

# **Un-Governing the Anthropocene: After Resilience, from ‘Un-Governing With’ to ‘Un-Governing Within’**

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**(It’s rather schematic - intended more for discussion than publication - so please no citations without permission)**

## **Abstract**

This paper locates ‘un-governing’ as a growing field of experimentation, which flags up the limits of traditional ‘command-and-control’ assumptions of power and seeks to develop or reflect non-modern approaches to governance. The majority of ‘un-governing’ work falls into categories with which we are increasingly familiar, which draw upon immanent alternatives to transcendence. These initially involved the system- and process-based framings associated with ‘resilience’, seeking to tap into or enhance ‘innate’, ‘internal’ or ‘endogenous’ capacities to meet policy goals. Newer approaches to un-governing challenge these claims and seek to develop less governmentalized alternatives: firstly, those of ‘un-governing with’, which, suggest that instrumental interventions are too reductionist and homogenizing, fail to facilitate differentiation and individuation, and remain too human-centered; secondly, those of ‘un-governing within’, which highlight alternatives which co-exist in the present. Rather than generating new forces, powers and capacities the latter focus on working ‘within’ less predictable environments, where sensing and attunement to forces beyond direct knowledge and experience is key.

## **Introduction**

The necessity of ‘un-governing’, of thinking through the implications of a process-oriented framework for governance, beyond the cuts and closures of liberal modernist discourses, has come to the fore in the epoch of the Anthropocene. This paper seeks to engage with ‘un-governing’ the Anthropocene through contemporary critiques of resilience and adaptation which problematise ‘governing’ discourses of bouncing back to the status quo or modulation around an equilibrium. It suggests ‘un-governing’ be grasped as a framework, problematic or paradigm through which problems, practices and theories of governance are being recast.

Most importantly for our purposes, it is necessary to start the argument with the end of modernist approaches of ‘top-down’ control, direction and regulation – the use of governance to achieve instrumental goals of development, security and progress. These approaches assumed a modernist separation between humanity and nature: i.e. that humanity’s knowledge, reason, science and technology would continue to expand, enabling progressively more control over external ‘nature’ as a

resource to resolve problems and find new solutions. We are familiar with the erosion of this separation and the growing awareness of the entanglements and interdependencies between humanity and the environment since the 1970s: 'development' morphed into 'sustainability' and then into 'resilience', as discourses of 'extractivist' work on or against nature turned to understandings of care/enablement and 'working with'.

Therefore, if we start after 'modernity' we can think of 'un-governance' in three paradigms. Firstly, what I would call the 'modernist legacy' paradigm, which seeks to adapt to changes through capacity-building and enabling communities to ward-off the effects of global warming and climate change. This could be seen as the first framing of 'un-governing': the agenda is understood to be imposed externally by the new threats of climate change which necessitate adaptive responses. Here, the agenda is not subject-centered in the sense of instrumental work upon the world *de novo* but responsive or recursive, entangled with the outside, with the goal of maintaining the status-quo or equilibrium. This is the paradigm of 'resilience'. The second paradigm, seeks to move beyond the management of the status-quo and provide alternative futures after 'modernity', through harnessing the power of 'life' in new and different ways, working or becoming 'with' other modes of life, rather than seeking to extract or instrumentalize them. The third paradigm of 'un-governance' is held to take this framing further in opening up speculative opportunities for seeing and becoming differently.

### **Governing 'Against': Resilience and the Limits of Adaptation**

Resilience has rapidly spread throughout the policy world over the last two decades, driven by the desire to use systems theories and process understandings to develop adaptive approaches. However, as intimated above, this paper argues that, under the auspices of the Anthropocene, the assumptions and goals of resilience become problematized. In fact, resilience can be seen as one of the key 'fields of contestation' or test-beds for discourses of 'un-governing'. This is because resilience approaches have tended to remain stuck at the limits of modernist framings of governance. They speak the 'talk' of un-governing, opening up the field, but rarely manage to 'walk the walk'. While resilience-thinking has achieved nearly universal success in the policy-making world - suggesting new sensitivities to problems and rejecting 'high-modernist' technocratic approaches, which depended upon universal 'one-size-fits-all' solutions from on high - resilience is still a 'modern' construction which assumes that problems are 'external' and that we need to develop 'internal' policy solutions to maintain and to enable our existing modes of being in the face of shocks and perturbations. 'We' need to be more responsive and adaptable. 'We' need to be sensitive to minor changes and to 'tipping points'. In short, that 'we' are not the problem, but that 'we' need to develop new approaches to preserve our modernist imaginaries of development and progress. Despite the talk of 'un-governing', resilience seeks to govern: to fight or to evade the conceptual assumptions of the Anthropocene and inevitable progression of discourses of 'un-governance' rather than to accept them.

