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Democracy and Resilience: From Neoliberal Governance to Post-Liberal Democracy?

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The paper explores the relationship between resilience thinking and democratic theory, a topic often overlooked in both fields. While resilience thinking shares ontological and epistemological commitments with neoliberal governance, it should not be equated with neoliberalism, particularly in its critical form. The paper examines David Chandler's concept of post-liberal democracy, which builds on a critical understanding of resilience. However, it argues that resilience thinking limits human agency due to its ontological assumptions. As a result, post-liberal democracy departs from key democratic concepts such as collective will, popular sovereignty, deliberation, and representation. This is due to resilience thinking's rejection of the modernist liberal framework of autonomous subjects and its debasement of the social. The paper concludes that while resilience cannot be reduced to neoliberalism, resilience thinking promulgates an impoverished notion of democracy, making it less stimulating for democratic theory than its widespread use in the social sciences might imply.

Keywords: resilience – post-liberal democracy – autonomy – ontology – neoliberalism

The current crisis of democracy, characterized as democratic decay, i.e. "the incremental degradation of the structures and substance of liberal constitutional democracy" (Daly 2019, 17), brings with it the interest of scholars not only in democracy's possible demise but also in its defence, life, and survival. Democratic resilience scholarship is one of the prominent strands of

this trend. It differs from other approaches (e.g., militant democracy) (Kirshner 2014) in that it does not focus exclusively on strengthening democracy's robustness (i.e., a democratic regime's ability to withstand shocks and crises – in the case of militant democracy, primarily by containment of anti-democrats) but also highlights democracy's ability to survive and thrive via internal adaptation (see, e.g., Merkel – Lührmann 2021, 872). While the idea of democratic resilience has become established in more empirically oriented research (e.g., Boese 2021; Guasti 2020; Rovny 2023), it has been haunted by the ambiguity of the very notion of democratic resilience. Josh Holloway and Rob Manwaring (2022) claim in their review paper on recent discussions within the democratic resilience scholarship that the field "suffers from an absence of clear definitions, coherent theorizing, and means of measurement" (Holloway – Manwaring 2022, 69). They have also listed 14 definitions of democratic resilience (Holloway – Manwaring 2022, 90) in the literature on democratic resilience. As Volacu and Aligica note, this ambiguity is challenging since "development of a research area around any concept requires basic agreement on its core tenets" (Volacu – Aligica 2023, 622).

The ambiguity of definitions within the democratic resilience scholarship has at least three causes. First, the success of the concept of resilience, which "in the recent past rapidly infiltrated vast areas of the social sciences," leading to the proliferation of its various conceptualisations (Walker – Cooper 2011, 143; see also Borbeau 2018). Second, as Kolers (2016, 92) argues, "by large, political philosophers have missed the resilience rush," which means that political philosophy, the discipline by definition most focused on elaborating and defining concepts, tends to overlook the idea of resilience that contributes to the gap between resilience thinking, on one hand, and democratic resilience scholarship and democratic and political theory more generally, on the other. Third, political philosophers tend to ignore the idea of resilience because of the widespread belief that resilience is associated with neoliberal governance (see, e.g., Joseph 2013; Evans – Reid 2014; Foucault 2008; Stiegler 2022; Zebrowski 2013).

The present paper is situated within the field of political philosophy. It does not delve into the discussion within empirically oriented democratic resilience scholarship and does not intend to provide yet another definition of democratic resilience. Instead, it asks a more general question about the relationship between democracy and resilience thinking stemming from social-ecological systems (Walker – Salt 2006). Hence, the paper focuses on resilience

