Resisting resilience

Mark Neocleous

I'm 24, in a horrible relationship, feeling stuck and alone. I met my boyfriend three years ago while I was struggling to find work after graduating. He was not only charismatic, ambitious and gorgeous, but supportive, too. I became infatuated. By the time I found out about his angry rages and subtle bullying, I had moved in with him and into a job in his town. I'm sad and anxious all the time, but I have no idea how to leave. I can't afford the landlord's fees for cancelling our flat lease. If I go back to my mum's, I'll lose my job. What would I do during my six-week notice period? All my friends live far away, in London. I'm so ashamed that I've got myself here … I catch myself wishing I was a teenager again, safe with my family, still with potential. If I could only learn resilience, I feel like maybe the practicalities wouldn't be so daunting.

Dominated by an overpowering and angry bully of a man and pushed this way and that by the competing demands of capital and community, this young woman has internalized a very contemporary solution to her problem: she must learn resilience. The problem was sent to Mariella Frostrup for her 'Dear Mariella' advice column in the *Observer*, and published on 29 July 2012. Frostrup offers little on the question of how to learn resilience, yet here are some of the 'Resilience Tips' published in a very different sort of publication the very next month:

Physical – Add superfoods to your grocery list such as broccoli, eggs, beets, blueberries, tomatoes…
Emotional – Grab the challenge, not the way out of the challenge…
Family – Parents [should] model healthy family behavior such as having dinner together and engaging everyone in affirming, healthy conversation…
Social – Know your personal strengths and which traits strengthen the character of those around you…
Spiritual – Take a break from your busy schedule to meditate on what is really important to you.

This set of advice is from the very first edition of *CFS2 Quarterly*. The main purpose of the publication is as an information-provider for those who operate CSF2, which stands for 'Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness', a programme designed to push the fitness of US army personnel, their families and friends, and, in a roundabout way, the citizenry. The fitness programme itself had been running a long time, but its original strap line, 'Strong Minds, Strong Bodies', was changed in 2012 to 'Building Resilience, Enhancing Performance', and in the same year the programme as a whole underwent substantial restructuring around the idea of resilience. As a consequence, CSF2 offers a Performance and Resilience Enhancement Program (CFS2–PREP), run by Master Resilience Trainers and consisting of various aspects such as Universal Resilience Training and Institutional Resilience Training. More advanced Comprehensive Resilience Models include Building Resilience for the Male Spouse, Building Your Teen's Resilience, and Dynamics of Socially Resilient Teams. Its website even offers a Global Assessment Tool for individuals to assess their resilience.[1]

When the only thing a sad, lonely and oppressed young woman thinks might help her turns out to be the very same thing being taught by the world's largest military power, something interesting is going on, something that takes us from mundane tips about how to live well to the world of national security, emergency planning and capital accumulation.

Imagining everything that could go wrong

'Resilience' has in the last decade become one of the key political categories of our time. It falls easily from the mouths of politicians, a variety of state departments are funding research into it, urban planners are now obliged to take it into consideration, and academics are falling over themselves to conduct research on it. Stemming from the idea of a system and originating in ecological thought, the term connotes the capacity of a system to return to a previous state, to recover from a shock, or to bounce back after a crisis or trauma. Thus, for example, a 2008 OECD document on state-building, styled 'from fragility to resilience', defines the latter as 'the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness or legitimacy. These changes can be driven by shocks … or through long-term erosions (or increases) in capacity, effectiveness or legitimacy.'[2] As well as offering a succinct definition, this OECD document also reveals what is at stake and why the concept has become so appealing: rather than speak of fragility and its (negative) associations, we should be speaking of resilience and its (positive) connotations.

The first thing to note is the impact this is having on the concept of security. The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2002), published as a major statement of US strategy following 9/11, mentions 'resilience' just once. In contrast, five years later the *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (2007) is almost obsessed with the idea of resilience. The document outlines the need for 'structural and operational resilience of … critical infrastructure and key resources', but resilience is also planned for 'the system as a whole' and even for 'the American spirit', with the overall aim to 'disrupt the enemy's plans and diminish the impact of future disasters through measures that enhance the resilience of our economy and critical infrastructure before an incident occurs'.[3]

