Resilience, resistance and the quest for a counter-space in Colombia’s Pacific coast region

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Introduction
Debates on social movements usually take place within the wider literature fields of resistance and contentious politics. In the case of indigenous and Afro-descendant movements in Latin America, their struggle is frequently over a defence of place(s) and resilient life forms that are seen by movements as under pressure from capitalist modernity. ‘Resilience’ in fact emerges as an important concept in the defence of their lifeworld, their “quest for a counter-space” (in a Lefebvrian understanding), or radical alternative political ontologies. This paper examines how resilient life forms among black communities on the Pacific coast of Colombia have been mobilized by a sector of the Afro-Colombian social movement in their struggle to resist both further encroachment of external capital and the spread of violence in the region. Resilience and the focus of survival strategies, I argue, are at the heart of this movement’s political and spatial vision, a concrete utopia that not only challenges social inequalities and uneven power relations, but provides a blueprint for alternative life forms and ways of being, or alternative political ontologies. The fact that this is above all a political vision and not an already established social fact may easily get lost in critiques of movement activists’ purportedly essentialist projections of what are argued to be more complex, entangled, and varied lived experiences on the ground.

Specifically, in this paper I want to focus on two competing narratives with regard to the emergence of a social movement of black communities in Colombia’s Pacific lowlands and changing domestic governance structures – or adaptive governance – in this region. I want to
argue that these competing narratives have led to a scenario – which I call “the great misunderstanding” – that have transformed a region that was erstwhile considered a “peace haven” into landscapes of fear and terror. I will approach these narratives through the two notions of resilience and resistance.

Resilience as buzz word
What is resilience? The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definitions:

I. Literal applications.
   1. The action or an act of rebounding or springing back; rebound, recoil.
   2. Elasticity; the power of resuming an original shape or position after compression, bending, etc.

II. Figurative uses.
   3. The quality or fact of being able to recover quickly or easily from, or resist being affected by, a misfortune, shock, illness, etc.; robustness; adaptability

“Resilience” has become a buzzword that is interpreted quite differently by different people depending on the context in which it is used. First, there is the popular meaning that refers to the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune. It is related to a notion of buoyancy, or toughness. I recently saw a beautiful movie – “Far from the madding crowd”, based on the literary classic by Thomas Hardy. It is the story of an independent, beautiful and headstrong woman (Bathsheba Everdene, played by Carey Mulligan), who attracts three very different suitors. The Entertainment Weekly commented on the protagonist: “With a steely resilience burning beneath her delicate, creamy complexion, Carey Mulligan brings remarkable nuance and a rich inner life to the role.”

Second, as the figurative use of “resilience” as defined in the OED suggests, it is often connected to the notion of resistance. In the entrance to “resistance” in the 4th edition of the Dictionary of Human Geography, Geraldine Pratt (2000) writes: “Resistance places emphasis on the creativity, ingenuity and resilience of non-dominant groups and individuals” (p.705). I will come back to this particular link (between resistance and resilience), when discussing the case study of Colombia’s black communities in the Pacific lowlands.
Most notably, however, “resilience thinking”, which evolved from biological sciences and the study of ecosystems (Holling 1973), has permeated the social sciences in recent decades. Ideas of vulnerability, adaptation and resilience, originally used to frame the assessment of landscapes and biophysical systems, have been transferred, with varying levels of critical analysis, to explore the lifeworlds of people and societies. This intellectual migration of resilience theory has opened up fertile fields of interdisciplinary research within the broad sphere of development and environmental studies. As part of this migration, we have seen a very specific reframing of the term linking resilience thinking to disaster management and global climate change and mitigation, among others, making it a policy-relevant tool for interventions by states and multilateral agencies.

A 2008 conference in the UK on resilience had this to say:

“The concept of resilience is now capturing high interest across academic, policy and popular debate. In a world where threats – whether linked to climate change, epidemic disease, or fluctuating financial markets – loom ever larger, resilience thinking valuably highlights the complex, open, path-dependent dynamics of coupled social-economic-environmental systems. Not only does it provide an increasingly vigorous and sophisticated body of analysis, resilience thinking also offers prospects for more integrated and effective policy making towards sustainability.” (Leach 2008, quoted in Watts 2015:36).

