

**Resilient Resistance? The third sector in the London Borough of Newham
at a time of 'post-racial' politics**

This paper engages with the shift towards an emphasis on ‘resilience’ in local government discourses. Using the London Borough of Newham as a case study, it will argue that contradictory definitions of the term have, until recently, been used to justify the erosion of the third sector in the borough, specifically groups who support religious and linguistic minorities. Interviews and documentary analysis are used to consider how the concept of resilience had a racializing effect in this borough, and we argue that as a facet of policy resilience risks treating plurality as a threat rather than a strength. This is highlighted through an examination of how the third sector was characterised as retarding individuals’ resilience and promoting ‘ethno-centrism’ in official resilience discourse. We offer three distinctive insights on the problem of resilience as a feature of policy, firstly, that resilience has a symbolic power that makes it difficult to securitize; secondly, resilience discourses risk instituting racism within policy; and thirdly, that resilience is built against collective forms of resistance and is therefore incapable of harnessing the resources and capacities of local populations. To conclude, we discuss the evolving political situation in the borough and the demise of the administration promoting resilience, through collective forms of resistance.

We believe a lack of resilience keeps our residents poor

[London Borough of Newham, 2011c]

Introduction

The prolonged austerity measures experienced by the U.K have provided fertile ground within which a discourse of resilience has taken root in local policy. This article will explore the policies and practices of one local authority, the London Borough of Newham (L.B.N). We argue, that as a facet of local policy, resilience had a racializing effect in this borough. We will contend that instituting a concept such as resilience only has merit if understood in relation to wider structural forces and collective forms of resistance. To begin, the austerity context in which the policy of resilience emerged in this borough is described; we examine the genesis of the term and consider how Newham’s policy sits with respect to broader national and international trends. We argue that Newham is a revealing case study, given the breadth of policy reconfigured through the concept of resilience, the directly elected mayoral system, and the long and continued history of collective resistance to the administration that promoted the resilience agenda, which led to its demise in 2018.

Newham

Between 2009 and 2014 the spending power of local authorities in England was reduced by a fifth. This is double the cuts to the rest of the public sector (DCLG 2011, DCLG 2015).

Central government reduced funding to local councils' in London by 33% (Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015). The borough most affected was the London Borough of Newham (henceforth L.B.N.) has seen its spending power decrease by 26%, more than neighbours Tower Hamlets (25%); Hackney (24%) and Redbridge (19%) (Fitzgerald and Lupton 2015). Little changed under the Westminster government led by Theresa May. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (2017, 2019) analysis of each council's core spending power estimates that between 2016 – 2020 Newham's spending power will increase by £7.3 million, but with concurrent a rise in housing stock in the same period this amounts to a net decrease in spending per dwellingⁱ. The largest single drop in L.B.N's finances came in 2011 when the council's budget dropped by 11% (L.B.N 2011a). In the same year L.B.N's Labour council launched its 'Resilience Agenda' in a series of five policy documents.

The quote that starts this piece is from the second of these documents, *Quid pro quo, not status quo* (L.B.N. 2011c), and specifically from the forward written by the then Mayor of Newham. *Quid pro quo* seeks to make a case for reconfiguring the role of the local council as an enabler rather than a direct service provider, or as it describes itself within the stakeholder consultation which preceded it, as a 'springboard for residents' success' (L.B.N. 2011b: 14). In these documents, the social problems faced by residents are characterised as the consequence of a failure of resilience in the local population, fostered by previous policy approaches, which have neglected to 'demand more from people', and condemned them to live 'unfulfilled and stunted lives' (L.B.N. 2011c: 05). The forward ends with a call for the residents of Newham to be allowed to 'flourish':

It is time to care enough about the people whose lives we have damaged over the last few decades to challenge the policies that might make professionals feel virtuous but ultimately hold our people and our community back'. (L.B.N. 2011c: 05)

While the use of 'we' suggests collective responsibility (including on the part of the council) for the supposed lack of resilience in the local population, through the course of fieldwork the extent to which this exhortation was targeted at voluntary and community groups emerged. What became clear was that the shift to a resilience agenda was understood by L.B.N. less as a failure of council policy and more as a measure to curb the influence of the third sector. 'Professionals' in this borough had come to be represented as retarding the resilience of residents, and to have done so specifically by promoting ethno-centrism.

