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From Resilience to Resourcefulness: A Critique of Resilience Policy and Activism

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical and political critique of how the concept of resilience has been applied to places. It is based upon three main points. First, the ecological concept of resilience is conservative when applied to social relations. Second, resilience is externally-defined by state agencies and expert knowledge. Third, a concern with the resilience of places is misplaced in terms of spatial scale, since the processes which shape resilience operate primary at the scale of capitalist social relations. In place of resilience, we offer the concept of resourcefulness as an alternative approach for community groups to foster.

Keywords

Resilience resourcefulness ecology communities capitalism

From Resilience to Resourcefulness

Concepts of resilience are used to describe the relationship between the system under observation and externally induced disruption, stress, disturbance, or crisis. In a more general sense, resilience is about the stability of a system against interference. It is, however, more than a response to or coping with particular challenges. Resilience can be seen as a kind of systemic property (Lang 2010: 16).

In its tendency to metabolise all countervailing forces and insulate itself against critique, ‘resilience thinking’ cannot be challenged from within the terms of complex systems theory but must be contested, if at all, on completely different terms, by a movement of thought that is truly counter-systemic (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 157)

Introduction

The concept of ‘resilience’ has migrated from the natural and physical sciences into the social sciences and public policy with the identification of global threats such as economic crisis, climate change and international terrorism focusing attention on the responsive capacities of places and social systems (Hill et al., 2008; Swanstrom et al., 2009). The question of how to build up the resilience of places and organisations is attracting particular interest, especially in the ‘grey literature’ produced by government agencies, think tanks, consultancies and environmental interest groups. As Walker and Cooper (2011: 144) observe, the concept of resilience has become “a pervasive idiom of global governance”, being “abstract and malleable enough to encompass the worlds of high finance, defence and urban infrastructure”. Rather like the related concept of sustainability, the abstract and somewhat under-theorised character of resilience is often masked by this underlying imperative for communities to become more resilient in the face of looming environmental catastrophe, which seems uncontentious and common-sensical (Swyngedouw, 2007).

This paper aims to provide a theoretical and political critique of how the concept of resilience has been applied to places. In particular, we are concerned with the spatial politics and associated implications of resilience discourse, something which we consider to have been neglected in the burgeoning social science literature (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008; Norris et al., 2008; Pendall et al., 2008; Simmie and Martin, 2010; Walker and Cooper, 2011).¹ A key issue here concerns the importation of naturalistic concepts and metaphors to the social sciences and the need to problematise social relations and structures, rather than taking them for granted (Barnes, 1997). This requires recognition of the ecological dominance of capitalism in terms of its capacity to imprint its developmental logic on associated social relations, institutions and spaces (Jessop, 2000).² From a geographical perspective, urban and regional ‘resilience’ as an objective must be understood in relation to the uneven spatial development of capitalism across a range of spatial sites and scales (Smith, 1990). In this context, we suggest that resilient spaces are precisely what capitalism needs – spaces that are periodically reinvented to meet the changing demands of capital accumulation in an increasingly globalised economy. This becomes especially clear when we consider the fundamental question of whether the economy should conform to meet the needs, values, and vision of a democratic society, or whether societies should evolve to meet the needs of capitalism. The critique offered here is grounded firmly in a normative social and spatial justice position that the former is true; economies should be structured and regulated primarily to meet social needs over and above the needs of capital.

To take the material well-being of poor and working people as a starting point, however, is not to ignore the ideological and discursive dimensions of urban policy. Research on the neoliberalisation of governance and public policy has shown that the discursive framing of social and economic life is an essential dynamic through which ideology is enacted and spread (Hay, 1995; Hendrikse and Sidaway, 2010; Peck, 2010). Attention to discourse does not supplant a concern with ideology; nor does it assume, as Smith (2010: 52) suggests, that “one changes the world first and foremost by changing the way we think and talk about it”. Rather, as the frequency with which

Thatcher's infamous quips about society (there is no such thing) and alternative policy directions (there are none) are cited suggest, how we talk about social relations and social problems profoundly shapes how we attempt to address and remediate them (O'Neill, 2011).

Our critique of resilience is based upon three points. First, we argue that the concept of resilience, derived from ecology and systems theory, is conservative when applied to the social sphere, referring to the stability of a system against interference as emphasised in the first of our opening quotations (Lang, 2010). This apolitical ecology not only privileges established social structures, which are often shaped by unequal power relations and injustice (Harvey, 1996; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003), but also closes off wider questions of progressive social change which require interference with, and transformation of, established 'systems'. Second, resilience is externally-defined by state agencies and expert knowledge in spheres such as security, emergency planning, economic development and urban design (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008; Walker and Cooper, 2011). Such 'top-down' strategies invariably place the onus on places to become more resilient and adaptable to a range of external threats, serving to reproduce the wider social and spatial relations which generate turbulence and inequality. Third, we contend that the concern with the resilience of places is misconceived in terms of spatial scale. Here, resilience policy seems to rely on an underlying local-global divide whereby different scales such as the national, regional, urban and local are defined as arenas for ensuring adaptability in the face of immutable global threats.³ This fosters an internalist conception which locates the sources of resilience as lying within the particular scale in question. By contrast, we contend that the processes which shape resilience operate primarily at the scale of capitalist social relations (Hudson, 2010). Crucially, the resilience of capitalism is achieved at the expense of certain social groups and regions that bear the costs of periodic waves of adaptation and restructuring.

