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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: What's Resilience?

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This special series of posts is produced by [Juliet Pinto](#) (Florida International University) and [Phaedra Pezzullo](#) (University of Colorado-Boulder)

*In collaboration with [International Environmental Communication Association](#), FIU's [Sea Level Solutions Center](#), and [eyesontherise.org](#).
Both Pinto and Pezzullo are attending [COP21](#) in Paris.*

By Phaedra Pezzullo, from Paris

It is hard to provide or to navigate a COP map.

We are gathering in temporary structures in Le Bourget, a suburb of Paris. There are restaurants, restrooms, water bottle refill stations, and lots of meeting spaces. The IECA has a booth in a long building with many other

NGOs; there also are great halls for large diplomatic meetings; smaller meeting spaces for spinoff groups; places to recharge your computer through stationary biking; plastic animals that appear to be an artistic statement about the loss of biodiversity; pocket gardens; and much, much more. Plus, there are events throughout the city of Paris during this time.

One area within the convention space features various countries and regions (think: Disney World's "It's a small world"). The Japanese Pavilion tagline declares: "Transformation!-Low carbon & climate resilient society." They feature photographs of Mizuhiki art "to show the many layers and curves of the ties between stakeholders" and Japan's intention to share an appreciation of what can "be gifted from natural world" (Pavilion brochure).

Germany features several themes at their exhibit, including "climate resilient development" with the tagline: "Time to adapt!" The U.S. hosted a panel sponsored by the Department of Interior, including an indigenous representative from the Marshall Islands and an Eskimo: "From the Arctic to the Islands: Building Resilience Now in the Face of Rapid Climate Change."

For the U.S. government's [Climate Resilience Toolkit](#), the indigenous representatives encouraged people who were not yet convinced to visit the frontlines of climate change to witness changes firsthand and to listen to stories of indigenous communities to find out how people are being impacted. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) shared their [Coastal Resilience tool](#).

Yesterday, UN Secretary-General and South Korean statesman Ban Ki-moon repeated his ongoing call for our focus to include not just preventative measures to decarbonize, but also resilience. He emphasized that the "insurance industry can play an important role, especially in helping to ease the financial burden associated with disasters and to protect the vulnerable."

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Throughout these exhibits, policies, and displays, resilience—simultaneously pragmatic and imaginative, depressing and optimistic—is a striking structure of feeling for our times.

Coined in the 1800s, “resilience” was an attempt by scientists initially to consider how wood and engineering could withstand ecological pressures like water and earthquakes. Its influence during this period of scientific inquiry arguably is best known for how it shaped Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Drawing on Darwin, ecologist Crawford Stanley “Buzz” Holling distinguished ecological resilience from engineering resilience by defining it as the “measure of the persistence of systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance”; that is, how “a major strategy selected is not one of maximizing either efficiency or a particular reward, but one which allows persistence by maintaining flexibility above all else.”

In order to link the paradoxical spirit of nature as change and persistence, predictable and unpredictable, and what I would add to include panic and pleasure, with the dynamic reality of hierarchies across scale, Holling coined “panarchy” as an homage to the Greek God Pan. Holling does so to emphasize the fundamental need for us today to grapple with how we can adapt and persist at the same time. One way to think about this is to ask: how do we maintain our flexibility and embrace technoculture without making this planet uninhabitable for our species? ([Holling, C. S. 2004](#)).

The Rockefeller Foundation has initiated a 100 Resilient Cities Campaign, which was highlighted today at a side panel for COP21. Their goal is to focus on cities as significant spaces of acute and chronic climate adaptation and recovery efforts. In Boulder, for example, the motto has become: “Bounce Forward,” to emphasize that bouncing back to one’s previous state post-disaster is not enough, but that we must, as some say of New Orleans, “rebuild better.”

The primary goal of participants at COP21, of course, should be to prevent the need to bounce or rebuild. And yet...the word seems to appear again and again as part of UN, governmental, corporate, and NGO discourse here in Paris.

It perhaps goes without saying that resilience is a big shift from the affect of the so-called Greatest Generation; leaders do not appear to be promising that disaster will happen “never again” or that we can aim for “sustainability.” No one seems to believe we are building a world post-disaster. Instead, the repeated message is that we have begun an era of ongoing negotiation of inevitable disasters, which only could be exacerbated if negotiations here fail.

Figuring out the ecological limits of adaptation, the ethics of survival, and ways we can foster our capacity to imagine how to thrive in this conjuncture are some of the grand challenges we face. Is that resilience? Or does “resilience” become the discourse to deter justice and finance what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism”? The negotiations carry on. I suspect we will hear more responses advocating climate justice from frontline communities if we listen.

Endnote: Resilience has become a popular discourse and some of my favorite scholars today are thinking a great deal about what this means. If you are interested in resilience, check out four exemplars of many:

1. Leah Sprain’s ongoing research project in Boulder, Colorado:
<http://abbieliel.com/whatsnew/2015/10/17/rips-update>
2. The new journal coedited by Stephanie Foote & Stephanie LeMenager titled *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*:
<http://www.resiliencejournal.org/>
3. Bridie McGreavy’s article, “Resilience as Discourse,” in the journal *Environmental Communication* this past summer (available online, if you don’t subscribe already).

4. Patrice M. Buzzanell, “Resilience: Talking, Resisting, and Imagining New Normalcies Into Being,” *Journal of Communication* 60 (2010) 1–14. (Previously, her International Communication Association Presidential Address.)



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