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Beyond resilience: The role of leadership in progressive planning

Robin Hambleton, University of the West of England, Bristol

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Abstract

Resilience has become an influential concept in planning theory and, to some extent, in planning practice. This paper, by drawing on research on the role of place-based leadership in promoting progressive planning and urban innovation in cities in fourteen countries, will suggest that resilience is a concept with serious limitations. On the plus side, the concept has proved itself to be valuable in enhancing understanding of the ability of an ecological system to absorb disturbances and recover from shocks and stresses. But the meaning of the word is now being stretched and applied in an inappropriate way to socio-political systems. The growing misuse of the term is eroding its usefulness in relation to pressing public policy debates. The evidence suggests that, as with the term sustainable development, powerful interests appear to be using the word resilience to promote a depoliticised, or managerial, view of city politics and planning. In much of the recent literature on resilience fundamental social conflicts are downplayed, power structures are neglected, and major challenges facing cities, particularly growing inequality in societies, are overlooked. Research for a new book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, suggests that paying attention to leadership, and particularly various forms of place-based leadership, can provide helpful insights on how to tackle social and environmental ills. The paper suggests that it may be possible to strengthen resilience theory and practice, certainly as it relates to urban and regional governance, by injecting ideas drawn from the study of place-based leadership.

Contact details

Robin Hambleton
Professor of City Leadership, Centre for Sustainable Planning and
Environments, University of the West of England, Bristol

E: robin.hambleton@uwe.ac.uk

Introduction

In recent years resilience is a concept that has gained popularity in planning theory and, to some extent, planning practice. The literature on resilience has expanded rapidly in recent years (Monahan 2012; Lewis and Conaty 2012; Newman et al 2009; Pearson et al 2014; Rodin 2015). In this paper I seek to raise some concerns about both the concept of resilience, as it applies to socio-political systems, and the way it is being applied in some cities and city regions.

Concepts are important. They can help us make sense of our complex world and, if they gain acceptance in political and policy circles, concepts can come to have a marked influence on practice – and on society as a whole. As explained by Donald Schon, in his perspicacious book, *Beyond the Stable State*, concepts can move, sometimes quite swiftly, from the margins of scientific discourse to become ‘ideas in good currency’ (Schon 1971 p123). Resilience would appear to be an idea that is now, in some circles at least, regarded as an idea in good currency.

The rational, scientific model offers one way of explaining the rise of resilience thinking. From this point of view understanding of natural and social systems has been advanced over the years by sound research and analysis. As a result, scholars have discovered and developed this useful concept called resilience. Schon argues, however, that stakeholders may, wittingly or otherwise, collude in the creation of a scientific mythology. He suggests that governments appear to believe that they need to operate under an aura of rational, active work on what are taken to be public problems. He describes a need for a façade of progress and problem solving:

‘This has the effect of inducing premature abandonment of issues. If we are not solving them, we must at least give the appearance of progress by moving to the next batch. It tends to be true of government, as of philosophy, that old questions are not answered – they only go out of fashion’ (Schon 1971 p142)

In this paper I will explore whether Schon’s analysis might help us explain the way resilience appears to be displacing sustainable development as an idea in good currency. Perhaps governments have found it too tough to implement effective approaches to sustainable development. On this interpretation resilience may be proving attractive to politicians and policy makers because it offers less of a challenge to established power relations than sustainable development. I will suggest that paying attention to the role of leadership, inspiring place-based leadership, is now important if we are to create just and sustainable communities.

The analysis unfolds in four parts. First, we consider, albeit briefly the notion of sustainable development. Over the years, various interested parties have chosen to redefine the concept to the point where, in some settings at least, it has become a virtually meaningless expression. We then turn to examine the

concept of urban resilience. Again our touch will be light because a substantial literature is available. In the third section three concerns about the concept of resilience are outlined. If this critique has merit, the concept would appear to have serious limitations, at least as it relates to urban and regional governance. A fourth section discusses the importance of focussing more attention on place-based leadership if we are to understand why progressive change takes place in localities and city regions. The commentary here draws on evidence presented in a new book on *Leading the Inclusive City* (Hambleton 2015). It will be suggested that it may be possible to strengthen resilience theory and practice, as it relates to urban and regional governance, by injecting ideas from the study of place-based leadership.

