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Resilience

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*R*esilience has rapidly become the most used and abused term in contemporary policy and decision making. Like the idiom of “sustainable development,” it incorporates multiplicities of difference into a single and apparently incontrovertible consensus. Who could possibly disagree with making social, economic, and ecological “systems” more resilient in the face of our current environmental problems, especially global climate change? Surely resilience and the ability to “adapt” to adversity by “bouncing back” is in *everyone’s* interest.

The plurality of claims made on behalf of resilience in fields as diverse as urban planning, international security, environmental policy, financial regulation, development economics, and mental health echo the fragmented ends and means that came under the rubric of sustainable development. And as many critics of sustainability point out, the varied and sometimes incompatible interests served by sustainability depend on who wants to sustain what—livelihoods or profits, ecological health or economic wealth, individuals, species, or systems. With the recent mainstreaming of climate change as a political problem, resilience similarly threatens to subsume articulations of political difference to a totalizing will to action. Resilience risks becoming code word for “business as usual” as industrial, military, and political elites rearrange their operations to acknowledge the reality of climate change while maintaining relations of power.¹

To be sure, there are examples of people doing progressive work under the name of resilience. Some critical scholars push its conceptual framework to include social

1. Cote and Nightingale, “Resilience Thinking Meets Social Theory”; Diprose, “Resilience Is Futile”; Taylor, *Political Ecology of Climate Change Adaptation*.

transformation as a viable policy and political option.² In large part, however, the problem with the resilience discourse is the ease with which it can be applied indiscriminately to any and all circumstances, obscuring the power that comes with providing authoritative representations of nature. The groundwork for this wholesale reconceptualization of nature through the lens of resilience was laid by the postwar naturalization of cybernetic language; cybernetics and systems theories are far from being ethically, politically, or ontologically neutral. Think, for example, of describing the world in terms of “ecosystem services” and how this plays out in terms of the commodification of carbon.³ Indeed, one might say systems theory epitomizes the technological enframing of the world so that nature becomes meaningful only insofar as it is rendered available for human consumption (vis-à-vis Heidegger).

Resilience discourses selectively focus on system *survival* at varying scales and levels. This manner of drawing boundaries around social-ecological systems draws attention to some phenomena while obscuring others. Species, habitats, and human populations that are deemed marginal to system survival may be rendered more expendable, making them more rather than less vulnerable to change. But pernicious effects of resilience can also arise from how things come to be included in systems, not just excluded. In New York City, for example, wetlands and oyster beds are included as engineering solutions that are expected to dampen future storm surges related to climatic events such as Hurricane Sandy.⁴ In this context, the discourse of resilience repositions nature as both threat and, if correctly managed, that which helps the city to bounce back from such threats. Nature is thus enfolded as a mode of governing complexity.⁵

The pervasiveness of systems thinking facilitates the rapid growth of the resilience discourse among academics who use it to present narratives that all too often adhere to univocal holism and homogeneity in a way that excludes the messiness of the world that “methodological pluralism” brings to attention.⁶ In the rush to reconfigure scholarship toward an interdisciplinary response to the human impact on nature, scientists and other academics often deploy the concept of resilience in a manner that tramples upon the plurality of ways that the environmental humanities (and social sciences) have engaged with this issue. Along the way, the “broadly positivist” understandings that have been so soundly critiqued in past decades are being reinvigorated.⁷ Indeed, resilience signals the pernicious return of structural-functionalism precisely at the moment when much more nuanced, thoughtful, and critical attention should be given to the relationships and differences between and within human and nonhuman populations.⁸

2. For example, see Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin, “Reframing Adaptation”; Inderberg et al., *Climate Change Adaptation and Development*; and Pelling, O’Brien, and Matyas, “Adaptation and Transformation.”

3. Sullivan, “Ecosystem Service Commodities.”

4. Bloomberg, *Stronger, More Resilient New York*.

5. Braun, “New Urban Dispositif?”

6. Olsson et al., “Why Resilience Is Unappealing to Social Science.”

7. Castree et al., “Changing the Intellectual Climate,” 764.

8. Brulle and Dunlap, “Sociology and Global Climate Change.”

In resilience theory, the mechanism of adaptation to extreme perturbations drives cycles of feedback, growth, and “creative destruction,” which ensures the perpetual self-organization of systems.⁹ The same ahistorical and universal mechanism of change—adaptation—is posited as a common characteristic of both forest fires (in nature) and economic crises (in society). This downplays, through a naturalized understanding of destruction, what is often irretrievably and unnecessarily lost. In short, the ontology of resilience—understood as the “panarchy” of nested, hierarchical, multiscale feedback loops¹⁰—overdetermines nature by mapping a particular vision of neoliberal economics onto it.¹¹ The environmental humanities might thus understand resilience discourse as a mode of biopolitics that disciplines subjects into accepting radical precarity as if it were determined by nature alone. Structural adjustments and market processes beget vulnerabilities that are then subordinated to the imperatives of becoming resilient to climate change.¹² Radical changes, even catastrophes, are renamed as normal “regime shifts” to be adapted to, not struggled against by, for example, confronting the dominance of fossil fuel infrastructure and the corporate power of big oil. In this sense, “ecological resiliency is the calculative metric for a brave new world of turbulent capitalism and the global economic order, and a new ecology of rule.”¹³

The environmental humanities offer imaginaries of subjectivity that resist the totalizing discourse of resilience. There are many theoretical possibilities here, many of them instantiated in this very journal. All of these alternatives would share a vision of the world as one populated with ontologies, politics, and ethics capable of expressing concerns for the well-being of those most vulnerable, socially and ecologically, and of taking ecopolitical sides in such debates, not adopting a false neutrality and objectivity. Fruitful engagement with the resilience discourse is opened up by turning to a term that is often paired with resilience: *vulnerability*. What, after all, does it mean to be vulnerable? Even when political-economic forces and social-historical trajectories are taken into consideration, the resilience discourse treats vulnerability as a feature that is inherent to whatever system is under consideration. That is, the resilience discourse treats vulnerability as an objective phenomenon that can be made subject to measurement. Against this view, we think of vulnerability as an ethical orientation to the other.

The environmental humanities already engages with the mode of ethical relationality we are suggesting. For example, we might think of ecological expansions of Giorgio Agamben’s “coming community,” Jean-Luc Nancy’s “inoperative community,” or Alphonso Lingis’s “community of those who have nothing in common.”¹⁴ Or we might

9. Holling, “Understanding the Complexity of Economic, Ecological, and Social Systems,” 395.

10. Gunderson, *Panarchy*.

11. Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience.”

12. Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*.

13. Watts, “Political Ecology of Environmental Security,” 96.

14. Agamben, *Coming Community*; Nancy, *Inoperative Community*; Lingis, *Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*.

think with Susie O'Brien of "a friction of misapprehension and appropriation, accommodation and surprise" with the other.¹⁵ In these works, *something else* that resists being brought into language orients the act of relating to the other, a radical incommensurability that traverses and subverts final representations.¹⁶ A being is made vulnerable to an other (human or nonhuman) being through attending to the impossibility of naming in fixed terms the bounds of the other's existence. The value of others resides in their differences, their nonsubstitutability, and the myriad resonances of their existential presence and absence, not in their instrumental or operationalized role within a larger system. Such concerns, which make possible a sense of (ecological) community with others, go well beyond "adaptive fitness" and would purposefully resist the tendency to turn biosocial communities into complex machines—that is, systems.

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15. O'Brien, "Edgework of the Clerk," 203.

16. Dillon, "Poststructuralism, Complexity, and Poetics."

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