

Thought's Journey to the End of the World: Resilience as an analytical and conceptual tool

David Chandler (University of Westminster)

Initial draft - do not cite with author's permission

Introduction

This draft paper is about the resilience of Thought and the thought of Resilience. Thought's need to adapt itself to the world – thought's resilience – makes the ways in which we think about resilience a key indicator of changes in contemporary subjectivities. As we know from the work of critical sociologists from WEB Du Bois to Theodore Adorno, contemporary subjectivities appear to assert themselves over individual human beings (who cannot but be influenced) but at the same time, they operate through individuals pursuing their own interests and understandings (for example, Adorno 2006:26). Thus, subjectivities are not formed through open conscious processes of reflection or deliberation nor are they imposed upon us by any external or metaphysical force. This presents us with the question of thought as the object for thought. This is the question at the heart of the dialectical method.

To address the question of resilience as an analytical and conceptual tool is for me a question of a dialectical approach to the conceptualizing of resilience. While the thought of resilience (what we understand by the term or concept) is changeable it is not arbitrary. Because it is a product of social mediation, thought cannot appear as there 'for us' in unmediated ways, but, precisely for this reason, its form of appearance provides a register or indication of underlying processes of subject formation. We can then approach the thought of resilience through the dialectical relationship between what could be called the 'thought of Resilience' and the 'resilience of Thought'.

I wish to suggest that what this relationship tells us is that the thought of Resilience can be quite different, depending upon processes of societal mediation. Here this process will be traced as a journey from disavowal to affirmation. Through analysis of the changing understanding of resilience we can deepen our understanding of how we become at home in the world after the end of the modernist world (of ontological assumptions of a division between human as subject and nature as object).

Tools for Thought

This dialectical approach to the conceptual analysis of resilience can be distinguished from a nominalist or positivist approach which assumes the subject as a rational actor separate from and prior to the world and the world as an object before it and then seeks to construct or to

define resilience as a conceptual tool (for working upon or for understanding the world). Let us call this position that of an unreflective or 'uncritical' realism. For uncritical realists, resilience (properly conceptually defined) is something that we can instrumentalize for our own purposes. In which case, we can discuss how resilience (as an analytical tool for achieving goals of sustainability) can be improved.

In a dialectical approach to concept analysis, resilience (the thought of Resilience) is an effect, a trace, a registration, a sign that can be read or interpreted in order to learn something about changing subjectivity. As the title of the paper indicates, I wish to suggest that what we learn from (the thought of) resilience is that thought is journeying to the end of the world. We learn that the world as a set of ontological distinctions in time and space is less apparent to us, less clearly demarcated, less 'there' for us. We learn that thinking of resilience in terms of definitions or as a tool for working on the world is particularly problematic today as the necessary separations of subject, tool and world are increasingly blurred.

Journey from World

The genealogy of resilience might be expressed in three broad framings of understanding, ones which we are mostly familiar with so we don't need to spend too much time on them:

Modernity

The modernist world was one in which the subject was understood to be separate from and to stand before the world (as object). In fact, a modern temporality presumed 'progress', the reasoning subject as increasingly separate from and therefore able to dominate and to direct the world as object. Resilience was at home in the world of modernity, not as a contested concept but more as a common-sense assumption. It was essentially an ideological affirmation in the face of disaster. A discourse of 'building back better', - or a Nietzschean 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' - i.e., we learn and progress through setbacks. Regardless of the obscenities of war and genocide, sacrifices were worthwhile for the progress of the nation/race/species etc. Resilience in modernity tells us that history is that of the victors not the losers. As Elizabeth Povinelli notes, it is important 'to remember the function of the horizon and frontier in liberalism as a mechanism of disavowal' (2021:38): 'The horizon is liberalism's governmental imaginary, its means of bracketing all forms of violence as merely unintended, accidental, and unfortunate consequences of liberal democratic unfolding.' (2021:41) It could be argued that there was little questioning of the shared disavowal (across the political left/right divide) of colonial dispossession and genocide as the necessary price for 'progress'.

