# 16
# RESILIENCE
## A right-wingers' ploy?

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It is often said that cities and regions, their populations, and their governance structures increasingly have to respond to major challenges and a vast range of contemporary risks resulting from environmental change, threats to national and international security, and an array of issues associated with international migration and growing global economic turbulence. In the short term, at least in the global North, local communities, cities, and regions have to tackle and mitigate the impact of the global financial and economic crisis. In the medium term, they ought to be equipped to manage the pressures of an ageing and declining population. In the long run, the capacity and systemic capabilities of the critical urban infrastructure in major population centres must be enhanced to cope with potentially cataclysmic consequences of climate change. 'Resilience' is a conceptual framework which purportedly offers its adherents a set of mechanisms to confront these monumental challenges of the modern age.

In this chapter, I discuss the impact of resilience as a popular way of thinking about humans and society at large. It is often argued that the market forces unleashed through the neoliberal globalization reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, combined with growing political turbulence following the global financial crisis of 2008, enhanced a sense of personal and collective insecurity, particularly in the West (Birch and Mykhnenko 2010). Consequently, some critics of the resilience thinking have linked its supposed ascendance with the perceived desire by the major Western governments, international financial institutions (IFIs), and bilateral donors to respond to such major challenges by shifting the burden of responsibility onto individual citizens and local communities. Within this context, I initially set out differing definitions and approaches to the study of resilience. Consequently, I deal with the somewhat 'elastic' quality of resilience as a political agenda. In turn, I address the question of how influential resilience theory really is in terms of its appeal to academic scholarship as well as the public policy-making. In particular, I focus on the failed attempt by the British Conservative Party-led coalition government to enact some of the resilience thinking during its 2010–15 term in office. I conclude this chapter with an overall assessment of resilience, its strengths, and weaknesses.

### Resilience: 'fuzzy', functional, formulaic?

'Resilience means different things to different persons': that was the conclusion of the first ever literature review on resilience conducted in 1947 by J.H. Dillon for *Textile Research Journal*

(Hoffman 1948: 141). In what was most probably the scientific community's first attempt to arrive at an agreed definition, Hoffman noticed a paradox involving resilience: the term could easily describe an inherent property of such different substances as rubber, wool, and quartz. To state that these materials were resilient was 'all at least partially true but, at the same time inconsistent' (ibid.). His suggestion of a generalized concept of resilience as rebound elasticity encompassed the focus on stress, strain, and time, so prevalent in physical sciences. This paradigmatic view of the so-called *engineering resilience* as the ability of a material to absorb and withstand compressive stress without suffering permanent deformation has been shaping both theoretical and empirical investigations of the phenomenon ever since. In 1973, the ecologist C.S. (Buzz) Holling was the first to reject the notion of resilience as a 'bounce back' from a shock by developing the so-called *ecological perspective* on resilience, defining it as 'shock absorption' or 'stress resistance'. Holling's research has framed the debates on resilience in ecology and environmental sciences, spilling over into business and economics, public administration, and other social sciences (see Table 16.1). In the early 2000s, psychologists, mental health practitioners, and early education professionals (Folke 2006) proposed a new – social-evolutionary – reading of resilience as 'positive adaptability'. A 'bounce forward' is the metaphor used in describing *evolutionary resilience* as a transformation and attainment of 'good outcomes' under adversity (see Table 16.1). Nevertheless, 65 years after Hoffman's seminal paper in materials science, a fresh review of the literature on the topic declared that 'resilience, we now know, has no agreed definition and is many things', with the only constant in all the elaborate definitions being 'a concern with the response to undesirable changes' (Downes *et al*. 2013: 1–2). Thus, resilience continues to be a sufficiently undefined – 'fuzzy' – concept (see Pendall *et al*. 2010).



Markusen (2003: 702) memorably defines fuzzy concepts as 'characterizations lacking conceptual clarity and difficult to operationalize': those which possess 'two or more alternative meanings and thus cannot be reliably identified or applied by different readers or scholars'. A number of representative definitions of resilience collated in Table 16.1 illustrate the 'fuzziness' of the term: contradictory opinions about the term are common not just across different disciplines, but within them. The fundamental ambiguity of defining the concept in physical sciences as elastic resilience (or 'bounce-back-ability'), on the one hand, and shock resistance (or 'perseverance'), on the other hand, was uncovered as early as the 1940s. The new paradox of resilience, identified in the 2000s, involves the nature of changes following a shock to the system: a post-crisis recovery understood as a restoration of normality differs from 'positive adaptation' – a transformative process leading, in the words of Martin and Sunley (2015: 13), to a 'new sustainable path characterized by a fuller and more productive use of… physical, human and environmental resources'. Finally, the fourth reading of resilience, which is popular in business studies and disaster management, puts the emphasis not (just) on recovery, but rather on preparedness and anticipatory adaptability. According to one management guru, 'zero trauma' – a culture of automatic, spontaneous, and reflexive responsiveness to shifting circumstances should become the new ethos of all large organizations, willing to survive (Hamel and Välikangas 2003).

