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The promise of security: resilience, surprise and epistemic politics

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Over the past decade, resilience has become a quasi-universal answer to problems of security and governance, from climate change to children's education, from indigenous history to disaster response, and from development to terrorism. This article places the proliferation of resilience in relation to the earlier proliferation of security discourse and practice. Why resilience today? It answers this question by unpacking the epistemic regimes that underpin the move to resilience. Rather than tracing the differences between protection, prevention, pre-emption and resilience, the article argues that the political transformation that resilience entails becomes explicit in relation to the *promise* of security. Although the language of 'promise' and 'promising' has been widely used in relation to security, its political implications have remained unexplored. Underpinned by an epistemology of surprising events, resilience discourses reconfigure the promise of security. Through an empirical engagement with the turn to resilience in DFID's humanitarian policy in the UK and a theoretical reconsideration of Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of the promise, I offer a critical vantage point on the transformation that resilience portends for our contemporary condition.

Keywords: security; resilience; protection; promise; Hannah Arendt; surprise

Introduction

Resilience of big water basins, children's resilience, refugees' resilience, resilience of spirit, national resilience, community resilience, resilience of democracy, resilience linguistics, emotional resilience, seismic resilience, resilience of illegal drug markets, etc. – all these forms of resilience are of very recent extraction. They populate the pages of numerous academic journals. Yet, just a few decades ago, resilience was quasi-absent from academic debates. In the 1970s, C.S. Holling's 'Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems' and Jerome Kagan's 'Resilience in Cognitive Development' appeared to be the only significant contributions, which lacked any substantial follow-up for quite some time. Hardly any other articles mentioned resilience at the time.¹

Over the past decade in particular, resilience has become a quasi-universal answer to problems of governance, from climate change to children's education, from indigenous history to disaster response, and from development to terrorism. The proliferation of resilience is so extensive that a critic talks about the 'gospel of resilience'.² Overviews of the resilience literature are now rife in many disciplines, from environmental studies and

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¹ C.S. Holling, "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4, no. 1 (1973): 1–23; Jerome Kagan, "Resilience in Cognitive Development," *Ethos* 3, no. 2 (1975).

² Paul Nadasdy, "Adaptive Co-Management and the Gospel of Resilience," in *Adaptive Co-Management: Collaboration, Learning, and Multi-Level Governance*, ed. D.R. Armitage (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 208–27.

geography to psychology, and from economics to organisational studies and planning.³ The concept of resilience has been subjected to numerous discussions, critiques, modifications and extensions. From the extension of resilience to socio-ecological systems⁴ and the imbrication of ecology and psychology,⁵ to the critique of the absence of interest in power relations and social transformation,⁶ the use of natural metaphors in capture social dynamics and the lack of attention to inequalities, structures and conditions of possibility of transformation,⁷ resilience has been dissected and either pronounced a 'dead end' or a 'bridging concept' for new research.⁸ Despite the criticisms adduced to the concept, resilience has proved increasingly amenable to reframing and thus applicable to many disciplines and domains of social life. Its ambiguity and elasticity have made it particularly apt for deployment across many domains and problems of (neoliberal) governance.

Why resilience today? This article aims to offer a different answer to this deceptively simple question. So far, the novelty, proliferation and appeal of resilience for a whole array of social practices have often been folded back upon the continuity of liberal or neoliberal practices of governance. The political subject fostered as resilient has been revealed as neoliberal and self-reliant, acquiescent to the status quo rather than insurgent or rebellious, agential but within the coordinates of the system.⁹ In these approaches, the logic of resilience is symptomatic of an intensified neoliberal logic. For Walker and Cooper, resilience evinces an 'intuitive ideological fit with a neoliberal philosophy of complex adaptive systems'.¹⁰ For Evans and Reid, resilience is indicative of the neoliberal credo of

³ For instance, in geography, see Marc Welsh, "Resilience and Responsibility: Governing Uncertainty in a Complex World," *The Geographical Journal* 180, no. 1 (2014): 15–26; in criminology, Willem Lint and Nerida Chazal, "Resilience and Criminal Justice: Unsafe at Low Altitude," *Critical Criminology* 21, no. 2 (2013): 157–76; in economics, Charles Perrings, "Resilience and Sustainable Development," *Environment and Development Economics* 11, no. 4 (2006): 417–27; or in planning, Cathy Wilkinson, "Social-Ecological Resilience: Insights and Issues for Planning Theory," *Planning Theory* 11, no. 2 (2012): 148–69.

⁴ F. Berkes, J. Colding, and C. Folke, eds., *Navigating Social-Ecological Systems: Building Resilience for Complexity and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Dvora Yanow, "Neither Rigorous nor Objective? Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science," in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 67–88; and S.A. Levin et al., "Resilience in Natural and Socioeconomic Systems," *Environment and Development Economics* 3, no. 2 (2001): 221–62.

⁵ Ann S. Masten, "Resilience in Developing Systems: Progress and Promise as the Fourth Wave Rises," *Development and Psychopathology* 19, no. 3 (2007): 921–30.

⁶ Mark Pelling, *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

⁷ Alf Hornborg, "Zero-Sum World," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, nos. 3–4 (2009): 237–62.

⁸ Simin Davoudi, "Resilience: A Bridging Concept or a Dead End?" *Planning Theory & Practice* 13, no. 2 (2012): 299–307.

⁹ David Chandler, "Resilience and Human Security: The Post-Interventionist Paradigm," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012): 213–29; Pat O'Malley, "Resilient Subjects: Uncertainty, Warfare and Liberalism," *Economy and Society* 39, no. 4 (2010): 488–509; and Mark Neocleous, "'Don't Be Scared, Be Prepared': Trauma-Anxiety-Resilience," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37, no. 3 (2012): 188–98.

