Resilience and Democracy: Using Associative Democratic Theory to Reconcile the Needs of People and Ecosystems

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Abstract

Resilience theory is sometimes criticized for ignoring issues of power (Moore and Tjornbo 2012) equity (Armitage 2007) and democratic accountability (ibid.). It may be fairer, though, to suggest that resilience, like other theories dealing with the governance of complex problems, poses problems for conventional conceptions of modern liberal democracy. Many of these conventional accounts focus on the capacity of individuals to best judge what is in their own interest and rely on the mechanism of competition for votes to ensure that politicians are held accountable and responsive to the needs of the electorate (or at least of the majority see e.g. Held 1997, Schumpeter 1976). However, the work of the complexity community raises two principle obstacles to this conception:

• There are hard boundaries limiting capacities of ecological systems to sustain human wellbeing that cannot be exceeded without risking catastrophic consequences (Rockstrom et al. 2009). These boundaries impose limits on the freedoms of individuals to decide for themselves what is in their best interest and argue for a greater role for science in policy making.

• Theories concerning the government of complex problems such as adaptive governance (Folke et al 2005), new governance (Pierre and Peters 2005) and wicked problems (Head 2008), unanimously favor a decentralized, bottom-up mode of governance that deemphasizes the role of elected officials and invites the involvement of non-governmental organizations and special interest groups in governance. Voting thereby plays less and less of a role in ensuring accountability.

These tensions cannot be ignored. It is clearly not satisfactory to suggest that modern societies must accept the limits of the natural world and learn to live within them at any cost. Rather, any acceptable approach to governing social-ecological systems must successfully negotiate these limits while also preserving the principles of democratic accountability and participation that are the best safeguards for ensuring that governance continues to provide for the needs and wellbeing of all.

In order to do so, I would suggest that we need to put aside the widespread liberal democratic conception of democracy and acknowledge alternative conceptions that may in fact be better suited to the needs of modern societies. In this paper I will draw on the concepts of associational democracy (Warren 2001) and deliberative democracy (Elster 1998) and suggest that an associational, deliberative democracy might provide the best model for creating a form of governance that is both democratic and able to deal with the intricacies of

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complex problems. Through discussions drawing on a wide range of ‘complexity governance literature’ as well as democratic theory I generate a set of principles that would be vital to such a governance system and at the end I present an idealized model of how such would deal with a complex problem. It is my hope that these principles will help enrich the debate on adaptive governance and lead to a greater emphasis on democratic values in this literature.

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