1) The use and abuse of sustainable development

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, stressed, in line with the 'limits to growth' argument set out by Meadows et al (1972), that any agenda for future development must include the creation of a healthy and productive environment for all human beings. And, more than a decade later, the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, mapped out a framework for equitable development. Described, in the Brundtland Report, as 'sustainable development' this approach attempted to balance environmental, social and economic needs (WCED1987).

The work of all those involved in creating and developing the notion of sustainable development, and advocating its application in the public, private and non-profit sectors, is a spectacular achievement. The idea that companies should focus solely on the 'bottom line' and seek profits at all costs was challenged. And the last thirty years have seen important steps forward across the world in relation to sustainable planning, sustainable development and sustainable living. There is now widespread recognition that the resources of the planet are bounded.

A problem, however, is that powerful interested parties have chosen to redefine, and dilute the core messages of sustainable development to the point where, in some settings at least, it has become a virtually meaningless expression. This happened fairly quickly. For example, the goal of 'sustainable development' was endorsed by the leaders (including Prime Minister Thatcher of the UK and President Reagan of the USA) of the G7 group of industrialised nations at the Toronto summit of 1988. An attempt was made to disguise the conflicts between environmental protection and economic development: 'The term sustainable development appears like a magic wand to wave away such conflicts in a single unifying goal. We can have our cake and eat it, it seems to say' (Jacobs 1991 p59)

We can note, then, that over twenty years ago evidence was presented showing that economic growth and environmental conservation are uncomfortable bedfellows. Fears were expressed that sustainable development was likely to become 'a green cover for "business as usual"' (Jacobs 1991 p59). Others have criticised the way the term has been used:

'Sustainable development remains ambiguous, inexact, ill-defined, unbounded and unmeasurable' (Stewart and Collett 1998 p59). Nigel Taylor (2003) provides a particularly incisive analysis of the meaning of the term 'sustainable development' and shows that fudging together conflicting aspirations is intellectually dishonest.

It is important to go back to the Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development. Please note that it contains **two sentences**, not one:

'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains two key concepts: 1) the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, **to which overriding priority should be given**; and 2) the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs' (WCED 1987 p43, my emphasis)

The second sentence, with its strong commitment to addressing the needs of the world's poor, has vanished from view in many academic and policy debates. Some writers on sustainable development not only forget to include the second sentence, they pay no attention to poverty and unfairness in society at all.

This drift in focus away from dealing with inequality and poverty has not gone unnoticed. It is encouraging to be able to record the increased interest in planning circles in environmental justice (Anguelovski 2013). As Adebawale (2008) explains, adopting an environmental justice perspective to nature foregrounds the social dimension. It highlights the way society interacts with the environment not just in aggregate terms, but also in relation to the **distributional impacts** of planning and urban development policies and practices. Environmental 'goods' and 'bads' are very unevenly distributed in many societies and planning plays a key role in this process. It follows that the distributional effects of urban planning and development should be at the heart of sustainable development.

Unfortunately, much of the time, distributional effects are ignored. Dana Meadows and her colleagues, when they revisited their *Limits to Growth* analysis thirty years on, reinforce this point: 'Current modes of growth perpetuate poverty and increase the gap between the rich and the poor.... In the current system economic growth generally takes place in the already rich countries and flows disproportionately to the richest people within those countries' (Meadows et al 2005 pp 41-42).ⁱ

2) The emergence of urban resilience

In every day use the word resilience means springing back, or resuming an original shape after bending or stretching. The concept has been in use in the study of ecological systems for over forty years, although it's meaning has evolved and is, even within ecological debates, contested (Holling 1973;

Bulkeley 2013). In more recent times efforts have been made to make connections between ecological and planning resilience research (Nelson et al 2006). For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the term resilience is often used to refer to the ability of an urban system to withstand, and recover, from shocks. This is, for example, the way the phrase is used in the annual conferences on *Resilient Cities* organised by ICLEI, the international organisation of local governments dedicated to sustainable development.ⁱⁱ

The concept has enhanced understanding of urban vulnerability to disasters, like floods, storm surges or heat waves, and has been popularised by various writers (Lewis and Conaty 2012; Monaghan 2012; Newman et al 2009; Pearson et al 2014). Cathy Wilkinson (2012) explores the notion of socio-ecological resilience and suggests that planning theory should give more attention to ecological concerns. This is, in my view, a sound proposal.

