

# Resilience is futile

Kristina Diprose

The cultivation of resilience is not an answer to  
austerity and poverty.

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Lately resilience has become the answer to everything. The ability to withstand and adapt to stress, once a subject chiefly of interest to health professionals, is now a catch-all call to arms for an age of uncertainty. This is a trend I first noticed when the vocabulary of my work as a youth researcher began to overlap with that of the environmentalist networks I was involved with through ethnographic PhD research.<sup>1</sup> Others have noted the propagation of resilience across diverse policy fields such as urban planning, national security and poverty reduction. The psychological specificity of the term has been diffused into a pop-psych DIY ethos that is starting to sound a lot like a national pep talk on endurance.

I used to associate the idea of resilience with grassroots groups like Transition Towns and later Climate Camp, who rallied against 'There Is No Alternative' neoliberalism with small spectacles of self-determination. Then, as I spent more time working with young voluntary sector campaigners (in a climate change lobbying group and a school-based citizenship programme) and was confronted by alternative usages, this romantic notion of resilience became difficult to sustain. In environmental policy, resilience was proffered as a climate change adaptation strategy, a policy-makers' panacea for everything from flooding to famine. After the 2011 riots, a 'Resilience Consortium' was established, positing community and personal resilience in young people as a safeguard against public disorder. Building resilience is the aim of social services for 'Troubled Families'; and it is also seen as a means of taming the troublesome more widely. In March 2014 it was the buzzword of Chancellor Osborne's budget. Far from being a sign of defiance, resilience has become the preferred means of maintaining business as usual.

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The bounce-back-ability bandwagon has an incongruous alliance of advocates, in government, in the private and voluntary sectors and at the grassroots, together forging political consensus around the politics of self-help. Though I understand the attraction of this idea, my argument is that resilience is no basis for contentious politics, and its circulation as a dominant idea may do more harm than good.

This article considers resilience as an aspirational goal of good citizenship, and looks at where its proponents are coming from and what its dangers are. In particular I discuss how resilience is deployed as an inducement to putting up with precarity and inequality and accepting the deferral of demands for change, and as a means of relocating responsibility.

## Keep calm and carry on

The mainstreaming of resilience in policy and politics coincided with the onset of – and long process of recovery from – the worst recession to hit the UK since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It also coincided with a sustained austerity drive from government; the first domestic manifestations of the catastrophic consequences of climate change, and a seemingly irreparable standard of living crisis. A generation came of age and abruptly learned to lower its expectations. Resilient communities, resilient sectors and resilient people are required to suffer these troubled times. In this context, resilience resonates more as a statement of survival than of aspiration - and one that entreats people to consider man-made crises as mysterious tests of character.

The campaigners I worked with feared for their present and future in a world they experienced as unbalanced. The climate change lobby group, comprised of young people in school, at university, in work and in unemployment, offered a dismal list of the issues and feelings affecting them and their peers:

Unemployment; disengaged from society; disillusioned about politics;  
media misrepresentation; apathy; financial dependency and debt;  
overqualified in things that can't get us jobs; no middle ground for young  
people any more – you either get on the high road for employment or  
the low road; increasingly individualised; underestimated.

Beneath these immediate concerns lurked a deeper, dreadful disquiet about

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what climate change could mean within their lifetimes. Yet these young people were relatively fortunate compared with many of their contemporaries, including international colleagues in Africa and the Asia-Pacific, who spoke of vanishing homelands and livelihoods.

My research took place as the financial crisis and cuts to education and youth services were looming large over young people's choices. School pupils enrolled in the citizenship programme I worked with had been encouraged to do a project on race and the riots, but instead they designed a survey about the impact of austerity on their peers. Many responses told similar stories:

I had my EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] reduced and there aren't many grants and scholarships available. Also with the cuts, less companies are willing to hire so I'm currently struggling with money.

With the loss of my EMA, it's harder to contribute to bills for my mum, and we have to buy very cheap food. My dad has lost his business, and mum's going to be made redundant in February. We're downsizing houses to lose some bills, but that means I have to work extra hard to get into Uni, or I doubt I'll have anywhere to live.

Both groups of young people were casualties of cowboy capitalism – they were human surplus, collateral damage. They were anxious and angry, but also determined to '*work extra hard*' for a better future. These were good, resilient citizens – dogged instead of disheartened, disruptive, or worse.