Resilience thinking also has connotations of stability and sustainability that can seem anti-neoliberal insofar as it promotes a reduced environmental footprint and local supply networks rather spatial competition and global sourcing (Hudson, 2010). As

such, resilience has also been adopted by local community groups and environmental campaigns such as the transition towns movement (Mason and Whitehead, 2011; North, 2010). Whilst acknowledging the attractions of resilience for radical environmental and community groups, we maintain that initiatives such as transition towns continue to operate within the orbit of (ecologically dominant) capitalist social relations and fail to fundamentally challenge the accompanying neoliberal ideology. In place of resilience, we offer the concept of ‘resourcefulness’ as an alternative approach for community groups to foster, emphasising ‘bottom up’ forms of mobilisation based on local priorities and needs rather than externally-defined norms. This is intended to contribute towards the development of a ‘counter-systemic’ mode of thought (and practice) that transcends systems theory and resilience thinking in the spirit of our second opening quotation (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 22).

The remainder of the paper is divided into six sections. The next section discusses the concept and discourse of resilience, tracing its migration from the natural sciences to the realm of urban and regional public policy discourse and activism. We then address the three points of our critique in turn. This is followed by a consideration of the possibilities of resourcefulness as an alternative approach for communities and environmental groups. Finally, we summarise our arguments and consider their implications in conclusion.

Resilience and its uses

The concept of resilience originated in physics and mathematics, where it refers to the capacity of a system or material to recover its former shape following a displacement or disturbance (Norris et al., 2008). Subsequent applications to a number of objects from ecosystems and the built environment to individuals, social systems and communities have spawned a range of definitions (Table 1). The work of the American ecologist C.S ‘Buzz’ Holling (1973; 2001) has proved particularly influential, not least through his role in groups such as the Resilience Alliance of scientists and the Stockholm Resilience Centre, a high-profile think-tank (Walker and Cooper, 2011). In general, these definitions share a concern with the capacity of the entity in question to cope with disruption and stress and retain or regain function,

capacity and form (Holling, 1973; Hudson, 2010: 2). Researchers often distinguish between resistance and ‘bounce back’, where the former refers to the ability of a system to block disruptive changes and remain relatively undisturbed whilst the latter is defined in terms of the capacity to recover from shock and return to normal functioning.

In the ecological literature, two types of resilience are commonly identified (Holling, 1973). The first is ‘engineering resilience’, which is concerned with the stability of a system near to an equilibrium or steady state, where resilience is defined in terms of elasticity which emphasises resistance to disruption and speed of return to the pre-existing equilibrium (Pendall et al., 2008: 72). Second, ‘ecological resilience’ refers to external disturbances and shocks that result in a system becoming transformed through the emergence of new structures and behaviours. This understanding of resilience appears to be complex and open-ended, making it more suitable for the study of social phenomena characterised by ongoing adaptation and learning (Pike et al, 2010, Tschakert and Deitrich 2011, Pickett et al 2004). Yet Simmie and Martin (2010) suggest that even the ecological model of resilience should be treated with caution as it relies on a conception of external shocks triggering a shift from one relatively stable regime to another, simply recognising that equilibria are multiple rather than single (cf. Hassink, 2010).

In recent years, the ecologically-rooted concept of resilience has rapidly infiltrated public policy fields such as national security, financial management, public health, economic development and urban planning (Walker and Cooper, 2011). For instance, increased concerns about terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks have led to widespread securitisation through increased electronic surveillance, the establishment of bounded and secure zones in cities and key transport hubs, and the adoption of increasingly complex forms of contingency and scenario planning (Boin and Smith, 2006; Coaffee and Murakami-Wood, 2006). Lentzos and Rose (2009) distinguish between three national models of biosecurity: a contingency planning approach in France; an emphasis on protection in Germany; and the UK strategy of resilience. UK resilience amounts to more than simply preparedness; implying a

systematic programme of measures and structures to enable organisations and communities to better anticipate and tolerate disruption and turbulence. This requires what has been termed a ‘multi-scale governance fix’ (Coaffee and Murakami-Wood, 2006: 509), involving the establishment of Local Resilience Forums and Regional Resilience Teams within each of the Government Offices for the Regions in England, overseen by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office (Cabinet Office, 2010).⁴

Walker and Cooper (2011: 2) argue that the success of resilience in “colonising multiple arenas of governance” reflects its ideological fit with neoliberalism. Contemporary forms of securitisation overlap substantially with neoliberal discourses of competitiveness, which emphasise the need to promote economic growth (Bristow, 2010). Such discourses support a framework of inter-regional competition in which cities and regions have effectively become ‘hostile brothers’ which compete for investment, markets and resources (Peck and Tickell, 1994). Enhanced regional competitiveness is seen as the key to success in global markets, based upon the harnessing of local resources and assets through initiatives which seek to upgrade workforce skills, stimulate the formation of new firms and foster innovation and learning (Bristow, 2010; MacKinnon et al., 2002). Increasingly, resilience and security strategies have been linked to competition for footloose global capital with urban marketing strategies, for instance, stressing the ‘safety’ and ‘security’ of cities as places to conduct business (Coaffee and Murakami-Wood, 2006).

