

## **Critique and Ontological Politics**

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### **Abstract**

In this commentary I explore three questions in response to Simon and Randalls emphasis on the 'resilience multiple'; how to understand the endurance of the general as it folds with and into the singular; how might an ontological politics concerned with the coming to form of realities deal with processes of unbecoming; and what becomes of critique as practice and ethos in the midst of a concern with ontological multiplicity.

Keywords: Multiple, Multiplicity, Critique, Ontological Politics, Resilience

## Critique and Ontological Politics

How to take seriously the incoherences and contradictions of an apparently singular phenomenon, in this case resilience? And what is at stake, theoretically and politically, in paying attention to the relations and foldings between singularity and generality that constitute something as 'more than one, less than many'? These are the questions Simon and Randalls (2015) pose in their important, timely intervention in debates about resilience. The questions extend beyond their concern in this paper with resilience. They challenge geographers and other social scientists to refuse the reductionisms that allow us to tell simple, consoling stories about the contemporary condition. Stories that too easily make seemingly novel phenomena into an expression of some kind of already known and named social/spatial formation (in this case principally 'neoliberalism'; see Anderson 2015). Carefully teasing out differences in the sites and interventions that make up various but partially connected resiliences, their analysis makes resilience into a problematic object for thought and research. Not only is resilience multiply enacted and differentially articulated, but it is also actual and virtual, enveloped and animated by promises and threats that fold into the different kind of realities it becomes with. It is not only, then, that resilience is a multiple. It is also that resiliences 'exist', in part, as possibilities or potentialities. In making resilience strange, by paying attention to and taking seriously its constitutive incoherence and ambiguity, the paper interrupts a particular, habitual way of being critical. 'Resilience' is not the latest expression of the thing called 'neoliberalism'. Far from dismissing work that ties resilience to iterations of neoliberal reason, the paper rejects (by the manner of analysis, rather than explicitly) an argument that proceeds by resemblance: that neoliberalism supposedly individualises and resilience individualises, to give a far too crude example. They also reject an argument that would extract the generality of the relation between resilience and neoliberalism from a single case of how resilience gets done in practice. 'Resilience' is never a simple expression of an already constituted political formation. This is not, however, to rule out any relation; far from it. Rather, Simon and Randalls encourage us to slow down and trace the precise connections between whatever is taken to be neoliberalism or neoliberal (or any other political formation) and this or that articulation of the singular-multiple resilience. To borrow a phrase from

Foucault (2008) and to put it negatively and in the imperative mode, analysis must avoid the 'elision of actuality' that can characterise some confident denunciations of resilience or the resilient subject. In this response, I raise some questions about an approach I support, honing in on the relation between singularity and generality, the practice of ontological politics and the consequences for critique.

Simon and Randalls are clear that resilience is something more than a collection of radically different singularities given unity only by a shared name. Rightly, they are concerned with describing and determining generality but without reproducing an interpretive strategy that reduces the singular to the excessive. How, though, to extract some kind of generality from different case-events of how resilience is articulated in practice (including in the kind of programmatic statements that the paper focuses on)? What, in short, is the commonality that enables Simon and Randalls to speak of 'resilience' as a singular-multiple, rather than a series of disconnected fragments (and here there is a difference between showing ontological multiplicity, as Randell and Simon do, and an emphasis on multiple, different ontologies) ? They identify what cuts across resiliences as a 'post-political generality' i.e. a particular organisation of the space-time of politics that forecloses the possibility of some kind of radical disruption from the outside (as articulated through techniques and technologies of management). Leaving aside whether this is right, and I think it should have the status of a proposition to be developed through further research, this raises some questions about how to approach the general through an emphasis on multiplicity. How is the generality that, in part, composes resilience produced, enacted, articulated or expressed? My sense is that the conceptual vocabulary Simon and Randalls offer could be supplemented in order to understand how the general (whether the 'post-political' or something else) endures across otherwise different singularities. Consider the concept of 'diagram' as a way of thinking about how the general fold with but is irreducible to singularities. Translating Foucault's (1977: 201) description of the panopticon as a diagram of a mechanism of power into his own vocabulary, for Deleuze (1988: 36) a 'diagram' is a: "map of relations between forces ... a non-unifying immanent cause that is co-extensive with the whole social field". The concept is a way of abstracting from singularities a generality that organises worlds as an open, unfinished, set of tendencies (the concept of diagram has a kinship to the idea of 'logic' that is central to Mol's (2008) later work). Following on, we might ask whether the generality of resilience is actually the

