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Forum

Questioning the Diffusion of Resilience Discourses in Pursuit of Transformational Change

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Abstract

Desirable responses to global environmental challenges are increasingly being characterized as requiring transformational social change. Keeping pace with this growing imperative, discourses of resilience are shifting away from an emphasis on durability toward more progressive themes. After briefly revisiting the interdisciplinary origin of social-ecological resilience, some lingering concerns about its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications are raised. With the theme of transformational change in mind, two sets of questions are posed—aiming to stimulate discussion of resilience as a boundary object and resilience in practice. The former questions are intended to draw attention to differences between analysis and normativity in resilience discourses, as well as to how this plays out across different scales. The latter problematize the predominance of localism in resilience discourses and seek to advance the critique of its inherent neoliberalism.

Going beyond incremental change has become a prominent normative position in global environmental politics. As formidable environmental challenges put urgent pressure on ecosystems and social systems alike, the imperative to both build resilience and transform society continues to grow (IPCC 2014; ISSC/UNESCO 2013; Kates et al. 2012; Leach et al. 2012; O'Brien 2012). But are these terms "resilience" and "transformation" not at odds? An intuitive interpretation would suggest the former to be about maintaining the status quo and the latter to be the exact opposite. However, in the environmental social sciences there is a concerted effort to cast resilience as leading toward progressive and potentially transformational change (Folke et al. 2010; Pelling 2010). This paradoxical-sounding discourse has gained traction, producing coexisting definitions and interdisciplinary dialogues (Alexander 2013; Brown 2014; Janssen et al. 2006; Xu and Marinova 2013). By highlighting some of the assumptions, interpretations, and controversies around the concept of resilience, this forum piece offers a critical reflection on the transformational potential of its associated norms, discourses, and practices. Beginning with a brief look at its roots in the epistemology of social-ecological systems, the article goes on to discuss the diffusion of the resilience concept across disciplines and scales, thereby drawing attention to its malleability and posing some questions about its relationship to transformational social change.

The Concept

Present in mechanics and psychology, but popularized by ecology, the concept of resilience initially referred to the durability of a given system—that is, its capacity to bounce back after a shock (Alexander 2013; Holling 1973). Riding the intellectual zeitgeist of systems thinking and the increasing prominence of environmental issues in the latter half of the 20th

century, resilience became embedded in an influential description of the adaptive cycles commonly found in ecology, but now also extended to society via the hybrid construct of social-ecological systems (Adger 2000; Gunderson and Holling 2002). Since this pivotal disciplinary diffusion, the concept of resilience has received increasing attention from social scientists (Brown 2014; Janssen et al. 2006). The political implications and normativity of this agenda are clearest in instances where deliberately fostering social-ecological resilience through particular forms of governance is presented (Folke et al. 2005; Olsson et al. 2006). Immediately, the applicability of a systems epistemology (e.g., resilience, adaptive cycles, and connectivity) to matters of explicitly social and political concern should be called into question.

For many authors, the two schools of thought are complementary (Berkes 2007; Folke 2006; Gallopín 2006; Lebel et al. 2006). Some researchers have suggested that by incorporating social dimensions such as institutions, participation, and accountability into the governance foundations of resilient systems, many political and justice issues can be controlled for (Armitage et al. 2010; Lebel et al. 2006). Advocates argue that a further entwining of ecological resilience and social vulnerability perspectives could produce a shared epistemology applicable across multiple scales and capable of empowering stakeholders (Edwards 2009; Miller et al. 2010), thereby contributing to the reconciliation of some of sustainability's intractable human/environment trade-offs (Turner 2010).

These attempts to further embed resilience into social science without losing the latter's emphasis on power and justice have contributed to a significant shift away from mere persistence or bouncing back, toward more progressive-sounding themes, such as transformation and innovation (Folke et al. 2010; Pelling 2010; Westley et al. 2011). This shift is also being driven by the clamor of discourses in global environmental politics (e.g., planetary boundaries,

sustainable development, ecomodernism, and low carbon transitions), all calling for large-scale transformations in response to climate change, species loss, and numerous other environmental pressures.

Some Concerns

Many critiques of resilience that address its pertinence for progressive social concerns can be grouped into two themes. First is a perceived inability to articulate and address complex social processes such as power relations, human agency, and ideation. Critics have pointed out the lack of attention paid to how multiple actors utilize and contest different interpretations of what it means to be resilient (Brown 2014; Cretney and Bond 2014; O'Brien 2012). Despite resilience discourses appearing to be more analytical than their normative ancestor, sustainable development, the new discourses still offer a paucity of social theory, leading to a narrow and all-too familiar focus on material assets, economic incentives, and individual behavior (Armitage et al. 2010; Davidson 2010). Whether this can be redressed through interdisciplinary dialogue is discussed below, but for some the issue is already moot: resilience is not an explicitly pro-poor concept, so it has no business usurping existing international development agendas (Béné et al. 2012), and any such dialogue couched in a social-ecological systems epistemology is destined to be subsumed by the very resilience of resilience thinking itself (Walker and Cooper 2011).