¹⁰ Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, "Genealogies of Resilience From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 2 (2011): 145; see also Jonathan Joseph, "Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism: A Governmentality Approach," *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 1, no. 1 (2013): 38–52.

living with and making most out of vulnerability; for them, the ‘underlying ontology of resilience, therefore, is actually vulnerability’.¹¹ Pat O’Malley stresses the liberal genealogy of resilience, which he sees as a particular assemblage of ‘liberalism, militarism and medicine’.¹² Resilience is therefore another instantiation of the neoliberal logic of security, with its attendant constitution of vulnerability and abjection.

While it is undeniable that resilience is often deployed within or resonates with neoliberal frameworks, these analyses tell us little about the difference that today makes. ‘What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?’, asked Michel Foucault.¹³ Taking Foucault’s question seriously, this article inquires into the increasing appeal and rapid circulation of resilience across so many social and political domains. Questioning the novelty of resilience is suspended when a continuous history of resilience is constituted in recent academic research as an expression of neoliberal practices¹⁴ or through an ontology of liberal subjectivity as ‘fundamentally vulnerable’.¹⁵ Neoliberalism as an overarching logic does not fully capture the reformulation of UK emergency planning into UK resilience, the reframing of counter-terrorism or the supplementation of disaster reduction with disaster resilience in UN reports or UK’s humanitarian policy.

Several authors, however, have tried to render the novelty of resilience by unpacking the logic of security and tracing a move from protection to prevention or from vulnerability to agency.¹⁶ This move embraces novelty at the expense of longer histories of prevention – through risk profiling, assessment and management – and agency – through fostering neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjects. This article argues that a more nuanced position is needed to attend to the difference that resilience makes today, while exploring historical continuities.

To this purpose, the article starts by placing resilience within a historical transformation of regimes of knowledge. Rather than starting with the various meanings of resilience, I unpack the problem to which resilience offers a solution. It is the particular problematisation of future events as surprises that resilience aims to answer. Long-standing challenges for security governance, surprises are reconfigured through a new epistemic regime. In a second stage, I expose the political transformations that the epistemic regime of surprising events entails through a reading of the UK Department’s for International Development (DFID) reformulation of humanitarian policy, which is centred on resilience. The problematisation of humanitarian policy in the face of continuously surprising events reveals a political transformation that resilience makes possible – the suspension of the promise of security. The final section then unpacks the promise of security across epistemic regimes in order to reveal the political implications of this suspension. Although the language of the promise of security is pervasive in International Relations (IR), the concept of the promise and promissory politics have remained unexplored. The promise allows us to understand the effects of the transformation that takes place: from the promise of security to the non-promise of resilience.

¹¹ Brad Evans and Julian Reid, “Dangerously Exposed: The Life and Death of the Resilient Subject,” *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 1, no. 2 (2013): 1–16.

¹² O’Malley, “Resilient Subjects,” 4.

¹³ Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

¹⁴ Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience.”

¹⁵ Evans and Reid, “Dangerously Exposed.”

¹⁶ Chandler, “Resilience and Human Security”; and Mark Duffield, “Challenging Environments: Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry,” *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 5 (2012): 475–92.

Resilience and changing epistemic regimes

The literature on resilience has recognised that resilience enacts a shift from problems to responses. Some commentators have noted that ‘resilience thinking plays an important heuristic role in shifting the focus away from the quantitative availability of resources, and towards the scope of available response options’.¹⁷ For instance, Cote and Nightingale argue, the problem of the ‘earth’s carrying capacity’ which led to particular solutions of ‘limits to growth’ is replaced by a wider array of variable solutions, under the heading of resilience.¹⁸ The emergence of resilience as a solution and the analysis of the contours of that solution are entwined with the articulation of a particular problem. However, the formulation – and formation – of the problem to be tackled has been less debated. In focusing on the kinds of responses that resilience entails, what it means and what kind of ‘fit’ with neoliberal governance it effects, less attention has been paid to the articulation of the problem that resilience purports to solve. The problem is not climate change, terrorism or disaster, but particular problematisations of these.

Rather than starting from the numerous and endlessly varied meanings of resilience, I suggest to revisit the problematisation that leads to the invocation of resilience. Problematisation entails turning ‘the given into a question’ and ‘exploring the conditions under which possible answers can be given’.¹⁹ In much of the resilience literature, it is assumed that resilience is a response to shocks, disasters, risks, threats and other disturbances. Understanding how particular things become a problem allows us to see how particular solutions are presented as necessary and how they become truthful. To reveal the political implications of resilience, it is important to trace ‘this transformation of an ensemble of difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions are proposed’.²⁰

Resilience therefore offers a solution to particular problematisations of future events. At first sight, these events appear straightforward: risks and threats. Thus, we are confronted with a more general problematique of events and contingency. At the same time, contingency is reshaped historically through particular problematisations. As Michael Dillon has noted, ‘Contingency is not arbitrary chance. It represents a complex discourse – set of truth-telling practices – about the knowledge of uncertainty’.²¹ How have discourses of contingency been changing? To understand the shift that is taking place, I draw on the distinction between three epistemic regimes which problematise contingency differently: ignorance/secrecy; risk/uncertainty; and surprise/novelty.²² These three epistemic regimes are underpinned by different assumptions about what can be known, how knowledge can be acquired and how contingency can be ‘tamed’.