Young people were not alone in this predicament. The public and voluntary services that supported them were similarly learning to adapt to less to survive. They were doing so knowing that poor communities would lose out as provision became piecemeal. They preached employability as unemployment rates soared. They did what they could, where they could, knowing that it fell far short of what was needed. Resilience was a compromise, one that instilled self-preservation in place of safeguards, and encouraged people to cut back, adjust and accept setbacks – to Keep Calm and Carry On.

## A role for resilience

It is understandable that many people see a role for resilience. Some consider

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building capacity to cope with challenges as pragmatic (and cost-effective) policy-making; while for others resilience connotes communitarian ideals such as autonomy from the state, skills sharing and mutual care. A friend who campaigns on fuel poverty defended resilience by arguing that ‘we need some way to respond to a society that makes us physically and mentally ill’. In solidarity activism, resilience work emerges because social struggle is not a philosophical abstraction: people are up against a whole host of hardships that can be practically addressed.

The most convincing defence of resilience I have found is in Cindi Katz’s research into how young people in Harlem, New York, and Howa, Sudan, responded to rapid economic change in the 1980s and 1990s. In *Growing Up Global*, Katz argues that resistance, reworking and resilience are all means by which people do what they can against the odds to survive.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that acts of out-and-out *resistance* are rare - defining these as practices that deliberately challenge oppression by creating awareness of injustice, and undermining and providing alternatives to the status quo. More commonly, people engage in acts of *reworking*, which attempt to redistribute power and resources. Meanwhile, they are sustained through acts of *resilience* that enable ‘material and spiritual survival’ and ‘the recuperation of dignity’: acts like caring for community members, education and re-training.

An example from my research illustrates all three of these practices in tandem. In the midst of recession, the climate change lobby group decided to run a campaign on the green economy. Their ideas about what this would look like were based on a rejection of free market economics in favour of more regulation; localism; non-specialism; co-operation; reparation; wage equality; and maximum employment. Their attempts to assert these alternative values in personal choices about work were arguably a modest form of resistance, while their campaign for green jobs for young people was an attempt to rework the current system. Yet these young people also practiced resilience for status quo survival, making considerable efforts to enhance their employability as a product of their activism. These included activities such as role specialisation, seeking leadership opportunities, professional training and networking. The school citizenship programme was similarly packaged as ‘something for the CV’.

Katz suggests that resistance, reworking and resilience are mutually reinforcing; and that all of these acts may support social transformation. She makes a

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compelling case for surviving and thriving in spite of neoliberalism as the means through which people find the wherewithal to resist it. Being resilient might be the difference between a fateful or fatalistic response to social change; between hope and hopelessness. People fare poorly in a crisis if they lack the confidence that their actions can make a difference. Perhaps a more pertinent question to ask of resilience is not so much whether it is sometimes necessary, but whether it is something for progressive politics to aspire to.

My own research suggests that resilience can be less benign. In the green economy example it meant, in practice, that young people were settling for less and privileging personal gain: seeking employability rather than economic reform. Social change is a frustrating, overwhelming and uncertain endeavour. Getting a new job/friends/skills and feeling safer offers consolation. This is an uncomfortable critique because it feels unfair, but I am also self-critical in respect of how much energy I invest in being resilient, in simply surviving in, rather than shaping, society. In the following sections, I outline four ways in which I believe resilience forms habits of resignation rather than resistance.

## Putting up with precarity

In a previous research project I interviewed beneficiaries of a New Labour Government sponsored programme that funded disadvantaged youth from the UK to volunteer on overseas development projects. This was proffered as a 'global citizenship' initiative, and I was interested in what connections, if any, would be made between anti-poverty work in the Global North and in the South. A principal lesson of this endeavour seemed to be 'make do and mend', as reflected in comments such as this on young people's return:

In this country when someone's on benefits and living in a bad area, we say 'It's not fair that I've not got this or that. My kids can't do this, my kids can't do that.' In Peru, they get on with it. They might not have all the luxuries or everything they need necessarily, but rather than complaining about it or moving to another place they make do with what they've got and try to improve their area.

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Resilience is a way of encouraging people to live with insecurity because the status quo is deemed insurmountable. Thus conversations about climate adaptation and economic adjustment are dominated by discovering how storms are to be withstood, for they are presumed inevitable. An ingenious disregard for living within limits is how people change the world; but energy diverted to resilience leaves little time for dissent and asking difficult questions. Resilience is reactive and distracts from legitimate indignation. It fixes people to the present, hiding the history that fashioned beggars and kings and proves all imaginable change possible. Consider how many inconvenient facts are buried beneath the comparison of life in Lima and Doncaster quoted above. Citizenship programmes should be inspiring young people to change more than their attitude.

