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'Reframing' Resilience: Challenges for Planning Theory and Practice

Introduction

It should come as no surprise that a concern with resilience has now firmly entered debates in planning theory and practice. The term has not only spread like wildfire through a number of social science disciplines (Shaw and Theobald, 2011), but has also been deployed by a wide range of decision-makers, policy communities and non-state actors. Much of the appeal of the term lies in it being sufficiently malleable to cut across the so-called ''grey area'' between academic, policy and practice discourse' (Bristow, 2010: 163), it's status as both a normative and empirical framework and, above all perhaps, as a reaction to the uncertainty and insecurity produced by the quest for survival and adaptation when faced with contemporary crises. In this context, the rise of resilience can be viewed as part of the lexicon of the 'new austerity', where economic recession and public expenditure crisis, the depletion of natural resources and the challenge of mitigating and adapting to climate change constitute a crisis of an altogether different order (Wenban-Smith, 2011:431). Such a challenge also provides opportunities and, in the words of one recent contributor to this journal, 'arguably creates a space for innovation and change that we have not seen for decades' (Bertiloni, 2011:430).

At the outset, I would agree with Simin Davoudi in her optimistic view that a focus on resilience can make an important contribution to debates in planning. In this short contribution, I will concentrate on three features of the debate across the social and policy sciences that are relevant to the term's application to planning theory and practice, namely: resilience as a contested concept; resilience as a radical agenda; and resilience as a framework for policy and practice.

Resilience as a Contested Concept

Simin's contribution usefully draws attention to the different interpretations of the term and highlights the contribution to planning debates of what she refers to as 'evolutionary' resilience, in contrast to the more limited 'engineering' approaches to resilience. Her view, on the virtues of the former, is shared by a number of contributors to the wider debates on resilience in public policy and management where a contrast is drawn between traditional

management approaches that emphasise 'optimality, efficiency, stability, risk management and control' and resilient approaches stressing 'flexibility, diversity and adaptive learning' (Leach, 2008). A key feature of these approaches, then, is the flexibility to 'adapt to changed circumstances, to change, rather than to continue doing the same thing' (Adger, 2010: 1). This approach also highlights the importance of developing a capacity to seek out 'the opportunities that always arise during a crisis to emerge stronger and better than before' (Seville 2009:10).

I would perhaps be a little less concerned than Simin that interpretations of resilience are 'power blind' and that the transfer of the concept from its original ecological roots runs the risk of losing 'insights from critical social science' (Davoudi, 2012). Indeed, recent attempts to 'reframe resilience' (Shaw, 2012) have produced approaches to classification that identify the term's political, ideological and normative underpinnings and view resilience as encompassing

'....a spectrum from discursive and deliberative politics to more antagonistic politics of resistance and struggle; all involve moves away from the managerialism that characterised early resilience approaches, towards conceptualising it in fundamentally political terms' (Leach, 2008: 15).

Such an approach can be contrasted with more traditional approaches which have often served to obfuscate key questions such as, 'resilience from whose point of view and resilience for what purpose?' (Jasanov, 2008). From this perspective, resilience is clearly acknowledged to be an essentially contested and politically-laden discourse 'enwrapped with power relations and enabling some effects while closing down others' (STEP, 2008). Indeed, rather than viewing this as problematic, 'reframing resilience' allows values to be identified, choices to be made, and political pathways to be identified. Thus, embracing the politics of resilience is central to what the term has to offer. Using this approach, two particular resilience discourses can be identified.

- The term's roots in ecological sciences and, particularly, in disaster management, suggest the centrality of a *'survival'* discourse: a narrative of uncertainty, vulnerability and recovery. Within this, vulnerable individuals, groups or organisations look to 'recover, bounce-back and persist after a crisis', through 'taking

timely action before the misfortune has a chance to wreak havoc' (Valikangas, 2010: 19).

- An alternative discourse 'involves attending to possibilities for *life,* not just survival' (Jasanov, 2008: 13). Such a view holds out the possibility of optimistic alternatives centred on hope, renewal and transformation. Hence resilience involves a dynamic process of 'bouncing forward' which provides for the adaptation and constant reinvention needed to innovate and to do new things.

The message for planning theory and practice is that rather than viewing resilience as *bouncing back* to an original state following the external 'shock' , the term should be seen in terms of *bouncing forward*, reacting to crises by changing to a new state that is more sustainable in the current environment. It is to this radical approach to resilience that we now turn.

Resilience as a Radical Agenda

The message from recent approaches to resilience across the social and policy sciences is that such a focus make us question some of our 'basic assumptions and measures of success and failure' (Christopherson et al. 2010:4). As suggested above, this would involve eschewing interpretations of resilience as 'survival' as they are tied to conservative political values espousing a return to the status quo ('business as usual'). This view of resilience reflects more traditional, top-down, responses to dealing with 'threats' to security, and by the dominance of managerial or technical solutions to problems based on disaster or risk reduction strategies. As one account notes, this approach to resilience is 'in danger of a realignment towards interventions that subsumes politics and economics into a neutral realm of ecosystem management, and which depoliticises the causal processes inherent in putting people at risk' (Cannon and Mueller-Mahn, 2010: 633).

