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# THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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*“The weakest link determines the chances of survival...”*  
Disaster awareness campaign currently on Dutch TV

## Introduction

At the turn of the century the Netherlands has uneasily been moving from a technology-driven “hazard” approach, based on protection standards, towards a risk approach – from “resistance to resilience” (see the section below). Experiments with risk differentiation between flood-prone areas, building in floodplains and flood insurance are under way. In this context the Dutch can learn a lot from the United States where the reliance on structural works was abandoned in the 1960s with the rise of the Chicago school of human geography (WHITE 1945, BURTON et al 1978; 2002). This school challenged technocratic infrastructural solutions to hazards applied by public agencies such as the US Corps of Engineers, showing that they did not reduce losses rather than keeping the river away from people. They argued it made more sense to keep people from getting too close to the river through incentives and zoning and to influence human rather than river behaviour. By contrast after Katrina, American authorities have taken a renewed interest in infrastructural works.

The present contribution argues that the “risk” and “hazard” paradigms miss important developments in Disaster Studies related to the emergence of the concepts of “vulnerability” and “resilience”. The vulnerability approach to disaster studies has been on the rise in Disaster Studies since the 1980s, notably with regard to developing countries, when critical analysts started to question the techno-centricity of the hazard approach and the individualism of the risk approach (see Table 1: Four Disaster Paradigms). It emphasizes the systemic physical and societal forces that make certain

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groups more vulnerable, depriving them of alternatives. Its major focus is on communities. Accordingly, the *vulnerability* approach has paid attention to (individual, group or community-level) coping capacities that came to be seen as a major counter force to vulnerability as exemplified in a variety of vulnerability and capacity analysis (VCA) tools that emerged in disaster policy practice.

While the notion of vulnerability already suffered from “definitional heterogeneity” (FRERKS and BENDER, 2004), the use of the term “vulnerability” became even more confusing when a fourth emerging paradigm, complexity, informed by developments from the new ecology, started to make inroads in the Disaster Studies community. It introduced a different, systemic concept of vulnerability with *resilience* as its counterpart, based on non-linear systemic dynamics leading to adaptation or mal-adaptation. Translated into the social domain, “social” (in the European Union) and “community” (in the Anglosaxon world) resilience are now policy buzzwords in several countries with a view to coping with a variety of threats including natural hazard, climate change and terrorism.

The present contribution teases out the differences between those paradigms, but also argues how they can complement each other. It further discusses how these paradigms correspond to and are produced by wider political dynamics under what we like to call the *politics of disaster*.

Table 1: *Four Disaster Paradigms*

<i>Disaster narrative</i>	<i>Security is about</i>	<i>Security Referent</i>
“Hazard”	Reducing Probability	Infrastructure
“Risk”	Reducing Probability x Impact	Floodplain / Polder
“Vulnerability”	Reducing Probability x Impact x Vulnerability & Increasing Capacity	Community / Groups
“Resilience”	Increasing Adaptivity/Resilience	System

### Dutch Policy: From Resistance to Resilience?

In the water domain, the Netherlands has displayed a tendency towards a “resistance” or hazard approach to water risk. It shares this feature with other coastal urbanised areas, where resistance to just relocate rather than depend on loss reduction becomes stronger as they evolve and grow (KLEIN *et al.*, 2003). The “fight against the water” has led the Dutch to resist any flood risk, that is, to seek to reduce the residual risk after technological intervention to zero. The 2009 Delta State Advisory Commission proposed to bump coastal protection up by a factor 10 to a probability level of 1:100,000. This was interpreted by Dutch politicians as if a disaster could “never” happen. The

resulting false sense of security leads the Commission to encourage rather than reduce the further development of hazardous areas.

As a consequence of its “winning mood” after the building of the Delta Sea Protection Works (1953-1980), the Netherlands have neglected the rear end of the security chain until 1994, when the first evacuation plan was devised. In the early 21st century, great strides have been made to get serious with the risk approach. This can be seen in the adoption of Disaster Risk Reduction as the sum total of efforts made in each link of what is known in the Netherlands as the “security chain” (i.e. the US disaster cycle with an extra “pro-action” link added). This translated again as a tendency towards greater geographic risk differentiation, controlled flooding, the acceptance of multiple uncertainties in dike safety calculations (“failure factors”) and acceptable risk levels.

