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Resilience, complexity and post-liberalismⁱ

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Abstract:

Resilience is one of the dominant tropes in contemporary policy, practice and academic debate. This paper situates resilience within historical and contemporary approaches to international intervention, governance and analysis. It contains three related arguments suggesting that resilience reflects and seeks to offer a positive alternative to the loss of modern frameworks. Firstly, it is argued that resilience emerged in international intervention as a response to the limits of liberal internationalism in the 1990s. Secondly, that resilience has emerged as a post-liberal episteme that reflects and seeks to engage the ‘reality’ of complex life as an alternative to modernist frameworks of analysis. Today, rather than being seen as a limit, complexity is positively foregrounded under resilience frameworks as an active force that has moved beyond the limitations of modern frameworks. Third, this emergence of resilience as a post-liberal episteme that actively responds to complex life can be usefully explained through reflecting upon recent work that engages Foucault’s notions of biopower and biopolitics.

Keywords: resilience, complexity, post-liberalism, intervention, biopower

Introduction

Although the idea that societies should be resilient has been around for decades (Lewis and Kelman, 2010), over the past twenty years the concept of ‘resilience’ has become prominent in contemporary debate across the natural and social sciences (Chandler, 2013; Weichselgartner and Kelman 2014). In January 2013 resilience was declared by *Time* magazine as the buzzword of the year (Brown, 2013). The United Nations (2004), The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID, 2013), the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2013) and the World Bank (2013) have all made resilience a top priority. The website of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (2013) asks “What are you doing to make your city resilient?”

As Brown (2013:1) says, there has been a “spectacular rise” in articles engaging the term. In 2013, for example, the first academic journal examining *Resilience* in international relations was launched by David Chandler (2013). Resilience is now key in fields as diverse as geography and international politics (Walker and Cooper 2011; Grove, 2012; Welsh, 2013; Brown, 2013), economics (International Monetary Fund, 2013; Chandler, 2013), climate change (World Bank, 2013), development (United Nations, 2012), community development (Department for International Development, 2013), child psychology (Collins, 2007), security (Chandler, 2013), peace (Kaufman, 2012) and terrorism (Coaffee and Wood, 2006).

While there are many definitions ‘resilience’ is most often defined as something like “the capacity of a system, community or society to resist or change in order that it may obtain an acceptable level of functioning and structure.” (UN, 2004, Ch.1, S.1,17). Adger (2000:347) says that social resilience is “the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change”. As Welsh (2013:1) explains:

“Resilience is primarily conceived as the property that captures the capacity of the entity to anticipate, adapt to and recover from the event such that it resumes its original configuration, shape, functional relationships or trajectory afterwards. The linking of social and ecological systems and integration of complexity theory produces a model of interlinked systems in continual adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring and renewal... This conceptual model has been particularly successful in propagating itself across disciplinary knowledge domains, including human geography”.

This paper focuses upon resilience as an increasingly dominant mode of Western intervention in the global South. Resilience development holds that people who live in the global South should learn to become more adaptable to the complex economic, social and environmental forces that they face (DfID, 2013; UN, 2012). It therefore ostensibly represents a shift in international intervention that seeks to correct the top-down legacies of colonialism and prescriptive models of governance by instead empowering subjects to make life choices that better enable them to adapt to the conditions of their lives. However, recent years have also seen the number of criticisms of resilience increase. One major concern in the critical literature is that resilience is an essentially conservative concept that maintains rather than challenges the status quo (Reid, 2012). Another is that resilience discourses and policy often fail to recognise how resilience is socially contingent, rarely addressing the question: ‘resilience for whom?’ (Brown, 2013). And a third critique among many others is that resilience is an illustration of today’s post-political approaches to governance and therefore downplays the role and importance of conflict in favour of a more de-politicised view of the world (Welsh, 2013). In what follows I situate resilience within historical and contemporary approaches to international intervention, governance and analysis. Specifically, this paper contains three related arguments suggesting that resilience reflects and seeks to offer a positive alternative to the loss of modern frameworks. Firstly, it is argued that resilience emerged in international intervention as a response to the limits of liberal internationalism in the 1990s. Secondly, resilience is a ‘post-liberal episteme’ that works with rather than challenges complex life (see also Chandler, 2014). Third, this emergence of resilience can be usefully explained by drawing upon recent work that engages Foucault’s later lectures and notions of biopower and biopolitics (particularly *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008)). This situates the paper within a growing body of literature that draws upon Foucault to examine international intervention in a complex world (Massumi, 2009; Collier, 2009; Walker and Cooper 2011; Chandler, 2012; Anderson, 2011; Duffield, 2012; Reid, 2012; Evans and Reid, 2014; Grove, 2013; Chandler, 2014).

