Resisting Resilience: Against the Colonization of Political Imagination

Mark Neocleous

We know by now just how much 'resilience' has become the new fetish of the liberal state. The word falls easily from the mouths of politicians, state departments of all kinds fund research into it, urban planners are now obliged to take it into consideration, disaster recovery systems plan it in their preparations, and academics are falling over each other to conduct research on it. The language of resilience now comes to us 'naturally'.

When categories and concepts take on an increasing appearance of being the 'natural' categories through which we are encouraged to think, critical theory needs to be on the alert. Such is the case with resilience.

I want to ask what the proliferation of resilience might be doing, ideologically and politically. I suggest that resilience has become a way of mediating the demands of security and capital. The war *of* security and *for* security is a war that functions *through* security. What I want to suggest is that the language of resilience and the idea that we might be trained in resilience is a means of preparing us for war: the war on terror, of course, and the more general security wars, but also the war of accumulation. In so doing resilience shapes our political imaginations and thereby cuts off alternate political possibilities.

Resilience is everywhere

Resilience is now everywhere. On the one hand, it appears at the higher levels of state power, with state institutions and personnel reorganised and retrained in resilience. In the US, for example, resilience training is now part of the armed forces. The 'Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness' programme was designed to push the fitness of US army personnel, their families and friends, and, in a roundabout way, the citizen body as a whole, but where the original programme was 'Strong Minds, Strong Bodies', this was changed in 2012 to 'Building Resilience, Enhancing Performance'.

In the UK, the Cabinet Office, at the heart of the British system of government, now has a Resilience Unit within it. This appearance of resilience within the higher levels of state power is reflected by its increasing use by international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank.

On the other hand, resilience now permeates the everyday, in the rise of literature on *personal* resilience. 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).

This list could go on and on, and note that all these books are published in the last 12 years. Such work is also connected to the growth of the 'happiness, and it is also connected to the interest in resilience found in the psy-disciplines and major groups such as the American Psychological Association which has been pursuing a 'happy resilient citizen' agenda. These are indicators of the relationship between the economic development of neoliberal subjectivity and the political development of resilient citizenship. Resilience is now part of the jargon of authenticity in a way that connects to the same jargon used in 'high politics'.

Resilience and security

What I want to suggest first of all is the connections between the resilience agenda and the security agenda. The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2002), published as a major statement of US strategy following the attacks on the World Trade Centre, mentions 'resilience' just once. In contrast, five years later the *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (2007) is almost obsessed with the idea. The document outlines the need for structural and operational resilience, resilience of critical infrastructure and key resources, resilience planning for 'the system as a whole' and even resilience of 'the American spirit'.

By the tenth anniversary of the attacks, President Obama could publicly declare that 'these past 10 years tell a story of our resilience'. The UK's *National Security Strategy* published a year after the US *Strategy for Homeland Security*, talks about the resilience of the United Kingdom, the resilience of the armed forces, of police and of the British people, of 'human and social resilience' and of 'community resilience'.[1]

Now, I am aware that resilience has a longer history than just these past 15 years, but the point I am making is that the *rise of resilience* in these last 15 years is *deeply connected to the security problematic*, in that the exponential rise of resilience has seen its emergence from under the sign of security. But also, I would argue that resilience has not just emerged from under the sign of security, but is now subsuming and surpassing the logic of security itself.

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'. 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: 'resilience'.

Why does security need a new concept?

Yet the question must be: why? Why does security need a new concept so closely aligned to it and yet which is also somehow overtaking it? To answer these questions we need to make a

number of related points.

First, we must have a critical grasp on the nature of security. This means seeing security not as some kind of transcendental value nor as some kind of universal positive good, and it certainly does not means seeing security as the basis for emancipation as some thinkers in 'critical security studies' do. Rather, it means we must understand security as a mode of governing, a political technology through which individuals, groups, classes, and, ultimately, modern capital have been reshaped and reordered. Security is a principle of formation, a technique of power, a political enactment deployed and mobilized in the exercise of power.

