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## *Resilience*

**with contributions from Philippa Collin,  
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## **Thinking in Common about Resilience: Introduction**

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Resilience. An increasingly rhizomatic concept. A ‘turmeric’ cure-all. Add a dash to your latte, your white paper, your community – and a better world should be possible. As Walker and Cooper (2011) show in their genealogy of resilience, the concept has been transplanted and given rise to new ‘forms’ right across the natural and social sciences. Tracing its contemporary roots to complex systems theory, they argue that the power of resilience thinking is in its ability to “metabolize all countervailing forces and inoculate itself against critique” (p. 157). Indeed, in practice – as in theory – resilience thinking is everywhere: in therapy, popular debate, public policy and scholarship across fields and disciplines. And yes, there is even an app for it. At least 138 of them, to be precise.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that resilience is a ‘high resonance’ concept and has been taken up and developed across many different fields and contexts from engineering to psychology, ecology to economics, urban planning to international development. Consequently, it is defined – some would say poorly – in many different ways and with wide-ranging consequences. Its uses implore all kinds of people, places and things to achieve new levels of performance, responsiveness, adaptability, responsibility and self-reliance. But it is also wielded in the service of particular values, qualities, relations, capabilities and – ultimately – futures.

This future orientation is most vividly realised in relation to children and young people who embody the central concerns and hopes of resilience thinking. Practically, children and young people are the targets of policies, programs and interventions designed to foster the ability to persevere in the face of change and adversity. Take, for example, the Rockefeller Foundation-supported ‘100 Resilient Cities’ initiative. Children and young people are incorporated in various ways into the Resilient Cities’ strategies – principally as the targets of actions designed to improve access to parks, raise educational attainment, reduce crime and promote employment. Children and young people are, therefore, constructed as ‘future citizens’, ‘vulnerable citizens’ or ‘problematic citizens’ by city plans – principally designed and delivered by ‘adult experts’ – which aim to rectify already-defined, perceived ‘problems’ associated with ‘youth’ who are of, or at, ‘risk’.

This framing epitomises just two of the many issues with resilience thinking. Firstly, there is the ambivalent positioning of agentic subjects who are called to action at the same time as they are constrained and have their agency denied. Children and young people must become more

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<sup>1</sup> At 02 August 2018, a search on the iTunes and Google Play app stores for ‘resilience’ render 138 apps – removing all duplicates.

resilient, but they are routinely excluded from the processes and institutions which largely define the terms of their relationships to the world. Secondly, there is the way in which resilience is conceptualised as being *internal* to a person, community or system, and thus also promotes the internalisation of risk and responsibility (by said individuals, communities or systems). Given at least these constraints, can – indeed, should – resilience be thought otherwise?

Drawing on David Chandler (2015), I and my colleagues have proposed resilience as a metamorphic *orientation* to the world enacted through an evolving set of *capacities* for participating in ongoing processes of reflexive, relational thought and action (Collin, Notley & Third, 2017). By this, we think of resilience as the *capacities to transform the conditions of social life*. We propose that this orientation can be developed through ongoing processes of individual and collective receptivity and responsiveness (Third, Collin, Black & Walsh, forthcoming). In our own work, we take this approach seriously in aiming for engaged research that prioritises dialogue, responsiveness and action with children, young people and their communities. While evolving, ours is just one attempt at productive engagement with resilience thinking.

In November 2017, four scholars came together at Western Sydney University's Institute for Culture and Society in a 'Thinking in Common' panel to explore the concept of Resilience. These sessions are a feature of the Institute's seminar series. The format invites four panellists to 'think together', bringing different perspectives into dialogue in order to facilitate an interactive discussion with the audience on pertinent and powerful concepts of central import to contemporary scholarship and social life.

In this *tOPICS* paper, we present a collection of short essays developed out of the seminar presentations on Resilience. Each author approaches the question 'what is resilience and is it a term we wish to work with'? They grapple with what the concept signifies and what work it does in the world. In different ways, each author responds to the charge from Walker and Cooper (2011) that resilience thinking cannot be challenged from its own footings but must be contested on completely different terms.

Not ready to abandon the term, Louise Crabtree argues for a return to the roots of resilience by arguing how its own key concepts might help recover its utility for thinking the world differently. Specifically, she argues that a renewed conceptual focus on systems and their capacity for 'co-management' and attending to 'core functions' offers the means by which to think through the politics of contemporary crisis – such as housing – and to address questions of equity and justice.

Drawing on his work on enterprises that manage commercial viability alongside social and ecological concerns, Stephen Healy also explores the possibility for resilience to be, if not redeemed, then recast *as a property* 'expressed in relation to a corporate ethos'. In contrast with the assertion by psychological, environmental or economic theories that resilience emerges through stress responses, Healy explores how the embodied principles of cooperation and commitment which guide responses to act – or not to act – can be generative of a pragmatic collective-resilience.

Can, then, resilience be a disposition or way of thinking in relation to human and nonhuman things? Only if, as both Simone Fullagar and Paul James argue – in very different ways –

resilience is put in its place. Fullagar critiques the limits of resilience thinking by tracing the gendered and humanist framings of mental health. Instead of finding new ways to perpetuate resilience as a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), she argues for other theories, such as materialist feminism, and methods with which to achieve a more reflexive and relational politics for being in and with the world.

In his essay, Paul James also traces many contradictions and constraints of current conceptual and practical applications of resilience, highlighting the increasingly dominant role of resilience in contemporary forms of governance. Arguing against resilience as a ‘singular construct’, James prosecutes a case for resilience to be seen as one among a large set of ‘social capacities’ required to make a ‘flourishing world’. This position calls for a much broader political project and a set of heuristic and methodological tools for moving beyond the pursuit of resilience *per se* towards dialogue and debate over what we are resilient for.

Indeed, these short essays and their distinct ruminations on the topic of resilience offer many provocations for future work. Rather than simple defence or rejection of resilience, each argues the need for critique as well as constructive engagement with the concept. They begin to answer, in their own ways, a question posed by David Chandler: ‘If resilience is the answer, suggested by policy interventions in every area, from education to the environment to conflict-resolution and poverty-reduction, what does this tell us about the questions we are asking of the world and how we understand ourselves in relation to this world?’ (2014, p. 2). In this collection of papers with diverse concerns and styles, the authors posit alternative questions about our relationship to the world – to other people, places and things, both human and nonhuman. In doing so, they signal possible concepts, theories and methods that may make visible and enable positive transformation – rather than preservation – of the state of ever-adaptive people, communities or systems.