Policy-makers in the UK have also placed an increasing emphasis on the social and community aspects of resilience in recent years, seeking to raise public awareness of potential threats and to encourage increased ‘responsibilisation’ by involving citizens and communities in their own risk management (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008: 113). This resulted in the publication of a Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience (Cabinet Office, 2011), defined in terms of “communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency” (4). Here, community resilience is viewed in terms of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda, which is intended to promote greater

community self-reliance and empowerment by reducing the powers of the state and encouraging volunteering and community activity (HM Government, 2010).

The recent upsurge of interest in community resilience is not only a product of the ‘top-down’ strategies of government, but also of the ‘bottom up’ activities of a wide variety of community groups. In the context of the rapidly-growing Transition Towns movement (Bailey et al., 2010; Mason and Whitehead, 2011), for instance, resilience seems to be supplanting ‘sustainability,’ providing a renewed focus for initiatives seeking to localise the supply of food and energy in particular (Mason and Whitehead, 2011). Transition groups provide crucial sites for the development and spread of emerging social and ecological practices of community resilience that appear to challenge key aspects of contemporary global capitalism. Building upon these activities, the Carnegie UK Trust (2011) has produced a handbook on community resilience which emphasises the need for people to come together to “future-proof their communities on the basis of agreed values” (4). The second part of the Handbook outlines a ‘compass’ of community resilience based upon: healthy, engaged people; an inclusive and creative culture that generates a positive and welcoming sense of place; a localised economy that operates within ecological limits; and the fostering of supportive inter-community links. Researchers have noted, however, that this burgeoning sphere of action tends to operate through a kind of inclusive localism that is largely apolitical and pragmatic in character (Mason and Whitehead, 2011; Trapese Collective, 2008).

Resilience and the privileging of existing social relations

Resilience can be seen as the latest in a long line of naturalistic metaphors to be applied to cities and regions (Barnes, 1997; Evans, 2011; Gandy, 2002). Organic conceptions of cities as systems displaying natural traits such as growth, competition and self-organisation have proven particularly influential, informing the urban ecologies of Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard and the Chicago School (Evans, 2011). The notion of the ‘sanitary’ or ‘bacteriological’ city took shape from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, based upon the application of the nascent sciences of epidemiology and microbiology, alongside the emerging professions of planning and

civil engineering (Gandy, 2002; Pincetl 2010). The use of natural metaphors had implications for the governance and management of cities, as Gandy (2002: 8) observes:

In the twentieth century, a range of technological advances facilitated a new mediation between organic metaphors and the production of urban space. In 1965, for example, the engineer Abel Wolman outlined “the complete metabolism of the modern city” as the culmination of advances in the technical organisation of urban space. Yet these metabolic metaphors treat the city as a discrete physical entity. The “body of the city” is considered in isolation from wider determinants of urban form, and the social production of space is downplayed in relation to the technical mastery of cities.

In the context of scientific efforts to create more resilient urban infrastructures, Evans (2011: 224) suggests that ecology may come to play an analogous role in the shaping of twenty-first century cities to that of the sanitarians in the nineteenth century. Informed by the work of ecological authorities such as Holling, Arthur Tansley and the Resilience Alliance on ecosystems as complex adaptive systems, this new urban ecology conceives of the city as a social-ecological system, in which biophysical and social factors are linked by multiple feedback loops and exhibit the common properties of resilience and complexity (Evans, 2011: 229). The effect is to naturalise cities and regions as self-contained systems by divorcing them “from wider determinants of urban form” such as flows of capital and modes of state regulation (Gandy, 2002: 8). The abstract language of systems theory and complexity science offers a mode of intellectual colonisation which serves to objectify and de-politicise the spheres of urban and regional governance, normalising the emphasis on adaptation to prevailing environmental and economic conditions and foreclosing wider socio-political questions of power and representation (Evans, 2011).

The implication of the extension of ecological thinking to the social sphere is that human society should mimic the decentralised and resilient processes of nature (Swanstrom, 2008: 15). Resilience is fundamentally about how to best maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of externally-derived disturbance. Both the ontological nature of ‘the system’ and its normative desirability escape critical

scrutiny. As a result, the existence of social divisions and inequalities tends to be glossed over when resilience thinking is extended to society (ibid). Ecological models of resilience are fundamentally anti-political, viewing adaptation to change in terms of decentralised actors, systems and relationships and failing to accommodate the critical role of the state and politics (Evans, 2011; Hassink, 2010; Swanstrom, 2008). Deference to “the emergent order of nature” (Swanstrom, 2008: 16) is implicitly extended to society as existing social networks and institutions are taken for granted as ‘natural’ and harmonious. This reflects the origins of resilience thinking in the writings of Holling and others as a critique of the methods of scientific resource management employed by state agencies in the 1960s and 1970s, fostering a suspicion of central authority that has affinities with the work of Hayek (Walker and Cooper, 2011).⁵ In response, Swanstrom (2008: 16) argues that the neglect of the role of the state and politics and the privileging of harmonious social networks makes the ecological model of resilience “profoundly conservative” when it is exported into a social context. This conservatism is reinforced by the normative aspect of resilience, which is assumed to be always a positive quality, imbued with notions of individual self-reliance and triumph over adversity.

