

# Responsibility, resilience and symbolic power

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## Abstract

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between the concepts of responsabilisation and resilience appears, in policy and political circles at least, almost natural. Whilst both concepts have been subjected to sustained academic critique for their presentation as largely individual or familial qualities, and their negation of social and structural pressures, there has been more limited attention paid to the potential of the concepts if they were put to work in a different way. This article attempts to sketch out ways in which the fundamentally relational aspects of the concepts of responsibility and resilience can be brought to the fore. In doing so, it builds on Rose and Lentzos's argument that we should perhaps 'argue not *against* responsibility and resilience but *on the territory* of responsibilities and resiliencies' and sets out the case for engaging with, rather than withdrawing from or resisting discussions of the meanings and uses of these concepts, in tandem. Extending the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant, it argues for the need to turn the lens on the structures and mechanisms of power which promote and maintain inequality and divisive complex social relations, which undermine the possibility of collective 'resilience'. The article advocates our collective 'responsibility' as engaging in processes that challenge and redefine these practices and structures to enable resistance and progressive action.

## Keywords

Bourdieu, collective, individualism, resilience, responsibility, symbolic power, Wacquant

## Introduction

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between the concepts of responsabilisation and resilience appears, in policy and political circles at least, almost natural. Where some aspect of someone's life has gone wrong, this is often attributed to their irresponsible behaviour, or inability to withstand a variety of 'conditioning factors' impacting on everyday lives, or failure to meet accepted standards of normal functioning. Building the capacity to understand, adjust and overcome adversities is presented as a natural and necessary response.

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'Responsibilisation' is well-established as a feature of the social landscape. Hard work and self-sacrifice are counterposed with the damaging effects of idleness and self-indulgence. We are held responsible for the choices we make between these alternatives (Juhila et al., 2016). Alongside the obligations (*responsibilities*) held by all citizens, those affected by disadvantages, crises or emergencies are expected to demonstrate or develop *resilience* to cope with adversity. What emerged as a form of discourse in the 1940s, and accelerated following 9/11 and similar seismic shocks, has now seeped into almost all areas of government activity and rhetoric (Joseph, 2013). Young people are expected to show resilience at school, disadvantaged families are exhorted to become more resilient to better cope with the vicissitudes of modern life, and communities hear that increased resilience will enable them to manage the consequences of terrorist attacks and/or extreme weather events. Beyond national boundaries, the International Monetary Fund has stated that the 'financial system needs to become resilient and regional economies need to build resilience' (Neocleous, 2013, p. 4).

The pervasive influence of notions of 'self-help' can be traced back to Victorian times at least (Rimke, 2000); with associated concerns regarding deserving and undeserving groups, and the feckless 'underclass' (Welshman, 2013). In the late 1800s and early 1900s politicians and health professionals were concerned about 'feeble-minded' individuals who were 'unemployable', amongst whom were those who:

. . . without suffering from apparent disease of body or mind, are incapable of steady or continuous application, or who are so deficient in strength, speed, or skills that they are incapable . . . of producing their maintenance at any occupation whatsoever. (Welshman, 2013, p. 36)

Following the Second World War, 'problem families' occupied the thoughts of politicians, policymakers and practitioners (Lambert, 2019), and recent policy discourses have addressed issues of 'social exclusion' and 'troubled families'. Similar currents of concern have ebbed and flowed consistently over at least two centuries. An explicit emphasis on responsibility and resilience has been a newer development, perhaps. Bottrell (2013) argues that responsibilisation and resilience are 'twinning neoliberal texts', jointly focusing on the obligations and capacities of agentic individuals or atomised groups (the family, the community) to make their own way, without undue reliance on the enervating support of the state. These terms are, accordingly, two sides of the same coin, and necessarily so. Important, in this respect, is the 'work' they do in harness to justify and sustain aspects of the neoliberal project. Whilst both concepts have been subjected to sustained academic critique for their presentation as individual or familial qualities, and their neglect of social and structural dynamics, there has been limited attention paid to their potential if put to work in a different way. Some researchers have, though, initiated this kind of discussion (Rose & Lentzos, 2017; Trnka & Trundle, 2017; Welsh, 2014). This article complements and extends their work, drawing attention to the irresponsibilities of those in positions of power, the politicised origins of the rhetoric of self-help, and the need to reimagine and rework these two 'key words' (Garrett, 2017; Williams, 1976).

