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Which Resilience? Thinking Democratic Subjectivity in the Polycrisis

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In the context of the current polycrisis, Andreas Reckwitz suggests that instead of emphasizing progress, Western liberal democracies should cultivate resilience. The question is: which resilience? The prevailing theory of democratic resilience focuses on securing the "invariant core" of democratic institutions. This article shows why this approach is insufficient and discusses the advantages of the multisystemic approach. Democracy is here understood as a quality of the lived relational environment and a regime with social and ethical aspirations. Developing resilience in this context means nurturing the sources of democratic subjectivity and consistently opposing the inner and institutional violations in the society. As such resilience has nothing to do with invulnerability or protection against external threats. Instead it supports the resistance against the double binds caused inside democratic regimes by the neoliberal paradigm in the name of cultivating democratic agonism and transformation.

Keywords: resilience – polycrisis – liberal democracy – democratic resilience

Introduction

The contemporary state of *polycrisis* (Morin – Kern 1999) clearly demonstrates that Francis Fukuyama's claim about "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1989, 4) was a misguided illusion. In lieu of the anticipated "triumph of the West … and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989, 3 – 4), it has become evident that the realpolitik of liberal democracies has substantially contributed to the polycrisis. Many claim that a radical change in thinking is imperative to address the situation. Pankaj

Mishra emphasizes "the need for some truly transformative thinking, about both the self and the world" (Mishra 2017, 670). Similarly, Andreas Reckwitz claims: "We have entered a phase where the unbreakable positive expectations of a better future no longer seem credible. … A shift in thinking awaits the West" (Reckwitz 2024). This shift in thinking is not merely an intellectual exercise; rather, it is a crucial step in the transformation in the policies, organizations, and political discourse, governed by the neoliberal interpretation of freedom as borderless individualism, endless progress, and appropriation of natural environments. As Reckwitz posits, a shift towards resilience could represent a novel and meaningful objective.

> The high vulnerability of liberal democracy – its infrastructure, its prosperity, its civility – is evident. Recognition of this vulnerability must lead to the development of resilience.…Strengthening resilience can be a positive goal towards which society can work (Reckwitz 2024).

In a political system formed by the idea of resilience, rather than progress, there is, according to Reckwitz, the potential for revolutionary transformation, enabling a more nuanced response to polycrisis. However, a crucial question remains: Which resilience?

This article aims to address this difficult question and to contribute to the conceptual discussion of resilience in relation to democracy. To do so, I will first provide a brief overview of the two main origins of resilience research, with a particular focus on its relevance to democracy. Next, I will present the theory of relational subjectivity and democracy, along with its social and moral aspirations, as foundational to resilience theory. I will then elucidate the principles of multisystemic resilience and highlight the pitfalls it must avoid. Following this, I will examine two psycho-political attractors and the consequent double-binds uncovered by the multisystemic approach, which deepen the erosion of societal aspirations for democracy. Finally, I will summarize the findings of resilience research in relation to understanding democracy and polycrisis.

I. The Two Origins of Resilience Research

Despite its current broad scope, resilience research has evolved from two distinct fields: 1. psychology and social work, and 2. ecology and engineering. The first domain of psychological resilience research was driven by two major discoveries. First, it was found that prolonged or excessive stress can leave neurobiological imprints on the brain, leading to detrimental and lasting,

potentially irreversible, consequences for individual development, well-being, and selfhood. Second, it became evident that a psychology focused purely on pathology and dysfunction cannot adequately explain the phenomenon of thriving and that human health cannot be described uniquely as the absence of disease. Since the end of the Second World War, research in the field of psychological resilience has focused on the human capacity to overcome adversity and major forms of trauma. This research has examined how individuals build their capacities and organize under stress, what sources they use, and what factors impede their ability to cope. Initially, resilience research investigated specific *individual* traits and *extraordinary* abilities that enable individuals to cope with or recover from traumatic experiences. In its second phase, resilience has been reassessed and conceptualized as

> the capacity of a system to anticipate, adapt, and reorganize itself under conditions of adversity … [that] is seldom a trait of the system itself, but instead the result of facilitative interactions with cooccurring, subordinate, and supraordinate systems that make it possible for a system or its parts to function well during and after a disturbance (Ungar 2018, 3).