thinking and its relationship to democratic theory, a topic that democratic theory and democratic resilience scholarship tend to neglect or address only fleetingly (see Burelli 2024; Volacu – Aligica 2023). It suggests that even though resilience thinking shares ontological and epistemological commitments with neoliberal governance, resilience cannot be identified with neoliberalism, especially in resilience's critical form. To prove the thesis, the paper engages with David Chandler's conception of post-liberal democracy, arguably the most influential conception of democracy based on a critical understanding of resilience. However, the paper also suggests that resilience thinking, because of its ontology, proposes a limited understanding of human agency (Schmidt 2015; Joseph 2016). This leads to post-liberal democracy being a relatively idiosyncratic notion of democracy, one that identifies democracy with reflection on the inner life and, therefore, refuses some of the cherished democratic theory concepts such as collective will, popular sovereignty, deliberation, and representation, to name just a few (Chandler 2014b; Chandler 2014c, 162 – 180). The paper suggests that this impoverished notion of democracy results from resilience thinking's refusal of the modernist liberal framework of autonomous subjects and the debasement of the social. The paper concludes that although resilience cannot be identified with neoliberalism, resilience thinking is still less stimulating for democratic thought than the widespread use of the resilience concept in social sciences might suggest.

The paper is structured into three parts. The first two parts briefly discuss the genealogy of the resilience concept within social-ecological systems and F. A. Hayek's understanding of adaptation as a crucial feature of resilience's ontology of adaptive systems. The paper's final section turns to David Chandler's concept of post-liberal democracy as an example of a critical resilience's take on democratic theory.

I. From Ecological to Social Resilience

As suggested above, the concept of resilience (i.e., its meaning, origin, and genealogy) is contested (Bourbeau 2018). Therefore, its interpretation varies across various disciplines, from engineering to psychology. However, there is a consensus that resilience in the social and political sciences originates in ecology (Grove 2018; Walker – Cooper 2011). Crawford Stanley Holling's 1973 paper on the resilience and stability of ecological systems is widely regarded as a foundational study in the ecological understanding of resilience. Holling, drawing on evolutionary theory, whose main "pay-off," he claimed, is to "stay

in the game" (Holling 1973, 18), i.e., to preserve the system, highlighted two ways of conceiving how systems might be preserved: resilience and stability. He defined stability as a system's ability to return to equilibrium after a temporary perturbation. In contrast, resilience was defined as the "persistence of relationships within a system" (Holling 1973, 17), meaning the system's capacity to absorb change while maintaining its core functions. From this perspective, a system can be highly resilient yet relatively unstable; in other words, resilience is compatible with significant fluctuation.

According to Holling, the distinction between stability and resilience also determines different approaches to systems management based on different epistemologies. The stability approach emphasizes maintaining a stable and identical equilibrium, implying a predictable world with minimal fluctuations. By contrast, the resilience approach requires accepting that it is impossible to achieve complete knowledge, acknowledging human ignorance, and understanding that "future events are expected but that they will be unexpected" (Holling 1973, 21).

The concept of resilience later expanded into social science under the heading "social-ecological resilience." This view highlights that "people and nature" are "interdependent systems" that can't be understood independently (Folke et al. 2010, 2; Adger 2000). However, this extension also means a reformulation of the resilience concept. Whereas for Holling, the system required resilience only in the presence of external shocks, meaning that in the case of their absence, the system could exist without resilience; social-ecological resilience sees both systems as interacting, which places shocks and changes at the very core of social-ecological systems. In other words, while for Holling resilience was external to the system, social-ecological system makes change and resilience the system's ontological propriety. Following this, the social-ecological system approach to resilience differentiates two strategies of resilience (or staying in the game): adaptability and transformability. Adaptability involves the capacity of social-ecological system "to learn, combine experience and knowledge, adjust its responses to changing external drivers and internal processes, and continue developing within the current stability domain" (Folke et al. 2010, 2). By contrast, transformability captures the capacity of social-ecological system to "transform the stability landscape itself" and become "a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social structures make the existing system untenable" (Folke et al. 2010, 2 – 3).