I have primarily worked with young people for whom putting up with precarity is detrimental but not degrading; who are resilient with reasonable hope of future success. There are many for whom insecurity is not an ignorable inconvenience, temporary or otherwise. Precarity can be dehumanising and even life-threatening. In some circumstances, to insist that people's best hope is to learn to endure the unendurable is cruel. Thus Eric Carlin, who works with young people growing up in communities steeped in long-term economic decline, while admiring their extraordinary resilience in coping with difficulties such as familial unemployment, social isolation, violence and substance misuse, has argued that resilience can often mean surviving without thriving.<sup>3</sup> Resilience policies represent a failure of political will to offer substantive change for marginalised communities. Take, for instance, the suggestion that fuel-poor households simply wrap up warm: it disregards the system that is making people unwell.

Resilience is about readiness to cope with crises, but there is only so much insecurity that people can take. Reported incidence of mental illness rose with the recession, and with the rise of resilience rhetoric. Privileged and poor – resilience romanticises the lives of people who are struggling. It casts the plucky proletariat who manage to make ends meet as 'hard-working families' while obscuring the personal cost. Until resilience is recognised for what it is – at best a temporary solution for the symptoms of stress and suffering – those who manufacture and profit from crises are being let off the hook, while the burden of risk management falls disproportionately elsewhere.

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## Instilling inequality

Previous generations have had the prospect of social mobility dangled before them; they have been encouraged to internalise social struggle, and assured that any setbacks would be temporary while hard work was bound to breed reward. Vicki Boliver and David Byrne have observed how prominent policy projects still promote the idea of meritocracy: 'a society in which social position is absolutely a product of innate ability, coupled with application or effort - with the implication that social origins have no influence on outcomes'.<sup>4</sup> Resilience is another such delusion to contrive a reason for inequality besides the obvious; to convince the comfortable that their success is earned and the rest that life chances are determined by character. The difference is that today's outlook is less optimistic. Social mobility invited the aspirational classes to sell out socialism for the promise of prosperity; whereas resilience is about pacifying people in their place and encouraging the 'have-nots' to have patience.

Meanwhile, promotional culture celebrates overcoming-the-odds performance. Workplaces reward out of hours commitment; fitness and fundraising industries market feats of extreme endurance; diet and beauty industries regulate bodies beyond recognition. Everywhere people are called to consume and be consumed by lean, hardy versions of themselves, and to concede that there will always be winners and losers. The conviction that you need to 'have what it takes' can wreak havoc where 'it' seems out of reach. This can be seen, for example, in the work of Jo Pike and Gill Hughes, who have contrasted media coverage of youth during the London riots and the Olympic Games, noting how 'aspiration' or lack thereof was mobilised to encourage young people to 'work upon themselves'.<sup>5</sup> This simplistic storytelling frames symptoms of social decay as failures of personal ambition. The more the ability to self-discipline is prized, the less empathy there is for people who are not coping well.

On the way to work earlier this year I joined a queue of people stepping over something at my local bus stop. As I got closer I realised in horror that the thing they were stepping over was a woman, unconscious and visibly injured. It was early March and cold. No one could say how long she had been there. Only one other person stopped, to call an ambulance. This is the ugly side to romanticising the resilient poor: the rest are deemed worthless, beyond or undeserving of help. I felt

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disturbed by my neighbours' response, then later by my own. I roused the woman with some difficulty, helped her to warm up and talked to her until the ambulance arrived, then I just left. I assumed someone else would take care of her after that; and to be entirely, uncomfortably, honest, I recoiled from offering friendship that might become burdensome at a time when I was already stressed. The ever increasing demands of self-care erode collective compassion and people skirt around the fallen because they fear falling themselves.

