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From Systems Thinking to Systemic Action: Social Vulnerability and the Institutional Challenge of Urban Resilience

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When it comes to translating ideas like urban resilience into actions, institutions are slippery by nature – they can serve as a bridge or a barrier, and often both at once. For example, this slippery aspect of institutions fuels the decades-old debate among environmental sociologists over the effect of the global sustainability movement. Some argue that the actions of the global sustainability movement have had the cockeyed effect of reinforcing institutional barriers that protect environmentally *unsustainable* growth (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2015). Conversely, others argue that the movement created a permanent new institutional bridge between actions associated with private capital accumulation and innovative ideas for environmental preservation (Spaargaren and Mol 1992). A third position argues that institutional contexts are not monolithic: some are more conducive to sustainability transitions and some less (Hansen and Coenen 2015).

As urban resilience scholars and advocates translate ideas about how social, ecological, and physical systems work into an action agenda for cities, they find themselves in front of the same variegated institutional contexts faced by the global sustainability movement before them. In addition to their generally slippery nature, the institutions that currently direct urban growth are supported by centuries (relative to the history of capitalist cities) of accumulated rules, laws, norms, mores, incentives, and social relations. These accumulated institutional supports enforce entrenched definitions of what is desirable, acceptable, and who benefits from urban growth. Urban historical institutionalists and political ecologists have mapped the ways that these pathways of institutional accumulation translate into the specific built forms, social geographies, and mechanisms for creating wealth. What can, and should, urban resilience advocates and scholars do in the face of urban institutions that are both slippery in terms of how they connect ideas to actions and deeply entrenched?

In this commentary, I argue that prioritizing social vulnerability provides an answer to this question and allows resilience efforts to avoid simple replication of the path taken by the global urban sustainability movement. This is the case because addressing social vulnerability requires

addressing institutional barriers that urban sustainability initiatives tend to avoid. By prioritizing economic benefits, sustainability appeals to entrenched interests that are conducive to bridging new ideas with new ways of acting *when such a move results in economic growth*. If urban resilience adds anything to our current framework for action, though, it will go deeper by addressing entrenched institutional barriers. In the sections below, I briefly offer one example of the institutional challenge associated with addressing social vulnerability. I also highlight the importance of meso-level social infrastructure for addressing social vulnerability.

Institutional Barriers to Urban Resilience: The critical case of “green tech” cities

Few cities are currently experiencing more rapid growth than those with substantial local high technology and green economies. In North America, these “green tech” cities are exemplified by Vancouver, Seattle, Austin, and San Francisco. In these cities, sustainability initiatives tailored to economic growth agendas are thriving. Relatedly, an “avalanche of money” (Gold 2017) is rapidly increasing inequality and wage gaps and pushing lower income vulnerable populations to the margins of the metropolitan region (Wile 2017). As a result, the institutional framework that generates winners and losers in urban growth has already forced resilience tradeoffs. In these cities, greater resiliency in one geographic area or across one threat category may quickly generate new vulnerabilities in another area or category.

One example of such tradeoffs is found in efforts to mitigate the impact of flooding and sea level rise by creating and preserving open space. Without such intervention, development trends in these cities would almost certainly deplete ecosystem capacity for flood mitigation. However, the perverse effect of these ecological resilience initiatives may be to force lower income residents into even more ecologically and socially vulnerable circumstances. These new green amenities may make certain neighborhoods more desirable, causing displacement through gentrification or may have the effect of limiting development in high cost areas, creating pressure on another area and causing indirect displacement (Busch 2015).

In these circumstances, resilience measures cannot stop at preserving ecosystem services with new green infrastructure. Resilience tradeoffs can only be addressed if resilience is defined simultaneously and equally in social and ecological terms, and not in economic terms. Certainly, though, such an approach hits up against entrenched institutional barriers. So, how can advocates and scholars of urban resilience start to address this institutional challenge?

Building Social Resilience from the Middle

Integrated initiatives that address housing affordability and ecosystem service preservation are essential. This is the direct response that should always be at the top of the agenda. However, given the difficulty of implementing such direct measures at the scale required, it is important to think more broadly about ways of building social resilience alongside ecological resilience. These broader efforts include initiatives that expand meso-level social infrastructure. I describe two examples below.

First, urban resilience programs should seek to address vulnerability by enhancing *bridge organizational capacity* in low-income neighborhoods. Bridge organizations are groups that

specifically work to link bottom-up grassroots initiatives with top-down organizations from the State or private capital. For example, in New York City, these groups played an essential role in identifying needs and targeting resources from philanthropy to communities bereft of basic services during the 1970s fiscal crisis and in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy when public sector disaster relief was overwhelmed (Connolly et al. 2013). These groups carried information between grassroots neighborhood organizations and state and private organizations that allowed resources to transfer from higher scales of social organization to lower scales in a more targeted fashion than would otherwise have been possible.

In Austin, where urban sustainability initiatives created stiff development pressures in low-income communities, a newly formed group called The East Austin Conservancy is using a similar bridge approach to help connect residents with resources to cover tax burdens that are causing rapid displacement. Ongoing research suggests that this organizational infrastructure is a “missing middle” for many low-income communities. There may be strong local and grassroots capacity and there may be extensive public and private resources, but the connection between the two is needed in order to generate the capabilities within low-income communities that allow members of wealthier communities to remain resilient in times of disaster and financial upheaval. This capabilities aspect of bridge groups makes them an essential component in furthering a just green model for cities.

Second, sustained *political bridges* between social equity and environmental groups are essential. I do not speak here of strategic coalitions around specific policy initiatives. Rather, I refer to something more like a sustained heterarchic governance arrangement that balances power among environmental and social equity interests in order to engage together in the ongoing project of directing urban growth. These permanent political bridges do not compress social equity and environment into a single political cause but do create a systemic link that challenges growth-oriented interests. In California, some progress has been made in this direction. Regional planning and climate initiatives focused on land use have created tendrils of alignment between powerful environmental and affordable housing movements. These interests are not always aligned, but political bridges are in place when new land use battles arise. If a strong version of this structure were adopted, growth interests would have to reorient in a way that would allow resilience to go deeper than sustainability in addressing institutional challenges.

Resilience as a Project for Institutional Change

Speaking of urban greening initiatives, a community activist recently commented that the motivations had “shifted toward another shade of green.” She implied that the main intent was to make money (the new shade of green) by using greening as an excuse for displacement and new development. She was frustrated by the on-the-ground effects of deeply entrenched institutions that support urban growth and had, in her mind, taken over sustainability initiatives. If resilience does not focus on tradeoffs by addressing the institutional circumstances that generate social vulnerability alongside ecosystem preservation, it will meet the same fate...at least in the eyes of those who are further marginalized.

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