

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resilience as the policing of critique: A pragmatist way forward

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Abstract

This article offers a critical review of the main conceptual readings of resilience as a prominent policy paradigm in international development, security, and disaster management. Focusing on neoliberal, biopolitical, cybernetic, and postliberal understandings, it probes the possibilities for engaging in a socially transformative critique of resilience. In particular, the article asks how the resilience discourse polices critique in a way that includes certain forms of knowledge, such as indigenous, local, and everyday knowledge, while excluding abstract theorising. What is considered authoritative knowledge in the resilience discourse? And what are the possibilities for opposing resilience if it ‘metabolizes critique into its internal dynamic’, as Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper famously argued? How does critique turn from a tool to undermine dominant knowledge-power regimes into a motor of governance? The article demonstrates that the more seriously we engage with the underlying ontology of resilience, the more difficult it becomes to formulate a critique that is not incorporated into governance. As a possible way forward, the article discusses Luc Boltanski’s pragmatist sociology of critique.

Keywords: Resilience; Critique; Governance; (Neo)liberalism; Pragmatism

Introduction

Over the last decade or so, resilience has moved from the ‘periphery to the centre of governmental fields of vision’.¹ It is now commonly referred to as ‘the organising principle in contemporary political life’.² Myriam Dunn Cavelty et al. even claim that resilience today ‘enjoys the status of a superhero’ – a policy paradigm allegedly able to tackle a wide range of international governance issues, from security and development to climate change and global health.³ And Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper famously called resilience a ‘pervasive idiom of global governance’ in a much-cited critical article on the topic.⁴

Importantly, while resilience discourse has become increasingly popular in the policy world, it seems weirdly immune to traditional forms of critique. In an early commentary on *Resisting Resilience*, Mark Neocleous claimed that resilience served the interests of state control and

¹Jon Coaffee, ‘Rescaling and responsabilizing the politics of urban resilience: From national security to local place-making’, *Politics*, 33:4 (2013), p. 242.

²James Brassett, Stuart Croft, and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Introduction: An agenda for resilience research in politics and international relations’, *Politics*, 33:4 (2013), p. 222, emphasis in original.

³Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Mareile Kaufmann, and Kristian Soby Kristensen, ‘Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:1 (2015), p. 4.

⁴Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, ‘Genealogies of resilience: From systems ecology to the political economy of crisis adaptation’, *Security Dialogue*, 42:2 (2011), p. 144.

capitalism.⁵ Although this is a politically powerful claim, it seems somewhat preformulated and does not take full account of the fact that resilience thinking rose to power without being promoted by a particular set of actors and without being the product of any ideological struggle. Resilience thinking has assumed the status of common sense, of revealing a truth about the world that is ‘really real’, without being anyone’s political project.⁶ Established forms of critique geared towards unveiling hidden forms of domination by powerful actors in society seem to have little purchase when it comes to opposing resilience thinking.

At the heart of the difficulty of opposing resilience in a meaningful way lies its apparent ability to ‘metabolize critique into its internal dynamic’.⁷ There seems to be something peculiar about resilience as a new knowledge-power regime that allows it to ‘inoculate itself against critique’.⁸ This reminds me of a scene from Woody Allen’s 1969 movie *Take the Money and Run*. Woody Allen finds himself in prison. In order to break out, he kneads a block of soap into the shape of a gun and covers it in black shoe polish. He makes his way out of his prison cell by taking one of the guards hostage. He makes it all the way to the main gate when it suddenly begins to rain heavily. His soap gun dissolves into a big foam bubble in front of everyone’s eyes and he is taken back to his cell. The resilience discourse seems to have such a disarming effect on traditional forms of critique in the social sciences. Traditional forms of critique in the social sciences were aimed at deconstructing totalising knowledge claims and demonstrating how their inculcation secretly served the interests of powerful actors in society. In those empirical cases where resilience works as an instantiation of neoliberal governmentality such a form of critique is powerful and convincing, focusing on responsabilisation and marketisation.⁹ However, this article argues that the more resilience discourse and practice are cohered through an ontology of unknowability and uncontrollability, the more complicated the project of critique becomes. In contrast to neoliberal governmentality readings of resilience, this article suggests that resilience poses a fundamental challenge to critique. Importantly, traditional forms of critique – aimed at exposing the partiality of knowledge claims – are actively incorporated into the governance process. As Kevin Grove puts it, critique – understood as the valuation of difference – turns from being the ‘saboteur’ of governance into its ‘motor’.¹⁰

Established critiques of resilience have reverted to a set of normative and analytical foundations with which to oppose resilience. David Chandler calls for an ethical separation between the subject and the world.¹¹ Without an external subject position, it is not possible to govern life in an instrumental, socially transformative way. By understanding humans as always, already embedded in complex socioecological systems the resilience discourse erodes this liberal governing position and, instead, interpellates the subject to work on herself in order to change the world. Rather than the problems of the world existing ‘out there’ – in underlying economic structures and market relations – they become reframed as unethical consumer choices. The problem with Chandler’s normative reconstitution of the political subject and the modernist form of governing is that it contradicts the ontological assumptions of complexity theory. Reaffirming phenomenological constructions of the world seems to be a necessary element of socially transformative critique. But for resilience thinking this merely blocks a context sensitive

⁵Mark Neocleous, ‘Resisting resilience’, *Radical Philosophy*, 178 (2013), pp. 2–7.

⁶Delf Rothe, ‘Climate change and security: From paradigmatic resilience to resilience multiple’, in David Chandler and Jon Coaffee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience* (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), pp. 171–84.

⁷Walker and Cooper, ‘Genealogies of resilience’, p. 157.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jonathan Joseph, ‘Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: A governmentality approach’, *Resilience*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 38–52; Marc Welsh, ‘Resilience and responsibility: Governing uncertainty in a complex world’, *The Geographical Journal*, 180:1 (2014), pp. 15–26; Pat O’Malley, ‘Resilient subjects: Uncertainty, warfare and liberalism’, *Economy and Society*, 39:4 (2010), pp. 488–509.

¹⁰Kevin Grove, *Resilience* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹David Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014).

understanding of systems and keeps life from unfolding its self-organising power. For the proponents of resilience, relevant knowledge is always partial, situated, and context specific. Chandler's postliberal critique of resilience is not as easily absorbed into governance as the classic neoliberal argument. But his normative defence of liberal government does not compute well with a resilience framework. Unlike traditional neoliberalism with its focus on rational choice subjects and efficient markets, resilience discourse deliberately refrains from authorising any one particular kind of knowledge. Therefore, it would seem as if resilience thinking cannot be meaningful opposed by positing a predefined normative yardstick, such as the liberal subject. What is more, it would seem as if modernist forms of critique – targeting totalising knowledge claims and the underlying political interests they serve – are precisely what resilience discourse feeds on. Thus, the puzzle of resilience is to formulate a critique that is neither metabolised into governance by suggesting a totalising knowledge claim on the part of those in power nor grounded on a predefined normative benchmark. Only a critique that takes on board resilience's own core values and assumptions will be able to effectively challenge its dehumanising and depoliticising effects.

