The demise of the intervention paradigm: resilience thinking in the Merida Initiative

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Abstract

Post-Cold War interventions have gone through a series of distinct paradigms—each allowing for its own oppositional discourse. This possibility seems to be diminishing with the rise of resilience thinking. In the early 1990s, liberal internationalist framings drove intervention by prioritizing individual human rights over state rights to non-interference. Here, it was possible to oppose intervention as illegal boundary violation and unaccountable foreign rule. Neo-liberal approaches circumvented the legal problematic by conflating sovereignty with the capacity for good governance. However, they depended on a strong socio-cultural dichotomy, giving rise to accusations of neo-colonialism. In contrast, the resilience discourse emphasizes the positive, transformative aspects of local agency, rather than seeing it as deficient and needing paternal guidance. This paper argues that by claiming to merely plus up already existing social practices, international policy engagement in the Global South becomes difficult to conceive as boundary transgression or hierarchical imposition. These insights are drawn out with reference to the Merida Initiative, a US-Mexican security agreement signed in 2007.

Introduction

This article is about the growing difficulty of policymakers and academics to conceive international policy engagement in the Global South as intervention—a governmental practice rationalized through hierarchy, boundary and instrumental transfer. Drawing on the Merida Initiative, the study argues that the resilience discourse removes the conceptual and normative bases for understanding international policy involvement as (potentially illegitimate) interference and imposition.

With a planned initial budget of $1.4 billion, the Merida Initiative is now considered the 'centrepiece of the US Government´s security cooperation with Mexico', a country whose rising crime levels have become a focal point of international attention. [1] Initially, the main purpose of the agreement was to 'increase the operational capabilities of Mexican agencies and institutions' through technical assistance and military equipment. [2] In early 2010,

however, US policy shifted to a more indirect approach, centred on good governance promotion and civil society participation, the so-called Beyond Merida strategy. This involved an increase in rule of law and anti-corruption programmes as well as the inclusion of Mexican human rights NGOs into policy formulation and supervision. This article focuses on the resilience discourse which emerged out of this strategy change. Importantly, it is not a classic case study and, therefore, does not aim at reconstructing Merida´s policy evolution as such. Rather, it gauges conceptually the possibility of critiquing resilience policy as intervention, using the Merida Initiative to ground the theoretical argument. It engages with Merida´s resilience discourse as an 'art of government'—a systemic reflection 'on the best possible way of governing'. [3]

The Merida Initiative reflects a powerful critique of Mexican sovereignty as the right to self-government and non-intervention.[4] It articulates a profound scepticism towards classic liberal notions of political autonomy and national interest, presenting them as cumbersome administrative obstacles. Thus, while traditional notions of sovereignty have not disappeared entirely and might be regain strength in the future, the Merida Initiative shifted the discourse of Mexican sovereignty from rights to capacity.[5] Importantly, sovereignty-as-capacity silenced the critique of international involvement as illegal trespassing and restricted the policy debate to technical issues. Although it moved beyond the legal defence of sovereignty, the capacity discourse (re-) instated a strong socio-cultural dichotomy and epistemic hierarchy between capable US tutors and incapable Mexican recipients. Empowerment discourses foreground the agency of local actors, while recasting them as requiring outside guidance and betterment.[6] Accordingly, Merida´s anti-corruption awareness-raising program—the Culture of Lawfulness (CoL) project—invited allegations of neo-colonialism and 'Yankee' tutelage. In contrast, by claiming to merely enhance the 'grounded knowledge' of 'real communities', the resilience discourse dissolves this socio-cultural binary and epistemic hierarchy.[7] Rather than trying to incentivise deviant subjects to make better choices by re-designing their socio-institutional environment, resilience frameworks foreground the functionality of local mentalities and social dynamics. In fact, here, it is the 'modernist techniques of social and spatial control' that have hindered local creativity and agential potential from below.[8] Instead of curbing subjects into conformity with law-oriented security governance, the policy challenge is to 'creat[e] spaces for sharing knowledge and information among networks of those affected by violence'.[9] If this is done in a non-judgemental, non-imposing and non-instrumentalist enough way, 'real communities ' will be able to reflexively and organically deal with emerging security threats. [10] Critiquing international policy engagement as intervention—external, hierarchical and instrumental—becomes increasingly detached from policy discourse. That is because the normative and conceptual separation between the subject and object of government vanishes.[11]

The first section describes Merida´s new understanding of Mexican sovereignty. The second section draws out how policy started to revolve around technical questions, rather than political interests. In the third section, the study discusses Merida´s Culture of Lawfulness program as disciplinary governmentality. As section four makes clear, the resilience discourse is more appreciative of everyday practice, framing knowledge as locally grounded and

irreducible. Finally, the article elaborates on the political implications of the resilience discourse. Although the emphasis on autonomy and participation is well-taken, the resilience discourse makes it difficult to meaningfully discuss political inequalities in the international system because the conceptual separation between interveners and intervened is blurred.

