

## PERSPECTIVE

# The limits of “resilience”: Relationalities, contradictions, and re-appropriations

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**Abstract**

The concept of “resilience” is ubiquitous in global governance, extending from climate and ecological issues to practically all spheres of human endeavor. However, post-pandemic discourses suggest that the concept may no longer be capable of synthesizing diverse and diverging geopolitical interests into common policy goals. Responding to what we see as an emerging “crisis of resilience,” we reconsider the utility of the concept and advance “irresilience” as its critical relational “other.” We argue that to make resilience meaningful in a “polycrisis,” it is necessary to think about it dialectically and consider how it is undermined by the very actors that evangelize it.

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contradiction, crisis, dialectics, Irresilience, relationality, resilience

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

Resilience is the go-to crisis-governance concept. Climate and ecological emergencies are its centers of gravity, but it extends far beyond into the economic, social and political realms (Datola, 2023, p. 11). Its success derives from malleability and adaptability, its capacity to synthesize different perspectives (Cox et al., 2022). However, this capacity may be running up against limits, calling for a re-evaluation of the concept. To demonstrate this Perspective, we explore polycrisis discourses, exemplified by the United Nations, which have become increasingly urgent since the COVID-19 pandemic. UN agencies simultaneously evangelize resilience and suggest that it is severely undermined by states and corporate elites. The second part of the Perspective develops this insight into the contradictions of resilience by surfacing the little-used concept of “irresilience.” We define manufactured irresilience as damage incurred by people, places and planet, which undermines the possibility of resilience, and results from causally discernible and remediable human behaviors. Building on the “critical resilience” literature (De Verteuil & Golubchikov, 2016), we propose irresilience as a provocative analytical twist on the pairing of concepts. However, instead of a continuum leading from one condition to another, such as vulnerability-security (Detraz, 2011), we position resilience and irresilience as causally related

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opposites. We argue that conceiving of irresilience and resilience as a dialectical pair puts the latter in its place, demanding a renewed focus on causation, the scope for human agency and repair. The article therefore presents a new Perspective for research approaching resilience both critically and dialectically.

## 2 | RESILIENCE: THE ORTHODOXY

Resilience has become an “orthodox” crisis-governance concept, where orthodoxy is constituted by de-politicizations and silences enacted through dominant ways of knowing (Davies, 2012, p. 2690). With roots in science and engineering and anglophone origins in the 17th century (Dahlberg, 2015), it was introduced to ecological theory by Holling (1973). It spread into the social sciences through the body of social theory on reflexive modernization developed most influentially by Beck (1992). The essence of Beck’s argument was that the industrial societies and sciences of first modernity produce accelerating, complex and incalculable risks confronted by problem-solving networks. Resilience is imbued with these presuppositions.

Recent taxonomies suggest that the concept of resilience has evolved into two primary approaches. The first is an equilibrational, absorptive or static model, accentuating the need for entities to recover and “bounce-back” to pre-existing states (Datola, 2023; Grego et al., 2024). Recognizing the evolutionary character of both natural and social systems, the second approach accentuates complexity, adaptivity and transformation. The adaptive perspective asserts the impossibility and often undesirability of returning to a prior state that, existing only in the past, can never fully be replicated (Amirzadeh et al., 2022). It therefore seeks to “increase the adaptability of systems rather than reduce vulnerability” (Amirzadeh et al., 2022, p. 4). Where they highlight the relationship between inequality and adaptive capacities, and the positive capabilities of agents to transform environments and systems (Amirzadeh et al., 2022, p. 5), these approaches overlap the heterogeneous concept of “critical resilience” discussed below. The relationship between complex systems thinking and dialectics is itself diverse and complicated (Levins, 1998), but it remains characteristic of mainstream resilience literature, whether adaptive, transformative or equilibrational, that they accentuate complexity in a way that naturalizes escalating risk.