In 2013, The Rockefeller Foundation launched a '100 Resilient Cities Challenge' to encourage cities to better address the increasing shocks and stresses of the 21st Century.ⁱⁱⁱ Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, has written a book, *The Resilience Dividend*, making the case for giving resilience more attention (Rodin 2015). It summarises many of the arguments currently being put forward in favour of 'resilience'. It provides, in my view, a reasonably up to date statement of the arguments used by those who believe resilience presents a sound way forward for localities, cities and city regions in the 21st Century.

Rodin defines resilience in the following way:

'Resilience is the capacity of an entity – an individual, a community, an organisation, or a natural system – to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from a disruptive experience' (Rodin 2015 p3)

This is, pretty much, a mainstream definition of the way the concept of resilience is now being used in public policy making in a number of cities and city regions around the world. By drawing on systems theory Rodin sets out some broad-brush ideas on how to build resilience. She identifies five characteristics of resilience (aware, diverse, integrated, self-regulation, adaptive) and explores three phases of resilience building (readiness, responsiveness, revitalisation).

Questions can be raised about the quality of the evidence Rodin marshals to support her argument. For example, a fair amount of the case study material presented in her book is drawn from the written applications cities made to become members of the 100 Resilient Cities Challenge. It goes without saying that cities bidding for the reputational gains and resources that flow from being awarded the status of a 'Rockefeller Resilient City' have a vested interest in presenting a case that fits well with the resilience narrative. Offering a critique of this particular book is not, however, my focus of interest in this paper. Rather I am spotlighting *The Resilience Dividend* as it provides

a helpful way of drawing attention to wider problems with what we might describe as the urban resilience discourse.

3) A critique of urban resilience

In my view scholars and practitioners interested in resilience should be asking much more penetrating questions about the distributional consequences of being resilient. It is important to ask: 'Resilience for whom?' Answering 'Resilient for everyone' is an unsatisfactory response because we know that steps taken in the name of the resilience agenda have distributional consequences.

For example, measures taken to make cities more resilient to the risk of flooding may involve displacing populations and it is often poor communities that tend to be disproportionately affected. The post-Katrina reshaping of New Orleans illustrates the argument – residents of public housing areas have lost out. Edward Goetz notes that the response to the hurricane has had distributional effects:

'Katrina provided the opportunity for a final push to close down public housing in the city and move toward redevelopment' (Goetz 2013 p 93)

The environmental justice dimensions of fostering resilience seem to be getting displaced onto the margins of scientific and public policy discourse. Equally worrying, there is a risk that resilience will come to replace sustainability as the next spray-on term that vested interests may try to use to support the status quo of socio-political power relations in the modern city. In the discussion below I separate out three inter-related criticisms of urban resilience theory and practice.

i) Resilience is a significant step back from the progressive agenda originally set out for sustainable development

As mentioned above, the definition of sustainable development provided by Gro Harlem Brundtland and her colleagues in 1987, was progressive. It provided a framework for equitable development. It stressed the importance of tackling poverty. Indeed, it made clear that giving attention to meeting the needs of the world's poor should be given 'overriding priority' (WCED 1987 p43). The United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network has stayed true to this agenda. Their recent report to the United Nations, advocating a separate urban goal for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, stresses the vital role of sustainable development in tackling poverty and bringing about social inclusion (UN-SDSN 2013).