In 2014/2015 [anonymised] interviewed twenty-two ‘professionals’ in Newham. The term ‘professionals’ is used here to describe those ‘working’ in organisations with an interest in the borough. Including individuals from local, regional and central government; housing associations; campaigning and religious organisations and community groups. Although some were paid, others worked in voluntary capacities and most were also residents of Newham. In May 2018 after the local elections [anonymised] contacted the original respondents and five agreed to discuss further developments in local politics. Due to the charged political atmosphere in the borough, quotes will be presented here with complete anonymity, without general descriptors. Changes to funding has led to a number of organisations folding and in the context of this diminished third sector, participants from specific types of organisations, are more easily identifiable.

Resilience

The concept of resilience saturates the policy strategies of local and national government, think tanks and funding bodies (Harrison, 2012). Usually defined as positive adaptation to negative circumstances (Luthar et al. 2000), its rise to prominence in policy is associated with two shifts in perspective on the nature of civil society and agentic capacities of populations. In the context of the latter, policy and research focused on the strengths of individuals has been welcomed as a counterbalance to approaches fixated on vulnerability. For Boyden and Cooper (2007) though, what may have started as recognition of agency, has led to the formation of an orthodoxy in research and policy, whereby those who appear to have achieved some measure of social success, are analysed in relation to a psychological understanding of resilience alone. Harrison (2012) argues this turn to individualism has negated the examination of systemic inequality in a way that benefits socially conservative policy. Indeed, Peck and Tickell (2002) contend that a focus on resilience as a personal attribute, has the effect of transferring responsibility to communities without devolving any real power, as the processes that shape outcomes operate at the scale of ‘capitalist social relations’ (McKinnon and Derickson 2012: 255). Thus, this turn to resilience has been highlighted as divesting responsibility from local authorities, turning attention away from the question of how the public sector might work to ‘change the odds’, to the assumption that individuals and communities should be ‘beating’ them through their own resources (Secombe 2002).

McKinnon and Driscoll (2012) argue capitalism relies on resilience, they contend that ‘resilient spaces are what capitalism needs – spaces that are periodically reinvented to meet the changing demands of capital accumulation in an increasingly globalized economy’ (ibid: 254). While capitalism may generate the upheavals to which policies of resilience purport to respond, pressure to adapt to its inherent contradictions keeps the system from collapsing. This is akin to treating capitalism as a force of nature, which protects structural inequality from scrutiny (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). Or in Wacquant’s (2004) terms, public policy has become wedded to market forces, to such an extent that all of civil society must be brought under the logic of the market. Garrett (2016) has emphasised the influence of the U.S.A. behind such neo-liberal shifts. He highlights the irony of social policy measures that follow its example, given the leading capitalist economy has pioneered separating public policy from a socially progressive ethos (Garrett 2016). The U.S.A’s influence in proliferating resilience policy globally is observable through the ‘100 Resilient Cities’ scheme, funded by the U.S.A. based Rockefeller Foundation. Within Britain, this organisation is partnered by the British Council and five British cities are members: Manchester, Bristol, London, Glasgow and Belfast. The initiative provides funding for ‘Chief Resilience Officers’ to be employed within city councils, with a remit to make sure cities, ‘survive, adapt, and grow, no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience’ (100resilientcities.org, no date). This mirrors (and likely influenced) the decisions of councils across Britain to produce resilience documents dealing with ‘shocks’ such as cyber-attack (Belfast 2016), climate change (Llywodraeth Cymru 2018) and economic insecurity (Glasgow 2016). In these cases the impetus is placed on localities and local residents to govern responses to the volatility of the capitalist project (Garrett 2016).

However, a creeping trend in these policy measures is the treatment of the populace itself as a threat to resilience. For instance Manchester City Council lists ‘community cohesion’, along with fire, flooding and infrastructure as key priorities for its resilience strategy due to be published in 2019 (Greater Manchester Combined Authority 2018). Here, it is not simply that individuals should be resilient to the economic and climatic fallout of capitalism, but are in and of themselves a danger. Or perhaps more precisely certain demographic mixes are thus construed, given the extent to which the phrase ‘community cohesion’ is often used to describe racial and religious plurality (Pilkington 2008). If the resilience discourse is predicated on the idea that ‘good subjects’ should survive and indeed thrive in any situation (Neocleous 2013), ‘bad’ subjects are part of the challenge of resilience itself. The question