However, considering the fact that a residual risk does remain, it remains of the essence to focus on reducing the potential impact of a disaster as well. A risk approach extends the security chain beyond response and relief to mitigation, preparedness before the event, and reconstruction and aftercare after it. Next to probability, impact (loss) is part of the equation. The idea is that by focusing on all links in the chain and their interconnectedness, loss can significantly be reduced in the event of a disaster. This does not only depend on the exposure to the hazard concerned, but also on existing vulnerabilities and – to offset those – societal capacities to deal with the impact of the disaster. In that connection, the Dutch authorities are now talking about citizens’ self-reliance and also the newly emerging discourse on resilience is sometimes heard in debates on flood safety in the Netherlands. The section below first elaborates on the emergence of the vulnerability discourse in disaster studies to move on to the notions of capacity and resilience. A final section discusses the political dimension of those discursive changes and the need for a transformative approach.

## **Vulnerability**

In a review of the state of Disaster Studies on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the *Disasters* journal, David Alexander (1997) asserted that the emergence of the notion of vulnerability was one of the most salient achievements in the field of Disaster Studies of the last decades. The risk of being exposed to disaster had become recognized as a product of hazard and vulnerability which, in turn, was seen as actively created by such factors as bad governance, bad development practice, and political and military destabilization. This emphasis on vulnerability was associated with a shift from seeing disaster as an event caused by an external agent to a more sociologically oriented interpretation of disaster as a complex, socially (as well as politically, environmentally and economically) constructed process.

Wisner et al (2004: 11) define vulnerability as: “. . . the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process). It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which

someone's life, livelihood, property and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature and in society."

This "new understanding of disaster also called into question earlier, ill-conceived ideas of "normality" and "abnormality" that pervaded much thinking about disaster. Disaster often used to be seen as an abnormality or an aberration from a linear path of progress rather than perhaps a chronic condition as much caused by development as impinging on it. Wisner et al (2004: 20) therefore argued that the phenomenon of disaster should be placed in the mainstream of policy and practice.

Lavell (2004: 72) for example, showed that in the Lower Lempa River Valley Project in El Salvador "disaster risk" became combined with "lifestyle" or "everyday" risk: "The sum of their permanent living conditions signify that the poor or destitute live under permanent conditions of disaster." An important policy implication was the emphasis put on reducing everyday risk and vulnerability as a significant contribution to disaster risk reduction. "Vulnerability to disasters and life style vulnerability are part of the same package and must be tackled together in the search to reduce overall human insecurity or risk." Heijmans (2004) also noted that the difference between normal and extreme events has become negligible, as both may be turned into disasters as a consequence of the conditions under which people live. Hence, for the most vulnerable in society everyday life and subsistence are already highly hazardous (see also Allen 2003). A flood itself may not make all that much difference in light of the myriad challenges they face, and the flood relief itself may not be much help either. A flood or drought may turn out to be just another hazard in a long line of adversity. A wealthy, orderly society is likely to regenerate from a moderate flood, but specific groups in that society, with low social, financial or political capital, in poor health, with low literacy levels or from a minority community may not.

A powerful metaphor used to explain the vulnerability approach is the nutcracker. This analysis explicitly links incidental shocks with structural vulnerabilities, which helps explain why a hazard turns into a (systemic or partial) catastrophe. The Chicago school assumes that people make rational choices, while in practice, critical geographers have argued, this does not keep people with little or no alternative choices, away from risks and hazards. Poverty and population growth, for example, force people to move to steep slopes at risk from landslides, or to flood-prone or earthquake-prone areas.

Moreover, as the UNDP's *Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery* (BCPR)'s *Disaster Risk Index* reveals (2004), disasters hit poor people disproportionately. A similar number of disasters of similar intensity will claim many more victims in poor countries than in rich ones. The poor not only have less means to recover from disasters, a disaster often pushes them back into poverty, which makes them again more vulnerable to the next disaster (HELMER and HILHORST, 2006).

The PAR (Pressure and Release) model (WISNER et al, 2004) is frequently used to map structural vulnerabilities that influence whether an incident (such as a flood) turns into a disaster for specific groups. As a result, the loss of a house may be overcome by social groups that could afford an insurance policy or had sufficient reserves to rebuild it, but is absolutely devastating to others. The left-hand corner in the

pressure-and-release model shows the structural causes, dynamic processes and unsafe conditions. In the right-hand corner the hazards and triggers are entered that put pressure on these conditions such that the vulnerabilities are “released”. The vulnerable are caught between structural conditions and incidental shocks, like a nut between the two legs of a nutcracker.

