folk politics” can be seen as one of the many ways in which the Thai state employs a neo-liberal approach in its environmental agenda. It was expressed notably in five global warming mitigation strategies included in the BMA Declaration of Cooperation on Alleviating Global Warming Problems, ratified by 36 organizations in May 2007. The implication across all of these strata is that responsibility over the provision of security in the face of climate change lies largely if not entirely with the individual citizen and his or her willingness to engage with adaptive measures. The strategies range from encouraging joint societal support for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and promoting a “sufficiency economy” lifestyle for preparedness and adaptability, to funding public awareness-raising activities (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration 2009). The 2009 “Bangkok Assessment Report on Climate Change” made this shift in political responsibility and attendant reification of adaptability yet more explicit. The report focused on green initiatives aimed at reducing climate change and highlighted a series of campaigns targeting social practices at the level of individual ethical responsibility. These events were targeted at Bangkok residents on the ninth day of each month.

They included an event to persuade a section of the public to turn
off electric lights for 15 minutes each day under the directive “Stop! Warming up Bangkok City.” Another, piloted at a marketplace, urged people to switch to energy-saving light bulbs and a “Plant a Tree” campaign used Her Majesty the Queen’s birthday as the occasion for Bangkok residents to plant trees. Another example, rather ironic given the state’s role in destroying much of Bangkok’s canal system, was the May 2008 “Canal Water Quality Improvement” campaign directed at communities living alongside the waterways, aimed at “enhancing public awareness of the need to protect the city’s unique canal environment” (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration 2009). The self-reliance agenda constitutive of this localized voluntarism can be seen to embody the shifting terrain of security responsibility and the reification of adaptability inculcated by the project of resilience. Individuals are expected here to internalize the prerogatives of climate change resilience, that is, to accept the dissolution of modern security imperatives and the seemingly inevitable encroachment of danger and risk upon their lives. With these campaigns Bangkok’s residents, including the most vulnerable, are being told that the only response to systemic insecurity must be adaptability.

This shift in political responsibility towards an adaptability agenda is also manifest in the ever-present advocacy of technocratic solutions, aimed at furthering the adaptive capacity of vulnerable populations through so-called “smart” urban planning and design. The development of urban environments and infrastructure that is adaptive to the perturbations of climate change serves to empower the (undemocratic) ascendancy of the technical expert within society and further underpins the abdication of state responsibility regarding the provision of security. This ascendancy of the figure of the technical expert within the project of urban climate change resilience foreshadowed the processes by which the social and environmental concerns of Bangkok’s flood-affected communities came to be depoliticized by the adaptability agenda. If we again refer to the 2009 “Bangkok Assessment Report on Climate Change,” we can see that the initiatives advocated for mitigation were based on technical expertise, which undercut the intrinsic political dimension of urban climate change adaptation. Suggestions, for example, included the development of smoother channels of communication between local authorities and experts and the broadening of public health awareness activities. As Friend et al.
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(2014, 16) note, “the clearest successes of project interventions around climate change have often been technical, based on building preparedness for weather related emergencies...[and] putting in early warning systems and building protective infrastructure.”

**Embracing risk**

The manner in which responses to the floods were both individuated and rendered technical has contributed to the bifurcation along socio-spatial lines of the subject of resilience in the neo-liberal context. There is a distinct division in terms of vulnerability under the resilience agenda between rich and poor. The former has been disproportionately able to co-opt the benefits of climate change governance for its own security, while the latter has suffered depoliticization brought about by the reification of adaptability. This is most palpable when we consider that Bangkok’s flood defenses are disproportionately concentrated around areas inhabited by the city’s ruling class. There are undoubtedly other explanations for this expression of inequality, such as the economic liberalism that followed the 1997 Asian economic crisis, and factors related to longstanding domestic political conflict in Thailand. Indeed I welcome more expansive discussion on this point. However, it is my contention that the ideology of resilience needs to be considered as part of these broader discussions interrogating political and social inequalities in the context of disaster governance in Thailand. These uneven vulnerabilities are not solely confined to the Thai experience; across the Asia Pacific, the project of resilience has helped to entrench socio-economic inequalities and structures of domination rather than alleviate them. The government’s strategy for dealing with the 2011 floods reaffirmed existing socio-economic inequalities, by electing to protect the city’s inner core of high-income households and business and commercial districts to the detriment of Bangkok’s poorer outer districts. This was realized through the closing of water barriers and the construction of a vast network of strategically erected sandbag defenses. These functioned as ad-hoc dams, totally inundating the eastern, western and northern outlying regions, with floodwater that reached record highs in some parts and lasted for several weeks or even months while the capital’s core remained unaffected.