'Shared responsibility' in the Merida Initiative—shifting the discourse of Mexican sovereignty

Politically, the key feature of the Merida Initiative is that it departs from long-standing notions of sovereignty as the right to self-government and non-interference in US-Mexican security relations. Through the Merida Initiative, Mexico essentially gave up 'claims of legal equality and autonomy in internal affairs'.[12] Whereas 'twenty-five years ago it was practically impossible to think of a scheme of this nature', references to sovereignty are notably absent from Merida´s new discourse of 'shared responsibility'.[13] In a widely noticed press conference in 2009, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton 'accepted' that her government had 'co-responsibility' for the worsening public security situation in Mexico, promising to increase demand reduction programs domestically and capacity-building efforts abroad.[14] The notion of sovereignty as self-government and non-interference that 'was previously so pervasive in the relationship' subsided 'by appealing to a sense of collaboration and joint solution of problems'.[15] According to Rafael Velázquez and Jorge Schiavon, 'shared responsibility' in the Merida Initiative is a 'substantial change in [...] discourse' because Latin American governments used to 'defend their sovereignty against the [US] hegemon': 'In other times, it would have been difficult, because Mexican public opinion perceived that cooperating with the United States in questions of security could undermine national sovereignty'.[16] There was a growing consensus that closer security cooperation with the United States would 'demand that the two countries [...] overcome mistaken nationalist [...] perceptions'.[17]

Advocates of national self-determination and non-interference were not part of the policy process. This was most obvious in Mexico where critique of the Merida Initiative 'as an attack on sovereignty' was confined to the congressional opposition.[18] The National Council of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)[19] called upon its members to 'eliminate from the agreement all elements that damage the sovereignty of our country' and to 'stand up for and defend national sovereignty'.[20] However, those suggesting that 'the Merida Initiative should not allow that someone from outside comes and opinionates on what only the Mexicans should decide' were clearly in a minority.[21]

Where the traditional discourse of Mexican sovereignty did play a significant role was during debates in the US Congress about conditioning Merida funds.[22] It was absolutely vital for the Mexican government that Merida would not involve a return to the discredited certification process of the 1980s and 1990s. As part of this annual diplomatic ordeal, the US government had compiled a list of major drug-producing and transiting countries and had evaluated the counter-narcotics efforts of their governments as well as their degree of cooperation with the United States. After intense diplomatic pressure from Mexico, the US embassy clarified that human rights reporting by the State Department was 'a dialogue […],

rather than a certification mechanism', although it conceded that 'Congress ultimately has funding authority'. [23] This goes to show that the traditional notion of Mexican sovereignty as self-determination continues to enjoy political leverage and can be used effectively as a negotiating strategy.

On the US side, policymakers immediately realized the 'historic nature of the moment', as former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon explained.[24] Shannon welcomed the fact that his government had 'finally broken through some longstanding taboos', indicating a new 'willingness' on the Mexican side to 'work with us in a fashion that they´ve never done before'.[25] Merida would allow for an entirely 'different kind of relationship with the United States'.[26] Similarly, an internal cable report by the US embassy proclaimed triumphantly that the 'old anti-American shibboleths are dead or dying' and that the 'near future will sweep away a number of the remaining vestiges of the "Yankee go home" sentiment'.[27] For the US-Mexican policy community, Mexican nationalism and associated ideas of sovereignty were definitely taking a back-seat at this point.[28]

Crucially, many commentators demanded 'replant[ing]' the notion of sovereignty.[29] That is, Merida redefined Mexican sovereignty, rather than discarding it: '[W]ith the changes in the international environment, we have to acknowledge that the concept [of sovereignty] has had to mutate in order to make sense [...]'.[30] The critique of sovereignty as an 'obstacle[...]' to effective transnational governance facilitated a new sovereignty discourse— one 'recogniz[ing] [...] the centrality of state capacity'.[31] 'Shared responsibility' focused attention on deeper 'ineffective, mouldy and intransparent tendencies and practices' which the nationalist defence of sovereignty had 'masked'.[32] In stark contrast to Mexico´s historic reliance on international legal discourses, state capacity moved to the fore 'in a similar way to how it marks the global tendency today'.[33] The discursive shift from political autonomy and non-intervention to state capacity comes out nicely in the following quote by policy analyst Raúl Benítez:

> *Sovereignty is actually destroyed by organized crime because it weakens the state and decomposes social cohesion, which is why this aide [i.e. the Merida Initiative], as modest as it may be, can serve to re-establish the debilitated authority of the state to impose the law in Mexico. [...] In other words, the cartels are destroying sovereignty and the emergency cooperation [with the United States] [...] could help reconstruct the corroded institutions.[34]*

In sum, while this evolution has been challenged on several occasions and might still be reversible, the Merida Initiative has moved the discourse of Mexican sovereignty from foundational political rights to good governance capacity. As the next section elaborates, this discursive shift undermined the critique of US policy enmeshment as trespassing.

Dissolving intervention, cohering best-practice politics
Through the Merida Initiative, Mexico entered the post-Westphalian international order in which intervention claims to enhance sovereignty, rather than repress it.[35] The US ambassador

at the time, Carlos Pascual, had a strong professional background in state- and peacebuilding operations as former Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at the State Department. Just before taking up his position in Mexico City, Pascual had co-authored an article in the Huffington Post on 'Changing How We Address Global and National Security'.[36] This piece clearly expressed an understanding of intervention as strengthening sovereignty: 'Entering agreements or accepting [international] assistance is not a weakening of sovereignty; it is the exercise of sovereignty [i.e. formal-legal] in order to preserve it [i.e. capacity]'.[37] Thus, Merida´s policy discourse is one of building Mexican sovereignty—not of denying it. In this way, Merida illustrates how post-Cold War policy discourse works through the idea of strengthening sovereignty and, indeed, self-determination. According to Stephen Krasner, 'shared sovereignty' provides 'substance' to 'free and solid self-rule'.[38] In this view, international compacts to build governance capacity make sovereignty real, meaningful and effective, precisely, by abandoning atavistic, retrograde aspirations to political autonomy. Where the Mexican government stressed the adherence to national 'legal and constitutional dispositions', this seemed to be a way of bolstering and defending US involvement rather than an attempt to fend it off or negotiate its limits.[39]

Sovereignty-as-capacity transcends international law and liberal notions of non-intervention. It, thereby, corrodes the critique of international policy engagement as illegal infringement. Once Mexican sovereignty literally means state capacity, opposing the Merida Initiative as illegal boundary violation or as limiting political autonomy would seem to make little sense. As David Chandler succinctly writes, 'it is the lack of sovereignty that is being rectified'.[40] Critiquing US involvement in Mexican public security affairs as intervention is more and more out-of-touch with governmental reasoning because the term 'derive[s] meaning from a "rights-based" framework of international relations'.[41] Throughout most of the Merida Initiative, US-Mexican policy debate has operated outside the 'formal international legal and political sphere of law and sovereign rights', and, thus, can usefully be labelled 'post-interventionist': '[I]ntervention and sovereignty are no longer binary opposites: there is no longer an inside and an outside'.[42] From this perspective, critiquing the Merida Initiative as outside interference sounds prefabricated and alien because it depends on a rights-based framework of international politics which enjoys less suasion nowadays.

