



From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical and political critique of how the concept of resilience has been applied to places. It is based upon three main points. First, the ecological concept of resilience is conservative when applied to social relations. Second, resilience is externally defined by state agencies and expert knowledge. Third, a concern with the resilience of places is misplaced in terms of spatial scale, since the processes which shape resilience operate primarily at the scale of capitalist social relations. In place of resilience, we offer the concept of resourcefulness as an alternative approach for community groups to foster.

Keywords

communities, ecology, resilience, resourcefulness, social relations

Concepts of resilience are used to describe the relationship between the system under observation and externally induced disruption, stress, disturbance or crisis. In a more general sense, resilience is about the stability of a system against interference. It is, however, more than a response to or coping with particular challenges. Resilience can be seen as a kind of systemic property. (Lang, 2010: 16)

In its tendency to metabolize all countervailing forces and insulate itself against critique, ‘resilience thinking’ cannot be challenged from within the terms of complex systems theory but must be contested, if at all, on completely different terms, by a movement of thought that is truly counter-systemic. (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 157)

I Introduction

The concept of ‘resilience’ has migrated from the natural and physical sciences into the social sciences and public policy as the identification of global threats such as economic crisis, climate change and international terrorism has focused attention on the responsive capacities of places and social systems (Hill et al., 2008; Swanstrom et al., 2009). The question of how to build up the resilience of places and organizations is attracting great interest, especially in the

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'grey literature' produced by government agencies, think tanks, consultancies and environmental interest groups. As Walker and Cooper (2011: 144) observe, the concept of resilience has become 'a pervasive idiom of global governance', being 'abstract and malleable enough to encompass the worlds of high finance, defence and urban infrastructure'. In particular, the frequency by which resilience is invoked by progressive activists and movements underlines the need for critical appraisal of both the term itself and the politics it animates. Through our own ongoing engagement with a grassroots project in Govan, a post-industrial neighbourhood in Glasgow, as well as through attending a variety of events in Britain over the past year that have attracted representatives of environmental groups and campaigns such as Transition Towns, Grow Heathrow, and Coexist,¹ it is clear that 'resilience' is helping to frame particular forms of activism, some of which are anti-capitalist in nature.

This paper aims to provide a theoretical and political critique of how the concept of resilience has been applied to places. In particular, we are concerned with the spatial politics and associated implications of resilience discourse, something which we consider to have been neglected in the burgeoning social science literature (Agder, 2000; Norris et al., 2008; O'Malley, 2010; Simmie and Martin, 2010).² A key issue here concerns the importation of naturalistic concepts and metaphors to the social sciences and the need to problematize social relations and structures, rather than taking them for granted (Barnes, 1997). This requires recognition of the ecological dominance of capitalism in terms of its capacity to imprint its developmental logic on associated social relations, institutions and spaces (Jessop, 2000).³ From a geographical perspective, urban and regional 'resilience' as an objective must be understood in relation to the uneven spatial development of capitalism across a range of spatial sites and scales (Smith, 1990). In this context, we suggest

that resilient spaces are precisely what capitalism needs – spaces that are periodically reinvented to meet the changing demands of capital accumulation in an increasingly globalized economy. From this perspective, both the sources of resilience and the forces generating disruption and crisis are internal to the capitalist 'system'. Crucially, the resilience of capitalism is achieved at the expense of certain social groups and regions that bear the costs of periodic waves of adaptation and restructuring.

Our critique of resilience is based upon three points. First, we argue that the concept of resilience, derived from ecology and systems theory, is conservative when applied to the social sphere, referring to the stability of a system against interference as emphasized in the first of our opening quotations (Lang, 2010). This apolitical ecology not only privileges established social structures, which are often shaped by unequal power relations and injustice (Harvey, 1996; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003), but also closes off wider questions of progressive social change which require interference with, and transformation of, established 'systems'. Thus, while Larner and Moreton (2012) suggest that resilience can generate a politics that prefigures alternative social relations, we do not regard it as the best way to animate such a politics. Second, resilience is externally defined by state agencies and expert knowledge in spheres such as security, emergency planning, economic development and urban design (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008; Walker and Cooper, 2011). Such 'top-down' strategies invariably place the onus on individuals, communities and places to become more resilient and adaptable to a range of external threats (O'Malley, 2010), serving to reproduce the wider social and spatial relations that generate turbulence and inequality. Third, we contend that the concern with the resilience of places is misconceived in terms of spatial scale. Here, resilience policy seems to rely on an underlying local-global divide whereby different scales

such as the national, regional, urban and local are defined as arenas for ensuring adaptability in the face of immutable global threats.⁴ This fosters an internalist conception which locates the sources of resilience as lying within the particular scale in question. As a result, resilience policy is devolving what Peck and Tickell (2002: 386) call ‘responsibility without power’ by effectively setting up communities and places to take what our collaborator Gehan MacLeod has called ‘knock after knock’ and keep getting up again. By contrast, we contend that the processes which shape resilience operate primarily at the scale of capitalist social relations (Hudson, 2010).

