

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Bankoff, G. (2018), Remaking the world in our own image: vulnerability, resilience and adaptation as historical discourses. *Disasters*, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12312>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.



**Remaking the world in our own image: Vulnerability, resilience and adaptation as historical discourses**

Journal:	<i>Disasters Journal</i>
Manuscript ID	DISA-Feb-16-1943.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Vulnerability, Resilience, Adaptation, Cold War, Discourses

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3 Disasters have become for most of humanity “a frequent life experience” (Bankoff 2003). A  
4 warming climate and less predictable weather patterns and an expanding urban infrastructure  
5 susceptible to geophysical hazards make the world an increasingly hazardous place even for  
6 those living in high income countries (HICs). It is an opportune moment, therefore, from the  
7 vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, to review the terms and  
8 concepts regularly employed to assess risk and measure people’s exposure to hazard to  
9 determine whether they are still valid. In particular, it may be useful to examine  
10 “vulnerability”, “resilience” and “adaptation”, the principal theoretical concepts that have  
11 dominated post-World War II disaster studies, from an historical perspective and to ask to  
12 what extent they were discourses particular to their time and place.

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21 That time and place was the Cold War in Europe, an ideological contest that sought to  
22 explain societies *and their environments* from the stance of competing conceptual  
23 frameworks and then, in its aftermath, the “triumph” of liberal democracy, neoliberal  
24 economics and, in recent decades, globalisation. The discourses elaborated to describe these  
25 decades all owe their origins to a Western intellectual tradition that casts the rest of the world  
26 as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken, and hazard-prone regions that were dependent on external  
27 medical knowledge, overseas aid, and scientific expertise (Bankoff 2001). During the Cold  
28 War, the non-Western world was depicted as vulnerable, and then following the collapse of  
29 the Soviet Union, as resilient. More recently, the focus has been more on climate change  
30 through policies that advocate adaptation and disaster risk reduction (DRR) as the guiding  
31 principles of disaster risk management (DRM). Though all these discourses have been  
32 present in one form or another over most of this period, there have been notable shifts in  
33 emphasis that represent something of an intellectual adjustment that has rendered  
34 vulnerability seemingly less important as a discourse. If vulnerability helped explain how, so  
35 to speak, the world was rendered unsafe in the second-half of the twentieth century, why has  
36 the term lost favour, at least on an official level, at the turn of the twenty-first century when  
37 the societal and environmental conditions that inspired its formulation in the first place are, if  
38 anything, more prevalent?

### 50 51 52 53 54 **Vulnerability as a Cold War discourse**

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56 There is no denying that the historical context was highly significant to the emergence of  
57 vulnerability as a discourse. The term emerged and gained validity during the 1970s, a time  
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3 when the Cold War was heating up again under Ronald Reagan (Gaddis 2005). Its chief  
4 proponents were scholars and practitioners highly motivated by concern with the plight of  
5 citizens in the newly denominated Third World, and who shared a growing suspicion of the  
6 development policies pursued by Western governments and transnational corporations in  
7 these new nations. The Cold War had entrenched a militarised model of civil defence  
8 developed in the years following World War II that subsumed disaster management under the  
9 need for nuclear preparedness. NATO, for instance, established a Civil Defence Committee  
10 in 1951 to oversee efforts to provide protection for its citizens stating that “the capabilities to  
11 protect our populations against the effects of war could also be used to protect them against  
12 the effects of disasters” (NATO-OTAN 2001:5). However, by demonstrating that there was  
13 nothing “natural” about natural disasters and that people were put at risk as much by the  
14 political and social structures of the societies in which they lived as by any physical hazard or  
15 event, some scholars began to question the hitherto unchallenged assumption that the  
16 growing incidence of disasters was due to a rising number of purely natural physical  
17 phenomena. In the process, they offered a searing critique of both the means and the intent  
18 behind Western-led development and investment policies (O’Keefe et al 1976, Hewitt 1983,  
19 Watts 1993). Rather than lifting people out of poverty, the results of such programmes were  
20 too often to make of their life a “permanent emergency” (Wisner 1993:131-133). The  
21 emphasis, instead, was shifted from an agent-specific focus on an extreme event to  
22 consideration of what rendered communities unsafe, a condition, they argued, depended  
23 primarily on a society’s social order and the relative position of advantage or disadvantage  
24 that a particular group occupied within it (Cannon 1994, Hewitt 1997:141). The term coined  
25 to assess the nature and extent of this risk was “vulnerability”, where the latter is not only a  
26 gauge of people’s exposure to hazard but also a measure of its capacity to recover from loss  
27 (Chambers 1989, Blaikie et al. 1994, Hewitt 1997, Lewis 1999, Cannon 2000, Pelling 2003,  
28 Bankoff et al. 2004, Adger 2006).