This article argues that Luc Boltanski's pragmatist sociology of critique can serve as a way forward.¹² Pragmatist critique builds on the moral concerns of actors *en situation*, rather than a pre-given political anthropology. It generates normativity from the bottom up, rather than reverting to a liberal-universal ideal. Importantly, social scientists play a key role in systematising and generalising these local insights. They help situated actors compare their living conditions with those of others. By proposing shared explanations for actors in similar circumstances, they help them relate to each other and engage in collective action. This is not ivory tower science, but activist research connecting the everyday understanding of situated actors with abstract theorising. In this way, pragmatist critique takes on board resilience's call to include local, situated, everyday knowledge as well as the critical potential of the social sciences to formulate abstract knowledge and help envision an alternative future. The unique selling point of pragmatism, when it comes to reinvigorating the critique of resilience, is that it is able to take on board the bottom-up understandings of situated actors while also appreciating the need for general social theory. Pragmatism aligns intuitively with resilience in that knowledge production is seen as a joint venture of multiple stakeholders, both laymen and (social) scientists. However, since pragmatism produces meaning collaboratively between situated actors and social scientists it is able to offer a powerful critique of the depoliticising and dehumanising neoliberal iterations of resilience: Everyday actors can legitimately voice their opposition to responsabilisation and marketisation while social scientists contribute systematic explanations in the form of social theory. Building on the work of Luc Boltanski, this article works out how a pragmatist approach to critique can incorporate resilience's 'deeply experimental ethos'¹³ as well as its drive to include local, everyday voices, while still being able to 'rise towards generality'¹⁴ and, thus, avoid the dehumanising and depoliticising effects of neoliberal iterations of resilience.

Resilience as neoliberal governmentality: Reinforcing responsabilisation and marketisation

For Foucauldian governmentality studies, resilience discourse falls into the general fold of neoliberalism.¹⁵ According to Marc Welsh, resilience promotes a set of 'archetypal governmental

¹²Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

¹³Stephanie Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop: Experimentation in Unsafe Operating Space* (London, UK: Open Humanities Press, 2020), p. 55.

¹⁴Boltanski, *On Critique*, p. 37.

¹⁵Welsh, 'Resilience and responsibility', p. 20; O'Malley, 'Resilient subjects'; Kathleen Tierney, 'Resilience and the neoliberal project: Discourses, critiques, practices – and Kathrina', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59:10 (2015), pp. 1327–42.

technologies of neoliberalism': government-at-a-distance, individual responsabilisation and 'practices of subjectification that produce suitably prudent autonomous and entrepreneurial subjects in a world of naturalized uncertainty and risk'.¹⁶ Resilience spreads the responsibility for managing an uncertain future throughout society and puts the burden on the (mal)adaptive subject.¹⁷

This section focuses on the work of Jonathan Joseph on resilience as a paradigmatic example of the neoliberal governmentality perspective. Joseph's book on *Varieties of Resilience* as well as his earlier interpretation of *Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism* will inform the discussion.¹⁸ Joseph's reading of resilience is influenced by poststructuralist arguments on governmentality from the 1990s.¹⁹ He argues that resilience interpellates subjects as 'enterprising, active and responsible citizens'.²⁰ According to Joseph, resilience proposes a view of the world as beyond our control and prediction, full of surprises and contingencies.²¹ Importantly, the resilience discourse moves relatively quickly from a 'fuzzy' big picture to reinforcing disciplinary rule at the micro level. While the macro level might be unpredictable and uncontrollable, individuals can hope to survive better by 'show[ing] their own initiative as active and reflexive agents capable of adaptive behaviour'.²² In this way, resilience works as a classic neoliberal rationality 'appealing to the freedom and autonomy of the governed, promoting the ideas of responsibility, self-awareness and self-regulation'.²³ Subjects are encouraged to act 'freely' in a responsible manner.²⁴ In so doing, resilience devolves responsibility for crisis management to the individual and community, rather than looking to the state for help.²⁵ In a nutshell, the resilience discourse is seen as yet-another modality for 'rolling-out neoliberal governmentality'.²⁶ There is nothing fundamentally new about resilience as a governmental rationality in a complex and interconnected world. Behind resilience as a neoliberal governance approach lies the familiar theme of promoting free markets and private enterprise.²⁷ While resilience paints a picture of the world as complex and unpredictable, there is still a specific market logic with which to govern. The 'free market' continues to serve as an abstract 'model' of governance and a yardstick for individual behaviour.²⁸ In the neoliberal argument, ideas about complexity and unknowability really work as tropes to install ever more rigid forms of 'population management'.²⁹ Here, there is an instrumentalist view of resilience which sees it as a means for entrenching neoliberalism and market relations: 'Rather than constituting a break from previous strategy, resilience invokes new notions of uncertainty and complexity in order to intensify the process of institutional reform and monitoring'.³⁰

The neoliberal reading of resilience as responsabilising and increasing state surveillance has been substantiated by other, more micro-level empirical studies. For example, in their research on urban counterterrorism strategies in the UK, Jon Coaffee et al. have demonstrated how a resilience approach to (in)security tends to 'decentralize risk management responsibilities to a range of

¹⁶Welsh, 'Resilience and responsibility', p. 6.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience: Studies in Governmentality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism'.

¹⁹See Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 1999).

²⁰Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism', p. 42.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 39.

²³Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*, p. 128; see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York, NY: Picador, 2004).

²⁴Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*, p. 156.

²⁵Ibid., p. 62.

²⁶Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism', p. 51.

²⁷Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*, p. 172.

²⁸Ibid., p. 174.

²⁹Jonathan Joseph, 'Resilience, governmentality and neoliberalism', in Chandler and Coaffee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience* (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), p. 163.

³⁰Joseph, 'Resilience, governmentality and neoliberalism', p. 166.

stakeholders’.³¹ The resilience discourse propagates the view that ‘we all ... have a role to play in reducing the vulnerability to risk, and in mitigating the impact of a disaster event’.^{32,33} In a similar vein, Dan Bulley has pointed out critically that

passing over responsibility to local volunteers, ‘champions’ and organisations is not about empowerment per se, but forming subjects, placing them in a hierarchy, drilling (and scaring) them into more manageable, directable (and resilient) individuals and communities.³⁴

While Coaffee et al. and Bulley clearly seem critical of this trend, Paul Aldrich explicitly celebrates the capacity for autonomous recovery by local communities.³⁵ Aldrich argues that top-down state intervention often causes negative unintended consequences in post-disaster situations. Instead Aldrich calls for ‘leveraging the power of people’.³⁶ Even communities with ‘low income’ and ‘little outside aid’ can help themselves by building on ‘denser social networks and tighter bonds’.³⁷

The neoliberal reading of resilience has triggered some critique. It is now often argued that the link between resilience and neoliberalism should be treated more as an open empirical question than a conceptual given. As Ben Anderson has asked provokingly, ‘[h]ow do we make resilience into an object of inquiry rather than reproduce consoling accounts that repeat what is already well known in other critiques of (neo)liberalism?’.³⁸ Similarly, Delf Rothe critiques the tendency to subsume resilience under the broad banner of neoliberalism. He sees the ‘resulting heuristic [as] inevitably narrow[ing] the analytical perspective and blur[ring] empirical findings that do not fit its pre-established categories’.³⁹

What matters for the purpose of this article is that in the neoliberal reading of resilience critique opposes an alleged totalising knowledge claim. As with the general neoliberalisation of society and economy since Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s and the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, resilience can be opposed in an unproblematic way by equating it with marketisation and responsabilisation. Behind the facade of bottom-up governance lies continued state control. Although resilience talks up the role of local empowerment, the agenda is actually ‘still directed by the state’.⁴⁰ The discourse of bottom-up governance and local ownership does not speak for any deeper ontological commitments. It merely serves as a legitimising rhetoric for continued top-down social engineering. For Joseph, resilience ‘is in reality a top-down approach whereby government tells people what to do and forces them to agree to a particular agenda and way of seeing things’.⁴¹ Here, critique is unproblematic because the discourse of complexity is not engaged with on an ontological but a rhetorical level. Weirdly, the world is portrayed as unknowable and uncontrollable at the macro-level, but at the micro-level governance is able to operate through reductionist (liberal) notions of the efficient market, creative private sector, and rational-

³¹Jon Coaffee, David Murakami Wood, and Peter Rogers, *The Everyday Resilience of the City* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 8; see Coaffee, ‘Rescaling and responsabilizing the politics of urban resilience’, p. 243.

