

Resilience in crisis reconsidered: The need for values against relativist ethics

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Resilience, as a composite force of resistance and adaptation to changing environmental conditions, is often assumed to pre-exist in social and natural systems as an inherent feature which is not created, enhanced or mitigated by deliberate planned actions. However, it is well-known already that some political decisions may reduce or enhance the ability of a specific population to resist and adapt to change through a particular activity. For example, the Common Agricultural Policy in the EU has encouraged many farmers to rely on subsidies and public aid and insurance in case of natural disasters, reducing individual incentives to privately undertake such resilience-enhancing investments and broaden their individual experience in dealing with crises.

The subsequent lower exposure and reliance on external shocks has driven many modern farmers in the Mediterranean to improve their quality of life adapting their life style and expectations to those of an urban population. While this creates a ground for some perceived increase in equality among urban and rural populations, it may also create an excessive dependence of a farmer's wealth on global economic phenomena and exposure to economic crises.

If we accept this as a -not necessarily global- valid and realistic scenario, we can use it as a starting point to ask the main question addressed here: Should we take resilience as an exogenously given force of the system which will automatically tend to counterbalance any undesired effects of external change, or should we rather consider resilience as an endogenous and, especially vulnerable characteristic whose sensitivity to policies and politics should be taken into account when a society designs its strategies towards any relevant economic or social activity? The response to this question may not be straightforward in many cases, but the consequences of being favourable to one or the other approach are.

If we accept resilience as an inherent feature of human societies, which is exogenously and invariably present independent of the environmental and political context, then we should happily expect it to function on the right direction every time a challenging or even threatening phenomenon emerges. Then we should say nothing more beyond this point.

The thoughts exposed in this paper assume that the latter of the two aforementioned alternative postulates is true, namely that resilience is a dynamically endogenous and, especially, vulnerable characteristic of human societies and, thus, when considering public measures towards any economic or social activity, its sensitivity to policies and politics and even its final value to society should be taken into account.

Resilience as an individual and collective feature of human society

At an individual level, early psychology research (Gamezy 1991; Gamezy 1993) recognizes resilience both as an idiosyncratic and context-dependent characteristic, associated with an individual's social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future. This type of research, focusing mostly on the educational context, can clearly identify the risk factors, typologies and even quantifiable degrees of resilience in children, benefiting from the advantage that resilience can be studied through the individual's school performance proxy.

Another important lesson from this literature is the dynamic interplay between resilience and the risk factors under which resilience is both triggered and observed. In that sense, a particular risk is, metaphorically speaking, both a disease and the factor triggering the spontaneous cure mechanism, like are vaccines against a particular infection.

Translating these lessons from the individual to the social domain would be methodologically useful and even desirable from a normative point of view, but unfortunately this is not as straightforward as one could imagine. The immediate problem that one could suspect to emerge in such a translation of lessons from individual to social resilience would be the heterogeneity of individual preferences and, thus, behaviours in the society. However, this is not the most important divergence between the individual and social sources of resilience, not so much because heterogeneity in a society is negligible, but, rather, because individual behaviour is also the result of many underlying potentially divergent attractors of actions, like selfishness and altruism or laziness and creativity, to name a few examples.

The main problem when trying to translate the lessons learnt from individual resilience in an educational context to resilience in the social context is the assessment of outcomes. Specifically, while it is straightforward to assess a student's resistance and adaptation to a risky environment coping with challenging or unfavourable environments, by looking at his/her performance in the educational context, it is difficult to assess the resilience of a social system unless we fall into the trap to consider as good all forces against change. It becomes apparent, that studying the quantity of resistance against change is not sufficient, because some of today's risks and challenges may be good starting points for a positive change.

In fact, in the dynamic context mentioned above, even the risk of a negative change is the mechanism necessary for the activation of resilience mechanisms in the society. The reader must have realized by now that a major problem in studying resilience from either a positive or a normative point of view, is that the researcher or the policy maker must respond to the challenging questions, i) what is a good or a bad change in the social context? and ii) is all resilience good by definition?

Subjective values and objective prices

Since the early awakening of our thirst for knowing the truth, humans have too often believed to hold the keys of the door leading to the one and absolute truth, usually expressed as religious beliefs, but also, as lemmas of early science based on casual observation of a wrongly "obvious" reality.

With a large proportion of individualistic ethics and relatively low empathy for others' "absolute truths", the early debates have only exceptionally been solved through the dialogue among philosophers. Rather, the conflict among "absolute truths" has often led to violence and war, which unfortunately does not seem to have been abolished (although substantially reduced) yet in the modern world.

In an effort to mitigate the devastating effects of competing absolutistic views on the potential for a peaceful symbiosis among diverse people on the same planet, the useful and appealing presumption that "two parties claiming divergent truths might be both wrong" was broadly confused with the wrong version of it, that "... they could be both right", which easily gave its place to the even more wrong relativist corollary that "there is no absolute truth". This easily accepted principle is well-known for its problematic inconsistency with itself, as it belongs to the family of self-contradictory statements, profoundly and eloquently reviewed by Hofstadter (1979). Despite the self-contradictory nature of the basic philosophical relativism axiom, the recognition of our cognitive limitations and biases as thinkers bring most of the social scientists closer to a relativistic production of partial approaches to knowledge than to a noble but almost unfeasible endeavour for the discovery of global absolute truths.