This is why security has been central to liberal and capitalist order-building and state formation. The fact that security has become the master narrative through which the state shapes our lives and imaginations – security risks here, security measures there, security police everywhere – is because security produces and organizes subjects in a way that is always already predisposed towards the defence of the established order. This is why security is the supreme concept of bourgeois society. Yet still, this does not explain how and why resilience has come to the fore. After all, quite a lot was already being achieved in the name of security.

Managing imagination

To answer this question we need to go to the second point, which is that this is intimately connected to the concept of emergency as well as security. To understand why, we have to consider the politics of the imagination. 'Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies', noted the official *9/11 Commission Report* in 2004, which then went on to suggest that what the state needs is a means of connecting state bureaucracy with the political imagination.[2]

The implications of such an idea are huge, because they suggest an attempt to manage the imagination in the name of security. And here is where I think we need to situate resilience, by connecting the question of the political imagination with the issue of emergency, or, in the terms of this symposium, the idea of catastrophe.

The state now assumes that one of its key tasks is to imagine the worst-case scenario, the crisis-to-come, the looming war attack, the future disaster, the coming catastrophe. All of these things are now wrapped in the language of 'emergency'. This is why 'Emergency Planning Scenarios' are now commonplace in advanced capitalist states.

The state now constantly imagines emergencies

The state now constantly imagines and reimagines emergencies that could happen, that might happen and that probably will happen, in order to be better prepared. So the thing to note about the US and UK *Security Strategies* just cited in which resilience appears so frequently is that both documents presuppose that a *future attack* is assumed to be going to happen.

Resilience and emergency preparedness – or preparation for catastrophe – go hand in hand: resilience both engages and encourages a culture of preparedness.

But the converse is also true: preparedness engages and encourages the culture of resilience. In such a 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. But the real power of this culture lies in the idea of a coming *political* disaster striking at the very heart of the war power.

Although the 'terror' attack and the 'natural' disaster are often brought together – the forest fire raises the possibility of terrorist arson, a new strain of flu raises the possibility of bioterrorism, and so on – taken together they are intensely future-oriented. They thereby come to shape behaviour beyond stocking up on duct-tape, batteries, tinned food and bottles of water, for they orient us towards a future event beyond our control but which we must be prepared to take under our control by being trained to withstand and bounce back from.

Policing the political imagination

So resilience is nothing if not an apprehension of the future, but a future imagined as disaster/attack and then, more importantly, recovery from the disaster/attack. 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 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*'.[3] The jargon of authenticity is thus connected to the jargon of total global management.

Commenting in his famous WWI novel *Under Fire* (1916) about the experience of soldiers waiting for battle, Henri Barbusse said 'we have become waiting-machines'.[4] A century later, we have become *preparation-machines*. In the eyes of the state, being a preparation-machine is now what makes us authentic citizens. My concern is that in such preparation the war power subsumes the imagination of the future.

No political imagination except an imagination of attack and recovery; no political future except an infinite preparation for war. Resilience thereby comes to be a fundamental mechanism for policing the political imagination, nothing less than the attempted colonisation of the political imagination by the state.

What war is it that we are speaking of?

We can extend this point by asking a question: what war is it that we are speaking of? It is easy to think that the war in question is the 'war on terror', and of course in one sense it obviously is, as I have been suggesting. But type 'resilience' or 'resilient' into the website of

the International Monetary Fund, and the search reveals some 4000 uses of the terms, with the terms appearing in the title of 60-plus IMF documents, all published since 2008. Running through 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.

The World Economic Forum now speaks about 'systemic financial resilience' and the World Bank also has published a series of pieces on 'social resilience' as a means of fighting poverty. 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'.[5] 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 inherently possess; all they require is a little training in how to realise it.

Security is being subsumed under the idea of resilience

It is clear that resilience has registered with these organisations as a means of further pursuing an explicitly neoliberal agenda. 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 the war of accumulation. If security is being subsumed under the idea of resilience, and security is the supreme concept of bourgeois society, then resilience is, in effect, becoming the supreme concept under which accumulation is being organised.

This is why as well as becoming the official means by which the world's poor are to move out of poverty, resilience is also becoming central to corporate restructuring, and why state officials very quickly resort to the theme as a mechanism for underpinning austerity measures and cuts to public spending.