However, many authors have noted the similarity between this understanding of natural and socioeconomic systems, such as markets. Some

(see, e.g., Walker – Cooper, 2011, 144) even proclaimed resilience's "ideological fit with a neoliberal philosophy of complex adaptive systems" as developed in the later works of F. A. Hayek. The connection between ecological thinking and economics or even neoliberalism should not be surprising as they all share the view of the world as a self-regulating mechanism tending towards equilibrium. In this context, Chris Zebrowski (2013, 164) points to the "co-constitution" of disciplines of economics and ecology, emphasizing the fact that ecology has been under the influence of Carl Linnaeus's 1749 seminal work *The Oeconomy of Nature*, originally understood as "nature's economy." Moreover, it was Thomas Malthus's concept of natural selection that influenced Darwin's theory of evolution, and, in turn, evolutionary theory influenced many 19th- and 20th-century political thinkers, including the godfathers of neoliberalism, Walter Lippmann and F. A. Hayek (e.g., Hayek 1988, 23 – 28; Stiegler 2022).

A closer look at the relationship between resilience thinking based on social-ecological resilience and neoliberalism reveals key areas of their interconnection: epistemic-ontological and governance. Let us start with the epistemic-ontological level. Both neoliberalism and resilience thinking share a form of epistemic modesty. This stems from both approaches' conception of the world as being subject to constant flux and change, beyond the full grasp of human reason. Hence, economist Douglass C. North defines the world as non-ergodic, by which he means that the world has no stable structure that would allow us to develop a theory that could be "applied time after time, consistently" (North 1999, 2).

Regarding governance, the non-ergodic world of constant change and flux causes permanent danger, uncertainty, and the consequent securitization of life. Uncertainty results from the impossibility of calculating probability distributions in a non-ergodic world due to its permanent changes. Therefore, knowing the outcomes of both social and natural processes in advance is impossible. As for the danger, it is part and parcel of biological life itself, which can never be safe due to its vulnerability and mortality. Similarly, in neoliberal as well as liberal thought, danger arises partly from the freedom of the individuals to pursue their interests, from their vulnerability and ability to choose to avoid pain and suffering. As Foucault claims, "The motto of liberalism is: 'Live dangerously'" (Foucault 2008, 66, 171 – 173).

This awareness of the non-eliminable danger and the vulnerability that is its source, together with the non-ergodic nature of the world, determines the shared nature of the governance practices of both social-ecological resilience

and neoliberalism. These practices shift from understanding governance via more or less stable sociological categories like class, nation-state, or social identity to seeing the world as comprising of variable webs of overlapping relationships between individuals and their environment. Coming to terms with one's vulnerability then requires, on a biological level, resilience as an endless process of adaptation of individual organisms and entire ecosystems to the environmental conditions they are exposed to and depend on. Similarly, neoliberal governance understands life as a never-ending process of adaptation by the neoliberal subjects to the changing state of their environment beyond their control (Reid 2016, 52).

II. Hayek and the Psychological Nature of Adaptation Process

As suggested above, the non-ergodic world of vulnerable actors requires governance practices with adaptation at their core. Saying that, however, implies that it is vital to understand the adaptation processes and the constraints and demands that are placed on adapting actors. In this regard, F. A. Hayek's understanding of adaptation as a psychological process is commonly considered seminal to resilience thinking (see, e.g., Walker – Cooper 2011; Schmidt 2015; Chandler 2016, 34 – 39). Hayek interprets the issue of adaptation as a question of evolution, which, he says, "is a process of continuous adaptation to unforeseeable events, to contingent circumstances which could not have been predicted" (Hayek 1988, 25). For Hayek, the subject capable of adaptation is the result of the evolutionary process, which, as he repeatedly emphasises, is unintended and cannot be controlled or predicted by reason since the human mind itself is the result of evolution. Hayek thus contrasts evolution with "constructivist rationalism," which falsely sees "the human mind as an entity standing outside the cosmos of nature and society, rather than being itself the product of the same process of evolution to which the institutions of society are due" (Hayek 2021, 19 – 20).

