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REVIEW ESSAY

On resilience politics: from transformation to subversion

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Adaptation to Climate Change: from Resilience to Transformation, by Mark Pelling, London, Routledge, 2010, xv + 203 pp., £28.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-47751-2

Politics of Catastrophe: genealogies of the Unknown, by Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster, London, Routledge, 2012, vi + 176 pp., £28.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-62738-2

Ontology of the Accident: an Essay on Destructive Plasticity, by Catherine Malabou, translated by Carolyn Shread, Cambridge, Polity, 2012, v + 112 pp., \$12.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780745652603

A pervasive sense of uncertainty permeates individual and collective life today. The political economic, cultural, infrastructural, and environmental changes, neoliberal development ushers in, manufacture insecurity at scales stretching from the molecular to the global.¹ Sensationalist media reporting on natural disasters, terrorist attacks and virulent disease strains, to name but a few, fan the flames of unease. Responses to this new reality have been largely reactionary, involving, inter alia, invasive new surveillance procedures and the securitisation of migrants from the global South. However, a beacon of hope on the left has been the emergence of resilience theory in ecological thinking, and its subsequent dissemination throughout a wide array of policy domains, including disaster management, sustainable development programming, and civil defence and homeland security. Because resilience theory is founded on holistic and topological modes of thought that undermine positivist and empiricist assumptions,² advocates often interpret resilience as a radical alternative that introduces critical modes of thought into governance processes.³ However, research from a variety of critical perspectives has begun unpacking how resilience is increasingly marshalled to defend the existing neoliberal order. Good intentions notwithstanding, the effect of resilience initiatives is often to defend and strengthen the political economic *status quo* against uncertainty and surprise.⁴

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¹ Simon Dalby, *Security and Environmental Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

² C.S. Holling, "Cross-Scale Morphology, Geometry, and Dynamics of Ecosystems," *Ecological Monographs* 62, no. 4 (1992): 447–502.

³ Emily Boyd and Sirkku Juhola, "Stepping Up to the Climate Change: Opportunities in Re-Conceptualizing Development Futures," *Journal of International Development* 21, no. 6 (2009): 792–804.

⁴ Mark Duffield, "Total War as Environmental Terror: Linking Liberalism, Resilience, and the

This essay takes as its point of departure the muddled politics of resilience. Taken individually, the three texts reviewed appear to have little in common: each comes from a distinct theoretical lineage, and is written for vastly different audiences. Nonetheless, each offers a unique window on practical, historical and philosophical issues confronting critically minded scholars and practitioners labouring to create a more progressive socio-ecological life. Read together, these texts offer a window on the *limits* of the political imaginary that underpins much work on resilience – specifically, their grounding in the centred subject of modernist political thought – as well as potential avenues for rethinking resilience politics.

Mark Pelling's *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation* frames resilience as one form of adaptation that individuals and organisations may pursue in response to climate change. The most conservative form of adaptation, resilience, prioritises the near-term sustainability of socio-ecological systems over more radical reforms to the underlying structures and institutions that cause insecurity and vulnerability in the first place. Pelling classifies the latter as transformative actions. A middle ground, transitions, alters access to, and distribution of, rights and responsibilities within an existing system, but does not challenge the system itself. This division enables him to explore why certain adaptation pathways rather than others are chosen, persist and constrain subsequent adaptation possibilities. Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the institutional and intellectual history of adaptation, focusing on four antecedents of adaptation: coping, adaptive management, cybernetics and co-evolution. This discussion draws out a continuing tension between approaches that emphasise the generalisability of nature–society interconnection, and those that stress the contextual specificity of these connections. For example, with roots in complexity science, resilience theory visualises nature and society as an interconnected system whose relations can be quantified, operationalised and modelled. Although theoretically elegant, in practice, resilience results in marginal changes that sustain social and political inequalities, sacrificing social justice for systemic persistence. In contrast, researchers drawing on coping literatures emphasise how the choice of adaptation strategies reflects place-specific issues of governance, inclusion and value judgements.