Resilience has become in the 21st century, one may say, what Raymond Williams (1977) calls a “keyword.” It is deployed by a wide range of quite heterogeneous groups, circulates widely, and is indicative of certain forms of thought. Most notably, in its recent systematic deployment, according to geographer Michael Watts (2015:36), “Resilience occupies a common semantic space with a post-9/11 vocabulary: the keywords include risk, uncertainty and security” (as seen in above UK conference quote). In a world dominated by insecurities of all kinds – impending environmental disaster/collapse, financial/economic crisis, etc. – culturing and nurturing resilience is seen as the basis for survival. Policy recommendations, such as those issued by the World Resources Institute (based in Washington, DC) focus on ecosystem-based enterprises, community resource management and foster local-state partnerships. The benefits are argued to be multiple: a more sustainable resource use, biodiversity conservation, and community empowerment.
Critique

Others, however, have pointed to a weakness of socio-ecological resilience thinking, in that it resonates more clearly with the maintenance of a social or political status quo, and the focus of survival strategies, rather than challenge social inequalities and uneven power relations (Duit et al. 2010, Hornborg, Watts 2015). In other words, resilience thinking is devoid of an account of power and as such is seen as insufficient, and, one may argue, misleading in its pretence to tackle the multiple crisis that we are living today (environmental, economic, financial, security, etc.). Pretending that the latter can somehow be “fixed” by adapting our mode of governance, without addressing the impact of the unequal distribution of power, and the growing divide between the poor and the super-rich (the so-called 1%) is naïve at best, or delusional more likely. The human ecologist Alf Hornborg sees the asymmetrical distribution of resources and power in social systems as a weak spot of resilience theory. As he memorably commented, “We needed a revolution. We got resilience.”

Others have applied biting sarcasm to the idea that resilience thinking could help get us out of the trouble we’re in. Tom Slater had this to say on his blog: “Neoliberal urbanism has proved to be extraordinarily resilient, and the most “resilient community” of all appears to be that of a cartel of politicians and financial executives, aided by think tanks and philanthropic organisations, who have “bounced back” … from a crisis they created with even more violence and venom towards marginalised citizens (who they treat as the culprits).”

https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/tom-slater/resilience-of-neoliberal-urbanism

The question that arises is this: does such an approach to resilience (resilience thinking of the adaptive kind) lead to the de-politicization of otherwise politicized communities of resistance? In other words, what happens, if we bring resistance into this debate? How useful is it to depict certain communities as “resilient,” and what would these communities have to say about such a depiction?

In this regard, Julian Reid tweeted a photograph of a poster in New Orleans which nicely captures the symbolic power of the anaesthetizing spell of resilience: “Stop calling me resilient!”
In what follows I want to concur with Hornborg, when he states that “… we need to consider a concrete case in order to assess whether the concept of resilience is really the most useful way of accounting for what actually seems to be a (rather well understood) problem of power” (from his blog; my emphasis).

**Resilience and resistance in Colombia’s Pacific coast region**

Colombia embarked on a significant decentralization program of the state apparatus in the mid-1980s. Decentralization was seen as a way out of an institutional crisis that had brought the country to the ‘brink of chaos’. It was to diffuse tensions within a framework of broader and more inclusive political participation. Above all it aimed to strengthen democracy at the municipal level and bring government closer to the people (eg popular election of mayors from 1988 onwards).

The passing of a new Constitution in 1991 marked an important step in the spatial restructuring of the state. It declared the nation to be multicultural and pluriethnic and affirmed that “the state recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation” (Article 7), for the first time officially acknowledging the country’s black population as an ethnic minority worthy of special protection. Transitory Article AT-55 made explicit reference to the country’s black communities. It marks a watershed in the changing relationship between the Colombian state and the Afro-descendant population. Referring to the 10 million hectares of tropical rainforest in the Pacific coastal region, AT-55 states:

“Within two years of the current Constitution taking effect, Congress will issue [...] a law that grants black communities who have been living on state-owned lands in the rural riverside areas of the Pacific basin, in accordance with their traditional production practices, the right to collective property over the areas that the law will demarcate. … The same law will establish mechanisms to protect the cultural identity and the rights of these communities and to foster their economic and social development.”

Law 70 was passed in 1993. By 2014 a total of 159 collective land titles had been issued to black communities covering almost five million hectares of tropical rainforest in the Pacific coastal lowlands, an impressive 50% of the entire region. Anthropologist Michael Taussig (2004)
considers it “one of the most innovative experiments in political theory this century … granting to black ethnicity a political reality unknown in North or South America.”

The Pacific Coast region became the first battlefield around which an emerging social movement of black communities began to mobilize. Their demand for collective land titles was not just about delimiting their land rights in space. It was first and foremost an affirmation of an ancestral black territoriality that had been exercised for hundreds of years but that had not been recognized and respected as such. The reference in AT-55 to ‘state-owned lands’ – or tierras baldías in Spanish – is a clear indicator of this lack of recognition.

Law 70 of 1993 was more specific, referring to “the lands situated within the limits of the national territory that belong to the state and have no other owner”. Thus, the 1993 legislation still did not recognize the existing ancestral black territoriality. Law 70 simply makes provision for establishing a collective ownership over lands considered as belonging to the state and as ‘empty’. What may appear to be a subtle difference shows in fact the discrepancy between traditionally held and exercised territorialities and the Western territorial state logic that had been superimposed. What had in fact existed for centuries were overlapping territorialities.