For example, in setting out an agenda for resilience in management studies, an influential journal editorial argued that a “key characteristic of many of the disasters and crises societies face nowadays is that they are triggered by improbable events the causes of which are not well understood” (van der Vegt et al., 2015, p. 972). This controversial proposition is presented as an incontrovertible fact. Norberg and Cumming (2008, p. 3) described resilience as incorporating “adaptation, learning, and self-organization ... in addition to the general ability to *tolerate* disturbance” (emphasis added). This view of resilience remains highly influential and promotes acquiescence in the sense of learning to live with or adapting proactively to a suboptimal system (Koutra et al., 2022). As Amirzadeh et al. (2022, p. 5) observe, both main approaches to resilience focus “more on consequences than eliminating the root causes of the crisis or vulnerability.” One consequence, we suggest, is that mainstream resilience thinking tends to overstate intangible causal complexities and downplay immediate and readily visible causes: the impacts of knowable and attributable human actions.

This approach to resilience has penetrated deeply into the global governance and public policy of the climate emergency (and far beyond). According to Cox et al. (2022, p. 296), resilience planning is characterized by a process they call “designerly synthesis.” By this, they mean that it integrates perspectives that are often in tension if not contradiction. This methodology sits comfortably with the premise that continued risk escalation is a fact of life and captures the process underpinning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where rich and poor nations elaborated common problematizations and goals, but without challenging ways of living in high GDP and high-polluting countries. Designerly synthesis neutralizes critique by invoking complexity and establishing an equivalence between inequivalent experiences of climate change, such as between rich white and poor black neighborhoods (Cox et al., 2022, p. 304). The notion of the “just transition” is a synthesizing concept par excellence: a goal that is hard to oppose, but in practical terms requires very little of the rich, minority world (Bainton et al., 2021).

Mainstream conceptions of resilience have met with a robust critical response. We identify two main critical traditions. The first repudiates the concept altogether, seeing resilience as irretrievably co-opted to the neoliberal worldview, imposing market-friendly solutions and devolving responsibility for crisis management to individuals and communities (Arrieta & Davies, 2024). Such approaches represent any failure of resilience as a cultural or moral deficit (Donoghue & Edmiston, 2020; Joseph, 2013). The second perspective defined by De Verteuil and Golubchikov (2016) as “critical resilience,” seeks to reappropriate the concept to social justice struggles. Sou (2022), for example, shows how resilience and resistance intersect in a study of the Puerto Rican response to Hurricane Maria, at once challenging neo-colonial

subjection by the United States and demonstrating how a bottom-up focus on self-determination challenges mainstream thinking. We see our Perspective on resilience–irresilience, explained below, as a contribution to this “critical resilience” literature, illustrating how “resilience” might be recovered through subverting and inverting the concept while considering it relationally with its opposite. We see this conceptual lens as lending fresh impetus to critical resilience scholarship by de-naturalizing risk, bringing dialectics and repair to the forefront of the conversation and amplifying the analytical scope for radical human agency.

### 3 | LIMITS OF RESILIENCE

The idea that we are in a global “polycrisis,” a multifaceted crisis of economy, state, polity, society and environment, has become widespread. It has become even more salient since COVID-19, the pandemic accelerating existing crises and reigniting others, such as inflation. Polycrisis is itself a contested concept, represented variously as the confluence of separate instances of crisis (Lawrence et al., 2024), or as deriving from a set of inter-related or hierarchically ordered causes (Callinicos, 2023). Whatever the roots of poly-crises, when they erupt, they disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of the world. Established governing principles and orthodoxies, become prone to tension and contradiction and vulnerable to re-politicization (Griggs & Howarth, 2020, p. 105). Before the pandemic, for example, Chandler (2019) saw signs that resilience might be reaching exhaustion both as an intergovernmental agenda and an analytical framework. One sign of such a crisis is cognitive dissonance. This, we argue, is evident in the post-pandemic analysis of the United Nations.