Beyond this critique, our approach is attentive to what we understand to be the normative political yearnings that underpin resilience talk among oppositional groups and campaigns. In these contexts, we recognize that resilience is meant to prefigure alternative social relations in which social and environmental well-being is the system which is to be privileged (i.e. the resilient system), with capitalism seen as one of a number of disruptive and destructive forces. Without intending to belittle such activism, we view the cultivation of what Spivak (2012) has termed a will to social justice as a first step towards realizing the vision that we understand resilience activism as attempting to ‘prefigure’. Put another way, if alternative social relations are to be realized democratically and sustainably, and in ways that are wide-reaching and inclusive (as opposed to uneven or vanguard-driven), then uneven access to material resources and the levers of social change must be redressed. To that end, we offer resourcefulness as an alternative concept to animate politics and activism that seek to transform social relations in more progressive, anti-capitalist and socially just ways. In contrast to resilience, resourcefulness as an animating concept specifically seeks to both problematize and redress issues of recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 1996; Young, 1990) and work toward cultivating

conditions in which communities can develop alternative visions of social relations. It is intended to foster a ‘counter-systemic’ mode of thought (and practice) that transcends systems theory and resilience thinking in the spirit of our second opening quotation (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 157).

The remainder of the paper is divided into six sections. The next section discusses the concept and discourse of resilience, tracing its migration from the natural sciences to the realm of urban and regional policy and activism. We then address the three points of our critique in turn. This is followed by a consideration of the possibilities of resourcefulness as an alternative approach for communities and oppositional groups. Finally, we summarize our arguments and consider their implications.

II Resilience and its uses

The concept of resilience has roots in both physics and mathematics, where it refers to the capacity of a system or material to recover its shape following a displacement or disturbance (Norris et al., 2008), and ecology where it emphasizes the capacity of an ecosystem to absorb shocks and maintain functioning (Folke, 2006; Holling, 1973). Subsequent applications to a number of objects from the built environment to individuals, social systems and communities have spawned a range of definitions (Table 1). The work of the American ecologist C.S. Holling (1973, 2001) has proved particularly influential, not least through his role in groups such as the Resilience Alliance of scientists and the Stockholm Resilience Centre, a high-profile think-tank (Walker and Cooper, 2011). Researchers often distinguish between resistance and ‘bounce back’, where the former refers to the ability of a system to block disruptive changes and remain relatively undisturbed, while the latter is defined in terms of the capacity to recover from shock and return to normal functioning.

Table 1. Selected definitions of resilience.

Author, date	Discipline	Level of analysis	Definition
Gordon, 1978	Physics	Physical system	The ability to store energy and deflect elasticity under a load without breaking or being deformed
Holling, 1973	Ecology	Ecological system	The persistence of relationships within a system; the ability of systems to absorb change and still persist
Resilience Alliance, undated	Ecology	Ecological system	The capacity to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state (http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/resilience)
Egeland et al., 1993	Psychology	Individual	The capacity for successful adaptation and functioning despite high risk, stress or trauma
Agder, 2000	Geography	Community	The ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure
Katz, 2004	Geography	Community	Ways in which people adapt to changing circumstances to get by and 'make do' through the exercising of autonomous initiative
Hill et al., 2008	Urban and regional development	Region	The ability of a region to recover successfully from shocks to its economy

Source: Adapted and extended from Norris et al. (2008: 129).

In the ecological literature, two types of resilience are commonly identified (Folke, 2006; Holling, 1973). The first is 'engineering resilience', which is concerned with the stability of a system near to an equilibrium or steady state, where resilience is defined in terms of elasticity which emphasizes resistance to disruption and speed of return to the pre-existing equilibrium. Second, 'ecological resilience' refers to external disturbances and shocks that result in a system becoming transformed through the emergence of new structures and behaviours. This understanding of resilience appears to be complex and open-ended, making it more suitable for the study of social phenomena characterized by ongoing adaptation and learning (Pickett et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2010). Yet Simmie and Martin (2010) suggest that even the ecological model of resilience should be treated

with caution as it relies on a conception of external shocks triggering a shift from one relatively stable regime to another, simply recognizing that equilibria are multiple rather than single.

In recent years, the ecologically rooted concept of resilience has rapidly infiltrated public policy fields such as national security, financial management, public health, economic development and urban planning as policy-makers and expert advisors have adopted the concept (Walker and Cooper, 2011). For instance, increased concerns about terrorism in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks have led to widespread securitization though increased electronic surveillance, the establishment of bounded and secure zones in cities and key transport hubs, and the adoption of increasingly complex forms of contingency and scenario planning (Coaffee and Murakami Wood,

2006). Lentzos and Rose (2009) distinguish between three national models of biosecurity: a contingency planning approach in France; an emphasis on protection in Germany; and the UK strategy of resilience. UK resilience amounts to more than simply preparedness, implying a systematic programme of measures and structures to enable organizations and communities to better anticipate and tolerate disruption and turbulence (Anderson, 2010). This requires what has been termed a 'multi-scale governance fix' (Coaffee and Murakami Wood, 2006: 509), involving the establishment of Local Resilience Forums and Regional Resilience Teams within each of the Government Offices for the Regions in England, overseen by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office (Cabinet Office, 2010).⁵

Walker and Cooper (2011: 144) argue that the success of resilience in 'colonizing multiple arenas of governance' reflects its ideological fit with neoliberalism. Contemporary forms of securitization overlap substantially with neoliberal discourses of competitiveness, which emphasize the need to promote economic growth (Bristow, 2010). Such discourses support a framework of interregional competition in which cities and regions have effectively become 'hostile brothers' which compete for investment, markets and resources (Peck and Tickell, 1994). Enhanced regional competitiveness is seen as the key to success in global markets by policy-makers and business leaders, based upon the harnessing of local resources and assets through initiatives which seek to upgrade workforce skills, stimulate the formation of new firms, and foster innovation and learning (Bristow, 2010; MacKinnon et al., 2002). Increasingly, resilience and security strategies have been linked to competition for footloose global capital with urban marketing strategies, for instance, stressing the 'safety' and 'security' of cities as places to conduct business (Coaffee and Murakami Wood, 2006).