Resilience, thus, emerges as a complex and contradictory multi-disciplinary concept, with multiple meanings. In addition, a large number of fundamental ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ideological conflicts and inconsistences in many readings of resilience have been identified in the literature. Downes *et al*. (2013) provide further ammunition to those critical of applying the resilience thinking in social sciences. Finally, Olsson *et al*. (2015) offer the most devastating critique of resilience theory and its complete incommensurability with social sciences. Having conducted a comprehensive review of all the major work on resilience

*Table 16.1* Representative definitions of resilience across disciplines

| *Research area* | *What is resilience?* | *Source* |
|---|---|---|
| **Engineering and materials science** | 'The capability of a substance to return to its original state at some later time after the removal of a deforming stress... Resiliency is a stress–strain–time property of a material, characterizing the completeness of a recovery from deformation and varying in kind with the modulus of elasticity and the rate of recovery' | Hoffman (1948: 141, 148). |
| | 'The ability to withstand shocks and disturbances and to continue to operate in recognisable form' | Lombardi *et al.* (2012: viii). |
| **Computer science** | 'A large-scale, gracefully degradable system can tolerate element failures while providing continued operations… Network resilience... is defined as the maximum number of node failures that can be sustained while the network remains connected with a probability' | Najjar and Gaudiot (1990: 179). |
| **Ecology and environmental studies** | 'Resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist' | Holling (1973: 17). |
| | 'The capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks' | Walker *et al.* (2004: 5). |
| | 'In the context of communities and settlements, it refers to their ability to not collapse at first sight of oil or food shortages, and to their ability to respond with adaptability to disturbance' | Hopkins (2008: 55). |
| | 'Resilience in our personal lives is about lasting, about making it through crises, about inner strength and strong physical constitution... Resilience can be applied to cities. They too need to last, to respond to crises and adapt in a way that may cause them to change and grow differently; cities require an inner strength, a resolve, as well as a strong physical infrastructure and built environment' | Newman *et al.* (2009: 1). |
| | 'Community resilience [is] our capacity to both mitigate and adapt to the disruptive implications of climate change, peak oil, and ecosystem decline' | Lewis and Conaty (2012: 19). |
| | 'The ability to absorb disturbances, to be changed and then to re-organise and still have the same identity (retain the same basic structure and ways of functioning)' | Resilience Alliance (2002). |
| **Psychology; medicine and dentistry** | 'A process whereby people bounce back from adversity and go on with their lives' | Dyer and McGuiness (1996: 276). |
| | 'A dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' | Luthar *et al.* (2000: 543). |
| | 'Reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences' | Rutter (2012: 336). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Business and economics** | 'Think of the boxer who has been floored in the ring. A 'knock-out' may be ignored, since it very rarely happens outside the fable of Atlantis that a whole civilization is completely wiped out. The boxer has a certain resiliency which enables him to resume after a shorter or longer time which is determined partly by his physique and determination, partly by the amount of punishment he has already received. In a somewhat similar way there is what may be called economic resiliency which after a crisis endeavours to recover from the series of shocks which industry and commerce have experienced' | Scott (1930: 291). |
| | 'Strategic resilience is not... about rebounding from a setback. It's about continuously anticipating and adjusting to deep, secular trends that can permanently impair the earning power of a core business. It's about having the capacity to change before the case for change becomes desperately obvious' | Hamel and Välikangas (2003: 53–4). |
| | 'The ability of an economy to (i) recover quickly from harmful external economic shocks; and (ii) withstand the effect of such shocks' | Briguglio *et al*. (2010,:16). |
| | 'The ability to transform regional outcomes in the face of a challenge' | Chapple and Lester (2010: 86). |
| | 'The region's ability to experience positive economic success that is socially inclusive, works within environmental limits and which can ride global economic punches' | Bristow (2010b, 153). |
| | 'The capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances' | Zolli and Healy (2012: 7). |
| | 'The capacity of a regional or local economy to withstand or recover from market, competitive and environmental shocks to its developmental growth path, if necessary by undergoing adaptive changes to its economic structures and its social and institutional arrangements, so as to maintain or restore its previous developmental path, or transit to a new sustainable path characterized by a fuller and more productive use of its physical, human and environmental resources' | Martin and Sunley (2015: 13). |
| **Public administration; social work** | 'A capacity to address short-term problems in ways that generate long-term success' | MacArthur Foundation (2007: 2) |
| | 'The capacity to adapt and to thrive in the face of challenge' | World Resources Institute (2008: ix). |
| | 'The ability to adapt to changing conditions and prepare for, withstand, and rapidly recover from disruption' | Obama (2010: 18). |