A vulnerability assessment predicts what may happen to a particular group exposed to a particular hazard. A crisis often exposes the hidden vulnerabilities of a society, community or group. A proper vulnerability and capacity analysis however can help uncover the structural drivers and situational factors that make specific groups vulnerable, which can subsequently be prioritized for remedial action and help.

Incidentally, the concept of vulnerability may suggest to some that we should strive for zero vulnerability, but that would imply a non-dynamic and ahistorical understanding of reality. Not only hazards themselves, but also societies change continuously – with old vulnerabilities diminishing or perhaps disappearing and new ones coming up – hence we cannot exclude vulnerability and live with zero risk in our social endeavors. Also, broader contexts, including socio-economic and political environments and people’s perceptions, motivations and attitudes change over time.

The task of keeping track of everything would be endless, which has induced some humanitarian NGOs to concentrate on specific types of vulnerabilities only, such as vulnerabilities of place. Or, alternatively, they focus on the vulnerability of specific groups only, currently called EVIs in humanitarian jargon, extremely vulnerable individuals. Specifically identified vulnerable groups include women, the landless, ethnic minorities and others who find themselves in unfavorable locations and conditions as a result of the political economy (HEWITT, 1983, PEET and WATTS, 1996; WISNER *et al*, 2004 [1994]; PELLING, 2003). Showing that bilateral and multilateral aid and development policies have tended to reinforce the unfavorable conditions of vulnerable groups, radical vulnerability analysts have advocated retreating from the wider structures of aid and development. Vulnerable groups should be given help in increasing their own coping capacities for dealing with environmental hazards in terms of disaster risk reduction and preparedness.

### ***Bringing in capacity***

While the vulnerability approach was widely adopted in the world of development and disaster in the 1990s, a critique points out that it victimizes and disempowers people. It would engender a fatalistic and passive outlook and take away the agency from people, thereby creating external dependency. In fact, vulnerability is externally attributed to groups of people, who rarely label themselves as vulnerable unless strategically to get benefits out of the system. In recognition of this danger of victimizing and disempowering disaster-affected groups, Anderson and Woodrow (1989, 1998) highlight that people have important material, institutional and motivational capacities that can offset vulnerabilities and are engendered in individuals, groups and local communities to deal with crisis. The concept of capacity mediates the relative weight

of people's vulnerability, taking into account their knowledge, skills, and organizing capabilities to cope with disaster. The thinking on the role of local capacities and people's coping mechanisms has sociologically been influenced by debates on actor-orientation and the role of agency. Actor-orientation is a constructivist perspective focusing on the making and remaking of society through the self-transforming actions and perceptions of a diverse and interlocked world of actors (LONG, 2001). Actor-oriented approaches form a counter-balance to approaches that basically see human behaviour as externally determined by a person's place and role in the social system or by the values and norms that rule society.

In this respect, Anderson and Woodrow's VCA (Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis) could already be considered an early, useful and balanced, tool for analysis, as it combines both the vulnerability and capacity aspects. The amount of guides, tools and manuals in this field has multiplied since then. Cannon, Twigg, and Rowell (2003) have made an inventory of over fifty instruments that deal with vulnerability and capacity aspects.

However, it is not sufficient to focus only on the capacities of the disaster-affected groups and communities themselves. The role of the public sector and of public policies is crucial in attempts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to disasters. Regardless of whatever international aid can be offered, the responsibility to help people in need resides squarely with their own government. It is here that an analysis of the government institutions, the political culture and the functioning of the public sector can provide insight into the history of a disaster and the disaster response. Ahrens and Rudolph (2006) describe the interdependence between institutional failure and susceptibility to disaster. They assert that accountability, popular participation, predictability, and transparency of the administration are key factors in the promotion of sustainable development and disaster reduction. However, in many societies facing disaster, governments are weak, failing, or even collapsing. Others are plagued by corruption, "spoils politics," dictatorial rule, and predatory regimes, or are subject to "economies of violence." Many of them finally operate through systems of patronage or clientelist politics, as, for example, has been documented for the post-tsunami aid in Sri Lanka (FRERKS and KLEM, 2005, FRERKS, 2010).