Therefore, the critique of statebuilding as a contradiction in liberal terms misses the point. For example, Dominik Zaum continues in the 1990s liberal 'tension' between the ends and means of intervention, i.e. autonomy vs. heteronomy.[43] He does not to take full account of how the neo-liberal redefinition of sovereignty as the capacity for good governance dissolves this older problematic.[44] Neo-liberal interventions are not about 'deny[ing]' states 'their agency'. [45] They are not about 'denying the citizens [...] their choice'. [46] They are about enabling them.

Once sovereignty refers to capacity, the legitimacy of intervention is no longer contested in terms of competing rights—individual human rights vs. state rights to non-interference—but in terms of functional effectiveness. The contentious issue is no longer whether temporary foreign rule is warranted in a particular (exceptional) case. Instead, the debate deals with technical questions of how to intervene best. As Susan Woodward explains,

there exists a consensus in which the 'problem is not whether to intervene but how'.[47] Or as Michel Foucault put it in 'The Birth of Biopolitics', in neo-liberalism 'the problem is not whether there are things that you cannot touch and others that you are entitled to touch. The problem is how you touch them'.[48] By focusing on questions of 'governmental style', the scope of intervention depends on what qualifies as optimal policy design, rather than what is normatively desirable .[49]

Importantly, the argument refers less to states´ actual room for manoeuvre than to how the neo-liberal redefinition of sovereignty has changed the 'zone of intelligible contestation'.[50] As Philip Cunliffe has pointed out, sovereignty has always been 'buffeted by other forces'.[51] What matters is that an international order based on autonomy has a very different kind of politics than one concerned with the 'inculcation of the methods and approaches of good governance'.[52] Sovereignty-as-capacity opens up a new 'shared vocabulary within which disputes can be organized'.[53] And this vocabulary problematizes rights-based notions of the subject, state and international relations. It is, therefore, immune to the critique of intervention as illegal interference. Interestingly, while the neo-liberal focus on capacity successfully removed the rights-based distinction between domestic and international, it reinforced socio-cultural binaries and a strong epistemic hierarchy, as the next section shows.

The Culture of Lawfulness program—neo-liberal boundary drawing
While the neo-liberal capacity-building discourse avoids the 1990s controversy of human rights vs. state rights, it reproduces a strong socio-cultural binary and epistemic hierarchy. In this way, it legitimizes the inculcation of 'Western', 'liberal' templates from the outside. A good example here is Merida´s Culture of Lawfulness (CoL) program.

A Culture of Lawfulness is an 'ethos sympathetic to the rule of law'.[54] As a policy framework, the Culture of Lawfulness posits that state 'efforts to enforce the law are insufficient in and of themselves to establish the rule of law in a country'.[55] Accordingly, it aims at fostering 'societal support' for public institutions through 'cultural and educational resources'.[56] The Culture of Lawfulness is about a public-private partnership to make 'ordinary people' 'stakeholders in law enforcement'.[57] This 'citizen buy-in' calls for a comprehensive awareness raising campaign to effectuate a 'fundamental shift in values'.[58] The goal is to 'instil a sense of individual responsibility to uphold the rule of law in Mexico'.[59] Here emerges a deviant, but potentially improvable, subject whose socio-cultural environment needs to be redesigned to stimulate harmonious attitudes and collectively-beneficial choices. This is a therapeutic discourse concerned with the 'psychosocial skills' the subject needs in order to 'resist[...] lawlessness'.[60] In this framing, the rule of law is not about the representational character of collective rule-making, but about 'changing their attitudes of apathy, fear, and indifference'.[61]

Importantly, while trying to work through the agency of grassroots actors and their own context understandings, the CoL discourse proposes a 'particular kind of associational life relating in particular kinds of ways to the state'.[62] While putting local ownership centre-stage, civil society in the CoL framework is very much a 'constructed realm' in which 'certain

kinds of associational life are to be reworked or even eliminated, and other forms encouraged'.[63] It is full of 'value-loaded metaphors and dichotomies'.[64] This is the governmentality critique of the 'new interventionism'.[65] It argues that international intervention vies to install a new division 'along the lines of the metropolitan, civilized world versus disorderly borderlands'.[66] Similarly, Rita Abrahamsen understands the good governance agenda as constructing 'underdeveloped' and 'developed' subjects and 'as placing these in a hierarchical and unequal relationship to each other'.[67] As for the interveners, their expert position is reinforced as the needs of the Other move to the fore. International development planners claim to 'know what is best for them, to know what they need'.[68] The classic liberal, rights-based boundary has been replaced by a socio-cultural and epistemic division between capable Western interveners and incapable non-Western intervened: a 'boundary that separates those who claim to know how others should live from those whose conduct is to be conducted'.[69] Although neo-liberal empowerment emphasizes creative agency 'from below', it depends upon 'positioning oneself as an expert with the power to diagnose and correct a deficit of power in someone else'—an 'authoritative knowledge'.[70] In brief, the neo-liberal empowerment discourse dissolves rights-based categories of domestic/international while reinstating new socio-cultural dichotomies and knowledge hierarchies. It becomes nonsensical to critique intervention as illegal infringement but much more pertinent to oppose it as Western tutelage or neo-colonialism.[71] The next section shows how the resilience discourse questions these divisions and hierarchies.