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# Beyond Bouncing Back: The ‘Cruel Optimism’ of Resilient Selfhood in Women’s Recovery from Depression

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*Cruel Optimism* turns toward thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on. (Berlant, 2011, p.8)

It is not surprising that resilient selfhood figures in the contemporary cultural imagination as a hopeful narrative in the context of increasing rates of mental ill health/distress, expanding diagnoses, online treatments, psychopharmacological markets and funding for neuroscience. As Lauren Berlant’s quotation above suggests, the political manifestations of hope raise critical questions about how ideas and practices of resilience and recovery materialise through the affective contours that enfold subjectivities and desires. What do these ideas ‘do’ in terms of helping or obscuring our understanding of the experiences and cultural conditions that shape distress? In thinking through these complexities I draw upon over a decade of research into the contradictory forces that shape how Australian women come to experience distress as depression and enact recovery over the life course.

I will offer several critical points about the limitations of resilience thinking as it has been framed by the human sciences and, in particular, various traditions of humanist psychology, sociology, social work, mental health promotion *etc.* Broadly, across these disciplines mental health is positioned as an aspect of agentic selfhood – an individual trait, character or learned coping response – that is compromised by a disorder, illness or biopsychosocial forces. I am interested in shifting the way we have thought about mental health by considering the gendered context of distress and how a ‘more than human’ approach might offer different insights into agentic capacities. Rather than emanating from ‘within’ a humanist self, agentic capacities are understood as produced through material, affective and discursive relations (Barad, 2007; Fox & Alldred, 2016). What is at stake in this project of rethinking recovery and resilience is the current neglect of the sociocultural in ‘biopsychosocial’ models that privilege biomedical knowledge at the expense of more complex understandings of power and affect (Fullagar, Rich & Francombe-Webb, 2017). New materialist feminism offers a different way to think beyond the persistent dualisms of biology and culture, mind and body, self and the social, to consider how resilience is enacted through the relational practices of gendered entanglement – humans, nonhuman nature, objects, medication, embodied movement, digital technologies, public spaces and services *etc.* (Barad, 2007).

Resilience holds the promise of overcoming adversity – the distress of trauma, injustices and the intensifying pressures of everyday life in advanced capitalism (Ungar, 2013). Resilient people are supposed to bounce back by drawing upon their inner resources, professional expertise and self-management to recover their lives. We see this kind of instructional pedagogy in the [5 Ways to Wellbeing](#) campaign, for example, where activities are prescribed to develop self-care habits as a means of restoration and prevention (regular exercise, sleep and

**The Occasional Papers, Institute for Culture and Society vol. 9, no. 1**

Philippa Collin, Louise Crabtree, Simone Fullagar, Stephen Healy & Paul James (2018) ‘Resilience’

nutrition, volunteering, social support and learning, as well as medication and therapeutic support). Yet, the prevalence and recurrence of common mental health issues (including the high rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders for young women) point to the failure of individualised models of resilience to grasp the sociocultural, economic and political conditions shaping emotional life, and hence our collective capacities to live well.

Metaphors of overcoming, bouncing back and returning to our normal selves emerge from a humanist fantasy that ignores how complex power relations ‘get under the skin’. Mental health is profoundly embodied (think, for example, of the weight of depression or exhaustion of anxiety). How we feel about ourselves is bound up with the performance of subjectivity and the imperatives of self-improvement, success, productivity and desirability across work, education, leisure and digital spaces, relationships with respect to differences across class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, *etc.* By privileging a unified but troubled self with inner agency, resilient thinking obscures the inequities and affective relations that enable distress to flourish, and thus positions the individual as responsible for adapting and coping, in the context of underfunded and limited support services, and intensifying social pressures. Borrowing from Berlant (2011), do the individual, professional and policy hopes invested in resilience actually perpetuate a form of cruel optimism that can exacerbate self-blame, stigmatisation and inequity? The question remains as to whether ‘resilience’ can be reconfigured beyond the preoccupation with restoring a humanist self, to acknowledge the conditions of precarity and uncertainty along with the human and nonhuman relations that shape agentic capacities.

In my research, women spoke of the intensification of shame and failure when their dutiful efforts to recover did not resolve their emotional distress (Fullagar, 2009; Fullagar & O’Brien, 2013). Recovery and resilience are not neutral terms, they have political effects that work through different registers, intensities and sites connecting the visceral, digital, organisational and geographic (Swist and Collin, 2017; Harper and Speed, 2014). The focus of mental health promotion and intervention on improving women’s coping skills, emotional regulation, thoughts and moods works to individualise responsibility for change by ignoring gender power relations: ‘DIY’ resilient self-management as a means of re-covering rather than questioning the conditions of (ab)normality. The ‘failure’ to enact resilient selfhood impedes women’s recovery by exacerbating self-blame and shaming responses that further undermine mental health (and contribute to loss of income, parental custody of children, relationships, self-worth and sense of future *etc.*).

On a practical and policy level, this situation calls for much more gender-sensitive early interventions and far broader ways of thinking about support, relationality and equity. By failing to analyse gender critically (as distinct from merely reporting on gender differences as variables), various treatments and prescriptions for wellbeing deflect attention from the vital ‘infrastructures of care’ (Butler 2014) required to support our collective capacities to act, resist and transform the conditions of possibility for living well. The effect of austerity measures in the United Kingdom is a compelling example of how public infrastructures of care that can support resilience and recovery are being eroded with massive cuts – from the health system to public park maintenance, community and children’s centres, library closures *etc.* The contradictory economics of austerity calls for feminist analyses as women bear the brunt of many cuts to public spending, and yet common mental health issues significantly contribute to a growing ‘burden of disease’ (Harrison, 2013; Howell & Veronka, 2013).

New materialist feminism offers a different way of thinking through the embodied politics of distress by reorienting the debate towards more relational understandings of recovery and resilience as practices bound up with the ongoing material, affective and discursive entanglement of self and world (Fullagar, 2018). For example, gendered discourses about successful or shameful womanhood, the effects of emotional labour at work and home, the impact of childhood trauma on the somatic self over time, the support or lack thereof for lone mothers and pressures to perform desirable femininity from a young age, all produce affective intensities – sadness, anger, despair, agitation, shame *etc.* These discourses are translated through diagnostic cultures that women negotiate in various ways (adopting, refusing, experimenting with ‘illness or disordered’ identities in performing recovery).

