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## **Introduction: The Politics of Resilience: Problematizing current approaches**

**Clemence Humbert and Jonathan Joseph**

### **Introduction**

By now it should be clear that resilience is not a thing, nor is there 'one' logic of resilience that informs all instances of its usage. A scholar from the ecology literature using 'resilience' may mean something different to a policy-maker in an international governmental organisation. Trying to find a fixed definition or clear understanding of resilience across time, space, and disciplines can only lead to a narrow perspective. Indeed, the scholarly consensus is that we should embrace the conceptual vagueness and malleability of resilience (Brand and Jax 2007). While this position raises certain epistemological difficulties, we still wish to emphasise the pluralistic character of resilience by examining what is politically at stake in discourses and practices of resilience and how these relate to particular subjects, themes and agencies; allowing an analysis that sees resilience as a complex and evolving process of articulation and identification. Discourses and practices of resilience can carry multiple logics. A certain form of selectivity takes place, we argue, and certain ideas of resilience are more or less mainstream or dominant according to the particular logic it works by. This special issue will identify such different political logics and discourses both in relation to dominant approaches and in possible alternatives of a more critical or emancipatory character. We seek to reconsider critical approaches to resilience in three ways – first by reexamining the relationship of resilience to neoliberalism; second by rethinking the immanent or endogenous focus of resilience upon the local and the indigenous in particular; third challenging and extending readings of resilience itself by introducing a more mundane, everyday conception of resilient activity.

### **Problems of definition**

Despite our reluctance to offer a set definition of resilience, we refuse the (equally unhelpful) idea that it is only a catch-all term. The contributors to this issue all agree that resilience relies on ideas of self-organisation, adaptation, transformation, and survival in the face of adversity or crisis. This framing, of course, can be unpacked in a number of ways, and some of these terms also raise disagreements within this issue. Readers will be aware of differing approaches to the politics of adaptation and transformation (for example, Gunderson *et al* 2002; Adger 2006, Berkes, Colding and Folke 2003; Bourbeau 2018), leading to a range of understandings ranging from the conservative to more radical views of resilience. This more radical view is founded on the ideas of complex life and creative problem-solving (Chandler 2014, p.35) seeing a return to a previous state of affairs as insufficient under conditions of uncertainty.

Perhaps, the dominant tendency in the critical literature, one reflected also in this journal, is to see resilience as conforming to a neoliberal view of how individuals and societies behave. A number of critical scholars have noted the 'intuitive ideological fit' (Walker and Cooper 2011, p. 154) between resilience and neoliberal philosophies of resignation and adaptation. For Evans and Reid the resilience of the poor requires neoliberal systems of governance (Evans and Reid 2014, p. 36) while Zebrowski (2008) notes that resilience is better understood, not through its own claims about the changing nature of security threats, but instead as an indication of the changing organisational structure of advanced liberal societies. In all these approaches, resilience is seen as matching with contemporary neoliberal governance, particularly in terms of its individualistic approach, its shifting responsibility onto individuals and communities and its promotion of reflexive self-governance through strategies of awareness, risk management and adaptability (Joseph 2018). The resilience as neoliberal governmentality thesis suggests that resilience fits neatly with Foucault's notions of 'governing from a distance' and responsabilised governance of the self (Foucault 2008).

Notably, however, David Chandler, while agreeing with elements of the resilience as neoliberal governmentality thesis, has suggested that resilience is post-liberal.<sup>1</sup> Liberal views emphasise the capacity to withstand and 'bounce back', founded upon the classical liberal subject's capacity for rational behavior. By contrast, the post-classical or post-liberal subject is relational rather than autonomous, meaning that it is embedded within a much more complex social environment than is allowed for by modernist reasoning (Chandler 2014, p. 11). We might debate whether this is really post-liberal, or actually a feature of neoliberal approaches – an issue taken up in Mavelli's article – and we might also frame this issue in terms of rational or conservative (and reactionary, Michelsen and De Orellana would add) understandings of resilience vis-à-vis more dynamic or transformative arguments about adaptability and transformation. Indeed, Bouchard separates adaptability and transformation into three positions: a) resilience as successful opposition and resistance to external shocks and a return to the former state; b) resilience as successful adaptation to a new situation involving adjustment, negotiation and compromise; and c) resilience as the opportunity to creatively respond to new challenges showing innovation and thriving in the face of adversity (Bouchard 2013, p. 267).