Ignorance and secrecy entail an assumption that the unknown can be reduced and rendered tangible by making transparent, surveying and discovering secrets. It is an epistemology of depth and surface, where ignorance is simply a failure that can be

¹⁷ Muriel Cote and Andrea J. Nightingale, “Resilience Thinking Meets Social Theory: Situating Social Change in Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) Research,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 4 (2012): 475–89.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations,” in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 118.

²⁰ Foucault quoted in Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today. Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 47.

²¹ Michael Dillon, “Governing Through Contingency: The Security of Biopolitical Governance,” *Political Geography* 26, no. 1 (2007): 45.

²² Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

remedied through better access to what is held secret, hidden or underground. Although ignorance has often been considered synonymous to non-knowledge or the unknown, its analysis in relation to knowledge that is obscured, silenced or deflected indicates a particular epistemic regime in which the relation between knowledge and non-knowledge is that of surface and depth.²³ In this epistemic regime, contingency is tamed by accessing secrets, making transparent and reducing non-knowledge.

Risk and uncertainty work within a different epistemic regime. Rather than surface and depth, knowledge depends upon the existence of parallel worlds. There is no deeper knowledge to be accessed. Knowledge is only produced by creating a parallel world that 'models', 'simulates' and mimics the 'real' world through statistical and computing techniques. Risk does not solve the problems of non-knowledge by probing deeper or bringing to the surface. The dynamics of risk is that between individual and mass. Risk can tell us nothing about a particular event, but only about a class of events for which frequencies can be calculated. As Mary Ann Doane has noted, 'Statistics is an epistemological framework that works by acknowledging the intractability of the contingent, the unknowability of the individual; knowledge is displaced to the level of the mass'.²⁴ Events are made governable not as singular occurrences, but as patterns that can be deciphered in populations across time with the use of statistics. Risk management creates a different reality that can be ordered; it is the reality of multiples and averages. Contingency is tamed through the move from the individual to the multiple and from uncertainty to risk.

Unlike the regimes of ignorance/secrecy and risk/uncertainty, surprise and novelty indicate an epistemic regime in which events are always emergent and potential.²⁵ As complexity theorists argue, surprise is inevitable and novelty always already in the making.²⁶ In this epistemic regime, there is one 'flat' world where surprise is always a potentiality – the unknown is always already part of the world, but it cannot be made visible either through accessing a deeper secret or through modelling uncertainty through risk management techniques. Preparedness and resilience are the answers to the surprising event and its emergent novelty. Contingency is not tamed, but incorporated, literally lived with. This is not to say that surprise cannot function within epistemic regimes of ignorance/secrecy or risk/uncertainty. Yet, in these regimes, surprise takes on different meanings and functions.

The changes to the historical uses of surprise are indicative of these epistemic transformations. The problematisation of surprise itself is not new, but has a longer history that includes surprise attacks in strategic thought, psychological and emotional surprise, and more recently climate change surprise. For instance, Handel noted in the 1980s that

²³ Linsey McGoeys has recently argued for attention to ignorance and particularly strategic ignorance. She aptly draws attention to ignorance within a broader analysis of 'the constant policing of boundaries between the known and the unknown'. Linsey McGoeys, "On the Will to Ignorance in Bureaucracy," *Economy & Society* 36, no. 2 (2007): 13.

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane, "Imaging Contingency: An Interview With Mary Ann Doane," *Parallax* 13, no. 4 (2007): 24. On the emergence of probability and statistics, see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas About Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

²⁵ The ecological literature often tends to collapse surprise, ignorance and uncertainty. See e.g. Malte Faber, Reiner Manstetten, and John L.R. Proops, "Humankind and the Environment: An Anatomy of Surprise and Ignorance," *Environmental Values* 1, no. 3 (1992): 217–41.

²⁶ See, for instance, Reuben R. McDaniel Jr, Michelle E. Jordan, and Brigitte F. Fleeman, "Surprise, Surprise, Surprise! A Complexity Science View of the Unexpected," *Health Care Management Review* 28, no. 3 (2003): 266–78.

'[s]urprise diplomacy can be used to transcend old policies through two interrelated elements, namely, secrecy and shock'.²⁷ Even as the language of surprise is used, surprise functions in an epistemic regime of surface and depth, where knowledge can be accessible and brought to the surface. Similarly, surprises continue to exist in the regime of risk/uncertainty. Every individual event would contain an element of surprise. However, it is not the individual event but the frequencies and the general distribution of risk that count. In current deployments of surprise as problematisation, surprise is ontologised, a given characteristic of our world: 'it is part of the natural order of things'.²⁸ Surprise becomes an ontological characteristic of all complex adaptive systems rather than a lack of knowledge that can be addressed. It is its unexpected and always emergent quality that becomes the main concern for security and governance. At the same time, surprise is dehistoricised and divorced from an analysis of historical conditions and constraints. If surprises always happen and novelty is emergent, historical conditions lose their importance. In a sense, the surprise/novelty regime renders the epistemic regimes of ignorance/secrecy and risk/uncertainty as either insufficient or inadequate for the contemporary conditions of unpredictability and complexity.²⁹ At the same time, surprise circulates across the three epistemic regimes, thus making possible the apparently seamless circulation of resilience across so many different domains of governance.