The UK's *National Security Strategy*, published a year later, notes that 'since 2001, the Government has mounted a sustained effort to improve the resilience of the United Kingdom.' The document goes on to talk about the resilience of the armed forces, of police and of the British people, of 'human and social resilience' and of 'community resilience'. Yet, more than anything, the document is focused on preparing for future attacks: 'We will work with owners or operators to protect critical sites and essential services; with business to improve resilience.' It outlines a 'programme of work to improve resilience' at national, regional and local level, and across 'government, the emergency services, the private sector, and the third sector'.[4] Such claims have created the rationale for state institutions and personnel to be reorganized and retrained: from the resilience training offered to armed forces (the USA is not alone with CSF2, as other states have similar programmes), to the creation of units such as 'UK Resilience' based in the Cabinet Office, right down to the fact that sniffer dogs now receive resilience training.[5]

What both the USA and the UK strategy documents reveal is the extent to which resilience is subsuming and surpassing the logic of security. The demand of security and for security is somehow no longer enough. Thus whenever one hears the call 'security', one now also finds the demand of 'resilience'. For example, much was made of the security measures enacted for the London Olympics of 2012, but the relevant body of the London Organizing Committee had not a 'Security' section but a 'Security and Resilience' section, working with a 'London Resilience Team' whose task it was

to 'deliver Olympic Resilience in London'. It is as though the state is fast becoming exhausted by its own logic of security and wants a newer concept, something better and bolder: enter 'resilience'.

As well as being newer, better and bolder, resilience is also more imaginative. For resilience both engages and encourages a culture of preparedness. The state now assumes that one of its key tasks is to imagine the worst-case scenario, the coming catastrophe, the crisis-to-come, the looming attack, the emergency that could happen, might happen and probably will happen, all in order to be better prepared. In the US and UK security strategies just cited, a future attack of some (unstated) sort is assumed to be going to happen, and even if a terror attack is prevented a disaster of some other sort is assumed bound to happen at some time. In this way the logic of security in the form of preparation for a terrorist attack folds into a much broader logic of security in the form of preparation for an unknown disaster. Resilience is nothing if not an apprehension of the future, but a future imagined as disaster and then, more importantly, recovery from the disaster. In this task resilience plays heavily on its origins in systems thinking, explicitly linking security with urban planning, civil contingency measures, public health, financial institutions, corporate risk and the environment in a way that had previously been incredibly hard for the state to do. Thus a Department for International Development publication on *Defining Disaster Resilience* (2011) finds that disaster resilience stretches across the whole social and political fabric, while a UN document on disaster management suggests that to be fully achieved a policy of resilience requires 'a consideration *of almost every physical phenomenon on the planet*'.[6] The presupposition of permanent threat demands a constant re-imagining of the myriad ways in which the threat might be realized. Resilience thereby comes to be a fundamental mechanism for policing the imagination. 'Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies', notes the official *9/11 Commission Report* in 2004, which then goes on to suggest that what the state needs is a means of connecting state bureaucracy with the political imagination.[7] 'Resilience' is the concept that facilitates that connection: nothing less than the attempted colonization of the political imagination by the state.

Poor, but resilient

Type 'resilience' into the website of the International Monetary Fund and the search reveals that almost 2,000 IMF documents contain some reference to the term; 'resilient' generates another 1,730 hits. 'Resilience' or 'resilient' appear in the title of fifty-three documents, all published in the last four years. Separating these into two broad types gives one group of texts in which resilience and disaster go hand in hand – *Sendai: A Tale of Natural Disaster, Resilience and Recovery* (2010), for example – and another far larger group, in which resilience is something that needs nurturing or building: *Enhancing Resilience to Shocks and Fostering Inclusive Growth* (2012), *Latin America Needs to Build Resilience and Flexibility* (2012), *Building Up Resilience in Low-Income Countries* (2012), and so on. Running throughout the texts is one core assumption: that the global financial system needs to become resilient, that national and regional economies need to build resilience, and that 'sustained adjustment' is a means of developing this resilience. Relatedly, the World Economic Forum now speaks about 'systemic financial resilience'. The World Bank also has a 'Social Resilience and Climate Change' Group, which has published a series of pieces on 'social resilience' as a means of fighting poverty and overcoming the weaknesses of fragile states, and, in conjunction with the UN, the World Bank has come up with the novel idea that resilience is now the means for 'growing the wealth of the poor'.[8] The beauty of the idea that resilience is what the world's poor need is that it turns out to be something that the world's poor already possess; all they require is a little training

in how to realize it. Hence the motif of building, nurturing and developing that runs through so much of the IMF literature.