Hayek distinguishes biological and cultural evolution (Hayek 1988, 11 – 17). While biological evolution endows humans with instincts through genes, the cultural revolution leads to the emergence of rules that govern man and create the "extended order of human cooperation." These rules arose spontaneously and unintentionally in the course of cultural evolution, and "men tend to dislike [these rules], whose significance they usually fail to understand, whose validity they cannot prove" (Hayek 1988, 6). However, by this, Hayek makes clear, firstly, that we do not learn these rules by reason but by tradition and imitation (Hayek 1988, 21 – 23), i.e., by following rules that

have proven themselves in natural selection, and, secondly, that these new rules override or replace genetically inherited instincts, which also means that the human mind "does not so much make rules as consist of rules of conduct" (Hayek 2021, 35).

This point suggests that the adaptation process is psychological by its nature. Hayek, who studied psychology before deciding to focus on economics, addressed this topic at length in his *The Sensory Order* (2017), originally published in 1952. There, Hayek developed a specific form of neural network theory, which became the basis for his theory of spontaneous order (see, e.g., Gaus 2006). Very briefly, the central issue in Hayek's psychological doctrine is the relationship between physical and phenomenal order. While the physical order classifies things according to whether they lead to similar external events, the phenomenal order classifies things based on their sensory qualities, such as colours, sounds, tastes, etc. However, the distinction between these orders should not be understood as the difference between reality and appearance but rather as "the differences of events in their effects upon each other and the differences in their effects on us" (Hayek 2017, 138). The task of theoretical psychology, then, is to explain the phenomenal order and its noncongruence with the physical order, which – as Hayek suggests – is a consequence of the "structure of these organisms" (Hayek 2017, 141), i.e., in other words, a result of the central nervous system.

It is important to see that the division between phenomenal and physical order makes the external world – both the natural world and the world of social hierarchies – principally unknowable and uncontrollable by human reason and incapable of transformation by purposeful human behaviour. Indeed, this division places internal limits on human reasoning resulting from the psychological structures of the given subjects (their instincts, rules learned by imitation, and past experiences), rather than from orientation towards a future goal. Thus, no human behaviour can be explained without "intervening processes in the brain" (Hayek 2017, 174).

Hence, this notion of adaptation/evolution and its corollary understanding of resilience present two challenges for democratic thought: a debasement of the social and a denial of autonomy. The fact that adaptation takes place at the *milieu intérieur*, i.e., "the internal environment, within which the central nervous system functions" (Hayek 2017, 205), means that it is not the external social world that causes social hierarchies but individual responses to external events conditioned by intervening processes in each individual's brains, and as such determine their actions in the social world. This also implies

the impossibility of autonomous subjects and the consequent impossibility of the world's transformation through self-directed action (Chandler 2016, 36). Individual humans and the entire human community are conceived as biological organisms that evolve "in their structure or activity" (Hayek 2017, 206) through their adaptation in a contingency-driven evolutionary process. While human beings are not conceived of deterministically in this process because the rules that govern our actions mutate, and it is impossible to determine in advance which mutations will prevail, it is not possible to think of humans as autonomous if by autonomy we understand "the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master" whose decisions depend on them alone and "not on external forces of whatever kind." Autonomy presupposes that I am moved "by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside" (Berlin 1969, 131).

III. Post-Liberal Democracy beyond Neoliberalism

The previous section concluded that the notion of adaptation in resilience thinking results in a debasement of the social and a denial of autonomy. The question is how these epistemological-ontological assumptions are compatible with democracy – in other words, what conception of democracy stems from resilience thinking. Nevertheless, the notion of democracy is a relatively neglected concept in resilience research compared to concepts like crises, risk, and security. For example, the journal *Resilience*, the main outlet for discussing topics concerning resilience (published from 2013 to 2019), does not feature any articles focusing primarily on democratic theory. However, I find David Chandler's (2014b and 2014c) concept of post-liberal democracy to be the most developed discussion of democracy in resilience thinking. Chandler claims that post-liberal democracy has been enabled by the current post-ideological zeitgeist following the end of the contestation between left and right for state power. The main thrust of post-liberal democracy is "freeing democracy from its liberal limits" (Chandler 2014b, 43), where these limits are identified with a linear relationship between state power and society. Post-liberal democracy, therefore, does not focus on the construction of a unified collective will distinct from the particular wills of individual citizens and its representation in state institutions but on "the problematic of legitimizing rule through bringing democracy down to the societal level of plural and individuated 'everyday life'" (Chandler 2014c, 163).

