

Letter

Universities and Disaster Capitalism

I have been sitting in exam board meetings this summer noticing how some, particularly those in senior and management positions, have started using a term that, for a while now, has been the focus of significant discussion in one of my areas of research. This term is 'resilience'. I wish I had recorded some of these conversations but, in short, this term is being applied to students whose time at university has been hit by Covid-19 - and all the resulting shortages of resources and care. Intruding into the conversation about a student's worth has been praise for how 'resilient' they have been during the crisis, or not.

The context in which I work is a small, elite art school nestled within a large metropolitan university. As Andrew Ross in *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs* has pointed out, the field of art-work has become a fulcrum in which new, and newly exploitative, models of work are pioneered. He describes how the artist, or 'creative', has become a model citizen in the emergent new economy, defined by precarity, short-termism, attention-seeking self-exploitation, and enmeshment within networks that, equally, can be described in

like terms. This is newly represented, I fear, in the development of 'resilience' in the vocabularies of academic institutions.

Some students, of course, have not demonstrated resilience; those who have become ill, who have been too tired, who have complained, or whose intellectual and creative endeavours are simply incompatible with the conditions of a global pandemic. If resilience is something to be praised and, indeed, rewarded, one wonders what this implies about other students' capacities to meet learning outcomes.

The terminology of resilience is especially associated, currently, with discussions about the social effects of natural disasters (the term has also been the subject of critique in other contexts, for instance Mark Neocleous's 2013 essay 'Resisting Resilience' in *Radical Philosophy*). In much the same way as I have observed in exam boards this year, populations such as Puerto Rico's have been praised for their resilience in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Resilience is demonstrated by an ability to fill the void that state care has been unable or unwilling to tackle, enabling capitalism and the social status quo to return. In most cases of 'disaster capitalism', this resilient population might show itself to be 'empowered' in its heroic efforts to rebuild and

manage, but that same population is all too often powerless to stop pro-private, profit-driven organisations and governments exploiting the 'opportunities' that the disaster leaves in its wake - they spy opportunities for investment, deregulation, authoritarianism and, if you are Robert De Niro, luxury hotels.

Though individual and collective attempts to adapt and hold on are praiseworthy, ultimately, narratives of resilience following a disaster only serves the agendas of those keen to legitimise or normalise strained conditions. Austerity measures are one obvious item on the institution's agenda, but also watch out for the ways in which representation and funding become further skewed towards those in positions of relative privilege, able to make their case heard, qualify for grants and, as recipients, reflect funders' interests first and foremost. As I have already stated, the ability to adapt to a context that is fabricated, unnecessary and geared around the status quo only entrenches these values further. The rhetoric of resilience must be called out in higher education. In a meeting of graduate examiners last month, I failed to point out any of the above, but I hope this acts as a warning for the future.

Thomas Morgan Evans
Camberwell, London