There are three key problems with ‘un-governing’ through resilience and adaptation:

#### *Extractivism*

Resilience policies tend to seek to enable or scale-up vulnerable communities through the external provision of resources and technologies. Un-governing is materially grounded in the Anthropocene as ontologically closing the possibility of the spatial or temporal displacement of problems. In the Anthropocene we are told ‘there is no away’ and the consequences of what we do ‘stick with us’ (Morton, 2013). In modernity, supporting and enabling vulnerable communities and ecosystems can help resolve problems but in the Anthropocene resilience approaches can easily appear to be spreading, rather than containing, the problem. Any attempt to resolve problems through focusing upon enabling and capacity-building can be seen to speed up the process of resource depletion and the arrival at the Earth’s ‘Planetary Boundaries’ rather than slowing it down (Stockholm Resilience Centre, n.d.).

#### *Adaptation*

Adaptation is the problem not the solution. The Anthropocene, initially a geological concept, claims that human actions have deeply affected and altered geologic processes, destabilising earlier ‘Holocene’ conditions of stability. Thus, we are threatened with catastrophic climate change not as some sort of ‘external’ threat to our modernist ‘internal’ narratives of sustainable development and human progress but precisely because our ‘internal’ understandings of humanity as somehow separate to, or above, the world, in a fixed and empty framework of time and space (with ourselves at the centre) were entirely false. Our stories of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ – the stories of our separation from nature - ignored the fact that we were actually destroying the very foundations of our planetary survival. This is why Anthropocene thinkers argue that the Anthropocene is not just another problem or crisis to be ‘solved’ or ‘bounced-back’ from’ or ‘recouped’ but rather a sign that modernity was a false promise of salvation, one that has brought us to the brink of destruction (Latour, 2013; Stengers, 2015; Tsing, 2015).

#### *Instrumental ontology*

Resilience can never be a solution to the problem of ‘un-governing’, merely a way into the problematic. The reason for this is that it is forced to ‘govern’ – to intervene with an instrumentality – although resilience discourses nod towards system-interactivity, assemblages and the power of immanence they are always transcendental. In other words they always assume a separation between governing and the object of governance and that this object can be known and directed. Intentionality always trumps unintended consequences, side-effects and externalities. This is not ‘un-governing’, it is not even close to ‘un-governing’.

#### **A Note on Framing**

Resilience with its ‘bottom-up’ versus ‘top-down’ motifs of empowerment and capacity-building sought to instrumentalize or governmentalize immanence but not in a particularly conceptually clear way. Resilience-thinking drew upon early systems-

thinking, first- and second-order cybernetics and thermodynamic imaginaries of entropy and negentropy, most clearly articulated in formulations of complex adaptive systems and assemblage theory. Looking back from the vantage point of today, the influences of Frankfurt School critical theory in the academy, neoliberal thinking in economics, ecological resilience and adaptive cycles in ecology, and second order cybernetics reworked through continental philosophy, enable us to see the clear stamp of the 1970s on these first attempts to challenge and ‘un-govern’ modernity. There was a futural, ‘counter-cultural’ and experimental ethos in the development of immanent framings of life, which was seemingly captured, perverted and instrumentalized as liberal modernist views of ‘progress’ became exhausted and these alternative framings became gradually integrated into governmental discourses. This was inevitable. Ideas which sought to challenge hegemonic approaches were ill-fitted for governance: resilience discourses tried to hold these tensions together, but often in ham-fisted, ridiculous, patronising and clearly apologetic ways, giving purchase to the blanket ‘radical’ critique that ‘un-governing’ was just another word for ‘neoliberalism’.

The argument of this paper is that the Anthropocene helps to clarify what is at stake in discourses of ‘governance’ and ‘un-governance’. It draws on (and re-reads) contemporary theorists of governance-as-process – emphasising ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ - to draw out the implications of ‘un-governance’ as an open-ended, creative and experimental approach to governance. As indicated in the introduction, two sets of theorists will be considered as particularly useful. It should be noted that the division into paradigms is purely heuristic, in practice, most theorists are happy to blur the conceptual framings, in some cases intentionally, in others not. The following paradigms could be considered as ‘immanent’ to the field opened up in discourses of resilience in a double sense: firstly, that they attempt to overcome the three problems drawn out above; and secondly, the moves extend the engagement with the forces and powers of immanence, begun in these discussions of resilience.