Feminism reorients our thinking through a vital politics that recognises the relations and affects that shape our agentic capacities beyond an atomistic model of subjectivity. In this sense, agency is not something that emanates from within. Rather, our capacities for thought, feeling and action are assembled through a range of human and nonhuman relations (Barad, 2007; Fox & Alldred, 2016; Duff, 2014; McLeod, 2017). Exploring the materialities of mental health and tracing the gendered patterns of affect also require new methodologies and representational practices in research. For example, I (Fullagar, 2018) have repositioned ‘found poems’ (Richardson, 2015) through a materialist orientation in the desire to evoke recovery and resilience as processes of becoming; messy, contradictory and entangled gender relations that shape embodied distress through helpful/unhelpful practices. Moving beyond ‘representationalism’, such approaches help to complicate simplistic narratives of resilient selfhood as an inner quality, responsibility or linear trajectory, while also materialising the gender politics of distress. Other researchers also draw upon non-representational and creative practices to explore the relations between difficult affects and contexts that exceed capture in discourse (Bartlett, 2015; Muller et al., 2015). We have also recently seen [The Big Anxiety Festival](#) in Sydney, with multiple sites, creative forms of engagement and digital presence (led by Professors Jill Bennett and Katherine Boydell from the University of New South Wales). In a stark contrast to prescriptions for living, these interactions invoke multiple possibilities for mindbody, natureculture, digitalvisceral ways of knowing, moving and transforming traditionally individualised meanings about ‘anxiety’. Rather than perpetuating the cruel optimism of humanist approaches to resilience, materialist feminisms deploy creative ontologies and methodologies to trace the tensions, diffractions and relational flows of becoming that enfold the subject, thereby complicating inside and outside, human-nonhuman relations.

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## Resilience Reimagined: Looking for Inspiration in Regional Australia

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The question I want to answer is whether or not the term ‘resilience’ can be redeemed. Not one to waste a perfectly good word, I want to say ‘yes’, there certainly are words worse than resilience and we can make it come to mean something else. In particular, it could be a useful way to describe some of the enterprises my colleagues and I are encountering in a project on the future of manufacturing in Australia that focuses on enterprises that manage commercial viability with social and ecological concerns. One of the firms we are looking at is NORCO Dairy (established as The North Coast Fresh Food & Cold Storage Co-operative Company Ltd), a 125-year-old farmer owned dairy cooperative in northern New South Wales. The enterprise consists of over 200 dairy farmers who form the producer cooperative, three value-adding manufacturing plants employing 837 people, and 34 cooperative-owned rural supply stores. Having interviewed farmer-owner board members, the Chief Financial Officer, general managers, factory managers, and factory floor workers – two things have become clear.

First, there’s a pragmatic cooperative ethos that pervades the organisation which informs its cautious approach to capitalisation and market development, decisions around automation, and strategic engagements with international markets. This ethos shows up in paying the highest gate prices for raw dairy, and above-award wages for factory-floor positions in its three manufacturing plants. It extends to downstream customers and the region as a whole. Second, this commitment to cooperation as an enterprise strategy gives it staying power — specifically a resilience to survive 28 years after the end of state regulated pricing. NORCO’s survival is something of a paradox - it entered into two partnerships with the largest industry players globally (Parmalat and Fonterra) where the expectation was that it would be absorbed. In both cases, NORCO not only survived but improved its market position and is now closing in on \$1 billion in sales while retaining its status as a member-owned enterprise. This achievement is all the more impressive considering the fate of larger players like Murray Goulburn, which came to grief after partially listing and, becoming beholden to outside investors, ended up betraying farmer owners, and upending cream supplies throughout the country in the process.

In studying enterprises like NORCO, we might be able to come up with a different sense of what resilience is. It could be a property expressed in relation to a corporate ethos. But, at present, this ‘other’ resilience is difficult to see, obscured by a dominant understanding that, like a ‘bad penny’, surfaces in a variety of contexts that I think across. Resilience, like sustainability or neoliberalism for that matter, is perhaps another example of a term that has come to mean too much. But there’s something more going on here. More than these other terms, resilience describes a bodily capacity — an ability to bounce back from perturbation, to both adapt and keep composure. Resilience could be a property of any body, such as a cooperative like NORCO, but it seems to get directed at the human body in a particular way. Increasingly it seems that resilience is not just *an* answer to Spinoza’s question, ‘what can a body do?’ (Roelvink, 2016), but rather it is *the* answer, an imperative, something we must do, must be.

**The Occasional Papers, Institute for Culture and Society vol. 9, no. 1**

Philippa Collin, Louise Crabtree, Simone Fullagar, Stephen Healy & Paul James (2018) ‘Resilience’

Writing in the context of economics, Williams and Vorley (2014) restate the commonplace understanding that resilience is not just an ability to bounce back, to return to homeostasis, but to bounce forward, to evolve and adapt in a world without equilibrium. In this sense, we might think of resilience as a synonym of an earlier term, flexibility, that as Emily Martin (1994) pointed out, described everything from immune systems to manufacturing in the era of post-fordism. Flexibility had positive connotations – flexible hours, freedom from set tasks — but all too often negative consequences — numerical flexibility, what we now know as the new normal of casualised employment.

Resilience has a similar bifurcation in a management context. Resilience training is common in the US, UK and Australian health care sector, and certainly it is an acknowledgement of the needs for physical and psychological wellbeing of caregivers in demanding professions. But, this buoyancy training has an entirely different meaning in the context of institutional austerity — the lesson that it intones is that it's your job to deal with increased patient loads, demands outside work, the emotional toll when things go wrong, even workplace bullying *etc.* For Kaika (2017), resilience, like flexibility before it, operates as an immunological device: the goal is to inoculate us, to make us more tolerant of a worsening situation, and what it precludes, of course, is the idea that, if institutions could become more supportive, individuals wouldn't need to be so buoyant:

*Flexibility called upon a body to be bendy.*

*Resilience insists that we be bouncy.*

*Bendy, bouncy but what about breaky?*

*What happens when we can't be resilient, when the strain proves too great, when adaptation is not possible?*

Autonomist Italian theorist and Bologna native Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's (2017) newest book, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, explores this question. What he foregrounds in his analysis of the present political moment is what Nancy Fraser recently termed the right-wing electoral mutiny — the violent nationalist turns in electoral politics that are now shockingly familiar in the visage of Theresa May's post-Brexit UK and Donald Trump's America in one way, but also the electoral success of the anti-immigrant right in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, Narendra Modi's India and Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines (Fraser, 2017). He argues that these 'strong' figures have been elected partly as a response to a widespread feeling of impotency: precarity, automation-anxiety, and the loss of social status due to perceived immigrant and minority privilege.