The limits of interventionism in a complex world

Until the 1990s western international intervention in military and development programmes in the global South held that any problems in the functioning of government lay in blockages created by national elites (Chandler, 2012). Formal institutional frameworks were seen as determining the outcomes of social interaction. Colonial governments that were once part of a system of hierarchy, domination and exploitation became the focus of functional organisation and strategic allocation. Liberal interventionism, from structural adjustment programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, sought to export liberal institutions in order to produce modern subjects. Sometimes this was done through economy, sometimes through military means, but usually the connection between state and society was held to be firmer than it is in interventionism today (Paris, 2004; Pugh et al, 2013).

Until the 1990s, the state rather than wider society was the main focus of international intervention (Chandler, 2012). Since the 1990s the limits of an approach that focused upon formal institutional frameworks as determining outcomes of social interaction has been widely seen as failing, as illustrated in the debacles of Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo and liberal statebuilding more generally. In such cases there has not only been a deepening malaise from outside the liberal tradition but within the liberal project itself (Duffield, 2012). Both liberals and their critics have re-centred upon the value of working with civil society. In his book *At War's End* Roland Paris (2004) argued that liberal internationalists had underestimated the blockages coming from local agency and society at large that prevented the operation of liberal institutional frameworks. This reversal of approaches focused upon how people in the global South were embedded in complex social and cultural practices and that these needed to be first understood in detail, at social, cultural and anthropological levels, before liberal statebuilding could take place (Fukuyama, 1995). For liberal internationalists like Fukuyama (1995) there had been too much democracy promotion in societies that were problematic, a-liberal or dysfunctional. What was first needed, therefore, was for these societies to build their effective capacities for action at the level of civil society. Subsequently, liberal internationalists have changed how they approach international intervention.

The main response to the limits of international intervention in the 1990s was for international agencies to turn away from formal institutional statebuilding (Chandler, 2012). Modernist constructions of fixed communities of governance and sovereignty were replaced by the construction of communities as essentially vulnerable to the vast range of complex forces that circulate from the local to the global (DfID, 2013). It is at this point that 'resilience' emerged as a heuristic device in the history of liberal international interventionism that reveals the limits of traditional statebuilding. In many ways resilience is a response to the malaise and disillusionment with liberal interventionism (Duffield, 2012; Chandler, 2012). Institutions, societies and nature were not transformed as had been predicted (as revealed in the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent hesitations about intervention in Libya, Syria and other recent conflicts). As a consequence of previous failures in statebuilding organisations like DfID (2013) now do not want to focus upon specific goals or destinations, but a dynamic process of adaptation, learning and action. The resilience frameworks that they now adopt do not put forward modern frameworks of analysis or solutions that offer hierarchy and order, but instead foreground understandings of governance through complexity and self-organizing adaptivity. Resilience research more generally focuses upon "creating opportunities for self-organization" (Berkes, 2007:283). Attention is paid to "adaptation initiatives" that "tangibly influence the vulnerability of human communities or societies ..." (Smit and Wandel, 2006:282). Today the world is often held to be too complex for modernist frameworks of intervention or analysis.

The figure of the environment

We cannot fully understand this shift toward resilience without bringing in the figure of the environment. The shift toward resilience in international intervention is not only a response to the perceived limitations of international interventionism in the 1990s. It is also a consequence of changing understandings of the environment and, in particular, complex life. We cannot understand the transition toward resilience as a new form of international interventionism without understanding how complexity has made its way into contemporary reasoning. Making that connection first requires a brief reminder of how political economy works. As Julian Reid (2012:68) says:

“Economics was conceived from its outset as a domain of knowledge concerned with the prosperity not just of human communities, families and subjects, but of nature in its entirety. For Aristotle, economics, it was said, ‘must conform to nature...in as much as nature has already distributed roles and duties within the species themselves’ (Mondzain 2005: 19) ‘Implicit’, therefore, ‘within the economy is the notion of an organic objective and functional harmony...a providential and natural order to be respected while acting in the service of the greatest cohesion of utility and well-being’ (Mondzain 2005: 19)”.

