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Resilience, solidarity, agency –

grounded reflections on challenges and synergies

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Abstract

In this paper, we respond to academic critiques of resilience that suggest an inherent affinity with neoliberalism and/or the incompatibility of resilience and critical agency. Drawing on the reflections of people who have found 'resilience' a helpful conceptual tool that has informed their engagement with a challenging and unsettling context, we suggest that ideas of resilience, solidarity and agency intersect in complex and interesting ways. Following a brief discussion of our methodology, we begin with an overview of how respondents to an online survey and a series of related conversations conceptualise resilience. We go on to explore how these conceptualisations might relate to critical analysis of the status quo, and to engagement with solidarity and agency. We conclude that there is potential to link these concepts, and that thoughtful engagement with this potential, and with the tensions and questions it raises, might make valuable contributions to both theory and practice.

Keywords: resilience; solidarity; agency; politics of resilience; transition; permaculture

Our journey across the resilience terrain forced us to appreciate the hidden depth of its nihilism, the pernicious forms of subjugation it burdens people with, its deceitful emancipatory claims that force people to embrace their servitude as though it were their liberation, and the lack of imagination the resiliently minded possess in terms of transforming the world for the better.

(Evans & Reid, 2015, p. 154)

'[The concept of resilience] gives me hope which I had almost lost for the past 10 years'.

'it has radicalized me, seeing how our industrial civilization has always traded away resilience in favour of the economics of scale, ever greater efficiency, productivity and private profits. Private property rights are an example of efficiency but not resilience.'

'So far, [resilience] connects/intersects - politics, culture, community, resources. It's political. It's flexible.'

'I have actually found [resilience thinking] most useful when applied to understanding repression and how social movements can be resilient to it.'

Introduction

Is resilience a concept that demobilises, debases and 'degrades the political capacities of human beings' (Evans and Reid, 2014, p. 82), that 'inform[s] a conservative, indeed pacifying rationality of governance' and that 'seems to bypass any suggestion that extant (social, economic, political and ecological) circumstances might be subjected to a wider or structural critique' (Michelsen & Vrasti 2014)? Or is it (also) a concept that can radicalise critiques of current political and economic structures, inspire alternatives and generate solidarity? Reading the comments above alongside each other is interesting. For one thing, it clearly suggests that there is no one discourse of resilience, nor one set of political implications of the concept. It also suggests that, while critiques of resilience as too closely aligned with neoliberal forms of governance and insufficiently attentive to power have gained significant traction in academic debates across disciplines (Bulley, 2013; Fabinyi, Evans & Foale, 2014; Fainstein, 2014; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012; Walker and Cooper, 2011), resilience continues to inspire some people to question, challenge, resist and reclaim political agency (see also Brown, 2014; Cretney & Bond, 2014; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012; Shaw, 2012).[1]

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[1] A few days after this paper was finished, our immediate local area – the Calder valley in West Yorkshire – experienced some of the worst flooding in the UK in the winter of 2015/16. The experience of the many

This article contributes to the discussion of whether resilience and resistance are, by definition, mutually exclusive conceptual lenses and practices. We do not deny that resilience discourses are also being used in attempts to suggest uncritical adaptation to current social, political and economic arrangements and/or to ecological crisis. However, a critical reading of historic and current processes associated with the assertion of power over land and people (Linebaugh, 2009), and the origins and spread of capitalism in particular (Perelman, 2000), suggests that the erosion of household and community resilience, the suppression of resistance, and integration into structures of injustice have, in many times and places, tended to coincide. To the extent that this is the case, it is at least possible that reclaiming resilience, building solidarity, and political agency can also go together.

The key question for us, then, is not necessarily whether resilience is something to aim for or to resist, but in what contexts and in relation to what systems we might choose to do either. As many people working with resilience have recognised (e.g. Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Davoudi, 2012; Leach, 2008; Porter & Davoudi, 2012; Shaw, 2012; van der Haart et. al., 2015; Walsh-Dilley & Wolford, 2015), the critical questions of resilience 'of what, to what, for whom, to what purpose?' are key. Or, put differently: What do we need, value and care about? What events or processes undermine, erode or destroy the things we value, need and care about – and how, in the face of these challenges, might we find ways of strengthening and sustaining them? And, not least, who are 'we' – and do we need to rethink our responses to this question?

In what follows, we explore these kinds of questions by drawing on reflections from people and networks who have engaged with the concept of 'resilience' not because it has become an academic or policy buzzword but because, for many, it has seemed a helpful concept in thinking through, and engaging with, the converging crises facing people and societies

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impacts on landscapes, infrastructure and people, and of the strength and diversity of community responses, has generated insights and reflections that resonate with many of the themes we explore below. It is worth briefly noting that the idea that 'we're a resilient lot in our valley' (Coop, 2016) – the claiming of resilience in the first person (see also below) - has clearly generated rather than undermined a sense of agency and solidarity. The implications for political action seem more complicated (though no less interesting), not least because the solidarity that mattered most in the immediate aftermath crossed political boundaries. This in itself has opened up spaces for conversation about political questions that involve people from a wider range of backgrounds and political perspectives than is often the case in everyday life. Among other things, the nature of these discussions suggests that in a complex social-ecological system, the relative influence of factors within and beyond the responsibility of different actors can be genuinely difficult to disentangle, making it harder to appeal to simplistic political narratives.

today. Many of these reflections were responses to an online survey we created to gather thoughts and experiences from people who have been engaging with 'resilience' in different locations and contexts. Our respondents included people working in community relations/dialogue work, those involved in transition initiatives, and practitioners of permaculture, an approach to designing systems that meet human needs in ways that are sustainable, resilient, and in accordance with the ethics of earth care, people care, and redistribution of surplus/fair shares (Mollison, 1988; Holmgren, 2002).[2] Most of our respondents are critical of the status quo and are trying to find constructive responses (individually and collectively) to a set of crises that includes climate change and the degradation of ecosystems, energy depletion, austerity, conflict, inequality and injustice. Interestingly, many of them appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own understandings and uses of the concept of 'resilience', on the contexts in which they had seen the concept appear, and on its strengths and limitations.

