

Resilience thinking, fluidity and the agency of a quasi-actant

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Abstract

This commentary adds to Simon and Randalls' interrogation of resilience by offering three insights into a more vibrant understanding of multiplicity. First, this article seeks to align the current development of an ever-expanding scientific (and political) project called 'resilience thinking', with the ambivalence of resilience politics. Second, it responds to resilience multiple by proposing that resilience is also fluid, a term derived from de Laet and Mol's fluid technology. Lastly, it extends the implication of fluidity within resilience thinking to the agency of a quasi-actant that shapes and disrupts the current political project of the uncertain future.

Keywords

agency, fluidity, resilience thinking, quasi-actant

Introduction

Resilience has become a widely encompassing theoretical concept and policy framework in the pursuit of a sustainable future. As Simon and Randalls (2016) mention in their introduction, the range of disciplines adopting the concept of resilience is remarkable. In the academic world, research on resilience has increased exponentially over the past four decades, with more than 1300 publications recorded from 1973 to 2007 (and over 200 publications in 2007 alone) (Janssen, 2007). This has more or less influenced the way resilience appears as the new catchphrase in policymaking, particularly in addressing complex issues such as climate change, peak oil and the global economic crisis.

Notwithstanding the huge interest in, and a very wide applicability of, the term 'resilience', it also brings some confusion and different interpretations in its meaning. Questions arise as to what resilience actually is or is-not (Reghezza-Zitt et al., 2012) or

whether resilience is necessarily a good thing (Amundsen, 2012). The current debate can possibly be seen as a failed attempt to coalesce different views of resilience into a single, all-encompassing framework. In this sense, I am thankful to Simon and Randalls (2016) who have been able to elegantly frame this debate by identifying the ontological politics of resilience multiple. However, whilst the authors argue that resilience lies in, and is subject to the contestation of, different ontological politics, I argue that this expanding influence of resilience on both the academic and political realms also portrays the agency of the very concept itself,

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enabling its users to move beyond paradigms and ideological stances.

In this commentary, I like to build upon Simon and Randalls' (2016; *ibid*) rendition of the multiplicity of resilience by offering three complementary insights into the discussion. Firstly, whilst I find that Simon and Randall have given a thorough overview of resilience from health and security perspective, they have done unjustly by underplaying discourses occurring within 'resilience thinking', a scientific and political project at the global level that attempts to build new paradigms from which the sustainability of social-ecological Systems (SESs) is perceived (Folke et al., 2002). In this commentary, I seek to explore how the resilience thinking project has been able to address some of the concerns mentioned by Simon and Randall.

Secondly, using resilience thinking as a case in hand, I argue that the concept of resilience also has the capacity to be a fluid quasi-object, due to its vague boundaries despite its rigour scientific claim. The term fluidity refers to the work of Marianne de Laet and Annemarie Mol (2000) on an adaptable technology. Here, the concept is taken further by applying it not to a material object (such as a technology), but to an abstraction, or quasi-actant (Krarup and Blok, 2011). Thirdly, I suggest that seeing resilience as a fluid actant offers a different way of engaging with the politics of the uncertain future.

The construction of resilience thinking

Resilience as an academic concept emerged from two distinct disciplines. The first was introduced by Holling (1973) to explain the amount of shock a system is able to endure before it shifts into a different configuration. Holling thus suggests that resilience is not about maintaining the system in a stable state but about understanding the boundaries within which a system can operate without shifting into different states. The second concept of resilience originated in the discipline of social psychology as a term to describe groups of people that are able to rebound from adversity (Walsh, 1998). This perspective understands resilience as emerging from an active effort within individuals and society to self-organize and thrive amidst crises and disasters.

The two streams of studies have found a convergence in what Carl Folke (2006) termed resilience thinking, as nurtured by a group of prominent, interdisciplinary scholars called the Resilience Alliance. The group has played a crucial role in formulating some of the key concepts within resilience thinking and disseminating these ideas across numerous fields. One of the group's successful political projects at the global level was in incorporating the concept into the sustainability agenda at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Folke et al., 2002). The group also encourages theoretical merging with other social theories across different paradigms (e.g. Dwiartama and Rosin, 2014).