The field of Disaster Studies has only recently started to develop this type of anthropologically induced analysis of disaster governance. Its earlier a-historical, de-contextualized models of disaster management and engineering approaches to preferred technical solutions hardly took such specificities into consideration. However, work in complex emergencies over the last two decades has put those governance issues forcefully on the agenda. Pelling and Dill (2009) highlight that the field of disasters is, in fact, a highly political domain. While we may analytically advocate design principles for complex adaptivity, decisions made about people's security and safety are made on the basis of a variety of considerations, not all humanitarian, but often squarely political or inspired by the existing political economy or economy of violence. In fragile, fragmented, conflict-ridden states, there may be adaptive capacity, but no motivation to rescue people. In fact, often the aid intended for them is robbed or diverted by

those in power. The “politics of disaster”, therefore, as put on the agenda by the vulnerability school in the 1980s and 1990s, remain highly relevant to our analysis. A vulnerability approach sees vulnerability and marginality of a community as (also) resulting from inadequate social protection (health insurance, health services, construction rules, prevention measures, etc.) and limited solidarity networks. In the PAR model, development is the transmission belt between root causes and unsafe conditions. Vulnerabilities are increasingly seen as a consequence of unresolved everyday development problems. This reinforces the possibilities that development interventions might bring about positive change, in terms of the reduction of vulnerabilities and the strengthening of local capacities and resilience. Many countries in North and South as well as humanitarian aid agencies have subscribed to this framework that invites combining relief and development in a more encompassing approach. The Netherlands government and many agencies regrettably still treat humanitarian aid and development as separate domains with their own institutional mechanisms and budget lines, confounding a more comprehensive approach that would overcome the problem of structural vulnerability in a more systematic way.

### *Capacity and governance*

In the 1990s, the idea of risk society and state failure promoted the idea that non-state actors should coordinate their capacities with the government to arrive at a greater sum total of coping capacity to deal with stress. This idea was and still is actively put into practice by liberalizing government. Krahmann (2003) for example shows the increasing involvement of private actors in security provision, while governments such as the Dutch state are stressing the need for citizen self-reliance / private action (in Dutch: “*zelfredzaamheid*”) in the case of disasters. Based on functionalist reasoning, authors like Kooiman (2000) were highly optimistic about multi-stakeholder partnerships between social sectors with complementary governance capacities. Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) were thought to increase preparedness and learning (WARNER et al, 2002).

This has been reinforced by networks like CAPHAZ.net, which have argued that social capacities should be enhanced, highlighting the potential of existing expertise in social capacity building for the field of natural hazards (KUHLCHE and STEINFUHRER, 2010).<sup>5</sup> It also echoes Norris et al ‘s (2008) approach to resilience as a “set of capacities” and “resilience as a process” (NORRIS et al 2008, CUTTER et al 2008; see section below), defined in terms of continual learning and taking responsibility for making better decisions to improve the capacity to handle hazards.

The governance question – who should do what – is in a way moot. It has been documented in most disasters that local residents act as the real “first” responders, saving and rescuing many victims even before professional aid providers arrive. As Gaillard (2010) observes, local communities also nearly always constitute the first line of defence in reducing vulnerability and building resilience. While a CBDRR approach emphasizes the strengths of community-based disaster risk reduction, it ignores the

problems of communities to deal with infrequent, unusually large events as well as with rapid change outpacing their adaptivity. Also, the “community” in community resilience reflects an “imagined community”. As Coaffee and Rogers (2008) among many others observe, “the community” is not homogeneous and they expect many conflicting viewpoints will emerge as to what is acceptable and what is not in community resilience strategies. Power differentials within communities can also prevent voluntary collective action celebrated by CBDRR. It will be argued below that resilience, like vulnerability, is a political construct and has its own “politics”, in the way it is used and framed in practice. To arrive at this point, we first need to explore the concept of resilience

### **Resilience**

Since the 1990s the field of Disaster Studies has started to take on board some of the ideas coming from environmental (earth and climate) systems analysts, such as non-linear processes, tipping points, adaptive (co-)management and resilience. Ecologists such as Holling who pushed the concept, define resilience as “the ability of a system to maintain its structure and patterns of behavior in the face of disturbance”, whereas stability is the “propensity of a system to attain or retain an equilibrium condition of steady state or stable oscillation ... resist any departure from that condition and, if perturbed, return rapidly to it” (HOLLIN, 1986: 296).