Wendy Brown (2017) has recently made a very similar argument, seeing Trump's America as a product of a wounded narcissism, segments of the populace unable to change, but confronted with increasingly multicultural, global, cosmopolitan centres full of bodies that can seemingly bend, bounce and prosper (Brown, 2017). For both Berardi and Brown, authoritarians politically capitalise on this cauldron of resentment but have neither the power nor interest in changing the underlying conditions that generate this helplessness. The problem that Berardi identifies is that resilience talk may work to make this narcissistic wound deeper, while ignoring a reality that even those of us who are cosmopolitans are caught in as well. Our individual capacities to remake ourselves are not infinite; neither our powers nor our times are unlimited. There are things that a body cannot do. Berardi's solution is to return to Spinoza to find what he calls forms of collective-potency (*potentia agendi*), a capacity to act collectively,

or, dare I say it, communally in response to the challenges before us — ecological, economic and cultural (Rehmann, 2016).

NORCO's cooperative/corporate approach to being resilient finds expression in its approach to capitalisation and market development in one way, but also in the care that it exhibits towards members and employees. These cautious but forward-thinking approaches to cooperative enterprise might be readily seen as a basis for a collective-resilience in regional Australia — a long-running example that might inform a range of discussions from cooperative approaches to aged-care to worker-owned and controlled versions of the sharing economy (Orsi, 2013). These novel extensions are important, but there's something else we can take away from NORCO's long history. While contemporary discussions of resilience seem to focus readily on innovations — discovering new things that bodies can do — Sharpe (2014) points out that Spinoza also emphasised something else. That is, bodies possess the power to say no — to exercise an im-potentiality, to not act. Since 1999, NORCO has consistently said no to listing as a public corporation and, in light of the Murray Goulburn experience, this refusal is precisely what has allowed it to bounce and to endure.

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**The Occasional Papers, Institute for Culture and Society vol. 9, no. 1**

Philippa Collin, Louise Crabtree, Simone Fullagar, Stephen Healy & Paul James (2018) 'Resilience'

## Rescuing Resilience from Itself

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Resilience has an increasingly jaded reputation. This paper focuses on interpretations of resilience based in ecology and complex adaptive systems, arguing that adaptive co-management and commoning offer pertinent and defensible models for governing resilient systems. It will draw on research into housing as informed by this framework to argue that there remains potential for resilience as an enabling concept. The paper essentially makes one point: that the apparent vagueness of resilience is both a strength and a weakness, such that it might contain the tools for its own redemption. As an aside, though, it argues that there is a monumental oversight concerning how resilience is often embraced.

Resilience has no default affiliation, unlike, say, ‘health’. We can talk of a healthy economy or a healthy environment, but when someone says that they work in ‘health’ the default is to understand that individual as somehow involved in the emotional and physical wellbeing of humans rather than in the environment or the economy. Poor resilience has no such default. It also has at least three identifiable points of origin – engineering, psychology, and ecology. In engineering, resilience corresponds to resistance to change, or the amount of stress tolerated prior to structural change. In psychology, it concerns the abilities of individuals and communities to bounce back from stress or trauma. In ecology, it is the ability of a system to continue its core functions in the wake of shock, disturbance or stress. While reflective of their different origins, these three definitions share a language of persistence – the concern is with the ability of *something* to withstand *something else*, with the implication that the latter presents some kind of challenge or threat to the former.

In the absence of a default affiliation, ‘resilience’ has adjectives appended to it, to name that which it is hoped might persist; hence, terms such as ‘urban resilience’ or ‘community resilience’. Oddly, though, despite frequently being interpreted as largely about people, resilience is accused of having no politics, or of having a worryingly neoliberal politics of outsourcing risk to communities and individuals who have to find the capacity to deal with whatever issues are besieging them, whether personal or systemic. To me, this is a gross misreading of resilience, and I want to argue that engaging with its openness provides the means for engaging with politics.

While engineering has focused on material attributes, and psychology on individual and community attributes, ecological research and theory regarding resilience has spanned this gap, focusing on hybrid, entangled systems of both people *and* things, referred to as coupled socio-ecological systems, and as a type of complex adaptive system. These are systems in which humans are reliant on material systems, such as fisheries, forests, and grazing lands, for their livelihood. Extensive work looking at how such communities have successfully managed these systems over time, and in the face of stress or threats, presents two conceptual tools that can be adopted to rescue resilience from incoherence or problematic politics. To explore these tools,

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we need to draw on ecology's assertion of resilience as the ability of a system to continue its core functions in the wake of shock, disturbance, or stress.

The first tool that emerges is 'the system'. The act of announcing the concern for a system's ability to continue immediately raises the question of 'what system?' Research demonstrates that a coupled socio-ecological system has identifiable boundaries and an identified user group that decides rules of use and access. Contra to the possible evacuation of politics, then, immediately political questions are raised. Urban resilience prompts questions as to what system is under consideration – the city? Its food chain? Its water supply? Energy sources? Social networks? Who are the users? What are the rules and who makes them? These are difficult and intertwined questions, but we can again look to ecology theory for insight into how, as a complex society, we might grapple with them.

Ecology tells us that communities that successfully govern complex adaptive systems do so through adaptive co-management. This concept refers to governance mechanisms that bring multiple stakeholders together in ongoing processes that combine diverse knowledges and levels of influence, and that can understand and respond to feedback, learn, and accordingly access and allocate resources. Crucially, they are documented as requiring vision, leadership, and trust – so much so that some theorists posit that the resilience of coupled socio-ecological systems has more to do with social and institutional parameters than material ones. This sounds much more involved than neoliberal outsourcing. The *co-* in co-management is the 'giveaway' – resilience as adaptively co-managed requires meaningful partnership and the substantial combination of information and resources from multiple sources and scales, rather than the feared neoliberal platitudes, buzzwords, and offloading.

The second tool is the suite of 'core functions'. Again, taking this tool into the city prompts the question of '*what* core functions?' Should the city act to provide decent housing, food, amenity, opportunity, and conviviality to all; or to concentrate wealth; or, to deny First Peoples' claims? What is the city *for*? Who decides this? How do 'we' know if the city is still doing what 'we' think it needs to? By way of example, there are organisations in the USA, UK, and elsewhere called community land trusts (CLTs), which in the USA have been federally defined in Section 233 of the *Cranston-Gonzales National Affordable Housing Act* of 1992 as providing permanent affordable housing and community benefit. This intentionally broad definition means that it is up to each CLT to determine them, leading to immense diversity and flexibility in the housing, community, and commercial activities that CLTs undertake. Many CLTs structure their Boards so that no one interest group can dominate the discussion, and so that resource networks can be tapped into. Therefore, they combine CLT residents with residents of the broader community and representatives of the public at large.