Rather than provide a history or genealogy of these two concepts, as others have done (Bourbeau, 2018; Joseph, 2013; Rose & Lentzos, 2017), we first sketch out ways in

which the relational aspects of the concepts of responsibility and resilience can be highlighted. We build on Rose and Lentzos's (2017, p. 44, original emphases) assertion that we should 'argue not *against* responsibility and resilience but *on the territory* of responsibilities and resiliencies'. We agree, although we also plot a different path across these domains, incorporating a sharp critique of the 'neoliberal government of insecurity' (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 312). In the next section, we note some areas of agreement with Rose and Lentzos, before setting out where and how we diverge from their analysis. We draw on Bourdieu and Wacquant to make the case for keeping government discourse and action – or inaction – at the centre of our analysis. Using the UK examples of the recent programme of austerity, preparations for leaving the EU (Brexit) and the government response to COVID-19, we set out how fuller, relational understandings of resilience and responsibility can be used to 'bring in' the shortcomings of powerful actors and institutions. A discussion of the need to engage with, rather than withdraw from or merely 'resist' (Neocleous, 2013), these debates brings the article to a close.

### **'On the territory of responsibilities and resiliences'**

Rose and Lentzos suggest that we

. . . should argue . . . *on the territory* of responsibilities and resiliencies, about who should be responsible for what and how they should be held accountable, about the power and resources required to make resilience a reality, about the collective conditions for responsibility and resilience. (2017, p. 46)

It is this suggestion, along with their recognition that what is at stake is 'not the hope of not being governed, but of being governed differently' (2017, p. 46) that we take as our starting point. But whilst Rose and Lentzos (2017, pp. 45–46) propose that 'there are some positive elements in resilience strategies that might provide handholds for a more progressive politics' we argue for a different perspective on resilience – one which interrogates and challenges the sources of the harms that undermine our capacity to take care of ourselves and each other. Our position is closer to that of Welsh (2014, p. 15), who notes that contemporary resilience theories deflect attention from political programmes that increase insecurity and precarity, echoing the limitations of Giddens's (1991) politics of the self; instead these ideas reify 'the naturalisation of shocks to the system, locating them in a post-political space where the only certainty is "uncertainty"' (see also Harrison, 2012).

We agree with some aspects of Rose and Lentzos's argument. We concur with their assessment of some of the problematic deployments of responsabilisation rhetoric: in particular, that responsibility is deployed against those who are not responsible for their condition by those wishing to escape or deny their own responsibilities (2017, p. 34). We also agree with their criticism of new obligations to 'make us resilient' placed on, for example, parents, community workers, teachers, therapists, and even ourselves (as reflexive actors) – 'demands for resilience without the collective and infrastructural powers and resources to realize resilience are disingenuous at best, toxic at worst' (p. 34).

We agree that responsibility and resilience are not exclusively neoliberal tropes, that they have been put to use by actors from across the political spectrum and that both have

a much longer history and wider reach than contemporary neoliberal discourses and policies. Following on from this perspective is a recognition that resilience and responsabilisation discourses are not always, or indeed, inherently, individualistic, even though they are often used to describe individual qualities that can be acquired through teaching and learning. Rose and Lentzos argue that ‘responsibility is inherently relational – it entails a set of obligations towards others’ (2017, p. 34), that ‘[r]esilience is fundamentally socially embedded’ and the concept ‘can offer individuals and collectivities a space of action and creativity . . . and authorizes arguments concerning the distributed capacities and solidarities required to make resilience a reality’ (2017, p. 37). These are all arguments that we concur with, and upon which we hope to build.

Criticising responsabilisation *per se* is, in Rose and Lentzos’s view, ‘a political and ethical shortcut’ which skirts around the ‘difficult questions . . . of who is being held responsible by whom for what, in relation to what, in what ways, and with what consequences’ (2017, p. 35). They also argue that researchers and critics ‘might do better to abstain from the rush to judgement’ when considering resilience strategies, exhorting us to ‘explore the polyvalence of resilience strategies’ instead. If we do so, they suggest we should ask ‘whether, how and in what ways we might find some handholds here for a more optimistic intellectual and political engagement’ (2017, p. 39). Again, we are in agreement about this, and do indeed intend to consider some of the difficult questions about who is responsible for what, and what we need to be resilient against. However, the handholds that we have found appear to be different to those identified by Rose and Lentzos and they take us in a different direction across the terrain.

Rose and Lentzos (2017, p. 30) note that an exploration of the history of responsabilisation rhetoric ‘may give the impression that responsibility is always inculcated by authorities “from above” in the service of “social control”’. They go on to highlight that friendly societies and trade unions and the ‘ethics of prudentialism’ equate to responsabilisation ‘from below’. However, the focus of this responsabilisation, wherever it originates, is always on less powerful actors or groups. Rose and Lentzos’s (2017, p. 34) acknowledgement, mentioned earlier, that ‘all too often, responsibility is imposed . . . by those who wish to deny or escape their own responsibilities, upon those who are not responsible for their condition’ appears almost as an afterthought, with little consideration to how questions of responsibility could be asked of those doing the imposing.

