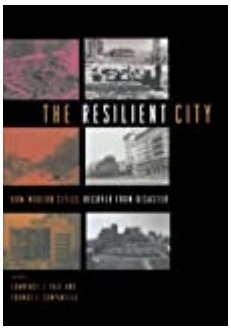
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lawrence J. Vale, Thomas J. Campanella, eds. *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiv + 376 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-517583-7.

Reviewed by Andrew Herscher (Program in Comparative and World Literature, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Published on H-Urban (June, 2005)

Disasters in Cities, Cities as Disasters, and the Dialectic of Urban Resilience

Though cities are always shaped by destruction as well as construction, the particular history, forms, and problems of urban reconstruction became exceptionally salient in the United States after September 11, 2001. The destruction of the World Trade Center–or, more precisely, the predominant narration of that destruction by U.S. politicians and the media outlets that reiterated them–yielded a newly-heightened interest in how cities respond to disaster in both popular culture and academia. This book is one of several edited collections that have grappled with postdisaster reconstruction in the wake of September 11. To varying degrees, the historical moment of these books–that is, the aftermath of September 11–has conditioned their enunciation of the history of reconstruction. In the case of *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, this conditioning is especially consequential. At the same time, however, through the depth of the essays collected within it, *The Resilient City* far surpasses previous edited volumes on urban reconstruction that have come out since September 11.[1] And perhaps most usefully, *The Resilient City* contains a number of essays that condense and extend their authors' previous book-length treatment of their subjects: Edward T. Linenthal on Oklahoma City; Max Page on New York; Brian Ladd on Berlin; Carola Hein on Tokyo; and Diane E. Davis on Mexico City.[2]

The editors of *The Resilient City*, Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, frame the book with a sweeping claim: that "although cities have been destroyed throughout history Ã¢?Â¦ they have, in almost every case, risen again like the mythic phoenix" (p. 3). This resilience is, so the editors argue, a universal feature of urban phenomena; "it has become increasingly rare," they write, "for a major city to be truly or permanently lost" (p. 5). Equating "resilience" with postdisaster "recovery," the book sets out to explore, then, the reconstructive capacity of modern cities; how, the editors ask, "do modern cities recover from disaster?" (p. 5).

The responses to this question are divided into three sections. The first section, "Narratives of Resilience," comprises three chapters that examine accounts of disaster in U.S. cities: Chicago after the 1871 fire; San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire; Oklahoma

City after the bombing of the Murrah Building; and New York during two centuries of its capitalist "creative destruction." For Edward T. Linenthal, a narrative of civic renewal after the Oklahoma City bombing and after September 11 in New York "signified the defiance of these wounded cities" (p. 61). This narrative, Linenthal writes, "is a very real one, not merely a rhetorical strategy to domesticate the horror of those events" (p. 65). Linenthal also notes, however, that while narratives marked the "resilience" of these cities after disaster, disasters in addition served as "commodities used in ongoing ideological battles" (p. 66). That narratives of resilience are themselves ideological, however, is pointed out by Kevin Rozario in his essay on post-fire Chicago and post-earthquake San Francisco. Rozario describes how the scripting of disasters as "instruments of progress" allowed them to be recuperated within pre-existing and hegemonic narratives of urban progress and development. Rozario writes that "part of the attraction of disaster narratives surely lies in their power to settle those who have experienced the unsettling of their worlds" (p. 33), but he shows how this reassurance necessarily invokes the ideologically-saturated hopes and fears of the writers and readers of those narratives.

Both Linenthal and Rozario conclude their essays with reflections on the narrativization of September 11; the third essay in this section, by Max Page, looks explicitly at discourse on New York's destruction both before and after September 11. The subject matter of each essay, then, is emplotted more or less as a pre-history to September 11. Linenthal thus posits the afterlife of the Oklahoma City bombing as "an appropriate road map" to the aftermath of September 11 (p. 58); Rozario sees the "optimistic narrative script" of post-disaster Chicago and San Francisco enduring in that aftermath (p. 46); and Page places September 11 in the context of two centuries of visual and textual narratives of New York's destruction. This rendering of history as September 11's prehistory raises, however, two questions.

First, while each of these three authors addresses what we can learn about September 11 from the narratives of previous disasters–both real and imagined–in U.S. cities, the question of how September 11 itself has reframed our understanding of those narratives is left unasked. The question is important because not only do past narratives of resilience inform our understanding of September 11, but September 11 informs, if not determines our understanding of these narratives. Previous American urban disasters are now September 11's prehistory, a historical status that both foregrounds certain understandings of these disasters and represses other understandings, yet in these essays historical analysis only flows from past to present, and not from present to past.