In hazards research, the definition of resilience means the ability to survive and cope with a disaster with minimum impact and damage (BERKE and CAMPANELLA, 2006; NATIONAL RESERACH COUNCIL, 2006). As of recent, it was expanded to include more social and institutional aspects. Harrauld and Veldhuis (2010) provide an overview of the recent debate on resilience in the US and include a series of definitions currently in use by US departments and in academic literature from which we show a selection in box 1:

“Resilience is the ability of systems, infrastructures, government, business and citizenry to resist, absorb, and recover from, or adapt to, an adverse occurrence that may cause harm, destruction, or loss of national significance” (DHS, Risk Steering Committee, DHS Risk Lexicon, 2008: 23-24).

Community resilience “is defined as the sustained ability of communities to withstand and recover - in both the short and the long terms - from adversity (NHHS, 2009: 15).

“Resilience refers to the ability of human systems to respond and to recover. It includes those inherent conditions that allow the system to absorb impacts and cope with the event, as well as post-event adaptive processes that facilitate the ability of the systems to recognize, change and learn in response to the event” (CUTTER, 2008).

Resilience is “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance. Community resilience emerges from four primary sets of adaptive capacities – Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication and Community Competence” (NORRIS, 2008).

(Derived from HARRALD and VELDHUIS, 2010: 9-10)

Those definitions move far beyond the systemic equilibrium thinking evidenced in the above quote of Holling’s work. They emphasize a number of common elements, namely the capacity or ability to anticipate risk or disturbance, absorb or limit impact, and bounce back after a crisis affecting (coupled) human and natural systems. Additional elements, however, are the adaptive community capacity, the notions of change, competence and learning. It must also be stressed that the capacities and abilities mentioned are not some mysteriously in-built systemic property or even anymore “owned” by individual persons or organizations, but are a collective, shared or networked property requiring specific forms of management and interaction.

In view of those definitions we suggest that resilience is seen as the shared, social capacity to anticipate, resist, absorb, and recover from an adverse or disturbing event or process through adaptive and innovative processes of change, entrepreneurship, learning and increased competence.”

Hence, there is a major difference between the fairly individual and instantaneous approach of “zelfredzaamheid” promoted by the Dutch government and the systemic, long-term and collective approach of resilience: the “zelfredzaamheid” approach of the Dutch government is geared towards the individual (and perhaps household) coping capacity to deal with a disastrous event, while resilience is a longer term adaptive approach based on social learning and change. It definitely includes response and coping, but goes beyond it and is also more geared to social and systemic aspects of dealing with disaster rather than only to individual and household capacities. In this connection we also refer to Dovers and Handmer (1992) who have proposed that we differentiate between proactive and reactive social resilience. Reactive resilience seeks to perpetuate and reinforce the status quo, whereas a proactive system accepts change and adapts to it.

Turning to the policy world, it makes sense to invest in resilience. This would have to go the earlier promoted structural vulnerability reduction, though that would be part of it. However, as said above, the vulnerability discourse has certain drawbacks that could be avoided in a future resilience approach. Hence, it needs to be combined with a perspective promoting agency and capacity. The resilience concept with its emphasis on capacity and competence embodies such an agency-focused perspective *par excellence*.

On the other hand, there is as yet fairly little insight in how to translate resilience in a workable concept and policy approach. Though its potential strengths are clear in comparison to the earlier hazard, risk and vulnerability paradigms, there is so far little

substantive work on the operationalization of the concept and its use in policy practice. Its present popularity seems partly the product of a political and policy discourse that seeks to shift the responsibility for mediating the impact of disasters to the society at large.

The issue of resilience has an important bearing on the perceptions, behaviors and responses in the given public policy contexts. It is associated with a sort of paradigm shift or shift of focus over the last one or two decades concerning responsibilities and roles in public policy and with regard to the composition of larger actor alliances involved. In a resilience-approach there is a relatively strong emphasis on community and grassroots involvement compared to the traditional reliance on state-delivered services. New forms of stakeholder engagement and public-private partnerships are explored and encouraged.

In the field of disaster management such collaboration between authorities and citizens was already promoted in the 1994 Yokohama and 2005 Hyogo frameworks respectively. It is however necessary to elucidate the impacts of such paradigmatic shifts for the anticipation on, prevention of, and recovery after shocks. As a grassroots or community-based perspective has often been welcomed merely on ideological grounds or sentiments, it is essential to provide for a critical and evidence-based approach to inform policy and practice and enhance effectiveness in the field of resilience promotion.