Perhaps the most significant point of disagreement with Rose and Lentzos, and the one which takes us off in a different direction across the responsabilisation and resilience territory, is around neoliberalism. For Rose and Lentzos, neoliberalism is ‘an all-purpose term of critique in much contemporary social science’ which is often used as a way of ‘avoiding the complexities of careful analysis and evaluation’ (2017, p. 38). They argue that ‘there is much analytic work to be done if we abandon the blanket critique of neoliberalism’ (p. 40). We feel that this smacks of overreaction, and here we attempt to show how a critique of neoliberalism can aid discussions about more progressive, democratic and social forms of resilience and responsibilities. Wacquant’s (2009a, p. 306) call for a ‘fully sociological understanding’ of neoliberalism to understand the ‘new government of insecurity’ is central to our analysis.

Our decision to locate strategies of neoliberal governments and politics at the centre of our analysis is at odds with Rose and Lentzos’s ambivalence towards the role and

responsibility of states in both producing social harms and providing social protection. They suggest that ‘a frank admission of the limitations of political action might be no bad thing’ (2017, p. 39), whereas we would instead argue that an acknowledgement of the full possibilities and potential of political action may be a more urgent task. By way of example, they suggest that:

On the one hand, securing individuals against adversity, whether from poverty, from urban violence or even from catastrophic external events such as floods or terrorist attacks, is beyond the power of the State alone; on the other, innovative actions – whether by loving parents, inspiring teachers, resourceful communities – can ensure not merely survival but flourishing in novel and more effective, perhaps more democratic ways, by maximizing resilience. (2017, p. 38)

Here, we fundamentally disagree with some of the specifics of this perspective, as well as the framing of shocks as natural and apolitical (Welsh, 2014). Even supposedly ‘natural’ disasters may well be shaped either by state activities (or inactivity) beforehand, and perhaps more obviously by the nature of governmental responses (Green, 2005). Perhaps governments ‘alone’ cannot secure all individuals against some of the adversities that are listed, but it cannot be denied that they are significant actors in determining the frequency of such adversities, and the impacts they have. Urban violence, especially in the USA, cannot be neatly decoupled from political issues such as racial segregation and injustice, policing techniques and the structure of opportunities available to young men. In the case of poverty, it is governments who decide the levels at which benefits are set, who is entitled to them, which disadvantages or inequalities they attempt to address. Governments also play a significant role in determining the discourse surrounding people who rely on state support as the primary source of their income. It is also the policies, actions or inactions of governments with regard to taxation levels, wage floors, employment legislation, regulatory systems, stimulus measures and so on that create certain labour market conditions that can do much to help or hinder the eradication of poverty. As John Veit-Wilson (2000, p. 143) has noted:

Ensuring that all the members of society, residents in or citizens of a nation state, have enough money is a clear role which governments can adopt or reject, but they cannot deny they have the ultimate power over net income distribution.

If we turn our attention to the somewhat idealised ‘loving parents, inspiring teachers, resourceful communities’ that Rose and Lentzos highlight, there is little acknowledgement of the role of the state in supporting or inhibiting these roles, and a corresponding exaggeration of the capacities of such actions to mitigate structural deficiencies (see also Dagdeviren et al., 2016). Many children living in poverty have loving parents, but that love cannot heat a home, put food on the table, buy new clothes or support hobbies or extra-curricular activities if a household income is not sufficient to allow it. Keeping, or bringing back, issues of government action or inaction leads us to consider different questions of responsibilities and why resilience is required.

Rose and Lentzos suggest that robust critiques leave ‘little space for ambiguity or for optimism’ and they suggest that ‘national productivity, global competitiveness and stronger futures’ might not be ‘such dreadful things to hope for’ (2017, p. 39). Again, we

disagree with this analysis and its denial of any domestic or international costs associated with the pursuit of such goals. Again, our position is closer to Welsh (2014, p. 21), who believes that ‘resilience approaches to the governance of uncertainty should be subject to sustained critical interrogation’. We therefore argue that it is through more robust and realistic engagement with neoliberal deployments of resilience and responsibility that we can better understand some of the costs and contradictions associated with neoliberalism itself, and thus be optimistic about different understandings and uses of the concepts in future.

