

Reaction Paper Jenny Suckale

The readings from Lawrence and Campanella describe and compare resilience in major cities around the world in the aftermath of a catastrophe. The comparison is hampered by the very broad scope of the subject. No restrictions in the type of catastrophes or regions in question are undertaken. Despite being desirably comprehensive, the analysis is not fully convincing to me in several aspects:

1. Has resilience truly increased over time as speculated in the introductory chapter? It is not obvious that the modern society and specifically life in megacities is immediately comparable to historic precursors. Therefore, resilience today simply means something different than it did before. Technological change, more professional management approaches, vastly improved communication possibilities and the revolutionary development of computer capacities have certainly opened up opportunities that were not available before.
2. The focus on resilience in cities versus resilience in the countryside invokes the impression, that resilience in cities was particularly high. I doubt that this is necessarily so. Certainly, almost all catastrophe-prone cities have been rebuilt, but rebuilding seems to be a basic attitude of societies towards destruction and not unique to cities. Also, I would like to question why disasters in cities often get greater attention than those in the countryside. Apart from the most obvious aspects such as high population and material density (and thus higher vulnerability and higher destructive potential of the catastrophe), I wonder if this is also due to the fact, that it is easier to successfully build a narrative around the specific disaster because it is more concretely attached to a specific site and to specific lives. In this context, I found the discussion about the influence of narratives in the concluding remarks very enlightening.
3. I would like to challenge the notion that cities are particularly resilient or have become more so over the last decades. While this is certainly for specific cities in the industrialized world, I doubt this proposition holds generally worldwide. I wonder whether there is data evidence for changes in resilience, specifically because the data one usually sees in this context shows that losses due to natural catastrophes have increased exponentially over the last decades. Examples like the volcanic eruption and its destructive consequences in Goma (Congo) do not seem to indicate resilience. Furthermore, the increased share of the world's population living in megacities creates demanding challenges for that city's resilience that are still to be met.
4. Each of the huge catastrophes has a very individual component. Lawrence and Campanella elaborate that apart from the simple "physical" differences, these events have major psychological and emotional effects on the future perception of and response to catastrophes. I therefore wonder whether the rather simplistic four-stage model for resilience proposed in the last chapter appropriately describes the dynamics of resilience.