This response to the floods caused uneven exposure to danger among
the city’s low-income population and the residents on the wrong side of these barriers were subjected to a range of deadly hazards. Putrid, stagnant floodwater, untreated sewage, respiratory and water-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid and fear of drowning, particularly for the young and elderly, were all grave concerns for those affected. In addition, inhabitants had to contend with more exceptional risks. 3,000 crocodile farms each containing hundreds or even thousands of the reptiles were submerged, allowing their escape into surrounding residential areas, which, understandably, terrified locals. Snakes and other large reptiles such as Bangkok’s ubiquitous monitor lizards were also inadvertently released. Local authorities fielded “as many as 10 calls per day reporting snakes sighted, including pythons and highly venomous cobras and pit vipers” (New York Daily News 2011). These factors further underscored the intense vulnerability of those low-income residents outside the government’s flood defenses. Indeed the notion that humans must necessarily adapt to the risks posed by nature, as propounded by the resiliency agenda, is revealed here as an absurd irony when considering the infestation of predatory wildlife in Bangkok’s streets.

These circumstances led to considerable public controversy and discontent, manifesting in 85 organized community-based civil society protests across the city (Marks 2015, 644). Residents of flood-affected communities directed their anger and frustration towards the sandbag walls that prevented floodwater from draining out of their homes. In some parts, residents took to removing or destroying the sandbag barriers themselves, and in others demanded their removal by the state. Other grievances included insufficient compensation and the issue of public consultation, particularly in regards to transparency around government flood defense plans and the very construction and location of the sandbag barriers in the first place. Beleaguered citizens demanded recognition of their place within the city on equal terms with those at the inner core. In one flooded area, residents adopted a slogan declaring “We are quality citizens in Bangkok” (Marks 2016, 18). One exasperated resident, Arunee Ninkaew, told an AFP reporter,

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4 An article at the time (Jackson 2011) noted, “Overall, Thailand had an estimated 3,000 crocodile farms when the onslaught of monsoon rains hit lower lying parts of the country in July—and many of the reptiles are thought to have escaped.”
“I watch the news until I’m almost out of my mind. I see in the city that it’s almost dry and here nobody comes and sees how high the water is. The government never cares and doesn’t look after us” (ABS-CBN News 2011).

At the core of this public controversy was the contention by the affected communities that they had to bear the disproportionate brunt of responsibility for adapting to the floods. This expectation was expressed, for example when, during the disaster, a government representative called on residents in certain besieged districts to go to work as normal (Marks 2015, 645). Contention regarding the uneven vulnerabilities faced by citizens in and around Bangkok resonated with another aspect of the controversy, which disputed the governmental discourse legitimizing and indeed realizing their exposure to danger as a necessity for resilience. The government response was not about distributing vulnerabilities equitably but about strategically consolidating vulnerabilities in particular areas. A statement by prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra exemplified the way in which this process served to depoliticize and contain not only rising floodwater but the growing grievances of those most vulnerable. At the November 2011 ASEAN conference she announced, “it’s certain the inner zone of Bangkok will be safe from floods, as the measures to hold floodwaters have been successful” (Bangkok Post 2011b). This can be interpreted as a declaration of success that implicitly said to Bangkok’s most socially vulnerable and politically marginalized that they alone had been assigned the task of embracing the dangers of climate change.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, what I have sought to convey in this paper are the ideological characteristics of what I have called the resilient subject of climate change in Thailand. In order to do this I began our discussion by tracing the idea of resilience back to the conceptual cornerstones of the liberal tradition, emphasizing the latter’s understanding of security and political subjectivity in terms of the principles of autonomy, freedom and self-determination. Through this discussion I showed how the longstanding security imperatives constitutive of these modern concepts are at present being eroded in favor of notions of (in)security and vulnerability. Continuing to navigate liberal moder-
nity’s long conceptual shadow, this section finished by looking at how the doctrine of sustainable development, essential to neo-liberalism’s project of resilience, problematically relies upon this ontology of vulnerability for its depiction of human life.

Secondly, having described the vulnerability-resiliency nexus necessarily implied by this doctrine of sustainable development, I went on to show how liberal modernity, at its very conception, can be conceived as a kind of bio-politics. In particular this section described how liberalism’s early engagement with the life sciences of biology and ecology influenced its understanding of human governance and security. Significantly, this process of ideational exchange, as I discussed, took bio-spherical life as its referent object and thereby transformed the liberal tradition’s understanding of the human in terms of bio-spherical catastrophe, species existence, and complex adaptive systems. After further clarifying the ontological resolutions and catastrophic imaginaries of risk generative of the resilient subject, our discussion proceeded to touch more closely upon the socio-economic and political dimensions of Bangkok’s 2011 floods.

What I illustrated lastly was how neo-liberalism’s project of resilience reconfigured social responsibility, reified adaptability and embraced danger, particularly in relation to the defense of Bangkok’s central districts. The infrastructural violence underwriting the BMA’s critical infrastructure protection was, therefore, intimately bound up with practices of urban containment in which the brunt of the responsibility for adapting to floods was placed on the shoulders of Bangkok’s most vulnerable communities. What is evident in my analysis is that human exposure to the risks posed by the 2011 Thai floods was not evenly distributed across the BMA’s urban population. Ultimately, the agenda of adaptability put forth by the government, especially because it is generative of the resilient subject of climate change, acts to depoliticize the grievances of Bangkok’s urban poor whilst unashamedly insisting on their need to adapt in the face of danger.
References


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