In Part II (chapters 3–5), Pelling bridges this tension by constructing a framework for understanding adaptation that maintains the analytical precision of socio-ecological systems theory while accounting for politics and culture. Chapter 3 engages with resilience theory to understand how change occurs within organisations. Social learning and self-organisation are two key determinants of how a system might re-organise around new practices, beliefs and values in response to external stimuli while maintaining the same function and structure. Norms, values and beliefs that shape institutional architectures are outcomes of social learning (59). Self-organisation refers to the capacity of collectives to form in the absence of top-down direction. Together, self-organisation and social learning offer a systemic way of analysing the contextually specific process through which beliefs and practices change. Chapter 4 draws on transitions theory and regime theory to understand adaptation as transition. Existing governance regimes may contain hierarchies and rigidities that inhibit transitional innovations, but supportive governance structures can promote informal networks and communities of practice that are key sources of alternative ideas and practices (82). Pelling refers to these networks as shadow spaces of

Bunker," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 3 (2011): 757–69; Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, "Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 2 (2011): 143–60.

social learning: physical and social spaces of experimentation and risk-taking, where new practices and beliefs might be tried out and refined before diffusing more widely throughout society.

Pelling considers more wide-ranging transformations in chapter 5 by bringing together three distinct bodies of work: risk society, social contract theory and human security. Risk society locates the root causes of environmental crisis in Western modernity, and makes adaptation a matter of reflexively changing cultural beliefs, values and practices. Such global-scale changes are necessarily grounded in political processes, which Pelling theorises through a social contract theory. The social contract symbolises the ‘compact’ in society that determines the distribution of rights and responsibilities. Together, the cultural assumptions of the risk society and the institutional norms symbolised by the social contract produce human security or the ability of individuals and communities to exercise and defend their human, environmental and social rights. Although Pelling acknowledges recent critiques of human security’s counter-revolutionary tendencies (94), he suggests that it has a unique capacity to regulate private behaviour, and build participatory structures and adaptive capacities into national governments. In short, Pelling makes human rights the practical and theoretical foundation of transformative action that targets institutions at the heart of contemporary state-based neoliberal order – institutions that can be identified and analysed through risk society and social contract theories.

The contribution Pelling’s framework offers lies in his ability to work *through* resilience theory to develop an internal critique that folds political and cultural considerations into systems theory. This is a valuable corrective to much resilience research, which tends to downplay the influence that material and discursive power relations have on adaptation. Part III (chapters 6–8) illustrates his framework’s utility through a variety of case studies. Chapter 6 demonstrates the impacts that shadow spaces and relational qualities, such as trust, can have on adaptive capacity within organisations through two case studies from Wales. Chapter 7 analyses adaptation practices in four cities in Quintana Roo, Mexico through discourse analysis and regime theory. Here, the mobility of both migrant labourers and foreign capital lessens individual attachments to place that can foster adaptive beliefs and practices. Chapter 8 utilises the case studies of disasters in Bangladesh, Nicaragua and New Orleans to analyse the cultural, political and economic forces that shape the possibilities for transformation. For example, Cold War geopolitics and neoliberalisation contributed to the Nicaraguan government’s failed response to Hurricane Mitch.

Pelling has succeeded in crafting a text that works well on many levels. The breadth and depth of research he draws on while building his framework make this required reading for undergraduate and postgraduate courses on adaptation, sustainable development and resilience. Application-oriented researchers and practitioners will find his analytical framework and illustrative case studies useful, whereas his interest to translate critical theory into transformative practice will resonate with critically minded scholars.