remains though, what is taken as evidence of resilience? Howard et al. (1999) argue that much of the literature which uses the term uncritically has neglected to consider resilience through the terms groups themselves define it. Moreover, forms of ‘success’ can emerge from what policy makers may consider evidence of maladaptation (Luthar et al. 2000). Behaviour considered non-conforming, may be a strategy and, in itself, evidence of resilience, especially in the face of systemic forms of racism and injustice (Lorde 2007 [1984]). In L.B.N. there is a long history of opposition to institutional inequality and racism, which has often found expression in communal organisation, yet as we will see this activity was not interpreted as resilient behaviour by the council, but rather as something to be curbed. Indeed, in many ways, the council’s resilience approach was used to undermine the viability of groups set up by and supporting minorities, under the guise that they eroded the capacity for resilience.

‘Resilience’ in Newham

Like many local, national and international bodies, L.B.N. produced core policy documents on resilience. However, in contrast to the situation in other local areas, in addition to six core documents, the council also produced and commissioned at least twenty-three other reports, covering topics as diverse as equalities and diversity (L.B.N 2013d), analysis of survey data (L.B.N 2015b) and calculations on the minimum wage (L.B.N 2015a) all of which were framed in relation to resilience. Within the principal documents, some of the measures introduced and justified as promoting resilience include: closer links with private business (L.B.N 2013b); changes in housing policy (L.B.N 2013d); the removal of ‘foreign’ language newspapers and books from libraries (L.B.N 2013b: 20); and significant changes to funding. Between 2011 and 2013 three funding pools were developed which awarded money to residents (L.B.N 2013a, 2013b, L.B.N. 2011), but excluded established groups from applying. The council institutionalised core criteria of not providing funding to groups they characterised as ‘for only one or particular specific communities’ (L.B.N 2013a: 4). These policy shifts impacted those defined by the council as ‘single identity’ (L.B.N 2013d). The validity of this characterisation is discussed below, but it is worth noting here that many of these groups have long histories in the borough, rooted in successive waves of anti-racism mobilisation.

L.B.N is the most diverse part of London: eight out of ten of the most diverse wards in East London are in Newham, no one group makes up more than 17% of the population (Jivraj 2013). This is nothing new: Newham has long-established global links due to the presence of

the Royal Docks (Visram 1993). Trade and heavy industry in the area attracted internal and international migration in significant numbers from the 1700s (Butler and Hamnett 2011). Concurrent with this boom in employment came action and resistance, protests by workers led to a proto ‘occupy’ movement in 1886 where the East End poor camped out in West End parks and in 1889 dock workers held a successful strike to mitigate some of the most extreme aspects of casual labour in their industry (Butler and Hamnett 2011). A more well remembered movement by dockers came in 1968 when many marched in support of Enoch Powell. Indeed, there is an intricate history of discrimination in the borough which dates back to the 11th century, extends through to the blackshirt movement, and is observable through attacks on commonwealth soldiers who settled there during and after both world wars (Holmes 1991). From the 1960s through to the 1980s, Newham is remembered for two things: the winding down of the docks until their eventual closure in 1981 and a rise in overt racist incidents and political movements (Butler and Hamnett 2011). In the 1980s four violent events came to national attention: the murder of teenager Akhtar Ali Baig; the bombing of a halal butchers; a car bomb left in an Asian shopkeeper’s car; and the wrongful arrest of a number of Asian men (Tompson 1988). The emergence of these stories into the public domain was a product of local organisation. Indeed attempts to find a coherent modality for activism was the context in which many of the organisations we spoke to were formed:

So [name of group] grew out of anti-racism. Initially, twenty-six/twenty-seven years ago, there were groups of people that came together to look at issues around racism that were happening, [...] they set up more of an ad hoc organisation just to monitor cases around racism and look at responses by local authorities to issues around racism.