Resilience has been recognized by these organizations as a means of further pursuing an explicitly neoliberal agenda and has become one main way of managing the 'disaster' that is the global financial crisis. Not only is resilience increasingly coming to replace security in political discourse, then, but it is doing so by simultaneously becoming one of the key ideological tropes underpinning accumulation. And just as resilience is now the means for helping the poor become wealthy, so corporations are now in on the act, with 'organizational resilience' trumpeted and defended by the 'International Consortium for Organizational Resilience' (which runs a range of courses offering 'certification' in various aspects of resilience). Likewise, state officials very quickly resort to the theme as a mechanism for undermining anti-austerity actions.[9]

This consolidation of 'resilience' during the current crisis reunites state and capital by foregrounding a politics of anticipation. It also straddles the subjective as well as the objective: systemic, organizational and political resilience is connected to *personal* resilience. Hence the theme of resilience as a personal attribute now dominates self-help books: *The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles* (2003); *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life* (2004); *Resilience: Bounce Back from Whatever Life Throws at You* (2010); *Find Your Power: A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change* (2010); *Building Resilience in Children and Teens* (2011); *Resilience: Teach Yourself How to Survive and Thrive in Any Situation* (2012); *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges* (2012). This list could go on and on, and the longer it went on the more obvious would be the fact that all the books have been published in the last decade. It is here that one finds the relationship between the economic development of neoliberal subjectivity and the political development of resilient citizenship. Resilience comes to form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state. This is one reason human resources departments of large organizations such as universities are so interested in it. Good subjects will 'survive and thrive in any situation', they will 'achieve balance' across the several insecure and part-time jobs they have, 'overcome life's hurdles' such as facing retirement without a pension to speak of, and just 'bounce back' from whatever life throws, whether it be cuts to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown. Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it.

This in turn explains two notable developments during the same period. The first is the growth of political 'happiness agendas' and official 'happiness indices'. Resilience is central not only to the self-help industry, but also to the wider 'happiness studies' now being peddled by politicians and academic disciplines such as psychology and economics.[10] The *Journal of Happiness Studies* was launched in 2000, and of the sixty-eight articles published since its launch that mention resilience, fifty have been published in the last five years. 'Resilience is very, very important' says Richard Layard, a leading figure of the new 'Action for Happiness' movement and now a British Lord

for his work in the field. What might improve a nation's happiness score? For Layard, it is 'a programme in schools to build resilience among children'.[11] Happiness is to become part of our resilience training; resilience is to be learnt as part of our happiness training.

The second is that major groups such as the American Psychological Association (APA) have been central to the 'happy resilient citizen' agenda. The APA launched a major 'Road to Resilience' campaign in 2002 explicitly in order to link the attacks on 11 September 2001 with 'the hardships that define all of our lives, anytime that people are struggling with an event in their communities'. After 9/11, 'people were interested in learning more about themselves – and in particular, how to become more resilient', said the APA Director of Public Relations. The APA launched a 'multi-media approach' to help people learn resilience, with a free toolkit including '10 ways to build resilience', a documentary video *Aftermath: The Road to Resilience* with three 'overarching messages' ('resilience can be learned'; 'resilience is a journey, not an event or single turning point'; 'there is no prescribed timeline for the road to resilience'), special phases of the campaign including 'Resilience for Kids and Teens', and resilience workshops for journalists. The APA website now registers some 1,500 references for either 'resilience' or 'resilient', more or less all of which have appeared in the last decade.

Resilience connects the emotional management of personal problems with the wider security agenda and the logic of accumulation during a period of crisis. It is so widespread, so dominant, so demanding, that it would be surprising if one of the larger publishing houses had not yet launched a journal devoted entirely to the subject.