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47 The purpose here is not to assess the relative merits of the term in relation to any other but  
48 simply to examine it historically as a product of its time and place, and the importance of the  
49 relative political and economic factors that underlay its conceptualisation (Cote and  
50 Nightingale 2012: 478). The Cold War origins of the term begin with its definition or, rather,  
51 the way vulnerability is applied in practice. Everybody, of course, is made vulnerable to some  
52 extent by a combination of variables such as class, gender, age, disability and ethnicity  
53 among others that affects their entitlement to command basic necessities and their  
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3 empowerment to enjoy fundamental rights (Watts 1993:118-120). While the term embraces a  
4 wide spectrum of who is vulnerable, that turned the Indian Ocean Tsunami into a “natural  
5 disaster” with the single largest death toll in Swedish history, in practice, the focus is  
6 primarily on those with the highest degree of constant exposure to risk (Hellman and Riegert  
7 2009). And these people overwhelmingly live in low and middle income countries (LMICs).  
8 The relative vulnerability of these populations is usually defined either in terms of mortality  
9 or magnitude: the Bholia Cyclone of 1970 that killed an estimated half a million people in  
10 East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and still the deadliest tropical storm in world history, or the  
11 7.8 M<sub>w</sub>Tangshan Earthquake of 1976 that flattened a city in north-eastern China causing  
12 approximately a quarter of a million deaths (Sommer and Mosley 1972, Yong et al.1988).  
13 Vulnerable people, it was apparent, lived in vulnerable places, and these vulnerable places  
14 principally lay in the so-called developing world and were subject to the monolithic industrial  
15 modernisation projects of the post-World War II era.

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27 This message was made clear in the most complete model proposed to explain how risk is  
28 generated and disasters come about. In *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and*  
29 *Disasters* first published in 1994, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis and Ben Wisner  
30 presented the pseudo-formula  $risk = hazard + vulnerability$  to show how the measure of a  
31 community's risk is directly attributable not only to the physical hazard experienced but the  
32 extent to which a particular social order puts people at risk. According to the Pressure and  
33 Release Model (PAR), vulnerability is reproduced over time: at a global level through “root  
34 causes” that reflect the historical distribution and exercise of power in a society that  
35 marginalises certain groups; at an intermediate level through more contemporary “dynamic  
36 pressures” that include epidemic disease, urbanization, conflict, foreign debt, certain  
37 economic policies and environmental degradation; and at an immediate local level through  
38 “unsafe conditions” that equate to a particular group's hazardous living conditions, dangerous  
39 livelihoods or inadequate food sources (Blaikie et al. 1994). At the same time as offering a  
40 framework for linking the impact of hazards to a series of societal factors and processes that  
41 generate vulnerability, the PAR model exposed the processes that transformed the colonial  
42 territories of post-World War II into the new states of the Third World.<sup>1</sup> The critique was  
43 unequivocal: the imperial heritage, development policies, and unequal power relationships  
44 rendered some communities less able to deal with disasters and left them more at risk.

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Not that everybody was affected in the same way or to the same extent. A small proportion of  
households and enterprises, more in wealthier states and fewer in less wealthy ones, did

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3 benefit from development policies and were able to protect their families and fortunes from  
4 the worst of human and natural excesses. To paraphrase the presidential campaign slogan of  
5 Democratic Party hopeful, Aldai E. Stevenson, in 1952 and later echoed by British Prime  
6 Minister Harold Macmillan, some people were safer than at any time in history and had  
7 “never had it so good”. A growing class of middle income-earners who were well-educated  
8 and politically engaged – professionals, middle managers, technicians and even unionised  
9 workers – were also relatively safer even if subject to the economic vagaries of globalisation  
10 that would eventually erode their fragile sense of security as the century unfolded. These  
11 groups, however, never constituted more than a small minority of the world’s population. The  
12 rest, the vast majority of humanity, whose lives were overwhelmingly rendered vulnerable  
13 and whose deaths constituted the figures in the newly compiled disaster statistics, were  
14 comprised of the low income populations of the Third World. These people wielded little  
15 political influence and had fewer entitlements. They also included a persistent if fluid section  
16 of First World citizens whose lives were rendered insecure by a combination of ethnicity,  
17 gender, class or some other factor.

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29 Vulnerability offered a means of critiquing developmentalism and the untrammelled pursuit  
30 of material prosperity that had become the dominant model of economic progress after 1945.  
31 Arturo Escobar refers to this conceptual ascendancy as “colonisation”, indelibly shaping  
32 representations of reality and constructing “the contemporary Third World, silently, without  
33 our noticing it” (Escobar 1995a:213). Nations were increasingly assessed in terms of their  
34 development or lack of it and some societies began to be regarded (and regard themselves) as  
35 underdeveloped, a state seen as synonymous with backwardness, poverty and, implicitly,  
36 vulnerability (Escobar 1995b:5). The Third World was not only disease-ridden and poverty-  
37 stricken but it was also increasingly disaster-prone, a zone where repeated hazards inflicted  
38 upon people sudden death and damaging losses that left communities physically weak,  
39 economically impoverished, socially dependent and psychologically harmed. It also formed  
40 an integral part of a generalising, Western cultural discourse that denigrated large regions of  
41 world as dangerous (Bankoff 2001).