As mentioned above, Chandler accepts the ontological and epistemic limitations of resilience thinking, leading him to reject the modernist

framework of democratic theory. Hence, he asserts that "democracy can be promulgated without the assumption of universality, rationality, and autonomy" (Chandler 2014c, 164). Nevertheless, even though he builds on a non-ergodic ontology, Chandler differentiates his position from neoliberalism on two accounts. Firstly, Chandler argues specifically against Hayek's overestimation of market rationality and its becoming a self-adaptive *deus ex machina* and suggests that Hayek overlooks that the market is also determined by the ethical stances of given communities (Chandler 2014a; see also Koopman 2009). Secondly, by referring to Dewey's pragmatism, Chandler sees democracy as "a mechanism to enable the responsive and adaptive capacities" of individuals (Chandler 2014c, 162), presupposing a specific form of human agency.

Chandler develops the concept of post-liberal democracy by discussing the concept of the public in Walter Lippmann's and John Dewey's works. His starting point is Lippmann's diagnosis of the Great Society (i.e., modern capitalist society) and its challenges to democracy.[1]

> Instead of that one grand system of evolution and progress, which the nineteenth century found so reassuring, there would appear to be innumerable systems of evolution, variously affecting each other, some linked, some in collision, but each in some fundamental aspect moving at its own pace and on its own terms. The disharmonies of this uneven evolution are the problems of mankind (Lippmann 2022, 73 – 74).

According to Lippmann, the disharmonies of Great Society reveal the unattainability of the foundational democratic ideal of the sovereign and omnicompetent citizen (Lippmann 2022, 29). The reason for this is the lag that stems from the logic of evolution, from the fact that adaptation to environmental or social change occurs only after the change has taken place. This means that human understanding and knowledge of world affairs never correspond to the current reality. It should be emphasized here that Lippmann's argument is not inherently elitist and is based not on the difference in the mental capacities of the masses and the elites but rather on the complex nature of modern society. Consequently, the public cannot be understood as constituted through a deliberative public sphere or representative institutions. Instead, publics are conceived as plural and fluid, temporarily emerging

[1] The following paragraphs do not claim to be exhaustive nor to provide the only possible interpretation of the so-called Lippmann-Dewey debate. Their aim, above all, is to explicate Chandler's argument.

around a particular issue or event (Lippmann 2022, 133 – 141). However, this also meant that the public as such was unrepresentable via the representative and decision-making institutions of the state.

Chandler points out that in Lippmann's work, many aspects vital to resilience thinking, as discussed above, can be found: the non-ergodic world, evolution as adaptation, a denial of the autonomous subject, and debasement of the social (Chandler 2014c, 172). In other words, in a complex society, outcomes are emergent and impossible to predict in advance. Concerning the public, the limited understanding with which individuals can operate makes it impossible to form a general will standing outside the interests of individual people or their associations. In other words, for Lippmann, the public is a transient party to dispute emerging around a particular issue (Lippmann 2022, 30 – 52).