This commitment to progressive possibilities is **not** centre stage in the narrative about resilience. On the contrary, definitions of resilience focus on process, not substantive outcomes. For example, the definition of resilience provided by Judith Rodin – see above - is devoid of social purpose. Dictators would be happy to sign up to this as a description of their approach to governing. They will agree that it is wise: '... to prepare for disruptions, to

recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from disruptive experience' (Rodin 2015 p3). To be fair, Rodin's book does mention poverty, albeit only once. However, it is introduced to suggest that '... poverty is in decline' (Rodin 2015 p 91). The lack of awareness in this book of the growth of inequality in the modern world is startling, particularly when there is so much fine scholarship on this topic (Dorling 2014; Stiglitz 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). The growth of inequality is a critical feature of our time and resilience strategies that ignore it are unlikely to be effective.

In making this criticism of resilience thinking I am echoing the critique of planning theory set out by Susan Fainstein (2010). In her book, *The Just City*, Fainstein argues that much planning theory is obsessed with process – as a result it simply ignores the reality of structural inequalities and hierarchies of power in modern society. She argues that the substantive purposes of city planning should be central to planning theory, not some kind of afterthought. The same is true for resilience. The focus in much of the urban resilience literature is on process – substantive social purposes are neglected.

Allow me to press the point. The apartheid system in South Africa was clearly a resilient socio-political system if we accept Judith Rodin's definition of resilience. The National Party, the ruling party in South Africa from 1948, was able to curtail the rights of the majority of black inhabitants for almost half a century. It was so resilient it was able to imprison articulate, political opponents, including Nelson Mandela, for decades. Dictatorships across the world are, right now, demonstrating that they can be resilient in the face of legitimate political pressures for change. The governmental systems dictators steer in these countries seem to manage, much of the time, to adapt creatively to perceived threats and shut them down. Resilience, then, describes a quality of a given system. It is **not**, in and of itself, a desirable objective for a social system. It describes a process – the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Progressive politics requires the overthrow of oppressive power systems. Frankly speaking, we don't want these unjust systems to bounce back.

ii) Intellectual incoherence

Perhaps because the substantive political purpose of resilience is rarely clearly expressed, writers on urban resilience appear, at times, to be confused about the objectives of resilience efforts. On the one hand, resilience implies an ability to 'bounce back' – to recover from shocks and stresses. In broad terms resilience appears to refer to the ability of an urban system to adapt in the face of change – to recover, to get back to where it was before. On the other hand, some writers on resilience appear to recognise that it is important not just to 'bounce back' – it might be important to move beyond resilience and consider how to transform the systems that limit socio-environmental possibilities (Pelling 2011).

This is a key point. Is the objective to bounce back? To recover from the disruption caused by a shock to the system? Or is it the opposite? That is, to **not** to return to a pre-existing situation, but to change into something else?

Some writers seem to be confused on this point. For example, Satterthwaite and Dodman (2013) exhibit a tendency to collapse together resilience and transformation in their discussion of urban change. This approach fails to recognise that these words have **different meanings**. Transformation means making a thorough and dramatic change in form and/or character. It is not about bouncing back, it is about changing into something else.

In her book Judith Rodin appears to recognise this distinction (Rodin 2015). But, because her definition of resilience lacks substantive content we are left wondering what political and social objectives she believes resilient policy makers should pursue. In the discussion below I suggest that effective civic leaders are not focussed on returning to the status quo – they strive to change things. They collaborate with diverse interests to develop a vision of the future and then work with stakeholders to bring about that vision. They are clearly in the business of transformation.

iii) The neglect of power and politics

My third concern about resilience, and it is a variation on my first criticism, is that it seems to pay little attention to power and politics in modern society. When it does show political awareness, it appears to be careful not to offend figures in the established power structure. This is unsatisfactory. There is now a helpful body of literature on the exercise of power in cities and city regions, but this literature on the struggles and conflicts encountered in every city does not feature that much in the urban resilience literature. Urban political scientists and sociologists have advanced our knowledge of who gains and who loses in the modern city. But authors like Fainstein (2010), Harvey (1973) and Stone (1989) seem to be rarely cited by academics studying urban resilience.