Our intention in this project is to provide a perspective on the debate about resilience thinking that is rooted in concrete experience and in the reflections of people actively engaged with resilience, not only in institutions or policy making forums, but at a personal and community level. For many, resilience has been an influential concept that has generated new insights.

In what follows, we explore what the responses to our survey might contribute to an exploration of relationships and tensions between resilience, solidarity and political agency. In this, we take up the framing of a workshop on 'Political Action, Resilience and Solidarity' at King's College in September 2014 that stimulated a series of interesting exchanges and reflections, both at the workshop itself and afterwards on 'The Disorder of Things' blog. As this piece of research was primarily a response to the workshop call (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014), the latter is an important reference-point for the framing and structure of this paper.

Following a brief discussion of our methodology, we begin with an overview of how our respondents conceptualise resilience, and how these conceptualisations inform their

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[2] In this context, it is also worth noting that permaculture was the original inspiration behind the transition movement, which emerged from the attempt by students on one of Rob Hopkins's permaculture design courses to grapple with the likely implications of peak oil. Transition, as originally conceived, was Hopkins's attempt to apply a permaculture approach to larger-scale community engagement and local planning (see Hopkins, 2008). Today, permaculture and transition are overlapping but not identical sets of ideas and networks.

assessment of the status quo. We then move on to look at the implications for solidarity and agency. We conclude that there is potential to link the concepts or resilience, solidarity and agency, and that thoughtful engagement with this potential, and with the tensions and questions it raises, might make valuable contributions to both theory and practice.

Methodology

As explained above, our aim in this project has been to elicit and examine perspectives on resilience that have been influential on the ground, and to bring them into conversation with some of the critical perspectives on 'resilience' that have been articulated in academic debates. In this, we share the aim of other recent articles in this journal that are concerned with 'paying attention to the grounded and embedded meaning-making around resilience' (Walsh-Dilley & Wolford, 2015). We started by identifying and engaging with networks or communities of practice that are explicitly using the concept of resilience, and in the process, exploring its meaning and application in the context of their everyday practice and experience. Our data collection strategy had several overlapping elements, generating different kinds of data and some possibilities for triangulation.

Firstly, we set up a short online survey, using Survey Monkey, based around eight open questions. This allowed us to reach people without geographic limitations and made it possible for the survey to gain wider dissemination. To promote the survey and invite respondents, we wrote a short introductory article explaining the rationale for the survey and some of the themes within it, with a link to the framing of the workshop on 'Political Action, Resilience and Solidarity'. We then disseminated this invitation through various networks and websites that we knew were engaged with resilience. These included a knowledge exchange network (PPC Thinkspace) based at the University of Bradford that includes academics and practitioners working in the field of community relations, primarily in the North of England, various permaculture-related facebook groups, the Transition Research Network, Permaculture Magazine website, Transition Network, and resilience.org, a website dedicated to 'building a world of resilient communities' and hosted by the Postcarbon Institute. We also wrote directly to individual contacts and people we felt might be interested.

Survey questions were framed to be open and flexible, and to encourage reflection on both helpful and problematic uses of the 'resilience' discourse. Following an opportunity to leave contact details for follow-up, we invited people to give us a sense of who they are and what they value, and to reflect on their own encounters with 'resilience', the meanings it has had for them, the difference – if any – it has made to their thinking and/or practice, helpful and troubling uses of the concept. We also included space for any thoughts that were not covered by our other questions.

Second, we conducted a small number of in-depth interviews, again with practitioners known to us through different networks, and with survey respondents who expressed a wish to have a conversation with us.

Third, we ran a workshop at the 2014 UK Permaculture Convergence, using a 'conversation café' process to stimulate discussion among participants around a set of questions – similar to those used in the online survey. We also ran a workshop at the 'Thinkspace' in Bradford – a forum for local practitioners engaged in local peacebuilding. These conversation spaces allowed more in-depth discussion of some themes in the research.

Fourth, we published interim reflections on our data via the blog 'The Disorder of Things', which was then re-published on the Resilience.org website (run by the Postcarbon Institute). This generated some additional responses to the survey, some of which engaged more directly with the themes we had identified in our blog piece. Coincidentally, the PostCarbon Institute is also currently publishing interviews with a number of people working in this field, predominantly in the US[3]. As these are directly relevant to our project, we have incorporated them into our analysis alongside the data we gathered ourselves.

We analysed our data through coding in NVivo, working both separately and together. We are aware that, as participants in some of the networks we targeted, our 'insider' knowledge will have shaped our interpretation of respondents' answers – e.g. in helping us to recognise some of the implicit meanings in our data. Nevertheless, we have made a conscious effort to approach data analysis from a sympathetic but critical perspective.

94 people responded to our survey. Of these, 82 completed the survey in full. The following table shows the breakdown of geographic location, according to the information provided.

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[3] http://www.resilience.org/talking-resilience/.