Both government agencies and local environmental groups emphasise the need for communities to become more resilient and self-reliant (Cabinet Office, 2011; Carnegie Trust UK, 2011). In common with transition thinking, this agenda favours community self-organisation in terms of the agency of local people to make their communities more resilient, whilst overlooking the affinities with neoliberal thinking. Yet, as a number of critical scholars have argued, the nebulous but tremendously evocative concept of community is commonly deployed to bestow particular initiatives with unequivocally positive connotations as being undertaken in the common interest of a social collectivity (Joseph, 2002; DeFillipis et al., 2010). Rather than referring to a pre-existing collective interest, invocations of community attempt to construct and mobilise such a collectivity. By generating a discourse of equivalence between groups and individuals, they often have the effects of suppressing social difference (according to class, gender, race, etc) and masking inequality and hierarchy (DeFillipis et al., 2006; Joseph, 2002; Young, 1990). As such, the bracketing of

resilience with community works to reinforce the underlying imperative of resilience-building through the abstract identification of its socio-spatial object (the community in question), fostering a sense of common purpose and unity. The effect is to further naturalise not only resilience itself as a common project, but also the social and political relations which are to be mobilised in the pursuit of this project.

Resilience as an externally defined imperative

The second point of our critique is concerned with the external definition of resilience by state agencies and expert analysts across a range of policy spheres (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008; Walker and Cooper, 2011). In this contest, the “pseudo-scientific discourse” of resilience presents something of a paradox of change; emphasising the prevalence of turbulence and crisis, yet accepting them passively and placing the onus on communities to get on with the business of adapting (Evans, 2011: 234). The effect is to naturalise crisis, resonating with neoliberal discourses which stress the inevitability of globalisation (Held and McGrew, 2002). In the sphere of security, for instance, the identification of ‘new’ global risks, coupled with political leaders’ claims of ‘unique’ and ‘classified’ knowledge of potential threats, justified “the implementation of a raft of resilience policies without critical civic consultation” following the events of 11 September 2001 (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008: 115). In the context of urban and regional development, resilience has become the latest policy imperative by which cities and regions are entreated to mobilise their endogenous assets and resources to compete in global markets (Wolfe, 2010).

The emerging literature on regional resilience policy emphasises that resilience should be seen as a dynamic process such that particular shocks or crises must be situated in the context of longer run processes of change such as deindustrialisation (Dawley et al., 2010). The role of regional institutions is to foster the adaptive capacity to enable the renewal and ‘branching out’ of economic activity from existing assets, echoing the processes that seem to have underpinned the development of successful regions such as Cambridge (Dawley et al., 2010; Simmie and Martin, 2010). A key theme concerns the importance of civic capacity and strategic leadership in framing and responding to

particular crises and challenges. According to Wolfe (2010: 7), “Successful regions must be able to engage in strategic planning exercises that identify and cultivate their assets, undertake collaborative processes to plan and implement change and encourage a regional mindset that fosters growth”. A key task is the undertaking of detailed foresight and horizon-scanning work to identify and assess emergent market trends and technologies. Such exercises reflect how resilience thinking is associated with the adoption of a range of non-predictive and futurological methods of risk analysis and management such as scenario planning (Lentzos and Rose, 2009; Walker and Cooper, 2011).

As the above indicates, resilience is serving to reinforce and extend existing trends in urban regional development policy towards increased responsiveness to market conditions, strategic management and the harnessing of endogenous regional assets. In this sense, resilience policy fits closely with pre-established discourses of spatial competition and urban entrepreneurialism (Bristow, 2010; Peck, 2010). Its proximity to the prior understandings and outlooks of urban and regional policy-makers helps to account for the widespread adoption of resilience in economic development circles, providing a somewhat more muted successor to the ‘creative cities’ craze of the mid-2000s (Florida, 2002; Peck, 2005). Like the creative cities script, resilience is a mobilising discourse, confronting individuals, communities and organisations with the imperative of ongoing adaptation to the challenges of an increasingly turbulent environment (Peck, 2010: 221). Beyond the recurring appeal to innovation and strategic leadership, resilience can be seen as a more socially inclusive narrative, requiring all sections of the community, and not just privileged ‘creatives’, to foster permanent adaptability in the face of external threats. In the context of national security, this calls for a ‘culture of resilience’ which integrates “emergency preparedness into the infrastructures of everyday life and the psychology of citizens” (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 17).