Marx long ago spelt out the ways in which bourgeois society, rooted objectively in capitalism's need and desire for permanent change and constant revolutionizing of production, is a system of everlasting uncertainty; capital both generates and thrives on the insecurity that lies at the core of bourgeois subjectivity. The intensification of this aspect of class society, repackaged by politicians and employers as an inevitable fact of contemporary labour and exacerbated by the anxiety associated with the rise of consumerism, a decline of trust in public institutions and private corporations, and a collapse in pension schemes, has been compounded by this articulation of resilience as personal as well as systemic.

Good subjects will be prepared to survive

Resilience comes to form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capital as well as the insecurity of the national security state. It forms, in other words, the subjective grounds for preparing us for the war of accumulation as well as the war of security. Good subjects will be prepared to survive: 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 shit capital and the state throw at us, whether it be cuts to benefits, wage freezes, global economic meltdown, terror attacks.

Police power at its most profound

This is war-preparation and self-help conjoined: the policing of the resilient subject for the war power coinciding with the socio-economic fabrication of resilient yet flexible labour. Political subjectivity is now nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self. Our insecurities as subjects, as workers, as citizens, becomes subsumed under a structure of self-policing.

This is police power at its most profound, shaping subjectivity and fabricating order through psy-experts here there and everywhere: counselors within police departments, therapists within the workplace, psychologists in the media, and analysts in the cultural field, all offering advice on our insecurities, coaching us in our resilience and thus, in a roundabout way, functioning as technologies of security. As a consequence, and this is the point I want to stress, it achieves the ultimate police dream: closing down alternate possibilities.

Any concern about the state of the world and our place within it must generate resilience-training, not political struggle. We are permitted to be individually and collectively insecure and personally and structurally resilient. We are <u>not</u> permitted to mobilise politically against these things. We are not permitted to even imagine an alternative.

We are expected to imagine catastrophe

This preparation of the self forecloses political action, reminding us of the absence of something more collectively defining and depriving us of the possibility of engaging in political acts beyond those determined by the state and carried out under the sign of security. We are expected to imagine catastrophe and prepare for it by undertaking resilience training in advance, but we must not challenge the preparation-machine politically, for to do so would be to challenge the whole logic on which capital and the state are currently grounded.

What I am arguing, then, is that the new jargon of authenticity centred on resilience renders obsolete the key categories of critical theory and seeks to replace them with the key tropes of contemporary bourgeois thought, the tropes determined and desired by the state, by capital and the war power. So let me finish by putting it even more bluntly:

- Resilience has to be treated as a neoliberal ethic. It is fundamentally a kind of labour of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self.
- Resilience might appear to be somehow 'equal' or 'democratic' in the sense that it encourages us to think that any person or community can learn how to 'bounce back'

from disaster or misfortune, but it simultaneously masks the fact that resources are far from equally shared.

- Resilience recycles the pains created by capital into a resource that can be used for capital.
- Resilience recycles the kinds of power relations inherent in capitalism: class power, of course, but also patriarchy and racism.
- Resilience insists that we imagine the future as catastrophe, but also bouncing back from the catastrophe in a way that suits the requirements of capital and the state.
- Resilience also works to blind us to these points by encouraging us to see it in purely positive terms, colonising our imaginations such that we see resilience in purely positive terms.
- Critical thinking has become incapacitated, and resilience is partly what is incapacitating it.

Notes

[1] US National Security Council, *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, October 2007, pp. i, 25, 27, 28, 29, 31, 42, 47; Barack Obama, 'Remarks at "A Concert for Hope" Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the September 11 Terrorist Attacks', 11 Sept., 2011; Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World* (London: HMSO, 2008), pp. 8, 9, 26, 41, 42, 43, 45 and 55.

[2] *The 9/11 Commission Report: The Full Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004), p. 344.

[3] United Nations, *Living With Risk: A Global Review of Disaster Reduction Initiatives, Vol. 1* (New York and Geneva, United Nations, 2004), p. 37, emphasis added.

[4] Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire* (1916), (Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007), p. 11.

[5] World Economic Forum, *Systemic Financial Resilience* – Network of Global Agenda Councils Report, 2011-12; United Nations Development Programme, *World Resources 2008: Roots of Resilience – Growing the Wealth of the Poor* (Washington DC: World Resources Institute, 2008).