Location	Number
UK	29
USA	13
Australia	7
Canada	3
Belgium	3
Germany	1
Austria	1
Norway	1
Kenya	1
Nicaragua	1
Latvia	1
Turkey	1
Netherlands	1
Ireland	1
Unspecified	29

The emphasis on UK-based respondents largely reflects the way in which our call for participation was distributed – through networks that are primarily UK-based. The international reach of the survey is quite significant though. Participants came from a range of personal, professional and community backgrounds. While some reference to ecological concerns was one of the most common shared characteristics, involvement in building community relations and/or sustaining them in the face of crisis (whether or not this included ecological/energy crisis) also featured strongly. Several respondents referred to their work in public and voluntary sector organisations, including in health, education, youth/social work, and community development.

A significant proportion of respondents were coded as 'practitioners'. That is, they were engaged in some way in putting ideas and beliefs into practice in concrete ways, whether as part of their professional work or other formal roles, or (more often) on a voluntary basis. Included in this designation were people growing their own food, educators, activists, as

well as those doing permaculture, transition, or other forms of community work. For the most part, these practitioners were involved in activities that could interpreted as efforts to build resilience: developing self-sufficiency on smallholdings, creating localised food production systems or other forms of local economy, developing community relationships and capacities. We would suggest this has an important bearing on respondents' relationship to resilience thinking. For many, resilience is not an abstract idea, and to the extent that it has been adopted or applied, it is because it informs or deepens practice in some way.

Clearly, our respondents are not representative of the wider population. As other studies (e.g. Alloun & Alexander 2014; Quilley 2012) have pointed out, the networks in which they are involved tend to attract predominantly – though not exclusively - white, middle-class, educated and thus fairly privileged people. At the same time, these are often people for whom values of inclusivity, respect for diversity, equality and justice are important (Alloun & Alexander 2014). This combination in itself raises interesting questions in relation to the ways in which links between resilience, solidarity and political action are being conceptualised and practiced. We explore some of these below.

Analysis: Resilience, Solidarity and Political Action

Resilience

The *Resilience, Political Action and Solidarity* workshop call (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014) took as its starting point a set of claims about the current ubiquity of the resilience concept, its function as a 'heuristic device under which the defining problems of our era of supposedly unalloyed uncertainty and insecurity can be addressed', and its depoliticising function 'as a conservative, indeed pacifying rationality of governance'. Clearly, 'resilience' has become a buzzword across a wide range of institutions, policies and initiatives. However, the question of *how* resilience functions as a heuristic device seems to us important to understand in more detail, and is obviously linked to claims about its depoliticising functions. Does resilience necessarily 'bypass any suggestion that extant (social, economic, political and ecological) circumstances might be subjected to a wider or structural critique' (Michelsen &

Vrasti, 2014), or can it – as a heuristic device – actually encourage and support such critique?

Our survey questions gave respondents the opportunity to talk about what resilience means to them, and how it influences their understanding of the world. In analysing our data, many responses could be coded in terms of a 'standard' or 'popular' definition. That is, resilience is frequently defined in terms of a general capacity to deal positively with adversity – coping, adaptability, 'bouncing back' were common terms. A number of respondents made reference to social-ecological systems thinking (Walker & Salt, 2006; Walker & Salt, 2012), suggesting familiarity with theories of complex adaptive systems. Responses indicate, furthermore, that this conceptual framework can modify thinking in important ways. The idea that redundancy and diversity are key characteristics of resilient systems, for example, is an important counterpoint to discourses of efficiency (Walker & Salt, 2006; Rogers, 2015). Similarly, the encouragement to think systemically or holistically – to look at how human systems are embedded in ecosystems, to make connections between different issues and dynamics – can open up new perspectives. As the responses we cited at the top of this article suggest, an appreciation of what contributes to – and what mitigates against - resilience can help people to situate their own experiences and concerns in a wider systemic context. Whether or not a resilience frame leads to critique, of course, is closely linked to the question of *what* it is that we might seek to make more resilient, and what we perceive to be the dynamics that erode or threaten resilience.

In ways that resonate with the wider literature on resilience, responses to our survey ranged from formal definitions of 'resilience' as a potential attribute of any system, including 'resilient pathologies' (Fabinyi et. al., 2014) - and thus, by implication, not strongly imbued with particular values - to more clearly normative understandings that align 'resilience' with value judgements 'about what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' community pathways' (Wilson, 2012, p. 216), and which tend to include characteristics seen as desirable – diversity, fairness, equity, participation - in definitions of resilience themselves (see, for example, Walker & Salt, 2012; Wilson, 2012).

Several of our respondents suggest that a resilience lens can encourage a clearer focus on what matters most:

'Resilience thinking (as a lens to look at complex systems) is very helpful because it makes me focus on the core functions of a system…'

'It helps me to keep a clear sight and vision on my life and everything around it. It's sometimes hard to keep my focus, but talking to people about things that are changing and making it difficult to see clear[ly] helps me a lot.'

'For me, what brings me back to the value of this term [resilience] is the emphasis on maintaining essential purpose/function/values. That's 'radical' in the sense of staying in touch with the roots of intention and action.'

In response to our question of what had been particularly helpful about resilience thinking, the third respondent cited above expanded further on this theme:

That - as we have tried to use it - resilience thinking does not assume too much about the future, or even the ways our essential values and intentions will be expressed in the future, but rather focuses on deepening our understanding of those values/intentions, and helps prepare us to express those, and, at best, help create a future more supportive of those; at worst, respond most effectively to whatever future that unfolds.

What are the core functions and essential purposes or values – the 'roots of intention and action' - that are worth protecting in an uncertain and challenging context? For many of our respondents, answers to this question tended to revolve around (ecological) sustainability, community, basic needs, justice, regeneration, trust, equality and justice.