However, his framework also reveals a problematic tendency in prevailing approaches to power, politics and resilience. Although resilience theory is founded on topological modes of thought that see permanence and stability as ephemeral conditions, Pelling’s approach to resilience politics at times relies too heavily on the sovereign subject of individual rights and responsibilities. Two examples illustrate this tendency. First, his assertion that adaptation can be gleaned from studying intentions makes adaptation a product of the subject’s will: the subject of adaptation chooses from among a suite of different adaptation strategies (70). Her intentions can be gleaned from discourse analysis that offers a window on the power relations that shape her adaptation choices. This is a narrow understanding of discourse as the content of statements uttered by a subject, rather than a system of rules and norms that defines the

possibilities for true and false knowledge.⁵ The wilful subject that possesses intentions is the ontological foundation of his framework; the subject's intentions are its epistemological foundations. Second, the distributive and procedural notions of justice that Pelling introduces into resilience thinking rely on the individual subject of rights. Procedural understandings of justice give individuals the responsibility to define equality and the basic structures of society; distributive justice addresses the outcomes of such decisions (49). Participation is a key technique for achieving justice conceived as such: participation allows inequalities to be managed through negotiation (63).

These tendencies indicate a modernist political imaginary at the heart of Pelling's framework, in which politics is understood through categories of intentions, rights and responsibilities held (or claimed) by a subject. A political imaginary centered on a stable subject introduces a paradox into the heart of resilience politics conceived as such. The modernist foundations of Pelling's political imaginary make his political project paradoxically reliant on the very institutions it seeks to transform: the subject of transformation is constituted as such only through its relation with institutions such as the state, sovereignty, property and modernist understandings of the social contract. The possibility for more radical forms of political action that might call these institutions into question is limited by a resilience politics founded by the modern subject that is constitutively incapable of anything beyond simply *reforming* those institutions that create vulnerability and insecurity.

The resilience politics that follow from Pelling's framework are thus always open to the possibility of co-optation by modern institutions. An alternative slant on resilience politics is found in Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster's *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*, which engages in a genealogical analysis of how 'catastrophe' has come to be an object of government in fields such as security and emergency management. Government here refers to any calculated intervention that is designed to produce a change in others' conduct. Genealogy is a mode of thought about the present that destabilises established categories of knowledge and situates them within wider struggles over how to govern socio-ecological reality. For example, a genealogy of catastrophe does not take complexity science and resilience theory as the basis for analysis and subsequently, attempt to refine their ability to represent socio-ecological reality. Instead, it asks *how* conditions such as surprise, uncertainty and adaptation came to be governmental problems that could be understood and addressed through these forms of knowledge. Accordingly, in chapter 2, Aradau and van Munster situate contemporary interest in resilience, preparedness, precaution and pre-emption within Cold War era civil defence and war planning activities designed to secure liberal order against surprise nuclear attack. Practitioners devised a number of techniques such as scenario exercises, game theory and computer simulations in order to visualise and intervene in this uncertain future.

For Aradau and van Munster, these techniques are organised around particular 'styles of reasoning' that give meaning and significance to the practices and concepts through which these techniques operate: a style of reasoning 'introduces new objects, evidence, sentences, laws ... and possibilities' (14). What sets contemporary techniques for governing uncertain futures apart from their Cold War era predecessors is the introduction of conjectural styles of reasoning into security practice. Chapter 3 defines conjecture as an inductive mode of thought that posits possible connections between disparate minutiae to envision a hidden reality. Aradau and van Munster illustrate conjecture through the UK

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

counter-terrorism planning. They show how the counter-terrorist activities rely on inventive and imaginative combinations of different details, such as consumption patterns, internet search histories and so forth, to link apparent reality with a 'hidden world' of terrorist groups plotting the next attack. Although conjecture is an apolitical style of reasoning, its deployment in counter-terrorism assemblages has political *effects*: conjectural reasoning justifies exceptional measures taken to access vital 'clues' that unlock the hidden world, such as invasive data mining or torture methods in interrogations.

