Coronavirus and the End of Resilience
Written by David Chandler

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Resilience appears to be the key policy buzzword of our times. International organizations, as diverse as the United Nations and the European Union, have now adopted resilience strategies across various policy areas – highlighted by the UN's risk and resilience framework for its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2017), the EU *Action Plan for Resilience* (European Commission, 2013), the European Union Global Strategy (EU, 2016) and other policy documents. This short piece argues that global responses to the Coronavirus appear to demonstrate that policy discourses of resilience may be one (so far, unremarked) casualty of the Coronavirus outbreak. 'Keeping Calm and Carrying On' is not an option. Acting normally, not panicking, not overreacting, is seen as dangerous and hubristic (Taleb et al, 2020). Being resilient will make the problems worse. Being resilient will make the virus spread. Better to close, to cancel, to restrict now, rather than to regret later.

Extreme measures and state of emergency powers are being rolled out across the board (Mudde, 2020). Of course, it may be argued that resilience comes in more sophisticated versions; it is not necessarily just a matter merely of drawing upon inner resources, strength and courage, to cope with whatever travails life throws at us. Resilience can be framed as reactive, not merely as a response of denial and passively coping with adversity. Nowadays, reactive resilience approaches are often associated with uncertainty and the management of risk in a world increasingly understood to be complex, relational and beyond the capacities of 'top-down' command and control (Grove, 2018; Chandler, 2014).

As a policy discourse in disaster management, security, or peacebuilding, resilience is often framed as a flexible and responsive approach to dealing with threats. We are often told that resilience is about sharing or distributing responsibilities and responsiveness. Local communities are to own their problems and become empowered or capacity-built through resilience-building initiatives. Maybe this is merely a smoke screen for neoliberal cost-cutting; maybe this is a sign that complex problems need 'bottom-up' community solutions rather than policy-impositions from on high. No matter. When facing a global pandemic, even this reactive, flexible and community-led approach to resilience is not an option. People cannot be trusted. People do not know better. They panic buy, depriving the vulnerable of essentials from toiletries, to food and medicine. They socialise, they party, they travel, they put others and themselves at risk. People spread the virus when left to their own devices. If one thing is clear from the state of emergency debates, in a crisis the public are not to be trusted with the public interest.

The policy responses, which go well beyond the provision of emergency medical assistance, suggest that people are understood as both dangerously irrational and weak, vulnerable and in need of protection, both from others and from themselves. Neither of these figures of the public at large – the dangerous or the vulnerable – are considered capable of resilience. Quite rightly, some commentators have stressed the authoritarian outcomes of seeing people as needing protection, both from the virus and from themselves (Agamben, 2020a; Furedi, 2020). Yet, perhaps this misses the point. Whilst Agamben complains that society has been reduced to the protection and promotion of 'bare life', the prioritisation of mere existence, this is hardly a product of authoritarian oppression. Many radical and critical commentators have called for the extension of regulatory governance and asserted the potentially positive outcomes of a greater level of state intervention (Sotiris, 2020; Harari, 2020).

The promotion of new emergency measures reducing public existence to 'bare life' is enacted on the basis that the public are too irrational, fragile and vulnerable to be resilient. This highlights a deeper problem than the Coronavirus itself. The impossibility of resilience when it counts – that is, in a crisis – on the basis that the public lacks the capacities for autonomy and reason, reflects an underlying shift away from the values of liberal humanism (Pospisil, 2020; Bargués, 2020). For many, Agamben's divide (1998) between 'zoé' (specifically

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human life) and 'bios' (biological life in general) is a problematic and outdated conception of human exceptionalism: of humans as somehow being outside or superior to the rest of nature. Agamben, in fact, gets to the nub of the matter when he writes that a war on the Coronavirus: 'a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us.' (Agamben, 2020b)

The Coronavirus brings to the surface the limits of discourses of resilience. If we are the security threat as well as the subjects to be secured, then we cannot be trusted to secure ourselves. Certain Extinction Rebellion activists proclaiming that 'Corona is the cure. Humans are the disease' tap into this lack of trust, in perhaps an extreme way, but are not out of line with the UN's environment chief, Inger Andersen, who argues that the virus is a message from nature that humanity is bringing these crises upon itself (Carrington, 2020). It would appear that the ease with which resilience has been rejected can be explained by the fact that the 'human' which resilience presupposes, a subject capable of reason and responsibility, is seen as a hubristic and problematic fiction. The response to the Coronavirus demonstrates that societies no longer trust themselves to be resilient. If this is the lesson of the outbreak and the global response to it, then it truly is a wake-up call that a new approach is necessary.

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