

Re-Framing Resilience Turn in Risk and Management with Anti-Positivistic Perspective of Holling's Early Work

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Abstract : In the last decades, resilience has received much attention in relation to understanding and managing new forms of risk, especially in the context of urban adaptation to climate change. There are abundant concerns, however, on how to best interpret resilience and related ideas, and on whether they can guide ethically appropriate risk-related or adaptation efforts. Narrative creation and framing are critical steps in shaping public discussion and policy in large-scale interventions, since they favor or inhibit early decision and interpretation habits, which can be morally sensitive and then become persistent on time. This article adds to such framing process by contesting a conventional narrative on resilience and offering an alternative one. Conventionally, present ideas on resilience are traced to the work of ecologist C. S. Holling, especially to his article Resilience and Stability in Ecosystems. This article is usually portrayed as a contribution of complex systems thinking to theoretical ecology, where Holling appeals to resilience in order to challenge received views on ecosystem stability and the diversity-stability hypothesis. In this regard, resilience is construed as a “purely scientific”, precise and descriptive concept, denoting a complex property that allows ecosystems to persist, or to maintain functions, after disturbance. Yet, these formal features of resilience supposedly changed with Holling’s later work in the 90s, where, it is argued, Holling begun to use resilience as a more pragmatic “boundary term”, aimed at unifying transdisciplinary research about risks, ecological or otherwise, and at articulating public debate and governance strategies on the issue. In the conventional story, increased vagueness and degrees of normativity are the price to pay for this conceptual shift, which has made the term more widely usable, but also incompatible with scientific purposes and morally problematic (if not completely objectionable). This paper builds on a detailed analysis of Holling’s early work to propose an alternative narrative. The study will show that the “complexity turn” has often entangled theoretical and pragmatic aims. Accordingly, Holling’s primary aim was to fight what he termed “pathologies of natural resource management” or “pathologies of command and control management”, and so, the terms of his reform of ecosystem science are partly subordinate to the details of his proposal for reforming the management sciences. As regards resilience, Holling used it as a polysemous, ambiguous and normative term: sometimes, as an instrumental value that is closely related to various stability concepts; other times, and more crucially, as an intrinsic value and a tool for attacking efficiency and instrumentalism in management. This narrative reveals the limitations of its conventional alternative and has several practical advantages. It captures well the structure and purposes of Holling’s project, and the various roles of resilience in it. It helps to link Holling’s early work with other philosophical and ideological shifts at work in the 70s. It highlights the currency of Holling’s early work for present research and action in fields such as risk and climate adaptation. And it draws attention to morally relevant aspects of resilience that the conventional narrative neglects.

Keywords : resilience, complexity turn, risk management, positivistic, framing

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