There is a deeper argument here about, what I call, the ‘managerialisation of politics’. By this I mean the masking of socio-political conflicts by those powerful interests who prefer to define current political challenges within a managerialist paradigm. Erik Swyngedouw builds on and deepens this argument. He links the current populist discourse relating to climate change and sustainable development to the attempt, pursued by many in power, to adopt a ‘post-political’ approach to the public sphere. In this post-political world, so the argument goes, words are redefined or diluted in order to emasculate fundamental conflicts.

On this analysis it is no accident that sustainable development has become a relatively meaningless term because: ‘Post-politics refers to a politics in which ideological struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration’ (Swyngedouw 2010 p225). In making the link between post-politics and climate change he argues that many involved in green politics have moved from a position of contestation, organised action and radical disagreement, ten or twenty years ago, to one in which they have been co-opted into the service of neo-liberal aims and objectives. He argues that weak definitions of sustainable development, ones that attempt to

maximise consensus, stand in the way of clear thinking about what is actually going on. Perhaps the same can be said of resilience.

Judith Rodin gave a public lecture about her new book, *The Resilience Dividend*, at the University of Bristol on 16 January 2015. When asked by a member of the audience why she had said little or nothing about politics she asserted that there is no longer a right wing or a socialist way of bringing about change. She espoused a view that is clearly in line with the managerialisation of politics. Her book does not discuss power in modern society and says relatively little about the fundamental conflicts found in all cities, even so-called resilient cities.

Perhaps we need to ask some more fundamental questions about the use of the word 'resilience' in the urban context. Has the academic fashion for studying resilience led to the concept being used in an inappropriate way? Do we always want urban systems to bounce back to how they were? Does the concept of resilience embody an inherently conservative political stance?

4) Can study of place-based leadership contribute?

The critique of urban resilience set out above is not intended as an attack on the values that underpin authentic approaches to sustainable development, sustainable planning and sustainable living. Rather I am raising a few questions that could be given more attention by scholars and practitioners keen to understand and improve the quality of life in cities. In my own work I have found it helpful to focus on place-based leadership.

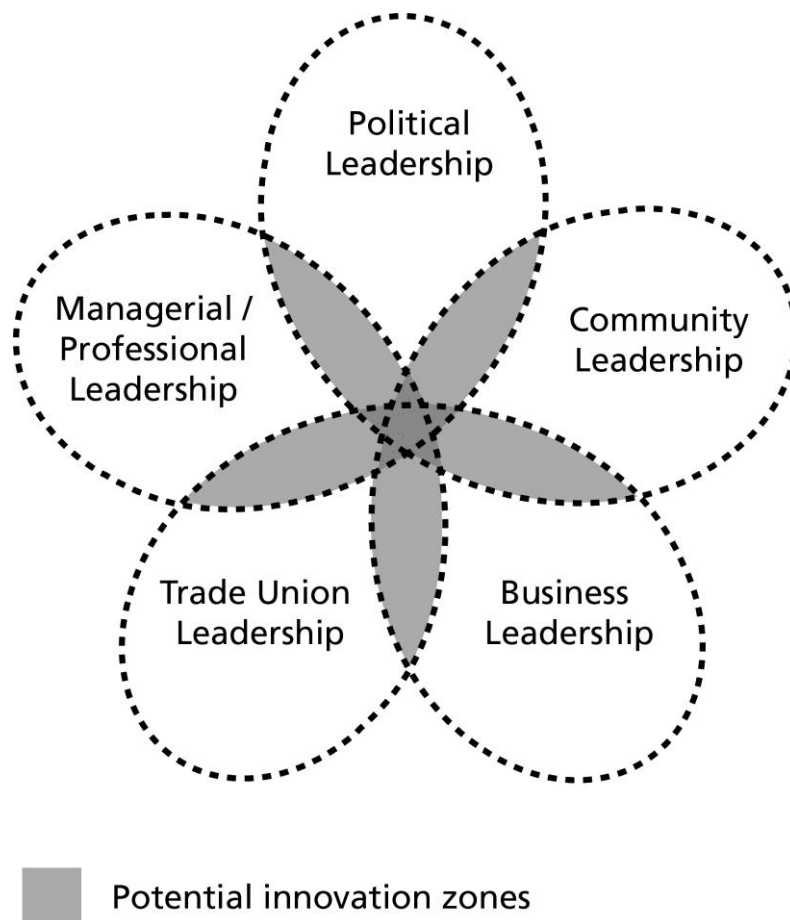
In my new book I suggest that those interested in progressive public policy making might find a notion that I describe as *New Civic Leadership (NCL)* to be helpful (Hambleton 2015). NCL involves strong, place-based leadership acting to co-create new solutions to public problems by drawing on the complementary strengths of civil society, the market and the state. If we are to understand effective, place-based leadership, we need a conceptual framework that highlights the role of local leaders in facilitating public service innovation. Here I provide a sketch of a possible framework.

