

Rethinking ‘Hope’ and ‘Resilience’ in the Anthropocene: An Interview with David Chandler

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Abstract

This is an interview with David Chandler, Professor of International Relations at Westminster University, UK, a leading scholar in the field of international politics and policy discourses of resilience in the Anthropocene. This interview explores the challenges presented by the Anthropocene and the ways that discourses of ‘hope’ and ‘resilience’ might effectively reflect and negotiate them.

Keywords

hope, resilience, the anthropocene, practices, entanglements, complexities

Shahira Hathout:

I would like to start off by asking you a question of a biographical nature. Your radical and innovative approach to ‘hope’ and ‘resilience’ in the Anthropocene is provocative. May I ask, what/who inspires it?

David Chandler:

I’m not sure if I would think of any theorist as particularly influencing my approach. Beyond the obvious link between governmental reason and the work of Michel Foucault, my reading and influences have tended to be pretty broad. I tend to approach contemporary theorists as providing material to work with rather than as guides that should be followed. Works of theory help us to register shifting trends in thinking. When we think about work in the fields of hope and resilience, we notice a shift to ontology. By this I mean that hope is not

defined merely in terms of possessing a positive approach to future outcomes. Hope is not grasped as a subjective attribute or positive mental state but as a discursive field of practices or activities designed to access what exists unseen in the present. For these thinkers, hope is grounded upon a reality that exists not on the transparent surface of appearances but in unseen potentiality and thus beyond the world of liberal or Enlightenment ‘reason’.

It strikes me that perhaps we can think of three ways in which contemporary theorists enable us to approach ontological framings of hope and resilience in the Anthropocene. The

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hope of, for example, the political theorists Jane Bennett and William Connolly or the international relations scholar Jairus Grove, is that of the speculative ‘seer’. They argue that we should train ourselves via openings of encounter to see events with a presumptive generosity rather than closing our thinking to focus upon the known and the comfortable. There is also what I would call the ‘pragmatic hope’ of Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway or the late Bruno Latour, where the focus is upon relational context and taking responsibility for our world-making practices. Finally, there is what could perhaps be seen as a more negative or nihilist approach to hope, forwarded by thinkers such as Axelle Karera, David Marriott and Claire Colebrook which refuses the desire to salvage and redeem this world rather than forefront its violent grounding and the violence needed for its maintenance and reproduction.

SH:

The Anthropocene is the new geological epoch that sees humans as a geological force that radically impacted the earth system (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000). The Anthropocene has called into question the nature of humans’ relationship to the nonhuman other. In your book, *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (Chandler 2014), you argue that, in the Anthropocene, to affirm our attached existence in the world, as argued by (Latour 2007), would alienate us from the world because we affirm ‘new bonds and attachments with unknowable, unseen, complex, overlapping, and interlinking processes which have already dissipated after the event.... we can never be *human* subjects, collectively understanding, constituting, and transforming our world’ (Chandler 2014, 192). Instead, you affirm the emergence of ‘new rationalities of governance rather than government...[a] shift towards resilience-thinking as a dominant mode of governance, based on complex and emergent life, which can only operate, after the fact, on the world as it appears’ (Chandler 2014, 195). In the Anthropocene, how can philosophy and

practice merge in ‘resilience’ to be of real and effective significance?

DC:

Resilience perhaps can be effective but because it promises merely more of the same, the logic of the Anthropocene would be that this is merely reproducing problems or storing problems up for the future. If resilience is a discourse of feedback effects and developing sensitivities in order to be able to see and to respond to feedback effects more efficiently, there is an inevitable logic of diminishing returns. By this, I mean, that policy interventions tend to become disabling and discredited for failing to respond adequately or to grasp the problems in their proper extent or, to be more precise, on an adequate scale.

To provide an example, let’s say that there is a lot of wasted resources, shops throw away and waste perfectly good food at the end of the working day, perhaps someone develops an app where all this food is picked up and then recycled, gifted to those in vulnerable housing or on low incomes, this appears to be an ideal solution, addressing two problems, those of wastage and those of shortages and everyone is happy. No one could complain, except, of course, the system that produces wastage and shortages continues, so the larger context is unchanged. This problem that confronts resilience also operates at a larger scale, that of environmental change and planetary warming.

For example, global warming makes subsistence agriculture less manageable, threatening many thousands of livelihoods and traditional ways of living and working, different resilience strategies are applied. Some development agencies work on scaling up local knowledge solutions drawing upon techniques and knowledges successfully applied elsewhere in the region. Other development agencies deploy tech start-ups, rolling out and testing new digital technologies of sensing, sometimes linked into regional or national databases, more effectively enabling subsistence farmers to respond to changes in insect predation, rainfall and temperature changes or

changing market indicators. Let's say that subsistence livelihoods are maintained, these resilience 'solutions' are still not addressing the problem at the scale of Western lifestyles and production and consumption choices that are producing the problems to start with, in fact, it could be argued that these 'solutions' are delaying tactics, creating the illusion that more widescale changes are not necessary.