Understood as a conceptual tool that might help us think through how to regenerate and sustain the positive qualities of people, communities and landscapes, resilience also tends to encourage critical assessments of current systems, trends and processes. Many of our respondents' statements about what resilience means indicate a perception that contemporary life erodes resilience:

I have been arguing for many years that current systems are not sustainable and that we need to make changes in pretty much everything. I have found it hard to stomach many of the changes in modern Britain. I believe in fairness; taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves; renewable energy; sustainable food growth; the need

to move away from money as the centre of everything; people having more time for themselves, their friends and families... I think it's all part of resilience.

This eroded resilience is related to a number of interlinked factors: forms of economic dependency and political disempowerment associated with neoliberalism (also see Hornborg, 2013); the degradation and destruction of ecosystems; dependence on finite resources, including the fossil energy that powers economic activity (Hopkins, 2008); the isolating effects of modern life, weakened community and solidarity. This is, in essence, a structural critique; it recognises that 'vulnerability' is rooted in a system that exploits both people and nature:

When you have a private system, you think, 'It is my job to meet all my needs by myself. I can't trust other people. They don't care about me. I need enough money so that I can pay people to do things for me that I can't do myself.' It's … like oppressive disability, like I am completely dependent on technologies and people that I don't understand, and that would abandon me if I didn't have enough money. (Robin & White, 2015)

Against this background, resilience thinking can serve two functions: First, it can make it easier to 'see when systems are critically impoverished' (survey response) and remind us of qualities that are relatively lacking in current economic and social systems, and in the ecosystems on which they rely. This includes ideas of resourcefulness, self-reliance, solidarity and interdependence, of being able to meet core needs, of being part of social-ecological systems that can be trusted. Second, it can encourage thinking about why those qualities are lacking, stimulating or supporting political critique. Both of these aspects could be found in our respondents' statements.

This perception of the erosion of resilience becomes political with the recognition that at least some of the processes that are seen as undermining resilience are closely linked to inequality and injustice. As Doria Robinson suggests,

it seems that injustice is rooted in the destruction of resiliency, you know? It seems that injustice comes from dehumanizing, disconnecting people from each other, from their families, from their cultures, from their land. So it becomes OK when people are

disconnected from land to poison it, because people [say,] 'I didn't use that land anyways, it was dirty....' … you actually have to destroy people's capacity to be engaged and in a reciprocal relationship with land in order to create the conditions for injustice.

It is worth noting that this perspective resonates with studies of the processes that accompanied what Perelman (2000) calls 'the invention of capitalism' - as Perelman demonstrates, enclosure and deliberate attempts to undermine the self-reliance and communal organisation of rural populations were instrumental to their integration into a system of wage labour:

> Primitive accumulation cut through traditional lifeways like scissors. The first blade served to undermine the ability of people to provide for themselves. The other blade was a system of stern measures required to keep people from finding alternative survival strategies outside the system of wage labor. A host of oftentimes brutal laws designed to undermine whatever resistance people maintained against the demands of wage labor accompanied the dispossession of the peasants' rights... (Perelman, 2000, p. 14.)

Resilience, as a term, does not appear in this account. Interestingly, though, descriptions of rural livelihoods prior to dispossession and displacement are reminiscent of the characteristics of resilient systems (as set out in Walker & Salt, 2006, Walker & Salt, 2012): 'The vitality of these rural producers', Perelman (2000, p. 3) notes, 'generally rested on a careful combination of industrial and agricultural pursuits' (diversity); '[c]ommon fields and pastures kept alive a vigorous co-operative spirit' (social capital, feedback) that 'enclosures starved' (Thirsk, 1967, as cited in Perelman, 2000, p. 13); the ability to survive despite both frequent religious holidays and the extraction of a large proportion of produce by the gentry suggests significant surplus (redundancy); what was increasingly restricted was 'people's opportunity for self-provisioning' (autonomy) (Perelman, 2000, p. 41). We would suggest, then, that the story of enclosure, dispossession, and the suppression of alternatives that has accompanied the 'invention' and spread of capitalism can also be read as a story about the erosion of household and community resilience. This, in turn, might offer a perspective in

which efforts to (re)build resilience are understood as an integral aspect of resistance, and vice versa.[4] Put differently, not all discourses that advocate 'the ability of people to provide for themselves' are aligned to the demands of neoliberalism; some, particularly those linked to struggles to maintain or reclaim access to land, are integral to assertions of sovereignty and autonomy from which resistance becomes possible. A related argument (Holmgren, 2013) suggests that 'actively building parallel and largely non-monetary household and local community economies' can itself be understood – and potentially be effective - as an act of resistance against centralised and unsustainable systems. As a more general point, one of our respondents notes that 'our society doesn't want many resilient people', not least because 'people who are resilient … might not be as following as other people want/expect'.

The responses to our survey, on the whole, do not suggest that our respondents' engagement with resilience has led them to 'accept[] the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the difficulties they are faced with but instead adapt to their enabling conditions via *the embrace of neoliberalism*' (Evans and Reid, 2014, p. 72). Rather, to the extent that they view resilience as antithetical to existing economic and political structures, they are also adopting a critical attitude towards the conditions that enable the erosion of social-ecological resilience. It is important to remember here that these perspectives do not, for the most part, emerge from detailed engagement with the theoretical foundations of either resilience or neoliberalism, and their compatibility or otherwise (as, for example, in Chandler, 2014; Nelson, 2014; Walker and Cooper, 2011), but rather from lived experiences in which neoliberal policies - such as privatisation, free trade agreements, and austerity - appear as processes that increase vulnerability and undermine resilience, both at a personal level and for communities/society more widely. As participants in one of the conversations related to this project suggested, the fact that neoliberal institutions and policies use the frame of resilience to support policies that are experienced as eroding resilience might hold potential for immanent critique.