### **Un-Governing ‘With’**

Contemporary approaches to ‘un-governance’ can be understood as recouping or recovering immanence from governmentalism. The first move is that of attempting to avoid the problems of extractivism, adaptation and instrumentality. There can be no provision of resources, aid or assistance: it is all too well rehearsed that this can only lead to dependencies and the avoidance or worsening of the underlying problem. The second move is to refuse the attempt to ‘save’ or ‘protect’ what exists, modernity is all too over and all too complicit in the construction of the problems it now seeks to evade or deny. The third move is to resist instrumentalism – there can be no goals or intentionality in ‘un-governing’ – if anything, un-governing has to be based on the immanent possibility of unintentional or accidental gains from any inter-active interventions, it is the intervention itself, often as an act of perturbation or stimulation which is key rather than intentionality.

‘Working with’ is thus less a developmental process of ‘enabling’ or ‘capacity-building’ but more likely to be posed in terms of an ethos of multi-species or ‘more-

than-human' 'care', 'nurture', 'exchange' or 'engendering'. Perhaps emblematic of this framing is Anna Tsing's work on 'disturbance' in her best-selling *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015: 257-8):

The mushrooms remind us of our dependence on more-than-human natural processes: we can't fix anything, even what we have broken, by ourselves. Yet this need not enforce paralysis. Some Japanese volunteers make themselves part of a perhaps-useful landscape disturbance as they wait to see what happens. They hope their actions might stimulate a latent commons, that is, an eruption of shared assembly, even as they know they can't actually *make* a commons.

The task of 'un-governing' is that of 'disturbance' and 'stimulation': enabling the immanent powers of 'becoming with', not on the basis of non-intervention but on that of non-intentionality. Accidental or unintentional peacebuilding is a good example, where peacebuilders do not come equipped with programmes and goals but open-ended conversations, ready for interactive becomings, which cannot be predicted in advance. The freeing of immanent potentialities enables 'un-governing with' to be seen in radical, experimental and emancipatory ways.

Discursive framings of 'becoming with' enable immanence to do more of the work than in governmentalized discourses of resilience with their transcendental goals of stability- and capacity-building. Yet, they still provide a governmental project of policy 'intervention'. Even the removal of goals does not stop 'peacebuilders' from 'peacebuilding' or Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway from advocating ways of enabling 'life in the ruins' or 'making kin' in the Anthropocene. A broad range of policy-advocates and critical theorists seem to have provided a new framework for 'posthuman' or 'more-than-human' policy interventions.

Perhaps the key question is what enables this 'recouping' of immanence in the Anthropocene in less instrumentalized framings of 'un-governance'. How does immanence work to provide an alternative way forward even without the transcendental directive power of liberal governmental imaginaries? Central to the 'posthuman' or 'more-than-human' imaginary is a 'natural' or 'innate' power of life or 'conatus', which rather than being captured and instrumentalized (as in resilience discourses) is to be 'emancipated' or 'freed' from subject-centred governmental constraints. The power of immanence is thus essentialized in thermodynamic 'laws' of the dissipation of energy – the laws of entropy and negentropy, unleashed from the Big Bang, through the evolution of life on earth. Here immanence provides a new telos to replace that of transcendental beliefs in human powers of progress. What life wants is differentiation and individuation, for differences to make differences. 'Un-governing' is the 'second chance' that modernity has craved ever since critical theory flagged up the dangers of rationalist and bureaucratic closure, separation and homogenization. We have a 'happy ending' through openness, experimentation and care for the other rather than instrumental governance and self-interest.

### **Un-Governing 'Within'**

There would appear to be an overdetermined or immanent trend in the rise and rise of immanence, which enables us to see the direction of critical and, seemingly, eventually policy thought and practice. That is for the limitations of 'un-governing' to become increasingly apparent. Not because they fail to solve the problems of modernity, this world is over (for now at least), but because they fail to appreciate the laws of immanence. Immanence enables discourses of un-governing but only as long as there is the imaginary of a telos working behind our backs – like the laws of evolutionary development (or, whisper it, the laws of the market). 'Un-governing' is fine if nature is there 'for us' in spirit (even if it is no longer revealing its inner workings in modernist ways).