In his earlier work in *The Order of Things* Foucault (2002) demonstrated that with the birth of the modern discipline of political economy ‘life’ took the place of ‘nature’. At this time the ‘life’ that political economy sought to respect, control and discipline was mainly that of the human species (Reid, 2012). In this early work Foucault tended to focus upon how political economy sought to secure the propensity and security of human populations through the governmental rationalities of the state. But neo-liberalism, as Reid (2012) points out, breaks with earlier traditions of liberalism in this regard. The legitimacy of neo-liberalism rests instead “on its capacities to correlate practices for the increase of economic profitability and prosperity not just with practices for the securing of the human species, but with the life of the biosphere” (Reid, 2012:68). This means that one cannot understand contemporary societies without understanding how the shifting figure of the environment has organised the correlation of its various practices of governance. It draws our attention to how changing understandings of the environment matter because these work to change the stakes of governmental rationalities and practices. As I now explain, the contemporary result of the shifting figure of the environment is that complexity has become a central object and focus of governance. This is demonstrated in how resilience has emerged as a new governmental rationality.

Today, the world is widely held to be complex. Through the pioneering work of such writers as Prigogine and Stengers (1984) the predictive outcomes of modern and rationalist models in both nature and society have been seriously questioned. Complexity means that the inputs into a system will not necessarily produce proportionate outcomes and we cannot know these outcomes in advance because systems are non-linear (Urry, 2006). Complex life is not closed off but open-ended and full of unpredictable and immanent possibilities. Socio-ecological systems are similarly held to act as complex and evolving integrated systems (Stengers, 1997). Complexity has invaded contemporary life and has become dominant at the level of ontology across a wide range of disciplines in the sciences and social sciences (Urry, 2006). Today, “normativity ceases to be a foundational concern, or even a constitutive factor.” (Massumi, 2009:176). There is what Urry (2006:111) calls a “structure of feeling” about complexity that characterises debate in a wide range of fields. As Urry (2006:116) says, “[t]hat systems seem to behave similarly whether they are economic populations, fruit flies, international terrorists, river basins or weather systems has colluded to spread complexity analyses around the world in a period that seems both post-

human and post-nature”. In recent debates life is often conceptualised as exterior, excessive and prior to techniques of governmental regulation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Foucault, 2007; Anderson, 2011; Philo, 2012; Rose, 2013). These debates reflect a greater awareness of and charity toward the unpredictability of outcomes and of the sheer increase in the complexity of products, technologies and socialities.

It is here that we can see how resilience relates to the changing figure of the environment and the idea of complex life in particular. Whereas complex life was previously held up as a problem and barrier under modern frameworks of intervention, under resilience frameworks complexity has been turned into an opportunity. Often defined as the capacity to buffer change, resilience has emerged as an *active response* to complex life and as a framework for understanding how to enhance adaptive capacities. Resilience research emphasises “the development of adaptive co-management systems, showing how local groups self-organize, learn, and actively adapt to and shape change with social networks that connect institutions and organizations across levels and scales ...” (Olsson et al, 2004:74). As Welsh (2013:1) points out, “[i]n a world of complexity and contingency, of risk, relationality, flows and mutability theoretical frameworks that promise a means of capturing that complexity are seductive”. The result is that, as I explain in the next section, resilience has emerged as the dominant response and governmental rationality in international intervention.

Resilience, complexity and biopower

What I have said so far in this paper can be summarised schematically. Firstly, international intervention in the 1990s used to focus upon a world of top-down states and disciplined subjects. Neo-liberalism, its critiques and the more recent focus upon the figure of the environment and complex life then revealed a world of plural and multiple engagements that underlined the limits of those older modern frameworks. However, whereas complexity was previously thought of as a problem for international intervention, today new ‘post-liberal’ interventions such as resilience have emerged. Under post-liberal resilience frameworks complexity is not foregrounded as a barrier to change but a new opportunity for engagement. Thus, as now explained, resilience has emerged as a biopolitical response to the contemporary idea of complex life.