³²Coaffee, Murkami Wood, and Rogers, *The Everyday Resilience of the City*, p. 157; see Jon Coaffee, *Terrorism, Risk and the Global City* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016); Jon Coaffee and Pete Fussey, ‘Constructing resilience through security and surveillance: The politics, practices, and tensions of security-driven resilience’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:1 (2015), p. 101.

³³The responsabilisation argument is given further traction by mainstream publications like Judith Rodin’s *Resilience Dividend* where she argues that ‘the responsibility for resilience building can and must lie in many places and with everyone.’ Judith Rodin, *The Resilience Dividend* (London, UK: Profile Books, 2015), p. 135.

³⁴D. Bulley, ‘Producing and governing community (through) resilience’, *Politics*, 33:4 (2013), p. 273.

³⁵Paul Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012).

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸Ben Anderson, ‘What kind of thing is resilience?’, *Politics*, 35:1 (2015), p. 60.

³⁹Rothe, ‘Climate change and security’, p. 173; see Jessica Schmidt, ‘Intuitively neoliberal? Towards a critical understanding of resilience governance’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:2 (2015), pp. 402–26.

⁴⁰Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*, p. 171.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

choice individual. Resilience is still a fundamentally neoliberal governmental technology aimed at producing rational-choice subjects. For Joseph, resilience follows an entrenched totalising logic of marketisation and responsabilisation.⁴²

Resilience as biopolitics: Living through vulnerability

A deeper engagement with the ontology of resilience and its political implications emerges in the work of Brad Evans and Julian Reid on biopolitics.⁴³ Evans and Reid tackle head-on the debased political nature of the resilient subject. At its core, the ‘new doctrine’ of resilience is about ‘abandon[ing] the dream of ever achieving security and embrac[ing] danger’.⁴⁴ Threats are portrayed as endemic and out of human control. In this turbulent new world, the resilient subject is expected to ‘permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world’, rather than thinking about changing it.⁴⁵ Resilience represents a fundamental normative shift from the ‘belief in the possibility of security’ to ‘a new belief in the positivity of danger’.⁴⁶ Importantly, exposure to danger is not only seen as inevitable, but as necessary for taking part in the world. Trauma and crises should not be avoided, but embraced as valuable ‘learning experiences from which we have to grow and prosper’.⁴⁷ The ontology of resilience, therefore, is vulnerability.⁴⁸ Vulnerability does not reflect a deficit in the human capacity to protect itself from suffering but is a necessary condition for living fully and productively. By normalising vulnerability in this way, resilience instantiates a biopolitical separation ‘between those who have the ability to secure themselves from risk, against those who are asked to live up to their responsibilities by accepting the conditions of their own vulnerability and asking not of the social’.⁴⁹ Resilience follows what Evans and Reid term the ‘lethal principle’ whereby the maladapted are allowed to perish, ‘so that life may carry on living with more resolute purpose’.^{50,51} In this way, resilience speaks to a general biopoliticisation of security.⁵² As a biopolitical technology of rule, resilience helps to govern the ‘emergency of emergence’ – the new fundamental characteristic of species life.⁵³ Evans and Reid’s ‘lethal principle’ is close to what Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero have referred to as the ‘continuous assay of life’:

⁴²The social realisation of this economic principle is a core feature of neoliberalism. As Thomas Lemke points out, neoliberal governmentality seeks to achieve a ‘congruence ... between a responsible and moral individual and an economic-rational individual’. Thomas Lemke, ‘Foucault, governmentality, and critique’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 14:3 (2002), p. 59. For neoliberalism, there is a clear moral judgement involved. The ‘moral quality’ of the responsible subject is determined by the extent to which it ‘rationally assess[es] the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts’. Lemke, ‘Foucault, governmentality, and critique’, p. 59. For governmentality scholars, resilience follows in these neoliberal footsteps, articulating a reductionist notion of the subject.

⁴³Brad Evans and Julian Reid, ‘Dangerously exposed: The life and death of the resilient subject’, *Resilience*, 1:2 (2013), pp. 83–98; Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴Evans and Reid, ‘Dangerously exposed’, p. 83; see Charlotte Heath-Kelly, ‘Resilience and disaster sites: The disastrous temporality of the “recovery-to-come”’, in Chandler and Coafee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*, p. 312.

⁴⁵Evans and Reid, ‘Dangerously exposed’, p. 83.

⁴⁶Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, p. 21.

⁴⁷Evans and Reid, ‘Dangerously exposed’, p. 83.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵¹Judith Rodin, former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, calls for ‘deliberate disruptions’ to foster innovation and ‘positive change’. Rodin, *The Resilience Dividend*, p. 306.

⁵²Mark Duffield, ‘Global civil war: The non-insured, international containment and post-interventionary society’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21:2 (2008), pp. 145–65; Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Malden, UK: Polity Press, 2007); Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009).

⁵³Dillon and Reid, *The Liberal Way of War*; see Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Biopolitics of security in the 21st century: An introduction’, *Review of International Studies*, 34:2 (2008), p. 267.

Their [‘biopolitical security practices’] purpose is ... to weigh life ... in order to determine which life is capable of self-regulating itself in the cause of its self-improvement, adaptation and change; and which forms of life have most to teach about these processes offering a kind of best practice of living and preferred forms of life. Different life forms display different capabilities in this respect. It therefore follows that some forms of life may be less capable or incapable, and even hostile or resistant, to self-regulating themselves in the cause of their self-improvement and adaptation. All life in some degree or another may have to be coached in its biopolitical self-governance and some life may have to be subject to more than coaching. Recalcitrant and intransigent forms of life may require punishment and correction. Ultimately some life forms may be regarded as inimical to life itself and these will have to be eliminated.⁵⁴

The alternative suggested by Evans and Reid is a normative one of reconstituting the ‘human as a fundamentally political subject’.⁵⁵ They make the case for a ‘hubristic belief’ in the human ability to ‘secure itself from those elements of the world it encounters as hostile’.⁵⁶ The ontology of resilience is rejected normatively by defending an imaginary where people may aspire to a life without ‘endless trauma and struggle’.⁵⁷ This reconstituted foundation would allow for meaningful social transformation in which humankind is again in charge of its own destiny. For Evans and Reid, resilience seeks to maintain life the way it is or what they call the ‘non-death’ of society.⁵⁸ In contrast to this status-quo orientation, they propose a return to utopian thinking: the ‘revolutionary capacity to allow us to suspend normality for a moment, take ‘mental liberties’ and wilfully imagine ‘possible futures to come’.⁵⁹ For Evans and Reid, the political involves the basic human capacity to resist the conditions of our suffering and purposefully ‘transform worlds in ways that provide security’.⁶⁰

Claudia Aradau formulates a similar critique of resilience.⁶¹ Her starting point is the way in which resilience discourse problematises future events as surprises.^{62,63} Resilience is the answer to a governmental problematic of “‘un-ness’”: ‘unexpected, unknowable, unpredictable, unmanageable events’.⁶⁴ The primary victim of our necessarily limited knowledge of the future is the promise of security. Resilience does not promise anything because it does not “‘tame” contingency’ through the ‘reduction of ignorance and the dispelling of secrecy’.⁶⁵ If our existing frames of reference are useless for a complex, interconnected world, then preventative and protective notions of security become impossible. Aradau draws out how future events become ontologised as unknowable surprises, radically diminishing our political ability to change the future.⁶⁶ If we cannot know the future in a predictive way, we cannot purposefully act upon it. In consequence, it

⁵⁴Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, ‘Biopolitics of security in the 21st century’, p. 291.