Second, the editors frame this section of the book as an examination of "the ways that humans assemble stories to explain or inspire processes of recovery" (p. 15). According to the editors, the three essays in this section, "demonstrate both the power and seeming ubiquity of resilience narratives" (p. 16). These three chapters, however, are all devoted to modern or contemporaneous U.S. cities, are all framed by September 11, and are all focused on the specific predicament of post-September 11 New York. The editors' framing of these chapters as universalized discussions of "humans" and as discussions with a cross-cultural and globalized "ubiquity" thus reflexively positions September 11 as a model for the urban disaster as such, leaving any and all other models completely unexamined. Traces of this positioning occur throughout the book, and I shall return to its consequences in the conclusion of this review.

The second section of *The Resilient City* is entitled "The Symbolic Dimensions of Trauma and Recovery." This section includes five essays, but in a book explicitly devoted to "the modern city," the relevance of two of these essays is somewhat unclear–one considers a series of buildings in Jerusalem, most of which were built and/or destroyed from hundreds to thousands of years ago, and the other focuses on the reconstruction of Washington, D.C., after it was burned by the British army in 1814. The other three essays in the section deal with the middle- and late-twentieth-century reconstruction of European cities: Gernika/Guernica after the Spanish Civil War, and Berlin and Warsaw after the Second World War.

Each of these three essays suggests, in varying depth, the complex relationship between "rebuilding" and "recovery." Jasper Goldman describes how the ideological discourses and political projects of Poland's newly ascendant Communist government shaped the post-war reconstruction of Warsaw. Brian Ladd tells the even more complex story of Berlin's postwar reconstruction in its Eastern and Western halves. While describing the different notions of history, modernity, and recovery that framed reconstruction in East and West Berlin, Ladd also marks the separation between ideological statement and conditions of production in both contexts; West Berlin's exposition of the free market economy in the reconstruction of the Hansa quarter was actually made possible by the mass expropriation of private property, and the expense of East Berlin's model reconstruction, the *Stali-*

nallee, made it impossible to replicate. While Ladd and Goldman discuss urban recovery primarily in architectural terms, Julie B. Kirschbaum and Desiree Sideroff describe how, in the case of Gernika/Guernica, the city's physical reconstruction actually intensified what the authors term the "emotional destruction" of its surviving residents and their descendents. Because the city was rebuilt by the same authority that ordered the city destroyed–Franco's fascist government–the trauma of that destruction was further intensified. This dynamic leads Kirschbaum and Sideroff to ramify "resilience" into distinct registers, which they term "physical," "emotional," and "cultural."

While all these discussions point to the complexity of postdisaster reconstruction, the case studies that comprise this section are, as in the previous section, remarkably similar. The editors frame the section as an examination of "the extent to which urban disaster and recovery are driven and signaled by a succession of highly symbolic actions" (p. 16). If the section included case studies of cities outside of Europe and/or devoid of international importance, however, the salience of "highly symbolic actions" in disaster recovery would probably be mediated by other sorts of actions, less symbolic and more instrumental. Again, it appears as if post-September 11 New York has furnished a model for historical interpretation, a model that radically transforms what it putatively seeks to only describe.

It is in its third section, devoted to "The Politics of Reconstruction," that the promise of this book is delivered most thoroughly. The essays in this section cover a more diverse range of case studies, providing a friction against the universalization of American and European case studies. In addition, several essays comprise masterfully thick descriptions of their urban objects of study, and one, by Diane E. Davis, is also a brilliant theoretical meditation on the theme of urban resilience itself.

In her essay on "Resilient Tokyo," for example, Carola Hein examines Tokyo's reconstruction following a series of disasters induced both by natural forces and by war. By constructing this broad historical context, she is able to show that "societal changes more than disasters per se are Ã¢?Â¦ key to understanding Japanese urban transformation" (p. 229). Hein's account of reconstruction in Tokyo also allows her to contextualize, rather than universalize European case studies. In Europe, she writes, "disasters may provoke more transformation (or provoke even more regret over what disappeared) than similar disasters in, for example, Edo-period Japan, where physical destruction of buildings occurred regularly, and the intangible urban culture and power structures stayed the same" (p. 230). In her essay on Mexico City after the 1985 earthquake, Diane E. Davis further expands on the relations between physical reconstruction, urban culture and power structures, and in so doing decenters the typical but typically unexamined meanings of urban resilience. Davis describes how "the case of Mexico City shows that it was precisely the resilience of some of the most corrupt and unjust people and institutions in the capital that made the post-earthquake recovery and reconstruction efforts so dreadful" (p. 273): the police, the national army, and the ruling party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*. At the same time, the most important reconstruction efforts were conducted by citizen groups, which were not so much "resilient" after the earthquake, but rather spurred into existence by the government's failure to address the earthquake's consequences.