We believe that it is useful to outline a research agenda that can overcome some of the conceptual, operational and policy weaknesses of the resilience approach. It goes beyond this paper to design such a research agenda, but it should minimally include the following major steps

- Definitional delineation and conceptual elaboration of the notion of resilience;
- Analysis of the academic and policy literature on resilience and the identification of pertinent issues and emerging themes;
- Building of a conceptual framework on resilience;
- Defining descriptive-analytical benchmarks or indicators for resilience;
- Developing and testing a policy-relevant approach to enhancing resilience;
- Applying framework through pilot case studies;
- Proposing policy measures to enhance resilience.

Though such steps can help and promote resilience of disaster-prone areas, there remains a need to also critically approach the resilience paradigm. Whether or not such interventions may have a beneficial impact depends largely on the broader political and economic context. Therefore we suggest that alongside the policy work outlined in the six bullets above, a more politically informed analysis takes place that looks at and deconstructs the resilience discourse as a political project. In our last section we pay attention to this dimension of the resilience *problematique*.

## Resilience as a Political Project

We saw earlier that partnership and coordination between the public and private sectors is seen by many as the way forward to increase resilience. Gaillard (2010) for example sees a role for governments to enforce building regulations and service provision, citing Colombia as an example of a central government that provides basic services to illegal settlers. He therefore advocates a mix of bottom-up and top-down.

However, when looking at resilience as it is promoted by governments nowadays, a more explicit political analysis is needed. Several authors have engaged with the political overtones of the rise of the resilience discourse, notably that in the UK. The literature reveals different lines of scepticism and criticism to this idea. The most familiar reasoning among these is that resilience as used “in bouncing back to the old state of affairs” is to reproduce pre-existing vulnerabilities, inequities and marginalising processes.

Several authors have therefore argued for a definition of resilience that is transformative in nature in stead of only reconstituting the status quo ex ante.

The question is to which extent this is feasible if we look at the practices of resilience. Coaffee and Rogers (2008) see a “dark side” to resilience planning”, in which “planning authorities and planners act regressively, exerting domination and causing inequality”. Discussing it in the context of terrorism, they see the erosion of civil rights and instrumentalization of social resilience “The term “resilience”... provide[s] a highly emotive rhetoric on which a host of wider issues not necessarily directly linked to terrorism could be attached. A new governance and policy structure has developed from this emergent policy metaphor of resilience.”

They argue that resilience can exclude citizens rather than promote coordination between security providers and citizens. They criticise the creation of an “anti-democratic condition” whereby particular powerful institutions determine how borders [between the safe and danger zones] are constructed and constituted to “control and disperse particular activities deemed “unacceptable” and “undesirable” (COAFFEE and ROGERS, 2008). Citizens, they claim, have become “passive recipients of an increasingly controlled environment.”

Along similar Foucauldian lines, they note that ideas of “responsabilisation” and an emphasis on citizenship being “active” with regard to self-regulating conduct within communities under the banner of “resilience” appear directed towards controlling “disorder”, “anti-social behaviour” and “civil disturbance”. By bringing social into the debate, they are being “securitised” (BUZAN et al, 1998) or “disasterised” (WARNER, 2011), i.e. brought into the special domain of emergency decision-making, legitimising exceptional measures, the deployment of the military and the exclusion of stakeholders.

We need governments to show the limits, yet the government does not seem to respect its own or societal limits, as it is more and more interfering in citizen behaviour. The current call for active citizenship can become a policy instrument of the public sector (GROENE AMSTERDAMMER, 21 April 2011).

This Foucauldian analysis has a particular slant. Chandler reveals resilience as a neo-liberal project<sup>6</sup> seeing resilience as the highest stage of liberalism, transcending “binaries of state and society, inside/outside, sovereign/citizen.” By this he means that it is no longer the state who rules people, they are now ruling themselves. This type of liberalism sees the solution to vulnerability as “universalising ... preventive intervention with the goal of the empowerment and capacity - or capability-building of the subject to enable resilience to, in and through danger.

