EXCHANGE

Pre-emptive strike

A response to 'Resisting resilience'

As the editor of the new journal *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, published by Taylor & Francis, I am pleased to have a chance to respond to the 'pre-emptive strike' launched against the journal as a neoliberal 'corporate-cum-academic dream' in Mark Neocleous's piece 'Resisting Resilience' (RP 178).

First, it seems to be self-defeating to argue that the primacy of resilience in policy understandings means that we shouldn't devote more academic attention to its study. Neocleous argues, quite correctly, that the concept of resilience has risen to a central position in the way both the reality of problems and the policy-making responses to them are presented across diverse fields from social welfare through to global warming and international security and development. If resilience is able to articulate understandings in various policy areas through a shared discourse, or a cohered ideological representation, this sounds very much like it should be a vital area for research.

Second, it seems rather fatuous to argue that a 'pre-emptive strike' on a journal on resilience is somehow resisting the dominance of resilience itself as a conceptual framework. In fact, if anything, resilience is arguably so dominant precisely because critical academia has ignored addressing it. I imagine Neocleous would have advised Karl Marx not to write *Capital* or engage in a discussion of how bourgeois economic theory, as a dominant ideology, operated to mystify social relations. Maybe it would be better if all critical journals publicly labelled themselves as 'radical' or 'critical' so critical academics knew what to read? Neocleous suggests that we should found a journal on resistance, which would, presumably, strengthen resistance. But not all work on resistance serves the forces of progress and not all work on resilience those of reaction. Critique would be entirely marginalized if critical theorists just concerned themselves with theorizing resistance and left dominant ideological discourses to look after themselves.

Third, I think that Neocleous, rather than 'resisting resilience', fails to take this dominant framing seriously. Is radical critique really achieved just through asserting that resilience is an expression of neoliberalism, operating to serve the needs of capital and the state? Even if this were true, critical theorists should still be interested in understanding how the conceptual packaging of resilience is able to do this or why this shift should have taken place so rapidly over the last decade, when neoliberalism was apparently doing very well without it before. Of course, one could argue that resilience does nothing and is just a fad or a 'buzz-word', but then 'resisting resilience' would not be necessary and we might just as well keep on going with whatever we do (or fail to do) to resist neoliberalism itself.

Personally, I am uneasy about assimilating the understanding of resilience to the critique of neoliberalism and uncertain about defining resilience in the narrow terms of preparing for or surviving future disaster. In my reading, resilience works in a much broader way, and perhaps Neocleous is focusing a

little too much on security discourses (where disaster has always been a key trope). I agree that resilience, as an overarching discourse, may well 'come to form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism'. However, a focus on the need to understand the embedded nature of cognitive frameworks, the experiential or practice-based context, crucial for the performance or reproduction of hegemonic consensus, and the rejection of abstract universals – such as 'contemporary capitalism' – alleged to be operating below or beneath the consciousness of actors, can hardly be restricted to the work of neoliberal ideologues or the theorists of new institutional economics. Equally, the concept is continually evolving, initially suggesting that vulnerabilities are a problem that need to be addressed through adaptation to market rationalities, but more recently that vulnerabilities are an ontological product of complexity which should be welcomed and accepted, so that it is the qualities of adaptivity which need to be inculcated in the knowledge that market 'rationality' is, in fact, a product of a complex, adaptive process of emergent causality that, rather than standing external to us, reflects our everyday choices and activities.

In short, there are many ways of understanding resilience in terms of 'new technologies of the self'. Some argue that the recognition of our embeddedness in relations of attachment, both direct and indirect, mean that technologies of the self are the road to changing or transforming the societies in which we live. Others argue merely that these technologies allow us to cope with or adapt to the world in the same way as therapeutic solutions. Neocleous underestimates the issue of resilience by understanding it purely in terms of adaptation to external risks. Perhaps the real problem of resilience is posed by its promise of transformative solutions, posed in terms of capability- or capacity-building individuals and communities. Such programmes can be seen across the board, from Amartya Sen's understanding of 'Development as Freedom' – starting from individual agential capacities – to the recent UK all-party group of MPs and peers' report arguing for the teaching of resilience in schools. (Incidentally, this report was sponsored by the Open University; demonstrating that resilience policy advocacy is not limited to defence colleges such as Cranfield.) To my mind, critical theorists have been far too slow in addressing resilience, letting the policy-advocates and government think-tanks monopolize the area. I think we should take Neocleous's call for the resistance of resilience seriously, but this means engaging with the world, not retreating from it. Rather than relying upon old certitudes, the dominance of resilience thinking should be a wake-up call to sharpen our critical armoury.

David Chandler

A reply

David Chandler has taken the opportunity of a response to try to correct my reading of resilience, but the substance of his concern is obviously to defend the launch of a new journal of which he is editor. To suggest that critical academia has ignored the concept is plain false, as Chandler well knows – not only has he written about resilience critically himself, but one of his co-editors of the new journal has already denounced the concept as 'disastrous' and 'politically debased'. My point is that a genuinely critical argument about such a concept does not warrant establishing a journal with that name.

Chandler suggests that my call to resist resilience should be taken seriously, yet implies that I am 'retreating' from the world rather than 'engaging' with it. This is a smart argument: *my* call to resist resilience means I am retreating from the world, but *his* call to resist resilience requires setting up a new journal called *Resilience*. Moreover, his concern that we 'sharpen our critical armoury' is also precisely my point: the critical armoury of socialist and feminist thought will be blunted, not sharpened, by the concept of resilience.

For all Chandler's talk of 'critique' being marginalized if we don't set up a journal with that title, his real concern appears to be a the far less critical need to 'study' and 'understand' resilience so that the policy-advocates and government think-tanks do not monopolize the area. In other words, the issue is not so much a desire to develop a genuine critique of resilience but more of a desire that our work has an 'impact' on the mainstream political agenda. But, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, from the standpoint of a genuinely critical theory any claim to immediate political impact not only turns out to be a bluff, but will also end up being exposed as the attempt to liquidate an almost hopeless situation by a series of completely hopeless manoeuvres, ending up resembling nothing so much as Baron Munchhausen's claim that he pulled himself out of a swamp by his own hair.

Mark Neocleous