Chapters 4–6 analyse different practices that attempt to govern catastrophic scenarios through conjecture. Chapter 4 offers a genealogy of terrorism insurance that locates the emergence of modern insurance not only in the development of statistical methods but also in response to catastrophic events such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1788. Terrorism insurance is a specific way of dealing with a catastrophic future that undermines equality, since it protects only those forms of life whose worth can be easily quantified – for example, forms of life defined by the possession of property at risk to economic loss from a terrorist attack. Chapter 5 analyses scenario exercises through Kantian understandings of imagination as a distinct form of knowledge about the future that creates both concepts and subjective sensations. In the extreme, imagination takes us to the limit of knowledge, the immeasurable, sublime catastrophe. As such, imagination alone cannot offer knowledge on future threats; it relies on both perception and experience. Chapter 6 draws on aesthetics – the manipulation of feelings that emerge in relation to sensations (88) – to unpack how catastrophe models and simulations act on the subjective realm of perception and experience in order to constitute prepared and vigilant subjects.

The highlight of the text is Chapter 7, which reads the politics of catastrophe through an engagement with recent research on exceptionalism. The exception, after Carl Schmitt, decides when the law can be suspended to preserve the law. Importantly, the sovereign's decision on the exception identifies both the exceptional condition and the norm. Although Schmitt posits a single sovereign as the agent of the decision, recent research details how contemporary practices of exceptionalism involve a more ordinary politics through which decisions on both the norm and exception are made. For Aradau and van Munster, catastrophes offer one example. The various styles of reasoning and their associated techniques that attempt to understand a catastrophic future enact a form of the sovereign decision: scenarios, war games and catastrophe insurance, for example, all identify a future threat that must be allayed by changing activities in the present. These banal practices inscribe an order of fear as the basis for collective life: social norms, beliefs and practices are reorganised around the fear of a future terrorist attack or environmental calamity. Fear of an uncertain future that threatens 'life as we know it', rather than freedom or equality, becomes the basis for collective life in contemporary liberal order. Styles of reasoning reinforce this order not only by staving off catastrophe but also by reiterating this foundation through banal 'decisions' on who or what should be protected, who or what is a source of threat and the proper techniques for negating this threat.

Key for our purposes here, Aradau and van Munster's approach enables them to identify resilience as one particular form of security practice that draws on conjectural styles of reasoning. Discussing disaster resilience (46–9), they argue that disaster preparedness techniques such as scenario exercises produce resilient subjects capable of living through surprising, novel and potentially catastrophic events. The incorporation of resilience into disaster management enables practitioners to envision a 'hidden world' of psychological resilience that exists beneath the apparent world of individual and systemic vulnerability to disaster events. Resilience becomes a technology of the self, a programmatic set of goals and techniques through which subjects govern themselves and

build the capacity to withstand unexpected events. Deployed as such through disaster management assemblages, resilience increases individual and systemic capacity to defend existing order against potentially catastrophic surprise. From this perspective, resilience politics take the form of an anticipatory politics that reshapes social life in relation to an event that has not occurred. Resilience approaches are a key part of this anticipatory politics, for they fashion subjects proper to contemporary neoliberal order: resilient subjects capable of withstanding catastrophic shocks and responding to adversity through modern institutions such as human rights and the social contract, rather than mobilising against the sources of insecurity. In short, resilience pre-empts more radical forms of political action that might arise in response to socio-ecological inequality and insecurity.

Against this anticipatory politics, Aradau and van Munster turn to Michel Foucault and Alain Badiou to think the catastrophe as an unthinkable event. An event is the irruption of pure novelty, something that is not thinkable from within existing social structures and epistemic regimes, such as the French Revolution. We can begin to see an alternative form of resilience politics in this orientation towards an uncertain future. At issue is whether novelty itself – the essence of the political – can and should be managed. From this perspective, resilience, preparedness, precaution and pre-emption all offer different ways of visualising, understanding and managing novelty. The exhaustion of novelty in a will to truth furthers the depoliticisation of resilience by robbing it of the essential political moment, the novelty of the event. In contrast, Aradau and van Munster suggest that ‘understanding the politics of catastrophe through the political category of events tells us that thinking the future needs to be done in relation to the present’ (122). The political and ethical challenge is not to see the future as insecure break from the secure and stable present, for this institutes an order of fear that justifies draconian governmental interventions to perpetuate the existing order of things. Instead, the challenge is to recognise the manifold forms of insecurity that exist in the present, and the role that efforts to secure ‘the future’ can unwittingly contribute to these insecurities.