*(Continued)*

*Table 16.1* Representative definitions of resilience across disciplines (*Continued*)

| *Research area* | *What is resilience?* | *Source* |
|---|---|---|
| | 'Communities and individuals harnessing local resources and expertise to help themselves in an emergency, in a way that complements the response of the emergency services' | Cabinet Office (2011: 4). |
| | 'The ability of individuals, organizations, systems, and communities to bounce back more strongly from stresses and shocks. Resilience means creating diversity and redundancy in our systems and rewiring their interconnections, which enables their functioning even when individual parts fail' | NYS 2100 (2013: 7). |
| | 'Ability of the community, services, area or infrastructure to detect, prevent, and, if necessary to withstand, handle and recover from disruptive challenges' | Cabinet Office (2013: 66). |
| | 'Resilience is more than what's known as bouncebackability. It includes the ability to self-organise, to maintain balance, and to respond to change... Caricatured as getting volunteers to do the jobs we were once paid for, it really touches on deeper issues of neighbourliness and community, turning the typical reaction to a crisis or injustice of "something must be done" to "we must do something". A socially resilient community doesn't pass the buck' | Dobson (2011). |
| **Other social sciences** | 'Social resilience is defined as the ability of communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure' | Adger (2000: 361). |
| | 'Urban resilience implies a physical capacity to bounce back from a significant obstacle, much like a rubber ball dropped on the pavement. But cities are not rubber balls, nor is a disaster like an asphalt plane, from which a rebound can be definitely predicted by a set of mathematical equations' | Vale and Campanella (2005: 335). |
| | 'A process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance… Resilience occurs when resources are sufficiently robust, redundant, or rapid to buffer or counteract the effects of the stressor such that a return to functioning, adapted to the altered environment occurs. For human individuals and communities this adaptation is manifest in wellness' | Norris *et al.* (2008: 130). |
| | 'Rather than viewing resilience as bouncing back to an original state following the external "shock", the term should be seen in terms of bouncing forward, reacting to crises by changing to a new state that is more sustainable in the current environment' | Davoudi *et al.* (2012: 309). |

published recently in the top ten natural and social sciences journals, they discovered five major points of contention in the scientific application of resilience. First, they stress *system ontology*: although the notion of 'system' is known in social sciences, it is not as essential, conventional or indispensable to them as it is to resilience theory. Indeed, as Downes *et al.* (2013: 5) convincingly demonstrate, 85 per cent of all social science studies of resilience are conducted at the level of individuals or families, not social systems. Second, the critics of the usage of resilience in social sciences emphasize the problem of system boundary: although systems are indispensable to resilience thinking, their boundaries can often be very difficult to demarcate spatially, temporally, or structurally (Olsson *et al.* 2015: 3–4; Martin and Sunley 2015). The third criticism of resilience theory lies in its rather formulaic notions of equilibria, thresholds, and feedback mechanisms. Social systems are driven by human agency at least to the same degree as by structural forces; thus, any systemic 'feedback' is subject to human interpretation and power relations. Fourth, the resilience thinking assumes self-organization of the systems understood in complexity theory as a natural propensity. By contrast, in social sciences self-organization refers to a messy societal reaction to power asymmetries and structural inequality, often resulting in the formation of new social movements (Olsson *et al.* 2015: 5). The fifth and final tension between the social and natural sciences' usage of resilience lies in the understanding of function and functionalism – a point raised by many.

*Panarchy* – a term devised by Gunderson and Holling (2002) to describe evolving hierarchical systems with many interconnected components – is by far the most significant formalized representation of a functioning ecological-social system. According to the book's blurb:



> Panarchy is the structure in which systems, including those of nature (e.g., forests) and of humans (e.g., capitalism), as well as combined human-natural systems (e.g., institutions that govern natural resource use such as the Forest Service), are interlinked in continual adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring, and renewal. These transformational cycles take place at scales ranging from a drop of water to the biosphere, over periods from days to geologic epochs. By understanding these cycles and their scales, researchers can identify the points at which a system is capable of accepting positive change, and can use those leverage points to foster resilience and sustainability within the system.
>
> *(Island Press 2012)*

Graphically, the panarchy model is represented by a lemniscate (i.e. sideways figure 8 sign), mimicking the mathematical symbol of infinity. According to some ecologists, the theory of the adaptive cycle, should only be treated as 'a useful metaphor and not as a testable hypothesis' (Carpenter *et al.* 2001: 766). Yet, given its grand design and purpose of describing the dynamics of how any ecological system, economic system, or a political system successively gives way to another and gets transformed (Olsson *et al.* 2015: 5), it is not hard to imagine the model to be taken literally as guidance to future developments. Indeed, a number of social scientists claim the panarchy model – with its four *consequential* and *circular* phases of rapid growth and exploitation, conservation, collapse or release (i.e. 'creative destruction'), and renewal or re-organization – can be used as a set of empirically testable propositions. 'The adaptive cycle model applies well to regions,' argue Pendall *et al.* (2010: 77; cf., Simmie and Martin 2010). Nevertheless, others contend that because of its structural functionalism resilience is incommensurable between the natural and social sciences, whereas core concepts and theories in the latter – 'such as agency, conflict, knowledge, and power – are absent from resilience theory' (Olsson *et al.* 2015: 9). In terms of politics, Martin and Sunley (2015: 8) stress that resilience as a concept can be 'easily

captured by neoliberal ideology, to prioritize the status quo, and importance of self-reliance, flexibility and role of "self-correcting" market adjustments'.