Policy-makers in the UK have also placed an increasing emphasis on the social and community aspects of resilience in recent years, seeking to raise public awareness of potential threats and to encourage increased 'responsibilization' by involving citizens and communities in their own risk management (O'Malley, 2010). This resulted in the publication of a Strategic National Framework on Community Resilience (Cabinet Office, 2011), defined in terms of 'communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency' (p. 4). Here, community resilience is viewed in terms of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's 'Big Society' agenda, which is intended to promote greater community self-reliance and empowerment by reducing the powers of the state and encouraging volunteering and community activity (HM Government, 2010).

The recent upsurge of interest in community resilience is not only a product of the 'top-down' strategies of government, but also of the 'bottom-up' activities of a wide variety of community groups and environmental campaigns. In the context of the rapidly growing Transition Towns movement (Bailey et al., 2010; Mason and Whitehead, 2012), for instance, resilience seems to be supplanting 'sustainability', providing a renewed focus for initiatives seeking to localize the supply of food and energy in particular (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). In the case of Govan Together, a project with which we have worked closely over the past year as collaborators and researchers, the language of resilience was meant to promote thinking about nature and society in a systemic way, influenced in large part by the intellectual framework of 'human ecology'. Informed by such initiatives, the Carnegie UK Trust (2011) has produced a handbook on community resilience which emphasizes the need for people to come together to 'future-proof their communities on the basis of agreed values' (p. 4). The second part of the handbook outlines a 'compass' of

community resilience based upon: healthy, engaged people; an inclusive and creative culture that generates a positive and welcoming sense of place; a localized economy that operates within ecological limits; and the fostering of supportive intercommunity links. Researchers have noted, however, that this burgeoning sphere of action tends to operate through a kind of inclusive localism that is largely apolitical and pragmatic in character (Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Trapese Collective, 2008).

III Resilience and the privileging of existing social relations

Resilience can be seen as the latest in a long line of naturalistic metaphors to be applied to cities and regions (Barnes, 1997; Evans, 2011; Gandy, 2002). Organic conceptions of cities as systems displaying natural traits such as growth, competition and self-organization have proven particularly influential, informing the urban ecologies of Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard and the Chicago School (Evans, 2011). The notion of the 'sanitary' or 'bacteriological' city took shape from the mid- to late 19th century, based upon the application of the nascent sciences of epidemiology and microbiology, alongside the emerging professions of planning and civil engineering (Gandy, 2002; Pincetl, 2010). The use of natural metaphors had implications for the governance and management of cities, as Gandy (2002) observes:

In the twentieth century, a range of technological advances facilitated a new mediation between organic metaphors and the production of urban space. In 1965, for example, the engineer Abel Wolman outlined 'the complete metabolism of the modern city' as the culmination of advances in the technical organization of urban space. Yet these metabolic metaphors treat the city as a discrete physical entity. The 'body of the city' is considered in isolation from wider determinants of urban form, and the social production of space is downplayed

in relation to the technical mastery of cities. (Gandy, 2002: 8)

In the context of scientific efforts to create more resilient urban infrastructures, Evans (2011: 224) suggests that ecologists may come to play an analogous role in the shaping of 21st-century cities to that of the sanitarians in the 19th century. Informed by the work of ecological authorities such as Holling, Arthur Tansley and the Resilience Alliance on ecosystems as complex adaptive systems, this new urban ecology conceives of the city as a social-ecological system, in which biophysical and social factors are linked by multiple feedback loops and exhibit the common properties of resilience and complexity (Evans, 2011; Folke, 2006). The effect is to naturalize cities and regions as self-contained systems by divorcing them 'from wider determinants of urban form' such as flows of capital and modes of state regulation (Gandy, 2002: 8). The abstract language of systems theory and complexity science offers a mode of intellectual colonization which serves to objectify and depoliticize the spheres of urban and regional governance, normalizing the emphasis on adaptation to prevailing environmental and economic conditions and foreclosing wider sociopolitical questions of power and representation (Evans, 2011).