From what was said earlier about Foucault’s work on political economy it could be thought that Foucault was only interested in biopower as a relatively constrained form of power that works to discipline human life and populations. This is not the impression that I want to maintain. A consideration of Foucault’s (2007; 2008) later lectures, in particular those on biopower and biopolitics, should make the point clear. These lectures “change our understanding of key themes” in Foucault’s work (Collier, 2009:78). They have recently gained renewed interest, particularly for those concerned with questions of international intervention (Massumi, 2009; Collier, 2009; Walker and Cooper 2011; Chandler, 2012; Anderson, 2011; Duffield, 2012; Reid, 2012; Grove, 2013; Chandler, 2014). In this section I will draw upon Foucault’s lectures to explain how resilience is a biopolitical response to the contemporary idea that life itself is less governable than we previously thought. This is directly associated with the emphasis upon resilience in international intervention.

In Foucault’s later lectures he shows that there is an important difference between life being defined as something that is amenable to rationalities of governance and life being defined as a topological field malleable to techniques of biopower (Collier, 2009; Grove, 2013). Foucault demonstrates how biopower as a form of power and problem space is different from biopolitics as a technique that targets specific populations (Collier, 2009; Anderson, 2011; Grove, 2013).

Interpretative work in Human Geography, International Relations, Political Geography, Geopolitics and related fields has drawn upon these later lectures to develop a connection between biopower and shifting techniques of governance as these relate to complex life. These not only demonstrate the proliferation of responses to complex life, but, crucially, how a complex future itself is brought to bear upon the present (Massumi, 2009; Reid, 2012; Philo, 2012; Grove, 2013; Chandler, 2014). The following is a brief illustration of disaster management, preparedness and resilience.

Disaster management is a governmental assemblage or apparatus that is shot through with a number of rationalities, including preparedness, preemption, precaution, and resilience. Taking 'preparedness' as an illustration, Grove (2013) explains how this is a biopolitical rationality that attempts to develop people's capacities to respond to events before they take place. Preparedness is part of the wider governmental assemblage of 'disaster management' that focuses upon the importance of being prepared for such things as climate change, terrorist attacks and hurricanes. The purpose is to reduce the possibilities of catastrophic breakdown in economic, social and environmental systems. Preparedness reflects a fear and concern with increased numbers of disasters and how these disrupt vital infrastructure. It illustrates how the move toward resilience frameworks is not fundamentally about challenging unequal socio-economic relations, but rather about creating resilient subjects that are trained to ride the unpredictable waves of neo-liberal life. Complexity itself thus bears down upon the present. Resilient subjects are educated to embrace the dangers of neo-liberalism wholeheartedly and to understand that security cannot be engineered since homeostasis is not possible in a complex and emergent world (Grove, 2013). As a form of biopower resilience works to make its subjects understand that risks and hazards and dangers are a permanent feature of life. We are told that vulnerability and insecurity are now inevitable parts of complex ecological systems and uneven political, social and economic orders (Reid, 2012). Transformation does not centre upon collective subjugation to an alternative political project or ideal (Chandler, 2014). Indeed, as Reid (2012) points out, large scale and collective institutions like the nation state play a relatively minor role in resilience programmes, with communities instead being encouraged to adapt and be prepared for resilience themselves.

Such concerns can be situated across a much wider set of debates in Geography and related disciplines over the extent to which governmental rationalities are more generally capable of capturing life. With the contemporary emphasis upon complex life the stakes are now shifting away from a narrow reading of governmentalities, such as resilience, town planning, or healthcare, to a re-focusing upon the abilities and weaknesses of governmental rationalities themselves. Here we find the sense that life is exterior, excessive and prior to techniques of governmental regulation is increasingly widespread. As Massumi (2009: 179) says in relation to warfare for example, the military establishment may try and control territory but the complexity of life "always outflanks them." Mitch Rose (2013:6) says we should conceptualise life itself as "...a future we can never know or expect, another person whose needs and demands we can never understand or fully accommodate and a natural world we can never master or control." In short, the stakes are changing and re-focusing upon the inabilities of governmental rationalities to capture complex life.