The problem for the advocates of 'becoming with', dependent on the beneficence of hidden and immanent forces, is that in the Anthropocene, these hidden forces and powers do not seem to be so human-friendly. Perhaps the laws of immanence don't care too much whether the planet and its environment is suitable for human life or not. What if other forms of being do not want to 'become with' humans after all? What is it that enables humans to have a 'second chance' and recoup the promise of life, excess and contingency so easily? Contemporary social and political thought is a little more sanguine about immanence being so amenable to human ends. Suddenly, 'un-governing' seems to be very similar to 'governing' after all. Human-centeredness has merely been replaced by 'humans-and-others-together' centeredness – all working serendipitously for the good of humanity.

'Un-governing' in this second paradigm is no longer an option so that we can govern better, be better and more caring humans and save ourselves at the same time, but something imposed upon us by the world itself. Un-governing becomes an ontological reality in the Anthropocene when we realise that interconnections and relations are not so tightly bound-up in close communities of actors, networks and agencies that we can 'assemble' or 'compose' through our own choosing. Developments across the 'hard' sciences suggest that we live amongst fields and forces that do not at all work on the same planes and temporalities. While Latour's actor-network approach does a lot of the work of immanence removing entities and essences and focusing on relations and effects, the human subject remains very much at the centre as a knowing and acting and assembling agential subject. Emblematic of this second paradigm perhaps would be the work of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, which places the subject/object inside immanence – the world of 'hyperobjects'. Here relations are no longer mutual but necessarily always unilateral, through the registration of effects through forces that are always unseen, without a direction or telos.

Without a shared temporality, Anthropocene thinking, in terms of 'becoming-within' could be seen to be more akin to quantum field theory, with its concepts of 'actions-at-a-distance' and 'superpositionality'. Here there are no cuts or separations, merely a world of 'intra-action', of becoming not 'with' but only ever 'within'. This closes off the possibility of any form of 'intervention' as the separations that enable this can no longer make sense. In this, all too real, world of 'un-governance', hyperobjects - in

fact all forces - can only be seen through the registration of their effects – proliferating, ageing, weathering etc. - depending upon the specific ‘affordances’ of the entities affected. Pollution, conflict, climate change, for example, can only be seen through the mediations of their effects, there are no mutual relations or possibilities of meaningful prediction: no way of influencing, directing, controlling or governing.

‘Un-governing’ now becomes clearer in a world without meaningful separations and temporalities. There can be no intervention, no instrumental capacity-building or even enablement of differentiations. Immanence is a form of suspension rather than world filled with instrumentalizable powers, dynamics, drives and life forces. The world of suspension is one of generic immanence and superpositionality: a world of effects without causes; a world where relations are merely of unilateral registration. ‘Un-governance’ thereby involves registering, seeing and sensing rather than acting as an intentional subject in the world. In this ‘quantum’ world a new ‘great outdoors’ opens up, where knowing and directing are displaced by discourses of sensing and responsivity. We are already getting familiar with this realm of ‘un-governing’ when we talk about ‘correlation’ rather than ‘causation’, i.e. the registration or ‘datafication’ of effects, which enable us to ‘see’ hyperobjects ontologically (through their effects or ‘traces’) rather than ontically (as entities with properties or essences).

## **Conclusion**

The end point of the un-governing of the world is the realm of generic immanence. A world in which we become suspended - merely ‘being in being’ - without a telos or goals or subject/object separations. Things/life can only ever be what they are (in that there is no modernist framing of making or intervening or changing things/life) on the other hand, at the same time, things/life no longer have ontic separations but are infinitely undifferentiated. Once we are sensitive to the registrations of effects, there are no longer entities and states of being. It sounds a little weird at first but take a simple example, like conflict, once conflict is seen through its effects - datafied, seen as a process, suspended or slowed down really slow - we see that conflict and non-conflict are present all the time in superpositionality with differing intensities, then we don’t have the temporalities of pre- or post- conflict or entities of conflict/non-conflict but merely effects to be responded to. The same for anything, any form of sickness or illness for example, for the ‘datafied self’ you can never be sick or healthy (only ever sick/healthy) and illnesses can never be entities, i.e. they could never be the same for different people (as if we were in the world of causalities and interventions and governing and un-governing) you would merely be sensing, responding to or modulating around effects. The point I’m making is that the world of un-government is not literally the end of ‘governing’ just the end of governing in a modernist framework of meaning, involving ‘reason’, ‘intervention’, ‘instrumentality’, ‘goals’ etc.