A new fetish

The publisher Taylor & Francis, owner of the Routledge brand and a major player among the security-mongers of the world, recently announced a new journal to be launched in 2013: *Resilience*. As part of its launch, the journal is organizing a themed section of the European Consortium for Political Research Standing Group on International Relations conference, later this year. There will be ten panels, each lasting 105 minutes and consisting of four or five papers. That will amount to between forty and fifty papers, with discussion lasting over seventeen hours. There must be a lot to talk about. But if the journal's homepage is right, there really is a lot to talk about, because according to the homepage resilience encompasses 'not merely … how we respond to a world of rapid change, complexity and unexpected events', but also 'a shifting relationship between our understanding of human agency, its potential and efficacy, and our aspirations for improving, securing and developing the world we inhabit'. Beyond that the scope is, frankly, enormous, expanding the journal's remit to: 'prevention, empowerment and capacity-building'; the 'policies and processes of resilience'; the 'discourses of adaptation and vulnerability, their genealogy and construction in relation to the natural and human sciences'; the arenas 'where communities and policy practices are constituted at a wide range of levels from the local and regional to the national and global'; and 'the subjectivities articulated'. Which is to say: the journal's remit is just about everything. It is a corporate-cum-academic dream of realizing the UN's policy that resilience involves a consideration of almost every physical phenomenon on the planet: nothing less than a journal of all and everything that capital and the state might want and need. As such, it might have been better coming out of Cranfield University, which has a long pedigree of providing advice to modern princes and which has recently added resilience training to its list of services, via degrees in the subject, taught in its Centre for International Security and Resilience (the first of many such enterprises, you can be sure).
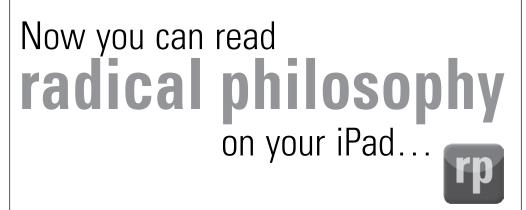
Sensing this, and no doubt trying to hold on to some notion of 'critical' academic work, the journal's editors have issued a call for papers for a special issue on

'Resistance or Resilience'. But aside from raising the obvious question – why not start a journal called *Resistance* and devote just one special issue to resilience? – the call seems to miss the central point: resilience is by definition *against resistance*. Resilience wants acquiescence, not resistance. Not a passive acquiescence, for sure, in fact quite the opposite. But it does demand that we use our actions to accommodate ourselves to capital and the state, and the secure future of both, rather than to resist them.

Against such an option, then, this Commentary is intended as a pre-emptive strike, and thereby in a roundabout way a strike against the whole resilience agenda: against the demand that we work on how to improve the resilience of state and capital, and against the colonization of the political imagination. Against resilience.

Notes

1. http://csf.army.mil.
2. OECD, *Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations: From Fragility to Resilience*, OECD, Paris, 2008, p. 17.
3. US National Security Council, *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, Washington DC, October 2007, pp. i, 25, 27, 28, 29, 31, 42, 47.
4. Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World*, HMSO, London, 2008, pp. 8, 9, 26, 41, 42, 43, 45, 55.
5. For more on sniffer dogs, see Mark Neocleous, 'The Smell of Power: A Contribution to the Critique of Sniffer Dogs', *Radical Philosophy* 167, May/June 2011, pp. 9–14.
6. Department for International Development, *Defining Disaster Resilience: A DfID Approach Paper*, DfID, London, 2011; United Nations, *Living with Risk: A Global Review of Disaster Reduction Initiatives*, vol. 1, UN, New York and Geneva, 2004, p. 37, emphasis added.
7. *The 9/11 Commission Report: The Full Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2004, p. 344.
8. World Economic Forum, *Systemic Financial Resilience*, Network of Global Agenda Councils Report, 2011–12, Geneva; United Nations Development Programme, *World Resources 2008: Roots of Resilience – Growing the Wealth of the Poor*, World Resources Institute, Washington DC, 2008.
9. In April 2012 in the midst of a potential strike by fuel tanker drivers British health secretary Andrew Lansley commented that the nation had to be prepared in order to better come through this and any other strike: 'we have got to build resilience in the system and that's what we're doing'; Dan Milmo and Juliette Jowit, 'Build Up Resilience against Tanker Strike, Lansley Urges', *Guardian*, 2 April 2012, p. 5.
10. Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, 2nd edn, Penguin, London, 2011, p. 251; Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2010, pp. 114, 149; Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* (2003), trans. Jesse Browner, Little, Brown, New York, 2007, pp. 69, 73, 115; Jessica Pryce-Jones, *Happiness at Work: Maximizing your Psychological Capital for Success*, John Wiley, Chichester, 2010, pp. 8, 74–8, 111.
11. Cited in Daniel Boffey, 'Labour Scorns Cameron "Happiness" Agenda', *Observer*, 29 January 2012, p. 23.