⁵⁵Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, p. 43.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Julian Reid, ‘Securing the imagination’, in Jim Bohland, Simin Davoudi, and Jennifer Lawrence (eds), *The Resilience Machine* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), p. 35.

⁵⁸Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*; see Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop*, pp. 12, 48, 49, 52–3, 54.

⁵⁹Evans and Reid, ‘Dangerously exposed’, p. 96.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 95.

⁶¹Claudia Aradau, ‘The promise of security: Resilience, surprise and epistemic politics’, in Chandler and Coaffee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*, pp. 79–91.

⁶²Aradau, ‘The promise of security’, p. 80.

⁶³For example, Andrew Zollig argues that future events are ‘stubbornly resistant to prediction’ and that ‘[v]olatility of all sorts has become the new normal.’ Andrew Zollig, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (London, UK: Headline, 2012), p. 5; see Rodin, *The Resilience Dividend*, p. 183.

⁶⁴Aradau, ‘The promise of security’, p. 82; see also Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁵Aradau, ‘The promise of security’, pp. 88, 85.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 87.

becomes difficult to hold decision-makers to account and engage in ‘collective political action’.⁶⁷

Evans and Reid, as well as Aradau, oppose resilience normatively. They envision a standpoint from which the individual subject and political collective can rise above the complexities and contingencies of the world and engage in a socially transformative collective project. Theirs is an insightful engagement with the underlying ontology of resilience and its political implications, but their alternative remains somewhat vague. While Evans and Reid imagine a full political subject in contrast to the passive resilient subject, Aradau seeks to rescue protective forms of security and political accountability. Biopolitical arguments highlight how the resilience discourse silences certain forms of critique. However, these critiques do not tell us how resilience approaches make critique useful; how they ‘metabolise’ it into the process of governing.⁶⁸ Neoliberal and biopolitical readings of resilience demonstrate how the discourse suppresses or excludes collective political action and curbs human aspirations while reinforcing governmental control. However, it would seem as if this kind of critique is grist to the resilience mill, as we will see in the next two sections.

Resilience as cybernetic control: Functionalist demands on critique

Kevin Grove’s book *Resilience* offers an insightful critique of resilience as a knowledge-power regime based on necessarily partial and limited truth claims.⁶⁹ The crucial aspect that Grove works out is that – contrary to the neoliberal governmentality argument – resilience discourse and policy practice do not articulate a totalising knowledge claim, or what he calls ‘a will to truth’.⁷⁰ For resilience thinking, truth is always bounded, expressing a limited, situated understanding of the world that ‘can contribute to, but not determine, a better understanding of complex systemic dynamics’.⁷¹ Resilience discourse does not work through objective knowledge, but through the pragmatic synthesis of different necessarily partial claims to truth: It ‘engages with the world from a position of necessarily limited knowledge and control’^{72,73} and seeks to pragmatically combine diverse forms of knowing and experiencing the world. For Grove, resilience thinking is about making difference useful. It articulates a ‘will to design’, which tries to ‘contingently assemble diverse forms of knowledge and interests in ways that can address specific problems of complexity’.⁷⁴ Here, diversity and difference are celebrated and actively incorporated into the policy process. Scientists and policymakers are invited to leave their disciplinary silos and ‘recognize the value of perspectives that differ from their own’.⁷⁵

The inability to know the world in a reductionist way fundamentally alters the policy process. It turns policy from an endeavour to predict and control social and ecological systems to an iterative experimentation process. Rather than a one-off instance of top-down intervention, policymaking becomes a reflexive learning exercise about the unique dynamics of a given socio-ecological system. Pragmatic knowledge about a specific system ‘emerges through the step-wise, adaptive process of interacting with the system: through designing interventions ..., monitoring how those interventions affect system performance, and adjusting interventions based on the new information’.⁷⁶ Uncertainty – the ontological inability to predict system dynamics – turns from a

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 87, 88.

⁶⁸Walker and Cooper, ‘Genealogies of resilience’.

⁶⁹Grove, *Resilience*; see, for example, Philippe Bourbeau, *On Resilience: Genealogy, Logics and World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 55.

⁷⁰Grove, *Resilience*, p. 13.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 15.

⁷²Ibid., p. 21.

⁷³In his influential article on *Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems*, C. S. Holling argued that resilience is not based on the ‘presumption of sufficient knowledge, but the recognition of our ignorance’. C. S. Holling, ‘Resilience and stability of ecological systems’, *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 4 (1973), p. 21.

⁷⁴Grove, *Resilience*, p. 17.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 110.

barrier or saboteur of governance into a 'vital resource that drives forward the decision-making process'.⁷⁷ The policy process thrives on surprises not because it forces a 'hidden truth' to reveal itself, but because it allows policy practitioners to develop a better 'inductive understanding of how the system responds to certain kinds of perturbations'.⁷⁸ Crucially, the goal is not to acquire an analytical understanding of the system's underlying causalities. Experimentation is not geared towards hypothesis testing to generate theory. Instead, it 'bring[s] about surprises that enable learning'.⁷⁹ In fact, in the resilience framework intervening into the system and learning about it merge into one ongoing process.⁸⁰

Notably, Grove highlights how resilience thinking complicates established practices of critique. How do we critique a governmental discourse that does not pursue a will to truth? Traditionally, the practice of critique in the social sciences has revolved around 'demonstrating the partiality of totalizing knowledge claims and their often-unacknowledged political biases and effects'.⁸¹ As Grove forcefully puts it:

What are the possibilities for critical ... research when the outcome of this research – the demonstration of difference and partiality of knowledge claims – is precisely what a will to design values and seeks to incorporate into pragmatic, solutions-oriented interventions? In other words, what happens when critique becomes the motor rather than the saboteur of governmental practice?.⁸²

While traditional practices of critique rely on opposing and deconstructing totalising knowledge claims, resilience thinking starts with the assumption of necessarily partial and limited knowledge and asks what governance can do with it. Resilience '*makes transgression useful for specific problems*'.⁸³ Conflict, contestation and subjugated knowledge become useful opportunities to learn about a system and design a more context sensitive policy intervention.

In consequence, rather than trying to critique resilience for a totalising knowledge claim it does not articulate, Grove rejects the implicit demand on difference to make itself useful. Different forms of knowing, experiencing, and living in the world are relevant to the resilience discourse only to the degree that they are 'translatable and amendable to synthesis with other forms of knowledge' such as scientific and bureaucratic knowledge.⁸⁴ Entire worldviews and episteme – from indigenous cultures to intimate, place-bound, everyday knowledge – are treated as 'rational abstractions that can be functionally re/combined'.⁸⁵ Deviance and diversity must offer some kind of practical value, 'some kind of functional utility to others'.⁸⁶ Niche thinking must make itself legible in a way that fosters functional synthesis. Diverse forms of knowledge

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 174.