The implication of the extension of ecological thinking to the social sphere is that human society should mimic the decentralized and resilient processes of nature (Swanstrom, 2008: 15). Resilience is fundamentally about how best to maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of externally derived disturbance. Both the ontological nature of 'the system' and its normative desirability escape critical scrutiny. As a result, the existence of social divisions and inequalities tends to be glossed over when resilience thinking is extended to society (p. 15). Ecological models of resilience are fundamentally anti-political, viewing adaptation to change in terms of decentralized actors, systems

and relationships and failing to accommodate the critical role of the state and politics (Evans, 2011; Swanstrom, 2008). Deference to 'the emergent order of nature' (Swanstrom, 2008: 16) is implicitly extended to society as existing social networks and institutions are taken for granted as 'natural' and harmonious. This reflects the origins of resilience thinking in the writings of Holling and others as a critique of the methods of scientific resource management employed by state agencies in the 1960s and 1970s (Ostrom, 2005), fostering a suspicion of central authority that has affinities with the work of Hayek (Walker and Cooper, 2011).⁶ In response, Swanstrom (2008: 16) argues that the neglect of the role of the state and politics and the privileging of harmonious social networks renders the ecological model of resilience 'profoundly conservative' when it is exported into a social context. This conservatism is reinforced by the normative aspect of resilience (O'Malley, 2010), which is assumed to be always a positive quality, imbued with notions of individual self-reliance and triumph over adversity.

Both government agencies and local environmental groups emphasize the need for communities to become more resilient and self-reliant (Cabinet Office, 2011; Carnegie UK Trust, 2011). In common with transition thinking, this agenda favours community self-organization in terms of the agency of local people to make their communities more resilient, while overlooking the affinities with neoliberal thinking. Yet, as a number of critical scholars have argued, the nebulous but tremendously evocative concept of community is commonly deployed to bestow particular initiatives with unequivocally positive connotations as being undertaken in the common interest of a social collectivity (DeFilippis et al., 2006; Joseph, 2002). Rather than referring to a pre-existing collective interest, invocations of community attempt to construct and mobilize such a collectivity. By generating a discourse of equivalence between groups and

individuals, they often have the effect of suppressing social difference (according to class, gender, race, etc.) and masking inequality and hierarchy (DeFilippis et al., 2006; Joseph, 2002; Young, 1990). As such, the bracketing of resilience with community works to reinforce the underlying imperative of resilience-building through the abstract identification of its sociospatial object (the community in question), fostering a sense of common purpose and unity. The effect is to further naturalize not only resilience itself as a common project, but also the social and political relations which are to be mobilized in the pursuit of this project.

IV Resilience as an externally defined imperative

The second point of our critique is concerned with the external definition of resilience by state agencies and expert analysts across a range of policy spheres (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008; Walker and Cooper, 2011). In this context, the 'pseudo-scientific discourse' of resilience presents something of a paradox of change: emphasizing the prevalence of turbulence and crisis, yet accepting them passively and placing the onus on communities to get on with the business of adapting (Evans, 2011: 234). The effect is to naturalize crisis, resonating with neoliberal discourses which stress the inevitability of globalization (Held and McGrew, 2002). In the sphere of security, for instance, the identification of 'new' global risks, coupled with political leaders' claims of 'unique' and 'classified' knowledge of potential threats, justified 'the implementation of a raft of resilience policies without critical civic consultation' following the events of 11 September 2001 (Coaffee and Rogers, 2008: 115). In the context of urban and regional development, resilience has become the latest policy imperative by which cities and regions are entreated to mobilize their endogenous assets and resources to compete in global markets (Wolfe, 2010).

The emerging literature on regional resilience policy emphasizes that resilience should be seen as a dynamic process such that particular shocks or crises must be situated in the context of longer run processes of change such as deindustrialization (Dawley et al., 2010). The role of regional institutions is to foster the adaptive capacity to enable the renewal and ‘branching out’ of economic activity from existing assets, echoing the processes that seem to have underpinned the development of successful regions such as Cambridge (Dawley et al., 2010; Simmie and Martin, 2010). A key theme concerns the importance of civic capacity and strategic leadership in framing and responding to particular crises and challenges. According to Wolfe (2010: 145), ‘Successful regions must be able to engage in strategic planning exercises that identify and cultivate their assets, undertake collaborative processes to plan and implement change and encourage a regional mindset that fosters growth’. A key task is the undertaking of detailed foresight and horizon-scanning work to identify and assess emergent market trends and technologies. Such anticipatory exercises reflect how resilience thinking is associated with the adoption of a range of non-predictive and futurological methods of risk analysis and management such as scenario planning (Anderson, 2010; Lentzos and Rose, 2009; Walker and Cooper, 2011).

As indicated above, resilience is serving to reinforce and extend existing trends in urban regional development policy towards increased responsiveness to market conditions, strategic management and the harnessing of endogenous regional assets. In this sense, resilience policy fits closely with pre-established discourses of spatial competition and urban entrepreneurialism (Bristow, 2010; Peck, 2010). Its proximity to the prior understandings and outlooks of urban and regional policy-makers helps to account for the widespread adoption of resilience in economic development circles, providing a somewhat more muted successor to the

‘creative cities’ craze of the mid-2000s (Florida, 2002; Peck, 2010). Like the creative cities script, resilience is a mobilizing discourse, confronting organizations, individuals and communities with the imperative of ongoing adaptation to the challenges of an increasingly turbulent environment. Beyond the recurring appeal to innovation and strategic leadership, resilience can be seen as a more socially inclusive narrative, requiring all sections of the community, and not just policy-makers serving the needs of privileged ‘creatives’, to foster permanent adaptability in the face of external threats (O’Malley, 2010). In the context of national security, this calls for a ‘culture of resilience’ which integrates ‘emergency preparedness into the infrastructures of everyday life and the psychology of citizens’ (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 159).