## Elastic politics of resilience: peak oil, climate change, and neoliberalism

Many of the representative definitions of resilience collated in Table 16.1 and discussed in similar reviews elsewhere (e.g., Manyena 2006; Brand and Jax 2007; Norris *et al.* 2008; Downes *et al.* 2013) invariably differ in terms of coherence, conciseness, and precision. However, the most striking variance may be observed in the philosophical predisposition to resilience. Positivism reigns supreme in physical and natural sciences, medical and mental health research, while normative descriptions of resilience are not uncommon in ecology, environmental studies, and geography, and prevail in business and economics, public administration, and other social sciences. Yet it is the application of the engineering or 'bouncing back' meaning of resilience to social phenomena that has stirred up the biggest controversy. With its appeal to the inherent individual attributes of self-reliance, self-help, and self-organization, the concept of resilience appears vulnerable to abuse by the 'common sense' vulgarity of populist ideologies. To some critics, resilience is an essentially Conservative idea, squarely aimed at the maintenance and privileging of existing social relations of global capitalism in the face of externally derived disorder (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013: 258). Indeed, most frequently, the resilience thinking is associated with neoliberalism and Conservative right-wing politics. Walker and Cooper (2011: 144) go further to claim that the success of the panarchy model of adaptive cycle ought to be explained by 'its intuitive ideological fit with a neoliberal philosophy of complex adaptive system… of Friedrich Hayek'. They argue that:



> The emerging consensus on resilient growth… both reiterates and modifies the Darwinian law of natural selection. Relying as it does on the non-equilibrium dynamics of complex systems theory, what the resilience perspective demands is not so much progressive adaptation to a continually reinvented norm as permanent adaptability to extremes of turbulence.
>
> *(Ibid.: 156)*



The number of warnings given by academics to 'watch out' for resilience is rather remarkable (e.g. Martin and Sunley 2015: 8; Olsson *et al.* 2015: 6; Pike *et al.* 2010: 66). Davoudi *et al.* (2012: 331–2) were among the first to emphasize 'the slippery slope to a neoliberal discourse of "self-reliance",' claiming that the resilience theory may be used to 'demonise those people or places who are deemed to be "just not resilient enough"', with vulnerable communities left to fend for themselves.

And yet, I would argue that the main feature of the politics of resilience seems to be its malleability: resilience is an elastic concept, politically. As mentioned by MacKinnon and Derickson (2013: 255), resilience is becoming a popular concept among oppositional groups, green campaigners, anti-capitalist activists, and various anarchist-autonomist movements. Hopkins's *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (2008); Newman, Beatley, and Boyer's *Resilient Cities: Responding to Peak Oil and Climate Change* (2009); Lewis and Conaty's *The Resilience Imperative: Cooperative Transitions to a Steady-State Economy* (2012) – all these accessible (guide)books to a 'better future' are firmly rooted in the concept of resilience as positive adaptability to the disruptive implications of climate change, 'peak oil', and ecosystem decline. Indeed, many advocates of 'green', 'post-carbon', 'non-capitalist' development trajectories have fully adopted resilience as their main argument against the free trade, globalization, and

neoliberalism (however defined). Some even commend the controversial 'self-reliance' aspect of resilience, advocating more 'closure' and 'self-containment' in the process of building resilient and self-sufficient local and regional economies (Hudson 2010). Devotees of the communitarian believes also cherish autonomy and praise the self-organization of local communities. As one enthusiastic newspaper reporter puts it, 'Ultimately, a resilient city has to be one in which, in a crisis, people come onto the streets to help one another, not to riot' (Evans 2014: n.p.).

## Resilience: an app(e)aling proposition

So far this chapter has established that resilience is a multifaceted concept: it is 'fuzzy' in some interpretations; it could be prescriptively formulaic in many adaptations; and it is structurally functionalist to the core. I have also shown how malleable and 'stretchy' resilience can be in its ideological interpretations, appearing as a dangerously reactionary notion to some, and progressively emancipatory in everyday practice to others. The most obvious set of questions to pose here is how influential resilience really is? Are academic scholars increasingly turning to resilience as a research agenda? Is resilience replacing any other long-established areas of scientific interest? For instance, has sustainable development or competitiveness actually lost any following, as predicted earlier (see Bristow 2010b; Davoudi *et al.* 2012)? Furthermore, is resilience public policy relevant? If so, does resilience theory supply practical answers to policy-makers and practitioners responding to acute exogenous shocks and/or chronic, long-term crises – the so-called slow burns?