While we agree with many of the critiques of resilience, we see this special issue as raising questions about some of their basic assumptions, particularly whether resilience is not just another way of saying adaptation. Perhaps resilience entails a tension between the notions of resoluteness and resistance and the ideas of change, transformation or adaptation. But resilience is not about complete adaptation; rather it is about changing certain things in order to retain 'core' elements of life that are threatened by circumstances. Does this open

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<sup>1</sup> And in this special issue perhaps that the post-liberal is now post-resilience.

up some possibilities for retaining something from resilience? Is resilience simply a means for creating neoliberal subjects, or is there something in the resilient subject that evades a purely neoliberal discourse?

### **Aims of the Special Issue**

The obvious popularity of the idea and the rapid spread of its usage in policy-making across a variety of fields, from economics to security to overseas development, means resilience cannot be ignored. However, the policy discourse often gives the impression that resilience has become a buzzword; making it easy to dismiss as being overused and lacking substance; as lacking conceptual weight or depth. Here we want to redress that by examining some situations where resilience is *doing* important work by lending meaning to certain activities. The activities chosen are deliberately varied and a departure from the normal examples – from the everyday practices of border communities to resilience as political protest to alt-right political identity.

Therefore, this special issue contributes by positioning itself within the critical literature, but does so by trying to add some difference and nuance to the dominant themes – particularly the ones that link resilience to a neoliberal discourse or dominant viewpoint. While not rejecting such a view, we nevertheless wish to problematize the resilience/neoliberalism nexus. We also seek to raise questions about possible alternatives to the negative critique of resilience and, in particular, this issue addresses the seemingly progressive move to take inspiration from indigeneity. Finally, the articles in this special issue might be said to raise some significant questions about the definition of resilience itself by relating resilience to things that have not previously been considered – as mentioned, such things as everyday practices across political borders and self-identity among alt-right groups.

In problematising current approaches to resilience, including current critical work on resilience as well as governance discourse, we actively encourage a diversity of approaches that present sometimes conflicting although often interconnected arguments that provide specific angles on resilience and open up some significant questions about how resilience can be understood. Given the diversity of the topics covered in this issue, we spend the rest of this introduction identifying some commonalities in the arguments, followed by some distinctive features that might enable us to reconsider resilience in different ways.

### **Common themes in the issue**

The first issue to consider is how resilience responds to perceived threats. The common assumption in the resilience literature is to regard this threat as an external one, often of a natural or quasi-natural origin (most notably ecological arguments about global warming and environmental change). In keeping with current understandings of resilience most

papers in the issue look at threat as external, something that is related to extreme change or extreme adverse conditions. In the papers by Reid and Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen this takes the form of the extreme ecological conditions faced by indigenous populations. For Mavelli the threat comes from external economic shocks and crises. It might be noted that since the financial crisis, economic shocks and instability have been treated as an almost inevitable external condition that allows for neoliberal policies to be 'rebooted' for an age of uncertainty (Mckeown and Glenn 2018). For Michelsen and De Orellana, the threat is somewhat different – one of cultural mix and changes in identity, culture and values – but this still takes the form of a perceived threat from without in the context of change and uncertainty.

Wandji's article presents something of an exception to the idea of external threat. He points out that while the conventional definition of resilience causes the notion of threat to be limited to an idea of catastrophe or shock, threats and shock can actually be slow moving and barely perceptible to people with an outside-perspective. Instead, threat is reconfigured in terms of a 'plurality of disruptions', something that embraces the idea of the need to be resilient in the face of constant challenges, but questions the idea that this has to be seen in terms of a dramatic external event.