Resilience thus encompasses the interaction of both living and nonliving systems: "a microorganism, a child, a family, a security system, an economy, a forest, or the global climate" (Masten 2014, 6). The multisystemic resilience approach recognizes that addressing adversity often requires not only supporting victims, but more importantly, implementing profound systemic change. The multisystemic approach is thus explicitly normative, answering the practical question of *how to develop a good enough life* in a non-ideal world, which also implies a thorough discussion on changing norms of the society so that it provides more livable conditions for individuals. As such, the approach formulates ontological and socio-political challenges.

The ecological and engineering approach to resilience is primarily descriptive, analyzing how systems dynamically interact between stable equilibria, shocks, and returns to normal functioning, always in response to external stressors. Resilience here denotes "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, and feedbacks, and therefore identity" (Folke 2016, 44). The system's inherent flexibility enables it to withstand disruptions, adapt to novel circumstances, and reorganize towards a new equilibrium when external pressures exceed a certain threshold, all in service of self-preservation. In this context, the term *self* denotes an invariant

characteristic – that is, a quality that makes the system recognizable as a distinct entity among others. Should this invariant undergo transformation, the system would cease to exist. Resilience is considered neither good nor bad for the system; it is simply one of the variables within the system dynamics.

The ecological resilience research has gradually expanded into the broader socio-ecological approach, which recognizes the inextricable link between human and non-human environments. This shift has introduced a normative question, applied as the next level of judgment to the a-normatively described system dynamics. This involves determining *how to govern* complex socio-ecological systems that society deems worthy of preservation.

II. Problems in the Theory of Democratic Resilience

As Holloway and Manwaring (2022, 4) show, the prevailing use of *resilience* in democratic resilience theory is derived from this socio-ecological approach and its applications. Resilience is thus often synonymous with maintaining certain core functions and safeguarding an *already achieved* liberal democratic identity. Major threats are described as *external* to the democratic ideal, causing democratic backsliding or erosion. According to Anna Lührmann and Wolfgang Merkel, while institutions or actors may change, it is important to "safeguard the invariant core of democratic principles and thus minimize present and future challenges" (Lührmann – Merkel 2023, 6). Here, democratic principles are understood through institutions:

> We define democracies as political regimes that were established in free and fair multiparty elections taking place in a context where freedom of speech, association, and universal suffrage were guaranteed (Merkel – Lührmann 2021).

This discourse risks overlooking that the task of liberal democracies is not merely to preserve their existing identity, but to *become democratic* through facing the problems they cause. Democracy is not guaranteed and defined by parliamentarism, and the maintenance of free multiparty elections; these must be linked through "transmission belts" to the lived experiences of the citizens. Political theorists are currently exploring why the transmission belts are malfunctioning and the needs and perspectives of all members of the society fail to be visible and secured. To *become* democratic is thus to recognize the shortcomings of the undemocratic aspects of democracy and to exist in tension with its own permanent negations and failures. Critiques of the democratic resilience theory show, however, that the theory stresses the principle of

returning back to the normal, as if something like democratic normal can be caught in time and maintained. They also criticize the theory for emphasizing the predictability and measurability of potential shocks threatening the system while neglecting internal power struggles (Chandler – Reid 2016; Cannon – Müller-Mahn 2010; Pelling – Manuel-Navarrete 2011).

The problem of neglecting internal power struggles stems from the socio-ecological approach view of the political regime as a dynamic whole. In this view, resilience is consequently evaluated as a positive value of the one united whole, where internal violations are rendered invisible. But in terms of power struggles, we must approach the political regime as a complex, divergent, lived relational environment. Relevant aspects to examine in this context include whether individuals, groups, or communities in challenging situations perceive their system as a trustworthy source of support or an obstacle to fair solutions, whether they all feel seen and receive assistance during major troubles, whether different social groups are surrounded by narratives that encourage or discourage their flourishing, and whether citizens experience an equally or unequally distributed burden or uncertainty.