Research on urban resilience tends to operationalize the term ‘resilience’ as it pertains to the ability of cities to either continue to replicate their day-to-day functions in the face of major shocks such as a terrorist attack or an extreme weather event, or to adapt to longer-term disruptive forces such as climate change (Otto-Zimmerman, 2011). While it is common for work in this vein to describe cities as ‘complex’ or ‘dynamic’ systems, in this work the term ‘system’ appears to refer merely to the everyday functioning of cities, rather than some fully conceptualized and empirically validated abstract model. Typically, ‘urban resilience’ mobilizes a coupled human and natural systems framework for conceptualizing urban systems. Whereas Pickett et al. (2004) describe ‘resilience’ as a metaphor for integrating analyses of urban design, ecology and social science, a more recent articulation of a framework for urban resilience research identifies ‘metabolic flows’, ‘governance networks’, ‘social dynamics’ and the ‘built environment’ as the key features of the urban ‘system’ (CSIRO, 2007). The Long Term Ecological Research programme in the United States (USA)

incorporates sites in Baltimore and Phoenix where scientists have been undertaking adaptive experiments in urban governance, defining the city as a social-ecological system. As Evans (2011) argues, the 'scientific assumptions of resilience ecology run the risk of political foreclosure because they frame the governance choices that are available, often in feedback mechanisms that are seemingly neutral' (p. 232).

Some scientists associated with the Resilience Alliance have emphasized the need to insert politics into research on resilience, particularly in terms of how governance can enhance the capacity to manage resilience (Folke, 2006; Lebel et al., 2006). Accordingly, Lebel et al. (2006) identify three key dimensions of this capacity: public participation and deliberation; polycentric and multi-layered institutions; and accountable and just institutions. While this represents a welcome advance in many respects, the proffered solutions of greater public participation and accountability seem inadequate, since they continue to be underpinned by a notion of adaptive management that subordinates communities and local groups to the imperative of greater resilience as defined by external experts and policy-makers. At the same time, the characteristic ecological emphasis on self-organization and polycentric institutions (Folke, 2006; Ostrom, 2005) remains divorced from the sociopolitical realities of state authority and unequal power relations.

V Scale and the localization of resilience thinking

The importation of the ecological approach into the social sciences has served to privilege spatial sites and scales such as cities, regions and local communities, which are implicitly equated with ecosystems, and viewed as autonomous and subject to the same principles of self-organization. In this sense, resilience thinking is characterized by a certain imprecision in scalar terms, treating different scales similarly as

arenas for fostering local adaptation in the face of global threats. Yet the question of whether the spatial unit in question can be usefully or accurately understood as a self-organizing entity modelled after ecosystems remains unaddressed. Informed by the extensive literature on scale (Brenner, 2004; MacKinnon, 2011), we argue that viewing cities and regions as self-organizing units is fundamentally misplaced, serving to divorce them from wider processes of capital accumulation and state regulation.

Discussions of resilience in the social sciences have tended to move from responses to natural disasters to consider the effects of economic shocks without recognizing the specific properties and characteristics of capitalism as the ecologically dominant system (Jessop, 2000). The result has been to take capitalism for granted as an immutable external force akin to the forces of nature, while focusing attention on the self-organizing capacities of places to become more resilient. As Hudson (2010) observes, capitalism is itself highly resilient at a systemic level, confounding successive predictions of its imminent demise through its capacity for periodic reinvention and restructuring, as captured by Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1943). This means that the sources of instability and crisis that affect urban and regional economies can be seen as internal to capitalism as a system, rather than as immutable external forces to which local groups and communities must continually adapt. Paradoxically, the long-term success of capitalism is predicated upon the periodic undermining of the resilience of certain local and regional economies, which are vulnerable to capital flight and crisis in the face of competition from other places offering more profitable investment opportunities (Smith, 1990). The extent of such vulnerability is conditioned by the operation of different forms and varieties of capitalism (Peck and Theodore, 2007), with 'liberal market economies', for instance, proving more permissive of uneven

spatial development and regional crises than 'coordinated market economies' which tend to have maintained ameliorative policy frameworks (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Peck and Theodore, 2007). As the contemporary politics of austerity in Europe and the USA demonstrate, the costs of adaptation and restructuring are often externalized by capital and the state onto particular communities and segments of labour at times of crisis and restructuring in the interests of 'general' economic recovery and renewal.

The equation of cities and regions with eco-systems reinforces the neoliberalization of urban and regional development policy, fostering an internalist conception which locates the sources of resilience as lying within the scale in question. By contrast, the need to position cities and regions within wider circuits of capital and modes of state intervention is apparent from some preliminary empirical analyses of the dynamics of regional resilience (Martin, 2011; Simmie and Martin, 2010). Defining resilience in terms of regions' resistance to, and recovery from, major economic shocks, Martin (2011) examines the responses of UK regions to the major recessions of 1979–1983, 1990–1993 and 2008–2010. While prosperous regions such as South East England invariably tend to emerge as more resilient than less favoured ones such as North East England, this is not simply the result of divergent endogenous capacities for innovation and leadership, but is bound up with the operation of a range of wider political and economic relations which have positioned the former as a global 'hot-spot' and the latter as economically marginal (Massey, 2007). As neoliberal modes of regulation have supported the interests of advanced finance in the City of London, regions such as the North East have borne the economic and social costs of capitalist adaptation in terms of deindustrialization and attendant levels of social disadvantage (Hudson, 1989).

