

How did we become unprepared?

Emergency and resilience in an uncertain world

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Ideas of 'resilience'

The origins of this talk lie in the discussions, spanning a year or more, that fed into the creation of the Cabot Institute at the University of Bristol in 2010. The Cabot Institute brings together the natural, physical and social sciences around the issue of environmental uncertainty. For someone working on the politics of disasters, it was the first time I had engaged with colleagues from the natural and physical sciences.

The discussions were fascinating, mainly because of the overlaps and convergences they revealed, rather than the expected differences, especially in relation to emergencies. It quickly became evident, for example, that the idea of 'resilience' now operates as a *lingua franca* of preparedness, adaptability and survivability across the natural, the physical, and the social. Definitions vary, but if resilience is understood as a basic ability to withstand shock and survive disaster through adaptation, one can talk about the resilience of simple organisms, entire ecological systems, or built structures, including cities and critical infrastructure – as well as the resilience of social institutions, communities and lone individuals.

If nothing else, resilience-thinking has encouraged a range and depth of dialogue across the disciplines that, even a generation ago, would have been difficult. As a platform for exchange and cross-fertilisation, resilience has much potential.

And in less than a decade, resilience-thinking has also risen to dominance in the popular media, in social policy, and in political discourse generally. Resilience is everywhere, especially now at a time of austerity – we're all expected to be resilient. However, if we are to extract something from this new ability to communicate, it is necessary to address the more hidden and troubling dimensions of resilience. My concern is with how resilience has been used, especially in translation from ecology, to understand the human condition.

Since resilience is inseparable from emergency, I will tease out these concerns by first considering how our understanding of disaster has changed since the 1980s, I will then use the international aid industry as a brief example.

Ideas of disaster and security

The difference in understanding lies between seeing disasters as accidents arising *outside* of normal society and against which society could and should protect itself, and

today's belief that disasters are *internal* to society and against which protection is not only difficult but may well be harmful. This fundamental difference lies between, what could loosely be called, modernist and postmodernist conceptions of disaster.

Compared to the certainties of Cold War nuclear stalemate, it is argued that we now live in a different world, where security is increasingly challenged by the growing radical interconnectivity of contingent global events. The idea of 'national security' is now based upon the principle of radical uncertainty. Since the past has not equipped us to deal with today's new emergent, unforeseen and networked threats, we are constantly finding ourselves exposed and unprepared.

Security now struggles to assert itself in a risk-terrain made dangerous by the immanent possibility of systemic failure and hence catastrophe. Dangerous climate change is a good example of emergent uncertainty. As an unpredictable force-multiplier of the various drivers of global poverty, and thus something able to increase the chances of conflict, displacement, refugee flows, transnational criminality and even terrorism, climate change has morphed seamlessly into a threat to global security.

Historically, the logic of security within liberal states has been to seek *freedom from* danger and surprise. The logic of resilience is different. Since disasters are uncertain and unpredictable, rather than protect or secure against them, resilience urges us to accept the immanence of disaster and, in learning to adapt in order to survive, to see in disaster a new meaning of life. Resilience has called forth, allegedly for our own benefit, a historically novel, *post-security* condition. It is a condition where being unprepared is not so much an oversight or act of neglect, for many – especially the world's poor and marginalised – it is rapidly becoming an officially sanctioned way of life.

1970s' approaches

If we could teleport the disaster experts of the 1970s into the present, today's complexity and resilience-thinking would appear rather fanciful, if not morally dubious. The dominant approach to emergency was then based upon modernist assumptions and their corresponding technologies of protection and rescue. Disasters were not seen as a necessary outcome of the functioning of society and the social-ecological interface. Natural disasters were more or less random accidents or unusual occurrences that originated outside of normal society. The aim of

humanitarian rescue was to separate, to quarantine, or otherwise to place a protective barrier between the disaster, including its victims, and normal society.