The UN-Habitat World Cities Report presents resilience as a master-concept: “building resilience must be at the heart of the cities of the future” wrote UN Secretary-General António Guterres (UN-Habitat, 2022, p. iii). Echoing risk society themes, UN-Habitat naturalizes climate turbulence, arguing that “urban governance should institutionalize the mindset of planning for shocks and disruptions” (2022, p. xxix). Such a “mindset” involves taking turbulence for granted, thereby “tolerating” a sub-optimal condition. At the same time, the report captures the discordance between calls for greater resilience and the reality of a burgeoning polycrisis. It highlights a “bitter cocktail” of threats (2022, p. vii) including inflation, unemployment, economic stagnation and recession, supply chain disruptions, geopolitical conflict and global food and energy insecurities. In another report, the UN defines intersecting climate and ecological emergencies as “crisis multipliers” (United Nations, 2022, p. 2). Pointing to the post-COVID reversal of progress toward the SDGs, UN-Habitat warns that by 2030, extreme poverty could have risen by over 30% (2022, p. xxi). It sees this situation as a dire threat to resilience arguing that “poverty and inequality are incompatible with sustainability and resilience since they undermine the basis of urban stability and potentially the fabric of society” (2022, p. 303). The analysis points to a dialectical bind: resilience is the solution to escalating risk, but its conditions of possibility are simultaneously undermined by escalating risk.

This bind implies that to extent they existed before the pandemic, the conditions for resilience to climate and other disasters are deteriorating, not only but most of all in the majority world. Addressing representatives of the least-developed nations, Guterres stated: “Combating a climate catastrophe that you did nothing to cause is challenging when the cost of capital is sky high, and the financial help received is a drop in the bucket. Fossil fuel giants are raking in huge profits, while millions in your countries cannot put food on the table” (News24, 2023). Resilience, therefore, hinges on demands for global justice, which are contradicted by the brute realities described by the UN (also Fenner & Cernev, 2021): an abundance of structural “irresilience” manufactured by state and corporate elites in the global north. The World Cities report is a multi-authored work by UN officials, policymakers and academics. The discordance suggests firstly that in this polycrisis, such a disparate group can no longer produce a consistent message on the plausibility of resilience, and secondly that the widening chasm between rich and poor cannot be absorbed into a designerly synthesis on the global governance of sustainable development. UN reporting on resilience post-COVID therefore provokes cognitive dissonance.

### 4 | BURGEONING IRRESILIENCE

The second part of this Perspective argues that one fruitful response to the apparent crisis of resilience is to invert it, calling for a relational focus on its antonym, “irresilience.” In proposing this move, we amplify the insight of Amirzadeh et al. (2022, p. 5) that “resilience and vulnerability are inherent in all dynamic systems” and that “all

resilient systems may contain some aspects of vulnerability,” and vice-versa. However, we go further by proposing a dialectical relationship, in which “resilience” and manufactured “irresilience” are causally implicated. As defined earlier, manufactured irresilience is the damage incurred by people, places and planet, which undermines the possibility of resilience, and results from causally discernible and remediable human behavior. This definition has two main advantages. First, it addresses the UN’s critique by moving away from the instability-as-fate thinking of mainstream resilience toward a proactive approach that focuses not only on system maintenance and/or adaptation, but also on tangible, remediable causalities, radical agency and repair. Such a move re-politicizes the concept and calls for attention to the policies and resources required to halt burgeoning irresilience. Second, a critical focus on the relationalities of resilience and irresilience, or the dialectics of resilience (Rothe, 2024), amplifies subversive re-appropriations associated with “critical resilience” scholarship and practice. It enhances the latter by proposing an alternative theoretical anchor in metabolic rift theory.

The UN warns that notwithstanding SDGs and climate summits, “risk creation is outstripping risk reduction” (UNDRR, 2022, p. xiii). Accelerating irresilience overwhelms the finite resources of resilience available to most of humanity. This reality is confronted by growing literature that contemplates worst-case extinction scenarios (Davidson & Kemp, 2024; Leigh, 2021). One way of conceptualizing the threat, beyond complex systems thinking, is to borrow from dialectical biology to suggest that the developmental dynamics of late-capitalism drive irresilience by relentlessly undermining the socio-ecological niches in which we subsist. They therefore exacerbate what Foster (1999), following Marx, called the “metabolic rift” (or rifts) in the human and non-human biosphere.

Our theoretical framework is itself the subject of debate. Moore (2011), for example, criticizes metabolic rift theory for introducing a “Cartesian binary,” or dualism, between capital and nature. However, our view is that Moore’s critique errs in confusing dualism with duality. As explained below, we see metabolic rift theory as invoking not a Cartesian binary, but a structured, internally and dialectically related “duality.” Another debate is whether the period should be defined as the Capitalocene, Anthropocene or Plantationocene (Gandy, 2022), though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. For the sake of conceptual parsimony, we follow Foster and Clark (2022, p. 4) in treating the “Capitalinian” as an inaugural phase of the “Anthropocene,” which it is hoped will be superseded by a “Communist” rift-healing second phase post-capitalism.