This brings us to the complex relationship between resilience and continuity. The idea of 'rebound and resume' is often promoted by resilience discourse with the person, community, company or service provider expected to carry out business as usual. Yet resilience is also about adaptation or transformation, and a tension exists between embracing change and staying true to the previous status or identity. This is evident even in the original ecology discussions (Holling 1973).

As noted above, Wandji introduces the idea of disruption which might be said to challenge the idea of continuity, or could be read as living with continuous disruption. He argues that the border community does not seek transformation and is resilient essentially in terms of adaptation as a form of continuity rather than change. The border-threat and all the obstacles this presents to communities becomes part of daily life and enables the continuity of social life across two countries divided by a political boundary and the complex, often disruptive, practices associated with this.

In another radically different take on resilience, Michelsen and De Orellana argue for continuity in the context of alt-right identity and discourse. Resilience as continuity means resistance to changes in values. This is indeed embracing a conservative rather than transformational approach. Continuity is understood in terms of preservation and, indeed, survival in the face of a hostile cultural and political environment. It is a reactionary ideology based on continuing the conservative principles which are considered to provide grounds for institutions and cultures that support the superiority of certain people.

For Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen continuity is often disrupted; indigenous people are expected to bounce back and continue their ways of being, but often not on their own terms. Indigenous people must adapt to the 'modern world', but they are required to stay indigenous 'enough' in order to keep receiving help from international organisations. In all these cases we see the importance of the wider political context and the role of power politics in the constitution of subjects and the shaping of their practices.

The transformative understanding of resilience positions itself against interpretations that emphasise 'withstanding', 'robustness' and perhaps even 'resistance'. Being resilient is to expect subjects to adapt and transform their habits or behaviour in light of a crisis or transformative event. For Reid and for Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, neoliberalism emphasises the need to adapt in order to survive. The indigenous individual has to adapt to the capitalist system in order to survive and indeed, through entrepreneurship, may actually be able to thrive, for instance by selling art to corporations. However, this transformation is not on their own terms, and represents the acceptance of the prevailing order. In this sense it is very different from the alt-right's resilience which is defined on its own terms and where, for them, survival also means retaining supremacy.

In Mavelli's paper the focus is on the system itself and how the capitalist economy creates a strong need for acceptance of the prevailing order. There is a conception of adaptation that bears similarity to the ideas set out in Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen's contribution and their view of how neoliberalism emphasises the need for the indigenous subject to accept and adapt. What is novel in Mavelli's argument is the idea that neoliberalism is less focused on transformation than we might be led to believe and instead requires a strong element of acceptance of the situation we find ourselves in, indeed, encouraging us to show faith in the face of market failures and financial crises.

Finally, all these contributions examine the temporal dimensions of uncertainty. The future is uncertain, and remains so until things are 'back to normal', that is to say until enough resilience has been shown. However, this is never fully achievable and resilience is dependent upon a state of uncertainty, and shows no clear deadline and no time frame of resolution of the threat. The 'goals' for resilience are always being adjusted over time, while the end is continuously postponed (Bargués-Pedreny 2018).

For Mavelli the ontology of resilience is complexity as unknowability – resilience is about being uncertain of what the future holds, sometimes even uncertain of the situation at one specific point in time. Indeed, resilience's focus on the local undermines a holistic view of the situation. Given this unknowability of the wider situation, Mavelli refers to the notion of

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a 'leap of faith' that he argues is the only option open to the resilient subject of neoliberalism.

Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen also raise the question of whether resilience can ultimately be achieved. The rewards keep escaping the resilient subjects. Those same subjects are urged to 'get over the past', focus on the future, and not entertain the idea that circumstances around them will improve. Their conditions must be endured with the promise of 'waiting it out'; resilience becomes an 'endurance test'.

These arguments reinforce the ideas present in much critical scholarship on resilience which questions modernist understandings of development and progress. They question the ideas of linearity and continuity in favour of the idea that we embrace the complexity of the present while recognising that its problems can never be fully resolved and that the promise of resilience is 'always to come'.