The modernist approach to emergency had three main assumptions. First, geo-physical processes and their human impacts could be predicted by science; huge amounts were consequently spent on prediction and large-scale responses. Second, it was possible to plan comprehensively and respond managerially to contain or minimise these impacts. This included the relocation of populations; redirecting rivers; the building of flood or avalanche defences; cloud seeding; the quarantine of cities; and camp-based refugee regimes. Finally, you could create a centralised rescue capacity based on a hierarchy of relief organisations, including the logistical and managerial capacities of the military.

This modernist approach was reflected in the organisation of civil defence against nuclear attack, especially in the Soviet Union, together with the emergence of comprehensive all-hazard command and control institutions from the 1970s in America and Europe. In the Third World, the main modernist technology of rescue and protection was the refugee camp. The refugee camp operated to wall-off the disaster, including its victims, from society and its politics.

During the 1970s, however, the modernist belief that disaster lay outside normal society began to break down. Rather than random Acts of God, the socio-economic context in which disaster occurred became increasingly significant. Importantly, ideas of vulnerability emerged to explain why some societies or communities were more prone to disasters than others. For illustration, I will say a few words on how our understanding of famine has shifted.

Famine

Until the end of the 1970s, it was still common to regard famine as a macro-economic phenomenon, as an absolute shortage of food. The work of Amartya Sen helped change this view. Sen shifted attention towards micro-economic questions of unequal social capacities and differing degrees of market inclusion, factors which define an individual's ability to access the food that, invariably, is available in the market place. Vulnerability to famine was redefined in relation to an individual's choice-making abilities, social capital and degree of market inclusion.

From the end of the 1970s, the refugee camp also attracted increasing criticism: they created dependency, prevented refugees using their skills, undermined government capacity, and made market integration difficult. The discovery that cultivating individual choice was important justified the emptying of the refugee camps. The camps that inevitably remain have been progressively securitised and militarised.

Disaster management shifted from saving lives to supporting livelihoods. Rather than providing relief as such, it privileged the promotion of coping strategies and improving market access; it shifted to supporting individual choice and collective self-help. Rather than

calling-forth traditional security-based – *freedom from* – technologies of protection, the direction of travel favours more – *freedom to* – approaches, which involve accepting the inevitability of disaster. Rather than disaster and its victims being removed from society, since the 1980s they have been effectively (re)absorbed within it.

Adapt to survive

Within the past decade, resilience-thinking has colonised and expanded this, essentially, *neoliberal* turn within disaster management, indeed, within social policy generally. The recent discovery of the *Anthropocene* as a new geological age, for example, takes the (re)absorption of disaster within society a step further; humanity itself has blurred into the environment as the author of its own *permanent emergency*. Humanity has exchanged its subjectivity to become a bio-human force of nature.

Drawing on departures within ecology, especially the finding that non-human species exist dynamically on the edge of extinction, resilience-thinking regards landscapes of uncertainty and surprise as an intrinsic part of the bio-human condition. History from the Ice Age to Climate Change has become a series of catastrophic and violent events to which humanity, as a force of nature, continuously adapts and evolves in order to survive. I'm thinking here of Andrew Marr's 2012 television series, *The History of the World*, which took just this line.

Within the Obama administration, rather than try to make major cities disaster-proof, some security advisers argue it is better to accept that they are 'built to be vulnerable' – the proviso being to stop demanding protection and just learn to adapt. Within the gaze of national security, the global debt crisis is now comparable to a hurricane or earthquake; they blur together as different examples of the same permanent emergency. If politics can be defined as the ability to solve root problems, post-security landscapes are also post-political. Rather than solve root problems, taking our lead from nature and the behaviour of non-human species, we must now endlessly and uncritically adapt to survive.

Neoliberalism

When one sees the global debt crisis being compared to a natural disaster, as a force of nature made worse by human folly, it is perhaps time to begin questioning the political agenda underlying the conversation between resilience and neoliberalism. In particular, while resilience-thinking has called forth disaster as a new ontology of life, the policy implications of this are far from being applied equally or fairly across society.

Resilience underpins a new biopolitics that differs from what shaped the great modernist project of the Welfare and New Deal states. In order to work, resilience needs populations, communities and people that are free of any interposing historical, institutional or cultural legacies of social protection. Resilience requires a *pre-existing* state of exposure. Closed, protected, or even reluctant, communities have to be opened-up to risk and

contingency, so that they are free to reinvent themselves anew as leaner and more agile versions of their bloated selves.