[New17]

The money was actually given to the [...] community by central government in the first place because they agitated – I think in 1984. I think prior to that it was very hard to find places to meet in the Borough [...] so they agitated to the central government. A lot of [people from two ethnic minority communities] came together and formed an alliance [...]. So that Alliance went to central government and then they got the money

[New10]

Organisations which emerged from these anti-racist groups make up a significant proportion of the ‘third sector’ in the borough, along with organisations started by migrants, philanthropic and religious organisations founded in the Victorian era, and community groups set up in reaction to deindustrialisation. Collective memory, continuous organization and self-activity amongst local people in the face of radical shifts in economic fortune, offers considerable evidence of what, by any reasonable measure, may be called resilience. Indeed,

histories of organized resistance to inequality and racism constituted a hard-won set of institutional and intellectual resources for these groups, which informed their current practices and forms of mobilization:

And I remember one of their [council] officers came to the meeting of the NGOs, [...] I or somebody else questioned [...] taking away the funding for independent advice, [...] that officer said, "Do you presume that you know Newham better than the leadership of our borough?" [...] "Do you presume..." obviously the answer is, yes, we do presume so because (laughs) we live in Newham and we work with communities in Newham [...] We can speak for many people who populate the whole Newham – the whole borough and who travel here, who live here, who go to the doctors here, who take their children to school, and who struggle with daily sort of existence in terms of social exclusion or poverty [New19]

As Gregory (2014) notes though, the resilience literature has tended to avoid exploring resistance as a form of resilience. For Dagdeviren et al (2016) this is so as resistance does not fit with the individualised definition of the term favoured within policy and theory. Indeed, for a senior member of Newham council, who could speak authoritatively on policy developments, the development of any form of collective resistance was to be avoided:

So, [...] we've got Eastern Europeans moving in. They don't ask for anything, they don't want anything. They want to come, they want to work. They don't get involved in politics. You wait ten years, there'll be people saying, "Ah, no, I need money to create community groups and create things so that..." And people will come and seek to get resources to place them in a position of leadership with that group of people. That's what happened in all the groups of immigrants coming in. [...] So, initially they're working and they're doing things, but then some people look around and say, "Ah, I could..." [...] They got money and it placed them in positions of significance.

[New13]

For this representative, resilience could not be understood as involvement in politics nor did it involve taking a leadership role with regard to local affairs, as both were considered problematic, rather than something to be encouraged. Dagdeviren et al. (2016) highlight that while individuals may display resilient reactions; the conditions that necessitate such actions are tied to structural forces. They warn that, 'ignoring social conditions of resilience may give rise to an identification problem' (2016: 13), as what is identified as individual resilience may instead be the absence of a structural risk factor. Within the resilience discourse though, 'success' is often misrecognised and defined as individual merit alone, to the exclusion of any consideration of structure or collective action (Garrett 2016). Within Newham there was evidence of just this understanding of resilience:

He [the Mayor] sees his strategy as making Newham a place to 'live, play and stay', [air quotes] but his strategy is entirely around residents and individuals. It doesn't see a place for the third sector. It recognises that there are voters who put him there, [...] So he's just started a scheme whereby any individual can apply for a small grant to improve themselves. [...]. He will encourage individuals to come together and have an event or a party in their street and that, and they will give them money to hold that event and get together as a group of individuals. But he doesn't fund capacity building for a group of people that want to get together...there's no money available for anything like that. [New2]

For Dagdeviren et al. resilience is also 'prone to ideological exploitation when it is considered in isolation from its social conditions' (2016, 14-15). In Newham, the targeting of

individuals under the resilience approach seemed to be ideologically aligned with characterisations of collectives, especially those seen to be run for and by ‘single identity’ groups, as ethno-centric, constructed by the council as creating division.

Resilience and Racism:

Throughout the interviews professionals shared their frustration that it was no longer viable to talk about racism in the borough:

It’s like the other equalities strands which are so important these days at the expense of race, which is terribly unfair because, you know, race sort of set the scene for so many years [New14]

A number emphasized that racism of the kind which they were set up to address was still happening, both at a micro level:

It remains a legitimate target for a sort of public prejudice. It’s changed only in that the East European Roma [...] They sort of have gotten a focus [...], but they’re certainly experiencing the same. I don’t think it’s got any better. [New8]

and at the level of institutions:

I think it’s a legacy of failed policy [nationally and locally] and it’s a legacy of racism, institutional racism that still exists [New17]

While all recognised there were a myriad of factors at play in L.B.N’s policy decisions, and that these often extended beyond the context of local politics, there was nevertheless a real sense of anger at how Newham council had turned away from support for explicitly anti-racism work. These criticisms tended to take a personalized form, with the then Mayor blamed for this disengagement from discussions of race and a broader dissatisfaction with what was perceived as an authoritarian leadership style:

the Mayor in Newham has got sort of more powers than that, you know. He sort of – he is sort of like— What did he do? He has inhaled Newham. He has kind of inhaled to the point that there is no governance, other than his leadership. [New19]