Resilience is assigned to people and communities to sift the deserving from the undeserving. Kirsten Fockert, writing in a recent issue, considered how stereotypes of lazy and undisciplined 'chavs' are contrasted with nostalgia for the respectable working-class of a bygone era.<sup>6</sup> This sifting coincides with increasingly aggravated social inequality. Our politicians' proverbial 'hard-working families' merit respect, but a sick woman in a bus stop doesn't even merit the minimum in human decency. Personifying inequality in this manner hides historically embedded structures. The young campaigners I worked with are no more inherently resourceful than the 'NEETs' in Carlin's study, but they are likely to fare far better. Obstacles can be overcome of course, but the magnitude of the obstacles people face varies, and stacked odds cannot be overlooked. So many things besides resilience make a difference to young people's lives: where they are born, what education they receive, what support they get from family, friends and the state, their local economy, services and climate, housing, income, health, safety, love. To pit people and places with every advantage against those with none and praise the former for their superior fortitude is age-old devious nonsense. It fosters complacency in place of care.

### Relocating responsibility

By focusing on the character of people and communities, resilience relocates responsibility for well-being and change. The onus is on active citizens in charge of their own destinies. Arrangements like new localism, voluntary action and Big Society sound appealing because they seem to promise power to people. These terms idealise self-regulatory, entrepreneurial citizenship in place of support from the state. For some this transition might seem desirable, but in the context of the neoliberal state it acts as a vehicle for the devolution of risk, not rights. As Tom



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Slater has observed in relation to urban planning: 'Resilience so easily supports not only austerity, but the territorial stigmatisation that so often precedes strategies of dislocation'.<sup>7</sup> That is, communities deemed to lack resilience can be more easily disregarded and displaced.

When the 2011 riots broke out, the campaigners I worked with expressed a feeling of failure: that their peers had resorted to vandalism, violence and theft and that they had not been effective enough in their efforts to give young people a political platform. The national debate in the main attributed the riots to lack of respect and resilience among those involved, often presumed to be symptomatic of dysfunctional families and communities. Young people's impatience to acquire high status consumer goods was derided and a punitive response demanded. Meanwhile 'broom brigade' community clean-ups were celebrated as exemplary acts of neighbourliness and citizenship, resilience in action. Everyone but the state assumed responsibility for the riots and their fallout.

The privatisation of the political pervades everyday life in ways subtler but no less scary than rioting. The lobby group I worked with created 'stories of self' as part of their campaigns training, connecting transformative action with personal experiences of triumph over adversity in a technique taken from Barack Obama's first election campaign.<sup>8</sup> 'Public narratives' were carefully constructed to link self and social transformation – as if the former breeds the latter – showcasing each speaker's resourcefulness and resilience. Personality politics invites everyone to play protagonist, to claim plucky proletarian heritage or flaunt comparable hardships to show that anyone can succeed.

Casting the self as the key site of struggle not only misses the point; it can be exploitative and expose vulnerability. One campaigner joked that she felt like 'the girl without a story', and asked why that should be seen as negating her contribution. Others expressed uneasiness about manufacturing 'sob stories' and trivialising personal grief. Another troubling example came from the school citizenship programme. In guidance circulated to staff on how to identify young people for promotional case studies, among the criteria for inclusion were: BME, poor, at risk of exclusion or homelessness, in the care system or a carer, refugee, asylum-seeker, young offender, or ideally several of the above. Rags to riches and reformed rebel stories are fetishised because they prove against-the-odds struggle possible; that young people need only change themselves to be out of danger.

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Finding strength in stories of self, struggle and survival is something that people inevitably do, to learn from experience, loss and achievement. Resilience is sometimes necessary. But it cannot solve all problems and it is a mistake to internalise everything. It is a mistake to elevate survivors to celebrity status and forget about fatalities. Some storms overwhelm people and it is not their fault. All are responsible for changing the weather and it is a task that no one is equal to alone. Conflating self and social transformation risks settling only for the former and falling far short of what a society is capable of.

## Deferring demands for change

The role of resilience in contentious politics is to reassure people that they will live to fight another day. Unmet demands and disappointed hopes are not entirely given up, only deferred. Resilience is about reflecting and regrouping, reconciling to temporary defeat or limited success.

Lobby group members were extremely disillusioned at the close of the climate change negotiations they attended, when the outcomes fell far short of expectations. One explained: 'You come back to the UK and suddenly it's cold, it's miserable, you haven't saved the world'. To recuperate, they took comfort in what this experience taught them:

Whether I reached [my goals] or not, the one single thing that ... annihilates everything I could have ever imagined is the personal change I went through.