generality of something else that, whilst frequently articulated with resilience, is irreducible to it and is also articulated with other ways of governing life (preemption, response, precaution and so on). For example, consider how resiliences appear to be frequently articulated with a sense of the normality of instability in which the geo-historically specific lines separating emergency and the everyday collapse. Tensed between the endemic and the evental and resonating with a sense of 'crisis normality' and a widespread sense of precarity (Berlant 2011), the becoming normal of perpetual instability has been described, in slightly different ways, in terms of 'turbulence' (Amin 2013), 'meta-stability' (Massumi 2009) and 'emergent life' (Dillon 2015). Perhaps what provides the commonality, then, across resiliences is what Berlant (2011) calls a 'mode of eventfulness': a barely coherent sense of the qualities that events have (so thought and felt assumptions about occurrence, impact and end). Rather than the catastrophic or the apocalyptic, with their sense of a radical overturning or reversal of a normally stable and orderly everyday life, perhaps resilience is one response to the becoming-general of a specific type of crisis 'mode of eventfulness'?

By way of Mol (2002; 2008) and the after actor-network theory tradition she is part of, Simon and Randalls argue that we should intervene in the 'resilience multiple' by practicing a form of 'ontological politics'. The political question asked of resilience becomes twofold: what kinds of realities come into being through articulations and enactments of resilience and how do those realities relate to and affect one another? These questions are a little different, we should note, from an emphasis on alterity or what Povinelli (2012) terms the 'otherwise' in work that emphasises multiple ontologies: immanent dearrangements and rearrangements folded into every arrangement of existence. Key to this form of politics is a close attention to what Simon and Randalls, after Mol, term the 'interferences' between different but partially connected resiliences (the term 'frictions' is also used). However, 'interferences' as a particular mode of relation through which some realities endure at the expense of others (or through changes to others) is left a little underspecified. It gives a sense, perhaps no more, that relations between enactments may be asymmetric or unequal. It reminds us of a tradition of thinking relations between phenomenon outside of a clear, unambiguous, line between the dominant and subjected (see Williams (1977), for example, on the 'residual', 'emergent' and 'dominant' in relation to 'structures of feeling'). But 'interference' perhaps needs further elaboration alongside a consideration

of other relations between enactments (support, enablement and so on). Specifically, we might ask how some enactments (or versions) of resilience involve the unmaking of worlds, rather than only their making. That is, put simply, how is the ontological politics of resilience a matter, in part, of how certain worlds never come into being, or are foreclosed, made to disappear, depreciated, devalued or end. If the emphasis is on how partially connected resiliences come to form, how might an 'ontological politics' deal with various forms and processes of what we could call unbecoming? Are there some things an ontological politics is less good at doing?

Finally, and following on from the concern in ontological politics with relations between realities, what becomes of critique as practice, ethos and value? Faced with ontological multiplicity, has critique as denaturalisation run out of steam (after Latour (2004) on one understanding of what critique is)? Might critique become something different to what Ranciere (2009: 49) calls "the endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast"? (to give another understanding of what critique is that resonates with Latour's dissatisfaction with critique). As well as showing the contingency of different but partially connected resiliences, a typical move in broadly post constructionist work, Simon & Randalls invest a hope in demonstrating ontological multiplicity. Perhaps, though, this means that critique changes in ways that they only hint at. First, and if ontological politics is to be something other than a pluralism that implicitly values harmonious relations between equally valued realities, critique becomes an immanent evaluation of versions/enactments and how they come to form through the making and unmaking of worlds (although this raises questions of normativity). Second, critique becomes an affirmative practice that intervenes and tends to how some realities come to form by tending to the alternative possibilities folded into any enactment. The critic is not only a judge. Latour (2004: 246) hints towards an alternative when he writes of the critic as one who "assembles" and "offers the participants arenas in which to gather". Perhaps this means that critique becomes a practice of offering resources to participants (including 'arenas to gather') so that some realities might appear as matters of concern and might flourish. In an interview first published in 1980, Foucault provides us with the dream of modes of criticism that would act in the midst of things coming to form. His dream is of an ethos of criticism that does not only proceed through denunciation but works through multiple practices and is infused with affective/cognitive styles in

addition to a paranoia that, to paraphrase Sedgwick (2003), always finds what it already knows. Instead, critique might aim to bring hidden, occluded or foreclosed possibilities to life by multiplying, summoning, and inventing ... :

“I can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better. All the better<sup>1</sup>”.

(Foucault 1997: 323)

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault (1997) in conversation with Christian Delacampagne. First published in *Le Monde* 6–7 April 1980.

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