To him, stressing resilience is a therapeutic axiom suggesting that “work on the self can resolve problems in the absence of any transformation of social relations.” Similarly Reid suggests that “the resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world.”<sup>7</sup> Resilience backgrounds the political, the imagining of alternatives, and foregrounds adaptivity, accepting “the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the difficulties they are faced with”. In response to this, attention has been focused on the need to move beyond resilience and look at wider transformations that may be desirable as outlined below.

### **Resilience or Transformation?**

The current celebration of resilience depicts adaptive capacity as a sign of maturity. This relates to a second strand of resilience analysis coming from (child) psychology, which usefully defines resilience as the capacity to respond to stress. Applying this notion to societies, Herman van Gunsteren, an emeritus professor of political theory and the philosophy of law, sees the lack of mental resilience as the biggest societal problem of our time. We do not seem to be able to handle shocks without losing core values, he claims. Claiming and the culture of complaint shows social immaturity (quoted in VN MAGAZINE, May 2011). A response like this calls for people to toughen up and “get over it”.

Norris *et al* (2008), however, note that the ability to deal with stress does not preclude distress. Many people experience distress after disaster; and while stress tends to be transient, people can suffer distress for years. The eventual equilibrium is not necessarily better or more resilient than the old. They claim: “Adapted functioning is not necessarily superior in level or character or effectiveness to pre-event functioning; it is simply different.”

We find this a point worth pursuing; resilience does not need to be a return to previous equilibria. This notion is embryonically reflected in the current debate about the rehabilitation stage of the disaster cycle, suggesting that rather than “building back”, we should be “building back better”. From a resilience-perspective, “better” is only better if it gives the vulnerable actor(s) more options and flexibility in their coping with future adversity. Rather than to revert to the old “equilibrium”, resilience suggests a system has multiple “equilibria” and that progress can be made by structural vulnerability reduction or the increase of capabilities. Yet, while trying to remedy shortcomings of the pre-disaster situation, this approach still implies largely a return to the pre-disaster order, including the built-in instabilities and vulnerabilities and

conditions of social and ecological degradation. Building back better, too, can reproduce old inequalities and inadequacies.

Some therefore advocate to think more radically and to move beyond resilience, towards social transformation (e.g. PELLING, 2010). This is not as utopian as it may sound. It may be questionable whether in socio-political systems a complete return to the situation-ex-ante is even a real possibility. The thinking in terms of equilibria and stable conditions as in ecology and environmental studies may not be an appropriate point of departure in politics, where the experience of the disruption itself may already have introduced irreversible change. A second issue is whether such a return may even be desirable, as it were those pre-disaster conditions themselves which may have induced the disaster in the first place and the apparent stability was more an outer illusionary façade rather than a firm and robust reality.

Radical change may be perceived as negative, but communities and societies have successfully done just that – adaptation can mean transitioning to a new life. Many African communities facing drought have already internalized adaptation as a matter of course, diversifying crops or livelihoods or relocating to other areas where they can access the resources they need and start a new life. Seeking to resettle them in their old territory can seem humanitarian, but may not conform to established patterns of survival. Likewise in the Netherlands and US, we should not expect that people want to take up their old jobs after a calamity. After Hurricane Katrina, some could not return, but others did not want to (GROEN and POLIVKA, 2008).<sup>8</sup> A disaster in this sense can be a window of opportunity for improvement. At a societal level, disasters have triggered revolutions, overthrowing governments that were already unpopular and handled disaster badly.

Disasters provide windows of opportunity to rethink social arrangements such as the “social contract” (PELLING and DILL, 2009). Several societal transformations have come about after a shock, which acted as a “focusing event” punctuating the equilibrium (BAUMGARTNER and JONES, 1991, BIRKLAND, 1998). Hurricane Katrina exposing FEMA’s misdirected reorientation to the War on Terror under Bush’s government also may have contributed to his administration’s loss of reputation. Revolution in Honduras after the outrage at the poor handling of Hurricane Mitch and the earlier downfall of Somoza’s regime after the 1972 earthquake in Managua are examples of similar dynamics. Pelling and Dill (2006, 2009) however have also shown that disasters can also induce ruling elites to reinforce the status quo on the strength of the extraordinary powers legitimised by calamity and crisis. This so-called “securitisation” of disaster is a domain that is largely unexplored, but could add to our understanding of political dynamics in fragile state contexts.