### **Problematizing approaches**

Having considered how the contributions to this special issue provide an understanding of new features of resilience, the final section of this introduction considers the way in which all the papers problematise conventional or current approaches to resilience. Each does so in a slightly different way, but in doing so, they raise questions about the dominant critical approach that regards resilience as merely a continuation of neoliberal governance. This special issue thus a) problematises the much-studied link between neoliberal governmentality and resilience, b) problematises the link between resilience and indigeneity, c) problematises the definition of resilience itself.

#### *Problematizing the link between neoliberalism and resilience*

Reid problematises the relationship between resilience and neoliberalism by showing that resilience is not only about the advancement and legitimisation of neoliberal governance. It can also be used as tool of vulnerable people, the specific example given being that of Ernesto Yerena Montajana, and their struggles against colonialism. However, the discourse of resilience is shown to be at the centre of a complex nexus including 'corporations, artists, colonial knowledge and neoliberal ideologues'. The indigenous exemplary subject is under pressure to be adaptive and self-reliant, something characteristic of the neoliberal subject. If they do not fit with such a model then this raises the question of whether this then implies that they are not 'indigenous'. Performativity is an important notion in this respect and indigeneity is expected to be acted out in accordance to the rules. The commodification of resilient subjects requires that to be resilient is to contribute. There is a point at which this may become disciplining – for example where enterprising subjects are required to produce

art as their main means of subsistence, but where this art is commercialised and commodified and subject to the demands of the market.

Mavelli's approach also sees resilience very much in relation to neoliberalism, but in his case he problematizes what neoliberalism is. Rather than a rational, calculating approach as understood in relation to Chicago School economics, it requires, at a certain point, something more like a 'leap of faith' – something emphasised in the work of Hayek. This leaves people ready to expose themselves to threat and risks while being resilient in the face of what this might entail. For these reasons, Mavelli opposes Chandler's (2014) argument that resilience represents a post-(neo)liberal approach, believing instead that it reveals a division within neoliberal thinking between rational calculation and a more religious 'leap of faith' in accepting and embracing the unpredictable power of the market.

Finally, Michelsen and De Orellana use resilience to study alt-right discourse in order to reveal the political ambiguity of resilience thinking and challenge the idea that it has an 'intuitive fit' with neoliberalism (Walker and Cooper 2011). Supporting the thesis that the concept of resilience does not have a 'natural politics' resilience can instead be understood as something that is contextually placed and provides a toolbox for various and sometimes opposed actors.

In all these cases, it is accepted that resilience has a strong link to neoliberalism, but the contributions reveal either a) that dominant neoliberal values should be seen in relation to more complex lifestyles and identities, b) that neoliberal itself divides between a more calculating approach and one based on showing faith, and c) that there are other complex identity relationships than cannot be reduced to a neoliberal story.

#### *Problematizing the indigeneity-local/resilience nexus*

The articles on indigenous resilience look at how indigenous people are now considered differently by international organisations. Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen argue that indigeneity comes to be seen as inspirational and traditional knowledge is deemed essential to being resilient. This knowledge is seen as central to global sustainability. Reid, also focusing on the resilience of indigenous people, argues that resilience is presented as inherent to indigeneity and related to people's supposedly innate connection to nature. Looking at the Arctic report, Reid shows how the capacity for resilience is identified with the indigenous and the global poor, who are victims of the changing environment and whose livelihoods and cultures are especially threatened. They are seen as an object of sympathy because they have usually done very little to contribute to climate change yet are the first affected. The report lauds the capacity of indigenous people to be resilient and cope with challenges in the Arctic, portraying them as an exemplary model for humanity.



Reid argues that the image of indigenous people as resilient is what allows for their exploitation and commodification. In one sense resilience and the idealisation of indigenous people is a reversal of previous colonial history. However the elements of the discourse often remain the same - for example, the idea of connection to nature, which was once deemed savage is today deemed desirable, even that which could save the world. This does not challenge the West's dominant position, or even reflect on its past and present violence but becomes part of white Western neoliberal governance.