Second, and following on from the theme above, is the way resilience thinking in practice often reinforces a perceived neoliberal hegemony (Joseph 2013). This is particularly pertinent to disaster response, climate risk, and security issues, where responsibility for mitigating, absorbing, and responding to environmental changes is a central concern (Chandler 2013). Here, the rise of resilience thinking is seen as clouding the issue of responsibility, passing it from

accountable collective bodies onto the marginalized and vulnerable (Evans and Reid 2014; Welsh 2014). As Alexander (2013, p. 2714) notes, in this situation "one person's resilience may be another's vulnerability"—for instance, due to needs for access to insurance or housing not built on flood plains. If collective alternatives are not sought, the existing institutions that have contributed to such predicaments not only remain unchallenged, but are relied upon to steer societal responses based on the same underlying assumptions that first led to problems (Gaillard 2010; Gardiner 2011). This emphasis on producing resilient subjects not only elides the structural causes of vulnerability, but it does so using an externally defined discourse that local communities would do well to reject in favor of a "politics of resourcefulness" that foregrounds inequality (Evans and Reid 2014; MacKinnon and Derickson 2013).

Questions

Resilience as a Boundary Object

As a boundary object, resilience is sufficiently fuzzy to enable multiple actors with differing values to share a common discourse. However, it remains to be seen whether this will lead to transformational coalitions or mere talking shops. At the local level, this might include shared norms capable of "uniting rather than unifying" multi-actor governance networks and social movements (Duit et al. 2010; Newell et al. 2012; Stirling 2011). At an institutional level, the concept of resilience may facilitate both communicative and coordinative discursive practices (Schmidt 2010), but whether this will be sufficient to break path dependencies is questionable. Similarly, in the public sphere resilience discourses proliferate, but an uncritical use of the term—for instance, treating it as an aspirational rhetorical device—may well hinder efforts toward transformational change (Leitch and Bohensky 2014).

In order to avoid the accusations leveled at previous environmental social science shibboleths, such as sustainable development and ecological modernization (Brand 2012), some resilience scholars argue for a return to its descriptive and ecological roots (Brand and Jax 2007), while others insist that the fuzziness/precision trade-off should be determined by the context (Strunz 2012). For instance, some disciplines may find such malleability conducive to bringing multiple concerns, actors, and scales together in pursuit of significant social change, whereas others may need to operationalize resilience precisely for it to produce anything meaningful in practice (Goldstein 2012). Most important of all is the question of "old wine in new bottles": does resilience bring disciplines together in a way that adds something new to their respective and collaborative endeavors? Does it tell us anything new about how these disciplines interact in theory and practice? And finally, does it offer a discourse through which the social and political dimensions of change can be expressed, or will the materialism of ecology, technology, and economics obfuscate these issues?

Resilience in Practice

With this high degree of saliency coupled with ambiguity, the link between theory and practice becomes incredibly complicated, yet it remains important. As Vogel et al. (2007) make clear, the production and mobilization of "resilience knowledge" is made especially difficult by the variety of stakeholders involved. Despite practitioners deploying different understandings of resilience, one common denominator is a focus on self-reliance (Aldunce et al. 2015), something which could prove problematic for those seeking the benign intervention of politicians or professionals. Many authors associated with deliberative and multi-actor governance advocate a pluralist form of politics and practice to counter these top-down tendencies, but the applicability

of such an approach is determined by contextual variations of power, representation, and scalar dynamics (Flyvbjerg 2001; Robards et al. 2011). As Jasanoff (2011) and others have illustrated, involving multiple "epistemic communities" in the creation of knowledge—in this case about what resilience is and whether it meets the need for transformational change—is a difficult but essential task in environmental politics,

Although resilience theory concerns abstract systems, the majority of policy prescriptions focus on the local level. On the one hand, this provides an opportunity to compare the different ways resilience is practiced across and between local contexts. On the other, there is a danger of overlooking the ways resilience discourses legitimize certain practices and nullify alternatives, thereby leading to undesirable outcomes and hindering transformational change (Adger et al. 2011; Brown 2014; Pelling 2010). For a clear example of this theory-practice disconnect, see Tweed and Walker (2011) on the recent Japanese tsunami and nuclear disaster. Many of the critiques cited have targeted the way resilience seems to reinforce a neoliberal perspective of risk and responsibility. More empirical work that traces this discursive formation and its influence on subjects and their practices would strengthen this line of argument. For instance, are individuals and communities able to alter its meaning and challenge policy prescriptions? What influence do resilience discourses have on local practices, relative to socio-political movements and/or material environmental pressures? To what extent does resilience reproduce or redefine local and multiscalar power relations?

Conclusion

As a malleable concept, resilience has the potential to mean different things to different people in different places and at different times. However, its aspirations as a transformational

discourse in environmental social science are more analytical than those associated with empty shibboleths. In light of repeated waves of criticism from critical and social schools of thought, the role of resilience as a boundary object and practice agenda requires continued attention. In particular, questions need to be asked of the ways resilience discourses are accentuating or attenuating social change.

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