Examples of this opening-up or social abandonment are clearly evident in current policy responses to austerity in Europe. However, we should not forget that, in the shape of structural adjustment, the global-South has been undergoing its own austerity-based shock-therapy for decades. From the modernist plateau of the Welfare State, our collective direction of travel, in the name of economy and freedom itself, has been one of deregulation, privatisation and, not least, *that well known force of nature*, globalisation.

However, the populations that are being politically exposed to disaster in order to become resilient *are not elites*; they are those hapless groups now revealed as especially vulnerable to uncertainty; in particular, the global poor and, in the North, those people and occupations that find themselves surplus to requirements.

Elite bunkers

Elites themselves are moving in a different direction. They are withdrawing from the post-security and post-political landscapes of permanent emergency; they are occupying and staking-out the world's proliferating privately secured gated-complexes and cultural walled-gardens. Elites are withdrawing from degraded and dangerous public spaces to the safety of private spaces. While the squeezed middle and working poor are expected to be resilient, urban environments are fragmenting as elites bunker themselves. Unsurprisingly, the international aid industry is not only a

good example of this wider spatial and logistical diagram, it is also an important site of experimentation and innovation.

Resilience-thinking has blurred the boundary between those requiring short-term emergency relief, and those needing long-term development assistance. Since emergency is now permanent, teaching the global poor to be resilient in the face of uncertainty presents itself as an essentially developmental act. For policy makers, the developmental properties of disaster mean that communities are not only expected to be able to bounce back from disaster, in the words of the Department for International Development, the aim now is to enable them to '... bounce back better'.

When one looks at the behaviour of international aid workers and donor representatives, however, one sees something different; rather than practising what is preached, there is a widespread retreat from risk and uncertainty. Since the 1990s, in response to the belief that aid work is becoming more dangerous, international aid managers have retreated into the aid world's proliferating Green Zones, the iconic image of which is the fortified aid compound (Figure 1). The result has been a deepening *paradox of presence*. While aid agencies have declared themselves willing to continue expanding within challenging environments, international managers themselves are becoming increasingly remote from the societies in which they work, presence is becoming progressively virtual.

Among international aid workers, ideas of resilience are associated with the therapeutic psycho-social and care-of-the-self aspects. Faced with landscapes of uncertainty and



Figure 1. UNHCR security-compliant compound, Yei, South Sudan. Photo: Mark Duffield.



Figure 2. UNHCR residential compound, Juba, South Sudan. Photo: Mark Duffield.

surprise, the basic argument among aid managers is that you cannot maintain constant vigilance and preparedness without taking care of the inner-self. Subjective resilience training, which is spreading from the military and emergency responders to international aid workers, has been likened to putting on mental armour. It tends to be formulaic, placing emphasis on things like healthy living, learning to recognise stress, the need for supportive social networks, and, importantly, developing emotional distance.

From this perspective, the fortified aid compound is more than a defensive structure; it is a therapeutic refuge that both separates international aid managers from outside uncertainty, and encloses the supportive social networks and cultural props that allow for narcissistic forms of care-of-the-self.

Dystopias

It is in relation to the bunker as a therapeutic refuge, that one can see another attribute of resilience-thinking – its basic post-Utopian credentials. In seeking refuge from uncertainty, today's social and economic elites are unlikely to imagine Utopias that involve a better future for all. Futures are more likely to be imagined in terms of the *exclusivity* that bunkered-life vainly promises. The post-

political is matched by the replacement of Utopianism with the dismal ability to imagine only social Dystopias and the frightening future threat landscapes to come.

If we are to extract something useful from the ability that resilience provides to talk across the sciences and disciplines, we must first dare to dream of a better collective future for humanity than the nihilistic prospect of permanent emergency; we must have the courage to demand protection for all.

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A panel discussion on 'How did we become unprepared? Emergency and resilience in an uncertain world' was held at the British Academy on 7 November 2012. An audio recording of the discussion can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/