In policy discourse, the events that confront us globally today take this unpredictable, unpreventable and surprising character. Take, for instance, the UK 2009 National Security Strategy, which formulated resilience as an innovative response to new problems confronting contemporary societies:

The increasingly networked, interdependent and complex nature of modern society, and the critical systems which underpin daily life will, over the coming years, increase both the UK's vulnerability and the potential impact of civil emergencies. [...] Dealing with *these widespread, complex and unpredictable events* will require greater societal resilience than we have today.³⁰

For the UK government, it is not simply that we are faced with more unpredictable or uncertain events, but the complexity and interdependency of societies makes these events unknowable and unmanageable. Resilience is therefore a proactive response to a world that is 'complex, unstable, unknowable, and unpredictable'.³¹ The problematisation that calls for resilience is that of 'un-ness': unexpected, unknowable, unpredictable, unmanageable events.³²

²⁷ Michael I. Handel, "Surprise and Change in International Politics," *International Security* 4, no. 4 (1980): 61.

²⁸ Reuben R. McDaniel Jr and Dean J. Driebe, eds., "Uncertainty and Surprise: An Introduction," in *Uncertainty and Surprise in Complex Systems: Questions on Working With the Unexpected* (Berlin: Springer, 2005), 7.

²⁹ This is not to say that the former disappear. Rather, these epistemic regimes co-exist, their tensions productively deployed for the purposes of governance.

³⁰ UK Government, "National Security Strategy – Security in an Interdependent World," http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/reports/national_security.aspx (emphasis mine).

³¹ K.E. Weick and K.M. Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 26.

³² While discussions of resilience have focused on the assumptions of complexity, connectivity and emergence, less attention has been paid to how events are known and governed. Mareile Kaufmann, "Emergent Self-Organisation in Emergencies: Resilience Rationales in Interconnected Societies," *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 1, no. 1 (2013): 53–68. For the uses of 'un-ness' to define events, see Aradau and van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe*, 23.

The role of unpredictable events has not gone unnoticed in the literature on resilience. However, the epistemic difference that surprising events introduce is effaced when events are subsumed under danger, shock, emergency or disaster. Yet, as I have argued, surprises gain meaning within a particular epistemic regime. It is important to recover the framing of resilience in relation to surprise in the literature on social-ecological resilience. C.S. Holling initially formulated the problem of events in ecological systems as ‘surprises’.³³ His theory of resilience has also been called a ‘theory of surprise’,³⁴ drawing attention to the importance of the problem that resilience answers. Surprises are unexpected events, which appear unknowable, unpredictable and unmanageable. In complexity theory, surprise is ‘inevitable because it is part of the natural order of things and cannot be avoided, eliminated, or controlled’.³⁵ Neither dangers nor emergencies have the same resonance. Holling had also noted that ‘there is an inherent unknowability, as well as unpredictability, concerning evolving managed ecosystems and the societies with which they are linked’.³⁶ Following Holling, Lance Gunderson has differentiated between three types of surprises: local, cross-scale and true novelty.³⁷ If local and cross-scale surprises can lead to policy crisis, it is surprise as novelty that can radically transform the system. However, ultimately, all these three types of surprises harbour an element of unpredictability and require resilience and some form of adaptive management. Therefore, surprise as inherent to our social and ecological systems entails a different modality of governance, which is attuned to the unexpected and unknowable, rather than purporting to prevent, anticipate or protect against the unexpected and the uncertain. ‘Expecting the unexpected’ has become the motto of resilience measures, from climate change to terrorism and from disasters to migration.

When the resilience literature in IR refers to surprises and shocks, it is without exploring the epistemic implications of this terminology.³⁸ Yet, surprise restructures the epistemic quality the continuum of events that resilience responds to. Resilience captures responses to a whole array of changes that ‘can be driven by shocks – sudden changes – or through long-term erosions (or increases) in capacity, effectiveness or legitimacy’.³⁹ It is, however, not the duration of stresses that becomes important in this epistemic regime. Rather, it is the moment of surprise that counts, when stresses cascade and give rise to unexpected and potentially surprising events. Thus, the remit of events that require resilience extends to encompass slow erosions and everyday disruptions, by modifying their epistemic quality through the lens of surprise. Even when the long-term quality of stresses is recognised, ultimately stresses and shocks require resilience when they take the form of adverse events: ‘People and systems are vulnerable when they are susceptible to,

³³ C.S. Holling, “Simplifying the Complex: The Paradigms of Ecological Function and Structure,” *Futures* 26, no. 6 (1994): 598–609.

³⁴ Neil W. Adger, “Social and Ecological Resilience: Are They Related?” *Progress in Human Geography* 24, no. 3 (2000): 347–64.

³⁵ McDaniel, Jordan, and Fleeman, “Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!”, 1.

³⁶ C.S. Holling, “Surprise for Science, Resilience for Ecosystems, and Incentives for People,” *Ecological Applications* 6, no. 3 (1996): 733–35.

³⁷ Lance Gunderson, “Resilience, Flexibility and Adaptive Management – Antidotes for Spurious Certitude,” *Conservation Ecology* 3, no. 1 (1999), <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol3/iss1/art7/>

³⁸ Walker and Cooper do not use the term ‘surprise’ in their analysis of resilience. References to surprises are by and large absent from the International Relations literature on resilience. Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience.”

³⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Concepts and Dilemmas of State-Building in Fragile Situations. From Fragility to Resilience,” Development Assistance Committee (DAC), www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/41100930.pdf

or unable to cope with, the adverse events’.⁴⁰ Similarly, the UK Cabinet Office promotes resilience as a response to highly capacious ‘disruptive challenges’, particularly in the context of organisations and business continuity management.⁴¹ Disruption is an event whose occurrence is unexpected, but whose effects can be potentially absorbed.