At its simplest, this arrangement balances the rights and responsibilities of the resident with those of the community, including future generations. It also creates networks throughout the CLT's service area and brings the groups comprising the Board into dialogue as to what permanently affordable housing and community benefit mean – who is the community? What is affordable and to whom? Who do our actions benefit? Are our activities still meeting those aims, given changes in our community? To me, this situation looks like adaptive co-management. No research has specifically examined CLTs from a resilience perspective, but the data on their performance through the mortgage crisis have certainly generated interest.

Now, this is all very good, but I must add some caveats by which I will conclude. Specifically, four. First is that, as I mentioned, identifying a system means identifying its boundaries and its users. Ultimately, it implies exclusion, so there needs to be sensitivity regarding who resilience is for, and if and how that stance is defensible. In the case of a city, hopefully this sensitivity keeps open the question of who the city is for and how we make it inclusive. The pragmatics of identifying where a city ends can be challenging, but models such as bioregionalism can help, as can the considerations of ethical and appropriate supply chains. The issue might not be so much the actual delineation itself, but how and why it is undertaken.

Second, is the issue of what is called ‘basins of attraction’ (Walker et al 2004). This is not a reality show about falling in love with someone you meet in the bathroom! Rather, it refers to the near-gravitational effects of the forces and factors maintaining systems within one of multiple possible equilibrium states. The interfaces between a system’s multiple basins comprise flip states or tipping points at which change from one state to another can be rapid and calamitous. Basins of attraction are inherently conservative, meaning that change might not be as easy as hoped. Work on path dependency in policy, organisational, and behavioural fields are echoed here, whereby it can be very hard for an individual, community or organisation not to keep doing that which it has previously done, even if it has been identified as deleterious or undesirable.

Third and related to this point, is that there is nothing inherent in resilience that suggests equity or justice. Many unjust things can persist. Moreover, there is research suggesting that, without care being taken, adaptive co-management can default to including the usual suspects – those with the ability, desire, and capacity to take part. So, care must be taken to try to identify and meaningfully include the unheard voices. These three caveats represent forewarning based in extant theory and praxis, and we can at least be on the lookout for them. Ideally, we might construct arenas and frameworks within which such issues can be tackled in a meaningful sense.

This observation brings me to close on the fourth caveat and the perhaps monumental oversight in how resilience is often conceived. It is possible that our obsession with resilience might be eliding its most significant origin story – that of its role in complex adaptive systems. Adaptive cycle research has been used to develop looping models that show how systems grow, stabilise, collapse, and reorganise. Systems do not persist eternally. As an ecologist, my concern is that resilience is possibly being hijacked by our ‘oh-so-human’ desire to avoid our own demise, to try to achieve the unachievable – the perpetual growth engine, or the perpetual steady state: that is, to force a dynamic loop into a persistent, singular state. This is not to propose despair due to some fatalistic acquiescence to the all-determining system that must dictate our collapse, but perhaps rather to shift our focus away from the *what* of trying to make particular physical and economic configurations persist, to the *how* of engaging collectively in an emergent politics and praxis of navigating the next phase of our loop.

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# Can There Be such a Thing as Positive Resilience? Re-embedding Resilience in the Capacity for Sustainability

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Over the coming generation, the world faces horrendous challenges. Humans have become witnesses to the upheaval of the planet, while we gradually come to the realisation that we are the main agents of this convulsion. Life on earth, at least as we know it, is slowly changing, with increasing storm surges, inundation, heat-island effects, droughts, and floods. While picture-postcards from various places around the globe, and snapshots taken at the right angle and at the right time, will continue to show a world of relatively comfortable urbanism, beneath the surface there is a deep unsettling of the human condition. Upheaval shakes the ground on which we walk.

This is the context for the rapid rise of the concept of ‘resilience’. It has become ‘all the rage’ in describing the base-level capacities required by households, communities and cities. Concerned organisations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, set out in good faith to contribute to positive urban practice, and a hundred cities around the world now proudly call themselves ‘Resilient Cities’. Unfortunately, however, the term has in some hands become one-dimensional and reductive. In other hands, as I will develop slowly across this essay, the very attempt to make resilience a positive virtue has undermined its usefulness as a concept. Resilience is now too often associated with the comfortable deferral of state and corporate responsibility for supporting community recovery from difficulty and disaster. The people of Puerto Rico, for example, ravaged by Hurricane Maria, did not have enough drinkable water, but everyone, including a belated Donald Trump, praised them for their resilience. They invented the term, says one newspaper headline (*New York Times* 24 October 2017; Cf. *Forbes Magazine*, 31 May 2018).

One core problem is that, instead of ‘resilience’ being integrated into a framework of other human capacities, it has been lifted out as a singular and *unsustainable* virtue — unsustainable in the sense that it becomes a capacity in itself, a capacity that people are thrown back to without the social wraparound of kindred capacities of reciprocity, flexibility, adaptation, receptiveness, care and trust (more of this later). To be sure, the compound concept of ‘community resilience-building’, and the cries for leadership in supporting local resilience-building, attest to the concept standing in for many other capacities and support-structures. However, as the emphasis on disaster management proceeds, we have unfortunately begun to blame those who have not properly assimilated the resilience-training manuals — both the ‘victims’ and the service-providers.

Everybody, especially those in trouble, are supposed to have resilience ‘in spades’. The coming world of disaster-management demands it. In the process, however, we now increasingly defer responsibility to those who suffer. ‘They’ need to find it in themselves to recover — to bounce back. ‘They’ are required to emerge stronger from whatever difficulties may confront them. And ‘we’, or at least those of us who are currently good at adapting to an increasingly unstable ecology, are edging towards blaming those who are not bouncy enough. It is no accident that, just as we have discovered ourselves in the Anthropocene, the responsibility to act together on

the sources of upheaval is either piecemeal or deferred. This brief essay begins by giving some background to the rise of the concept of ‘resilience’, and then outlines some of the dangers in focusing on the concept as singular and ‘in itself’. The final and key part of this essay presents an alternative framework of capacities that takes resilience seriously, while wrapping it in a matrix of other capacities, all of which together are necessary for social and natural flourishing in our changing world.

### **Background to the Rise and Rise (and Possible Fall) of the Concept**

With a longer history in materials science and civil engineering, ‘resilience’ as a concept emerged in a number of fields separately across the end of the twentieth century: in particular, the environmental study of species and ecosystems, the psychology of childhood development, the sociology of adults facing abnormal circumstances (the irony concerning ‘abnormality’ should not be lost here when climate change is being ‘normal’). It is only in the last ten years that all of these uses have come together in a public explosion of the term. The rise of resilience rhetoric coincided initially with the emptying out of the term ‘sustainability’. Because the meaning of sustainability had become so generic, with Left and Right attaching everything to it, from Sustainable Development Goals to sustainable built-assets, practitioners went looking for a new master concept. Resilience, unfortunately, was not a good choice. It does not have the capacity to carry so much weight.