SH:

In your piece: 'Three Modes of Hope in the Anthropocene: Speculative, Pragmatic, and Nihilist' (Chandler forthcoming) for the forthcoming co-edited book, *The Politics of Hope in the Anthropocene*, you managed to free 'hope' from its mooring in the socially constructed, progress-driven and 'seen' human sphere that failed to 'capture the complexity of the real world... [or account for] the exploitation of the natural environment' (1). Instead, you transport 'hope' to the 'figurative positionality of the unseen' (4) accessed through 'a discursive field of practices or activities' (1) to fully capture a world rendered complex by the advent of the Anthropocene. To me, the 'unseen', in this piece, sounds like it could be promising and hopeful. Could you please expand more on this?

DC:

In modernity, the unseen or the unknown was never really a problem as there was an assumption that humans wouldn't be here, we wouldn't be special, we wouldn't have been able to distinguish ourselves from the natural world, if development, progress and 'civilisation' were not in tune with underlying drives and dynamics. These unknown and unseen forces beyond the realms of science and technology were often comfortingly grasped in religious or mystical terms: Immanuel Kant's belief in the 'providence' of nature; Einstein's belief that 'God does not play dice'; Adam Smith's belief in the 'hidden hand' of market forces etc. etc.

In our contemporary moment of the Anthropocene, it appears that these assumptions of the benevolence of the 'unseen' can no longer be maintained. It appears that nature is not just there 'for us' that we can no longer conceive of ourselves as the source of purpose and meaning in the world. The world may well be able to get along 'without us'. In these circumstances, the unseen, the unknown and the previously disregarded or unaccounted for, become more important.

In contemporary discourses of risk, contingencies and disaster prevention, what we understand as the 'unseen', relates directly to what are seen as the limits of modernist ways of thinking. These ways are understood to be too reductionist, too abstract, too linear, failing to see and to grasp anything outside or beyond the norm of the expected. Thus, policy imaginaries seek to include the unintended consequences, side-effects, or externalities (of Ulrich Beck) or the attachments and relations (of Bruno Latour), to see feedback effects in more efficient ways. Bringing the unseen into awareness is the task of hope. Hope, understood in this way, is the project of becoming aware of the unseen 'presences' in the present.

SH:

In your work, you emphasize the notion of human 'entanglement' with nature as a way to challenge the anthropocentrism embedded in modernist thought, especially in the Anthropocene. This emphasis shows some similarity to other theorists concerned with a view of the world on the basis of a relational ontology, for example, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Which form of entanglement would you associate your approach with?

DC:

Personally, I am interested in how different ontological imaginaries work. 'Entanglement' means different things to different writers; this is all well and good. I am interested in what's at stake in these ontological 'cuts' or choices made by theorists. I do not consider myself to

be a philosopher, to be engaging in ontology, making statements or claims as to the nature of being. What is interesting for me is how discourses of ‘entanglement’ work and what work they claim to be doing, that is, what is at stake in ‘entanglement’. It seems to me that a new space is being opened up, one that is understood by its advocates as ‘beyond’ a modernist understanding, able to take into account complexity, change, creativity, able to be open to the unexpected, to be able to be changed through the experience of encounter.

This space of ‘entanglement’ is often articulated as appreciative of entities in relation, rather than as possessing separate and distinct ‘essences’, sometimes, as in Karen Barad’s concept of ‘intra-action’, relations are seen to precede entities, the potentialities of the virtual to be more important than the materialized world of the actual. One paradox, that I find, is that often advocates of entanglement seek to challenge the ‘binaries’ and the separations of the modern ontology but still seek to be able to take responsibility for their choices, to trace the lines of non-linear causal interaction, and to reinstate the human as subject in a world available to be known and instrumentally acted upon. I agree with some commentators, such as Claire Colebrook who problematize this post- or more-than-human imaginary that, in fact, can be understood to be more hubristic than that of the modernist subject.

SH:

In your article, ‘Security through Societal Resilience: Contemporary Challenges with the Anthropocene’ (Chandler 2019), you underscore the ‘existing inequalities, exclusions and blind spots of resilience-thinking’ (Chandler 2019, 211) and discuss two possible alternative solutions: 1) depending on local knowledge, experience, and the capacity of communities (informal dwelling and indigenious) to see and respond (Chandler 2019, 206). 2) New technological advances in computation and distributive sensory capacities that can enable communities to be more self-sustaining through Big Data and Internet of things

(Chandler 2019, 206). Can technology and Big Data help in humanitarian issues and displacements created by the Anthropocene?