Sir Robin Wales was head of Newham council from 1995 -2002 and directly elected Labour Mayor from 2002-2018. Many of the measures outlined above became the focus of national headlines and the former Mayor was the main spokesperson and target of both criticism and praise for these policies. For instance, the removal of ‘foreign language’ newspapers and translation services (L.B.N, 2013b) was discussed on *Newsnight* (Nye 2013), where the Mayor characterises ‘his’ measures as a solution for what he perceived to be separation amongst racial and ethnic groups in the borough, which he likened to ‘apartheid’. Wales also took part in a number of policy events promoting the council’s resilience approach involving the think tank *Demos*ⁱⁱ, (DEMOS 2011). Nye (2013) reported that ‘officials from other

ethnically diverse parts of the UK are watching what happens in Newham with great interest', a well-founded claim as Newham's policy changes have already influenced other local authorities. For example, after an appeal to the House of Lords in 2009, L.B.N. won the right to prioritize length of time on the housing waiting list over level of need (Lords 2009). This ruling opened up the way for other councils in England to follow suit. Even though this change to housing policy predated the borough's official resilience agenda, these changes and related social housing building strategies were subsequently explained in terms of the concept:

As we moved toward resilience, we were one of the first councils to say 'no more social housing' [...] what we didn't want was the estate south of the A13, great, big, monolithic estates. [New13]

How more social housing stock in the past may have failed to promote resilience is unclear, but perhaps a clue is to be found in the somewhat ambiguous use of 'we'. On its second iteration 'we' refers to the council but on first use a larger collective subject is implied. There is a slippage here between the use of the term 'resilience' to describe an explicit institutional policy framework, and resilience as something attributed to (or seen as lacking in) the wider borough. As Dagdaviren et al (2016) argue, any conceptualisation of resilience implies and projects its opposite, the 'whom' or 'what' that is taken to be non-resilient. While large estates of social housing, (and presumably the people who live therein) are presented as emblems of non-resilient, ethnic minority and residents of migrant backgrounds were also placed in the non-resilient category, through their assumed separateness:

If you come to a different country, you're going to assimilate into that country. And you better do because it's not good for you – it's not good to be sitting separate because separation, segregation, is bad for all of us. However, it's not for [us] to enforce that. It's just for [us] to encourage people to come together [New13]

At the very least, this perspective is paternalistic, at worst this institutionalises racism, which the council claimed the policy of resilience was tackling:

So we've been doing policies that we think can undercut the racism. [New13]

The concrete effects of this discourse can be seen in the removal of 'foreign' language newspapers from public libraries and translations services, whose aim, according to the council, was to reduce separation and encourage resilience (L.B.N 2013b). However, this reasoning seemed counter-intuitive to third sector groups:

Well everyone should speak English but you can't force people not to read, you know, in their own language. [New18]

Newham's justification for that was this whole idea of resilience and, "We want to encourage people to learn English to be able to get jobs," when in fact, not everyone who goes into a library wants to get a job.... it may be an elderly person who's retired... For me, that was really important because it was almost like a social aspect to it as well. [New4]

How denying the population the chance to read newspapers in a public space or read about council services through translated documents, could be said to reduce the presumed separation of ethnic minority groups, has been questioned by many third sector groups, as well as in the media and opposition politicians:

When the Mayor comes out and says astonishing things...."We will not have any translation services, we will not translate anything" and there isn't a peep from his Councillors, many of whom represent ethnic minorities where English is not well held... And we're saying that we do not translate those leaflets because of some hackneyed quasi racist instinct from the Mayor of Newham? [New12]

Minimally, this shows a rather blunt interpretation of what libraries and reading materials are for, but it also betrays a crude interpretation of what might make for, or constitute, separation. For example, the use of a paper written in Arabic, the official language of 22 nations and unofficially used in countless others, can only be designated as ethno-centric if one assumes that a vast range of heterogeneous audiences and readers belong to a homogenous 'other'. Moreover the characterisation of material not in the English language as 'foreign' ties readers to such a characterisation (Alexander et al. 2007). The assumption of this policy is that to read in Urdu is not British, despite 'Britain' being made within Empire, and Newham's own globalised history (Bhabha 1990). While the use of the English language as a tool of cultural annihilation may be acknowledged in historic colonialism (Hindley 1990), its continued propagation domestically as a 'neutral' way to enhance understanding, acts to veil how 'other' languages are marginalized and their users remade as foreign and separate, even as they engage in shared public spaces. One can see this discursive move playing out in Wales' 2014 AGM speech where he argued that:

To join in properly people need a common language [...] We cannot build community resilience without it. (Wales 2014)

When asked if the council understands why some people might find these policies controversial the council's representative responded:

It's an incredibly popular policy. The people that criticise it, I'm sorry, I don't understand what they're trying to do. What is [the council's] job? To encourage people to be separate or to spend public money bringing people together? It is not controversial. It's only controversial in the minds of a few people, like [names third sector groups in L.B.N] [New13]

In this account, dissenting voices from the third sector were dismissed as failing to represent residents. When asked what role the council believes the third sector to have, the council argued:

Often there's a sense of entitlement, they get bloated [...] They have a role if they can contribute. But our task [is to say ...] If you can contribute to developing and supporting resilience in this borough, you're our buddies. And if you can do it better than we can, you'll do it. [...] But you must contribute to what we're trying to achieve. [New13]

Thus development of groups who feel entitled to be heard is placed in contrast to resilience, which is itself conflated with the council's agenda. Resilience in this case becomes a means of demanding acquiescence with 'what we are trying to achieve'. Indeed, the nature of the way in which local groups emerged in response to racism and serve their needs became an object of explicit critique for the council:

I will never prioritise one group – be it religious, national or ethnic – over another. Newham will stand up against those who try to divide our community. (Wales 2014: 7)

An exact definition of what the council considered a 'single ethnic group', remained ambiguous, for L.B.N. entire religions and languages were used to homogenise heterogeneous populations. For MacKinnon and Derickson, attempts to generate 'a discourse of equivalence between groups and individuals... often having [sic] the effect of suppressing social difference (according to class, gender, race etc) and masking [sic] inequality and hierarchy' (2013: 259). The dangers of ignoring the continued need to support residents in multifaceted ways, especially in how individuals and groups continue to address racism, was a key concern of our interviewees:

The whole emphasis is, "In Newham, we're a get up and go borough and if you help yourself, we'll help you." Help you do what? [...] The system, the benefits system, is so skewed nationally that it doesn't make no difference [...] destitution and poverty is more acute amongst certain ethnic minorities.

[...]

Communities, individuals don't work like that. So sharing a cupcake with somebody along the street party doesn't make you friends for life, doesn't mean you still don't have racist views or you still learn to speak English any better. And that's what he [Mayor] can't get through his head. It's these big, superficial ideas that have got absolutely no substance, no understanding behind them at all because he doesn't understand how equality works, or how cohesion or diversity works; basic principal stuff. Doesn't understand but isn't interested. [...] That's exactly what the resilience strategy's built on.

[New3]

We might note here, that the concept of resilience has particular rhetorical or normative freight in this context. Resilience, as an alleged or imputed quality of communities implies, above all, their capacity to maintain themselves in the face of change. It invokes stability and singularity as the condition of community, the condition to which resilience pertains. The resilience of the resilient subject is the capacity to maintain its imagined subjecthood, its self-sameness. In this regard, as we can see from the usage of the term in official discourse here, it is all too well aligned with a political imagination which conceives of diversity, plurality and everyday multiculturalism as threats, those things which one needs to be resilient in the face of, rather than as strengths. The council was at pains to name a quality in individuals it

wished to enhance through official policy, but their efforts to define what resilience meant, encompassed a plethora of contradictory ideas and policies to the extent that the concept seemed to be rendered useless (Fesenmyer 2015). Yet, it effectively functioned in one sense; as it allowed the accusation of a lack of resilience to be levelled against a range of groups and actions. In this respect, collective action, speaking ‘foreign’ languages, being in and funding ‘single identity groups’, feeling entitled to speak up for residents or take on a leadership role for the community, were all treated as evidence of a lack of resilience. As a term, we suggest, its political and normative work is mostly done in the negative, allowing a range of actors to be defined in terms of a particular ‘lack’. In short, ethnic minorities, migrants and organisations developed for and by them were precluded from this concept. Hence, for a policy, which the council declared as undercutting racism, the very terms of this erasure had a racializing effect, and a divisive one, given the ways in which it elaborated and sustained distinctions between ‘resilient’ and ‘non-resilient’ peoples.