It was this silent discrepancy that had led to conflict in the region. The Pacific lowlands were first referred to as tierras baldías in a 1959 legislation. This designation had allowed sawmill owners to appropriate these ‘empty’ territories for timber extraction through government concessions, mostly without regard to the ways in which local black and indigenous populations used such lands according to their traditional production practices. Successive governments granted concessions to entrepreneurs over lands that black communities had made collective use of in ways that did not require delimitations in space in terms of fixed boundaries. The respaldo de monte, the hinterland, is perceived as open collective space, characterized by fluid boundaries and a powerful interethnic territorial understanding between black and indigenous groups that cohabit in this region. These two groups have in fact shared this space for hundreds of years and have created overlapping territorialities.

To date 159 collective land titles have been issued to black communities in the Pacific coastal lowlands. These titles cover some five million hectares, roughly half the size of the entire region. This is a huge achievement for the social movement of black communities in the country that has mobilized on an unprecedented scale. Afro-Colombians have stepped out of the
structural invisibility and marginality in which they had been held for hundreds of years by the dominant nation narrative of mestizaje. And although this is only the first step out of the tunnel of racist discrimination, it is a big leap.

**Terror and displacement**

These achievements are now under threat, however. Since the mid-1990s a trend has set in that has seen massive forced displacements of thousands of rural black populations at the hands of armed groups. Through threats, massacres and the spreading of terror among local populations, armed groups and the military dispute territorial control, with local peasants caught up in the cross-fire and often stigmatized as supporters of one group and hence eliminated by the other. As a result, hundreds of thousands of rural Afro-Colombians have been forcefully displaced from their homes.

**African palm and forced displacement**

It has become increasingly clear that a changing rationale for developing the Pacific coast region lies at the heart of the unprecedented violence. This development can best be seen in the rapid expansion of African palm plantations in the region since the late 1990s. These are established by often large conglomerates with national and transnational capital on lands collectively owned by rural black communities. This makes it illegal according to Law 70, and Afro-Colombian communities have increasingly resisted the appropriation of their lands in this way, drawing on the legal framework in their support. In order to implement these projects, African palm entrepreneurs require the collaboration of local populations to provide land and labor for the cultivation process. Or, in case of their non-cooperation, the cleansing of the territories. In this way, entire communities are subjected to threats, targeted killings, massacres, and individual and collective forced displacement.

There exists a systematic link between the particular economic strategy of African palm cultivation and the land dispossession of rural black communities in the Pacific coast region. One analysis puts it rather bluntly, when proposing a ‘chain model’ by which the hitherto collectively owned and worked lands are put under the control of African palm companies (Human Rights Everywhere 2006:22):
(1) armed incursion with its associated crimes and human rights violations;
(2) illegal and violent expropriation of land;
(3) forced displacement of owners of the expropriated lands; and
(4) the planting of African palm on the ‘conquered’ land.

As a black community leader from one of the embattled Pacific coast rivers told me:
“The phenomenon of displacement in the Pacific region is not a consequence of the armed conflict, as the government wants to present it to international public opinion. No. The displacement is a strategy of the conflict. Displacement occurs precisely to move people out. The armed conflict uses the strategy of displacement to empty these lands that they need in order to develop their macro- and mega-projects” (Bogotá, November 24, 2004).

Conclusions
The recognition of the resilience of black communities that had successfully adapted to living in the tropical rainforest environment on the Pacific coast, as stipulated in Law 70 of 1993, has since been dramatically undermined by continuing pressures on this population group from both state development projects and economic actors interested in the exploitation of the natural resources in this region. “Resilience” as a concept that informed the lawmakers in the early 1990s did of course not relate to the political resistance that black communities have since mounted against the imposition of development projects and their displacement. As I have argued her, there is a huge discrepancy – or a “great misunderstanding” – in the way that the state has regarded the new relationship with black communities (in terms of land rights based on socio-ecological resilience) and the communities themselves, who want full control over their territories.

To go back to the question posed earlier: did an approach to resilience (resilience thinking of the adaptive kind) lead to the de-politicization of otherwise politicized communities of resistance? That is, the state-centric discourse of social-ecological resilience drew black communities in the Pacific lowlands into the state’s adaptive governance scheme by granting communal land rights. Yet it ignored, or chose to ignore the more radical discourse of the social movement’s transformative visions that demanded autonomy, not integration; control over
territory, not merely land rights. Once, it became clear that these were competing narratives and visions, the state lost interest in protecting Afro-Colombian rights and their demand for autonomy. Violence and forced displacement were the outcome.

As seen on the poster in New Orleans, black communities in Colombia might also feel like resisting being called resilient: “Because every time you say, ‘Oh, they’re resilient,’ that means you can do something else to me”

References
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