Instead, resilience should be viewed as having the potential to develop as a more radical and transformational agenda that opens up opportunities for political voice, resistance, and the challenging of power structures and accepted ways of thinking (Bay Localize, 2009). This can be seen in how resilience is increasingly linked to progressive community-led environmental initiatives such as Transition Towns, and to approaches to climate change that argue for resilience as a 'de-centred, de-commodified and de-carbonised alternative'

(Brown, 2011: 14). The term is also applied to approaches to sub-national economic development that highlight alternatives to the predominant neo-liberal discourse on growth and competitiveness (Bristow, 2010). Similarly, an analysis of post-recession urban development in London and Hong Kong argues that rather than seeing resilience as a process of bouncing back, a more radical deployment would view it as a 'dynamic process in which change and constant re-invention provide the grounds for social, economic, and/or environmental strength' (Raco and Sweet, 2009: 6).

Resilience in Practice

The debate on 'reframing' resilience also offers insights from empirical studies that engage practitioners: an area viewed as underdeveloped in the context of planning (Wilkinson et al, 2010). Thus, while recognising the importance of definitional propriety and conceptual rigor, 'reframing resilience' also necessarily involves operationalising the concept of resilience and recognising the need to directly engage with *practice,* since policy decisions are 'increasingly being made as a matter of urgency in areas from climate change and energy to agriculture, water and public health' (Leach, 2008:15).

One recent study by Shaw and Maythorne (2012) of how emergency planners and climate change managers have understood and interpreted resilience confirms a number of the findings highlighted in an earlier study of the views of metropolitan planners undertaken by Cathy Wilkinson and colleagues (Wilkinson et al, 2010). The latter research highlighted: the increasing appropriateness of the term itself in a period of austerity; its ability to integrate features of climate change adaptation and emergency planning; and its ability to act as a 'strategic lynchpin' in relation to other policy areas such as economic planning and health and well-being. The agenda was also seen to chime with the contemporary focus on localism and to offer a range of frameworks through which to monitor and evaluate the sought resilience. In this context, the research supported the contention that there are 'reasons to be cheerful' in relation to the growing understanding (amongst practitioners) of the positive features of the resilience agenda (Harrow, 2009).

However, there is still much empirical work to be done on how effective leadership for resilience can be further developed, how professionals can best learn about resilience, and how the appropriate balance between organisational resilience and other types of resilience (such as those operating at the level of the community or individual) can be operationalised. There is also scope for examining how different policy areas – from planning to local economic development to public health - have interpreted the resilience agenda, and whether there are opportunities for greater cross-service planning. The links between resilient management and the wider debates on governance, such as the focus on promoting 'agile governance' (Demos, 2008), are also worthy of further examination.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that the application of a coherent resilience framework is not without its problems. These include the likelihood of conceptual 'stretching', the conflation of normative and empirical applications, and the risks that the term's growing popularity leads to it being seen as 'the answer', a panacea for organisations and communities struggling to come to terms with a variety of external 'threats'. In particular, I think that Simin is right to highlight the danger of the term being used as part of a neo-liberal focus on self-reliant individuals developing their own resilience. As one local authority participant in the study conducted by Shaw and Maythorne rightly noted:

'Communities cannot be left to fend for themselves. Local authorities still need to support them, manage problems and provide the resources. I am concerned that since some communities have high levels of social capital or 'natural resilience' this will be used as an excuse for government to step back and leave communities to tackle these problems on their own' (2012:14).

I would conclude by reinforcing Simin's view that the resilience 'turn' signifies that the planning discipline should be 'prepared for innovative transformation at the time of change' as resilience enshrines a radical challenge to the status quo. Thus, the use of a resilience framework should not be for the faint-hearted: for planning theory and practice resilience offers nothing less than a paradigm shift: a fundamental questioning of the central tenets of contemporary approaches to planning. For example, the focus on resilience as a radical concept clearly challenges planning's linear assumptions, as the acceptance of 'ontological

uncertainties' within debates on resilience ensures that 'blue-print' planning (Wilkinson et al, 2010: 31), while important, is no substitute for 'great leadership and a culture of teamwork and trust which can respond effectively to the unexpected (Seville 2009: 11). This emphasis highlights some of the limitations of an overly-planned approach to resilience and acknowledges the importance of the ability to improvise or to use imagination. Whatever the wider institutional or strategic implications of applying the resilience framework to planning theory and practice, perhaps it is ultimately the human dimension, based on an intuitive, 'sense-making', approach to unfamiliar or chaotic situations that remains as the crucial challenge in an era of profound uncertainty.

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