Mavelli warns us against the romanticisation of local knowledge which can end up with us dismissing the importance of understanding global dynamics such as those of the capitalist system. Likewise Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen problematise the global discourse of sustainability as promoted by international organisations like UNESCO, which, despite the positive rhetoric of empowerment, also engenders power relations and shifts responsibility onto resilient subjects and communities.

What these examples point to is the danger of romanticising particular subjects, or putting faith in the politics of the local when these, in fact, are often used as strategies for shifting responsibility onto particular groups, or emphasising their particular agency while denying the possibility to manage the wider structural or historical context within which this agency is located.

Turning to the politics and identity of the alt-right we find a curious borrowing of the language of indigeneity. The chapter by Michelsen and De Orellana illustrates how the resilience/indigenous nexus is idealised, related to the 'golden age of purity', an idea of the 'native' societal order and the struggle for 'white survival' against the odds. Resilience in the case of the alt-right is said to rely on an innate capacity for adaptation, which is idealised in the face of modern technology. Members of the alt-right movement call themselves 'indigenous' of the white race, and are thus personally responsible for their own resilience.

We saw how resilience can fetishise the traditional, the culturally-rooted, the historical and indigenous. Reactionary resilience seems to follow a similar pattern since it aims to continue a 'native' societal order (whether it be around positioning race or gender). The strategy for 'white survival' sees the white indigenous groups as supposedly threatened by a new social and genetic mix. Borrowing the language of vulnerability and indigeneity, the alt-right portrays the existence of a threat of extinction comparable to that of the settler-colonial experience of indigenous people.

*Problematizing the lack of reflection on the definition of resilience itself*

Even critical debate on resilience that opposes its top-down biopolitical dynamics is prone to leave limited room for discussions about the pertinence of vernacular practices of resilience. The aim in Wandji's paper, therefore, is to highlight the complexity of resilience through an

empirical examination of the African postcolonial border as site of resilience in order to show that resilience is more prolific and complex than might be suggested by some of the critical literature. Indeed, it is Eurocentric to simply consider resilience as a governance tool of Western intervention. A more people-centric approach to resilience-thinking considers what the element of adversity is and how this is present in everyday activities. In this case it is the postcolonial border, which creates both adversity and opportunity.

Wandji looks at how the local becomes responsible, based on the fact that individuals have had to create their own system of continuity apart from, or even in the face of, state authority. Local people are not looking for structural change and the state is seen as more of a barrier or threat to the resilient system put in place. The problem of who defines the threat is a key one according to Wandji. In this case, the borderlanders engage in practices according to their own perception of the threat. This focuses on a plurality of disruptions as well as a plurality of practices. And perhaps here on the border, as well as here in academic literature, that disruption can play an important, subversive, perhaps even counter-hegemonic role.

## **Conclusion**

How long resilience will remain with us is a matter of conjecture (see Chandler, this issue). What is clear from the contributions to this special issue is that it currently plays a pivotal role in the articulation of certain tactics, strategies and identities that sustain both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices and which help facilitate, if not wholly so, both practices of governance and alternative forms of self-governance. The variety of approaches discussed here is testimony to the malleability of resilience if not necessarily its sustainability. Whether explicitly or implicitly, it captures something of social life in this current age of governance through complexity (Chandler 2014), and helps us understand the multiple practices that sustain this.

As well as the obvious issue of different interpretations, what this special issue draws out are the contestations over such key ideas as threat, continuity, transformation, the local and the everyday as well as problematising the relationships between resilience and neoliberalism, resilience and indigeneity, resilience and the local and the relationship resilience has to power inequalities within societies and between societies. These are all problematised as political issues. The continuing relevance and importance of resilience will be decided by these questions. Foucault would no doubt have said that that resilience is the continuation of politics by other means – or should that be, politics will decide on the means for the continuation of resilience?

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