## **Conclusion: Comig Clean About Vulnerability and Resilience**

In recent years vulnerability and resilience have become mainstream notions as useful additions to hazard and risk. A focus on vulnerability helps us see that a systemic

approach to flood security makes little sense – while the sum total of protection may well increase, the risk of suffering and almost insuperable loss differs between certain social groups, and impels us to think about what to do about the deeper roots of such disparities. The concept of social resilience by contrast focuses our minds on the social capacities, well beyond the capacities of the formal sector and mobilising and strengthening the capacities of communities and societies. However, while greatly enriching our understanding of hazard and disaster, both concepts bring counterintuitive flipsides.

First, vulnerability is not always bad. Human relations would not be possible without a degree of “opening-up”. Habermasian authentic communication could entice us to take off the mask of invulnerability. This however may require an unrealistic degree of human trust and solidarity. Cutter et al (2008) for example note that governments are loath to advertise their vulnerability, as it may hurt investment and growth. Likewise hazard-proneness is often not communicated in a meaningful way to tourists and home buyers. For example in Limburg, the Netherlands, long-term residents are used to river flooding exacerbated by sediment from erosion; as a result they refrain from placing valuable goods at ground-floor or basement level. New home owners and tourists however are unaware of this risk.

While widely praised, resilience is not always good. The resilience project carries risks to society, and whether promoting resilience reduces people’s vulnerability to disaster is highly dependent on one’s socioeconomic standing (Klein et al 2002) and here is more differentiated approach is called for than the generalised to promoting resilience often implies. Nonetheless, we have argued that vulnerability reduction and the promotion of resilience matter and can be helpful, but that they also have their own politics. In this connection, we should be critical about the fiction promoted by the retreating neo-liberal state that everyone can be equally resilient.

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## Notas

<sup>5</sup> [http://caphaz-net.org/outcomes-results/CapHaz-Net\\_WP1\\_Social-Capacity-Building2.pdf](http://caphaz-net.org/outcomes-results/CapHaz-Net_WP1_Social-Capacity-Building2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> E.g. [http://www.fanrpan.org/documents/d00209/Chandler\\_African\\_poverty\\_Feb2007.pdf](http://www.fanrpan.org/documents/d00209/Chandler_African_poverty_Feb2007.pdf)/ The University of Westminster has a project tracing the genealogy of politics of resilience.

<sup>7</sup> Reid and Julian (2010) “The Disastrous and Politically Debased Subject of Resilience” presented at a symposium on “The Biopolitics of Development: Life, Welfare, and Unruly Populations” on 9-10 September 2010, [www.mcrg.ac.in/Development/draft\\_Symposium/Julian.pdf](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/Development/draft_Symposium/Julian.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey A Groen and Anne E Polivka (2008) “The Effect of Hurricane Katrina on the Labor Market Outcomes of Evacuees”, *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings* 2008, 98:2, 43–48 Online: <http://paa2008.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=80179>

# THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Much conceptual confusion exists over the concepts of vulnerability and (social) resilience, reinforced by the different paradigms (the article identifies four) and disciplinary traditions underlying their use. While since the 1980s the social construction of “vulnerability” as a driver for disaster received considerable attention, in recent years we have seen increased attention to people’s capacities and resilience. The currently popular “complexity” approach to risk moreover appears to offer ways of breaking through entrenched vulnerabilities. Resilience however is also a political project which, we argue, also has its dark, conservative overtones and overlooks structural sources of vulnerability that continue to affect hazard-prone actors. We may therefore need to conceive resilience as the potential for social transformation after disaster.

**Keywords:** vulnerability; resilience

**Resumo:** Existe muita confusão conceitual em torno dos conceitos de vulnerabilidade e resiliência (social), reforçada pela diferença de paradigmas (este artigo identifica quatro) e tradições disciplinares subjacentes à sua utilização. Enquanto desde os anos 80 a construção social de “vulnerabilidade” como condutor para desastres recebeu atenção considerável, nos últimos anos temos visto maior atenção às capacidades e resiliência das pessoas. Atualmente popular, a abordagem da “complexidade” do risco, além disso, parece oferecer maneiras transformadoras através das vulnerabilidades enraizadas. No entanto, defendemos que a resiliência é um projeto político que também tem seus sombrios sobretons conservadores e omite fontes estruturais de vulnerabilidade que continuam a afetar os atores propensos ao risco. Podemos, portanto, precisar conceber a resiliência como potencial para transformação social depois de desastres.

**Palavras-chave:** Vulnerabilidade; resiliência.

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