First, this section deals with *academic* studies of resilience. For the bibliometric analysis, I have used the new Thomson Reuters Web of Science™, as the world's largest collection of scholarly research and citation data. In particular, the Web of Science core collection of Science and Social Sciences Citation Indices was used to search for journal articles and conference proceedings papers published in English between 1 January 1900 and 15 June 2015, with the following terms and Boolean combinations: (1) topic: (resilienc*); (2) topic: (sustainability or 'sustainable development'); and (3) topic: (competitiveness). The search produced a list of 24,146 publications on 'resilience'/'resiliency', with the first two articles appearing in 1913. 'Sustainability'/'sustainable development' was the most popular topic among the three, though, with 51,425 records; 'sustainability' covered 74 per cent of the total aggregate, first appearing as a scientific research topic in 1974. The first academic paper on 'competitiveness' appeared fourteen years earlier; nevertheless, the topic only generated 13,876 publications within the period concerned.



Figure 16.1 shows the number of papers published each year on these three topics. Looking at the trends, it seems possible to identify certain trigger events in the popularity trajectories of sustainability, resilience, and competitiveness, respectively. For instance, the role of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, was paramount in institutionalizing sustainable development as the key idea in the international debate on development, while the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, ten years later, served as yet another mega-event promoting the concept. At the same time, one has to mention that the study of sustainability has undoubtedly benefited from the ever increasing planetary environmental hazards such as global warming and climate change – the topics which generated well over 91,000 articles so far.

Unlike sustainability or competitiveness, resilience is a much more multi-dimensional and trans-disciplinary concept: its rise may be accounted for by very different occurrences. Having being studied for over 100 years, resilience became really popular only in the early 1990s, following a couple of influential papers on childhood development and psychopathology (including Masten *et al.* 1990; Werner 2000; Garmezy 1991; Luthar 1991). The terrorist attacks

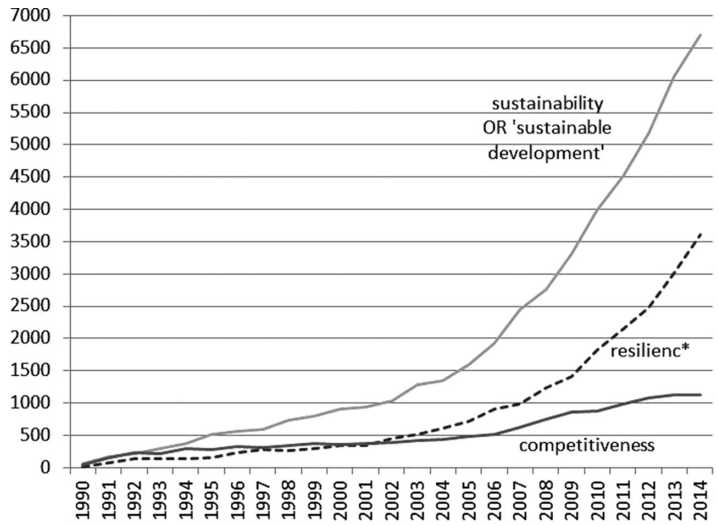


*Figure 16.1* Number of articles and proceedings papers published annually on the topics of resilience, sustainable development, and competitiveness

of 11 September 2001 upon the USA, the publication of Gunderson and Holling's *Panarchy* in early 2002, and Hurricane Katrina, that hit the southern Gulf of Mexico states in August 2005, all could be considered catalysts for resilience research. The global financial crisis of 2007–8 and Hurricane Sandy in November 2012 provided further impetus. The picture emerging from Figure 16.1 is that resilience is hardly a match for sustainable development as a popular academic research topic; however, it has long surpassed neoliberal competitiveness in terms of popularity – a positive achievement in itself (see Bristow 2010a, 2010b).



The total number of articles published on the three topics between 1900 and 2015 should be handled with caution, however. In a random selection study of 6,548 social science and ecological publications on resilience, Downes *et al.* (2013) found that 40.6 per cent of the entries had to be excluded as irrelevant to the topic. To unpack some of these bibliometric data, Figure 16.2 provides a breakdown of the resilience literature by disciplinary research areas involved (149 in total); publication duplicates were removed from the total count. Environmental sciences, ecology, water sciences, conservation, and the related natural sciences account for almost a half of all research on resilience, with almost a third covered by psychology, psychiatry, and other medical and human health-related sciences; another fifth of all the resilience literature was published in engineering, technology, and materials sciences. By the mid-2015, the share of social sciences in resilience research had only reached 10 per cent.