Nevertheless resilience as a word is evocative, it appeals to what we hope ourselves to be, as given the choice between being resilient and defeatist, few would choose the latter. When official policy adopts resilience as the mantle below which to introduce a raft of reforms, it makes it difficult for dissenting voices to be heard, as opponents risk sounding as though they oppose resilience or have no faith in the resilience of their communities. Thus, measures which for many were regressive, were repackaged as an expression of faith in the population. The appeal of a term like resilience is it seems to illuminate the power in your hands, when really it only places responsibility there. Indeed, the existence of the third sector at all, belies the fact that resilience is not that straightforward. Individuals and groups are not resilient simply in relation to personal factors, but are engaged in resilient practices to deal with challenges whose origins are structural in nature. Within Newham one of these key structures became the council itself. The policy of resilience and leaders within L.B.N who advocated them, became the focus of resistance in the borough.

Resisting Resilience:

On May 3rd 2018 Rokhsana Fiaz was elected Mayor of Newham. Before entering local politics in 2014, Fiaz worked for many third sector anti-racism organisations at a local, national and European level. She has defined herself as a ‘community activist’ (Waugh 2018a). Given the council’s past characterisation of members of third sector groups as professionals who erode resilience, as a figurehead Fiaz marks a break from these policies.

Yet, beyond Fiaz as an individual, the collective movement behind her election is worth noting. In much of the national press her election was characterised as a win for Momentumⁱⁱⁱ (Elgot 2018). However while the process of bringing Fiaz to power began in 2016, informally the effort to remove Wales dates back, at the very least, to the last local elections in 2014. In December 2016 Robin Wales won a ‘trigger ballot’, to automatically run as the Labour candidate in the 2018 local elections. In response, Newham Labour party members wrote an appeal letter to the National Executive Committee outlining irregularities in the ballot and crowd funded a court case over the matter (Hill 2017). Before a full hearing, Wales agreed to re-run the trigger ballot, which he lost. In an open competition between Wales and Fiaz the latter was selected as the Labour candidate and subsequently as Mayor. Key players in these processes included members of third sector organisations in the borough, many of whom took part in this study. On contacting the original interviewees after Fiaz’s election they reflected on the collective effort that resulted in Fiaz’s win:

Well it’s [Fiaz election] the culmination of a lot of effort, from all of us [New 14(2)]

Labelling this a Momentum win, that is the press [...] they just write some really lazy pieces about this being a Corbyn thing, but no, we working on this from before the last elections. I mean I think I mentioned this to you at the time, going the route of changing the labour candidate was, because really it’s a one party state here, so that was the best method of bringing some democracy back [New 16(2)]

Fiaz is a Newham candidate not Momentum, Momentum has been a good rallying point, but it only gave fuel to a fire [New 19(2)]

The scope of this piece does not allow for a discussion of Momentum, but what may be happening at a larger scale should not overshadow local level resistance. Indeed this respondent drew a line from the resilience policy of L.B.N to Fiaz’s victory:

Wales wanted resilience in the borough right? He got it [...] the people of Newham are resilient not in the way he wanted though [laughs]. [New 17(2)]

Resilience is reconfigured here, then, as something collective and subversive of the intention of L.B.N’s resilience agenda which was called out as a policy of assimilation:

If you had any doubts on what the resilience agenda was all about all you had to hear was how Wales handled the leadership contest with Fiaz [...] his barely suppressed fear and rage leaked out [...] Being resilient, (laughs) it was all a dressed up attempt at assimilation, at annihilation of difference [New 17(2)]

During the internal battle for the mayoral nomination Wales argued that ‘community politics’ were at play, and claimed that ‘Muslim party members’ were signed up to vote against him. He pointed to the former Mayor of Tower Hamlets (who was found guilty of voting fraud in

2015) as an example of what happens when ‘minority ethnic party activists separate residents rather than bring them together’ (Waugh, 2018b). The continued characterisation of Muslim residents as separating (and therefore non-resilient), even while at the heart of local politics, illuminates the work of political misdirection the concept sustains. ‘Bad’ subjects could be named by drawing on racial scripts, but simultaneously couched in supposedly neutral psycho-social parlance. However, this time there was a public reframing of these comments by Fiaz, who labelled them ‘appalling dog-whistle politics’ (Waugh, 2018a).