Enter resilience, exit deficiency

In contrast to the CoL discourse, resilience thinking in the Merida Initiative tries to develop a much more positive view of everyday practice. Unlike neo-liberal capacity builders who see the local as deficient and in need of outside enabling care, the advocates of resilience do not argue that local practices and relations need to be reformed according to liberal standards or that some distant policy elite holds a privileged expert knowledge. In the Merida Initiative, under the banner of 'community resilience', a new rationality has emerged, starting with the idea that local social practices and relations are more functional than problematic. [72] As Merida´s $90 million flagship Program for Citizen Cohabitation (Programa de Convivencia Ciudadana, PCC) states, local communities '*have* the capacity to transform harm into hope and silence into purposive approaches.[73] 'Reinforcing' resilience is merely about 'potentiating latent capacities'.[74] In principle, local communities are able to 'self-develop' 'without the necessity of the presence of a facilitator or external organization'.[75] Unlike the Culture of Lawfulness approach which clearly diagnosed particular social deficits and prescribed a standardized re-education campaign, resilience in the Merida Initiative centres on the 'real problems recognized by the communities'—not those artificially constructed from the outside.[76]

In an influential policy document on 'Urban Resilience in Situations of Chronic Violence', Harvard professor and Latin Americanist Diane Davis makes clear how resilience takes an appreciative stance towards local, everyday practice .[77] Davis proposes a 'pragmatic approach' that merely enhances what is already happening locally rather than trying to

transform it in accordance with state law.[78] Instead of trying to re-educate school children in the Culture of Lawfulness, resilience focuses on 'real communities' and the way in which their 'grounded knowledge' is *already* allowing them to respond to violence.[79] The key words here are 'already' and 'actually'.[80] While the Culture of Lawfulness saw everyday practice as problematic, resilience validates 'actions already undertaken' in a way which is unacceptable in traditional neo-liberalism.[81] As Davis writes, the 'originating premise' of resilience is 'how actors and institutions have comported themselves', rather than how they should comport themselves, or how their behaviour might be reduced analytically.[82] Instead of making assumptions about how to redesign socio-institutional context in order to incentivize deviant subjects to make better choices, actually existing reality becomes the starting point: 'the ways that actors [...] at the level of the community *actually* cope with or adapt to chronic urban violence'.[83] Davis discusses resilience in completely non-reductionist, empiricist terms privileging reality over artifice.[84] Writing a 'guide' on how to build a Culture of Lawfulness would be entirely pointless in a resilience framework. [85] Resilience thinking in the Merida Initiative accepts that 'human realities [are] more complex' and embracing complexity involves 'more than a concept'.[86] Resilience refers to an emergent 'dynamic reality which can be observed day-by-day', rather than to a yet another analytical concept.[87] In consequence, international policy can only ever be about 'creating spaces for sharing knowledge and information among networks of those most affected by violence', providing them with the 'autonomy' they need to 'carve out spaces for action'.[88]

This shift away from externally-imposed concepts seems to be driven by a new understanding of knowledge, i.e. an 'alternative way of generating knowledge about violence'.[89] The goal is to 'design[...] policy interventions around knowledge of how and in what ways people have mobilized to successfully confront problems of chronic violence' with a view to further strengthen 'existent forces and conditions'.[90] Knowledge is 'situate[d]' in the 'everyday-life world' of local subjects and communities.[91] It cannot be extracted out of this environment through reductionist analysis in order to inform large-scale policy interventions, like the Culture of Lawfulness. As Pol Bargués-Pedreny argues, the resilience discourse stresses how 'no representation can exhaust the rich diversity of human life'.[92] Thus, the challenge for policymakers is to 'learn from the ways that citizens in real communities are responding and changing their everyday behaviour in the face of violence'.[93] What exactly is there to learn from resilience? What does resilience have to teach policymakers? What does it help them think through and abide by which the CoL discourse did not? The 'biggest challenge' is to 'partner' with local communities *without* 'distorting or dominating' their 'own security agenda'.[94] Policymakers should under all circumstances resist the 'tempt[ation] [...] to revert to modernist techniques of social and spatial control'.[95] Those have only 'fuelled violence and conflict in the first place'.[96] Actually, it is the '*lack* of official security response[s]' that has 'catalyzed a *positive* source of resilience'.[97] The more policymakers are able to hold back state-sponsored, modernist policies, the more security there might potentially be, produced by a multitude of real-world, micro-adaptive practices. In other words, resilience thinking emphasizes 'the problem of governing from an outside perspective'.[98] It is a way of warning policymakers against any new 'programmatic action'.[99]

Here, policy moves into a flatter ontology. It relieves policymakers from the 'Sisyphean task of seeking to fully eliminate the root causes', as did the Culture of Lawfulness, and, instead, tries to help actual communities govern themselves as already-existing, networked life processes.[100] That is reflexively, organically, adaptively—unobstructed by the distorting influence of artificial policy concepts. In this way, resilience constitutes a 'magician´s sleight of hand' which 'redirects policy attention away from crime and violence per se, and toward the ways that citizens [...] have actually responded'.[101] Rather than pursuing a standard rule of law and good governance protocol, resilience thinking is interested in why one community is able to cope with or even avoid violence, while another one is not, although both communities might live in similar socio-economic conditions.[102] The idea of evaluating autochthonous life processes according to an external yardstick becomes unsustainable because 'priorities' can only be 'generated from networks of those who live in the situations of violence'.[103] Imposing good governance and rule of law priorities would only trigger more negative unintended consequences. In Merida´s emerging resilience discourse, there is a whole new governance ethos which is far less problem-centred or negative and much more interested in what is always already occurring.