Future surprising events – shocks, disasters, adversities, stresses, conflicts or disturbances – are seen as largely interchangeable in both policy and academic discourses. Yet, I have suggested that surprise restructures our understanding of a whole array of very different events. For instance, even as several authors have noted the pitfalls of ‘ecological surprise’ and ‘climate surprise’ for responding to climate change,⁴² they have paid less attention to the epistemological assumptions of surprise. When surprise becomes the dominant understanding of future events, these are processed on the modality of unexpected and unknowable occurrences emerging, in a sense, out of nowhere. This has implications for how discourses of governance have been transformed. The next section draws attention to humanitarian governance, as formulated by DFID in the UK, in order to show how an epistemic regime of surprise shapes resilience responses.

Surprises of development: from dignity to resilience

In 2011, DFID published a report on the UK’s humanitarian policy entitled ‘Saving lives, preventing suffering and building resilience’. The report has resilience at its centre as the building stone of humanitarian action as ‘the impact of disasters can be significantly mitigated by building the resilience of nations and people, and addressing the root causes of vulnerability’.⁴³ At first sight, resilience appears to supplement the promise of disaster risk reduction by incorporating community practices, based on the understanding that families and communities are the first ones to react in a disaster. The 2011 Report places resilience in a shift from reactive to proactive humanitarian action, which in itself is not new. Early warning, anticipation and risk management have long informed humanitarian policy. Resilience appears to supplement and strengthen a framework of risk management for disaster prevention. However, it is instructive to compare the specification of resilience in this report with another DFID report, published in 2006, which also mentions resilience but does so more marginally. The difference in title is also telling – ‘Saving lives, relieving suffering, protecting dignity’.⁴⁴ ‘Relieving suffering’ has been replaced by ‘preventing suffering’ and ‘protecting dignity’ by ‘building resilience’. A turn from present to the future-oriented action is also evident in the title change.

⁴⁰ Department for International Development (DFID), “Promoting Innovation and Evidence-Based Approaches to Building Resilience and Responding to Humanitarian Crises: A DFID Strategy Paper,” DFID, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dfid-research-promoting-innovation-and-evidence-based-approaches-to-humanitarian-crises>

⁴¹ UK Cabinet Office, *Strategic Framework and Policy Statement on Improving the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure to Disruption From Natural Hazards* (London: Cabinet Office, 2010).

⁴² For example, D.G. Streets and M.H. Glantz, “Exploring the Concept of Climate Surprise,” *Global Environmental Change* 10, no. 2 (2000): 97–107; Robert W. Kates and William C. Clark, “Environmental Surprise: Expecting the Unexpected?” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 38, no. 2 (1996): 6–34.

⁴³ DFID, “Saving Lives, Preventing Suffering and Building Resilience: The UK Government’s Humanitarian Policy,” DFID, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/The%20UK%20Government’s%20Humanitarian%20Policy%20-%20September%202011%20-%20Final.pdf>

⁴⁴ DFID, “Saving Lives, Relieving Suffering, Protecting Dignity: DFID’s Humanitarian Policy,” <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/humanitarian-policy.pdf>

In 2011, DFID clarifies that building disaster resilience has the implication either to ‘maintain or transform living standards in the face of shocks and stresses – such as earthquakes, drought, or violent conflict’.⁴⁵ Underpinned by an epistemic regime of surprise, the conditions of possibility of shocks and stresses remain unquestioned. The epistemic regime of surprise assumes that knowledge is limited and the condition of future events is that of unpredictability, novelty and unknowability.⁴⁶ Earthquakes, drought and violent conflict are all problematised as surprise events. They are reconfigured through another epistemic regime, which departs from either ignorance or risk.

Although DFID recognises that poor countries and poor people are most affected by disasters, the problematisation of events means that improving living standards is left out in favour of downscaling (read euphemistically as ‘transformation’) or ‘maintaining’ existing living standards. Most strikingly, the language of poverty and poverty reduction is absent from the 2011 report. Ironically, poverty appears only on the report’s back cover to capture the DFID motto: ‘leading the UK Government’s fight against world poverty’.⁴⁷ The report itself talks about ‘the poor’ and the ‘poorest’ rather than poverty. Equated with the poor, poverty becomes a given that resilience strategies need to accommodate.

In 2006, the report saw a clear link between poverty reduction and reducing the impact of disasters. Disaster risk reduction measures were therefore expected to

include national systems of social security to improve the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, and to provide a safety net in times of crisis. Where governments are not willing to back a pro-poor agenda, other options for delivering social welfare and basic services will be explored.⁴⁸

An epistemic framework of risk and uncertainty underpinned these measures, which saw the possibility of ‘taming’ uncertainty through spreading risk. Spreading risk through insurance practices was a mode of reducing poverty and vulnerability to disasters.⁴⁹ Moreover, humanitarian emergencies were seen as the effects of failures in policy. Thus, political measures focused on long-term investment were needed to tackle vulnerability and poverty.

Five years later, resilience responses entail a change in how poverty, development and security more broadly are envisaged:

Humanitarian assistance should be delivered in a way that does not undermine existing coping mechanisms and helps a community build its own resilience for the future. National governments in at-risk countries can ensure that disaster risk management policies and strategies are linked to community-level action.⁵⁰

This formulation does not specify what the mechanisms are or how the knowledge of disasters is formulated, acquired and distributed. Responses mobilise existing capacities and assume that disasters are a ‘fact’ in certain parts of the world. In its operational plan for 2012–2015, one of DFID’s aims is to ‘Help the poorest build resilience against economic shocks such as high food prices through the provision of expert technical advice to support the scaling up of effective programmes to protect the most vulnerable using innovative

⁴⁵ DFID, “Saving Lives, Preventing Suffering,” 10.

⁴⁶ There is a second problem that DFID’s endorsement of resilience responds to: that of austerity. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the role of austerity, as it focuses on the epistemic politics of resilience.