Catherine Malabou’s *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* offers a way of thinking the present and future that does not institute an order of fear as the basis for collective life. This text offers a succinct introduction to Malabou’s notion of destructive plasticity. Plasticity refers to the capacity of the subject to give form and be formed; it is a change in form (or identity) that preserves shape (subjectivity). For Malabou, reading Hegel, the subject has an anticipatory structure: the subject is at once sure of what is coming without knowing what is coming. It can see events unfolding, and intervene in these events, but can only guess at others’ intentions. Subjectivity thus carries the potential to take on any form; the form it takes is determined by its affective relations with the wider world. Affect signals the transpersonal and pre-individual capacity to affect and be affected. The concept of destructive plasticity suggests that this potential also includes the potential to lose form, to live without affective connections – in other words, to live while being indifferent to life. One example of indifferent life is the brain-damaged patient capable of reason but unable to form emotional connections with others because of damage to the emotional brain, particularly the frontal lobe that registers affects. Such patients are unable to read affective cues that signal how their actions are affecting others. They are indifferent to the world around them because they are incapable of being affected by others.

Chapter 2 develops this line of thought by connecting neuroscience with Spinozist philosophy. In Spinoza, Malabou finds definitions of life and death in which life is the ‘harmonious agreement of the movements of the body’, and ‘death occurs when the parts have their own, autonomous movements, thereby disorganising the life of the whole and breaking up its unity’ (31). Destructive plasticity signals this arrhythmic potential, the

potential of the body to change into another body in the same body (34). Chapters 3 and 4 consider ageing and death through engagements with Gilles Deleuze and Sigmund Freud, and Marguerite Duras, respectively. In Chapter 3, Malabou reads ageing as a traumatic event that transforms us into an unknown subject. Ageing as one form of destructive plasticity ‘sculpts while annihilating’ – its effect is like being in the presence of another person (54). In Chapter 4, she uses the asyndetic writing style of Duras to consider ageing before one’s time, or ageing before ageing. This writing style denies connections: there is no cause, no subject and no narrative; instead, asyndetic writing conveys disorder (61). Duras’ style demonstrates how the subject is a product of accidents that have no meaning and come from nowhere. Chapter 5 builds on these themes to argue that while dying is natural, death, as a singular transformative event, is always accidental. On the basis of this claim, Malabou provocatively revises Heidegger’s maxim that we form ourselves in relation to death. She suggests that we prepare for the *event* of death rather than our own finitude: we become indifferent to both life and death. In a striking passage, she argues that brain damaged patients – subjects who are absent from themselves – exhibit what she calls the ‘face of death’. This face of death is the same as our indifference to the death of an other, as in reading an obituary of someone we do not know. Thus, we do not anticipate death, but rather prepare for the indifference of others to our own death (70–2).

In Chapter 6, Malabou differentiates her understanding of destructive plasticity from Freudian notions of negation. For Malabou, destructive plasticity involves a negative possibility, ‘the possibility that makes existence impossible’ (88). She argues that psychoanalysis accounts for the negative possibility through the act of negation: the subject denies the analyst’s suggestions of other possible origins for an affliction. This is a rejection of what one is not, and thus what one could have been. In this case, the negative possibility only exists alongside the analyst’s affirmative possibilities. For Malabou, this indicates a messianic faith at the heart of psychoanalysis, a faith that an alternative origin can be identified which can deliver the subject from her afflictions. Underpinning this faith is the assumption of a stable psyche that retains a trace of all affective encounters; treatment is a matter of correcting affective imbalances so that the subject can recognise the root cause of her condition. In contrast, Malabou asserts that destructive plasticity does not allow the possibility that things could be other than they are. Indeed, destructive plasticity starts from an absolutely disjointed subject, a subject where all traces of the past, and any semblance of cohesion, have disappeared. The negative possibility ‘remains suspended in the post-traumatic form of a subject who misses nothing ... a subjective form that is constituted starting from the absence of the self’ (90).