Late Modernity

(The thought of) Resilience came to the fore of policy and academic concerns in the 1990s and 2000s as the clarity and consensus of the world mediated by the left/ right divide dissipated. There was a shift from an 'ideology' or politics of disavowal to one of affirmation:

of another reality (existing here and now) beyond 'abstract' modernist forms of representation. Frameworks of meaning, 'grand narratives', were undermined as differences and multiplicities moved to the fore with greater attention to problems of inter-relation, entanglement and non-linear constructions of risk. As less appeared to be scientifically determined, resilience enabled a more pragmatic mode of adaptation; of iterative and recursive understandings of governance bringing in the management of 'externalities'. The world appeared to be richer, populated by more actors and agencies as, in the discourses of the 'global', resilience called for more to be included and accounted for. In late modernity, resilience operated as a field of learning or transition, from the world of modernity to a more real 'reality'. Here, the shift to affirmation can be seen as bringing the (post)human back (in)to the world and, in so doing, privileging the immanent power of 'life' itself: the collaborative processes of 'more-than-human' or 'multi-species' worlding.

After Modernity

The process of bringing the world in - the 'revenge of the real' or the 'return of the repressed' - has turned out to be much more transformational than many resilience advocates imagined. Rather than a 'return' to the world, leaving the human and world intact, in the shift from disavowal to affirmation, the human subject has become dissolved into the world and in the process the world itself disappears. Resilience discourses have often struggled to keep up with the seemingly 'objective' pressure to problematise analytical cuts and separations previously assumed to be valid. Earlier framings of resilience as a format for governance now are seen to have required substantial ontological assumptions, for example: ecosystems, assemblages, and adaptive systems that maintained their coherence; nested 'panarchies' of time and space with distinct speeds and scales; and a subject external to and capable of observing and intervening in these system processes and milieus even if only indirectly ('managing the conduct of conduct'). At times the 'resilience of Thought' seemed to be forcing the 'thought of Resilience' to take unintended directions toward the end of the separations of subject and world.

We might say that we are now after modernity, or after the world: that resilience is no longer a field of thought working through and recalibrating the relation between subject and world. Today, when we think of resilience it is less likely to be a 1990s or 2000s sense of coming to terms with non-linearity and imaginaries of self-adaptive systems. There is less sense of a governing subject of late modernity indirectly attempting to steer a world. Perhaps the best analogy for the thought of Resilience, after the world, is that of a medieval world without the conception of an individuated subject with free will or autonomous reason confronting the world as object. The subject is no longer cut from the world and the distinctions of modernity (its binary cuts and spacetime gradations) seem to be much less important.

Resilience in the Post-COVID-19 World Disorder

The end of the resilience journey (the affirmation of/at the end of the world) is confirmed in the post-COVID-19 'world disorder'. The emergence of new threats, stemming from the interconnections and entanglements of our globalised world – from zoonotic diseases (from inter-species interaction) to cascading threats from conflicts and economic crises (from interacting events and circumstances) is now assumed. While for some policy analysts, these may still necessitate the system understandings and concerns with feedback and tipping points, much rehearsed in the earlier resilience literature, for others it is assumed that governance agencies will be forever playing catch-up, forever fighting the next war with the tactical understandings of the last. Resilience is no longer a matter of prevention or of bouncing back better but rather of coping with the unexpected. Even discussion of world 'order' and 'disorder' seems antiquated as we realise that these co-constitutive terms belong to a world that is now past. The end of the world is neither order nor disorder but the process of affirming what is. With the lack of political alternatives, the 'odious and abhorrent totality' that is our world is affirmed rather than disavowed.

Conclusion

What do we learn from the secular journey of resilience to the end of the world? We learn that thought has an 'objective' tendency towards making peace with the world but that this can take different forms and can be mediated differently by social, political, and technical processes. In modernity, thought made peace with the world through resilience as disavowal – the grand narrative of progress and the disavowal of slavery, colonial dispossession, and genocide. Today, analysis of the thought of Resilience enables us to understand the process through which the resilience of Thought makes peace with the world, in this case, via affirmation. A world without the human as subject lacks a positionality distanced from the immediacy of appearances and therefore capable of imagining other possibilities, so there is no need for disavowal. I imagine that some participants of this workshop might ask whether it is possible to conceptualise resilience in ways which avoid both the alleged dangers of disavowal and of affirmation. If I was an uncritical realist, I would probably choose a definition of resilience from the transitional period of the 1990s and 2000s. However, this paper has attempted to set out the possibilities of an alternative analytical approach concerned less with instrumentalising resilience as an analytic of governance in late modernity than with interpreting and deconstructing our imaginaries of resilience.

References

- Adorno, T. W. 2006. *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Povinelli, E. 2021. *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.