Ben Anderson (2011:29) thus argues that there is now a need to focus upon "the surpluses of life that Foucault invoked in the concept of biopower". Perhaps for many Geographers this is most prominently signaled in Nigel Thrift's (2007:1) seminal book *Non-Representational Theory*, the first chapter of which reflects the changing stakes of debate by being entitled "Life, but not as we know it." Other examples of the inabilities of governmental rationalities to control complex life are commonplace in such related ideas as Affect Theory, Assemblages and New Materialism; now familiar across a range of disciplines. Such work is not only re-focusing debate, it is re-

framing the stakes of contemporary politics in a quite particular way. As Anderson (2011:28) further illustrates “On the one hand, life is that which exceeds attempts to order and control it. On the other hand, life is that which is made productive through techniques of intervention. It is in the tension between these two versions of how power and life relate that a politics of affect resides...” Many critical Geographers share and support this particular way of re-framing the stakes of politics. Today, politics is less likely to be understood and explained in terms of how people can collectively subjugate themselves under modern frameworks of progress or development, than through focusing upon the emergent tensions between life and governmental rationalities such as those of resilience. It is at this intersection, as Anderson (2011) explains, that for many critical geographers politics emerges.

Indeed, it was Foucault (2008) who first forecast that this would be how people from the West would come to understand politics and learn to critique it. Foucault (2008:66) predicted that politics would increasingly be framed in that very particular way, between the intersections and tensions of governmental rationalities and life:

“we can say that the motto of liberalism is: ‘Live dangerously’. ‘Live dangerously’, that is to say, individuals are constantly exposed to danger, or rather, they are conditioned to experience their life, their present, and their future as containing danger. I think this kind of stimulus of danger will be one of the major implications of liberalism.”

Since Foucault made this prediction in the West at least we have increasingly framed and interrogated the stakes of politics in terms of how governmental rationalities secure the dangers and complexities of life. Whether through resilience frameworks or otherwise as critiques, Foucault’s prediction is materialising as correct. In this sense resilience is not new and cannot be confined in analysis. Resilience continues a long line of liberal rationalities and critiques that condition us to focus upon insecurity and danger – from town planning to campaigns around family life, disease, hygiene, as well as many critical forms of resistance today. But in another sense resilience is new, because, as explained in this paper, unlike previous governmental rationalities resilience seeks to actively work with complex life.

Conclusion

If *Time* magazine is correct and resilience is the idea of the moment then this is because of changes in how we think about governance and, as I have just explained, life itself on some level. Rather than struggle too much over definitions, in this paper I have suggested that resilience is better understood as a heuristic device. Resilience not only points to the limits of modern framings of the world, as explained in the first half of this paper, it also points to how the stakes of critical debate are being transformed through a concern with complexity. Resilience is a biopolitical response to the contemporary idea that life itself is less governable than we previously thought on some deep and fundamental level. This leads us to two clear conclusions.

Firstly, the ‘resilience turn’ in Western intervention could (on the surface) be thought about in terms of devolving responsibility and blaming the global South for the failures of Western intervention in the 1990s and early part of the new millennium. But this level of analysis does not seem to go far enough. In this paper I have also argued that resilience is a consequence of how in today’s world (in the West at least) life is held to be more complex, precarious and uncertain. As Foucault (2008:66) says, the heightened and intensified consequence of liberalism is that we are all encouraged to “live dangerously”. Life has always been complex, of course. But Foucault pointed to how we are constantly conditioned to embrace insecurity as our dominant framework

of reasoning. In this paper this is reflected in the growth of governmental rationalities of resilience as a 'logical' response to a precarious and uncertain world.

Secondly, resilience is also what I have more specifically called a 'post-liberal' episteme. In contrast to modern frameworks resilience accepts the 'reality' that life is too complex to predict or control (Chandler, 2014). Resilience takes up what Foucault (2008:66) calls the "major implications" brought about by liberalism and encourages us to embrace the idea of living dangerously in an uncertain world. Resilience accepts the reality that representational politics and institutional building take place in non-linear ways, where inputs do not result in predictable outputs or transformations. Indeed, resilience embraces the importance of adapting and navigating our way through the precarious nature of complex life through self-organisation as opposed to hierarchical and ordered frameworks of analysis and intervention (DfID, 2013; Grove, 2013). For many academics and policy makers resilience therefore illustrates how complexity has now surpassed the limitations of modern frameworks of analysis and intervention. This paper has situated resilience within such historical and contemporary shifts. It has suggested that resilience both reflects and seeks to offer a positive alternative to the loss of modernist framings of life, and, to some extent, that we are all in this together.

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