⁴⁷ DFID, “Saving Lives, Preventing Suffering,” 10.

⁴⁸ DFID, “Saving Lives, Relieving Suffering,” 10.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of insurance and development, see Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the world of Peoples* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ DFID, “Saving Lives, Preventing Suffering,” 10.

technologies’.⁵¹ Long-term investment has disappeared from the more recent strategy. It also remains unclear what the technical advice or the innovative technologies to be deployed are. Moreover, economic crisis, natural disasters, and conflict are all imagined as surprise events. The rendition of economic crisis as ‘shocks’ does not question the conditions of possibility for the crisis or the policies that might have led to crisis.

There is a significant difference in how the problem of disasters and humanitarian crises was formulated in 2006 and 2011. In 2006, disasters were seen as the effects of ‘failures of development and politics’.⁵² The language of failure was that of knowledge that could locate problems and pitfalls. In 2006, DFID translated failure into an epistemic regime of risk, where the solution was ultimately the spreading of risk. In 2011, the language of shock is that of inherent surprise, of the turn to the future and irreducible limits of knowledge. Unexpected ‘shocks and stresses’ call for resilience, while disasters are now seen to impede development. In this reversal of the disaster-development linkage, the failures of development need no longer be questioned. Rather, the stakes are formulated around resilience to disaster in order not to impede development. As an IDS policy brief noted, DFID programmes in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Bangladesh are increasingly focused on ‘building resilience’ rather than ‘increasing income’, at the risk of sustaining a type of ‘resilient poverty’.⁵³

Building resilience assumes that the unknown cannot be diminished as with epistemologies of ignorance. It also cannot be displaced as with risk management, even as prevention remains a desirable goal for DFID policies. These implications of the problematisation of surprise as the paradigmatic future event become explicit in the renunciation of security. Resilience answers the implicit realisation that security is not possible in complex world eliciting surprises, while its promise remains desirable for individuals and communities. This is spelled out in a series of recommendations to DFID,

The key to security is resilience, for ecosystems, people and economies. [...] We may not be able to protect people from stresses, shocks and catastrophic events, but we can help them withstand disasters, recover and adapt.⁵⁴

Security, governments, experts and academics keep repeating, is not what it used to be. The promise of security that underpins the liberal state is subtly rephrased – ‘we may not be able to protect people’. The provision of humanitarian aid, for instance, does not just create dependency, but it also has unintended effects. According to a report for DFID on the economics of disaster resilience, emergency aid has been ‘either too late or inappropriate, and [...] has further undermined sustainable development in these areas’.⁵⁵

Ultimately, it seems that what changes from 2006 to 2011 is the very promise of development and poverty reduction through mechanisms of risk spreading and protection of dignity. Surprises ultimately undo protective and preventive mechanisms, as noted by several scholars in IR.⁵⁶ Mark Duffield, for instance, has argued that ‘[e]arlier modernist

⁵¹ DFID, “Operational Plan 2011–2015: DFID – Growth and Resilience Department (GRD),” DFID, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67421/gth-res-dept-2011.pdf

⁵² DFID, “Saving Lives, Relieving Suffering,” 7.

⁵³ Institute of Development Studies, “Making the Most of Resilience,” *IDS Policy Briefing* 32, February (2013), <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/making-the-most-of-resilience>

⁵⁴ Camilla Toulmin, *Building Resilience for an Interdependent World: Why the Environment Matters and What DFID Should Do About It* (London: IIED, 2009).

⁵⁵ Courtenay Cabot Venton et al., *The Economics of Early Response and Disaster Resilience: Lessons from Kenya and Ethiopia* (London: Department for International Development, 2012), 16.

⁵⁶ Chandler, “Resilience and Human Security”; Duffield, “Challenging Environments”; Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London: Routledge,

forms of protection have been replaced by postmodernist calls for resilience and the acceptance of risk as an opportunity for enterprise and reinvention'.⁵⁷ Evans and Reid formulate the move in starker terms, as they emphasise that 'the liberal discourse of resilience functions to convince peoples and individuals that the dream of lasting security is impossible'.⁵⁸ While these authors are right to note the difference between resilience and earlier discourses of protection, the shift from protection to resilience does not account for the historical reconfiguration of security through prevention, pre-emption or preparedness, to name just a few.⁵⁹ Moreover, assuming a move from 'lasting security' to the lack of security does not fully consider the illusion of 'lasting security'. After all, prevention did not cherish the dream of 'lasting security'. As critical scholars have long pointed out, security discourses and practices reproduce insecurity, both in designating others as dangerous and in fostering anxiety and unease among populations to be made secure.⁶⁰ Instead of positing a binary of security/resilience or protection/resilience, the next section shows how the political implications of resilience can be grasped through an engagement with the promise of security and promissory politics.

Resilience and promissory politics

The promise of security is often referred to in the IR literature on security and more broadly.⁶¹ Yet, it is never the promise that is discussed. Rather the focus has been on security and attendant practices of (in)securitisation.⁶² David Campbell notes, for instance, that '[t]he state grounds its legitimacy by offering the promise of security to its citizens'.⁶³ The promise is also the paradigmatic speech act in securitisation theory, but is

2009); Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Resilience, Critical Infrastructure, and Molecular Security: The Excess of 'Life' in Biopolitics," *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2011): 367–83; and F. Lentzos and N. Rose, "Governing Insecurity: Contingency Planning, Protection, Resilience," *Economy and Society* 38, no. 2 (2009): 230–54.

⁵⁷ Duffield, "Challenging Environments," 475.

⁵⁸ Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 68.