At this point, it is important to note that the understanding of resilience as real life, described above, does not dominate the Merida Initiative, yet. A classic neo-liberal framing of resilience still prevails. In a popular policy document on 'Building Resilient Communities in Mexico', the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center and the Justice in Mexico Project at the University of San Diego frame resilience as a public-private partnership for law-based security, very much like the Culture of Lawfulness.[104] In that volume, resilient communities are those that 'demand greater effectiveness and accountability' from their government and where the 'potential' for resilience is one of government 'collaboration with citizens and civic organisations'.[105] For Rosa Acevedo, resilience is about 'getting deeper to the root of the problem plaguing Mexico' and 'encouraging the local communities to actively collaborate with law enforcement in their efforts to solve these problems'.[106] The resilient community 'relies and trusts in the police and the government'.[107] In this way, much of Merida´s resilience discourse is traditional neo-liberal policy thinking, and as such may be critiqued as 'a form of governmentality'.[108]

However, empirical evidence suggests that there is a nascent resilience discourse which no longer revolves around 'efficient public services and government transparency' and which does not attempt to responsibilize individual subjects in such an endeavour.[109] Instead, it attempts to relate to local ideational and socio-cultural dynamics in a non-instrumentalist, non-reductionist way, thereby, overcoming the epistemic hierarchy of neo-liberal governance. It would seem that the governmentality critique is rather difficult to reconcile with a fully unfolded resilience paradigm.[110] That is because resilience thinking desperately struggles to renounce the 'desire to know' and the imposition of 'benchmarks that are internationally set'.[111] Categories like 'corruption' and the 'rule of law' do not appear in an advanced resilience vocabulary. On the contrary, the 'tempt[ation]' to define substantively how subjects should organize themselves is the obstacle to be overcome.[112] This is a key point. The critique of resilience approaches as imposing artificial, liberal categories misses how exactly this

discourse has become the new policy avant-garde. Accusing resilience advocates of reproducing the neo-liberal good governance script—as governmentality studies do—only seems to strengthen their case. That is why this article has mentioned the neo-liberal, disciplinary variant of resilience policy, while focusing on the radically anti-reductionist understanding. [113] In a proper resilience framework, there is a desire to drop the remaining reductionist categories, concepts and assumptions of neo-liberal empowerment and capacity-building.

From intervention to presence

Resilience begs the question how to make sense of and critique a governance practice which no longer builds on epistemic hierarchy, instrumental transfer and a normative-analytical divide between interveners and intervened. How are we to think about what used to be easily identifiable as 'Western', 'international', 'foreign' or 'outside' involvement in the political, economic and social affairs of Mexico if neither the term occupation (liberal internationalist law-based boundary) nor neo-colonialism (neo-liberal socio-cultural boundary) really resonate? How can we meaningfully critique someone´s policy actions who does not claim and, in fact, actively tries to avoid any instrumentalist governing role? And how can we do so without falling back on the reductionist, modernist categories, concepts and binaries which, precisely, resilience thinking refutes?

This problematic comes out vividly in the Merida Initiative. As long as US security interventions in the Americas ran into a liberal rights-based defence of sovereignty, the focus of attention lay squarely on the 'agency of external interveners'.[114] The idea that US assistance potentially undermined Mexican autonomy not only sparked political opposition to outside meddling. It also compelled interveners to assume a clearly visible governing position. Here, the nature and extent of Mexican security cooperation with the United States could be discussed in a controversial and transparent way. Distinct political interests could be articulated openly and responsibilities allocated unequivocally. Re-defining sovereignty as the capacity for good governance shifted agency over to the intervened. Rather than US policymakers simply prescribing the correct policy solution from above or US law enforcement agencies governing directly on Mexican territory, neo-liberal approaches demanded that policy solutions be formulated locally. At the same time, neo-liberal discourses, like the Culture of Lawfulness, reproduced essentialized differences between liberal, Western interveners and the not-yet-liberal Other. This discourse accepted and foregrounded plurality and local agency while clinging to a core set of liberal aspirations and assumptions with which to rationalize purposive policy and normative judgement. As the head of the Washington-based National Strategy Information Center (NSIC), the former lead implementing NGO of Merida´s CoL program, Roy Godson, put it in a co-authored article, the CoL framework 'differentiate[s] between the values of a given social order [read bad, dysfunctional] and universal ethics [read good, functional]'.[115]

By problematizing the 'totalities of existing discourses', resilience seems to reverse the neo-liberal framing of intervention.[116] The resilience problematic is not how to curb deviant mentalities and deeply ingrained social practices into conformity with liberal

templates. Resilience invites policy to turn away from the 'institutional conditions' of the rule of law and open up to the ways in which local communities 'carve out spaces for action even in the most dire of circumstances'.[117] Resilience appears to be an attempt to reorient policy away from human rights, good governance and the rule of law. Resilience turns the 'direction of causality' around by calling upon policymakers to develop a 'better understanding' of the 'small but promising victories already being [...] won in the struggle to survive'.[118]

Importantly, the critique of instrumental, reductionist knowledge applies to governance generally, i.e. to internationals *and* locals. Which is why Davis´ call for local 'autonomy' is not a return to liberal governance with its top-down knowledge claims and goal-oriented policy. [119] Local communities are no more able to know reductively and govern instrumentally than internationals. If government fails to respect the irreducibility of emergent, non-linear social phenomena, resilience frameworks will only replicate the hubristic assumptions of liberal government all over again. Local self-organization is, therefore, not a mirror-image of what liberal international interveners used to do on a larger scale. Resilience thinking proposes a local turn that is more than a mere re-scaling exercise. It is a departure from reductionist social analysis and purpose policy action tout court.

