

A COMMENTARY ON DISRUPTION AS A STATE OF BEING AND (ANTI)PRACTICE: CHALLENGING ‘RESILIENCE’ AS THE LATE-MODERN RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I challenge the popular notion of ‘resilience’ as the 21st century recipe for happiness. I do so through exploring ‘disruption’ as a political imaginary and practice, by which the narrative of resilience-equals-happiness can be disrupted. I draw on key texts that theorise about practices of ‘speculation’, ‘failure’, and ‘narration’ to situate both the personal (cognitive) ability to disrupt neoliberal subjectification processes and the systemic disruption brought about by Covid-19 as essential channels for rethinking the contemporary. I argue that this is the moment to re-imagine the templates for human co-existence and build on the personal to global experiences of disruption occasioned by global capitalism *and* the coronavirus, as productive, though painful, opportunities for counter-narration.

KEYWORDS *Disruption, Resilience, Happiness, Global capitalism, Covid-19*

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INTRODUCTION

“Forget happiness, you should be aiming for resilience” reads the title to a 2018 World Economic Forum article¹, neatly encapsulating a core problematic of today: closing in on the edges of our planetary capacity, humanity finds no ‘happiness’ beyond its ability to endure a constant flow of shocks and crises. Within the templates of being that are made available by the contemporary configurations of power and capital, ‘well-being’ and ‘self-realisation’ are severed from the personal dreams and ambitions that reach beyond the individual resilience demanded to streamline productivity and ensure the *non-disruption* of global neoliberal social-economic relations.² Forced to guard ourselves against perpetual crises and to accept resilience as the 21st century manifestation of happiness to keep disruption at bay, disruption is also recast as a tool for resistance. In this brief reflection, I explore disruption as a political imaginary and practice from two perspectives: the personal and the systemic.

RESILIENCE BY WHOM AND FOR WHOM?

According to Anna Rowley, the psychologist interviewed by the World Economic Forum, “Resilience is the most important skill to cultivate” because of today’s “rapid rate of economic and technological growth.”³ As Rowley counsels the executives of leading global corporations, she urges them to forget about the notion of ‘happiness’ altogether, since “feeling good [is] fleeting” and “pleasure is a relative state” only made perceivable in relation to pain and discomfort. The resilience envisioned here has little to do with the kind found among those most exposed to structural and planetary shocks, in the determination to live a full life in the face of (in)direct violence, poverty, and policing. Rather, this is the resilience of *perpetual preparedness*⁴, of the ability of the state and capital to painlessly ‘bounce-back’⁵ from the challenges launched at the globalised nation-state – a reinvention of happiness birthed in the ivory tower of Big Business, and trumpeted out over the global ‘rest’ to ensure the political-economic pliancy of the everyday citizen.

¹ Ephrat Livni, “Forget happiness, you should be aiming for resilience,” *World Economic Forum*, (30 May 2018), <https://www.weforum.org/resilience-is-the-new-happiness/>.

² See: Simin Davoudi, “Just Resilience,” *City and Community*, 17, no. 1 (Mar 2018): 3-7.

³ Livni, “Forget happiness.”

⁴ Mark Neocleous, “Resisting Resilience,” *Radical Philosophy* 178, no. 1 (Mar/Apr 2013), <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience>.

⁵ Davoudi, “Just Resilience”, 3.