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Development was supposed to ameliorate the unsafe conditions and dynamic pressures that  
put people at risk. If it largely failed to do so, it was because development was too much a  
part of the root causes that underlay societies’ vulnerability in the first place. In this newly-  
constructed Third World, many people began to perceive development projects such as the  
financing of dams, mines, plantations and tourist resorts that required the conversion of prime

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3 agricultural or seafront land to industrial and commercial usage as disadvantageous rather  
4 than beneficial (Heijmans 2004). To make way for such projects, local communities were  
5 often displaced without consultation, losing not only their homes, livelihoods and rights to  
6 cultivate land but also their identity, dignity and roots. Moreover, the increasing dependence  
7 of industrialised societies on fossil fuels (more than half the total oil consumed in the last 150  
8 years has been burnt in the last three decades) necessitated an ever-increasing expanse of land  
9 and the organisation of a vast workforce outside of HICs to supply its need for all forms of  
10 energy (sugars as well as fossil fuels) (Mitchell 2011:6, 16). It is hardly surprising that many  
11 environmentalist and grassroots activists in these affected countries began to talk about  
12 “development aggression,” a form of development in which people were neither the partners  
13 nor the beneficiaries of projects but rather its victims (Heijmans 2004). It was also a  
14 condition that rendered societies and their environments much more vulnerable to the effects  
15 of natural hazards.  
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### 28 **The battle over resilience and the rise of neoliberalism**

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30 The link between development and disasters, the Cold War and vulnerability was not  
31 immediately apparent. Indeed, it is not an association that is often made even today.  
32 However, with the end of the Cold War in 1991 (and incidentally the demise of the Third  
33 World, at least in name), the emphasis on how societies should be viewed began to shift.  
34 Gradually, it was suggested that the issue of vulnerability should be turned around and  
35 approached from a more positive viewpoint. Societies were seen as no longer simply  
36 vulnerable, with all its associated negative connotations, but people began to be considered as  
37 primarily resilient; they had capacities to organise, resist, learn, change and adapt (Handmer  
38 2003). Actually, this change in thinking was already well underway influenced by the work  
39 of the ecologist Crawford Holling. Holling maintained that ecosystem dynamics were better  
40 understood not in terms of equilibrium but as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance  
41 while retaining the same population or state variables (Holling 1973). These same forces, it  
42 began to be argued, were also at work in a social context. First gaining official approbation  
43 with proposals for a decentralised alternative energy grid during the oil crisis of the 1970s,  
44 resilience thinking moved away from a qualitative assessment of why people were at risk  
45 towards a consideration of the available response options (Walker and Cooper 2011:153).  
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3 A change of discourse was also politically advisable in the new international climate. The  
4 rationale behind Overseas Development Aid (ODA) initiated by President Truman in 1949  
5 and projects funded by the World Bank designed to contain and rollback the spread of  
6 Communism were no longer required. Development, in this sense, had been a continuation of  
7 a discourse already initiated under colonialism and refined in the debates over post-war  
8 compensation about the best ways to deal with poverty, often compounded by natural hazards  
9 and disasters. As the anti-Communist agenda receded in the 1980s and 1990s, structural  
10 adjustment loans, foreign direct investment and private capital flows began to replace ODA  
11 as the favoured development paradigm. Any debate about the relative merits of market-  
12 oriented reform simply “expired” (Summers and Pritchett 1993:385). At the heart of the new  
13 approach was promoting growth by fiscal adjustments followed by facilitating  
14 macroeconomic stability and integration into the international economy (Easterley 2005).  
15 This neoliberal or strongly market-based view of post-Cold War economic integration is  
16 often, somewhat erroneously, referred to under the rubric of the Washington Consensus. If  
17 anything neoliberalism was a throwback, at least in principle, to the nineteenth century in  
18 terms of its heavy reliance on free market mechanisms. Under this new financial regime,  
19 funding was made conditional on fiscal discipline, tax reform, trade liberalisation,  
20 privatisation, deregulation and a reduced role for the state (Veltmeyer 2005). The consequent  
21 privatization of public services and infrastructure and sell-off of state assets commonly took  
22 place in the absence of proper regulatory safeguards, placing many services beyond the reach  
23 of the poor, leaving others at the mercy of substantial rises in utility charges, and rendering  
24 them all more vulnerable to the impact and effect of natural hazards and disasters (Hilary  
25 2004).

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28 In this new political climate, it was expedient to stress what made people resilient rather than  
29 what made them vulnerable (Blaikie et al. 1994, Maskrey 1989, Manyena 2006, Folke 2006,  
30 Gaillard 2007, Alexander 2013). This resilience was often referred to in terms of a  
31 community’s social capital or the manner in which a contribution freely given was expected  
32 to be reciprocated at an appropriate time, and by the development of group relations that  
33 morally enforced this code. Michael Woolcock identifies three kinds of social capital:  
34 bonding (ties between family, friends, neighbours and associates of similar demographic  
35 characteristics); bridging (ties among people from different ethnic, locational and  
36 occupational backgrounds but of similar socio-economic status); and linking (external ties  
37 with those in positions of wider societal influence) (Woolcock 2001). The role of social  
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3 capital in disaster management has received increasing, if not uncritical attention (Fine 2010),  
4 in recent years both with regard to volunteerism in the aftermath of both major events like the  
5 Kobe Earthquake of 1995 or the Marmara Earthquake of 1999, and in terms of everyday  
6 community risks (Jalali 2002, Nakagawa and Shaw 2004, Bankoff 2015). Emphasis has also  
7 been placed on the importance of location in generating particular forms of associational  
8 activities, a geography of social capital and “a recognition that context matters to the  
9 outcomes of social processes” (Mohan and Mohan 2002:202).