Research on urban resilience tends to operationalise the term ‘resilience’ as it pertains to the ability of cities to either continue to replicate the day to day functions in the face of major shocks such as a terrorist attack or a major weather event, or in their

ability to adapt in the face of more long-term disruptions such as those related to climate change (Otto-Zimmerman 2011; Godschaulk 2003). While it is common for work in this vein to describe cities as ‘complex’ or ‘dynamic’ systems, in this work the term ‘system’ appears to refer merely to the everyday functioning of cities, rather than some fully conceptualised and empirically validated abstract model. Typically, ‘urban resilience’ mobilises a coupled human and natural systems framework for conceptualising urban systems. Whereas Pickett et al (2004) describe ‘resilience’ as a metaphor for integrating analysis of the urban design, ecology and social science, a more recent articulation of a framework for urban resilience research identifies ‘metabolic flows’, ‘governance networks’, ‘social dynamics’ and the ‘built environment’ as the key features of the urban ‘system’ (CSIRO 2007). The Long Term Ecological Research programme in the US incorporates sites in Baltimore and Phoenix where scientists have been undertaking adaptive experiments in urban governance, defining the city as a social-ecological system. As Evans (2011) argues, the “scientific assumptions of resilience ecology run the risk of political foreclosure because they frame the governance choices that are available, often in feedback mechanisms that are seemingly neutral” (ibid: 232).

Katz (2004) provides one of the more productive social science treatments of resilience in her analysis of social reproduction and children’s lives in Sudan and New York City. Katz identifies resilience as one of three ways in which people respond to global processes in a more nuanced way than the binary framework of domination and resistance. As she conceives it, resilience refers to the various ways in which people adapt to get by and ‘make do’ in the face of the powerful and problematic challenges presented by globalisation. Katz emphasises the autonomous agency and creativity of social actors and avoids normative prescriptions of the need to make communities more resilient. By linking her conception with the more transformative possibilities of what she calls reworking and resistance, she explicitly problematises existing social relations and does not view the wider external environment as immutable. Yet while Katz’s critical approach and sensitivity to the relational nature of places exemplifies the type of analysis we are arguing for, resilience remains the most limited and conservative of the three responses to globalisation that she identifies. At the same

time, it is unclear whether her conception of resilience can be mobilised by community groups to address locally-derived priorities in ways that transcend the conservative connotations of resilience as a policy discourse.⁶

Scale and the localisation of resilience thinking

The importation of the ecological approach into the social sciences has served to privilege spatial sites and scales such as cities, regions and local communities, which are implicitly equated with ecosystems, and viewed as autonomous and subject to the same principles of self-organisation. In this sense, resilience thinking is characterised by a certain looseness or elasticity in scalar terms, treating different scales similarly as arenas for fostering local adaptation in the face of global threats. Yet the question of whether the spatial unit in question can be usefully or accurately understood as self-organising units modeled after ecosystems remains unaddressed. Informed by the extensive literature on scale (Brenner, 2004; MacKinnon, 2011), we argue that this is fundamentally misplaced, serving to divorce cities and regions from wider processes of capital accumulation and state regulation. Discussions of resilience in the social sciences have tended to move from responses to natural disasters to consider the effects of economic shocks without recognising the specific properties and characteristics of capitalism as the ecologically dominant system (Jessop, 2000). The result has been to take capitalism for granted as an immutable external force akin to the forces of nature, while focusing attention on the self-organising capacities of places to become more resilient. As Hudson (2010) observes, capitalism is itself highly resilient at a systemic level, confounding successive predictions of its imminent demise through its capacity for periodic reinvention and restructuring, as captured by Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1943). Paradoxically, however, capitalism's resilience is predicated upon the periodic undermining of the resilience of certain local and regional economies, which are vulnerable to capital flight and crisis in the face of competition from other places offering more profitable investment opportunities (Harvey, 1982). As the ongoing politics of austerity in Europe and the US demonstrates, the costs of adaptation and restructuring are often externalised by capital and the state onto particular

communities and segments of labour at times of crisis and restructuring in the interests of 'general' economic recovery and renewal.

The equation of cities and regions with ecosystems reinforces the neoliberalisation of urban and regional development policy, fostering an internalist conception which locates the sources of resilience as lying within the place in question. By contrast, the need to position cities and regions within wider circuits of capital and modes of state intervention is apparent from some preliminary empirical analyses of the dynamics of regional resilience in the UK (Dawley et al., 2010; Martin, 2011; Simmie and Martin, 2010). Defining resilience in terms of region's resistance to, and recovery from, major economic shocks, Martin (2011) examines the responses of UK regions to the major recessions of 1979-1983, 1990-1993 and 2008-2010. The first recession had the greatest impact on the old industrial regions of the peripheral and northern UK, whereas the 1990-1993 downturn affected the greater South East and Midlands most severely, and the effects of the 2008-2010 recession have been less clearly differentiated. While prosperous regions such as South East England invariably tend to emerge as more resilient than less favoured ones like North East England, this is not simply the result of divergent endogenous capacities for innovation and leadership, but is bound up with the operation of a range of wider political and economic relations which have positioned the former as a core global 'hot-spot' and the latter as economically marginal (Massey, 2007). As neoliberal modes of regulation have supported the interests of advanced finance in the City of London, regions such as the North East have borne the economic and social costs of capitalist adaptation in terms of deindustrialisation and attendant levels of social disadvantage (Dolphin, 2009; Hudson, 1989).