Also, resilience is not a return to the naïve liberal naturalism of spontaneous markets. In the resilience framework, autonomous recovery is not Adam Smith´s 'invisible hand' and, therefore, does not call for laissez-faire, i.e. non-intervention. The active role of international actors in 'supporting the community's own autonomous actions' is to help them adjust to an emergent reality without generalized knowledge and collective policy action.[120] It is about facilitating micro-adaptive practices without misguided social, political or economic meta-narratives, such as free markets and citizen rights (liberal) or good governance and the rule of law (neo-liberal). The practical 'challenge' is to 'identify' (successful) coping strategies and to prop them up with additional resources.[121] Resilience policies should be learning exercises with local 'innovations as a starting point'.[122] Instead of disciplining deviant subjects, policy is more interested in 'elicit[ing] their ideas'.[123] That is because 'community residents have the most privileged access to knowledge'.[124] While the ownership discourse wanted the intervened to find idiosyncratic, but normatively acceptable solutions by making them follow predesigned governance procedures, such as NGO consultation, the resilience discourse is looking for genuine surprises—the serendipitous, unexpected and accidental. At the same time, it is understood that conflict-affected people cannot be left alone. The resilience discourse is still interventionist in the sense that violent conflict 'over there' necessitates an international response. However, it lacks a reductionist episteme to inform real policy action of its own. Its programme is a negative one: To facilitate the ability of post-conflict subjects to govern themselves reflexively, adaptively, in a emerging, fluid, non-abstracting, day-to-day way—without the modernist (neo-) liberal baggage of markets, laws and civil society. Therefore, there is a lot of work to be done by international facilitators, but not in the crude neo-liberal parameters of the Culture of Lawfulness.

In the resilience framework, international policy engagement turns from quasi-imperial self-imposition into an exercise in normative and analytical deconstruction—a 'new opportunit[y] to learn from the trenches'.[125] Ultimately, resilience tries to distance itself from

'any larger security mandate set by the government' which in this case includes US policymakers and security agencies.[126] To be sure, there is still a need for involvement, simply because non-violence is seen as preferable to violence. However, the problematic is no longer presented in terms of a capacity deficit. It is presented in terms of the dangers of instrumentalist governing approaches and reductionist forms of knowing—for internationals *and* locals. The words 'intervener' and 'outside' lose analytical traction: 'There *is* no prevention *from outside* or *imposed* on the communities'.[127] Merida´s resilience discourse is one of irreducible 'self-directed processes', reflecting neither a liberal believe in political competition, collective self-determination and the free market nor a neo-liberal believe in enlightened technocrats and good governance frameworks.[128] Instead of talking about external intervention, in the future it will appear much more obvious to talk about international presence, i.e. without any connotation of boundary, hierarchy or instrumental transfer.[129] Blaming Western governments and international organizations for the negative outcomes of their policies will become much harder. They can very reasonably claim that they have never pursued any policy agenda of their own, no governmental approach that was not entirely rationalized around the networked knowledge and positive capacity of those on the ground, and that there is nothing they could improve or transform purposively—even if they wanted to—without throwing up more negative unintended consequences.

It bears emphasis that the resilience framework is not a theory or practice of foreign policy proper. Although Pillar IV of the Beyond Merida strategy explicitly introduced the goal of 'Building Strong and Resilient Communities', the resilience discourse operates more at the operational, than the diplomatic level. Resilience is an approach to rationalize a particular kind of policy engagement with everyday life, rather than a scheme to inform US grand strategy. As such resilience thinking has coexisted and thrived in US-Mexican security relations both under the classic liberal notion of sovereignty and the neoliberal partnership approach. To some extent, resilience thinking seems to develop independently from mainstream diplomatic discourse. This suggests that resilience informed US policy may be able to sustain itself in a context of renewed nationalism as is currently the case under the Trump administration and Mexico.[130]

Conclusion

This article has been about the growing difficulty to understand international policy engagement in the Global South as intervention—a governmental practice based on boundaries, hierarchies and instrumental transfer. The Merida Initiative has worked towards redefining Mexican sovereignty as good governance capacity. In the process, it helped disarticulate the rights-based distinction between international and domestic. US policy engagement appeared as strengthening the country´s sovereignty, rather than as undermining it.

Correspondingly, the CoL program was entirely unconcerned with liberal representative forms of government and the political rights of citizens. Lawfulness was about the intangible psychosocial skills that the subject needs in order to adjust its behaviour and attitude to formal state regulations. Seen from a neo-liberal point of view, the CoL program

actively produces freedom, rather than suppressing it. Opposing the CoL program as undemocratic foreign rule makes little sense. It is the lack of socio-cultural capacities at the individual and community levels which is seen as blocking effective and accountable governance. Defending a classic liberal conception of the rights-bearing subject might be a laudable normative standpoint, but it is irrelevant to the logic of neo-liberal governance.

However, it is possible to critique neo-liberal capacity-building for reproducing essentialized differences between capable Western tutors and incapable, non-Western disciples. The Culture of Lawfulness is highly normative because it is based on contrasting the values of good governance, human rights and the rule of law—understood as the distinguishing features of the Global North—to the pathologic path dependencies and informal codes of conduct in so-called weak, failed or fragile states. In this way, it legitimizes its own epistemic superiority, i.e. the necessary enabling role of external experts. This was the governmentality critique.[131]

The resilience discourse overcomes the liberal, modernist baggage of the CoL approach. It does not consider local practices and social relations as deficient. On the contrary, it sees them as positive and productive in their own right. What 'real communities' need is help to adjust reflexively and organically without repeating the mistakes of modern liberal governance.[132] The problem here is not deficient informal norms, but the outside attempt to reduce them analytically in order to transform them according to normative political goals, such as good governance and the rule of law. Resilience puts the neo-liberal world upside down. It is now external experts claiming to know reductively and be able to govern instrumentally that are causing the real problems.[133] Ultimately, the reason is a new understanding of knowledge as 'situate[d]' in local, everyday networks of affected individuals.[134] Trying to nail knowledge down through reductionist policy analysis defeats its very purpose. It contradicts the very nature of knowledge—emergent and non-totalisable. At this point, the socio-cultural binaries between capable, Western interveners and incapable, non-Western intervened start to disappear and authoritative knowledge becomes highly dispersed. Who is governing? Who is being governed? Who produces knowledge and who is it transferred to? These questions become extremely difficult to answer in a resilience framework, suggesting that the interventionary paradigm is in decline.