In the context of the modern capitalist market-centred societies, relativistic approaches were further encouraged by a radical shift of the discipline of economics at both the academic and the practical level away from value, which is by now fully replaced in all textbooks by market price. Things worth what the market says they worth! Arguably, determining the value of things is a very difficult task that would require a broad consensus on fundamental principles, very similar to agreeing among heterogeneous individuals on the absolute truths to believe in. Markets, empowered by "invisible hand" mechanisms are the obvious solution to this apparent impasse. We do not have to agree on anything, as long as we can let the supply and the demand of a good to determine its price by free exchange through the market mechanism.

Unfortunately, we also know from bitter experiences that some large players may affect the not-so-free exchange and we establish regulatory measures to mitigate market imperfections like abuse of market power by an oligopoly. Then, we can happily let the “regulated” market determine the value of things for us. But it seems this is not enough either! The market price says that a football player must earn more money than a brain surgeon and we all agree that this is a false representation of the ranking of values of these workers for the society. Also, the market price encourages more people to look for expensive mushrooms in Spain than to cultivate cereals to reduce food insecurity in Africa. So, the price mechanism is not a good basis for the determination of the value of things. Finally, the market price is subject to “invisible hand” type of dynamics with very undesirable properties, leading often and periodically to bubbles¹, which misrepresent value and mislead even experienced investors during their financial decisions.

The question is, are we prepared to look for values beyond prices? Strangely, the interest and scope of this question is by no means defined within the narrow limits of the economic domain. Rather, it must be formulated in the broader area of ethics and social norms. Furthermore, the two central problems of our times, environmental degradation and inequality, the latter heavily affecting quality of life in the Mediterranean, put immense pressure for an early response.

Paternalism and nudging

Presumably, a fundamental principle of non-paternalist liberal ideologies is the freedom to choose. Modern markets (more global and dynamic) have been advertised on the basis of their superiority over markets in the past (more limited in space and scope) or alternative allocation mechanisms regarding the individual consumer’s freedom to choose among a larger variety of options. Critiques have identified several contradictions in this approach.

For example, freedom to choose in one market may relate negatively with freedom to choose in markets at a different geographical area. Also, early results on market imperfections, predict that a larger variety leads to higher prices, driving low-income consumers out of the market, thus restricting their freedom to consume.

Most measures of market regulation may deal with such imperfections in a variety of ways (price margins, quality standards, trade agreements, etc.) but strongly avoid to challenge the assumption that preferences are as they are and should be respected as such. This is natural, because in a market-centred society, prices are the only objective information concerning the value of things. However, as we argued above, the objectivity of market-based price determination mechanisms leads to a plethora of problems like bubbles and other types of value misrepresentation.

With a large prevalence of examples from taxation and individual investment decisions but mostly arguments concerning the nutritional properties and health consequences of food choice, a rapidly growing literature has emerged since Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008) book on “nudging”. The literature is based on the view that people do not always make good decisions, not even when “good” is defined according to their own interest. In my opinion, this is a timid step towards the recognition of a well-known fact. When we care for someone, like for example, our son or our brother we feel entitled and obliged to remind them that smoking is harmful and that drinking and driving cannot be tolerated as a result of one’s “freedom to choose”. From this point of view, considering all types of individual behaviour as a natural way of optimally reacting to changes and challenges is obviously wrong. In the same way, admitting that resilience is an interesting phenomenon to study should not be confused as a proof that resilience is an exogenous feature inherent in all cultures and social groups, or that all resilience is good.

¹ Interestingly, defined as deviations between an asset’s market price and its fundamental value, admitting the existence of a fundamental value, independent of the market price.

Resilience through the filter of good and bad

The need for a reconsideration of resilience from both a positive and a normative point of view can be discussed using some of the lessons and conclusions drawn from individual resilience studied by psychologists in an educational context. The main point made in this article is that unless we want to approach resilience as a feature which is exogenously given in each population and society and whose dynamics, if any, are not subject to deliberate actions and policies, we need a framework for the evaluation of resilience as a social good.

Relying on the hope that resilience is necessarily built in our societies as a force guaranteeing convergence to a socially desirable point of social evolution may be too optimistic and even counterproductive, because it may lead us to an inefficient or biased political and regulatory decision making. When the effect of policies and actions at a national or international level take into account the dynamic effect of such actions on resilience itself, one cannot blindly rely on the goodness of the process any more. This is mainly because resilience is not uniformly embodied in all societies and it does not have a globally positive social value by itself. The issue of socially valuing the options available beyond market-price valuations becomes fundamental in this context.

In order not to leave the proposal outlined in the preceding paragraphs incomplete, two ongoing crises suggest the two major challenges which should be used as the basis for the assessment of both individual and collective expressions of resilience as a social good or bad.

First, the inequality crisis, also recently known as the “refugee crisis”. Individual or collective process contributing to an enhancement of inequality within or across national borders must be considered to be socially bad. They expose populations to the risk of an unsustainable social environment. War is just the most extreme example of such processes, but all other forces maintaining or increasing inequality levels must be considered as an unambiguously negative value to the society.

Second, environmental degradation. Energy consumption, territory, farm and urban planning, exploitation of natural resources and thus the use of production factors but even individual preferences for market goods can be assessed on the basis of their effects on the time horizon and survival possibilities of our planet. In this context, for example, overconsumption or an individual’s wish to possess and consume as much as possible are no longer treated as neutral “natural” rights resulting from a supposed freedom of choice. Resilience will then naturally be considered as a positive or negative social value affected by and affecting our actions as collective thinking beings. Whether this occurs within a nation a group of nations or the whole world is not a trivial issue.

The social value of education which potentiates the new generations’ discovery of common ethical principles rather than differences across borders cannot be overestimated. A long tradition of cultural symbiosis among the Mediterranean countries offers the best ground for this to be a feasible plan.

Bibliography / More information

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