Alongside the positive associations that the majority of our respondents have with resilience, however, critical comments are present in our data too. Indeed, and in ways that

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[4] In this context, it is interesting to note that searches on www.resilience.org and on www.transitionnetwork.org throw up numerous discussions of the commons/commoning, suggesting that for many involved in the spectrum of initiatives that have developed under the discourses of resilience and transition, these are related concepts.

mirror some of the critical literature, most of our respondents identify uses of resilience that they find troubling. For some, resilience is becoming too closely associated with – or co-opted by - systems and ways of thinking that they are trying to resist; in this context, whether 'the tussle over its meaning as an idea can be pushed in the direction of a transformational community resilience' (survey response) is an open question. This suggests, perhaps, that to the extent that resilience discourses continue to spread into mainstream institutions, their use among people interested in alternatives may start to diminish – as one respondent put it, 'involvement of any current political person will see me walk away'.[5] Others identify problematic uses of the term within their own networks, including its overuse as an increasingly meaningless catch-all phrase and, in other contexts, the observation that talk of 'resilience' may not resonate with wider audiences who have not come across the term.

For many of those respondents who identified problematic uses of resilience, however, these sit alongside an appreciation of how resilience thinking can be helpful. For one respondent, for example, the fact that 'some windbag politician will step up to the microphone and intone: 'We are a resilient people and we will get back to Our Way of Life'' is not a reason to abandon resilience, but an occasion to critique instances of 'anti-resilience disguised as resilience'. Clearly, people are capable of critical and reflective engagement with the concept, and of distinguishing between helpful and problematic uses.

One observation that has emerged from our survey and our own reflections is that the perspective from which people encounter resilience really matters. There are significant differences between claiming resilience as a tool for thinking and/or a positive personal or collective attribute on the one hand[6], and experiencing it as a judgement that is made about individuals or communities on the other. The latter – a second or third person perspective - feels disempowering for those at the receiving end:

> 'I first came across it in training provided to staff undergoing a bruising restructure, when useful as I found it, it seemed like the smile on the face of the tiger. A bit like 'I'm going to throw these sharp heavy rocks at you and at the same time teach you

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[5] The fact that this respondent seems to view this as a possibility rather than a current problem is indicative of the fact that the majority of our respondents have encountered resilience not via top-down policies or pronouncements but in spaces experienced as counter-cultural.

[6] See also footnote 1 above.

how to jump out of the way'. Well. Just don't throw the rocks?'

'The most problematic piece for me is when it's used as a measuring stick, as in either you're resilient and 'good,' 'successful'; or not-resilient and 'bad,' 'not successful'. This discourages a holistic, natural and honest acknowledgement of how we naturally move through periods of feeling resilience and not; discourages people talking about and reaching out for help/support when they are feeling down; and thus can diminish people's and communities actual resiliency.'

'…resilience becomes another way to bring non-conforming people/communities into line with some kind of idealised state that may not be right or appropriate for them.'

'I think that resilience is something that we can only assign to ourselves. It should not be directed at us by others, especially not in a passive aggressive way. We come to it ourselves.'

Clearly, it is possible for '[r]esilience policies [to] become in their effects 'managerial'' (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014). As we have shown, however, this is not the whole story. As 'something that we can … assign to ourselves' – a first person perspective - resilience can have a different set of connotations and effects. These include a sense of capacity and strength, supportive networks, and critical agency. They also, importantly, include hope. We will return to explore the potential significance of hope in relation to agency below. Next, though, we turn to the theme of solidarity.

Solidarity, scale and a sense of place

The workshop call that framed our research (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014) suggested two significant themes for exploration. First is the idea that resilience and the 'more explicitly political' concept of solidarity represent quite different modes of thought and practice. It was suggested that 'whereas resilience seems to suggest adaptation and immunisation in the face of complex unalterable forces, solidarity offers a means to challenge and alter extant conditions.' Is this the case? Does the apparent move from solidarity to resilience symbolise 'the threshold between two worlds' (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2015) – between an older world characterised by a belief in the potential of human agency to

reshape the conditions in which we find ourselves on the one hand, and a contemporary condition that encourages accommodation to forces beyond human control and thus limits the appeal and scope of collective political projects on the other hand? In what follows, we show that while a recognition of limits to human agency does form part of the conceptual framework that many of our respondents are working with, this does not, for most, simply imply the abandonment of agency per se. It does, however, have implications for how and where solidarity and political action are thought to be most possible, meaningful and needed. Considering these implications, we suggest, contributes some interesting questions to the discussion of 'what … it mean[s] to 'act in solidarity' with something or someone' (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014).

The second theme articulated for the workshop suggests a more complementary relationship between solidarity and resilience (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014):

> rather than being diametrically opposed concepts, solidarity seems a precondition for community resilience ('resilience from below'). In this sense, perhaps it is at the intersection of solidarity and resilience that effective political action can occur.

This framing resonates more strongly with our data than the first. Indeed, we will suggest that in addition to 'solidarity seem[ing] a precondition for community resilience', solidarity in turn also needs resilience.