Dewey agreed with Lippmann's depiction of the current state of the public, claiming that it was in a state of eclipse (Dewey 2016, 144 – 170). However, unlike Lippmann, he drew more favourable prospects for democracy: The fact that people self-organize around particular issues or events shows that democracy is thriving. Nonetheless, not in the public sphere associated with the state and representative institutions. Instead, Dewey claimed that "the heart and final guarantee of democracy" (Dewey 1976, 227) is to be found in the informal social realm of private life and decision-making. Hence, Dewey proposed a different solution to democracy's challenges in a complex society. The task was not to introduce some form of technocratic government proposed by Lippmann but to democratise democracy by developing the public's self-governing capabilities. Dewey sees this as the process of the Great Society's transformation into the Great Community (i.e., democracy as an ethical way of life), and in this, he attributes a key role to communication and a self-referential learning process (Dewey 2016, 170).

Hence Dewey starts from citizen's practices in everyday life and shows how the public emerges from them. These everyday dealings have consequences that can be distinguished into direct and indirect. Direct consequences concern only those persons who directly converse with each other, while indirect consequences also affect other people. However, as Dewey claims with reference to Adam Smith, no dealings in modern complex societies would have only direct consequences. This allows Dewey to reformulate the nature of the public. "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for"

(Dewey 2016, 69). This, however, presupposes that the consequences of joint human action are observed and reflected by all the members of a given community and thus create an incentive for individual and collective reflection and learning.

According to Chandler, this Deweyian analysis of prospects of democracy in complex society brings two essential aspects for post-liberal democracy. Firstly, this collective process of reflection and learning challenges the private/public dichotomy. It was (among others) the feminist cry "the personal is political" that criticized the dichotomy by revealing how politics permeates personal life, turning it into a political problem. On the contrary, post-liberal democracy highlights the need to empower citizens' capacity to reflect on their choices and actions. This way, "'political problems' are…'depoliticized' and represented as 'personal problems' which can be dealt with by empowered individuals and communities" (Chandler 2014c, 163). Secondly, this reflexivity opens space for understanding human agency, which is different from the neoliberal understanding of adaptation. This agency is participatory and gives the private sphere a democratic charge independent of linear mediation by political representation or state power. However, the separation of participation from representation and state power means that the primary realm of this agency is reflection on one's inner life, reducing "political understandings to reflexive work on the self, rather than work on transformation of the external world" (Chandler 2014c, 179).

IV. In Lieu of a Conclusion: Democracy and Adaptation

The current democratic decay has led many political theorists (and not only them) to address the question of the life and survival of democracy. Therefore, it is unsurprising that resilience has established itself as one of the leading answers to this question, especially in more empirically oriented research. Having said that, this paper is situated within the political philosophy field and addresses general questions about the relationship between democratic theory and resilience thinking. Resilience thinking is generally concerned with a system's ability to preserve itself through adaptation rather than limiting itself to the question of a given system's robustness (i.e., the ability to withstand the shocks without change). However, the paper concludes that it is because of its understanding of adaptation that resilience thinking is rather not stimulating for democratic theory. The preceding discussion has shown that the notion of adaptation within resilience thinking poses several problems: first, it breaks with the modernist framework of the autonomous rational

subject because of its non-ergodic ontology; second, it leads to a debasement of the social; and thus, third, it tends to be seen as a tool of neoliberal governance. Resilience thinking retains the first two characteristics even when it attempts to break away from neoliberalism in the form of post-liberal democracy. Jessica Schmidt's summary of the debate on human agency and democracy within the critical resilience framework makes it clear that resilience discourse does not seek to "shape the external environment through conscious, autonomous, and goal-oriented decision-making. Instead, agency resurfaces in terms of making constant change on inner life" (Schmidt 2015, 404).

This seems far from the common conception of democracy and the democratic subject. For example, Josiah Ober, in his discussion of the original meaning of democracy, asserts that democracy means, first and foremost, "the collective capacity to do things in the public realm, to make things happen" (Ober 2008, 7). This includes a transformation of the social sphere and its hierarchies through collective action, not just adapting to them reflectively or not. In other words, democracy assumes the autonomy of the individual, which includes not only the capacity of the individual to adapt purposefully (in contrast to the neoliberal understanding of adaptation) but also the ability to resist adaptation through self-directed action and conscious purpose, particularly within the social sphere.

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