⁸⁰In academia, Mark Pelling has made the case for 'ongoing policy experiment[s]' and 'greater inclusiveness' even of 'apparently weak or marginal actors'. Mark Pelling, *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011), pp. 30, 45, 72. In the policy world, Brian Walker and David Salt highlight how 'self-organizing systems are complex, dynamic, full of surprises and uncontrollable.' Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Practice: Building Capacity to Absorb Disturbance and Maintain Function* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2012), p. 38. We will, therefore, never be able to put together a perfect model. Instead, a system description should be 'constantly revisited, reiterated and fed into adaptive management'. Walker and Salt, *Resilience Practice*, p. 53. That is because each system is unique: 'There's nothing exactly like it anywhere.' Ibid., p. 50; see Fikret Berkes, 'Understanding uncertainty and reducing vulnerability: Lessons from resilience thinking', *Springer Natural Hazards*, 41:2 (2007), pp. 284, 289.

⁸¹Grove, *Resilience*, p. 22.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., p. 205, emphasis in original.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 134.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 238.

are judged according to the extent to which they provide abstract lessons for scientists, resource managers, and other stakeholders.⁸⁷ So, while resilience does not build any objective truth about the system, it ‘reduces the world to rational abstractions that can be functionally synthesized with one another in order to develop pragmatic solutions to complex problems’.⁸⁸ In this way, resilience works as a cybernetic form of control. It sees diverse forms of knowledge as useful resources for governance, while having to remove those cultural and ideological aspects that potentially stand in the way of dialogue and the free flow of information as feedback. At the heart of resilience lies a functionalist view of society built on consensus, downplaying the role of power relations and inequalities.⁸⁹ We can see here how neoliberal and biopolitical accounts of resilience as a new totalising knowledge claim miss the mark and can actually be reformulated by the resilience discourse as the problem to be overcome. Resilience discourse rejects any generalised account of society, including its neoliberal and biopolitical critiques. In fact, by claiming that there is a coherent underlying logic to resilience, neoliberal and biopolitical critiques become incorporated into the world that resilience is taking apart.

Resilience as postliberalism: Ethical self-governance in a complex world

David Chandler’s book *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* engages with the ontology of complexity underpinning the resilience discourse.⁹⁰ For resilience thinking, our being in the world is relational, embedded, and contextual.⁹¹ Rather than standing apart from the world and knowing it from an Archimedean point, we are always, already part of an interconnected and interdependent world beyond our control and comprehension. The complex nature of the world and the impossibility of an outside position mean that it is ‘not amendable to appropriation within liberal frameworks of representation’.^{92,93} In the resilience framework, the limits of our knowledge take centre stage. In fact, our ignorance is more important than what we hubristically claim to know.⁹⁴ Taking the unknowability of the world as its starting assumption, resilience fundamentally alters the way we think about governance. Instead of conceiving government as standing over and above the social and ecological world, governance should receive its clues directly from life itself. Governing turns into a process of learning about the complex interrelations of the world and adapting to them, rather than imposing instrumental goals from the top-down ‘as if [complex systems] could be shaped or directed’.⁹⁵ In a complex world, traditional modes of governing, based on hierarchy and reductionism, necessarily backfire causing more negative unintended consequences.⁹⁶ They ‘fly in the face of the “real” processes of social causation’.⁹⁷ In consequence, resilience inverts the relation between governance and life. Resilience as a new governance approach is geared towards facilitating the creative potential of life. Life is meant to guide and inform governance, rather than the other way around. Life not only resists

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 267.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 45.

⁹⁰Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 50.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Writing on post-Cold War interventions and critiques of the liberal peace, Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny similarly argues that for resilience thinking ‘no representation can exhaust the rich diversity of human life.’ Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny, ‘Realising the post-modern dream: Strengthening post-conflict resilience and the promise of peace’, *Resilience*, 3:2 (2015), p. 120.

⁹⁴Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, p. 4.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 12.

⁹⁶For example, Paul Aldrich argues that ‘much of the destruction from a disaster like Hurricane Katrina occurred precisely because of human attempts to subvert or artificially control nature.’ Aldrich, *Building Resilience*, p. 3. Paradigmatically, C. S. Holling opposed Maximum Sustained Yield (MSY) approaches to ecosystem management because they created instability. Holling, ‘Resilience and stability of ecological systems’, p. 21.

⁹⁷Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, p. 12.

being governed in an instrumental, top-down way, it may serve as a source of creativity and agency once liberal-universal artifice is overcome: life ‘trumps human attempts to constrain and to order it. The power of life – understood as an emergent system of ordering – always dwarfs the artifice of human understanding and construction.’⁹⁸ Self-organising complex life is creative and resourceful with solutions coming ‘from the most unexpected sources’.⁹⁹ Here, the aim of governance is to ‘harness the forces of reality, to latch on to and to engage the organic processes at work in society’.^{100,101} One way in which resilience approaches try to sync governance with life is by focusing on the ‘micro-knowledge and micro-tactics of the most “in-touch” with this reality: those with the innate or tacit knowledge required to respond and adapt’ – indigenous people, neighbourhood groups, and slum dwellers.¹⁰² In fact, the more marginalised and exposed, the better.

Celebrating life – understood as the ‘real-world’ processes of emergent self-organisation – invalidates traditional forms of critique that tried to unearth underlying power structures and universal causalities. On the contrary, any attempt to theorise beneath the surface appearances of the world as they present themselves in our personal experience would be hubristic and dangerous. Any attempt to critique what exists – class, race, gender hierarchies – would merely ‘reinforce the essentialized understandings of liberal modernity’.¹⁰³ Empiricism – ‘tracing surface connections and following the actors in their everyday practices and understandings’ – becomes the new mode of critique.¹⁰⁴ The idea is to liberate ourselves from the confines of ‘reductionist, linear, representational thinking’ to fully appreciate and learn from the creative potential of life as it really exists.¹⁰⁵ Here, critique revolves less around understanding and changing the world than ‘deconstructing phenomenological constructions of it’ and opening up to the lessons that life can actually teach *us*.¹⁰⁶ In this way, what used to count as radical critique – the deconstruction of totalising knowledge claims and the demonstration of their political bias – becomes the dominant discourse of power.

What takes the place of socially transformative critique is a heightened sense of ethical self-awareness: ‘We become critical as a mode of being’, as a process of reflecting on our (problematic) relational embeddedness in the world.¹⁰⁷ We start working on ourselves as ‘critical’ consumers in order to transform the world. In consequence, the governance of others and the governance of the self become ‘indistinguishable’, once we no longer engage with the world and its problems from an external subject position.¹⁰⁸ The ‘only winner’ in this new knowledge-power regime is governance itself.¹⁰⁹

The postliberal argument forcefully demonstrates how difficult it is to critique resilience from within a modernist frame of reference; how, in fact, traditional critique is repositioned as a barrier to learning from life. Chandler suggests a return to some sort of ‘separation of the self from the world’:

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 203.

¹⁰¹This endeavour is doomed to failure whenever there is a clearly visible governing position and a set of normative aspirations as in liberal peace interventions. Pol Bargués-Pedreny has recently pointed out that policymakers in a resilience framework suffer from a chronic ‘sense of deficit’. Pol Bargués-Pedreny, ‘Resilience is “always more” than our practices: Limits, critiques and scepticism about international intervention’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:2 (2020), p. 3. Interveners see their own actions and policies as invariably ‘fall[ing] short of enabling societies’ creative potential’. Bargués-Pedreny, ‘Resilience is “always more” than our practices’, p. 3.