The crucial role of national states in shaping levels of resilience is illustrated by Swanstrom

(2008) with reference to the foreclosure crisis in the USA, whereby forms of federal deregulation in the 1980s encouraged a wave of innovation through the introduction of new financial instruments which actually undermined household resilience in the long run. In another study, Swanstrom et al. (2009) examine how metropolitan areas in the USA have responded to the foreclosure crisis, defining resilience in terms of three main processes: the redeployment of assets or alteration of organizational routines; collaboration within and across the public, private and non-profit sectors; and the mobilization and capturing of resources from external sources. Crucially, while 'horizontal' collaboration between public, private and non-profit actors within metropolitan areas is important, Swanstrom et al. (2009) argue that the effects of this will remain limited without support from 'vertical' policies emanating from the state and federal scales of government. Only these institutions can provide the necessary level of resources to support local foreclosure prevention and neighbourhood recovery activities.

The vacuous yet ubiquitous notion that communities ought to be 'resilient' can be seen as particularly troubling in the context of austerity and reinforced neoliberalism (Peck et al., 2010). In the UK, this is being accompanied by a renewed invocation of localism and community through the government's 'Big Society' programme (Featherstone et al., 2012). This provides a crucial supplement to neoliberal discourses (see Joseph, 2002), serving to fill an underlying void created by the privileging of market rationalities over social needs (Derrida, 1976; Sheppard and Leitner, 2010). The effect is to maintain and legitimize existing forms of social hierarchy and control (Joseph, 2002), drawing upon long-standing Conservative traditions of middle-class voluntarism and social responsibility (Featherstone et al., 2012). We cite the 'Big Society' agenda here to emphasize the potential relationship between reductions in public expenditure and attacks on the state as an

active agent of redistribution and service provision, on the one hand, and arguments for greater local and community resilience, on the other (Cabinet Office, 2011). This discursive and material policy milieu promises to have profoundly uneven effects, with disadvantaged communities having fewer material resources, professional skill sets, and stocks of social capital to ‘step up’ to fill the gaps created by state retrenchment (Cox and Schmuecker, 2010; Fyfe, 2005). It is in this context that the promotion of resilience among low-income communities strikes us as particularly dangerous, insofar as it normalizes the uneven effects of neoliberal governance and invigorates the trope of individual responsibility with a renewed ‘community’ twist. At the same time, resilience-oriented policy discursively and ideologically absolves capital and the state from accountability to remediate the impacts of their practices and policies. Implicit, then, in resilience discourse is the notion that urban and regional policy should enable communities to constantly remake themselves in a manner that suits the fickle whims of capital with limited support from the state. Not only does this approach hold little promise of fostering greater social justice, it also elevates the operation of the market over the well-being of the communities that are meant to be resilient.

VI Towards a politics of resourcefulness

In this section, we outline our favoured concept of resourcefulness as an alternative to resilience, which we have argued is ill suited to the animation of more progressive and just social relations. Acknowledging that the concept itself requires more empirical research in conversation with a wide range of communities and groups, we argue that resourcefulness has the potential to overcome the three main limitations of resilience that we have emphasized. As we have argued, resilience is inherently

conservative insofar as it privileges the restoration of existing systemic relations rather than their transformation. Yet calls for alternative utopian visions and transformations of social relations are themselves not inherently socially just and progressive. Nor does the history of the 20th century suggest that decommodification and state socialism necessarily lead to ethical and desirable social relations. Rather, as we noted earlier, Spivak (2012) suggests that the immediate and most pressing task is to ‘cultivate the will to social justice’ among everyday people.

As a first step in that direction, we offer a politics of resourcefulness. Developed in close conversation with our collaborators in the Govan Together project, resourcefulness is meant to problematize both the uneven distribution of material resources and the associated inability of disadvantaged groups and communities to access the levers of social change. In this sense, a politics of resourcefulness attempts to engage with injustice in terms of both redistribution and recognition towards a vision of resourceful communities, cities and regions. The normative vision that underpins resourcefulness is one in which communities have the capacity to engage in genuinely deliberative democratic dialogue to develop contestable alternative agendas and work in ways that meaningfully challenge existing power relations. In particular, our approach is conscious of the need for progressively orientated groups, organizations and communities to avoid forms of politics and praxis that are prone to vanguardism, whereby a small group leads in a top-down, ideologically driven way, and the often unintentional recreation of unequal social relations (Cumbers et al., 2008; Mason and Whitehead, 2012).