## The ‘neoliberal government of insecurity’

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most influential and widely-read sociologists of recent times, but it has been noted that he is seldom read as a political sociologist, despite the fact that he ‘was centrally concerned with power and saw his work as an expression of political struggle’ (Swartz, 2013, p. 2). His friend and colleague, Loïc Wacquant has developed Bourdieu’s work in recent years to produce a comprehensive analysis of the ‘neoliberal government of insecurity’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 312). It is for these reasons that we draw on their work here.

Bourdieu attempted to construct a social theory ‘premised on the systematic unity of practical social life’ (Brubaker, 1985, p. 748), and positioning himself against dominant thinking was a recurrent theme throughout his work. DiMaggio (1979, p. 1461) argued that ‘Bourdieu takes as his subject precisely those attitudes, dispositions, and ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of a social class or a society’. Bourdieu himself argued that ‘[t]he preconstructed is everywhere’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 235, original emphasis) and that it was necessary for sociologists to break with common-sense views and widely-used classificatory systems. Bourdieu called this widespread acceptance of common-sense opinions and the closing off of discussions about alternatives a *doxa*, which, he argued, led to a view of the world as ‘taken for granted’ and ‘self-evident’ and was the outcome of attempts to make the arbitrary appear natural (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 164–167).

At the time that Bourdieu ‘came of intellectual age’ (Brubaker, 1985, p. 746) the French intellectual field was dominated – and split – by the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the voluntarism of Sartre. In attempting to transcend these two positions, Bourdieu’s work affirms ‘the primacy of relations’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 15, original emphasis). It was argued that the choice between agency and structure, subjectivism and objectivism, individualism and structuralism was a false choice, created by and embedded in the language that we use and which favours the description and distinction of *things* over relations and processes. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 15) argued that ‘Social science need not choose between these poles for the stuff of social reality – of action no less than structure, and their intersection as history – lies in relations.’

Bourdieu’s work has been criticised by ‘numerous commentators of various persuasions . . . for being overly static and “closed”’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 79), with little room provided in his theory for significant social change and transformation (see, for example, Jenkins, 2002). These criticisms are viewed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992, p. 80) as being ‘strikingly superficial’ and he does ‘not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance’. Elsewhere (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 234), he argues that:

The relative autonomy of the symbolic order, which in all circumstances and especially in periods in which expectations and chances fall out of line, can leave a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibilities.

Fowler (2020, p. 444) has recently noted that in ‘certain contexts, such margins for manoeuvre permit innovation, collective resistance, and transformative processes, and not just within segregated fields’. She argues persuasively that as well as his theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu’s work also ‘offers an accompanying, internally consistent theory of structural change’ (2020, p. 444) and notes that crises, ‘both within differentiated fields and across fields’, had ‘a profound impact’ (2020, p. 439) on Bourdieu. In discussing resistance, Bourdieu also rejected ‘the alternative of submission and resistance that has traditionally framed the question of dominated cultures’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 23) and argued that there can be an “unresolvable contradiction” inscribed in the very logic of symbolic domination’ with resistance in effect reproducing existing relations of oppression and control; and passive acquiescence standing instead as a form of critique and refusal. We endeavour to work with the ‘unresolvable contradiction’ here, at a time when we see multiple social and political crises across different fields, and when expectations and chances have fallen promisingly ‘out of line’.

Whilst the majority of Bourdieu’s work was not focused explicitly on the state, his view of power as ‘central organising dimension of all social life’ (Swartz, 2013, p. 3) and a concern with the reproduction of inequalities mean that much of his writing is applicable to examinations of government activities. Bourdieu extended Weber’s definition of the state as being the site of the monopoly of legitimate violence to include the concept of symbolic, as well as physical, violence (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 4). Symbolic power is, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘a power to construct reality’, (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79) and ‘*a power of consecration or revelation*, a power to conceal or reveal things which are already there’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23, original emphasis). Symbolic violence is the exercise of this power with the consent of those affected by it. It is a form of soft power which operates without being perceived as being violence – ‘the gentle invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192). Whilst many people in positions of influence – politicians, media commentators, celebrities, campaigners, etc. – can wield symbolic power, it is the state, in Bourdieu’s eyes, that is in the strongest position in the struggle to impose a constructed reality (see also Althusser, 1970).

Symbolic power can become, in the hands of politicians, the power to make groups, or classes, of people and to create what he termed a ‘vision of divisions’:

. . . the power to conserve or to transform current classifications in matters of gender, nation, region, age, and social status, and this through the words used to designate or to describe individuals, groups or institutions. (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23)

Bourdieu highlighted that official discourse possesses a particular strength, and is capable of imposing an official point of view or ‘a new construction of social reality’ (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18) by virtue of its special authority and legitimacy. He (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 2) also notes that ‘bureaucracies and their representatives are great producers of “social problems” that social science does little more than ratify when it takes them over as “sociological” problems’. We should point out here that we do not intend to take over the official social problems of individual and familial irresponsibility and a lack of resilience and make them sociological ones. We are attempting instead to ‘twist the screw the other way’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53), focusing our gaze on those that ‘constructed the instruments of construction’ (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 24), and aiming to ‘subject the state and the thought of the state to a sort of *hyperbolic doubt*’ (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 1, original emphasis).