Sustainability, for all its weaknesses, actually works better to signify the more general and important capacity of enduring across time. More recently, in the clash of concepts, sustainability has made a small come-back with arguments about the importance of *positive sustainability*. As James et al. (2015, p. 23) put it:

The distinction between positive and negative sustainability recalls and modifies the well-known distinction between positive and negative liberty. As with positive liberty, aiming for positive sustainability appears to be either utopian or dangerous. By contrast having the capacity to endure through reducing what is bad appears to be more comfortable. It has been normalized. However, because neither positive nor negative sustainability are end-states, and because the dominant focus of the last three decades on mutually assured negative sustainability has not saved us from the current manifold crisis, then something more radical is needed. Positive sustainability in these terms is a negotiated process projected beyond the present about how we want to live.

Given a positive orientation, at least in the version which foregrounds the ‘precautionary principle’, sustainability thinking has actively returned for some commentators and policy-makers as a meaningful guide for practice. That is, given that our knowledge is uncertain, and the consequences of non-action in relation to challenges such as climate change are great, the precautionary or ‘no regrets’ principle says that we should act now to make things better *in general*, and as part of responding to the immediate threats. The principle is particularly relevant for climate change adaptation: see, for example, the [‘No Regrets’ Charter](#).

This point suggests that perhaps the same thing should be done with resilience thinking and practice. However, because the concept has such definitional limits, I want to argue that this is not wise. ‘Resilience’ also began as a negative concept: bounce-back responsiveness to disaster or adversity. Across the last decade, it was primarily employed as a trope of sustainable survival. However, the more that its proponents have tried to give it a positive inflection — from sustainable survival to adaptive arrival (positive in the sense that it becomes the place where we

want to be) – the more that it collapses under its own weight. How can the capacity to bounce back from adversity be the basis for good living? All that resilience entails is that people overcome adversity. It says nothing about how we should live. The paradoxical outcome, *contra* recent sustainability thinking, has been that treating the concept of ‘resilience’ as positive has been its very undoing. In our topsy-turvy world, in which the ‘abnormal’ has become ‘normal’, to be resilient is to be comfortable with unsustainable degrees of madness and change.

### **Dangers in Focusing on the Capacity for Resilience in Itself**

There are many dangers in a singular focus on resilience, and they need considerable elaboration to understand the subtle undercurrents of these dangers. Here, however, I am only going to enumerate a few key concerns in rough outline:

1. *Nature tends to be recast as an external threat.* This concern is part of a larger issue where the environment is externalised in relation to humans. In these terms, humans are said to act upon nature, and nature to act upon humans, without at the same time acknowledging that humans are formed in and through nature. In other words, instead of treating ecology as the intersection of the environmental and the social (something that I want to argue for — using the original Greek root of *oikos* to re-embed humans in nature), the environment becomes the dangerous external context that *requires* human resilience. This is not to suggest that the concepts of ‘the social’ and ‘the natural’ should be collapsed. Handled with care, they remain useful analytical distinctions. Rather, it is to suggest that ‘nature’ is only contingently a threat. This is to use the concept of ‘threat’ in a short-hand phenomenal sense and, for a moment, to give weight to an individual experience of a storm or flood. For example, in the disaster-management literature we are seeing some practitioners coming to the important realisation that a hurricane is not a *natural disaster*, but rather only a potential social disaster, accentuated by humans building their cities in ways that redouble the possible destructive consequences of hurricanes on settlements.

2. *Community values tend to be redefined in terms of abstracting metaphors such as ‘ecosystems resilience’ or ‘resource-use maximisation’.* This redefinition has the effect of abstracting the bases of community capacities away from the culturally and locally variable modalities of social inter-relationality. As Liam Magee (2016, p. 66) writes, drawing on Bruce Braun’s work on eco-cybernetic urbanism, ‘[r]esilience discourse marks the complicated agenda of managing these systems’. At the same time, the worst form of this process treats the capacity for resilience as inhering naturally in ‘good’ communities. In a previous round of ‘good’ liberal discussion, community capacities such as trust and care were reduced to regimes of social capital. And now, by an ironical twist, the term ‘social capital’ has been reinserted into the dialogue by some commentators concerned about this abstraction process, and, therefore, suggesting that community resilience can only be understood in terms of larger processes of measurable ‘asset accumulation’. This suggestion is in part ‘good’ in that it recognises that resilience does not reside only in the psycho-social forbearance of individuals as part of designated groups of people, but it is ‘bad’ insofar as it turns relationships into instrumentalised assets. Once this happens, it allows the state to retreat from providing more than minimal direct support for its citizens, while it concentrates on exhorting communities to accumulate assets and to build capital. It allows blaming the victim and labelling those beset by problems as ‘non-resilient communities’. And it sets up a regime of survival through essential services, alongside the survival of the fittest, who are the worthiest and most resilient individuals and communities.

3. *Persons, at least under conditions of emergency and crisis, tend to be reduced to figures of resilience or failure.* This process privileges the successfully self-managing individual. Here, we can see the reason for Simone Fullagar's evocation in her essay in this collection of Lauren Berlant's (2011, p. 1) concept of 'cruel optimism':

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

A person who excels in resilience is a person who comfortably bounces back from adversity. Resilience supposedly provides the means to flourish under difficult circumstances. However, the very process of becoming resilient in this way tends to require dulling our senses in relation to adversity, with emotion and feeling arguably important capacities for human flourishing. That is, instead of recognising a dialectical relationship between wellbeing and adversity (where adversity can enhance receptivity to others and to nature, and, therefore, becomes an aspect of human flourishing), resilience emphasises the thin outcome of comfort and acceptance (together with potential complacency and smugness).

4. *Safety tends to be shifted under the auspices of technocratic management and homeland security.* The proposition accords with the current shift towards homeland security being militarised, including through counter-terrorism framing, where resilience is re-integrated with soft authoritarian policies. This point sounds alarmist, but the examples of disaster-governance tending towards technocratic management (and possible soft authoritarianism) are many. The Left-leaning Demos Foundation provides an early quaint instance. On the last page of its report *Resilient Nation*, Charlie Edwards (2009, p. 83) turns to community safety:

Community resilience may be best managed through existing neighbourhood watch schemes; in other areas of the country schools and education initiatives may present a more obvious route. In rural areas farm networks can be employed by local authorities, while in major cities supermarkets may offer an innovative way of nudging individuals to become more resilient.

