

Dissertation Review

“Securing cities: Urban resilience as a technology of government”

by Katarína Svitková

The dissertation “Securing cities: Urban resilience as a technology of government” by Katarína Svitková studies the role of resilience idea and policy in the urban context. In particular, it follows the uses and functions of the notion of resilience in the discourse of two global urban resilience programmes (United Nations Human Settlements Programme and 100 Resilient Cities) and investigates the practical enactment of policies of resilience in three cities (Barcelona, San Francisco and Santiago de Chile). Conceptually, the thesis contributes to the field of governmentality studies as it builds on the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, with resilience to be one of its techniques. For the empirical investigation, the thesis pursues two lines of inquiry: first, it assembles a large corpus of approximately 120 documents (mostly reports and strategic documents) designated for a content analysis; second, a field research including interviews and analysis of documents were carried out in three cities, that resulted in a rich description of various resilience policy assemblages.

The thesis is well embedded in the literature and the conceptual approaches that are mobilized. It builds on a considerable and rich corpus of empirical sources, covering different types of these, from policy reports and strategic documents, via interviews to statistical data and taking account of a several years time frame. In so doing, it can provide a broad perspective on resilience as a concept and practice.

In the following, I review the main points of the thesis in a structured way:

1. The topic and its relevance

(Urban) Resilience is a contested concept because, on the one hand, it informs a broad scope of contemporary policies on various societal and organizational levels, while, on the other hand, it is an object of, mostly scholarly but not limited to it, criticism as an “empty signifier” (p. 259) or even a novel technique of neoliberal governance. To my knowledge, this ambivalence is sufficiently studied on the conceptual level; however, empirical studies that scrutinise the practical implementation of resilience policies in particular localities, especially non-Western, are still much needed.

2. Theoretical framing

The thesis draws on the notion of governmentality. Nevertheless, it claims to use “an eclectic theoretical framework” focused on “practices of government and the notion of risk” (p. 21). In my view, eclecticism is perhaps too strong a word as the thesis just broaden the historical constructivist approach of Michel (not Michael) Foucault with Latourian-like ontology of (cognitive) assemblages. This conceptual *mariage* seems to suit well for exploring the use of the vague notion of resilience in the governance of contemporary cities. However, if taken seriously, the combination of Foucauldian diachronic perspective with flattened actor-network ontology risks to over-

determine the results of such an analysis. Foucault points to the fact that the most prominent features of our society and ourselves are results of contingent processes and that nothing like "the true nature" of humankind or human society exists. To explain the current state of affairs, one has to look into the past; not to search for any foundation, but to trace the path of development. For Latour, on the other hand, understanding of current assemblages lays in the analysis of what actants do in the present to sustain the apparent meaningfulness and functionality of the world. Therefore, one has to prioritise either processual or relational explanation of the phenomenon under study. Katarína Svitková decided to insert the actantial ontology of assemblages into (historical) governmentality conceptual frame, and I consider it an entirely acceptable solution.

Theoretically, the notion of risk plays an important role in the thesis, but it is underdeveloped. In my opinion, the risk is related to prevention and insurance; the risk is calculable – there is a certain chance of failure or accident – people can buy insurance to overcome it. Resilience does not rely on the concept of (calculable and insurable) risk but rather on a threat or disaster, often uncertain, from which there is no escape; if it were possible to insure a city against the earthquake or financial crisis, there would be no need for resilient subjects. I believe the exploration of semantic and pragmatic distinctions between notions of risk and uncertainty and its application to the empirical data would allow for better understanding of a change from developmental interventions to the call for responsibility and resilience.

3. Data and methods

On a general level, I accept the assemblage approach used in the research. Contrary to what is declared, the research is done in a quite positivist manner – a content analysis based on frequencies as a dominant variable and fieldwork in which communicative partners are considered informants. It is worth noting that interpretative approach is not intended primarily to “uncover” (p. 74) something like a microscope or psychoanalysis but to understand and interpret meanings people assign to the world as well as to their actions.