¹⁰²Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*, p. 41.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 225.

Without the separation of the ethical subject from the world, it is impossible to engage in transformative political projects based on the critique of structural relations and the market. Instead, critique of the world is displaced by reflexive ethico-political work on the self.¹¹⁰

Chandler calls for a reconstitution of collective political action and meaning through struggle, based on the assumption that ‘the world is amendable to human projects of transformation.’¹¹¹

A key value-added of the postliberal perspective is that it does not conceive resilience as a coherent governmentality. The importance of resilience thinking lies less in cohering a specific governmental technique or rationality than in showing a way to adjust to the collapse of the modern liberal project of knowing and controlling the world – without, fundamentally changing anything.¹¹² Resilience thinking as a new governance ethos is not based on a firm knowledge-power regime. It is ‘situated precisely amid upheaval’ where thinking enjoys a degree of freedom to formulate new problematisations.¹¹³ In addition, Chandler’s argument highlights how the resilience discourse polices critique in a way that suppresses all phenomenological constructions of the world. Whenever humans set themselves apart from the world and construct abstract knowledge, they are engaging in dangerous hubris. Authoritative knowledge in the resilience discourse is necessarily partial, local, and context-sensitive. The downside of the postliberal argument is that it ultimately falls back on the normative defence of constituted liberal power. It does not challenge resilience on its own terms, but rather through a pre-given political anthropology, that is, liberal idealism.

A pragmatist way forward

Resilience challenges our established modes of critique on several levels. The preceding sections make clear how difficult it is to oppose resilience meaningfully from a classic liberal position of normative goals and generalised knowledge. Accusing resilience discourse of reinforcing individual responsabilisation and marketisation is normatively appealing,¹¹⁴ but it fails to engage with resilience on its own terms as a new knowledge-power regime based on limited and partial knowledge and, hence, the impossibility of intervening from the top-down and in an instrumental way. If resilience was merely another way of repackaging the old neoliberal truth claims of efficient markets, private initiative, and strategic rational-choice actors, it would not represent much of a challenge to established forms of critique. While resilience might be many things, depending on the empirical context,¹¹⁵ scholarly critique needs to take account of the fact that resilience no longer articulates a will to truth.¹¹⁶ It seeks to facilitate reflexive, context-sensitive policy solutions to maintain the status quo – from a position of necessarily limited and partial knowledge.

In contrast, postliberal readings discuss the new ontology of resilience, but their critique falls back on a normative defence of humanist values.¹¹⁷ That is the ability of human beings to make sense of the world in abstract terms and change it according to their own goals of security, development, and progress.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 122.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 224.

¹¹²Brian Walker and David Salt see resilience as a way of changing in order not to change Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006), p. 32; Walker and Salt, *Resilience Practice*, p. 3.

¹¹³Stephen Collier, ‘Topologies of power: Foucault’s analysis of political government beyond “governmentality”’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26:6 (2009), p. 95.

¹¹⁴Joseph, ‘Resilience as embedded neoliberalism’; Welsh, ‘Resilience and responsibility’; O’Malley, ‘Resilient subjects’.

¹¹⁵Anderson, ‘What kind of thing is resilience?’; see Dunn Cavelti, Kaufmann, and Soby Kristensen, ‘Resilience and (in)security’, pp. 4, 8, 12.

¹¹⁶Grove, *Resilience*.

¹¹⁷Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*.

What would social critique look like if we took some of the core assumptions of resilience seriously? What can critique look like if we build it up from the everyday experiences of people *en situation*, as resilience suggests? What if we try to foster what Peter Rogers called the ‘positive articulation’ of resilience centred on ‘participation and citizen-led initiatives, opening access to decision-making and empowering action in the community’?¹¹⁸ What can we productively take away from resilience’s ‘deeply experimental ethos’?¹¹⁹ The pragmatist sociology of Luc Boltanski offers some useful insights to these questions and possibly a way forward.¹²⁰ For a pragmatist sociology of critique, the starting point is the ‘moral expectations which actors disclose in the course of their actions’.¹²¹ Rather than positing a universal moral standard, pragmatism ‘develop[s] and synthesiz[es] the critiques developed by “people themselves” in the course of their everyday activities’.^{122,123} Pragmatist critique is eager to engage the creativity of everyday actors in moments of dispute.¹²⁴ Its normativity is less of a substantive than a procedural one: ‘Its main objective will be to sketch the contours of a social order where different points of view can be expressed, opposed and realized through experiments.’¹²⁵ Pragmatism avoids the authoritarianism involved when open-ended experiments are closed down.¹²⁶ Pragmatism is open to potentially creative situations, rather than dispositions and incorporations that present people as robots. It emphasises the ‘critical capacities’ of people.¹²⁷ Actors are the main performers of the social and they act and think with a degree of freedom from ‘cartographic descriptions of the world’.¹²⁸ That is, actors are seen as active, rather than passive. Unlike postliberal critiques discussed above, pragmatism does not evaluate a given social order against the normative standards of a ‘philosophical anthropology’.¹²⁹ There is no pre-formulated, metaphysical standard against which practices are compared and evaluated.

The work of the pragmatist social scientist is first and foremost to ‘observ[e], describ[e] and interpret situations where people engage in critique – that is *disputes*’.¹³⁰ In so doing, it resists the temptation to try to emancipate people ‘without their consent’ which, for Laura Sjoberg, would be ‘violent’.¹³¹ This openness towards the views and critical insights of actors is remarkably close to the emphasis of resilience discourse on local, everyday knowledge. Both are appreciative and build on the actors’ own interpretations and critiques of the world.¹³² Critique here involves

¹¹⁸Peter Rogers, ‘Rethinking resilience: Articulating community and the UK riots’, *Politics*, 33:4 (2013), p. 322.

¹¹⁹Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop*, p. 55.

¹²⁰Boltanski, *On Critique*.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹²²*Ibid.*

¹²³Similarly, Clive Barnett argues that ‘critique is a dimension of ordinary life’ (p. 3). According to the Barnett, we should look for the political in ordinary claims of injustice, rather than ‘in the drama of events performed in public space’. Clive Barnett, *The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2017), p. 74.

¹²⁴A pragmatist approach to emancipation would be in line with Stephanie Wakefield’s recent suggestion that we should be ‘deciding for ourselves, in our own places and ways, what counts as a problem in the first place, how it is defined, what adversaries we ourselves perceive, and how we choose to respond to them’. Wakefield, ‘Urban resilience as critique’, p. 9.

¹²⁵Boltanski, *On Critique*, p. 12.

¹²⁶Stephanie Wakefield has demonstrated that urban experiments under the banner of climate change resilience are often conservative in nature. In her empirical study of Miami Beach, she works out how urban experiments, like elevating roads and building large pumping stations, ‘do not counter or transform existing social or economic urban relations. Instead, they attempt to *extend and maintain* existing relations into the future.’ (emphasis in original). They seek to ‘secure and manage an unchanging urban order’ founded on high-end real estate markets, tourism, and luxury lifestyles. Stephanie Wakefield, ‘Miami Beach forever? Urbanism in the back loop’, *Geoforum*, 107:2 (2019), pp. 34–44 (p. 40).

¹²⁷Boltanski, *On Critique*, p. 20.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 24, emphasis in original.

¹³¹Laura Sjoberg, ‘Failure and critique in critical security studies’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019), p. 83.