From the other side of the political fence, the UK Conservative Party's (2010) Green Paper was called *A Resilient Nation*. To what was this report devoted? Yes, national military security. And predictably so, too, was a parallel report on homeland security that came out from the Obama government in the same year. The report (US Government, 2010) was called the *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report: A Strategic Framework for a Secure Homeland*. 'Ensuring Resilience to Disaster' was the fifth of five homeland security missions, with the first 'Preventing Terrorism', and the second 'Securing Borders'. While that report was devoted to national security and disaster responsiveness, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano (2010), wrote public interventions under the heading of 'A Resilient Nation':

The federal government cannot prepare for, respond to, and recover from major crises on its own. Our ability to effectively prevent, disrupt and respond to terrorist attacks, violent extremism, and other major disasters relies upon Americans working together —

preparing emergency plans, notifying law enforcement when we see something suspicious, and helping our fellow citizens rebuild when disasters do strike.

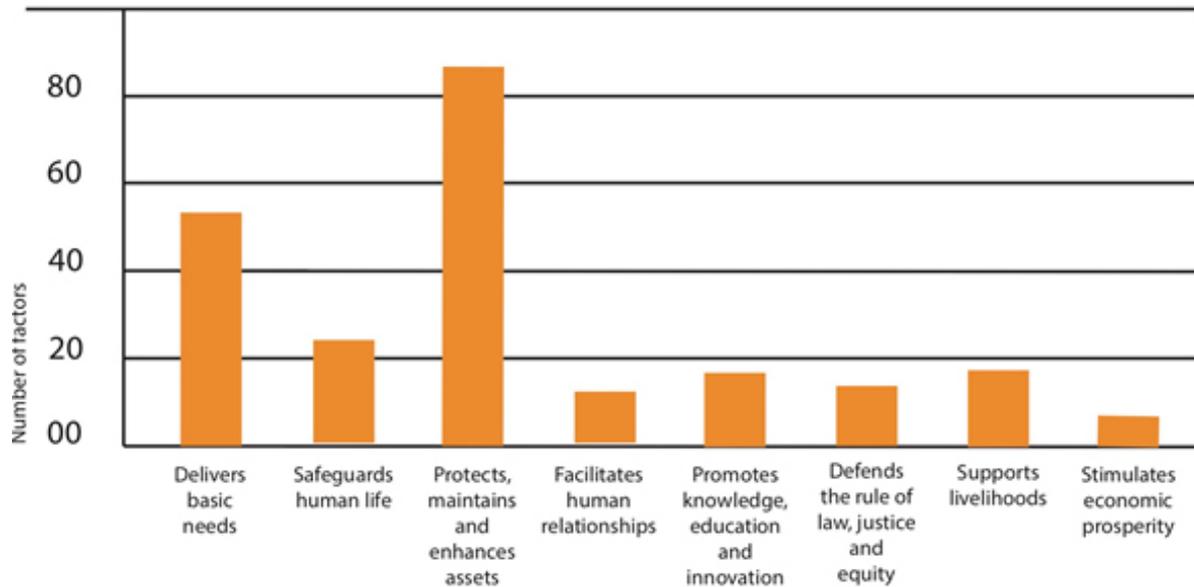
Here the rhetoric is generous, crediting American communities with contributing to the security of the nation. But, in the associated report, ‘resilience’ is evoked as the key capacity alongside security — being tough on violent strangers, keeping border-crossers out, and securing cyberspace — as the basis of defending the nation. Despite the range of these examples, resilience obviously connects across a wider range of themes than just security, and it is worth taking this discussion into that broader territory.

### **Extending the Examples of Complex Resilience**

If we turn to the theme of resilience and cities, the Rockefeller Foundation is the dominant player in this field. Beginning in 2013, the Foundation took on the concept of ‘resilience’ as the motif for its philanthropic global ‘resilience movement’. ‘Join the urban resilience community’, says its website: [100resilientcities.org/page/s/join-the-global-resilience-movement#/-./](http://100resilientcities.org/page/s/join-the-global-resilience-movement#/-./). Radical language, indeed. And many of the aspirations are well founded. However, unfortunately the operationalisation of these good intentions into a resilience framework was handed over to a consultancy company, with predictable results. After setting up a subtle but partial analysis of human needs, Arup’s (2014a) framework puts forward a skewed system of four domains for assessing resilience: Health and Wellbeing; Economy and Society; Infrastructure and Ecosystems; and Leadership and Strategy (it should be noted that the list of human needs does not include our relationship to nature).

Of these domains, only the first, Health and Wellbeing, works well to prioritise human needs and capacities. Their own research indicates, for example, that questions of trust underpins all the factors of resilience, ‘including trust in government; trust in communities; trust in information/communications; and trust in law enforcement’ (Arup, 2014b, p. 99), but this insight disappears in their analytic framework. And when the analysis is done (Arup, 2014a, p. 46), somehow the function of a resilient city ‘to protect, maintain and enhance assets’ is lifted out as the most factorially important function (the summary graph is strange, and Figure 1 below is reconfigured to clarify the scale for ‘Number of factors’). ‘Facilitating human relationships’ scores low on this scale, and interestingly so does ‘stimulating economic prosperity’, yet the economy still features as a structuring feature of their domain structure.

Figure 1: Factors mapped against the eight functions of a resilience city



Source: Arup, 2014a: 46.

At the top level of categorical organisation and prioritising of domains of resilience, immediate questions arise. Why is the economy featured and then treated outside the social? Why is leadership more important than actively engaged citizens? Why does ecology get reduced to ecosystem services? Then there are questions about placement and priorities. Where do critical factors such as local community support or cohesive communities sit in the framework? They are grouped under Economy and Society, as are strong identity and culture, and actively engaged citizens. Where does education sit? It sits under Leadership and Strategy.

