



Resilience & the city: Change, (dis) order and disaster

Peter Rogers. Routledge, 2016.

Available from Gray Research Center interlibrary loan

Book Digest

Relevance: For military professionals who are considering urban operations in a post-conflict or humanitarian context, this book investigates ways to improve urban resilience to disaster, disease, and conflict.

Discussion: When a small team of Marines deployed to Monrovia in support of Operation Onward Liberty in 2014, they had no idea that Liberia's bustling capital would become the epicenter of the world's largest outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease. In the midst of the crisis, when Liberians, humanitarians and some Marines were endeavoring to address sanitary and respectful body disposal, they were probably not considering how disease, despair, and a break down in social order in the urban environment goes back to the siege of Athens during the Peloponnesian War (71). This history is relevant, however, to better understand optimal approaches to building urban resilience. Readers who have considered how military involvement is linked to various forms of disaster may appreciate the author's consideration of how "resilience ... to perturbation and disorder" (101) is possible despite natural and man-made hazards to the urban space.

The author introduces theory and historical evidence, beginning with the siege of Athens, to produce a "study of the city as a 'resilient' phenomenon" (1). His definition of resilience is not necessarily based on the restoration of order, particularly when the outward appearance of urban order obscures a disempowered populous. In these cases, a restoration of life as before is not a positive end result, according to the author. Furthermore, resilience is not a "measurable thing" (178) but an "adaptive capacity" (143) wherein destruction and chaos hold the potential to "stimulate positive growth" (4). That growth is defined in part by how the benefits of planning, preparation, and recovery are distributed in the populace. According to the author, a city becomes more resilient with the extension of "human agency" (116) to the most vulnerable members of a population. If, instead, ruling elites benefit from a restoration of commerce while social exclusion continues for others, resilience is negative. Negative resilience is nevertheless part of a dynamic pattern of stability and unrest that, according to the author, is "required for progress" (59) in the urban environment. Negative resilience to one disaster can thus play a role in social change that contributes to positive resilience in subsequent crises.

The desired end state of this interplay between "disturbance and reorganization" (143) is the above-noted adaptive capacity that contributes to positive resilience. Here, the author introduces contemporary resilience research and advocates for more interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic. His critique of the popular "one size fits all" (145) technical solution, often referred to as "all-hazards management" (148), is that the concept is too limiting. Further, he is concerned about a preoccupation with restoring services and commerce. These sectors limit the role of the civilian population as "stakeholders and participants" (146). In the most extreme example of this tendency, the "emphasis on death rate becomes a stand-in for societal resilience" (166). Rather than manage that which can be measured in numbers, the author asserts a broader approach to "effectively manag[ing] crisis" (145) will permit "forms of doing" (145) at all levels of society, and result in increased adaptation and success.

The book starts out slowly as the author devotes several chapters to theory, in particular an exploration of the distinction between praxis ("the right way of doing") and poiesis (the "way-of-acting") (17). This framework sets up a "new reading of urban order and disorder" (5) that is central to the author's assertion that growth is embedded in negative events, such as disaster. The author is strongest in his exploration of the dangers to urban order over time and in describing "how danger is dealt with" (139). The author asserts it is possible that cities become "something else" (168) after a crisis, yet most of his examples are of negative resilience. He also concentrates too heavily on Western urban environments and could have provided more examples from former colonial territories. Despite these drawbacks, the book provides an insightful discussion of resilience through the geographical frame of urban space and place.

Review Author: Kristin Post, Davis Defense Group

Publication Date: 02 January 2019

This Digest was produced as part of the Translational Research Group's ongoing series of "quick look" publications, which provide overviews of scientific issues, books, and articles. **DISCLAIMER:** The views expressed in this work are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group.

DISTRIBUTION: Unlimited



For more information, contact
Dr. Kerry Foshier, Director of Research
703-432-1504 / kerry.foshier@usmcu.edu