¹³²By foregrounding the political claims and ethical concerns of real-world, situated actors, pragmatism invites social scientists to ‘get out of the way’ while occupying a ‘position of solidarity’, which is what Debbie Lisle and Heather

‘expos[ing] the discrepancy between the social world as it is and as it should be in order to satisfy people’s moral expectations’.¹³³ This self-driven critical practice can be facilitated through ‘access to practical devices and cognitive tools’ that allow actors to ‘break their isolation by comparing situations, whose constraints they suffer, with different situations wherein are immersed actors endowed with properties that are different, but with which a comparison or approximation can be made’.¹³⁴ In so doing, actors free themselves to some extent from the material and ideological constraints of the social order and their discourse ‘rise[s] towards generality’.¹³⁵ Pragmatism helps build up from the ground ‘collective systems’ through which actors can ‘extricate themselves from reality, challenge its validity and, above all, reduce its powers’.¹³⁶ Here, it is not the enlightened social scientist who reveals the social order to a set of misguided agents, but the actors themselves who employ their critical potential to step outside the existing order and imagine an alternative one. The key issue is for situated actors to distance themselves from reality. This bottom-up process can be supported by sociological thinking ‘challenging a social order in its totality’ by taking a viewpoint external to reality. This is akin to a ‘thought experiment’, which strips reality of its necessity and treats it ‘as if it were relatively *arbitrary*’.¹³⁷ In this way, Boltanski’s pragmatist sociology of critique allows us to oppose the dehumanising and depoliticising effects of resilience outlined above, while taking seriously resilience’s call to include situated actors and their everyday knowledge. Pragmatism also allows us to consider resilience’s call for a synergy between everyday knowledge and scientific research. In this way, it practices what Austin et al. call ‘companionship’.¹³⁸ For Austin et al., critique cannot be practised alone, especially not by a ‘closed community of reason’ represented by privileged Western academia.¹³⁹ The challenge for the practice of critique is to overcome the artificial boundaries between ‘researcher and object, or abstract-political and everyday situations’, in favour of ‘inclusive and symmetrical approaches’.¹⁴⁰ The inclusive, bottom-up type of critique that pragmatism offers is in tune with resilience in that both oppose a hermeneutics of suspicion: ‘a form of critique that treats its objects as an enemy that needs to be exposed, rather than as a companion to be engaged’.¹⁴¹ For Boltanski, critical theory needs to be backed up by a real-life ‘collective’.¹⁴² That is ‘ordinary critiques’.¹⁴³ In a spirit of intellectual and political companionship or camaraderie, the critical theorist ‘develop[s] them differently, reformulate[s] them, and [is] destined to return to them’.¹⁴⁴ The critical theorist assists situated actors engaged in real-life struggles and disputes to assume a ‘position of exteriority’ to the social order to which they find themselves subjected.¹⁴⁵ Pragmatism involves a double move: It ‘mak[es] use of the point of view of the actors’ – their moral sense and sense of (in)justice – while combining them with the social scientific tools necessary to conceive the social order in its totality. In short, pragmatists start from

Johnson call for in their critique of the EU refugee crisis. Debbie Lisle and Heather Johnson, ‘Lost in the aftermath’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019), pp. 36, 24.

¹³³Boltanski, *On Critique*, p. 30.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹³⁸Jonathan Austin, Rocco Bellanova, and Mareile Kaufmann, ‘Doing and mediating critique: An invitation to practice companionship’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019), pp. 3–19.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 7, 6.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴²Boltanski, *On Critique*, p. 4.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

the views articulated by situated actors engaged in everyday conflicts, but effectively assist them in 'ris[ing] towards generality'.¹⁴⁶ The 'rise towards generality' is a key aspect of Boltanski's pragmatic approach and represents a fundamental difference to resilience thinking, which compartmentalised knowledge into individual, context-specific insights. Resilience essentially polices critique by positing that any knowledge claim can only ever be partial and limited. If we want to avoid the dehumanising and depoliticising aspects of the neoliberal and biopolitical iterations of resilience – described so well by Joseph as well as Evans and Reid, respectively – this seems to be a basic normative and epistemic assumption: While everyday actors engage with the world from a perspective of partial and limited knowledge, their insights – assisted by critical theorists – can gain in generality and assume a certain degree of reflexivity *vis-à-vis* the social order.

The cornerstone of Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique are disputes.¹⁴⁷ Everyday actors are routinely engaged in disputes 'about what has gone awry and how it can be resolved'.¹⁴⁸ In these disputes, actors constantly have to justify the criteria for judging a given situation. Through these justifying practices, different 'orders of worth' (*grandeurs*) are articulated and tested, often with a view to fostering the common good.¹⁴⁹ In this way, ordinary people continuously engage in critique: the 'discursively articulated search for principles that are defensible in terms of their practical worth and normative validity'.¹⁵⁰ The practice of critique as conceived by Boltanski, therefore, involves much more than the technocratic neoliberal call for local ownership and bottom-up governance. The pragmatic sociology of critique posits a 'symmetrical position' of ordinary people and analysts.¹⁵¹ In contrast to the neoliberal discourse of inclusion – geared towards efficiency – pragmatists acknowledge the deeply political ability of ordinary actors to 'differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticisms and justifications'.¹⁵² Here, inclusion is not about increasing the efficiency of a preformulated policy project.¹⁵³ Instead, it involves conflict about the basic normative order of society.

Helping situated actors grasp the political circumstances of their existence as relatively arbitrary and, thus, open to change can be supported by a Foucauldian genealogy.¹⁵⁴ As Colin Koopman has worked out, genealogy as problematisation seeks to explicate and conceptualise 'a complex set of practices that have contingently coalesced' to shape the conditions of possibility of the world around us.¹⁵⁵ According to Koopman, genealogy 'neither legitimates nor delegitimizes'.¹⁵⁶ It initiates rather than concludes critical thought: 'It brings into focus the problems to which further critical work must develop responses'.¹⁵⁷ Genealogy as problematisation is uniquely compatible with pragmatism's bottom-up, experimental approach because it 'problem-ize[s] our present so as to reveal conditions we must work on to experimentally create an

¹⁴⁶Ibid., p. 37, emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁷Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, 'The sociology of critical capacity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2:3 (1999), pp. 359–77.

¹⁴⁸Frank Gadinger, 'On justification and critique: Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology and international relations', *International Political Sociology*, 10:3 (2016), p. 192.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁵⁰Simon Susen, 'Luc Boltanski: His life and work – An overview', in Simon Susen and Bryan Turner (eds), *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'* (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2014), pp. 3–28.

¹⁵¹Gadinger, 'On justification and critique', p. 191.

¹⁵²Boltanski and Thévenot, 'The sociology of critical capacity', p. 364.

¹⁵³Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁵⁴Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); see, for example, Stephanie Wakefield, 'Urban resilience as critique: Problematising infrastructure in Post-Sandy New York City', *Political Geography*, 79 (2020), pp. 1–12.