Second, rather than being externally defined by government agencies and experts, resourcefulness emphasizes forms of learning and mobilization based upon local priorities and needs as identified and developed by community activists

and residents. In this sense, our conception of resourcefulness takes the normative desirability of democratic self-determination as its fundamental starting point. The issue of community influence and control has been explored in the geographical literature, specifically with respect to autonomy (Clark, 1984; Lake, 1994). While some have defined autonomy as an objective condition in which localities are somehow independent of wider social relations, DeFilippis (2004) usefully argues that autonomy is a relational concept, which should be understood as a process, not as a property that an entity might possess. Following Lake (1994), DeFilippis (2004: 30) argues that local autonomy is 'the ever-contested and never complete ability of those within the locality to control the institutions and relationships that define and produce the locality'.

Third, as we have emphasized, resilience policy tends to reify different spatial scales such as the urban and regional as discrete, self-organizing units, requiring local actors to adapt to a turbulent external environment which is taken for granted and naturalized. By contrast, the concept of resourcefulness is both more scale-specific in focusing attention on the need to build capacities at community level, and outward-looking in emphasizing the need to foster and maintain relational links across space (Cumbers et al., 2008). In this sense, we advocate resourcefulness as part of a progressive and expansive scalar politics that both addresses local issues and appreciates systemic challenges. The conception of the local that underpins resourcefulness is not only spatially grounded in identifiable local spaces, but also open and relational in terms of both recognizing the wider politics of justice that often underpin local activism and emphasizing the need for alliances between community groups and broader social movements (Cumbers et al., 2008).

Resourcefulness, as we conceive of it, is better understood as a process, rather than as a

clearly identifiable condition amenable to empirical measurement or quantification. As a relational concept, resourcefulness cannot be understood as something communities possess to varying degrees. It is the act of fostering resourcefulness, not measuring it or achieving it, that should motivate policy and activism. We identify the following four key elements as an initial framework, recognizing that additional research is needed to further elaborate the concept and practice of community resourcefulness.

- (1) **Resources.** While foregrounding the importance of resources in a conception of resourcefulness might seem somewhat tautological, we want to emphasize the extent to which our conception of resourcefulness emphasizes material inequality and issues of maldistribution. This point is crucial in distinguishing resourcefulness from mainstream conceptions of resilience which take existing social relations for granted (Swanstrom, 2008). Rather than functioning as an internal characteristic of a community, resourcefulness is a material property and a relational term that seeks to problematize the often profound inequalities in the distribution of resources by the state that further disadvantage low-income communities. The resources to which we refer here include not only organizing capacity, spare time and social capital, but also public- and third-sector resources and investments on a par with the wealthiest communities.
- (2) **Skill sets and technical knowledge.** Communities with expertise in governmental procedures, financial and economic knowledge, basic computing and technology are much better positioned to take nuanced positions on public policy issues, as well as to propose policies and imagine feasible alternatives and the concrete steps necessary to enact those alternatives. While, like Fischer (2000), we regret the

turn towards technocratic public policy-making and away from a model based upon the democratic debate of normative ideals, we argue that resourceful communities must have at least some technical knowledge and skill for communicating that knowledge.

- (3) Indigenous and ‘folk’ knowledge. Alternative and shared ways of knowing generated by experiences, practices and perceptions are important spaces of knowledge production about the world: what Escobar (2008) terms ‘alternative modernities’. Moreover, they can also produce critical ‘myths’ from which resourceful communities may draw. Here, following Innes (1990), ‘myth’ refers not to made-up stories, but rather to origin stories (Haraway, 1991) and explanatory frameworks that weave together normative and observational knowledge, and serve as the guiding framework for shared visions. For example, a group of community activists in the disadvantaged district of Govan, Glasgow (UK), with whom we collaborated, mobilized the myth of past Gaelic Highlander life, and the folk ways and knowledges that emerged from that mythology, as a grounding for their alternative vision of social relations. There are a whole number of ways in which this kind of knowledge could become inward-looking and nostalgic, but the kinds of folk knowledge that ultimately cultivate resourcefulness will necessarily be as attentive to difference as they are to commonality.
- (4) Recognition. Philosophers of justice and oppression have emphasized the importance and value of cultural recognition as a requisite condition of justice (Taylor, 1994; Young, 1990). Recognition promotes a sense of confidence, self-worth and self- and community-affirmation that can be drawn upon to fuel the mobilization

of existing resources and argue for and pursue new resources. Additionally, recognition confers group status upon the community in question on the basis of common attributes and a shared understanding that the community is itself a subject of rights and a receiving body for state resources.

A politics of resourcefulness highlights the material and enduring challenges that marginalized communities face in conceiving of and engaging in the kinds of activism and politics that are likely to facilitate transformative change. Unlike resilience policy and activism, the concept of resourcefulness emphasizes the challenges that many grassroots endeavours face in terms of organizational capacity. While many Marxist-influenced geographers are quick to point out the need for anti-capitalist endeavours to link up (Brenner et al., 2010; Harvey, 1996), they often overlook the very immediate challenges that organizations and individual activists face. These include time, access to knowledge and essential skill sets, and the capacities for organizing and maintaining associated organizational structures to facilitate the kind of holistic, ongoing critique that might support sustained activism, the lack of which many critical political economists have lamented (Brenner et al., 2010; Harvey, 1996). In this sense, a politics of resourcefulness challenges the conservatism of resilience policy and activism by attempting to foster the tools and capacities for communities to carve out the discursive space and material time that sustained efforts at civic engagement and activism, as well as more radical campaigns, require.