At first glance, Malabou’s concept of destructive plasticity is far removed from Pelling’s framework for analysing adaptation. However, venturing into ontology helps us critically analyse how resilience theory envisions uncertainty and catastrophe. Destructive plasticity is an ontological condition: life carries with it the possibility of death. An ontology of the accident shows that life is nothing more than a series of harmonisations that always are possibly arrhythmic. The present is saturated with the potential accident, the possibility of the absence of all possibility. In this light, the efforts of resilience approaches to think uncertainty and develop individual and systemic capacities to live with an uncertain future manufacture an artificial form of the accident: the future catastrophe that destabilises existing systemic order. Resilience approaches position the accident in an uncertain future. The accident lies outside the resilient individual or system; it comes from an external stimulus. In essence, resilience thinking offers an ontology of the *future* accident; it renders the accident as a future catastrophe that threatens life as we know it, rather than as an ontological condition that saturates the present. The future accident is an artificial form of destructive plasticity that

enables modern institutions such as science and the state to govern socio-ecological life through ontological insecurity. Its effect is to produce resilient subjects and systems that are indifferent to suffering and insecurity in the present. Resilience inhibits affective connections that might serve as the basis for radical action against the institutional sources of existing suffering and vulnerability. It makes the object of political and ethical practice the capacity of a system to withstand future surprises, rather than the manifold sources of social and ecological insecurity in the present.

On this basis, we can begin to rethink the politics of resilience in a way that both destabilises the modern subject of rights and responsibilities and thinks the future in relation to the present. An ontology of the accident recognises that the subject is an unstable and precarious assemblage of various affective relations with other bodies – an assemblage that is always on the verge of disaggregation. Resilience intervenes in these affective relations to construct an order of fear that re-orientes life in relation to a potentially catastrophic future. In contrast, an ontology of the accident wholly immerses life in the present, it posits life without any guarantees. Rather than foregoing more radical forms of individual and collective action in the name of preserving life as we know it against an uncertain future, it offers an ethical basis for political practice, an openness to affect and being affective. This ethos enables us to see security and vulnerability as emergent products of constitutive affective relations, rather than conditions that can be attained through calculated programmes of governmental invention. Making this ethics the foundation of a politics of resilience directs attention to sources of suffering and insecurity in the present, rather than dedicating energies and resources to warding off future vulnerabilities. The path to more secure and just socio-ecological futures may ironically require us to immerse ourselves in the immediacy of being: in Malabou's terms, in the ontology of the accident.

This essay has explored the possibilities for alternative political imaginaries that might provide the foundation for a radical politics of resilience. The review of Pelling's text demonstrated that this requires thinking power and politics outside the modern subject, for an emphasis on rights on responsibilities makes resilience politics paradoxically dependent on the institutions it seeks to transform. Pushed to its logical conclusions, the core tenets of resilience theory bring us to an uncomfortable realisation: accidents happen, without logic, without meaning. Indeed, Malabou suggests that, 'the history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents which dangerously disfigure the meaning of essence' (91). The challenge for resilience politics is to invent other ways of living with ontological uncertainty than fearing a potentially catastrophic future. To draw on Melinda Cooper, the question is how the current interest in resilience might contribute to radical efforts to 'creatively sabotage ... the future' (129).⁶ Ontological insecurity offers radical politics an opportunity to creatively and subversively utilise modern institutions and styles of reasoning to combat the existing insecurities rather than secure the present order of things against an uncertain future.

Notes on contributor

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⁶ Melinda Cooper, "Pre-empting Emergence: The Biological Turn in the War on Terror," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 4 (2006): 113–35.