The coalescence of these two ideas, as Simon and Randalls have shown, does not entirely run smoothly. In my analysis, the most substantial tension lies in the different ontological siting of the concept, of what resilience actually means from an ecological and social point of view. This is particularly problematic because whilst the latter implies that resilience has an all-positive quality and becomes something to be pursued to achieve and maintain community wellbeing, ecologists contend that resilience is not necessarily a good thing, and the extent to which resilience needs to be maintained depends upon the desirability of such state. For example, Gunderson and Holling (2002) illustrate how a given state such as a polluted lake, a caste system or capitalism can arguably be undesirable and yet show a high degree of resilience. Scholars of resilience thinking, in this sense, seek not to nurture resilience *per se* but to understand it in the aim of identifying boundaries around which a system can support the well-being of a society.

Over the course of its development, resilience thinking has become so responsive to critique and inputs. The framework becomes resilient in its own right, as it is able to respond to feedback loops (in the form of criticism) to make amends to the incongruences within the construct. Carpenter et al. (2001), in responding to the ambiguity of resilience, urge the need to pose a question of 'resilience of what to what' in the analysis, somewhat addressing a similar concern to Simon and Randalls' point of articulation. However, what I want to argue here is that resilience thinking can proliferate as now not

because it is positioned as a ‘theory of everything’, nor because of its well-constructed theoretical framework, but because of its simple, apolitical nature that it is appealing to both the neo-liberal advocates and critics. It is, in a way, a *fluid* political project.

The fluidity of resilience thinking

The term fluidity refers to the work of de Laet and Mol (2000) on a technology called the Zimbabwe Bush Pump. As implied in its name, it was a well-accepted technology made to pump water for village communities in Zimbabwe. What made the pump so lovable were not its sophisticated and robust characteristics, but its fluidity – the way it was adaptable and responsive to the needs of the community. The design of the bush pump was simple, but both the engineers and the community had altered its appearance and functions over time to fit with local circumstances. It had multiple purposes, not only to pump water, but also, due to its design, to draw community members together. Using de Laet and Mol’s (2000: 226) words, a fluid object such as the bush pump ‘doesn’t impose itself but tries to serve’ and ‘may well prove to be stronger than one which is firm’.

Let us now consider whether resilience thinking can be remotely assumed to be similarly fluid. One way to do this is by seeing resilience as a multipurpose tool, used as a methodological cutting knife or a political arrow, particularly in environmental management. Resilience thinking started small in narrow fields of study, but it has grown larger and encompassed a wider spectrum of disciplines over less than half of century. This was done particularly through theoretical dialogues that went across different inquiry paradigms (e.g. Dwiartama and Rosin, 2014), rendering the boundaries of resilience fluid and vague. The usefulness of resilience thinking has also become ambivalent because, as the complexity of the framework increases, one can no longer distinctly say that a society is resilient or not, to which the term post-political as proposed by Simon and Randalls (2016; *ibid*) fits perfectly well. However, I also argue that the fluidity of resilience enables scholars and decision-makers to

employ a rigor framework in assessing complex SESs over a wide range of issues. By employing a post-politics of benevolence (Simon and Randalls, 2015), resilience acts as a fluid framework that ‘tries to serve’ others.

Embracing the agency of a quasi-actant

Understanding that resilience is fluid does not answer for a cause. The political implication of fluidity lies in the argument that a concept can thus be seen as an ‘actor’ or, using Krarup and Blok’s (2011) term, quasi-actant. Just like Latour’s (2005: 71) non-human actor, a concept such as resilience can ‘modify a state of affairs by making a difference’ and thus perform itself as an agent. Furthermore, referring to de Laet and Mol (2000: 227), an actor can also ‘be fluid without losing [its] agency’. A quasi-actant, in this sense, is a symbolic object outside a material association of the social, which enables relationships to be shaped and political projects to be pursued. Resilience may bear a post-political nature that opens up ambiguity and thus need to be interrogated at its points of articulation, as neatly suggested by Simon and Randalls (2016; *ibid*), but it also has the agency to influence the extent to which those projects can be driven.

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