In consequence, policy takes on an increasingly status-quo oriented character where any deliberate attempt to pursue substantive normative goals is a recipe for disaster. At the same time, responsibility becomes ubiquitous—but inconsequential. If everyone is responsible for public security, no one is (really)—least of all international policy elites who claim to have no political power or superior knowledge anymore.

Notes

[1] US Congress, *Drug Cartels and US National Security*, 57; International Crisis Group, *Back from the Brink*; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Spiralling Drug Violence in Mexico'; Human Rights Watch, *Neither Rights Nor Security*.
[2] Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State, *Joint Statement on the Merida Initiative*.
[3] Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 2.

[4] Finkenbusch, *Rethinking Neo-Institutional Statebuilding*.

[5] Chandler, *International Statebuilding*, 43–64; Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War. Governing the World of Peoples*.

[6] Murray Li, *Will to Improve*.

[7] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 30, 29.

[8] Ibid., 13.

[9] Ibid., 29.

[10] Ibid.

[11] see also Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, 7, 28–29, 50; Chandler, 'Beyond Neoliberalism', 48–51.

[12] Hernández, 'When Cooperation and Intervention Meet', 66.

[13] Velázquez, cited in Hernández, 'Recuperar El País'. *Milenio*, 6 July 2010, author´s translation.

[14] Clinton, *Remarks With Mexican Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinosa After Their Meeting*.

[15] Hernández, 'When Cooperation and Intervention Meet', 69, 65.

[16] Velázquez and Schiavon, 'Iniciativa Mérida', 96, 97–98, author´s translation.

[17] Hristoulas, 'Algo Nuevo, Algo Viejo', 38, author´s translation.

[18] former Senator Labastida (PRI), cited in '´Zafarse' de La Iniciativa Mérida, Pide Labastida Al Gobierno'. *El Universal*, 14 October 2010, author´s translation.

[19] Partido de la Revolución Democrática

[20] Ramos Pérez, 'Llama PRD a Eliminar Elementos Que Afecten Soberanía En "Iniciativa Mérida"' . *El Universal*. 29 October 2007, author´s translation.

[21] 'Rechazan Diputados Condiciones Para Iniciativa Mérida'. *El Informador*. 23 May 2008, author´s translation.

[22] Olson, *Evolving Mérida Initiative*, 6–7.

[23] US Embassy Mexico City, 'Mexican Government Reaches out'. The potential presence of armed US military personnel on Mexican territory was another sensitive issue couched in terms of the danger to national sovereignty (Olson, 2017, 6).

[24] cited in Hawley, 'Mexico's Drug Control Initiative Reflects More Trust'. *USA Today*, 29 October 2007.

[25] in US Congress, *Antidrug Package for Mexico*, 27.

[26] in ibid.

[27] US Embassy Mexico City, 'US-Mexico Relations'.

[28] It should be noted that despite Merida´s new 'shared responsbility' discourse, the classic liberal framing of sovereignty still persists on the Mexican side and that the shift towards capapcity may be reversible. It remains to be seen how the recent change in administration in the United States will affect this process.

[29] Ricardo Macouzet, in Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia, *Iniciativa Mérida*, author´s translation.

[30] Ricardo Macouzet, in ibid., author´s translation.

[31] Benítez, 'México: Seguridad Nacional, Defensa Y Nuevos Desafíos', 185, author´s translation; Benítez, 'The Geopolitics of Insecurity in Mexico-United States Relations', 37.

[32] Benítez, in Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia, *Iniciativa Mérida*, author´s translation.

[33] Prado, 'Iniciativa Mérida: ¿Nuevo Paradigma?', 199, author´s translation; similarly, Benítez, 'Presentación', 6.

[34] 'México: Seguridad Nacional, Defensa Y Nuevos Desafíos', 187, 188, author´s translation.

[35] Cunliffe, 'Sovereignty and the Politics of Responsibility', 46; Cunliffe, 'State-Building. Power without Responsibility', 65.

[36] Jones, Pascual, and Stedman, 'Changing How We Address Global And National Security'. *The Huffington Post*, 16 March 2009.

[37] Ibid., 2.

[38] 'The Case for Shared Sovereignty', 81.

[39] Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Cooperación Internacional*, author´s translation; see also Espinosa, *Posicionamiento de La Embajadora Patricia Espinosa*.

[40] *International Statebuilding*, 64.

[41] Ibid., 64.

[42] Chandler, 'Resilience and Human Security', 216, 218.

[43] *Sovereignty Paradox*, 4; see also Chesterman, *You, The People*.

[44] In this article, the term neo-liberal refers to those governmental strategies that pursue a market-based social order by focusing on the socio-institutional framework necessary for individual subjects to act productively and responsibly. As Michel Foucault writes, neo-liberalism redesigns 'the milieu' in which decision-making subjects are embedded 'to the extent that it is not a natural environment' *Society Must Be Defended*, 245.. In contrast, the term 'liberal' refers to the 'political philosophy of universal rights derived from rational and self-interested selves and associated forms of state' Harrison, *World Bank in Africa*, 44.

[45] Zaum, *Sovereignty Paradox*, 4, 5.

[46] Ibid., 5.

[47] 'Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter?', 145.