The concept of metabolic rift emerged from Marx’s analysis of unsustainability in 19th century capitalist agriculture, where depleting soil nutrients led to a cycle of declining soil quality. The subsequent widening of the rift between agricultural capitalism and the Earth’s ability to sustain it was but one facet of “the material estrangement of human beings in capitalist society from the natural conditions of their existence” (Foster, 1999, p. 383). Foster extended Marx’s idea of the metabolic rift to other spheres of capitalinian–anthropocenic destruction, constituting a pervasive alienation of people from each other and the planet. These widening rifts today undermine the conditions of our (and many other) species’ reproduction (Davidson & Kemp, 2024).

The concept of the metabolic rift provides a strong theoretical anchor for considering the finitude of resilience in the face of accelerating irresilience. Dialectical biologists define ecological niche construction as the bidirectional “process of organism-driven environmental modification” (Odling-Smee et al., 2003, p. xi). The novelty of our present condition is that states and corporations in Anthropocene act on ecological niche(s) in ways that are acutely and knowably destructive from the standpoint of survival and flourishing. The biosphere has always been vulnerable to climate change and other natural events, and there is likely no future in which it would not be. Anthropocenic irresilience, however, is qualitatively distinct, uniquely self-destructive and driven by the self-manufactured, self-diagnosed crisis of our own and myriad other socio-ecological niches. It is also uniquely iniquitous, because as Guterres implied, the main carbon producers, the rich and privileged nations and persons of the world, have “lifeboats” that most do not, and privileged geographies from which to launch them (Connolly & Grove, 2021, p. 51). Where complexity theory takes risk acceleration for granted, metabolic rift theory shifts the gaze back to tangible causes and to the relentless manufacture of irresilience, especially by states, wealthy elites and corporations in the global north.

The point of foregrounding “irresilience” is that climate change denialism notwithstanding, most of the world has become increasingly conscious of all this, but so far to little ameliorative, let alone reparative, effect. The problem is not that states and corporations do nothing to mitigate climate change. The extraordinary growth of solar power is but one illustration. It is rather that in parallel with more-or-less convincing greening commitments and innovations, they continue manufacturing the conditions for ever-greater climate and ecological catastrophes. Kühne et al. (2022), for example, disclosed 425 new fossil extraction projects supported by governments and corporations, each of which would produce at least a gigaton of carbon. The projected climate impact of these “carbon bombs” would be 3° of warming.

From this perspective, irresilience arises not so much from “complex risk” (UNDRR, 2022, p. ix) as from the purposeful, knowable and remediable actions of the political and economic elites that attend climate summits and themselves employ the vocabularies of climate emergency. In other words, the pursuit of resilience is systematically undermined by the rampant manufacture of “irresilience.”

Our proposed focus on this resilience–irresilience dialectic problematizes contradictions that are readily apparent in climate change literatures. Malm’s (2022) critique of geo-engineering frames the relationship between resilience and irresilience in dialectical terms. Malm explores near-future proposals to seed the atmosphere with sun-blocking particles, heralded as a solution to the climate emergency that facilitates the continued exploitation of fossil fuels (Malm, 2022, p. 14). He considers how predictably malign unintended consequences would escalate, resulting eventually in the abandonment of the technology and a catastrophic “termination shock.” This putative resilience strategy is therefore internally contradictory, directly manufacturing irresilience. In her study of the Montecito debris flow (California), Gray (2022, p. 622) shows how selective depictions of community resilience perpetuated a false sense of “recovery”, and “a false sense of equality by washing over the struggles of the poor and ignoring the social corrosion that was evident in the rebuilding process.” Official narratives on resilience obscured the offloading of costs to communities, further threatening their long-term viability. Garcia-Lopez (2020) concluded, brutally, that mainstream resilience is replete with colonial and biocidal development logics. Ranganathan and Bratman (2021) echo this in showing how resilience planning after Hurricane Katrina was used to license police violence and displacement against the residents of flooded neighborhoods.