### Regulating the poor

In developing and extending Bourdieu’s work on the bureaucratic field (Bourdieu et al., 1994) and the state (Bourdieu, 2014), Wacquant has, in recent years, focused on how the ‘neoliberal government of social insecurity’ (2009a, p. 312) in the USA and beyond has stigmatised and punished poor populations. Wacquant charts a shift from the broadly welfare missions of the postwar Keynesian state in the USA to a workfare state that is required to respond to the increase in social turbulence resulting from neoliberal economic and social policies. In *Prisons of Poverty*, Wacquant (2009b) sets out the USA’s ability to export oppressive and responsabilising social policies, arguing that the European ‘fascination with the United States stems essentially from the performance of its economy’. European governments’ political and economic fascination with the USA model and its associated policies is, Wacquant (2009b, p. 55) notes:

. . . much less diligent when it comes to registering the devastating social consequences of the veritable *social dumping* that these policies imply: namely, mass poverty and job precariousness, the generalization of social insecurity in the midst of regained prosperity, and the dizzying increase of inequalities fostering segregation, crime, and the dereliction of public institutions.

In a more expansive examination of this ‘punitive turn’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 302), Wacquant sets out a detailed ‘sketch of the neoliberal state’ (2009a, pp. 287–314). At the heart of Wacquant’s analysis is the point that neoliberalism needs to be understood sociologically and not just economically. Arguing that dominant representations of neoliberalism adhere to the doxic notion that it is predicated on a small state, Wacquant (2009a, p. 308) argues instead that ‘while it embraces *laissez-faire* at the top . . . it is anything but *laissez-faire* at the bottom’:

Indeed, when it comes to handling the social turbulence generated by deregulation and to impressing the discipline of precarious labour, the new Leviathan reveals itself to be fiercely interventionist, bossy, and pricey. The soft touch of libertarian proclivities favouring the upper class gives way to the hard edge of authoritarian oversight, as it endeavours to direct, nay dictate, the behaviour of the lower class.



In discussing the increasing deployment of this ‘hard edge’, Wacquant draws on Bourdieu’s (1998) concepts of the different hands of the state: the left hand as the providers of social services and support and the right hand as the ‘masculine side . . . charged with enforcing the new economic discipline via budget cuts, fiscal incentives and economic deregulation’ (2009a, p. 289). He argues that ‘the new priority given to duties over rights, sanction over support, the stern rhetoric of the “obligations of citizenship”’ are ‘policy planks [that] pronounce and promote the transition from the kindly “nanny state” of the Fordist-Keynesian era to the strict “daddy state” of neoliberalism’ (2009a, p. 290). In addition, he identifies ‘the cultural trope of individual responsibility’ as one of four ‘institutional logics’ of neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 307).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001, p. 2) have noted that a ‘strange Newspeak’ accompanies neoliberalism which includes terms such as globalisation, flexibility, governance and employability. Whilst the concepts of resilience and responsibility are not explicitly named, we argue that they form part of this ‘new planetary vulgate’ and, like the other concepts, ‘owe their power to convince to the prestige of the place whence they emanate’ (2001, p. 2), and to their unquestioned, doxic ubiquity. Bourdieu and Wacquant go on to highlight that institutions and agencies such as the World Bank, the EU, the OECD, think-tanks, universities and philanthropic foundations use these concepts. Elsewhere, Bourdieu suggests that such ‘keywords were just words, self-mystifying fictions that technocracy uses to give itself a bit of soul’ (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 190).

Whilst this has been a necessarily brief and incomplete summary of some of the works of Bourdieu and Wacquant, we hope that they highlight why we believe it is important, if not imperative, that the state and ‘the new government of insecurity’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 312) should be placed at the forefront of attempts to traverse the territories of responsibilities and resiliences. If our analysis aims to explicate the relational elements of these concepts, we must look at who applies them and who has the symbolic power to bring them to life.

## **Insecurity in the UK**

We focus on the neoliberal government of insecurity in the UK. Whilst the issues discussed here may not transfer directly to other countries, we contend that our depictions of the deployment of the tropes of responsabilisation and resilience will resonate more widely. We draw on experiences of austerity, Brexit and COVID-19 to demonstrate how the lenses of responsabilisation and resilience can be turned in other directions, calling into question the irresponsibilities of powerful individuals and institutions.