None of the four dimensions outlined above should be seen as sole preserves of resourcefulness, operating, instead, as sites of contestation and struggle between different social forces. Each is vulnerable to capture and co-option by powerful political and economic actors such as the state (Bohm et al., 2010). This is apparent,

for instance, in the growing emphasis on public participation, local institutions and the harnessing of community knowledge within mainstream conceptions of resilience derived from ecology (Folke, 2006; Lebel et al., 2006). In essence, it is the interrelations between the four dimensions and their yoking to a democratic politics of self-determination (independent of the imperative of adaptation to external forces such as climate change or globalization) that distinguishes our concept of resourcefulness. At the same time, the adoption of a relational approach helps to ensure that a politics of resourcefulness can transcend the long-standing tension between autonomous action and dependence upon the state (Bohm et al., 2010). As part of an expansive spatial politics, there is scope for community groups to feed into broader campaigns and social movements that seek to challenge neoliberal policy frameworks at the national and supranational scales (Brenner et al., 2010; Cumbers et al., 2008). By fostering such wider connections, resourceful and progressive forms of localism (see Featherstone et al., 2012) can overcome the 'local trap' identified by radical scholars (Purcell, 2006), representing more than particularisms or 'mere irritants' to the neoliberal capitalist machine (Brenner et al., 2010; Harvey, 1996).

VII Conclusions

While we have spent the bulk of this article criticizing the conception of resilience as it has been deployed by policy-makers, social scientists and progressive campaign groups, we recognize the motives of these actors in being drawn towards resilience as a desirable quality to foster. Having weathered a rapid and unforgiving shift in the global political economy and the associated fracturing of the welfare state and social democracy over the past 30 years, to be faced with a new economic and fiscal crisis since 2008, it is understandable that activists and policy-makers would be inclined to turn

away from the glare and intensity of globalization to consider how they might make themselves less vulnerable to future economic and environmental catastrophe. Nor are we intrinsically opposed to the integration of social and ecological perspectives; rather, we emphasize the need to pay close attention to the terms upon which such integration takes place (Agder, 2000). Yet, as we have argued, promoting resilience in the face of the urgent crises of climate change and global recession actually serves to naturalize the ecologically dominant system of global capitalism. It is the 'internal' workings of this 'system', we contend, that generate disturbance and instability and shape the uneven ability of communities, cities and regions to cope with crisis. Our fundamental problem with the mobilizing discourse of resilience is that it places the onus squarely on local actors and communities to further adapt to the logics and implications of global capitalism and climate change. This apolitical ecology entails the subordination and corralling of the social within the framework of socio-ecological systems. Convergence of thinking around the notion of resilience is resulting in the evacuation of the political as the underlying question of what kind of communities and social relations we want to create is masked beneath the imperative of transition (Swyngedouw, 2007).

This intervention has been prompted by our particular concern about the adoption of resilience thinking by community activists, oppositional groups and critical social scientists and geographers, in addition to government agencies, policy-makers and business organizations. As we have argued, by uncovering its origins, affiliations and consequences, resilience thinking has become implicated within the hegemonic modes of thought that support global capitalism, providing a further source of naturalization through complex systems theory. While the unsuitability of resilience in the social sphere is rooted in the underlying ecological concept, its regressive effects have been greatly

accentuated by its entanglement in neoliberal modes of governance. This makes its adoption by oppositional groups and critical analysts deeply problematic. In response, we offer the alternative concept of resourcefulness as a more productive means of challenging the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. This is designed to open up debate beyond the closures of resilience thinking, foregrounding the fundamental question of transition ‘to where, and from what’ (Trapese Collective, 2008: 3). Resourcefulness focuses attention upon the uneven distribution of resources within and between communities and maintains an openness to the possibilities of community self-determination through local skills and ‘folk’ knowledge. For resourcefulness to become part of a ‘movement of thought that is truly counter-systematic’ is, however, dependent upon more than the intellectual abandonment of complex systems theory (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 157). It also requires the cultivation of links with community groups and social movements as part of an expansive spatial politics that aims to both foster translocal relations between particular sites and exemplars and challenge the national and supranational institutions that support the operation of global capitalism.

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Notes

1. Thanks to Wendy Larner for bringing the work of this organization to our attention.
2. As such, our purpose is not to examine the geographical circulation and mutation of resilience policy through a range of elite networks as per the ‘policy mobilities’ literature (Peck, 2011), but to assess the ramifications of this discourse in terms of the framing of local and regional development.
3. This is not meant to suggest that capitalism is always the most pressing process or dominant social relation, and nor is it to suggest that all manner of politics must be overtly anti-capitalist in order to have potential to undermine oppressive social relations. In relation to urban and regional development, however, we maintain that capitalism is the most powerful set of processes at work.
4. Our critique follows resilience thinking in moving between these different scales, reflecting their common social and ideological construction.
5. The Government Offices for the Regions were abolished by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010 and the roles of the Regional Resilience Teams have been largely absorbed by Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.
6. As Walker and Cooper (2011) argue, Holling’s later work on adaptive cycles and social-ecological systems (Holling, 2001) resonates with the writings of Hayek (1945), whose notion of ‘spontaneous order’ through market exchange informed a growing engagement with complexity science and systems theory in his late career.

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