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15 If vulnerability was a product of the Cold War and the conceptual framework that created the  
16 Third World, to what extent is resilience an “invention” of a way of thought that promotes  
17 and condones neoliberalism? The uncomfortable truth, as scholars have recently pointed out,  
18 is that the two discourses have much in common and share many policy approaches even if  
19 for different reasons (Walker and Cooper 2011, MacKinnon and Derickson 2012). The  
20 neoliberal agenda envisages a state where human well-being is best advanced by “the  
21 maximisation of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterised by  
22 private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (Harvey  
23 2007:22). To achieve these desired ends, the state only has one primary responsibility and  
24 that is to create the conditions that permit a fully functioning market. In this “voluntary  
25 state”, where the emphasis has shifted from the structural factors that cause vulnerability to  
26 individual responsibility and choice, all other responsibilities are labelled as “personal”. A  
27 resilient community is one “better able to weather its exposure to global financial markets  
28 through the adoption of a localised, decentralised, post-carbon, ecosystems-based model of  
29 growth” (Walker and Cooper 2011:155). In effect, the state devolves public safety to civil  
30 society and then expects the market to meet the social needs of the population. It does so by  
31 promoting the conditions that create wealth and then allowing the wealthy to volunteer  
32 assistance to those it has impoverished. This “hollowing out” of the state, however, cannot be  
33 achieved without the voluntary contribution of non-state actors.

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48 As regards disaster management, the state increasingly depended on NGOs to fulfil the public  
49 safety roles it wished to be divested of, if not in the immediate short-term in respect to the  
50 provision of emergency services, then certainly in the longer term as regards preparedness,  
51 mitigation, recovery and reconstruction. From the neoliberal perspective, divesting  
52 humanitarian assistance to NGOs was seen as a salutary alternative to funding corrupt  
53 governments in LMICs. Reframing the state’s responsibilities in this manner now cast  
54 poverty largely as a voluntarily choice: the poor chose to be poor and only had themselves to  
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3 blame for being poor. Likewise, those who were vulnerable choose to be vulnerable and had  
4 only themselves to blame for being vulnerable (Nickel and Eikenberry 2007:536-537).  
5 Echoing the harsh sentence of nineteenth century Social Darwinists that condemned  
6 “primitive races” like the Aborigines of Tasmania to dwindle and disappear, proponents of  
7 neoliberalism regarded social responsibility as optional, and vulnerability as voluntary.  
8 “Resilient” people do not have to look to the state to secure their well-being as they have  
9 already made themselves secure. This “social resilience” has become a core constituent of the  
10 neoliberal economic agenda now expressed in terms of sustainable development and its  
11 prescriptions for institutional reform: “Resilience was reconceived not simply as a property of  
12 the biosphere, in need of protection from the economic development of humanity, but a  
13 property within human populations which now needed promoting through the increase of  
14 their ‘economic options’” (Reid 2012:72).

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24 The commonalities in practice between a neoliberal agenda and the shift from vulnerability to  
25 social resilience in DRM brought to the fore a new rhetoric that emphasised disaster risk  
26 reduction (DRR) and focused on community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM).  
27 DRR or a mitigation approach began to emerge in the 1970s and has gradually become the  
28 most dynamic discourse in the global policy field of disasters (Hannigan 2012:130-145). If  
29 resilience recognised the necessity of incorporating ecological systems thinking into disaster  
30 management through a greater awareness of environmental and sustainable development  
31 issues, the priority with DRR was risk reduction and prevention through improving the  
32 quality and security of people’s lives by improving livelihoods and increasing social  
33 mobilisation. Pre-Disaster Mitigation or a programme to invest in communities prior to  
34 disasters was first piloted in the USA in 1997 (Project Impact) and passed into law in 2000  
35 (Disaster Mitigation Act 2000) (McCarthy and Keegan 2009). Its international ascendancy  
36 can be noted in the five Priority Actions identified in the 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action  
37 (UN 2005), and, more recently, in the four Priorities for Action agreed upon in the 2015  
38 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction that formally recognised the responsibility of  
39 local government, the private sector and other stakeholders alongside that of the state in  
40 reducing disaster risks (UN 2015).<sup>2</sup>