### *Austerity*

Responsibility and resilience rhetoric became cornerstones of Coalition and Conservative government policy and the programme of austerity that was initiated after the General Election in 2010. Spending cuts, it was claimed, would be mitigated by unleashing the capacities of the Big Society and civic voluntarism. The mantra ‘we’re all in this together’

legitimised further cuts. Cooper and Whyte (2017, p. 11) viewed the relational aspects of austerity differently:

Austerity is a class project that disproportionately targets and affects working class households and communities and, in doing so, protects concentrations of elite wealth and power. The policies levelled at working class households have barely touched the elite. Neither have suicide rates in the political class or amongst city stockbrokers risen in the austerity period. Cuts to the NHS have barely affected those who can afford private healthcare. And elderly politicians and retired bankers have not experienced record rates of morbidity.

Universal Credit, the government's 'fiercely interventionist' (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 308) welfare reform measure, would 'support those who do the right thing, who take a full time job, to have an income which lifts them out of poverty' (HM Government, 2011, p. 24). Similarly, the government's child poverty strategy focused 'on fairness and personal responsibility, not cash handouts', this being 'the responsible choice in this fiscal climate' (2011, p. 3). But was the programme of austerity, led by the 'right hand' of the state, which created the 'fiscal climate', a 'responsible choice', given the predictions of increasing poverty and hardship that would occur because of it? Prime Minister David Cameron (2011), launching a programme to tackle the problem of 'troubled families', said 'my mission in politics – the thing I am really passionate about – is fixing the responsibility deficit'; but it was not his government's abdication of responsibility for the 2011 riots that led to the establishment of the programme, or the diminished resilience that resulted from welfare reforms that he had in mind. Rather, Cameron (2016) championed resilience as key to social mobility, to be achieved through familial learning:

While bad habits can be passed on to children, we know, too, that the secret ingredients for a good life character, delayed gratification, grit, resilience, they can be taught by parents, not just caught from them.

Garthwaite's (2016) study of foodbank use provides a lucid example of the development of responsabilisation and resilience rhetoric by the Coalition government, and the contradictions inherent within it. Foodbanks were praised by Cameron when he was Prime Minister, as an 'excellent example' of active citizenship and 'part of what I call the Big Society' (Hansard, 2012). Instead of being held up as symptoms of a failing state, foodbanks were celebrated, by government, as symbols of an indomitable spirit of resilience and active responsibility, in place of the traditional missions of the 'left hand' of the state. Predictably, though, a connection between growing foodbank usage and the failing safety net of the diminishing welfare state became apparent (Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford & Dowler, 2014). As the shine wore off this totemic image of the Big Society in action, Conservative politicians changed tack, contradicting themselves, to use foodbanks instead to pillory the irresponsible poor, seen by now as lacking in, rather than manifesting, resilience. People using foodbanks were characterised as 'unable to manage their personal finances, [they are] freeloaders abusing the service the foodbank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of foodbanks offering free food' (Wells & Caraher, 2014, p. 1436).

## Brexit

In the case of Brexit, resilience and responsibility featured heavily as rhetorical devices, put to use by powerful actors and institutions. Whilst we acknowledge that it was the British public who narrowly voted to leave the EU in a referendum in 2016, we also contend that the symbolically violent behaviour of politicians, public figures and campaigning groups has drawn on caricatured representations of our twin concepts. Following Brexit, we are supposedly able to ‘take back control’ (Hobolt, 2016), and ‘stand on our own two feet’ as a proud, independent nation once again (Corbett, 2016). This, though, has fuelled conflict and polarisation within the UK about issues such as ethnicity, migration, and democracy more widely.

The government’s own capacity to act responsibly was called into question, when it was found guilty of illegally proroguing parliament for five weeks in the run-up to the deadline for agreeing a withdrawal deal with the EU. The Speaker of the House of Commons called the decision ‘a constitutional outrage’ and noted that it was ‘blindingly obvious that the purpose of prorogation now would be to stop parliament debating Brexit and performing its duty in shaping a course for the country’ (Proctor, 2019). The Supreme Court found the government to be acting irresponsibly:

It is impossible for us to conclude, on the evidence which has been put before us, that there was any reason – let alone a good reason – to advise Her Majesty to prorogue Parliament for five weeks. . . . We cannot speculate, in the absence of further evidence, upon what such reasons might have been. It follows that the decision was unlawful. (House of Commons Library, 2019)