This dimension of democracy is increasingly relevant today. Political debates are replete with psychological terms such as *anxiety*, *anger*, *disillusionment*, *resentment*, *inferiority*, *abuse*, *revenge*, and *recognition.* Rather than viewing such development as a psychologization of politics, it may be more relevant to see this choice of vocabulary as symptomatic. If the private is political, then the political is also psychological. Do contemporary subjects have the conditions to become democratic subjectivities? It is not about therapeuticizing society; it is about considering political psychology. Systemic violence, misuse, abuse, and injustice are not merely external threats from which democracy should be protected; they are also part of its legacy. The fundamental challenge of democracy lies in the tenuous connection between individuals' lived experiences, their psyche, and the political system.

III. Relational Democratic Subjectivity

If we want to ask about the resilience of a complex lived relational environment within a political context, we must start with the description of human ontogenesis through power relations. Let us summarize very briefly the milestones of the human ontogenesis in the context of democracy.

British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott was among the first to link the theory of relational subjectivity to democracy. He asserts that human

development is inextricably linked to one's environment and that healthy or mature development does not entail the pursuit of absolute independence.

> Individual maturity implies a movement towards independence, but there is no such thing as independence. It would be unhealthy for an individual to be so withdrawn as to feel independent and invulnerable (Winnicott 1986, 21).

This quotation claims that invulnerability is a sign of neither a healthy nor a mature human being. The maturity, as a basis of future democratic subjectivity, must be developed in a constant interrelation with others. This condition is principally open – and therefore vulnerable – to misuse and ambivalence. But it is ontologically the only condition under which the sense of selfhood – the feeling of living one's own life – can be experienced:

> The life of a healthy person is characterized by fears, contradictory feelings, doubts, frustrations, to the same extent as positive phenomena. The main thing is that the man or woman feels that he or she is living his or her own life (Winnicott 1986, 27).

Healthy development toward democratic subjectivity occurs in what Winnicott calls "facilitating environments," where others provide "good enough" care. These environments take different forms over the course of human development, evolving from a primary niche that provides complete ontological security, to almost perfect co-existence of a baby with a devoted-enough caregiver, to explorations, role taking and children's plays, to cultural experience, to the democratic political arena. While these environments acknowledge power struggles, they regulate them to avoid the alienation of individuals from the collective social body. Democracy, in this context, represents a "mature" social space "well adapted to its healthy individual members" (Winnicott 1986, 240). Mature democratic subjectivities are characterized by an autonomy that depends on others, by a capacity to undergo creative conflicts in ontological security, by development without necessary progress, and by the feeling of selfhood within ambivalence. Winnicott, however, does not have the answer to the situations when these paradoxes start to get politically disbalanced.

Even the most mature social space cannot secure itself against the power misuse, failure, or violence. Democracy is an open system, and the vulnerable paradox of democracy is that it cannot be guaranteed as an ideal, let alone imposed. It can only exist as never achieved and non-ideal, yet voluntary site

of an essential contest. An excellent twist to this discussion is offered by Frédéric Worms, who, in his book *The Chronic Diseases of Democracy* (2017), develops an idea of the capacity of a democratic society to live with its own incurable "diseases." What does this mean? To put it very briefly, because democratic subjectivity develops in inseparable relation to others, it entails the possibility of harming or being harmed. The very possibility of harming others indicates that the subjectivities involved are principally free and equal (Worms 2017, 38). Building on this, Worms argues that democracy is not just one regime among others, such as oligarchy and monarchy; it is "the only form of regime that takes power seriously as a relationship" (Worms 2017, 28). Democracy is characterized by its social and ethical aspiration to refuse "violence that arises from within societies, relationships, and groups, even when they are defined to fight other external violence" (Worms 2017, 25). In this sense, democratic society not only focuses on external threats, but it also rejects its own internal violations. It "seeks not only security but also justice, for injustice is itself insecurity in the most vital and deadly sense of the word" (Worms 2017, 25 – 26). Indeed, injustice is a deadly experience:

> The experience of internal violence has the power to make human life literally unlivable, and sometimes to make us "die" without even needing to eliminate us, through acts that are apparently "less" than death or murder, but which can turn out to be much "worse" than death (Worms 2027, 31).