I have already discussed the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ideological reasons for the relative unattractiveness of resilience thinking to social sciences (for a comprehensive review, see Olsson *et al.* 2015). The only area of social sciences, where resilience has generated some interest, includes business and management studies, economics, and the related disciplines. Indeed, 'economic resiliency' was the title of the eighth earliest paper ever published on the general theme (Scott 1930). Despite a lot of interest, however, the scholars of business, economics, and economic geography have not been able to agree on a common definition, with some applying the conservative engineering notion of resilience as a 'bounce back', while others are keen on exploring resilience as transformational 'adaptability with better outcomes'.

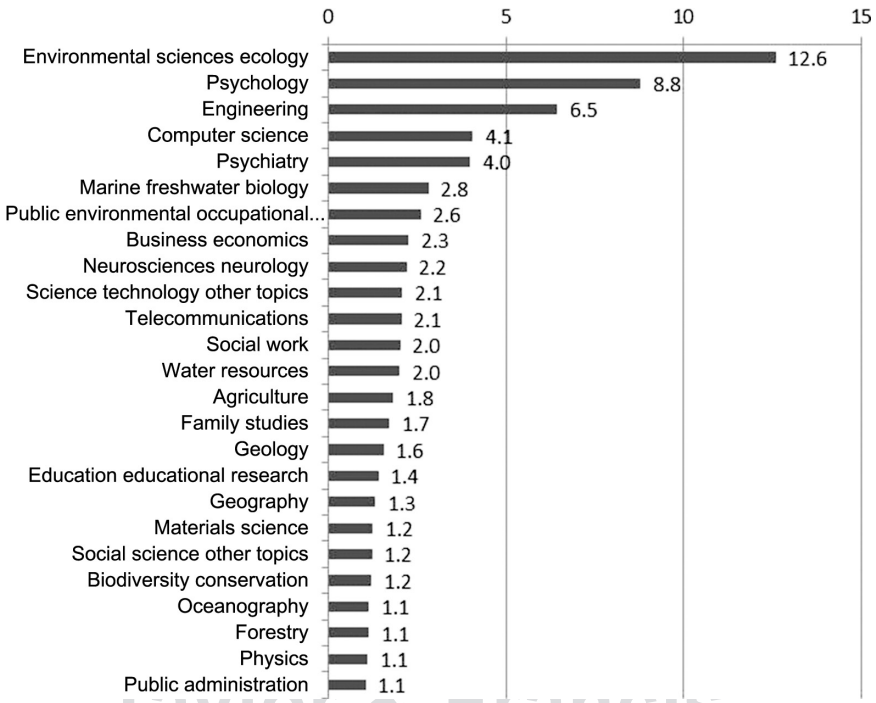


*Figure 16.2* Articles and proceedings papers published on resilience



## The 'big society': not bouncing back

By far the most contentious application of resilience theory, has been in the field of *public administration* and *public policy*. To many critics, the particularly controversial development relates to the emphasis put by the major Western governments, IFIs, and bilateral donors, on the ability of local communities and individuals – both in the rich and poor countries – to 'help themselves' and 'thrive in the face of challenge' (see Table 16.1). As Walker and Copper argue:

> This is a tacit recognition that 'development' for the post-colonial poor now consists not in achieving First World standards of urban affluence but in surviving – preferably on the land instead of in slums – the after-effects of industrial modernization, the Green Revolution and the financial conditions imposed under the Washington Consensus.
>
> *(2011: 155)*

In the UK, a lot has been made of the entry into the official *Civil Protection Lexicon* in 2009 of 'resilience', seemingly putting the onus of civil contingencies response on local communities and areas themselves (Cabinet Office 2011, 2013). The term was introduced into the public domain in a package of civil service-related terms and definitions in preparation for the London 2012 Olympic Games. Sporadically, the British government returns to resilience in the context of transport and housing infrastructure damage caused by storms and flooding affecting the UK (Cameron 2014; BBC 2015). Similarly, in the USA, the term was very slow to catch on: resilience did not feature prominently, if at all, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on

New York or post-Hurricane Katrina: neither the 2002 nor 2006 National Security Strategy signed by President Bush mentioned resilience once. It was only the 2010 National Security Strategy signed by President Obama that endorsed resilience, instructing the US Department of Homeland Security to operationalize the concept. Yet, as the Department openly admitted, 2010 was spent discussing the meaning of resilience, before a decision was taken to 'bucket it' within the rubric of 'adapting to changing conditions', 'withstanding disruptions', and 'ensuring rapid recovery' (DHS 2015).