Our respondents do recognise the potential for a focus on resilience to encourage retreat from collective social and political projects. One, for example, expresses the concern that the concept of resilience 'may have subtly steered some of us to more self-preservationist language and thinking, and away from considerations of the common good'. Another points out that 'there is selfish resilience and resilience for humanity' and asks '[w]hat are the tipping points for each of us to retreat into selfish resilience?' Yet another person describes how their personal tipping point away from political engagement and towards a 'retreat to self' was a strong sense of disillusionment with 'corruption and the failure to do what was right' and a feeling of 'powerless[ness] in [the] face of corporate and state power to effect change'. (The same person, however, also talked of the need for local communities to reclaim power and responsibility.)

Unsurprisingly, concerns about how to respond effectively and ethically to a set of

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conditions that often feel overwhelming are real, even – or perhaps especially – if these conditions are the subject of critical analysis. For many of our respondents, these conditions include the erosion of ecosystems (possibly beyond critical thresholds), energetic limits, and entrenched systems of power. This context raises intriguing questions about the scales at which engagement with complex systems becomes meaningful and manageable. For those who first encountered resilience in the context of the transition movement, resilience is very closely associated with localisation, in large part because concerns around peak oil generated the initial impetus for transition (Hopkins, 2008; for discussions of some of the tensions and theoretical limitations of this framing of resilience, see Cretney & Bond, 2014; Haxeltine & Seyfang, 2009; Quilley, 2011). For many of our respondents, then, their day-to-day contexts and communities are a particularly important location for resilience-building strategies. For at least some of them, the motivation for this local focus also stems from the desire to 'work on a scale proper to our limited abilities' (Berry, 2011). In this vein, a focus on building resilience locally may express both pragmatism and a conscious decision to forge a responsible relationship with place. Crucially, such a decision can also foster the kinds of affection for, memories of, and rootedness in particular places that can motivate critique and resistance, as suggested in slogans like 'it takes roots to weather the storm' (www.ittakesroots.org) and 'what I stand for is what I stand on' (Berry, 1980).[7]

It would be misleading to suggest, then, that localised, place-based practices are not political, or that they cannot build solidarity. As a participant in one of the conversations we hosted for this project pointed out, speaking about a 'we' that refers to particular people and relationships can be a more meaningful and political experience than formulating general system critiques that are addressed to no-one in particular. If anything, building solidarity in specific contexts, and sustaining it over time, is more demanding, more likely to involve 'recognis[ing] the ways in which dynamics of oppression work through the very fabric of our identities and everyday practices' (Rossdale, 2015) than practicing solidarity from a distance.

A focus on the specific does not mean that such struggles do not also situate themselves in a wider context. Rather, we have found that making connections between issues, people and

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[7] At the same time, it is important to recognise that in some settings, resilience might require mobility more than commitment to place. See, for example, Reinert & Benjaminsen, 2015; Thiede, 2015.

localities is another important theme for many engaged in efforts to build resilience. Several of the responses to our survey suggest that a resilience framework encourages people to make connections between multiple issues, and to move away from 'working in silos'. As one of them put it, the tendency of resilience thinking to emphasise connections and promote more cooperative ways of considering problems and solutions, then, may help to promote both 'big picture thinking' and 'seeing each others' "small picture" realities', and thus may facilitate building solidarity across multiple issues and constituencies.

In some communities, efforts to build resilience by fostering a connection with the places in which they find themselves can in turn generate forms of solidarity that are 'about commonality and counter-power: the common of creative cooperation, the common of collective spaces and stewardship, the common of democratic self-determination, etc.' (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2015). The work of Movement Generation in the US, for example, explicitly connects strategies to build local resilience both with the reclamation of land, water, food systems etc., and with a critical challenge to race- and class-based inequality and injustice (Choy, 2015; Movement Generation, 2015). As Amster (2015, p. 104) suggests, 'solidarity efforts … also necessitate forms of economic self-reliance in which people can produce and share the resources necessary for their livelihoods without having to resort to outside profiteers'. Meaningful solidarity, in other words, needs resilience to be sustained.

Conversely, and as many of our respondents recognise, resilience also needs solidarity or, as they are more likely to put it, connections, supportive relationships, cooperation and a sense of community. Importantly, the effort to build connections and relationships that might strengthen local resilience does not necessarily imply agreement on values or politics. As Sharon Astyk (2011) observes, creative adaptation to 'a world where most of us are poorer [and] less secure' also means 'work[ing] with people we once did not need', with 'people we did not choose'. In other words, a 'romantic view of communities' (Bulley, 2013; Vilcan, 2015) won't do.

This point is interesting in relation to the framing of solidarity: Is solidarity necessarily based on unity and a shared worldview? Or can solidarity also mean an effort to connect across political and other differences? If we accept, as Connolly (2014, p. 193/4) suggests, that 'we inhabit an entangled world', is 'the best hope … to extend and broaden our identities, interests and ethos of inter connectedness', to cultivate generosity? It is interesting that a

broader, more generous sense of solidarity can in fact arise in situations of disaster (Solnit, 2010). While this is not inevitable (Klein, 2008), the effort to cultivate such an ethos in more ordinary times can be an important strategy towards building resilience (Cretney & Bond, 2014). As one of our respondents expressed it, thinking about resilience can lend 'more weight and emphasis to building connections [between people] during times when we aren't facing the external shock and also to help think about the value of connections that could hold strong whatever the shock'. In some situations, it is precisely the fact that such connections link people who are differently positioned that makes change possible (Lederach, 2005).

On a related note, several of our respondents observe that resilience has been a concept that has allowed them to express their concerns and values in ways that resonate more easily with others than alternative framings:

'Resilience works better when dealing with Police and Council than anything with the word peace or conflict in, so it has been instrumentally useful. ... By using the word resilience, it has been possible to establish independent civil society led networks to respond to external threats.'