⁵⁹ Doerthe Rosenow has cautioned against too quickly assuming that complexity theory has been instrumentalised for the purposes of neoliberal governance. Doerthe Rosenow, "Dancing Life Into Being: Genetics, Resilience and the Challenge of Complexity Theory," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 6 (2012): 531–47. She has argued that complexity theory has developed a critical conceptual framework which has been largely ignored in these analyses. While it is beyond the scope of this article to assess various approaches in complexity theory, the various epistemic regimes proposed here can offer a more heterogeneous understanding of practices as well as of continuity and change.

⁶⁰ For example, Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (London: Routledge, 2006); Didier Bigo and Anastassia Tsoukala, eds., *Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes: The Games of (In)Security, Cultures et Conflits* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006); Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Claudia Aradau, *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶¹ Iris Marion Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 1–25; Maria Stern, "'We' the Subject: The Power and Failure of (In) Security," *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 2 (2006): 187–205; and Anthony Burke, *Beyond Security, Ethics and Violence: War Against the Other* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

⁶² For example, Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*; and Jef Huysmans, Andrew Dobson, and Raia Prokhovnik, eds., *The Politics of Protection: Sites of Insecurity and Political Agency* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶³ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 50.

quickly glossed over through integration in a continuum of baptism, marriage, betting and so on.⁶⁴ I propose to analyse the *promise* of security as a critical vantage point from which to reveal the political effects of resilience discourses.

The promising speech act presupposes a regime of knowledge based on the reduction of ignorance and the dispelling of secrecy. Promises are felicitous if no secret plans to the contrary nullify them, if they are well intended and their consequences carried out.⁶⁵ At the same time, promises presuppose a degree of control over the future, through the diminution of ignorance and the role of knowledge. To promise means to create continuity from the present to the future. Understood through the vantage point of the promise, security is primarily an epistemic endeavour which tames or displaces contingency. This move drastically limits or even suspends the openness of the future and effectively closes off political possibilities. Yet, embracing untamed contingency can have deleterious political effects as Hannah Arendt has aptly noted:

Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities.⁶⁶

Arendt's analysis of the promise is particularly useful for my purposes as she connects promises and epistemic politics. If politics for Arendt is about common action that creates a new beginning, the fragility and unpredictability of action needs to be tamed through promises. As she puts it,

binding oneself through promises, serves to set out in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security, without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men [sic].⁶⁷

Arendt's engagement with uncertainty and unpredictability has received little attention in the literature on IR, which has rather invoked the distinction between the social and the political in Arendt's work.⁶⁸ If security is simply a method of social governance, then it is also depoliticising, destroying the political with its 'power of potentiality by closing down futurity'.⁶⁹ Yet, Arendt's conceptualisation of the promise as way of taming the unpredictability of politics and addressing its fragility can help challenge this binary. The promise holds a paradoxical role, as it attempts to navigate the tensions between the unpredictability and surprising character of the future and need for some certainty. This paradoxical role of the promise can appear as a retreat from the contingency of the future and of politics and Bonnie Honig cautions that the promise 'would belie the moment of contingency that [...] characterizes the moment of politics'.⁷⁰

The paradox of the promise can be read differently and more productively, as a way of rethinking contingency/the limits of knowledge and politics. For Arendt, the promise enacts a limit to contingency and unpredictability, as promises are a necessary political

⁶⁴ Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework*.

⁶⁵ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 [1962]).

⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 237.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁸ Patricia Owens, "Human Security and the Rise of the Social," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 547–67.

⁶⁹ Rosalyn Diprose, "Arendt and Nietzsche on Responsibility and Futurity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 34, no. 6 (2008), 636.

⁷⁰ Bonnie Honig, "Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 104.

supplement to the unpredictability of action. 'Taming' contingency does not necessarily imply recourse either to the production of certainty or to the calculability of risk.

Arendt's conceptualisation of the promise eludes the dream of knowledge and of the reduction of ignorance. The promise of enlightened knowledge, which is the promise of the security speech act, is effectively the voice of authority and certainty. A world that is completely certain, foreseeable and predictable is a world devoid of politics. That would mean that the politics of promising disappears, as it becomes a 'calculated, programmed datum that can be anticipated in advance'.⁷¹ Resisting always-emergent surprises cannot simply mean a reversal to a world of knowledge, control and predictability. Arendt's cautionary note about the extension of promises draws attention to the fact that it is the negotiation of the boundary between uncertainty and certainty, predictability and unpredictability that defines the possibilities of political action:

The moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty, that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating.⁷²

At the same time, Arendt also cautions against simply embracing contingency, as Nietzsche's critique of promises would seem to suggest. Arendt acknowledges the importance of Nietzsche's analysis of the inextricable link between control and the promise-making individual. Nietzsche sees the capacity of making promises to rely on 'the more immediate task of first making man to a certain degree necessary, uniform, a peer amongst peers, orderly and consequently predictable'.⁷³ Promises require the production of predictable subjects and the promising individual needs to be first ordered according to a logic of predictability. Interestingly, Nietzsche associates promises with the creditor/debtor relations and thus inserts power and inequality at the heart of promise-making. Making promises is effectively a form of violence:

The debtor, in order to inspire confidence that the promise of repayment will be honoured, in order to give a guarantee of the solemnity and sanctity of his promise, and in order to etch the duty and obligation of repayment into his conscience, pawns something to the creditor by means of the contract in case he does not pay, something that he still 'possesses' and controls, for example, his body, or his wife, or his freedom, or his life.⁷⁴

Nietzsche's critique of promises echoes the critique of security speech acts which privilege authority and enact sovereign decisions. Yet, Arendt does not fully accept Nietzsche's critique of promises. Unlike Nietzsche, Arendt reclaims promises away from the association with individualism, sovereignty and violence that Nietzsche offers. Security promises do not just pawn us to sovereign authority. Arendt replaces individualistic promises with collective and mutual promises, which neither forsake contingency nor embrace predictability. As Vanessa Lemm notes in her comparison of Arendt and Nietzsche,

On Arendt's assumption that freedom arises from the power of the 'We' rather than from the will power of the isolated individual, the figure of the sovereign individual in Nietzsche

⁷¹ Lawrence Burns, "Derrida and the Promise of Community," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27, no. 6 (2001): 43–53.