From humiliation and rights violations to abuse, systemic violence, and necropolitics (Mbembe 2019), "death alive" is a real experience, even within democracies – one that alienates people from their environment and from their own lives. Although democracy aims to enable everyone to live a life worth living, to thrive as free and equal being, it cannot, for fundamental reasons, guarantee the total absence of such disturbances. The cardinal question, then, is how democratic society *responds to its own deep failures*, even *internal violence and trauma*, while providing space for flourishing, which is more than survival. This is a question of resilience.

IV. Principles of Resilience

The theory of multisystemic resilience does not develop any generalized study concerning the resilience of democracy as a political regime. For instance, the comprehensive monograph *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change* (Ungar 2021), which includes contributions from dozens of domains, does not explicitly address the topic of democratic

resilience. However, this approach examines the complex systemic network of forces, resources, protective factors, and hazards that either enable or hinder optimal individual development in the face of deep societal failures, internal violence, even traumas. It investigates how individuals develop in connection with communities, public institutions, culture, and the ecological environment. In this way, it contributes directly to the understanding of the transmission belts between citizens and democratic regimes understood as the only regime that takes power seriously as a relationship, refusing inner violence among free and equal beings, supporting the maturation processes through facilitating environments, and understanding itself as a permanent development and negotiation with its own negativity. In the following section, I will limit my description only to those ontological and political aspects of resilience that are relevant to discussing this form of democracy.

A. Beyond Strength and Weakness

The French neuropsychologist and ethologist Boris Cyrulnik, a renowned proponent of resilience theory, introduces *resilience* as a neologism. The novelty of this concept lies in its capacity to envision life beyond the duality of strength–weakness: Thanks to resilience, "we can do away with the notion of individual strengths and weaknesses. Resilience has nothing to do with vulnerability or invulnerability" (Cyrulnik 2009, 284). Resilience might be the term that would help Winnicott to tackle the negative part of democracy better. Resilience is not about invulnerability and strength, it is the capacity to live a livable, unalienated life with vulnerability, to live unwanted, but nevertheless appearing violations within interrelated systems. The traditional power discourse, based on dominance and subordination – the dialectics of winner and loser, master and slave – omits what resilience research makes visible and what also grounds democratic subjectivity: "Resilience means more than ability to resist. It also means learning how to live" (Cyrulnik 2009, 283). But it is a life after "having come close to death and having killed death (Cyrulnik 2009, 283).

So it is about plasticity of human power struggles. There are thresholds to this plasticity. Physical violence, systemic oppression, everyday humiliation, or a catastrophe can rupture the non-ideal but sufficient bond between the world and the self and "shatter the shell of the ego and permanently alter the inner mental world" (Cyrulnik – Jorland 2012, 7). Both Cyrulnik and Worms call this experience *death alive*. This field of experience shows itself to be worse than death because it is an experienced, witnessed death of oneself; it is a life

that is lived but no longer lived by the subject. Temporally, the present experience is continuously invaded by the memory of the past traumatic event. The subject lives as a "prisoner of the past" (Cyrulnik 2009, 182). What is painfully destroyed is the "feeling of selfhood" as "an emotion that is experienced physically and that has its origins in social representations" (Cyrulnik 2009, 19). This is why resilience research can be understood as radically pessimistic.

However, resilience research also shows that traumatic experience is not the endpoint. There are different possible trajectories after such an experience of disruption. Among them is a complex, paradoxical restoration of life development – not in the form of a "strong," flexible continuation, but as something else, like an oxymoron: a wounded icon a knitted mesh. This is how resilience research is radically optimistic.