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53 On the ground, the means by which DRR was translated into action was through CBDRR.  
54 CBDRR claims to offer an effective and sustainable approach to disaster reduction through  
55 empowering people to tackle the underlying problems of poverty, marginalisation,  
56 environmental degradation and political abuse (World Bank 2001). Its distinguishing feature  
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3 is its emphasis on participatory processes in disaster management, capacity building among  
4 the people affected, removal of the root causes of vulnerability, and the mobilization of the  
5 less vulnerable sectors in support of those with needs (Heijnsman and Victoria 2001: 13-18).  
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7 In the Philippines, for example, NGOs have become increasingly involved in DRM and have  
8 integrated mitigation and preparedness into their existing operations. Starting with traditional  
9 relief and charity activities, such organisations foster community capacities to reduce  
10 vulnerability. At the same time, existing development organisations have expanded their  
11 programmes to incorporate disaster management capabilities, and specific NGOs have  
12 formed in direct response to actual disaster events to carry out integrated relief and  
13 rehabilitation work (Luna 2001: 219-220). In this sense, DRR with its emphasis more on  
14 community-based practices is only rediscovering that people with local knowledge and  
15 expertise are the principal resource of their community. As Andrew Maskrey succinctly  
16 observed 25 years ago “only local people know their own needs and therefore only they can  
17 define their own priorities for mitigation, within a given context” (Maskrey 1989:87).  
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21 Participatory approaches to DRR, however, have not always proven to be the panacea they  
22 were once hoped to be and have also been suborned by the World Bank and other multi-  
23 lateral lending institutions to serve a neoliberal agenda. Participating approaches were  
24 initially held up as a major counterbalance to the power of the dominant development  
25 discourse and to give a voice to the poor (Chambers 1997). But as participation was  
26 increasingly written into development projects both as a method of delivery and even as an  
27 intended outcome, it has become “wholly compatible with the liberalisation agenda, and poor  
28 people’s voices carefully marshalled to provide support for the Bank’s policy prescriptions”  
29 (Williams 2004:558). Instead of local knowledge shaping development projects, they are  
30 often in fact shaped more by locally dominant groups and by the project’s own interests.  
31 Rather than people participating in agency programmes, it is the other way round to ensure  
32 consistency with project-defined models. What David Mosse calls the “ventriloquization” of  
33 villagers’ needs (Mosse 2001:24). That is participatory approaches serve the dual purpose of  
34 both de-politicising the question of poverty and shifting the responsibility for the project’s  
35 success away from the administrating agency onto the participants (Williams 2004:564-565).  
36 Even if CBDRR acknowledges the need for local participation and acknowledges the  
37 structural causes in disasters, it is communities who are ultimately still responsible for  
38 improving their capacity and addressing the risks.  
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3 Although by different routes and for very different intentions, neoliberalism and social  
4 resilience end up advocating much the same approach by much the same methods. They both  
5 emphasise an active citizenship whereby people take responsibility for their own social and  
6 economic well-being, and they both share a general distrust of centralised state systems and a  
7 desire to decentralise responsibilities. The emphasis is on local capacity, local decision-  
8 making, local responsibility and, of course, local funding. To one, however, this championing  
9 of civil society is a way to disguise the imposition of market discipline, part of a state-  
10 building agenda that, far from empowering people, is a means of exercising “governance  
11 from a distance”. Jonathan Joseph even claims that resilience thinking’s individualist focus  
12 on risk is above all an Anglo-Saxon discourse intent on promoting institutional reforms in the  
13 interests of global capital (Joseph 2013). To others, however, resilience is a continuing  
14 critique of existing international development and aid that, far from shedding its Cold War  
15 agenda, only found new vitality in the policies and programmes associated with the  
16 Washington Consensus. The continuing notion that “natural disasters” are simply a sign of  
17 underdevelopment and that the poor suffer disproportionately during such events because of  
18 their underdevelopment was bitterly attacked. In the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, for  
19 instance, trust in this principle was used to support the argument that economic development  
20 was the best answer to disasters in Nicaragua (Rocha and Christoplos 2001:246). Ben Wisner  
21 decried the “phantom decentralisation” in neighbouring El Salvador whereby central  
22 government responsibilities were decentralised to local agencies without funding or resources  
23 to implement them. Despite the encouraging rhetoric that acknowledged community  
24 resilience and claimed to be supporting local capacity-building, the government’s post-Mitch  
25 recovery plan “produced vulnerabilities that affect all but the very richest” and was nothing  
26 more than “run-away capitalism justified by neoliberal ideology” (Wisner 2001: 261). Naomi  
27 Klein has gone further and claimed that neoliberalism, even if it does not promote disasters,  
28 certainly profits from them through the marketisation of emergency assistance, a process she  
29 aptly names “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2007).

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49 Resilience is no less a Western discourse than is vulnerability: it recasts the world according  
50 to culturally-specific dictates. Depending on the context in which it is evoked, resilience  
51 either tries to restructure non-Western societies according to prescribed economic formulae  
52 or it looks for salvation in the social structures of traditional communities that it defines to its  
53 own intent. All too often, however, it is a profoundly conservative discourse. Resilience as  
54 expressed through state policy can be used to mask inequalities and social differentiation  
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3 within societies, absolving the state of its duty of care and implicitly accepting capitalism as  
4 an immutable force akin to the power of Nature (MacKinnon and Derickson 2012:258). As a  
5 critique of the status quo, CBDRM often exalts existing social relations within communities  
6 and denies the state a legitimate role in promoting change in society. In either case, it is, as  
7 Muriel Cote and Andrea Nightingale suggest, “a power-laden framing that creates certain  
8 windows of visibility on the processes of change, while obscuring others” (Cote and  
9 Nightingale 2012:484-485).  
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### 18 **Globalisation and the “turn” to adaptation**