The crucial role of national states in shaping levels of resilience is illustrated by Swanstrom (2008) with reference to the foreclosure crisis in the US, whereby forms of federal deregulation in the 1980s encouraged a wave of innovation through the introduction of new financial instruments which actually undermined household resilience in the long-run. In another study, Swanstrom et al., (2009), examine how metropolitan areas in the US have responded to the foreclosure crisis, defining

resilience in terms of three main processes: the redeployment of assets or alteration of organisational routines; collaboration within and across and public, private and nonprofit sectors; and the mobilisation and capturing of resources from external sources. Crucially, while ‘horizontal’ collaboration between public, private and nonprofit actors within metropolitan areas is important, Swanstrom et al., (2009) argue that the effects of this will remain limited without support from ‘vertical’ policies emanating from the state and federal scales of government. Only these institutions can provide the necessary level of resources to support local foreclosure prevention and neighbourhood recovery activities.

The vacuous yet ubiquitous notion that communities ought to be ‘resilient’ can be seen as particularly troubling in the context of austerity and reinforced neoliberalism (Peck et al., 2010). In the UK, this is being accompanied by a renewed invocation of localism and community through the government’s ‘Big Society’ programme. This provides a crucial supplement to neoliberal discourses (see Joseph, 2002), serving to fill an underlying void created by the privileging of market rationalities over social needs (Derrida, 1976; Sheppard and Leitner, 2009). The effect is to maintain and legitimise existing forms of social hierarchy and control (Joseph, 2002), drawing upon long-standing Conservative traditions of middle class voluntarism and social responsibility (Kearns, 1995). We cite the ‘Big Society’ agenda here to emphasise the potential relationship between reductions in public expenditure and attacks on the state as an active agent of redistribution and service provision, on the one hand, and arguments for greater local and community resilience, on the other (Cabinet Office, 2011). This discursive and material policy milieu promises to have profoundly uneven effects, with disadvantaged communities having fewer material resources, professional skill sets, and stocks of social capital to ‘step up’ to fill the gaps created by state retrenchment (Cox and Schmuecker, 2010; Fyfe, 2005). It is in this context that the promotion of ‘resilience’ amongst low-income communities strikes us as particularly dangerous, insofar as it normalises the uneven effects of neoliberal governance and invigorates the trope of individual responsibility with a renewed ‘community’ twist. At the same time, resilience-oriented policy discursively and ideologically absolves capital and the state from accountability to remediate the

impacts of their practices and policies. Implicit, then, in resilience discourse is the notion that urban and regional policy should enable communities to constantly remake themselves in a manner that suits the fickle whims of capital with limited support from the state. Not only does this approach hold little promise of fostering greater social justice, it also places the well-being of the market over and above the well-being of the communities that are meant to be resilient.

Towards a politics of resourcefulness

In this section, we outline our favoured concept of resourcefulness as an alternative to resilience, building upon the critique advanced in the preceding sections. Whereas resilience is typically couched in terms of local adaptation to a turbulent external environment, resourcefulness emphasises local autonomy, self-determination and the development of the capacity to shape and ultimately transform this wider environment. Whilst sympathising with the growing emphasis on resilience and self-reliance in recent years (see Transition Centre 2011, Co-Intelligence Institute 2011), we believe that ‘self-determination’ is a more suitable objective. The language of self-reliance perpetuates the fallacy that places are, or can be, independent and disconnected from other spaces. Self-reliance also leaves questions of distribution and redistribution unproblematised by suggesting that communities are responsible for their own success or failure, representing a turn away from the state as the vehicle for redistribution and the provision of welfare (DeFillipis et al., 2010: 151). Self-determination, by contrast, more fundamentally addresses the democratic impulse in localities and communities to actively shape their own destiny.

The issue of community influence and control has been explored in the geographic literature, specifically with respect to autonomy (Clark, 1984; Cox, 1993; Lake, 1994). Whereas some have defined autonomy as an objective condition in which localities are without constraint, DeFilippis (2004) usefully argues that autonomy is a relational concept, which is to say that it should be understood not as a property that an entity might possess, but as a process. Following Lake (1994), DeFilippis (2004: 30) argues that local autonomy is “the ever-contested and never complete ability of those within the locality to control the institutions and relationships that define and

produce the locality”. Whilst an objective of community self-reliance neglects the economic, social and ecological processes which link communities, we argue that self-determination captures a more democratic, outward looking, and realistic conception of how communities might actually achieve more democratic self-governance. Like DeFilippis’s conception of local autonomy, the concept of self-determination that we seek to advance acknowledges the ways in which places, spaces, and communities are inherently relational and interconnected in ways that can be both enabling and constraining.