On a technical level, I see several deficiencies in the methodology, in particular in the content analysis of UN-HABITAT and 100 RC documents. It is evident from the fact that there are only a few references to the methodological literature for both the textual and field research. The author declares using content analysis, but I am afraid it was not any standard type of content analysis what she actually did. She claims she discovered the key resilience concepts with the help of counting occurrences and exploring contexts of some words, but the credibility of such findings is undermined by the fact that the whole analytical procedure – from the sampling strategy to the interpretation of the use the (key)words – remained obscure. It is a mystery how clustering of keywords and finding their contextual meanings in the text was done; e.g. what is the evidential base for assuming that in the sample of UN-Habitat documents: “A capacity of individuals to overcome the state of poverty has to do with their *income* (4.655 references) and *resources* (2.820 references) at their disposal. (p. 118)? In my view, without a rigorous corpus-based technique of analysis, e.g. exploring collocations, it is technically impossible to validly and reliably determine the context of the use or contextual meaning of any term that has several thousands of non-uniform occurrences.

A minor note: In her field research, Katarína Svitková did not disclose the research problem to her communicational partners in order not to alarm them. I understand her motivation for doing so, but, at the same time, it signals that the field of resilience ideas and practices is full of tensions. In other words, it indicates that resilience, “a subtle form of power projection” (p. 26), is not without inner contradictions and conflicts. However, in the dissertation, these are explored only as an external critique of the resilience idea and practice, not as an inherent part of resilience practice itself (cf. the Foucault’s analysis of the birth of modern prison and its permanent reform).

4. Main findings

The research brought penetrating evidence on the assemblages formed under the notion of resilience, i.e., on agendas, actors/stakeholders, knowledge, establishments, and technologies of various societal areas and levels, producing together a particular form of urban governance.

As regards the analytical framework elaborated on the basis of the content analysis of documents issued by UN-HABITAT and 100 RC (p. 164), I think the framework is too general. We could easily replace “R[esilience]” with I[nnovation] or AI or N[anotechnology] and so on. Every strong discourse mobilises/creates knowledge, resources and technology. Alternatively, instead of knowledge, funding and technology, there could be rhetoric, practices and devices. Moreover, depicted practices include *loans*, *hardware*, *data*, *software*, *insurance*, *expertise* – none of these words was a keyword searched in the corpus, and they barely appeared in the previous analysis. Among actors we see, for example, *start-ups* (never mentioned before) or *corporations* (referred just several times).

Findings from the field research are mostly descriptive and rich in details. It is in line with the primary objective to describe the assemblage of resilience ideas and practices, including material objects involved.

5. Conclusions

The conclusion revisits the main arguments of the dissertation. I was particularly impressed by the sentence “That said, the concept itself is less important than the governance transformation that it has enabled.” (p. 274), which I consider the core argument of the thesis. In the long term, any disciplinary regime leads to passivity, distancing and subversion of its subjects and, as a result, to the erosion of the governance of population. The issue of governmentality is in finding a way how to activate, reconnect and mobilize subjects again. Drawing on her empirical analysis of resilience assemblages of three cities, Katarína Svitková suggests that the rhetoric of resilience has a transforming potential in current urban sphere by a) allowing to overcome the heterogeneity and diversity of urban problems in different locations; b) mobilizing both formal and informal actors for ideological, social and physical activity in the urban space.

6. Style and formal issues

Generally, the thesis is well written and organized.

However, John Law’s book mentioned on page 38 is not in the list of references. Also, a key reference for the definition of neoliberalism (Smith, 2019) is hidden in “online articles and media

publication” section of the bibliography.

7. Conclusion of the evaluation

I am convinced that the dissertation of Katarína Svitková fulfils and meets all requirements of PhD thesis and therefore I recommend it to be accepted by the commission.

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