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20 The all but disappearance of Communism and the rise of neoliberalism in the last quarter of  
21 the 20<sup>th</sup> century prepared the way for the integration of economies, industries, markets and  
22 cultures on a truly global scale. This new network society is both informational and global:  
23 informational because increasingly all aspects of society and culture are integrated as a result  
24 of the Information Technology Revolution, and global because productivity, consumption  
25 and the circulation of capital, labour, raw materials, management and markets are organised  
26 worldwide (Castells 1996). The process of globalisation, of course, has been taking place for  
27 hundreds of years but has speeded up and diversified enormously over the last half-century.  
28 Previously confined to mainly economic matters, the term now includes activities such as  
29 technology, media and culture. It is the ultimate realisation of neoliberal thinking expressed  
30 on a global scale but, as Naomi Klein writes, globalisation was never simply about trading  
31 goods across borders more freely. Rather, it is an ideological project “to lock in a global  
32 policy framework that provided maximum freedom to multinational corporations to produce  
33 their goods as cheaply as possible and sell them with as few regulations as possible – while  
34 paying as little in tax as possible” (Klein 2015:19).  
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46 In this new political era, the existential threat is no longer Reds under the beds or the public  
47 sector of nation states but is climate change, itself the product of unfettered capitalism  
48 (Leichenko and O’Brien 2008). Overwhelming scientific evidence now supports the  
49 conclusion that human activity is changing the climate and will continue to affect it for  
50 hundreds if not thousands of years to come even if there are no further emissions of  
51 greenhouse gases. World temperatures have fluctuated in the past. However, it is estimated  
52 that at no time in the past 650,000 to 800,000 years have concentrations of water vapour,  
53 carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone, chlorofluorocarbons and hydrofluorocarbons  
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3 in the atmosphere been so high as they are today (Giddens 2014:12, World Bank 2015:16).  
4 While sceptics remain, challenging both the validity of the science (Lomborg 2001) and its  
5 ideological underpinnings (Bell 2011), the current debate is more about the nature of climate  
6 change. Whether it is a gradual process that will allow human societies and economies  
7 sufficient time to adjust to the new conditions, or whether it is non-linear, whereby crossing  
8 some threshold will precipitate sudden and catastrophic change (Lovelock 2006). There is  
9 little that can be done in the latter case apart from ensuring that this tipping point is not  
10 reached by reducing the output of emissions into the atmosphere. Alternatively, if climate  
11 change is relatively slow, then individuals and societies will have time to adapt given the  
12 necessary inducements and incentives (Szerszynski and Urry 2010:1-2). There may even be  
13 some economic advantages to reap in such a process as, for instance, envisaged by improved  
14 seaborne communications in an ice-free Arctic Ocean (Patel and Fountain 2017). The key  
15 concept in this new discourse is climate change adaptation.

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Adaptation as a concept, however, is also a contested domain. This recent turn in discourse heralds yet another conceptual power struggle between Western governments, financial institutions and multinationals, and LMICs over how to shape the future (Pelling 2011:3). Unlike vulnerability and resilience, however, adaptation is very much a top-down rather than a bottom-up concept largely conceived and implemented by the UN and international organisations. Its definition and application are fought over in much the same way as were vulnerability and resilience. As the increase in greenhouse gas emissions began to be taken seriously by governments and scientists, an international treaty was signed in 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in which countries acknowledged that adverse changes in the climate were “a common concern of humankind” (UNFCCC 1992). The UN also established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide an objective, scientific view of climate change, its political and economic impacts, and the options available for mitigation and adaptation. Revealingly, the IPCC describes adaptation in terms of the need for an “adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities” (IPCC 2007).

As so stated, adaptation is defined as an inherently conservative activity that functions to preserve the status quo rather than encourage more radical solutions that might threaten existing social and political systems. In one sense, this is hardly surprising given its provenance in a UN system itself beholden to the nation states that fund its institutions and

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3 agencies, and the banking and corporate interests that manipulate the policies and interests of  
4 national governments (Pelling 2011:11). Adaptation's preoccupation with climate science,  
5 whether the intensity of storms will increase, how high sea levels will rise, to what extent  
6 floods will become more frequent, runs the risk of blaming Nature once more for disasters  
7 and returning to an older hazard-focused paradigm that ignores how such events are socially  
8 as well as physically constructed. This is an all too familiar trope that seeks to render large  
9 parts of the world as vulnerable by blaming the poverty of these regions squarely on natural  
10 forces and disasters on people's lack of resilience. It is part of the conceptual vocabulary of  
11 neoliberalism that evokes a social Darwinist ethic implying that those who do not adapt are  
12 not fit to survive. "It burdens and blames the victim", according to Jesse Ribot, "by devolving  
13 the onus of adjustment to the organism or affected unit" (Ribot 2011:1160). It also serves to  
14 diffuse the opprobrium that might otherwise be directed at an economic system created by,  
15 and until recently, largely benefiting western industrialised nations by making declarations  
16 that stress the common plight of humanity and by focusing on scientific and technical  
17 discussions about purely climatic and scientific phenomena (Bankoff 2001).