Figure 1 suggests that in any given locality there are likely to be five realms of place-based leadership reflecting different sources of legitimacy:

- **Political leadership** – referring to the work of those people elected to leadership positions by the citizenry
- **Public managerial/professional leadership** – referring to the work of public servants, including planners, appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organisations to plan and manage public services, and promote community wellbeing
- **Community leadership** – referring to the many civic-minded people who give their time and energy to local leadership activities in a wide variety of ways

- **Business leadership** – referring to the contribution made by local business leaders and social entrepreneurs, who have a clear stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality
- **Trade union leadership** – referring to the efforts of trade union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees

Figure 1: The realms of place-based leadership



These roles are all important in cultivating and encouraging public service innovation and, crucially, they overlap. I describe the areas of overlap as innovation zones – areas providing many opportunities for inventive behaviour. This is because different perspectives are brought together in these zones and this can enable active questioning of established approaches. It is fair to say the areas of overlap in **Figure 1** are often experienced as conflict zones, rather than innovation zones. These spaces do, of course, provide settings for power struggles between competing interests and values. Moreover, power is unequally distributed within these settings. This is precisely why place-based leadership matters. The evidence

from my research is that civic leadership is critical in ensuring that the innovation zones – sometimes referred to as the ‘soft spaces’ of planning (Illsley et al 2010) or ‘space for dialogue’ (Oliver and Pitt 2013, 198-99) – are orchestrated in a way that promotes a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to innovation. Civic leaders are, of course, not just ‘those at the top’. All kinds of people can exercise civic leadership and they may be inside or outside the state.

Reflections and conclusions

Powerful forces shape the context within which place-based leadership is exercised. Influential place-less leaders – in globalised corporations, central governments and elsewhere – may care little about the quality of life of particular communities living in particular localities. However, cities and localities are not helpless victims in a global flow of events. A key challenge for place-based leaders is to understand how to use their local power to negotiate with place-less organisations to bring about desirable outcomes and enhance the power of local democracy. The analysis presented here suggests that place-based leadership can, even in heavily constrained situations, work to expand the amount of political space available to local communities. The obsession with markets and market values has done great damage to societies across the world (Sandel 2012). But many cities are, right now, pursuing progressive strategies that amplify the power of communities living in particular places to shape their own future.

Creating resilient communities capable of responding to modern urban challenges – growing inequality, feelings of social exclusion, climate change and so on – requires the development of effective, multi-level, place-based leadership. In my book I provide seventeen examples of inspirational civic leadership drawn from cities in all continents. The urban resilience literature has enhanced our understanding of ecology *in* cities as well as the ecology *of* cities. However, in this paper I have suggested that the word resilience is now being stretched and applied in an inappropriate way to socio-political systems. Perhaps the growing interest in place-based leadership – politically driven leadership working to create inclusive cities can offer a corrective.

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Endnotes

ⁱ It is worth noting that in recent years scholars have created new academic journals that are attempting to advance interdisciplinary analysis of cities and urban development – ones that span socio-political and socio-environmental perspectives. For example, the European Urban Research Association (EURA) launched an international journal – *Urban Research and Practice* – in 2008; and *The International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* was first published in 2010.

ⁱⁱ ICLEI has been running international conferences on Resilient Cities since 2010. More: <http://www.iclei.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ More: <http://100resilientcities.rockefellerfoundation.org>