Thus, is Fiaz’s election a win for resistance over resilience? The new administration has distanced itself from the private housing policies previously advocated as building resilience. One month before the 2018 local elections financial irregularities in Newham council were reported by auditors, with funds ‘misaid’ and 80% of council tax going to pay off high interest loans, to fund the previous administrations private housing scheme (Moore 2017). Two weeks into Fiaz’s term two financial officers left the council (Cusack 2018). As of 2019 though, L.B.N website still promotes resilience, no new documentation has been produced, but the core documents still feature as a part of official policy and the social housing allocation policies have not changed since 2016. Protest by local people in relation to housing is ongoing, most prominently by the Focus E15 campaign^{iv} and lately by residents of temporary and emergency accommodation. Attending a council meeting in July 2019 residents drew on L.B.N’s resilience policy as a focal point of their protest. Resident ‘Egwolo’ drew from these policies to point out the difficulty of practicing resilience, while enduring housing inequality:

Newham Council website talks about building a resilient community [...] residents have spent months, and years in our current situation and to ask us to wait patiently [...] goes beyond the resilience required of any individual. (Focus E15 campaign 2019)

With this, does the long history of resistance in the Borough have a new rallying point, that of opposition to the political discourse of resilience itself?

Conclusion

Boyden and Cooper (2007) argue any definition of resilience is largely ambiguous as most attempts to measure it are based on a pre-existing understanding of risk. This relies on assumptions of what individuals and communities have been, need to be, and should be resilient to. L.B.N’s policy approach clearly presumed diversity to be a risk factor, yet neglected to consider the risks of their own policies. Moreover, rather than seeking to foster

the already evident resistance in the community, they instead identified this as threat to resilience policy itself. As Neocleous (2013) argues, resilience often finds its definition against resistance. Resilience seeks accommodation; it demands we use our actions to acquiesce to capital and the state. Demanding resilience demands capitulation, not resistance. While critiques of the resilience discourse rightly point out the absurdity of holding individuals responsible for the instabilities of neoliberalism, the case of Newham emphasises that policies of resilience are not supposed to work. It functions much as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) argue as a ‘screen discourse’, where questions of racialised inequality are deflected through implicit notions of cultural deficit, ironic given the history of resilience scholarship is rooted in fighting such conceptions.

Garrett warns of the importance of being attuned to the motivation behind ‘resilience talk’, as a way to expose its role in solidifying ‘the neo-liberal hegemonic order’ (2016: 1912). The case of Newham emphasises the racializing mechanisms within that order, where good and bad subjects are defined, supposedly through individual attributes, yet coded by collective racialized imaginations. With policies of resilience proliferating across Britain and globally at a time of right wing populism, policy makers cannot continue to present terms like resilience as neutral, as though its origin isn’t simultaneously created, all too easily woven into institutionally racist policy. Indeed, even if one does not accept the institutional racism at risk with policies of resilience, at the very least the case of Newham asks the question of whether personal attributes should ever be mandated by policy? Surely, personality traits are not the business of social institutions, as at the very least the measurement of them are based on assumptions and quite likely on prejudices, dangerous to institute in policy. Indeed, if social policy insists on social and personal uniformity to be effective, its focus is not on facilitating the community, but in the words of our respondents on ‘annihilating’ it. Annihilation lurks too within the embrace local policy makers have with the concept itself. Austerity measures from central government under the guise of resilience have deeply affected local councils, yet the very rationale used to cut their funding is what they have embraced. While in the short term these measures may bring savings, how can councils viably contest Westminster or wider global neo-liberal forces, if they have acquiesced so completely? Perhaps local councils should take a lesson from the playbook of Newham’s third sector and resist resilience.

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ⁱ In 2017 core spending in 2016-2017 was recorded as 251.7m in 2018 the 2019/2020 spending is estimated at 259m.

ⁱⁱ Demos is a think tank criticised for their approach to issues of ethnicity. The evidence base L.B.N uses draws from Demos' work (L.B.N 2013c)

ⁱⁱⁱ Momentum is a grassroots organisation supportive of Jeremy Corbyn as labour leader.

^{iv} E15 is a campaign group formed of young mothers served eviction notices after Newham Council cut funding to housing associations.