If self-determination is the goal, then cultivating resourcefulness is the way it might be achieved. Towards this end, we propose that an ethos of resourcefulness supplant resilience, believing that the former recognises the desirability and feasibility of community-based organising in a way that both addresses local issues and appreciates systemic challenges. The conception of the local that underpins resourcefulness is spatially-grounded in identifiable local spaces, but also open and relational in terms of both recognising the wider politics of justice that often inform local activism and emphasising the need for alliances between community groups and broader social movements. We argue that the promotion of resourcefulness holds promise to directly challenge the system of neoliberal capitalism, highlighting and challenging the uneven distribution of resources and fostering creative forms of reworking and resistance among community groups (see Katz, 2004). Rather than being externally-defined by government agencies and experts, resourcefulness emphasises forms of learning and adaptation based upon local priorities and needs as identified and developed by community activists and organisations.

Resourcefulness, as we conceive of it, is better understood as a process, rather than as a clearly-identifiable condition amenable to empirical measurement or quantification. As a relational concept, resourcefulness cannot be understood as something communities possess to varying degrees. It is the act of fostering resourcefulness, not measuring it or achieving it, that should motivate policy and activism. While additional research is needed to further elaborate the concept and practice of community resourcefulness, we identify the following four key elements:

- Resources – While foregrounding the importance of resources in a conception of resourcefulness might seem somewhat tautological, we want to emphasise the extent to which the conception of resourcefulness that we are advancing emphasises material inequality and issues of maldistribution. Thus, resourcefulness is not merely an internal characteristic of a community, it is a material condition and a relational term in that it seeks to problematise the often profound inequalities in the distribution of resources by the state that further disadvantage low-income communities. The resources to which we refer here include not only organising capacity, spare time, and social capital, but also public and third sector resources and investments on par with the wealthiest communities.
- Skill sets and technical knowledge – Communities with expertise in governmental procedures, financial and economic knowledge, basic computing and technology, are much better positioned to take nuanced positions on public policy issues, as well as propose policies and imagine feasible alternatives and the concrete steps necessary to enact those alternatives. While, like Fischer (2000), we regret the turn toward technocratic public policy making and away from a model based upon the democratic debate of normative ideals, we argue that resourceful communities must have at least some technical knowledge and skill for communicating that knowledge.
- Folk knowledge – While we argue above that technical skills and formal knowledge are an important dimension of resourcefulness, alternative and shared ways of knowing and resultant knowledges are critical ‘myths’ from which resourceful communities may draw. Here, following Innes (1990), ‘myth’ refers not to made up stories, but rather to origin stories (Haraway 1991) and explanatory frameworks that weave together normative and observational knowledge, and serve as the guiding framework for shared visions. For example, a group of community activists in the disadvantaged district of Govan, Glasgow (UK), with whom we collaborated, mobilised the myth of past Gaelic

Highlander life, and the folk ways and knowledges that emerged from that mythology, as a grounding for their alternative vision of social relations. There are a whole number of ways in which this kind of knowledge could be inward looking and nostalgic, but the kinds of folk knowledge that ultimately cultivates resourcefulness will be necessarily be as attentive to difference as it is to commonality.

- Recognition – Philosophers of justice and oppression have emphasised the importance and value of cultural recognition as a requisite condition of justice (Young 1990; Taylor 1994). Recognition serves the dual function of promoting a sense of confidence, self-worth, self- and community-affirmation that can be drawn upon to fuel the mobilisation of existing resources and argue for and pursue new resources. Additionally, recognition confers the community in question group status with meaningfully common attributes and a shared understanding that the community is itself a subject of rights and a receiving body for state resources.

A politics of resourcefulness highlights the material and enduring challenges that marginalised communities face in conceiving of and engaging in the kinds of activism and politics that are likely to facilitate transformative change. Unlike resilience policy and activism, the concept of resourcefulness emphasises the challenges that many grassroots endeavors face in terms of organisational capacity. While many Marxist-influenced geographers are quick to point out the need for anti-capitalist endeavors to link up (Brenner et al., 2010, Harvey 1996), they often overlook the very immediate challenges that organisations and individual activists face. These include time, access to knowledge and essential skill sets, and the capacities for organising and maintaining associated organisational structures to facilitate the kind of holistic, ongoing critique that might support sustained activism, the lack of which many critical political economists have lamented (ibid). In this sense, a politics of resourcefulness challenges the inherent conservatism of resilience policy and activism by attempting to foster the tools and capacities for communities to carve out the

discursive space and material time that sustained efforts at civic engagement and activism, as well as more radical campaigns, require.

As we have emphasised, the discourse of resilience is localist though rather imprecise in terms of scale, requiring local actors to adapt to a turbulent external environment which is taken for granted and naturalised. By contrast, the concept of resourcefulness is both more scale-specific in focusing attention on the need to build capacities at community level, and outward-looking by viewing the ability to foster and maintain relational links across space and between scales as an important aspect of resourcefulness. This outward orientation will enable community groups to feed into broader campaigns and social movements that seek to challenge neoliberal policy frameworks at the national and supra-national scales (Brenner et al., 2010; Cumbers et al., 2008). By fostering such wider connections, progressive forms of localism focused on the promotion of social and spatial justice (see Featherstone et al., in press) can overcome the ‘local trap’ identified by radical scholars, representing more than particularisms or ‘mere irritants’ to the neoliberal capitalist machine (Harvey 1996, Purcell, 2006; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010).