This discussion suggests that resilience is stymied by irresilience in at least three knowable, interconnected and remediable ways. First, it is *overflowed* by the parallel manufacture of irresilience, as the examples of fossil subsidies, carbon-bombs and rising inequalities demonstrate. Second, resilience strategies can be *structurally contradictory* in directly producing irresilience, as the examples of geo-engineering and the Montecito debris flow illustrate. Third, as Garcia-Lopez (2020) highlights, the vocabularies, practices and bio-politics of mainstream resilience are often at odds with the goods they purport to value, producing *performative contradictions* where resilience manifests as domination.

We emphasize finally that our goal in highlighting contradictions and limitations is not to dispense with “resilience,” but to refresh it by de-naturalizing the manufacture of risk and making visible the role of tangible causation in producing “irresilience.” Following the path of “critical resilience,” we suggest that resilience can contribute to overcoming irresilience if it is re-politicized, coupled with resistance, and *re-appropriated*. Extinction Rebellion’s “Resilience for Rebellion” slogan (Extinction Rebellion, 2022) is one pithy illustration of how resilience is reappropriated. The recognition and valuing of “rooted practices of care and healing from historical trauma” is another, drawing attention to the possibility of going beyond adaptation toward the radical forms of agency required for restitution and repair (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021, p. 116). Table 1 summarizes these conclusions.

**TABLE 1** The dialectics of resilience and irresilience.

<b>Dialectics of resilience and irresilience</b>	
<b>Relationality</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Irresilience overflows resilience	Elites talk resilience, while simultaneously manufacturing the conditions of irresilience. Example: Fossil-fuel subsidies and carbon bombs overflow the impact of climate friendly innovations, such as solar power.
Structural contradictions of resilience	Resilience exacerbates the crises it is supposed to mitigate. Example: Geo-engineering to mitigate the effects of climate change boomerangs and results in a catastrophic termination shock.
Performative contradictions of resilience	Top-down resilience planning embeds violent, racist and colonial logics. Example: Stigmatization of black neighborhoods in New Orleans leads to displacement and gentrification after Katrina.
Constructive: The re-appropriation of resilience	Critical resilience: The concept is reappropriated from mainstream discourses, re-centering radical human agency, resistance and repair. Examples: “Resilience for Rebellion” (Extinction Rebellion) directs resilience toward resistance. Stricken communities foreground ethics of care and healing (repair).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Cognitive dissonance in United Nations analyses of resilience demonstrates how the orthodox crisis-governance concept is undermined by surging irresilience. Our Perspective suggests that the cause of resilience is therefore best served by treating it as causally related with manufactured irresilience. This conceptual maneuver foregrounds questions that are typically ignored by the naturalization of risk manufacture in complexity theory. The advantages of framing resilience–irresilience as a pair are fivefold. It (a) refuses the bracketing of escalating chronic and acute climate disasters from the existence of knowable, remediable causes, (b) thereby considers the dynamics of resilience–irresilience in any disaster event or process relationally, (c) re-centers the view that minority world extractivism and pervasive poverty and inequality are primary drivers of irresilience; (d) in a more optimistic vein, radicalizes the potential for effective critique and action against states and corporations that speciously preach “resilience” and directs attention toward remediation, healing and repair; and (e) potentially rescues the concept from the political and analytical obsolescence forecast by Chandler (2019). Conceptually, our approach directs resilience toward contradictions and radical reappropriations, thereby enhancing critical scholarship. If it is recognized that efforts to build individual, organizational, infrastructural or systemic resilience are overflowed and contradicted by actions that manufacture irresilience upstream, it becomes harder for elites to justify downloading responsibility to people and places already struggling to survive. Bonilla (2020, p. 148) captured the sentiment: “We certainly want our buildings and bridges to be resilient, but do we really want our communities to become well-adapted to structural (and infrastructural) violence”? We propose that focusing on manufactured irresilience provides a new way of explaining the burgeoning contradictions of resilience and points to potential ways in which they can be overcome.

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**Jonathan S. Davies:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (equal). **Tania Arrieta:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (equal).

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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### RELATED WIREs ARTICLES

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[Power in resilience and resilience's power in climate change scholarship](#)

### FURTHER READING

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