¹⁵⁵Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, p. 93.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 95.

improved future'.¹⁵⁸ Genealogy can provide useful insights into the history of the present, while pragmatism's focus on the normative claims of situated actors is more future-oriented: '[T]he backward-facing genealogist hands off material to the forward-facing pragmatist'.¹⁵⁹ In this division of labour, genealogy is in charge of bringing out historical problematisations, while pragmatist critique works towards 'future reconstruction'.¹⁶⁰ Genealogy provides situated actors and the social scientists who accompany and facilitate their critique with the necessary 'reflexive relationship to the contingencies that make us who we are such that we can begin the long and hard labour of transforming those remarkably stable structures to which we find ourselves subjected'.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

This article has provided a critical review of the most important conceptual readings of resilience: neoliberal, biopolitical, cybernetic, and postliberal. These are distinct conceptual frameworks, which, nevertheless, share a common interest in critiquing resilience as a depoliticising, socially regressive mode of governing emergence. While the neoliberal reading is well established¹⁶² and covers many empirical practices in the areas of counterterrorism and security,¹⁶³ it does not really engage with the new ontological assumptions of resilience. Here, critique is straightforward and well worn. Resilience is seen as a way of rolling back state responsibilities in favour of the market and putting the burden on individuals to help themselves. Rather than increasing autonomy, it is a manipulative instrument to increase governmental power over people.

Brad Evans and Julian Reid's biopolitical interpretation takes issue with the ontology of vulnerability underlying the resilience discourse.¹⁶⁴ The subject's political abilities are silenced in favour of adaptive ones. People are thrown into an uncertain and uncontrollable world in which suffering and trauma should be seen as opportunities for self-growth. This is a sinister dehumanising move that consigns people to passively suffer without giving them a political horizon to overcome the sources of insecurity and deprivation. However, while this is a powerful normative critique, it fails to take resilience seriously on its own terms. In a resilience framework, collective attempts to protect and secure only make things worse. The hubristic attempts to know and control the world around us are precisely the problem to be overcome. Evans and Reid's critique is 'truly counter-systemic'.¹⁶⁵ But it is unable to oppose resilience thinking on its own terms.

Kevin Grove's critique is a Foucauldian genealogy of resilience.¹⁶⁶ It is less concerned with opposing resilience discourse on normative grounds than with working out how it operates as a new governmental approach based on necessarily partial and limited knowledge. Critique in the social sciences has traditionally been geared towards deconstructing totalising knowledge claims. This critical practice is precisely what resilience thinking builds on and wants to make useful. Grove's critique consists in demonstrating the functionalist demands put on subjugated knowledge. Indigenous, local and everyday understandings are welcome, but only to the extent that they offer functional insights into the workings of specific complex adaptive systems.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 139.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 268.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁶²Joseph, 'Resilience as embedded neoliberalism'; Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*.

¹⁶³Coaffee, Murkami Wood, and Rogers, *The Everyday Resilience of the City*; Jessica West, 'Civic resilience: Securing "resilient communities" to prevent terrorism', in Chandler and Coaffee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*, pp. 318–30.

¹⁶⁴Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*.

¹⁶⁵Walker and Cooper, 'Genealogies of resilience', p. 157.

¹⁶⁶Grove, *Resilience*.

Resilience thinking wants to make difference useful. The problem with Grove's cybernetic critique is that it still assumes an outside governing position from which to manage complex adaptive systems. While resource managers, policy practitioners, and other stakeholders have to continuously learn about the systems they try to improve, they are still seen as somehow separate from them, able to govern through more context-sensitive, synthetic knowledge.

The eroding outside position of governance is the central issue in David Chandler's postliberal argument.¹⁶⁷ For Chandler, there is no outside from which to intervene into a world of complexity. All actors, including those in government, are always, already embedded in non-linear, emergent processes of causation. There is no position of superior knowledge or power from which to control and guide the world. Instead of imposing phenomenological constructions onto the world, including those of the rational strategic subject and the invisible hand of the market, the challenge is to learn from life's autonomous self-organising dynamics. Government has to be informed by life, instead of setting itself over and above it. What we are left with is the ethical imperative to critically reflect on the unintended consequences of our individual actions. Ultimately, Chandler reverts to reserving a separate space for politics, founded on the idea that human collectives can explain and change the world.

Resilience is not a coherent policy paradigm. It is a loose cluster of thoughts that can be articulated differently, including subversively.¹⁶⁸ The challenge is to take on board those positive elements of resilience thinking that foster the inclusion of local, everyday actors and their critical capabilities while keeping our distance from neoliberal iterations of resilience.

Boltanski's pragmatist sociology of critique offers a potential way forward, allowing us to both oppose the dehumanising effects of resilience and profit from its call to include situated actors and their bottom-up knowledge.¹⁶⁹ Pragmatist critique starts from the moral concerns articulated by actors *en situation*. It is their understanding of injustice and inequality that are the foundation of critical work. Social scientists do not reveal a hidden truth to them or posit a pre-given (liberal) anthropology, but rather generalise these bottom-up expressions of dissent. In this way, the pragmatist form of critique is open to resilience's call for inclusion, while giving social science a role to play in formulating a systematic view of society and its problems.

Importantly, pragmatism does not advocate an unthinking reliance on everyday understandings. There is a co-production of meaning by both lay actors and social scientists. While everyday understandings provide the normative basis for critique, social scientists contribute to critique through general social theory. Situated actors and sociologists are seen as collaborators in the critical project. The role of the critical sociologist proposed in this article is akin to what Jonathan Austin called the 'parasitical researcher'.¹⁷⁰ Due to their 'interstitial positionality' between different lifeworlds, social science researchers are able to 'collect, gather, and combine *multiple* aspects of sociopolitical experience in ways that individual humans or collectivities cannot'.¹⁷¹ Unlike situated everyday actors, social scientists are uniquely able to 'travel through multiple worlds in order to combine and compose distinct entities into novel configurations'.¹⁷² There is, thus, a real added value of the social scientist in the pragmatist co-production of critique. Pragmatism in this article has been used as a way to salvage critique. However, this does not suggest a smooth unproblematic relation between lay actors and social scientists. While both sides

¹⁶⁷Chandler, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity*.

¹⁶⁸Kevin Grove, 'Resilience and the postcolonial: Hidden transcripts of resilience', in Chandler and Coaffee (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*, pp. 370–82.

¹⁶⁹Boltanski, *On Critique*.

¹⁷⁰Jonathan Austin, 'A parasitic critique for international relations', *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 215–31; see Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹⁷¹Austin, 'A parasitic critique for international relations', p. 217, emphasis in original.

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 229.

should collaborate with each other, their alliance might be one of ‘awkwardly linked incompatibilities’.¹⁷³ Friction might well be at the heart of their relation: ‘working across difference’ where the aim is not to erase difference ‘but to make it part of the political program’.¹⁷⁴ Collaboration across difference demands that we appreciate how knowledge ‘comes from other sources’.¹⁷⁵ This article has argued that pragmatism – taking on board key aspects of resilience thinking – can help us to ‘juxtapos[e] and blend ... our combined intellectual stock’.¹⁷⁶ In this framework, ‘misunderstandings’ and ‘incomprehensions’ between situated everyday actors and critical social scientists might actually be a source of the coalition’s success.¹⁷⁷

Pragmatism can also make use of resilience’s ‘deeply experimental ethos’.¹⁷⁸ As Stephanie Wakefield has powerfully argued in the context of the Anthropocene back loop, we are ‘free to use the best lessons of resilience practice and discourse to challenge its worst aspects, to open up a much wider field of possibility and with a much broader set of actors’.¹⁷⁹ Fostering broad and continuous experimentation would help prevent critique from being reabsorbed into governance as yet-another functional insight into the system. There exist ‘alternative meanings of resilience’¹⁸⁰ beyond neoliberalism, biopolitics, cybernetics, and postliberalism. Pragmatism can be one way of teasing them out empirically and conceptually.

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¹⁷³ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 267.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 248.

¹⁷⁸ Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop*, p. 55.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*