Implicitly acknowledging ‘the social turbulence generated by deregulation’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 308), the government noted the risks it was taking by hiring ‘resilience advisors’ (Sharma, 2018) to address possible ‘disruption’ caused by a ‘no-deal’ Brexit; local authorities were urged to establish ‘food resilience teams’, with the warning that they would be tasked with helping limit the risk of social disorder, which had previously been associated with food supply problems (Kentish, 2018). Government preparations for a no-deal Brexit were described as ‘inadequate’, and families began to stockpile food (Obordo, 2018). In a newspaper interview, Laura from Gloucester crystallised many widely shared fears:

I am most worried about Brexit disruption in the initial period, assuming a no-deal (food and medicine primarily), but longer-term I worry about the diminishing opportunities for my children in this country and an erosion of the standards and (some admittedly imperfect) safeguards on food, manufacturing, workers’ rights and environmental standards . . . I don’t think stockpiling will in any way protect us from those longer-term and chronic issues. It provides a bit of a comfort blanket, but no real aid.

In the absence of anything approaching coherent leadership from government, perhaps this form of self-help was the only way in which citizens could attempt to act responsibly and build resilience in the circumstances.

## COVID-19

At the time of writing, it is not possible to draw out or fully understand the full implication of the COVID-19 pandemic or the response of the UK government to it. Again, we acknowledge that no government intentionally caused the outbreak by its actions, but it is a legitimate activity to examine the actions and inactions of governments in responding to the outbreak (Hale et al., 2020). In the UK, a 'lockdown' was implemented, and the public were responsibilised via the slogan exhorting them to 'Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives'. Following the easing of lockdown, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock stated that it was their 'civic duty' to self-isolate if they were informed that they had been in contact with someone who tested positive for the virus.

By contrast, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson 'failed to attend five high security Cobra meetings during January and February that were held to prepare for a possible pandemic' (Proctor & Syal, 2020). During the period of the meetings, Johnson had taken short holidays, 'fuelling concerns that he hadn't taken the threat seriously enough at an early stage'. His Special Advisor, Dominic Cummings, later drove 60 miles with his family, allegedly to test his eyesight in contravention of the lockdown rules; and road traffic legislation. The trope of 'being led by the science' (whilst clearly ignoring much of it) represents a further cunning abdication of responsibility and evidence of the symbolic power of the state. After 11 weeks of lockdown, and at a time when the Office for National Statistics were reporting upwards of 45,000 coronavirus related deaths in England and Wales, a report emerged that Johnson had decided to take 'direct control' of the government's handling of the crisis. It was not clear who had been 'responsible' for the national response up to that time.

Despite government claims to have thrown a 'protective ring' around care homes, these were contradicted by the discharge of hospital patients with COVID-19 into care homes, the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for care home staff and the delay in providing tests for staff and residents. The UK government at first suggested that international comparisons regarding the impact of the coronavirus in different countries were premature, despite a number of public claims to be leading the world in various aspects of its strategy; but there is widespread acceptance that irresponsible decisions or non-decisions taken by the government (both in the short-term and over the longer-term, such as austerity) have caused harm and have cost lives. The use of private sector companies and the concerns of a 'chumocracy' (Conn et al., 2020) in the awarding of contracts relating to the government's response highlight the 'soft touch of libertarian proclivities favouring the upper class' whilst the increased use of 'stop and search' during 'lockdown' by the Metropolitan Police in London (Marsh, 2020) demonstrates the 'hard edge of authoritarian oversight' (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 308) of already marginalised groups.

At the same time, mutual aid has flourished in the face of the pandemic. The government announced that it wanted to recruit 250,000 volunteers to help support the NHS: over 750,000 people signed up. Mutual aid support groups have sprung up, connecting an estimated 3 million people across the UK (Butler, 2020), and new bonds in streets and neighbourhoods have been formed. Businesses have sprung into action to produce PPE for NHS and social care staff amidst previously predicted deficiencies in

availability through government suppliers, and to provide free food for them due to shortages at supermarkets, whilst other businesses have repurposed their activities to producing other products such as hand sanitiser. In some cases, and in the absence of a robust response from the state, volunteers and workers have given what they can – ‘the minimal hope that is necessary if people are to make it out of their difficulties’ (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 190).

## **Relational understandings of responsibility and resilience**

Trnka and Trundle (2017, p. 13) argue that the alternative ‘modes of responsibility’ in everyday life demonstrate we can and must ‘[break] away from neoliberal conceptualizations of individual responsibility’. Indeed, it is the neoliberal project which actually provides a ‘margin of freedom’, opening up space and prompting the creation of ‘new kinds of collective ties’; and so: ‘the neoliberal focus on self-responsibility that drives the establishment of programs to instil self-care and better living skills activates older values of *aktywnosc* (activity, activeness)’ (Trnka & Trundle, 2017, p. 13). Objects of concern may refuse to be responsabilised, or they may choose to redefine the principle of responsibility, so that it no longer aligns to individualised notions of self-worth and achievement, and instead includes our responsibilities to each other, especially marginalised and disadvantaged groups, as we have seen happen in response to austerity, COVID-19, Violence Against Women and Girls and the Black Lives Matter movement.