The New York State 2100 Commission report on *Recommendations to Improve the Strength and Resilience of the Empire State's Infrastructure* in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (NYS 2100, 2013), and the City of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's report on *A Stronger, More Resilient New York* (2013) have gone much further to provide a comprehensive list of actionable recommendations for: (1) rebuilding the infrastructure and buildings in both the city and the region; (2) rolling out a series of 'forward-looking resiliency' initiatives aimed at upgrading the area's costal defences, mechanical and electrical systems, sewers, and green infrastructure floodwalls; and (3) making the city's power, liquid fuels, telecommunications, transportation, water and wastewater, healthcare, and other networks 'climate-change ready'. A number of high-profile charity-funded civil society and academic research initiatives, including the Rockefeller Foundation's $100 million *100 Resilient Cities* programme (100RC 2015), and the MacArthur Foundation's *Building Resilient Regions* network at the University of California Berkeley (BRR 2015), have managed to expand the public policy debates on resilience from disaster management, mitigation, and forward planning, into the spheres of the urban and regional economy, public administration, social policy, and social work. The often-heard criticism of such resilience-building initiatives is that they instil a sense of confidence in finding local technocratic solutions to fundamentally global problems like climate change. While no one would deny the need for New York (or any other global city) to prepare for and bounce back from a human-made disaster, the scale of the environmental challenge facing the city travels far beyond the Empire State's boundary, and the nature of the solution lies in the political sphere.



To investigate the link between resilience and neoliberal policy-making further, I have analysed all 331 publication records on resilience (including articles, book reviews, proceedings papers, and book chapters) which appeared in English between 1900 and 2015 in the following disciplines: Law, Public Administration, Philosophy, Planning Development, Urban Studies, and Political Science. Figure 16.3 identifies the most popular policy-relevant themes developed under the heading of resilience by presenting a 'word cloud' of these titles, with the words 'urban', 'community', 'climate', 'change', 'social', 'building', 'disaster', 'development', 'cities', and 'planning' occupying most of the space.

Overall, this analysis does not seem to support the fear expressed by many scholars and commentators of resilience as some sort of a Trojan horse of neoliberals used to advance their causes. Note the absence of 'public sector' and 'reform' in Figure 16.3. And yet, arguably, it is in the most recent public policy development in the UK that we have witnessed the most far-reaching attempt to utilize the communitarian ideas of resilience through self-organization, self-help, and self-reliance, to transform the entire nation. The Big Society programme was launched by Prime Minister David Cameron on 18 May 2010, six days after the coalition agreement was reached between the British Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties to form a government. 'Big society' was the Prime Minister's core idea, ostensibly aimed at giving 'citizens, communities and local government the power they need to come together and solve the problems they face' (Cabinet Office 2010; Cabinet Office 2010). The term was coined by Jesse Norman, a newly-elected Conservative Member of Parliament for a rural constituency in the south-east of England. In his book on the topic, Norman (2010) boldly proclaimed the 'big society' to be 'the


*Figure 16.3* A Word Cloud of publications with the title on Resilien* (including resilience, resiliency, resilient)



most exciting new idea' to 'redefine British politics for a generation'. According to one commentator, however, the 'big society' was the Conservative Party's vaguely concealed attempt to reconcile the contradiction between reducing government spending and maintaining public welfare:

> So whilst Labour's vision of state market relations was beset by the contradiction of increasing expenditure but failing to increase revenue, the Conservatives focused their response around the desire aiming to reduce the deficit rapidly through reducing the role of the state. The Conservative leadership appealed to the Thatcherite desire for small government and an expanded private sector role. Yet, unlike Thatcher the Conservatives were beset by their own contradiction; a commitment to key elements of welfarism in health and welfare. Their attempt to square this circle was based on the notion of the big society but what is yet to be seen is whether a big society can replace the welfare functions of the public sector whilst maintaining quality of service and social justice.
>
> *(Smith 2010: 832)*

The government tried to legitimize the 'big society' as the way to end 'the unhappy social and economic effects of our recent over-reliance on the state' and to 'make the state better… leaner, stronger, and more resilient in responding to shocks' (Norman 2010: 230; cf. Dobson 2011). Yet, six months following the launch of the programme, the 'big society' was still seen as 'waffly, unmarketable and disliked by many Tories' (Glover 2010; cf. Pattie and Johnston 2011).

The ruling party members were not the only intellectual sceptical voices: following the rush of academic interest initially, the 'big society' only generated 113 academic papers between 2010 and 2015. Figure 16.4 shows a steep decline in publications on the theme through the course of the 2010–15 Conservative-led government. The 'most exiting idea for a generation'