Self-reflection and personal development were justified as reliable fruits of their labour, because this made young people more confident that they might succeed in the future:

I've developed a lot personally. I think I will be a lot more effective in whatever I choose to do next and that's great ... even if I can't pin it down to one particular thing, I am a lot stronger than before, and I'm more resilient and I know how to work in groups, and I can be patient and get over troubles and things a bit more.

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Here, self-transformation is not necessarily a catalyst for social change, but a consolation in the absence of it. Settling for employability instead of economic reform employs comparable logic.

The environmentalist Derrick Jensen has similarly suggested that hope encourages people to put their faith in future change, rather than embrace the full range of presently available options. ‘False hopes’, he argues, ‘bind us to unliveable situations, and blind us to real possibilities.’<sup>9</sup> To do justice to the notion of resilience, it does imply more personal agency than choosing to believe that things can only get better. Hope can simply involve entrusting change to forces outside of oneself; whereas resilience directs change inwards. With these as the tools of transformation, is it any wonder that progressive politics is stagnating?

Perhaps the best that can be said of resilience is that it prepares young people for an unfinished journey. ‘Unfinishedness’ is a key theme of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; his argument is that unfinishedness breeds resistance because it concedes no end of history and no immutable facts – if we are unfinished, then everything is still possible.<sup>10</sup> There is a difference, however, between unfinishedness and inertia. It is not enough to cast out for Ithaca and look forward to a marvellous journey, drifting on the tide. Self-preservation and indefinite deferral are woefully inadequate responses to suffering. We may be unfinished, but inertia politics has stalled a generation. There are alternatives to putting up with it.

### Recovery

It is time to rid ourselves of resilience: to renounce responsibility for the economic crisis; to stop scapegoating people who are struggling; to refuse to submit to stress; to recognise healthy limits and do everything possible to sustain them. I agree with my friend who argued that we need a way to cope with a society that makes us ill, but I do not believe resilience is the answer. Tracie Washington of the Louisiana Justice Institute makes the definitive case against resilience: ‘Stop calling me resilient. Because every time you say “Oh, they’re resilient”, that means you can do something else to me. I am not resilient.’<sup>11</sup> Political reform and grassroots resistance can only work towards recovery if we work for the weak as well as the strong; if we promote a culture in which people do not just survive, but thrive. Resisting resilience does not mean giving up. Quite the opposite – it calls for more

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courage. Imagine if the time and effort invested in future-proofing ourselves was instead given to fully occupying the present, and to more determinedly realising the change we want to see. The road to recovery is not easy, but with so many people in our communities pushed to breaking point, what other option is there? We can do better than survive: we need to reconnect with our conviction, and bounce back from the brink.

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## Notes

1. For my PhD on Youth Citizenship, Social Change and NGOs I spent sixteen months working with two national voluntary sector youth projects, one of which focused chiefly on environmental campaigns. A short summary of this research and its key findings is published as a blog on the NCVO website: <http://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2014/02/25/employable-entrepreneurial-empowered-how-the-voluntary-sector-supports-youth-citizenship/>.
2. C. Katz, *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives*, University of Minnesota Press 2004.
3. E. Carlin, 'Youth transitions, social exclusion and the troubling concept of resilience', *NYRIS12*, 12-14 June 2013, Institute for International Social Studies, Tallinn University.
4. V. Boliver and D. Byrne, 'Social mobility: the politics, the reality, the alternative', *Soundings* 55, winter 2013.
5. J. Pike and G. Hughes, 'Aspiration Nation: the framing of youth through the London riots and the Olympics', *RGS-IBG Annual International Conference*, August 28-30, 2013, RGS, London: <http://conference.rgs.org/AC2013/36>.
6. K. Fockert, 'The new moralism: austerity, silencing and debt morality', *Soundings* 56, spring 2014.
7. T. Slater, 'The resilience of neoliberal urbanism', openDemocracy, 28.1.14:

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[www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/tom-slater/resilience-of-neoliberal-urbanism](http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/tom-slater/resilience-of-neoliberal-urbanism)

8. M. Ganz, 'What is Public Narrative', 2008: <http://chutzpahportfolio.yolasite.com/resources/WhatIsPublicNarrative08.pdf>.

9. D. Jensen, 'Beyond Hope', *Orion*, May/June 2006: [www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/170/](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/170/)

10. P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin 1970.

11. T. Washington (Attributed), New Orleans poster, blogged by Candy Chang, September 2010: <http://candychang.com/resilient/>.