As such, resilience has not only co-opted contemporary notions of happiness but enjoys equal ‘buzz-wordification’ in national security and international development policymaking.⁶ The way resilience is mobilised in these contexts is intimately interlinked and always understood through the gendered, racialised, and classed prism of neoliberal hyper-productivity and omni-marketisation which, if left unconstrained, will miraculously lift us out of global underdevelopment and insecurity and make us *happy*. At least, so we are told.⁷

Targeting the emergent truism of resilience’s attack on happiness, political theorist Mark Neocleous is one of the few scholars who have embarked on a research agenda to ‘resist resilience’.⁸ What has made resilience so successful as a defining political category of our time, Neocleous notes, is its ability to reframe a fundamental critique of the contemporary global social order into an outsourceable solution. Instead of recognising that the need for ‘resilience’ is a direct result of the inherent brittleness of global capitalism, resilience is recast as a solution for bypassing the converse vulnerability of the individual and the planet. “Rather than speak of fragility and its (negative) associations”, as the story goes, “we should be speaking of resilience and its (positive) connotations.”⁹ What, then, is the potential of *disruption*, as narrative and practice, for resisting the resilience-equals-happiness agenda?

DISRUPTION, COUNTER-NARRATION AND SPECULATIVE BEING

Challenging the business-takeover of the concept of ‘disruption’ – as a managerial strategy to ‘shake things up’ and increase *corporate* resilience¹⁰ – I reclaim disruption as a

⁶ See e.g., DHS, “Resilience,” *Department of Homeland Security*, (25 Jan 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/topic/resilience>; Tom Staal, “‘Resilience’ is today’s buzzword in international development, but what does it really mean?” *USAID*, (13 Jan 2016), <https://medium.com/usaids-frontlines/insights-tom-staal-5a7ab307d818>.

⁷ For different takes on the gendered, racialised and classed expressions of neoliberalization, development, and security, see: Kathleen Tierney, “Resilience and the Neoliberal Project: Discourses, Critiques, Practices – And Katrina,” *American Behavioural Scientist*. 59, 10. (Jun 2015): 1327-1342; Leigh Spanner, “Resilient and entrepreneurial military spouses: neoliberalization meets militarization,” *Critical Military Studies*. 10 (Oct 2020): 1-21; Mark Duffield, “The Liberal Way of Development and the Development-Security Impasse: Exploring the Global Life-Chance Divide,” *Security Dialogue*. 41, 1. (2010): 53-76.

⁸ Neocleous, “Resisting Resilience.”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Joshua Gans, *The Disruption Dilemma* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

particularly useful *state of being*¹¹. A state which, by definition, is not pliant but essentially antithetical to individuals' and communities' economic productivity. Reacting to the stranglehold enjoyed by "capitalist realism"¹² over our imaginaries, I recognise the ability 'to disrupt' as a cognitive exercise that renders the personal into a realm for living the 'what if?' through imagining "the not yet, to hold it open for the yet to come."¹³

Decolonial and queer theory scholars, Aimee Bahng and Judith Halberstam¹⁴, offer such strategies for how to think and act beyond what is anticipated from us. Together, they formulate modes of thought and praxis that can disrupt the expectations of preparedness and productivity jointly held by government and market. Bahng opens our eyes to the role of speculation and 'speculative imaginaries' in the production of 'reality' and how we perceive it, reminding us "how narrative constructions of the future play a significant role in materializing the present."¹⁵ Replacing hegemonic narratives of 'happiness' and 'resilience' with one's own can help us regain a sliver of agency and control, allowing the mind to rest in the act of counter-narration. Consequently, through a counter-narration of who 'productivity' is for and what it can look like, we can embrace *non-productivity* as a way of practising disruption whilst simultaneously recognising the alternative productivity of *failure*¹⁶: of *not* aspiring to the objectives foretold by neoliberal imaginaries as the one desirable way to be and live, a source of happiness in the singular. Halberstam thus situates 'the art of failing' as a

¹¹ Even in academe, 'disruption' is predominantly associated with the utility and implications of 'disruptive innovation' and technologies pertaining to industry and market relations, see e.g.: Erwin Danneels, "Disruptive Technology Reconsidered: A Critique and Research Agenda," *Journal of Product Innovation Management*. 21, 4. (Jul 2004): 246-258. Disruption has also been used elsewhere, such as in relation to policymaking, politics or activism in an era of converging global crises, see: Clarissa Rile Hayward, "Disruption: What Is It Good For?" *The Journal of Politics*. 82, 2. (Apr 2020): 448-459; Kris Hartley, Glen Kuecker and Jun Jie Woo, "Practicing public policy in an age of disruption," *Policy Design and Practice*. 2, 2. (May 2019): 163-181; Marit Hammond, "Democratic deliberation for sustainability transformations: between constructiveness and disruption," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*. 16, 1. (Oct 2020): 220-230.