We must move beyond asserting and exemplifying alternative articulations of shared responsibility and mutual resilience, though. In Bourdieu’s (1996, p. 24) words, we need to ask ‘who constructed the instruments of construction’. The responsibilities of those in power thus need to be brought into the discussion; and the atomising and disempowering individualised notions of these concepts must be directly confronted. In this way, more egalitarian, interdependent and relational notions of responsibility take the place of the neoliberal politics of self, grounded in principles of mutuality and shared conceptions of justice; and more critical conceptions of resilience become the basis for the assertion of collective futures, of ‘getting through’ rather than just ‘getting by’.

The challenge before us then is to plot an alternative course across the territories of responsibilities and resiliences, to the one sketched out by Rose and Lentzos: one which does not take us away from the role of the neoliberal government of insecurity and uncertainty, and instead allows us to work with and on the ‘unresolvable contradiction of symbolic domination’ that Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 23) wrote of. Resilience and responsibility can thus be exemplified in the form of active, collective counter choices and resistance, as we have discussed. Here, we are excited and encouraged by the work of Iris Marion Young (2011, 2013), who set out clearly the necessity to reclaim and redefine the term ‘responsibility’ in pursuit of social justice. The examples mentioned above suggest that a large proportion of the British public are routinely ‘doing’ resilience in the sense of surviving under the political programme of austerity, with rising costs of living and falling wages, and adapting to changing economic and social conditions as a result of Brexit and an inadequate and arguably irresponsible government response to COVID-19.

Uneven attributions of (ir)responsibility also emphasise the need to widen the resilience discourse to understand where the most obvious threats or sources of harm

originate, and what generic mechanisms we can create to build resilience grounded in a spirit of mutuality, where a virtuous circle of responsibility ↔ resilience is established. We must exploit contingent opportunities collectively to prevent (at least some) of the adverse circumstances or events from happening, and redefine the constitutive elements of resilience, in line with a more equitable attribution of ‘responsibility’, along the lines of Young’s (2013) ‘social connection model’. Across the globe, the vastly different governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, where the resilience of some populations (and sub-groups within populations) has been tested far more than others, highlight that social harms can be ameliorated or exacerbated by political activity or inactivity.

Citizens of the UK are more likely to suffer from the effects of welfare reforms and austerity measures, imposed upon them by their own government, than they are from pandemics, terrorist attacks or environmental or climate related disasters. The comedian Frankie Boyle (@frankieboyle, 2018) tweeted that:

Coverage of Universal Credit talks of ‘vulnerable’ groups, when it would be more appropriate to describe them as ‘oppressed’. If the thing you’re vulnerable to is your own society, you’re oppressed. (Quoted in Yeo, 2020, p. 679)

The UK is one of the richest countries on earth, with historically low levels of corporation tax and an estimated ‘tax gap’ of at least £35 billion (HMRC, 2019, p. 3). We would argue that there is plenty of scope for (socially and fiscally) responsible political action to ensure that individuals and families are no longer expected to take personal responsibility for their own survival in the face of poverty and material deprivation. We should not realistically expect governments to urge citizens to be resilient against social harm and structural violence that emanate from their own policies and actions or inactions. Families and communities should not be tasked with exhibiting resilience, through means such as skipping meals, or volunteering at foodbanks, in the face of oppression and destitution imposed from above. Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 629) note that whilst it is ‘not easy to eliminate or even modify’ many structural disadvantages and causes of suffering:

. . . it is also true that any political programme that fails to take full advantage of the possibilities for action (minimal though they may be) . . . can be considered guilty of nonassistance to a person in danger.

Our underlying collective ‘responsibility’, then, is to pay closer attention to the interlocking mechanisms and practices which maintain an unfair, unequal and divisive complex of social relations; and which undermine, rather than sustain, the possibility of collective ‘resilience’, resistance and progressive action. Reimagined, the ‘twinned neo-liberal texts’ of responsabilisation and resilience can assist us in explicating the social and political origin of much adversity, disadvantage and exclusion experienced across the globe. It is necessary to ensure that the norms and practices of existing institutions are redefined in ways which facilitate change and promote social justice. Without this kind of process, resistance and transformation may be unachievable, and we may all need to become a little more resilient to coming crises.

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