'it has been another way to engage policy makers and planners for whom sustainability has all been a bit 'wooly' and too soft....'

'it's a useful 'buzzword' for local and national government officers to latch onto and recognise.'

For some of those concerned with inclusive and creative responses to change, then, the mainstreaming of 'resilience' is not necessarily a problem – and again, we would emphasise that recognising when it might be 'instrumentally useful' to talk about 'resilience' is compatible with critical reflection on problematic uses of the term (also see Cretney & Bond, 2014).

And there are, of course, critical questions to be asked in this context: When does an emphasis on inclusion, connection and partnership become accommodationist? Does 'coming to terms with fragility … undercut the political militancy needed to respond to it' (Connolly, 2013, p. 32)? As Connolly suggests, this is 'a living paradox of our time to engage and negotiate'. In what follows, we consider some of the ways in which people are doing

this.

Agency

The third overlapping theme in the workshop call expressed concern that the concept of resilience undermines any meaningful basis for agency (Michelsen & Vrasti, 2014). If resilience is articulated as a requirement that people accept and adapt to whatever life throws at them, then agency would seem to be limited to the basic tasks of surviving whatever personal, social, economic or ecological crises they are facing (Evans & Reid, 2014). When resilience becomes bound up with neoliberal governance, it is easy to see how ideas of coping and survival – rooted in an (encouraged) pessimism about change - might in turn discourage resistance, or attempts to change the conditions that give rise to vulnerability.

We have already indicated some of the ways in which resilience thinking can support a different outlook and expressions of political critique and solidarity. We expand on this further below. First, though, we want to acknowledge that the current context does indeed raise some very difficult questions about resilience, agency and political action. As Latour (2014, p. 1) puts it in his discussion of 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocence', '[h]ow can we simultaneously be part of such a long history, have such an important influence, and yet be so late in realizing what has happened and so utterly impotent in our attempts to fix it?'

Any meaningful grasp of the complexity and enormity of the ecological crisis can lead to the conclusion that little can be done, except perhaps to 'face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it.'[8] For some, the old forms of political action are redundant. Paul Kingsnorth (2010) expressed this impulse to give up on political action when he wrote: 'I withdraw, you see. I withdraw from the campaigning and the marching, I withdraw from the arguing and the talked-up necessity and all of the false assumptions. I withdraw from the words. I am leaving. I am going to go out walking.'

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[8] This was the rationale for the *Dark Mountain* project, a movement that takes as its starting point humanity's fundamental powerlessness in the face of converging economic and ecological crises – and whose rationale and focus on the aesthetic, we would suggest, has some resonance with Evans and Reid's (2014) suggestion that politics might now take the form of 'life as a work of art'. (See Kingsnorth & Hine, 2011)

Is 'leaving' really an option, though? Can 'withdrawing from the words' be more than a temporary response? As Latour (2014, p. 16) suggests, non-human forces do not have to 'enter the political arena as what stops the discussions'; instead, they can be envisaged as 'what feeds them'. What does it mean, then, for people to 'find their decisions entangled with former "forces of nature"' (Latour, 2014, p. 16) – and what does this have to do with resilience?

Responses to our survey suggest that for some people who are trying to engage with this context, the idea of resilience seems to play a role in recovering and supporting a sense of agency. It is interesting to note how many of the people who responded to our survey commented on the potential of 'resilience' to generate hope, to draw attention to positive capacities and possibilities in both human and natural systems, and/or to strengthen their sense of connection with other people and with the wider world. One respondent, for example, said they found resilience helpful because 'it gives me hope which I had almost lost for the past 10 years'. For another, 'it provides the energy and space to not feel overwhelmed by circumstances or challenges'. Is this hope as complacency, as an avoidance of more challenging questions? Is it, for those of us who are worrying about the future but not yet feeling immediately threatened, a bit too easy? Does a focus on resilience deflect attention from the recognition that, as Klein (2014, p. 442) puts it, 'we' – 'our individual bodies, as well as the communities and ecosystems that support us' – 'break too'? We are not sure. It seems to us, though, that talking about hope, empowerment, regeneration and positive possibilities is helping some people to find a sense of agency that is otherwise threatened, and that is necessary to political action, whatever form this takes. In this sense, engagement with resilience seems to be driven less by the temptation towards retreat and uncritical adaptation than by the attempt to reclaim a sense of individual and collective agency, through being proactive in difficult circumstances. As one respondent put it, '[the concept of resilience] often gives me the energy to keep going. Sometimes it makes me change course, and take risks that I otherwise would not'.

Attempts to find meaningful responses to the practical, political and existential questions posed by converging crises take many forms, expressing a range of values and purposes that are not mutually exclusive. So, for example, the widespread interest in growing food among our respondents can be part of an effort to enhance personal and/or community resilience,

but it is also undertaken as a practical expression of specific values (e.g. care for nature) and political beliefs (e.g. reducing participation in the capitalist system, increasing food sovereignty). Growing food enables people to reclaim agency in a fundamental dimension of their life whilst also strengthening connections with specific landscapes, places and people and – potentially – encouraging involvement in political action both locally and in relation to larger structures. In this sense, activities that are initially motivated by an impetus towards building community resilience can also be a way into more explicitly political concerns (see also Wilkinson, 2012) – there is a fairly direct link, for example, from the recognition that a resilient food system needs a diversity of plant varieties to a questioning of seed laws that counteract this (e.g. Deb & Emerson, 2014). The Food Sovereignty movement, centred around the insights, experiences and struggles of peasant farmers across the Global South, but now also building alliances with and within the North, is a pertinent example of the politicisation of what at first may look like localised activity. A practical task like growing food, moreover, takes us back to the present. As Berry (2015, p. 174) points out, spending our time and energy on 'the knowledge, the history, the good work, and the good examples that are now at hand' is probably a wiser course of action than 'set[ting] aside our present life, even our present happiness, to peruse the menu of future exterminations'.