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29 In particular, there is an unwillingness to recognise that the overdevelopment of the  
30 industrialised West had been at the expense of the underdevelopment of the rest of the world  
31 whose peoples are now expected to pay an inordinate share of the socio-environmental  
32 consequences of the resultant changes in climate. In 2013, a group of Pacific island nations  
33 led by Palau came close to asking the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion  
34 on the responsibility of historic emitters for global warming. They only refrained from  
35 pursuing a claim because they were advised to wait until the science made for more  
36 irrefutable evidence (i.e the 2014 IPCC report). In the same year, 132 LMICs staged a walk-  
37 out at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Warsaw because Western countries  
38 tried to block all talk about "loss and damage" compensation for the consequences of global  
39 warming until after 2015 (Weymouth 2013). Employing rhetoric very reminiscent of Cold  
40 War sentiments, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott even referred to his country's carbon  
41 tax, imposed by a previous left-of-centre government, as "basically socialism masquerading  
42 as environmentalism" (Vidal 2013). Rather than being a unifying issue around which  
43 humanity might rally in the face of a common challenge, climate change is as divisive as any  
44 Cold War discourse though the geographical fracture lines are now more likely to be depicted  
45 as North-South rather than East-West. The threat is also global, even if it disproportionately  
46 affects more equatorial regions.

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3 Moreover, climate change is often used as a scapegoat to explain the causes of natural  
4 hazards and occlude the true nature of disaster (Kelman and Gaillard 2008; Mercer 2010).  
5 While climate change is clearly an important driver of certain types of hazards, especially  
6 hydrologically related ones such as floods and extreme weather, it is too often used as an  
7 excuse to focus on natural explanations rather than social ones (Kelman et al. 2016). This is  
8 what Ribot calls drawing attention to the *who* are vulnerable rather than the *why* they are  
9 vulnerable question. The latter is too socially and politically contentious to address and most  
10 government agencies and development organisations invested with climate policy prefer to  
11 pursue policies that maintain existing structures and relationships. That is adaptation is  
12 conceived and implemented in such a manner that most projects preserve rather than  
13 challenge the status quo (Pelling et al 2015). Based only on published research, the IPCC  
14 reports are largely “a product of negotiated content between science and governments” and  
15 rarely risk alienating the political and technical decision-makers on whose support it depends  
16 (Pelling 2011:37-38). Consequently, as disasters are attributed solely to climate change,  
17 global institutions, following the UNFCCC’s lead, craft adaptation funds to redress only the  
18 “additional” damages produced in this manner, limiting liability and avoiding all  
19 consideration of the root causes of what made people vulnerable to climatic variations in the  
20 first place (Ribot 2014:670-672). The talk once again is about what makes people resilient  
21 and the discourse on adaptation is focused on how to maintain what existed before. Such  
22 attitudes remain prevalent among influential policy institutions such as the UNISDR and ODI  
23 (Kelman et al. 2016:S133).

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26 Of course, adaptation need not be depicted in this manner and the threat of climate change  
27 can raise profound questions about existing paradigms of development (Godfrey-Wood and  
28 Naaess 2016). Mark Pelling identifies three levels at which adaptation can influence  
29 development: adaptation to build resilience through implementing changes that do not  
30 question the underlying assumptions or power asymmetries in society; a transitional stage of  
31 adaptation that encourages only incremental changes in rights and responsibilities without  
32 advocating a fundamentally different regime; and transformational adaptation that advocates  
33 radical reform to the political and economic systems and the cultural discourses on which  
34 they are based. While he is careful not to favour any one form of adaptation, arguing that no  
35 level is intrinsically more desirable than another, it is clear that the challenges posed by  
36 climate change demand more radical solutions than simply the resilience favoured by the  
37 UNFCCC and IPCC (Pelling 2011). Such advocacy is anathema to hard-core conservatives  
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3 who prefer to deny that climate change is even real from fear of opening the door once again  
4 to massive state intervention and regulation of the market (Klein 2015:40).  
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## 8 9 **Conclusion**