Conclusion

While we have spent the bulk of this article criticising the conception of resilience as that has been deployed by policy-makers, social scientists and environmental interest groups, we recognise the motives of these groups in being drawn towards resilience as a desirable quality to foster in communities, cities and regions. Having weathered a rapid and unforgiving shift in the global political economy and the associated fracturing of the welfare state and social democracy over the past 30 years, to be faced with a new economic and fiscal crisis since 2008, it is understandable that activists and policy makers would be inclined to turn away from the glare and intensity of globalisation to consider how they might make themselves less vulnerable to future economic and environmental catastrophe. Nor are we intrinsically opposed to the integration of social and ecological perspectives; rather, we emphasise the need to pay close attention to terms upon which such integration takes place (Agder, 2000). As we have argued, promoting resilience in the face of the urgent crises of climate change

and global recession actually serves to naturalise the ecologically-dominant system of global capitalism. It is the workings of this ‘system’, we contend, which generates environmental degradation and shapes the uneven ability of communities and regions to cope with crisis. Our fundamental problem with the mobilising discourse of resilience is that it places the onus squarely on communities and regions to further adapt to the logic and implications of global capitalism and climate change. This apolitical ecology is resulting in the subordination and corralling of the social within the framework of socio-ecological systems. Convergence of thinking around the notion of resilience is resulting in the evacuation of the political as the underlying question of what kind of communities and social relations we want to create is masked beneath the imperative of transition (Swyngedouw, 2007).

This intervention has been prompted by our particular concern about the adoption of resilience thinking by community activists, oppositional environmental groups and critical social scientists and geographers, in addition to government agencies, policy-makers and business groups. As we have argued by uncovering its origins, affiliations and consequences, resilience thinking has become implicated within the hegemonic modes of thought that support global capitalism, providing a further source of naturalisation through complex systems theory. While the unsuitability of resilience in the social sphere is rooted in the underlying ecological concept, its regressive effects have been greatly accentuated by its entanglement in neoliberal modes of governance. This makes its adoption by oppositional groups and critical analysts deeply problematic. In response, we offer the alterative concept of resourcefulness as a more productive means of challenging the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. This is designed to open up debate beyond the closures of resilience thinking, foregrounding the fundamental question of transition “to where, and from what” (Trapeze Collective, 2008: 3). Resourcefulness focuses attention upon the uneven distribution of resources within and between communities and maintains an openness to the possibilities of community self-determination through local skills and folk knowledge. For resourcefulness to become part of a “movement of thought that is truly counter-systematic” is, however, dependent upon more than the intellectual abandonment of complex systems theory (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 157). It also requires the

cultivation of links with community groups and social movements as part of an expansive spatial politics that aims to both foster trans-local relations between particular sites and exemplars and challenge the national and supra-national institutions that support the operation of global capitalism.

Notes

¹As such, our purpose is not to examine the geographical circulation and mutation of resilience policy through a range of elite networks as per the ‘policy mobilities’ literature (Peck, 2011), but to assess the ramifications of this discourse in terms of the framing of local and regional development.

² This is not meant to suggest that capitalism is always the most pressing process or dominant social relation, and nor is it to suggest that all manner of politics must be overtly anti-capitalist in order to have potential to undermine oppressive social relations. In relation to urban and regional development, however, we maintain that capitalism is the most powerful set of processes at work.

³ Our critique follows resilience thinking in moving between these different scales, reflecting their common social and ideological construction.

⁴ The Government Offices for the Regions were abolished by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010 and the roles of the Regional Resilience Teams have been largely absorbed by Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.

⁵ As Walker and Cooper (2011) argue, Holling's later work on adaptive cycles and social-ecological systems (Holling, 2001) resonates with the writings of Hayek (1945), whose notion of 'spontaneous order' through market exchange informed a growing engagement with complexity science and systems theory in his late career.

⁶ While Katz's '3Rs' framework of resilience, reworking and resistance provides an important set of intellectual resources for critical geographers and other social scientists, it remains divorced from the

applications of resilience to the social sphere by ecologists, applied social scientists and policy-makers that are discussed in this paper.

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Table 1. Selected Definitions of Resilience

Author, date	Discipline	Level of analysis	Definition
Gordon, 1978	Physics	Physical system	The ability to store energy and deflect elasticity under a load without breaking or being deformed
Holling, 1973	Ecology	Ecological system	The persistence of relationships within a system; the ability of systems to absorb change and still persist
Resilience Alliance, undated	Ecology	Ecological system	The capacity to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state. http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/resiliencie . Accessed 25 October 2011
Egeland, 1993	Psychology	Individual	The capacity for successful adaptation and functioning despite high risk, stress or trauma
Agder, 2000	Geography	Community	The ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure
Katz, 2004	Geography	Community	Ways in which people adapt to changing circumstances to get by and ‘make do’ through the exercising of autonomous initiative.
Hill et al., 2008	Urban and regional development	Region	The ability of a region to recover successfully from shocks to its economy

Source: Adapted and extended from Norris et al., 2008: 129.