¹² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

¹³ Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 23.

¹⁴ Bahng, *Migrant futures*; Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 1-2.

¹⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art*.

creative and cooperative way of “finding alternatives to conventional understandings of success in a heteronormative, capitalist society.”¹⁷

Hidden in both authors’ excursions into the arts of speculation, failure, and counter-narration is thus a powerful account of how to disrupt the processes of subjectification that make resilience possible as the existential telos of 21st century (global) society – because we need to understand resilience, and especially its relation to happiness, as just that: an epitomised expression of Foucauldian *self*-governance, contingent upon a recent historical context of globalised (neo)liberal state and market relations.¹⁸ To resist resilience means to resist a quintessential expression of biopolitical logics of government(ality)¹⁹ wherein the interests of power and capital have long been merged and their inequitable tolls on human relations and conditions of existence long felt and lived.²⁰ Here, disruption is a tool for interrupting the biopolitical narratives of perfection and perseverance, predictability and efficiency associated with resilience, through reclaiming the imperfections, nonlinearity, and ambiguity of being human and engaging in social relations beyond the transactional relationality we have been taught to worship.

Nevertheless, when playing with such notions of counter-narration and non-productivity, it is crucial to discern the positionality behind different starting points from where speculation, failure and disruption as political praxes take place. Refusing to be productive is a very different thing from failing to internalise societal metrics of normativity and assimilability. Both can constitute narrations of utopia as a form of subaltern politics, but the former is most often an alternative bestowed upon already accepted and assimilated citizen subjects with the material and social leeway to refuse capitalist realist pragmatism and

¹⁷ Ibid, 1.

¹⁸ Massimo De Angelis, "Neoliberal Governance, Reproduction and Accumulation." *The Commoner* 7, (Spring/Summer 2003), http://libcom.org/files/3_07deangelis.pdf; Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France” *Lecture II*, Picador Press, (17 Mar 2003 [1976]); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

¹⁹ *Govern-mentality* comprises a specific mode of governance that is enacted through the internalisation and self-disciplining of power relations, see: Thomas Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality and Critique” *Rethinking Marxism Conference*, University of Massachusetts Amherst, (Sep 2000), <http://www.thomaslemkeweb.de/publikationen/Foucault,%20Governmentality,%20and%20Critique%20IV-2.pdf>.

²⁰ See Neocleous, “Resisting Resilience.”

still survive.²¹ Just as with resilience, we thus have to ask: disruption by whom, and for whom? With what consequences for the global distribution of life and death?

DISRUPTION, RESILIENCE, AND COVID-19

It would be foolish in the span of this conversation not to recognise the extent to which we are currently living an example of systemic disruption – and failure – par excellence, as the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the fault-lines now tearing through the myths of both the exemplariness and inevitability associated with global capitalism. The pandemic has left us at a crossroads in that it has proven that the forms of resilience demanded from society and the individual have come about not as *pro*-action but *reaction*, to respond to the crises spawned over and over within the contemporary capitalist global²², where uneven capital accumulation and unimpeded growth is privileged over sustainability and justice, and military(industrial) solutions are prescribed to resolve social challenges. Having been asked with so many defence strategies, fiscal packages, and development policies to brace ourselves against the volatility of our interdependent global existence, the pandemic has brought our utter unpreparedness into sharp relief.