Focusing on 'present understanding[s] of present needs' (Berry, 2015, p. 176), moreover, can be a powerful route to political action that directly challenges existing economic and political structures. This is evident, for example, in the practice of resilience-based organizing as formulated by Movement Generation (2015, emphasis in original):

> **Resilience-Based Organizing (RBO)** is emerging among communities that are steeped in an ecological consciousness and who recognize that a way to make transformative social change requires that we organize communities into a collective effort to meet the need at hand through **direct democratic decision-making and physical implementation by those who are being impacted by the problem**. These actions are taken with the knowledge, and, ideally, the *intention*, of butting up against legal or political barriers that force the questions of whether we have the right to self-govern and take right action in our own interests. The approach is to lead with the vision; live that vision; and live it in a way that reorients power to be more local and democratic;

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rather than simply trying to win concessions from corporations, or the structures of government that serve them.

In this example, the idea of resilience becomes synonymous with collective political action. It also involves the recognition that engaging in any sustained effort for social change is demanding, especially when it involves conflict with dominant ways of thinking, institutions or actors. Struggle requires energy, commitment, integrity and the ability to cope with efforts to put down resistance. Thus, a capacity for resilience, both personally and through solidarity with others, is one condition for successful political resistance.

The resilience of resistance and activism themselves is an important theme that provides a counterweight to the idea that 'resilience is by definition *against resistance*' (Neocleous, 2013). For some, an engagement with resilience is motivated precisely by the question of how to sustain resistance. Participants in the conversation café we hosted at the Permaculture Convergence, for example, talked about the ways in which both personal and collective resilience is an integral part of action for change. One participant talked about the value of a course on 'sustaining resistance' that she had found particularly helpful; another described the importance of incorporating resilience thinking into decision-making processes in a workers' coop; someone else reflected on resilience in the context of a decision of whether, how and where to become involved in political activism. Another of our respondents describes how resilience thinking and permaculture design principles (Mollison, 1988; Holmgren, 2002) have informed political activism in tangible and specific ways - including, for example, thinking carefully about how the human energy that goes into campaigning can be valued and sustained, designing a structure that is modular rather than overly centralised, valuing diversity and challenging discrimination, and, importantly, preparing for repression (Vosper, 2014).

These 'resiliently minded' people do not possess a 'lack of imagination ... in terms of transforming the world for the better', as Evans & Reid (2015, p. 154) imply. Instead, they are creatively drawing on an understanding of the features of resilient systems to inform their thought, practice and commitment to change.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that resilience can motivate solidarity, that it can be part of efforts to recover and strengthen agency, and that it can help people find creative, meaningful responses to some of the difficult practical and existential questions posed by the recognition of converging crises. It further suggests that resilience thinking contributes an additional dimension to these responses; that, in other words, it encourages people to ask a set of questions that can help to enhance and sustain their practice.

This does not mean that resilience will necessarily continue to fulfil this function; it is worth noting that the ways in which the individuals and movements discussed in this paper are framing their concerns and struggles are themselves in flux, subject to reflection and rethinking. Whether and how 'resilience' is employed as a helpful conceptual tool is not, thus, a question that can be answered once and for all.[9] In this sense, what we have captured here is a snapshot of how some people were using resilience at a particular moment in time (2014), and in particular geographic and social locations.

Calls to abandon resilience (as articulated by some participants at the London workshop) seem to us premature and insufficiently nuanced. As we hope to have shown, there are other perspectives worth examining that give a different sense of what resilience means or does. This does not invalidate the insights that have emerged from the critical literature, particularly around questions of power, inequality and difference (Alloun & Alexander, 2014; Biermann, Hillmer-Pegram, Knapp & Huma, 2015; Boke, 2015; Davoudi, 2012; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012). Accounts of how resilience discourses have conflicted with struggles for justice in concrete cases (e.g. Fainstein, 2014; Hayward, 2013) deserve particular attention from those interested in both.[10] Against this background, conversations between critical analysts and people who are engaged in genuine, often intelligent attempts

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[9] MacKinnon & Derickson (2012) and Boke (2015) suggest the alternative framings of 'resourcefulness' and an 'ethics of care' respectively, in an attempt to address some of the problems they have observed with resilience frames in the context of transition initiatives. In the meantime, the Transition Network itself is also reconsidering the story it is telling and suggesting a move away from seeing transition as a response to particular challenges (Hopkins, 2015) – potentially, this might lead to resilience fading into the background; whether it will also address concerns around power and inequality is less clear.

[10] In fact, there is impetus for this sort of engagement within some of the networks that many of our respondents belong to. For example, the increasingly public and visible articulation of justice, recognition of inequalities and decolonisation as key to climate change activism (e.g. Klein, 2014, Virasami & Kelbert, 2015), suggests that these questions are becoming more central.

to grapple with 'the fragility of things' (Connolly, 2013), with a real sense of converging crises, seem to us more worthwhile – and more conducive to critical engagement with resilience – than the dismissal of resilience at the level of abstract discourse (for similar arguments, also see Cretney & Bond, 2014; Walsh-Dilley & Wolford, 2015). A good basis for such conversations would be the recognition that, in the difficult context in which efforts to build solidarity and political agency now find themselves, there are no easy answers.

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