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11 During the Cold War, vulnerability offered a needed critique of development policies that  
12 emphasised growth rather than “purposeful development” (Cannon and Müller-Mahn  
13 2010:623-626). After 1991, the increasing stress placed on resilience signified a shift away  
14 from the extent to which socio-economic systems exposed people to different levels of risk to  
15 a perspective that emphasised how human actions made it possible for social-ecological  
16 systems to survive. Vulnerability remains a significant consideration in these discussions if  
17 for no other reason than it is an adverse effect on social-ecological resilience: loss of a  
18 community’s social capital, it is recognised, makes people more vulnerable (Adger  
19 2006:269). The neo-liberalism that dominated the decades following the collapse of the  
20 Soviet Union was able to suborn the public and academic discourses surrounding resilience to  
21 varying degrees by championing individual choice and personal responsibility. In the process,  
22 vulnerability was rendered an almost voluntary condition, one that was mainly the result of  
23 poor individual decisions. Adaptation, as it is presently conceived and implemented through  
24 the UNFCCC and the IPCC, is shown to be little more than a form of resilience in another  
25 guise though, like the latter, it too has the potential to be a conduit for more radical change.  
26 Moreover, there is also a complementarity between climate and capitalism in that both share  
27 an endless cycle of disturbance and crisis as permanent states. The present focus on climate  
28 change and the need for social adaptation runs the risk of reducing the latter to a choice freely  
29 made by individuals, communities and states. As Terry Cannon and Detlef Müller-Mahn  
30 deftly point out, for many, being “risk adverse” in the present is actually nothing more than a  
31 neoliberal concern with “profit maximisation” in the longer term. How society best adapts to  
32 climate change is effectively reduced to a question of how far growth can continue while  
33 limiting the most serious environmental consequences and even profiting from the economic  
34 opportunities that arise. Nor is there any guarantee that people made fully aware of the perils  
35 of climate change will respond by adopting risk reduction measures and behaviours (Cannon  
36 and Müller-Mahn 2010:627).  
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56 All three discourses are tainted in one respect: they are all culturally specific to Western  
57 perspectives, and they all view the world and its problems from an ethnocentric standpoint.  
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3 Both vulnerability and resilience, as this discussion has shown, are discourses which  
4 originated at a particular historical juncture. Their meaning was shaped by a particular  
5 historical perspective and their significance can really only be understood through a  
6 consideration of the way power operated at the time in the prevailing socio-environmental  
7 systems. If vulnerability expressed a profound unease with the developmental model that  
8 dominated the Cold War era and that depicted natural hazards as largely physical events for  
9 which there were mainly technical solutions, then the subsequent discourse of resilience fitted  
10 well with pre-established neoliberal ideas about competition and entrepreneurship that  
11 viewed disasters after the collapse of Communism as largely the result of individual choice.  
12 The current emphasis on adaptation as a trope implies accepting a world in which disturbance  
13 and crisis are constant features whether caused by climate change and/or social upheaval. It is  
14 also one where there is a continual need for neoliberally-sanctioned discourses about  
15 resilience and change. It accepts disaster as an endemic condition in anticipation of which  
16 society must remain in a permanent state of high alert. It is also a profoundly conservative  
17 discourse that largely obscures questions about the role of power and culture in society, and  
18 about whose environments and livelihoods are to be protected and why (Cote and Nightingale  
19 2012:484-485, Krüger et al. 2015).  
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32 There seems no escape from remaking the world again and again after a particular cultural  
33 image. No rival discourse seems ready yet to challenge Western hegemony in the language  
34 and metaphor of international governance and development policy. Accordingly, disasters  
35 remain inherently political events “because they pose questions about who should be allowed  
36 to re-compose the world and how” (Guggenheim 2014:4). That these discourses are mainly  
37 conservative and inherently protect western interests is not unexpected given the historical  
38 context in which they evolved. Only vulnerability offers a critique of existing power relations  
39 and the status quo but its import was blunted by the end of the Cold War and the new focus  
40 on resilience. Adaptation, too, has not so much been subverted by a neoliberal agenda as it  
41 has been largely conceived in its likeness and has been mainly implemented by its  
42 instruments and agencies. If the stress in HICs is increasingly on the need for adaptation and  
43 necessary adjustment as the only really practical measure, what, in effect, makes societies  
44 more resilient, for those in LMICs, the issue still remains much more about what renders  
45 them vulnerable, more especially as that condition is seen as largely imposed by the West on  
46 the rest (Bankoff and Borrinaga 2016). “Rather than seeking causality in social history”,  
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Ribot concludes, “adaptation becomes a necessary adjustment to the droughts, floods or storms that are directly attributable to climatic events” (Ribot 2014:671).

Examining these dominant discourses as products of the historical forces which gave them birth exposes the underlying values and norms that continue to shape our world and reveals how we chose to frame the future. Unfortunately, the power relations that underlie these discourses have not changed significantly since World War II as the world has been largely remade again and again according to an image fashioned by certain sectors in Western societies. Only a continuing emphasis on the root causes that make people vulnerable, on how power relations operate in society to place some people more at risk than others, on the importance of culture to community resilience, and on how adaptation provides an opportunity for a radical change in the way human societies operate can a similar fate be prevented and history made to stop repeating itself – yet again.

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46 <sup>1</sup> I use such terms as "Third World", "First World", "less-developed", "developing" and "developed" where they  
47 are appropriate to the context in which they were used at the time.

48 <sup>2</sup> The five priorities of the Hyogo Framework for Action are: ensuring that DRR is a national and a local priority  
49 with a strong institutional basis for implementation; identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and  
50 enhancing early warning; using knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience  
51 at all levels; and reducing the underlying risk factors and strengthening disaster preparedness for effective  
52 response at all levels. The four priorities for action of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction are:  
53 understanding disaster risk; strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; investing in disaster  
54 risk reduction for resilience; and enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to "Build Back  
55 Better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.  
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