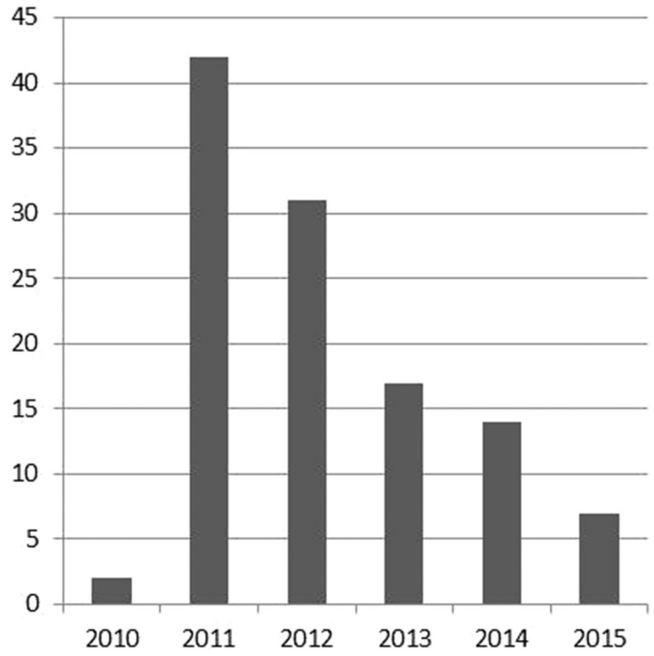


*Figure 16.4* Papers published annually in English on the topic of 'big society'



lasted just four and a half years. According to an independent investigation, on 27 November 2014, David Cameron's flagship Big Society Network collapsed in debt, having spent *at least* £2.5 million of government funding with no reported records of charitable activity behind. The number of applications received by the network for local community improvement projects (worth £830,000) reached 0.006 per cent of its target: just 64 groups signed up out of the million initially predicted. The network was subsequently investigated for misused funding and inappropriate payments to its directors (Wright 2014); it left no electronic trace: the network's website http://thebigsociety.co.uk was closed down and made unavailable.

## Resilience: what is it good for?

This chapter concludes with a summary assessment of the perceived, potential, and actual merits, flaws, and dangers of the resilience thinking. To make this statement meaningful, I have to limit the discussion to social sciences (arts, and humanities), given that the concept of resilience is technically indispensable to engineering, physical, and natural sciences. One of the perceived merits of resilience is a universal and unifying nature of the concept, which could transcend disciplinary boundaries and achieve synergies between natural and social sciences. Another perceived merit of the resilience thinking is the opportunity to create a theory of change, which could encompass the sudden shocks to the system as well as the 'slow burns', thus, expanding the predictive power of social sciences. Potentially, resilience theory could provide an analytical framework for studying complex socio-ecological systems and bringing the natural and human-made environment firmly back into the social science research – an urgent necessity in the context of cataclysmic climate change. Moreover, resilience theory – with its insistence on the value of redundant capacities for shock absorption and stress resistance – has the progressive

potential to be realized by local community activists, politicians, and decision-makers in advocating local empowerment and lobbying for the provision of additional resources of all sorts. The actual merits of the resilience thinking we have observed so far include: (1) the steady process of resilience displacing competitiveness as one of the key categories in applied economic research; (2) an increase in our understanding of how local communities and regional economies respond to shocks and disturbances, what determines that response, and how 'better outcomes' can be ensured, interpreted, and narrated; (3) the enhanced institutional capacity and a higher degree of preparedness to disasters across many public sector organizations and private firms. A lot of research illustrates how politically charged, symbolic, and necessary the narrative of resilience has always been for society to build anew in the wake of disaster (Vale and Campanella 2005). The fact that resilience thinking has been adopted by various green socialists, anti-capitalist environmentalists, 'slow town' and 'zero carbon' transition movements indicates its potential for progressive change.

The major actual flaws of resilience theory as applied in social sciences concern the system ontology, the system boundary, structural functionalism of the resilience thinking. Furthermore, the overall technocratic and naturalizing tendencies of resilience theory may cloud one's thinking by providing false hopes and generating erroneous forecasts (e.g. on climate change mitigation). In addition, power, interests, conflicts, and human passions are all perceived to be absent from the social science-related resilience theory. There is some evidence of resilience being pushed as an apolitical, even post-political, agenda, especially in US policy circles, where the concept is 'imbued with American values of heroic individualism, self-reliance', and self-help 'in the face of adversity (Pike *et al.* 2010: 66). Nevertheless, as this chapter has illustrated, the perceived danger of resilience theory to be (ab)used by reactionary political forces and neoliberal ideologues world-wide is highly exaggerated. The potential for passing the buck for dealing with economic crises or environmental disasters to the vulnerable communities themselves *does* exist. However, the ideas of the 'invisible hand', *laissez faire*, and 'rugged individualism' – most often invoked by neoliberals and free-marketeers of all sorts – predate the resilience thinking by two centuries. In reality, even as simplistic a dichotomy as 'the big society versus the big government' has failed to provide the British Tories with a constructive narrative for their austerity politics. When the high complexity of resilience theory meets the long-established anti-intellectualism of the populist Conservative Right, it would appear extremely unlikely that resilience could gain much traction with the politicians, busy protecting the power of monopoly-finance capital.



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