Having experienced a traumatic event, individuals usually react with a defense mechanism: they split into two separate, incoherent parts, one of which continues to live, while in the other remains dead, frozen in the past. Cyrulnik calls this an oxymoron (Cyrulnik 2009, 21). If the person receives resources in his or her environment (it is enough if such a "tutor of resilience" is only one person, or even an animal), the experience of "*death* alive" can transform into an experience of how to live with "death *alive*." "That is how resilience is knitted. Resilience is not just something we find inside ourselves or in our environment…because our individual development is always linked to our social development" (Cyrulnik 2009, 284). This insight reveals something crucial: the permanent split of the self, the imprisonment in the past, and the resulting irreversible suffering are not realized solely by the violent event itself *but by the inadequate socio-political response to the violence. It is this second social violence of the violated one that is the essential violence.* Only the second one determines the meaning of the first. This counterintuitive claim was first demonstrated by Emily Werner in her research on a group of children exposed to drastic circumstances in Kawai near Hawaii: after decades of observation, it was possible to conclude that the most damaged were "not those who had suffered the most violence, but those who had been the most isolated and who had had the least support" (Cyrulnik 2009, 15). There is a way out of death alive, but it does not lie in individual strength and invulnerability, nor in reconstructing the previous status quo. The "recovery" is a possible yet painful and complex, totally new intersubjective and environmental bonding process. Recovery is thus never a retroactive return to a previous state of being, as the plasticity has been irreparably broken: "All disasters result in a metamorphosis. Those whose souls

have been badly wounded…are living proof of the subjective emergence of a new philosophy of life" (Cyrulnik 2009, 283 – 284). The result is a new systemic mesh of meaning, not a substance: "Resilience is a sweater knitted from developmental, emotional, and social strands of wool.…Resilience is a mesh and not a substance" (Cyrulnik 2009, 51).

Moreover, if the survivors experience a responsive socio-political environment, then resilience is neither heroic nor extraordinary. Rasilience is "common" (Bonanno 2004, 26), "natural process" (Cyrulnik 2009, 13), "ordinary magic" (Masten 2014, 7). However, while resilience is common, and because it does not involve assimilating the wounded one back into "normal" society either, it is not about making victims normal again – healing them. Resilience is mostly a healthy defense mechanism against unhealthy social behavior. The metamorphosis thus includes both the individual and the environment. This process helps ontologically build "wounded icons," not as pure victors who have forgotten the past, but as carriers of the vital experience of their own death alive, as clever analysts of social pathologies, as creators of new narratives and images of themselves. Trauma does not cease to be trauma when it no longer hunts the wounded; rather, it acts as a powerful social force that can alter social abnormalities.

In summary, resilience does not deny the existence of trauma. It rejects the notion that traumatic events condemn people to suffer forever or transform them into pathological and dangerous individuals who should be excluded from social life. Resilience refuses to socially sacrifice those who should be helped through social support. On the other hand, saying that trauma is not the end station does not mean that everyone has a possibility, thus an obligation to overcome the trauma by his or her own means and not complain. Resilience research also refuses this way of societal outsourcing of responsibility. Instead, it emphasizes that trauma can be overcome only and uniquely if the society is not indifferent and changes alongside its support to those who were damaged by the societal dynamics.

B. Psycho-Political Attractors

Multisystemic resilience research interprets resilience as a complex, paradoxical, and transformative dynamics between individuals and their environment. It provides a sophisticated critique of the neoliberal pressure on individual responsibility. However, neoliberal forces have also sought to appropriate the concept of resilience, aiming to neutralize its significant contribution to paradigm shifts in thinking. I propose to describe these

attempts with the aid of two psycho-political attractors, which represent two misconceptions of resilience and orient the social discourse towards two separate values: pure and uncompromising optimism and pure and uncompromising pessimism.

These two psycho-political attractors arise from the disconnection of the interdependence of radical optimism and radical pessimism as presented by multisystemic resilience research. The consequence of this separation is dire – the paradoxes that must be endured for humans to develop healthy, mature, or democratic subjectivity (autonomous dependency, selfhood in ambivalence, strength alongside weakness, the lived experience of death, and democracy amidst one's own negativity and violence) transforms into double-binds – the beliefs in absolute values that destroy the very conditions of possibility of these values.

The psycho-political attractor of pure uncompromising optimism (grandiosity) frames resilience as unbeatable strength and refers to the myth of self-help. To follow this attractor means to have a seductive yet false belief that one can have one's life under full control. Michael Ungar (2019), Mark Coeckelbergh (2022), David Cabanas and Eva Illouz (2019), and David Chandler and Julian Reid (2016) show that this fetish is not only useless but also used for exploitation, oppression, cynical politics, and business. The psychological outcome is self-hate and burnout.