Davis's essay throws into relief the assumptions that guide the editors' framing of this book and most of the book's component essays. Already encoded in the book's title, which poses urban resilience against disaster, the two key assumptions are that resiliencies themselves are not disastrous and that disasters are not resilient. The pre-disaster urban status quo, in other words, is normalized, and interruptions to that status quo are assumed to be disordering, disturbing, and disastrous. Politically, such assumptions are components of ideologies of legitimation. And historically, such assumptions support the hegemonic understanding of September 11 as a singular act of violence interrupting a global regime of peace and order, rather than as one moment in a long-running historical structure of global violence and counterviolence.

The essays collected in this book thus only deal with punctual disasters such as earthquakes, fires, wartime destruction, and civil unrest. The editors concede that the book only focuses on "sudden or episodic forms of disruption," but argue that recovery from these disruptions involve "socioeconomic consequences," a term which seems to stand in here for structural forces (p. 7). Nevertheless, many types of urban disaster are, in fact, structural: structural underdevelopment, institutionalized corruption, neoliberal urban disinvestment, deindustrialization and so on. These comprise "structural disasters" that are themselves resilient, but by only including "sudden" disasters in the book, the editors are able to present urban resilience as a simple and positive value.

The editors have therefore secured their thesis on the inevitability and worth of urban resilience by omitting

the many counterexamples of terminal urban disaster. It is thus profoundly significant that the book mostly ignores the global south: no cities in Africa, Southeast Asia, Southeast Europe, and South America are discussed here, cities in which, as AbdoulMaliq Simone has written, "for many residents, life is reduced to a state of emergency."[3] Moreover, not only do these counterexamples of urban resilience force a re-evaluation of resilience's anodyne character, but they are themselves enmeshed with the examples included in this book. The resilience of cities in the global north, that is, is at least partly secured by the exportation of their destabilizing and risk-intensifying infrastructure to the south: pollution, low-wage labor, and so on. Many cities in the global south are enduring massive population explosions, largely in the form of new inhabitants of immiserated and immiserating urban slums.[4] Yet, while the growth of urban populations is simply a sign of urban resilience in *The Resilient City*, it is only such a sign in relatively prosperous and relatively stable cities, the cities most often considered in this book.

This book, then, not only explicates "narratives of resilience," but also is just such a narrative itself, a narrative that offers specific consolations in the post-September 11 United States. In the conclusion to his essay, Kevin Rozario points to this doubled status, writing that, "this very book on the resilient city surely testifies to our ongoing yearning for stories to help us come to terms with major disasters" (p. 46). Rozario points out that it is reassuring, in the wake of September 11, "to discover how well American cities have recovered from the terrible calamities that have befallen them" (p. 46). Yet this narrative of resilience is far from benign, as the following question, which the editors pose in the introduction to this book, makes clear: "Does anyone doubt that Kabul and Kandahar–or Baghdad and Basra–will also reemerge, once protracted fighting finally comes to a close?" (p. 4).

The question is not at all rhetorical, and it reveals the stakes of the discussion undertaken here. Americans are currently presented with the "protracted fighting" in cities in Afghanistan and Iraq as closely connected to the resilience of U.S. cities, to the protection of America from future urban disasters. To assume that cities currently under assault by U.S. forces will simply "reemerge" from this violence via the natural force of urban resilience is to refuse to see the dialectic of resilience, the way in which the resilience of U.S. cities after September 11 has been secured by rendering Kabul, Baghdad, Basra and a still-expanding set of other cities anything but resilient. A few years ago, as Mike Davis described, "American fighter pilots drop[ped] cluster bombs chalked with the names of dead Manhattan firefighters on the ruins of Kabul–a city infinitely more tragic than New York."[5] Kabul is a tragic city, and a city, like others outside the scope of this book, whose disaster has been perpetuated and intensified in the very name of (American) urban resilience itself.

Walter Benjamin pointed out in his "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight."[6] The best essays in this book attain this conception, but the others, comprehending disaster as simply exceptional, as only an interruption of urban resilience rather than as a predominant form of that resilience, yield a history that demands further probing.

Notes

[1]. Joan Ockman, ed., *Out of Ground Zero: Case Studies in Urban Reinvention* (Munich: Prestel, 2002); Raymond W. Gastil and Zoe Ryan, eds., *Information Exchange: How Cities Renew, Rebuild, and Remember* (New York: Van Alen Institute, 2002).

[2]. Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the German Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Carola Hein, Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, and Ishida Yorifusa, eds., *Rebuilding Urban Japan after 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Diane E. Davis, *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

[3]. AbdoulMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 4.

[4]. UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* (London: UN-Habitat, 2003).

[5]. Mike Davis, *Dead Cities* (New York: New Press, 2002), p. 18.

[6]. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 259.

Citation: Andrew Herscher. Review of Vale, Lawrence J.; Campanella, Thomas J., eds., *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10609