[48] *Birth of Biopolitics*, 133.

[49] Ibid.; Finkenbusch, *Rethinking Neo-Institutional Statebuilding*.

[50] Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 28.

[51] 'Sovereignty and the Politics of Responsibility', 54.

[52] Chandler, *International Statebuilding*, 64.

[53] Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 28.

[54] Godson, 'Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Security', 272.

[55] Dobriansky, *Promoting a Culture of Lawfulness*.

[56] Ibid.; Godson, 'Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Security', 271.

[57] Turner, *Crisis in Mexico*, 24; Dobriansky, *Promoting a Culture of Lawfulness*; see also México Unido Contra la Delincuencia, *Desarollo de Una Cultura de La Legalidad En México*, 4.

[58] National Strategy Information Center, *Developing Support for the Rule of Law*; Godson, *Guide to Developing a Culture of Lawfulness*, 3.

[59] US Embassy Mexico City, *Culture of Lawfulness*.

[60] Godson and Kenney, 'Fostering a Culture of Lawfulness on the Mexico-US Border', 454; México Unido Contra la Delincuencia, *Desarollo de Una Cultura de La Legalidad En México*, 4, author´s translation; for a critique, see Pupavac, 'Human Security'.

[61] National Strategy Information Center, 'Building a Culture of Lawfulness', 10. Merida´s CoL program has trained almost 700,000 Mexican school children in 2011-12 (US Embassy Mexico City, *Culture of Lawfulness)*.

[62] Williams, 'Civil Society and the Liberal Project', 9.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Zanotti, 'Governmentalizing the Post-Cold War International Regime', 481.

[65] Chesterman, *You, The People*, 2.

[66] Zanotti, 'Governmentalizing the Post-Cold War International Regime', 481; prominently, Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*.

[67] *Disciplining Democracy.*, 193.

[68] Murray Li, *Will to Improve*, 4.

[69] Ibid., 281–82.

[70] Ibid., 275; Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*, 167.

[71] see, for example, Duffield and Hewitt, *Empire, Development and Colonialism*.

[72] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*; US Agency for International Development, *Country Development Cooperation Strategy*, 17. The notion of 'community resilience' first appeared in US-Mexican security relations as part of the Merida Initiative (Olson, Shirk, and Wood, 'Building Resilient Communities in Mexico', 13).

[73] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*, 79, emphasis added, author´s translation.

[74] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Niños Y Jóvenes Resilientes*, 11, author´s translation.

[75] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*, 57, author´s translation.

[76] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Guía*, 7, author´s translation; see also US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Conceptos Y Estrategias*, 6.

[77] *Urban Resilience*; see also Davis and Tirman, *A Toolkit for Urban Resilience*.

[78] *Urban Resilience*, 29.

[79] Ibid., 29, 30.

[80] Ibid., 115; Davis and Tirman, *A Toolkit for Urban Resilience*, 6.

[81] *Urban Resilience*, 30.

[82] Ibid., 37.

[83] Ibid., 29, original emphasis.

[84] see Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, 12–13.

[85] National Strategy Information Center, 'Building a Culture of Lawfulness'.

[86] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*, 11, 14, author´s translation; see also US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Conceptos Y Estrategias*, 38.

[87] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*, 14, author´s translation.

[88] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 100, 29, see also p. 97.

[89] Ibid., 29.

[90] Ibid., 37.

[91] Ibid., 30.

[92] 'Realising the Post-Modern Dream', 120.

[93] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 29.

[94] Ibid., 103–4.

[95] Ibid., 13.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., 52, emphasis added.

[98] Bargués-Pedreny, 'Realising the Post-Modern Dream', 123.

[99] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 29.

[100] Ibid., 31.

[101] Ibid., 30.

[102] Interview with Eric Olson, Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., 16 February 2017.

[103] Ibid., 100.

[104] Shirk, Wood, and Olson, *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico*.

[105] Olson, Shirk, and Wood, 'Building Resilient Communities in Mexico', 15, 22; see also Shirk, Wood, and Selee, 'Conclusion'.

[106] 'Stepping Up the Merida Initiative', 254.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Joseph, 'Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism', 1; see also Walker and Cooper, 'Genealogies of Resilience'.

[109] US Embassy Mexico City, *Culture of Lawfulness*; Joseph, 'Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism'.

[110] Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy.*; Murray Li, *Will to Improve*; Williams, *World Bank and Social Transformation.*

[111] Williams, 'Governance and the Discipline of Development', 164–65; Zanotti, 'Governmentalizing the Post-Cold War International Regime', 480.

[112] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 13.

[113] Shirk, Wood, and Olson, *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico*.

[114] Chandler, 'Resilience and Human Security', 216.

[115] Godson and Kenney, 'Fostering a Culture of Lawfulness on the Mexico-US Border', 524. The NSIC has been disbanded (personal communication with Roy Godson, 3 March 2017).

[116] Bargués-Pedreny, 'Realising the Post-Modern Dream', 119; Finkenbusch, *Rethinking Neo-Institutional Statebuilding.*

[117] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 29.

[118] Ibid., 31.

[119] Ibid., 100.

[120] Ibid., 97.

[121] Ibid., 102.

[122] Ibid., 29.

[123] International Crisis Group, *Back from the Brink*, ii; Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 101.

[124] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 117.

[125] Ibid., 102.

[126] Ibid., 104.

[127] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Conceptos Y Estrategias*, 34, emphasis added, author´s translation.

[128] US Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación, *Comités Comunitarios*, 61, author´s translation.

[129] see also Chandler, 'Reconceptualizing International Intervention', 80.

[130] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[131] Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy.*; Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*; Williams, *World Bank and Social Transformation.*

[132] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 29.

[133] Finkenbusch, *Rethinking Neo-Institutional Statebuilding*.

[134] Davis, *Urban Resilience*, 30.

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