To extend these examples even further, we can turn to the current emphasis on the resilience of indigenous communities. In 2016, the *Arctic Resilience Report* (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016) was published, assessing the resilience of different indigenous peoples living in the Arctic region — in this case the Eurasian Sami people of Arctic Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. It ordered resilience into three categories: cases exhibiting resilience, cases exhibiting loss of resilience, and cases exhibiting transformation — all based on a template developed for what they called their ‘Regime Shifts Database’ framework. Under conditions of semi-enlightened postcoloniality, indigenous people are now said to show resilience by simultaneously staying close to nature and finding ways of making money within contemporary market relations. Successful resilience arises from the capacities of peoples to ‘self-organize ... experiment, learn and thus adapt’, while cases ‘exhibiting loss of resilience are those in which there has been a loss of livelihoods, identity, function and structure’ (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016, p. 100-101). While we again read the abstracting language of ‘ecosystems services’, the analysis is careful. However, the interpretation of successful resilience shows the skewed consequences of the emphasis on the economy and the market. For example, the successful resilience of the Inuit of Cape Dorset is trivialised in the heading: ‘Cape Dorset: From nomadic hunters to international art sensations’. As others have noted, the dark side to this success is the counterproductive cruel optimism of a transformation that maintains the old traditions in particular artists only by changing the form in which those traditions were once embedded. According to Julian Reid (forthcoming), artistic ‘success’ in Cape Dorset has entailed ‘the wholesale neoliberalization of the communities in question, the

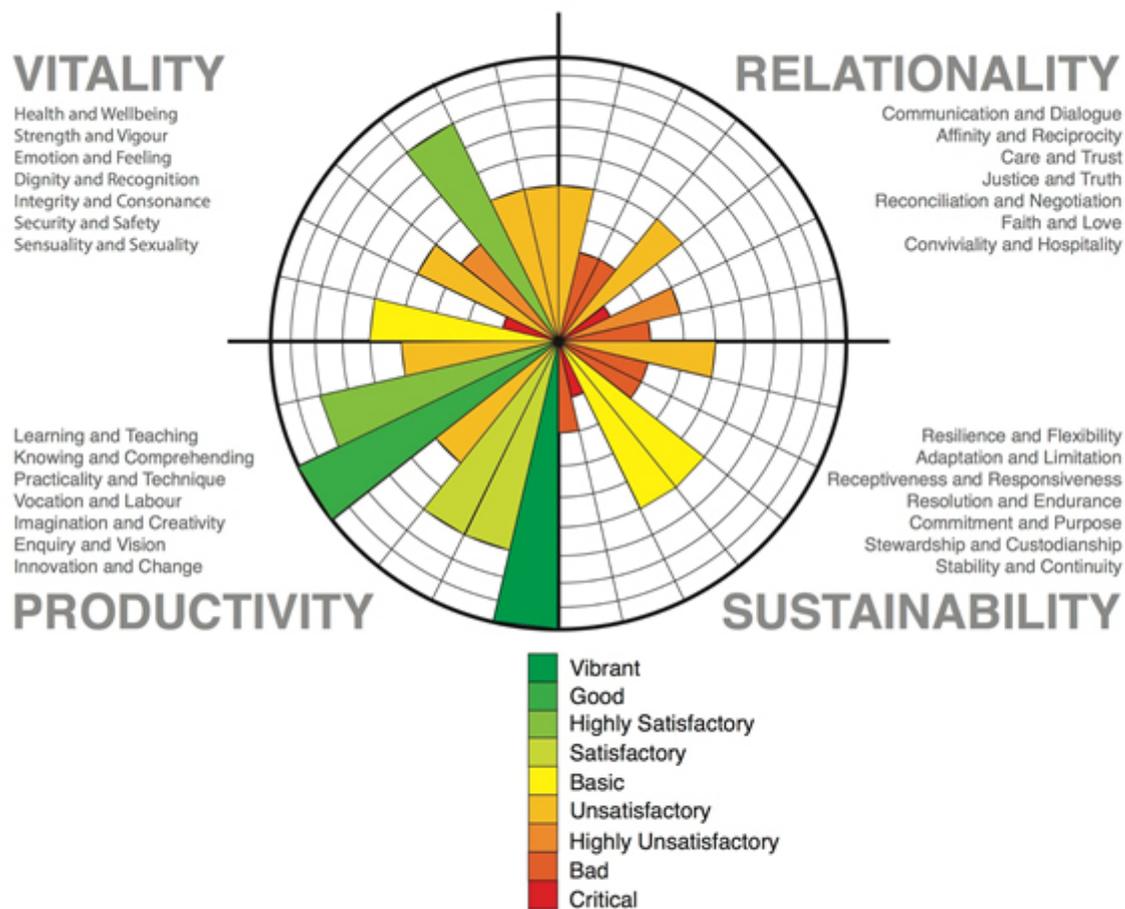
debasement of their traditions and livelihoods, the commodification of the catastrophes they have suffered, and their subjection to western economic reason' (see also Rathwell & Armitage, 2016).

### **Towards an Alternative Approach to Resilience**

Despite the deep problems with treating resilience as a singular and Atlas-like upholder of a sustainable 'good life', bearing the whole world on its shoulders, resilience can nevertheless be treated as a dimension of human flourishing if it is located in an alternative paradigm. The domain structure suggested here begins with the human condition (James, 2018). Rather than an Arup-style focus on domains that relate to corporate or metropolitan governance of cities: infrastructure, leadership, health and socio-economy, the Circles of Capacities approach seeks to treat human capacities as generative and integrated.

The first domain of *vitality* is broader than the Arup's 'health and wellbeing'. It sets out a threshold set of mental and embodied capabilities that are basic to human flourishing, from emotions and sensuality to security and safety. The second constellation of capacities concerns *relationality* - that is, relations to others and to nature, from affinity and reciprocity to care and trust. These relations are recognised by Arup, but not structured into their framework. The third constellation of capacities is the most difficult of all to name. Here, various terms were considered as a possible way of naming the general capacity to reproduce the conditions of existence. For a time, we settled on using an older Greek term, *poesis*, meaning 'to make'. We finally settled on *productivity*, used here with all the nuanced complexity entailed in describing the creative process of reproducing the conditions of existence. Finally, there is an important fourth constellation of capacities that enables us to sustain the conditions of social and natural flourishing. For all of the capacities for bringing about change that we seem to have in abundance in the contemporary world, we also need capacities to respond to change and to effect continuity and positive conservation. It entails having the capacity to adapt in relation to rapid external change, to recover from social forces that threaten basic conditions of social life, and to resolve to 'continue on' in the face of adversity. This is the domain that we have called *sustainability*, which is summarised in the figure below, setting out a four-domain structure of capacities:

Figure 2. Circles of Social Capacities



## CIRCLES OF SOCIAL CAPACITIES

In this framework, resilience appropriately becomes one capacity among many. It does not have to bear the full burden of a planet in upheaval. The capacity to bounce back from adversity can be a good one, but when lifted into a singular virtue, or in the context of a manifold of ‘normalising’ crises, resilience turns into a bouncing ball with multiple trajectories, some of which are leading to the opposite of what was intended. The mapping of capacities in Figure 2 is a thought-experiment only, assessing our global capacities for making a flourishing world. Resilience, while ‘unsatisfactory’ in this rating, is perhaps not the most important thing that we should be working on. And security, while rated at ‘critical’, ironically seems not to have benefitted from the trillions of dollars spent on it. Cruel optimism? Perhaps we need a different approach to a world in upheaval than that currently proposed.

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