“The first lesson the coronavirus taught us is also the most astounding: we have actually proven that it is possible, in a few weeks, to put [a global] economic system on hold” philosopher Bruno Latour wrote in the early days of the pandemic, “a system that we were told it was impossible to slow down or redirect.”²³ This insight is not limited to those hoping to challenge the divinity of global capitalism but applies equally to those wishing to launch an absolute critique of global militarisation, as the pandemic has demonstrated the undeniable helplessness of military security models in protecting either the people or the planet. Ripping through our physical, military, and economic (inter)national fences, the pandemic has highlighted that it is possible to imagine a different form of global govern-*mental* ethos.

²¹ See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique,” *Signs*. 38, 4. (2013): 967-991.

²² Tanaya Majumder, “A Critical Analysis of Capitalism, Capital Accumulation and Crisis Theory in David Harvey.” *Arthaniti: Journal of Economic Theory and Practice*, (October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0976747920953009>.

²³ Bruno Latour, “What Protective Measures Can You Think of so we Don’t Go Back to the Pre-crisis Production Model?” *AOC*, (29 Mar 2020), http://www.bruno-latour.fr/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_1.pdf.

With its immensely disruptive impacts on individuals, communities, and global social-economic relations, coronavirus has occasioned an exemplary opportunity to practice the arts of speculation and counter-narration in the systemic context. If seized and understood as such, the pandemic thus offers a unique window to disrupt any attempts at recreating the same world – again. Instead, this should be the moment to re-imagine the templates for human co-existence and build on the personal to global experiences of disruption as productive, though painful, possibilities for counter-narration. “It is no longer a matter of a system of production picking up again or being curbed” Latour notes, “but one of getting away from production as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world.”²⁴

As we ask these kinds of questions, each of us is onto the task of thinking up protective measures, not just against the virus, but against every element of the mode of production that we *don't* want to see coming back.²⁵

Naturally, caution is warranted here – as is the case whenever claiming a moment in time to constitute a novel or true opportunity for change. The disruptive force of the pandemic has been far from equally carried by the world's population. Judith Butler confirms this in her recent comments on the pandemic as “a crisis in itself but also one that exacerbates pre-existing crises of capital, care, race, and climate.”²⁶ However, as is also always the case when daring to have hope, through engaging in discussion and thought on how to seize the post-pandemic moment to build new realities worldwide, we *might* increase the chances of effectuating any such change at all. Yet throughout we need to keep asking: Who is this change for should it happen? Who has the opportunity (and time) even to speculate on alternative futures, and who gets to design and enjoy the fruits of such transformations?

²⁴ Latour, “What Protective Measures”, 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Judith Butler, “Judith Butler: On COVID-19, the Politics of Non-violence, Necropolitics, and Social Inequality,” *Verso Books*. (24 Jul 2020): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bnj7H7M_Ek.

CONCLUSION

When framed by resilience, disruption becomes a mode of systemic denigration, as much practically as cognitively and affectively. The point of this reflection has been to give theoretical sustenance to a highly subjective experience of how we all, in our own ways, grapple with the expectations of resilience, perseverance, and endless productivity accompanying late-modernity, and to situate the power to disrupt in the imaginaries of the everyday subjects of global capitalism. Disruption must thus be understood equally in the abstract context of speculative modes of personal narration (thinking, feeling, and dreaming). Here, the individual is able to think beyond the subject of neoliberal state desire and so disrupt processes of subjectification, disrupt the myths of resilience as the late-modern form of self-realisation, and disrupt the habit of existing in the name of productivity, to exist – for a moment’s repose – only as the object of one’s own desire. When using disruption as a state of the mind and the heart, it becomes a little easier to imagine happiness beyond the bounds of simply persevering. Bringing the systemic disruption generated by Covid-19 with us as final proof of the brittleness of global capitalist and military relations into our personal narration of the post-pandemic, we might just stand the chance of speculating a fairer, kinder, and more creative future into being – as long as we take care to speculate in conversation with those who are occupied with simply surviving.

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