⁷² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *"On the Genealogy of Morality" and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

becomes the paradigmatic example of a genuine lack of freedom resultant from a devaluation of the political.⁷⁵

Promises arising from collective action tame the contingency of the future and foster political action in the present. Thus, Arendt radically departs from the promise implied in security speech acts. Promises 'depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for ... no one can be bound by a promise made only to himself'.⁷⁶ Promises can extend the power of collective action into the future by enacting some form of knowledge and stability to counter the effects of unpredictability. Unlike security speech acts, promises do not rely on epistemologies of certainty and do not embrace emergent uncertainty.

The collective dimension of promises also avoids the pitfalls of taming contingency through risk. As the first section has shown, the epistemic regime of risk/uncertainty displaces contingency from the individual to the mass by depriving collectivities of political agency. Statistical populations emerge through statistical calculation and lack the power of collective action. Yet, if statistical calculability translates the past into future 'destiny', Arendt aims to undo the strictures of the past. Alongside promises, forgiveness palliates the other predicament of action: that of irreversibility.⁷⁷ If unpredictability is a consequence of political action in concert and human freedom, then it can also be 'tamed' through collective action. When unpredictability is ontologised as always emerging surprise, the historical capacity of human beings to hold actions to account and act upon the future is radically diminished. At the same time, when contingency is tamed through anticipation and certainty, the past forecloses the capacity for novel political action in the future. Knowledge becomes expertise and political subjects are reconfigured as either risky or vulnerable populations. Arendt draws attention to the 'infinite improbability' that characterises human action as well as to the history of promises that tames the 'chaotic uncertainty of the future'.⁷⁸ These elements disappear from the problematisation of resilience, when contingency and surprise are inserted in the fabric of the social as always already there independent of historical political events.

Through the episteme of surprise as always already emergent, resilience forecloses the politics of the promise, with its pitfalls, adjustments and potentials. Promises cannot but remain paradoxical, as they straddle the boundary between unpredictability and predictability, certainty and uncertainty, probability and improbability, possibility and impossibility. Promises unsettle the epistemic regimes of ignorance/secretcy, risk/uncertainty or surprise/novelty. Through promises, contingency is simultaneously tamed and embraced through the power of collective action that transforms the future. Is then the resilience of communities not an Arendtian promise for the future? The much vaunted resilience of communities when confronted with surprising events forsakes the unexpectedness of political action for the anticipation of resilient behaviour. Even when read through community rather than individual action, resilience ultimately enacts a displacement of contingency and unexpectedness as characteristics of political action upon contingency as a 'given' of the world. Moreover, resilient behaviour is imagined in relation to pre-given groups rather than opening up to the

⁷⁵ Vanessa Lemm, "Memory and Promise in Arendt and Nietzsche," *Revista de Ciencia Política* 26, no. 2 (2006): 163. I disagree, however, with her assessment that the promise 'reverses the flow of time' and removes the uncertain future in favour of a 'secured past' (163). Arendt's reinterpretation of past political events would be indicative of an openness of the past rather than the possibility of securing it.

⁷⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 236–42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 300, 237.

emergence of new collective subjects. Promises, however, can reignite the paradox of anticipation and surprise, uncertainty and certainty as political and not just epistemic questions.

Conclusion

Just like neoliberalism, resilience seems to be everywhere today. Although many of the elements of resilience appear to resonate with neoliberal principles, I have argued that the appeal of resilience today can be understood by exploring the epistemic regime underpinning resilience. Formulated as a response to the problem of surprising events, resilience draws attention to the transformation of epistemic regimes of ignorance/secrecy and risk/uncertainty. If ignorance presupposed an episteme of depth in which secrecy could be made visible and risk an epistemic regime of parallel worlds where uncertainty could be ‘tamed’, surprise functions in a complex, interconnected world where the novel and the unexpected are always emergent. The reference to surprise makes possible the constitution of a continuum of events, from minor adversities to shocks, and from stresses to traumatic events to capture a whole array of what the UK Cabinet Office refers to as ‘disruptive challenges’. Reconfigured through an epistemic regime of surprise and novelty, all these events make possible the deployment of resilience across multiple domains of governance.

When epistemic assumptions of emergent surprise underpin calls for resilience to reformulate DFID’s humanitarian policies in the UK, for example, these can be aligned with the retrenchment of the promise of security. Even as security remains desirable, the problematisation of surprising events renders its promise impossible, to be replaced by resilience. Resilience does not promise anything inasmuch as it does not purport to ‘tame’ contingency but only to live through the surprising and the unexpected. It also does not aim to constitute the conditions of collective political action, but reverts back upon forms of individual or pre-given group action. I have argued that Arendt’s analysis of the promise offers a vantage point from which both the promise of security and the non-promise of resilience close off political action. The promise of security stultifies the future through anticipation and expert knowledge, and disavows the limits of knowledge. Resilience withdraws from the promise as it disavows the transformative capacity of collective political action and remains hostage to the limits of knowledge.

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