> We are obsessed with self-improvement. [We] meditate, go to therapy, and use apps to improve ourselves and our well-being.…And the economy reflects that. In the United States, self-improvement is a $11 billion industry. …Even if people have a good quality of life, they are not happy, because they want to "create a better version" of themselves. Striving for perfection is stressful.…Failure to achieve this leads to self-hate.…We are improving ourselves to death (Coeckelbergh 2022, 1 – 2).

Here death alive is not what sets the process of resilience in motion, but what the process of misinterpreted resilience leads to.

The psycho-political attractor of pure pessimism and uncompromising weakness reflects another popular idea – that we all have hidden trauma, that we are principally vulnerable and at risk (cf. Bonnano 2020). Although this belief contradicts the central idea of the previous psycho-political attractor, it is only an apparent contradiction, since the attractor of uncompromised weakness can help to control the world from the position of an innocent victim

without any responsibility making demands on the ever-guilty and always-responsible environment.

The belief that we all have trauma opens another avenue for commodification: the seductive notion of trauma as a totalizing identity that can be the product of trafficking. This stubborn belief in one's own suffering can be used to condemn those who are willing to support other trajectories as trauma denialists. Moreover, proclaiming trauma as a widespread and irreversible experience can also increase the potential of political control over individuals, and the erosion of their agency. It teaches individuals to feel under permanent danger, to focus solely on seeking absolute empathy for their persistent suffering, which will never fade away. Governance that relies on this attractor of weakness magnifies and multiplies the image of external threats, offers protection, and prioritizes securitization. Instead of fostering conditions for a livable life amidst ambivalence and heteronomy, it stifles dissent and silences protest (Neocleus 2013, 7).

The irony of resilience is that it figures in the narratives of both of these psycho-political attractors – in a totally perverted interpretation. In the first case as individual strength and responsibility, in the second case as an idea of needed security assured by overprotective policies. This is how neoliberal discourse attempts to appropriate resilience and neutralize its potential for a paradigmatic shift. This misconception of resilience psychologizes the political instead of understanding that psychological welfare matters in politics. It renders invisible what resilience research made visible: the potential within democracy for both thriving and dying alive and the relevant response by individuals and society. But these misconceptions have even worse consequences: they compromise concepts like happiness, trauma, courage, and need. In a culture endlessly striving for improvement and happiness, which often leads to depression and burnout, the word "happiness" becomes a suspicious, empty buzzword, a pitfall, not a meaningful aim of life (eudaimonia). Similarly, in a culture that emphasizes that we are all traumatized, distinguishing those who need help becomes challenging. In the world where everyone needs help those who suffer become invisible, and solidarity evaporates. Both psycho-political attractors lead to destructive double binds. These double-binds undermine social and ethical democratic aspirations and instead divide people into two groups: unbeatable, self-confident winners; and unhealable humiliated losers. Those who secure themselves forever and those who live in deadly precarious conditions. This polarization destabilizes the

social foundation of democracy, and it is a symptom of societal death alive, not societal resilience.

V. Conclusion

When Andreas Reckwitz recommends that Western democracies should develop resilience rather than progress, he does not specify what kind of resilience he envisions. The multisystemic resilience approach introduces resilience as a neologism that avoids the distinction between weakness and strength. This leads to a complex account of the interdependence of society and human beings. Democracy is not just an achieved political regime whose resilience lies in the maintenance of its essential institutional core. It is also a democracy in the making, whose resilience lies in the ongoing cultivation of the capacity to regulate interdependent power relations, to recover from social violations, and to generate a sense of selfhood that is more than the absence of harm. The neoliberal discourse propagates two misconceptions of resilience that, instead of cultivating the paradoxes inherent in human mature life, establish two psycho-political attractors that lead to destructive and self-destructive double-binds. They are based on the absolutization and separation of radical optimism and radical pessimism, which should be considered together if democracy is to endure.

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