DC:

New technologies and Big Data, machine-learning algorithms, the Internet of things etc. certainly have potential to assist in seeing some problems or issues in their development or as they emerge and in enabling adaptive behaviour as a way of mitigating their effects. One example that I have written about is that of the PetaJakarta project, working with Twitter and other agencies for citizens to geo-tag locations of flooding in the city. This enables people to take evasive action, to plan alternative routes to work etc., effectively modulating around an ongoing problem in a mega-city below sea level which is slowly sinking under its own weight of development. This, quite quotidian, example shows how adaptive resilience based upon technological advances in machine learning and algorithmic computation enables new possibilities of citizen participation and, in effect, self-governance. However, despite all the positive claims for this type of ‘societal resilience’, as I mentioned in my discussion of resilience above, the larger problem, the context in which these technologies are applied, is unchanged and projects such as these can be seen as enabling everyday life to go on without transformational change.

SH:

In *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour, and Politics in the Age of Big Data* (Chandler and Fuchs 2019), you explain that Big Data ‘claims to provide an insight into the ‘actual’ rather than working at a level of modernist knowledge based upon representation or abstraction.... Big Data as a mode of Governance ...relies upon increasing the field of vision through the power of correlation and datafication ... to avoid ... crises or break downs...making a shock or crisis governable’ (Chandler 2019, 76). Would you describe this

approach as posthumanist and performative in line with Barad's goal to counter representation by associating matter and meaning? Also, looking at places threatened with total disappearance as a result of the rise in sea levels and other climate change issues, to what extent do you think technologies provided by Big Data can help these sites and preserve the inhabitants' culture and legacy from disappearance?

DC:

In terms of the first question, Big Data approaches claim access to the unseen, the real, the relations and interconnections that are obscured by a modern epistemology. Benjamin Bratton's 2021 book, *The Revenge of the Real*, is a good example of an approach to governance that is based upon Big Data and the extensive roll out of new technologies. Bratton argues that we need a sea-change in how we understand citizenship, that we should all participate and be included in the polity on the basis of being 'data objects' rather than traditional liberal subjects. What Bratton means is that the more that our data, related to our health, our social networks, consumption choices, travel patterns etc. are included, the more objectively society appears before us. Therefore, it becomes easier to track the spread of viruses or to tax on the basis of environmental impacts etc. It is possible that this might be understood to be posthumanist, matter certainly appears to have more meaning, via its 'datafication', humans become articulated as objects rather than as subjects, yet, there is something still decidedly modernist about this programme for governing, one which appears very similar to Deleuze's prescient warning in his short piece 'Societies of Control'.

I'm not sure how to answer the final question as I suspect that there are many pressures on 'inhabitants' culture and legacy' which Big Data technologies can have little influence on. Also, it is not necessarily everyone's understanding of resilience that the status quo should be preserved, sometimes change is necessary and in these cases I imagine it's about enabling those affected to

make informed choices and listening to these community desires.

SH:

I would like to wrap up this interview with a final question that puts 'hope' and 'resilience' in conversation. The Anthropocene sheds light on different forms of injustice, violence and suffering that extend through history and materialize in the present time in the form of an existential crisis. As you explained earlier, it appears that 'resilience' addresses the symptoms of the problem but not the bigger problem which is human violence (seen or implied) towards the nonhuman Other or dehumanized. Can we say that 'hope' as practices that promise to 'bring the unseen into awareness' will prove to be more agential and transformative than 'resilience' as a policy framework?

DC:

Many thanks for this concluding question. I guess that this enables me to draw out what is perhaps distinctive in my approach to 'resilience' and 'hope' in the 'Anthropocene. I am interested in how arguments take shape, the inherent logic that they express and how the attraction to this logic changes in relation to experience; basically, the forms through which political subjectivities are mediated. Thus, different framings or approaches to 'resilience' or to 'hope' or to the stakes of our current period, understood as 'the Anthropocene', are read in ways which bring out the logical mechanisms underpinning them abstracted from normative content, abstracted from their claims to be somehow grounded directly in the world. Of course, there are a number of formally logically coherent ways in which we think about 'resilience' or about 'hope' today, ways in which we attempt to make the world knowable or actionable 'for us' but the point about re-reading an argument in terms of its formal logic is to indicate its necessary limits, its necessarily reductionist form of operating. Thus, normatively, I am not advocating that we

choose one or, indeed, any particular framing; my work is that of problematization rather than advocacy.

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