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Grace in Times of Friction:
The Complexity of Social Resilience

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THE BRITISH public's reaction to acts of terrorism over the past two years has been instructive. Besides being generally unruffled by terror attacks and carrying on with normal life, the public has also used the internet to thumb its nose at terrorism. After the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the internet was employed by the public to declare "We're not Afraid". In Glasgow, the internet once gain has been deployed as a rallying tool. A tribute site has been created for John Smeaton (www.johnsmeaton.com), an airport baggage handler who, upon seeing a burning man attacking a police officer, pitched in to help. His interviews are available at the site and the public can use Paypal to buy him a pint of beer in recognition of his bravery.

Interestingly, the term resilience has become increasingly used to describe the stoic attitude exhibited. Indeed, many newspapers have referred to the "resilient city" and the "resilience of the British people". Academic writings have also begun to employ the term to describe recent events. In academia, resilience is subdivided into technical and social resilience. Technical resilience refers to 'hard' security measures such as increased surveillance while social resilience is used to capture 'soft' security issues such as the public's response to a crisis.

With many governments maintaining that a terrorist strike is a question of 'when' rather than 'if', it may be appropriate to spend some time reflecting on how social resilience may be understood and whether some societies have it while others don't.

Understanding Social Resilience

In the context of the British public's reaction to these acts of terror, the term social resilience does appear accurate. *Resilience* has its roots in the Latin *resilire* – meaning to jump back or recoil; it was originally employed in physics to describe the ability of materials to return to their original shape or position after being exposed to external pressure. As such, when coupled with the adjective 'social', social resilience may be defined as the capacity of society to absorb shocks and bounce back to a functioning condition as rapidly as possible.

The elements constituting social resilience are multi-faceted and the interaction of these elements with each other is frustratingly opaque. This is because these elements range from the psychological and social to the normative and also extend to the politics of both governance and culture. For example, when discussing the social resilience exhibited by the British public, this resilience may be analyzed from multiple vistas ranging from – but not limited to – the multiculturalism practised in Britain; the level of integration between different segments of British society; previous experience with terrorism; the ethnic and religious composition of society; and perhaps even the more elusive notion of a shared British national culture in the face of adversity.

Social Resilience as a Complex System

With such vagaries surrounding it, how should social resilience be understood? One possible manner would be to conceive of social resilience as a complex system. Complex systems are non-linear systems where clear lines of cause and effect between constitutive elements of the system are not clearly evident. In addition, in such a system, though constitutive elements are identifiable, their influence over the overall system is highly unpredictable.

Examples of complex systems include ecosystems or communities. In both ecosystems and communities, their constitutive elements react differently in different contexts rather than reacting as passive bits of matter in a predictable linear manner. For example, plant and animal life in an ecosystem adapt to the environment through genetic mutation whose outcome is difficult to predict, while people in a community adapt to changing circumstances through continual reflection and choice. In addition, of note here is that the ability of complex systems to be successful lies in the non-linear manner in which constituent parts interact to adapt and restore the system: it is the variability of interaction between constitutive elements that ensures survival of the system.

If social resilience is understood as a complex system, it becomes clear that identifying its most important element is impossible. For instance, it would be difficult to argue that British national culture is *the* key contributor to social resilience in the UK as it is influenced by and continually alters in response to a shifting wider context. Instead, the various elements of social resilience interact in a loose and adaptive manner to contribute to social resilience overall. Furthermore, to expect the constituent parts of social resilience to interact in a linear or predictable manner where it can be expressed in an equation such as: Element A + Element B + Element C = Social Resilience is ill advised. What goes on between elements is *interaction* and not *additivity*. In certain contexts, some parts will have a greater impact in comparison to others and the impact will not be consistent all through time. As such, results cannot be envisaged from examining the individual inputs either separately or by placing all the individual parts together.

Thus, a 'Copernican revolution' may be required to understand resilience. This revolution refers to the acceptance that social resilience's constituent elements revolve around each other and affect each other in subtle yet significant ways. They spin around each other and no single element is wholly independent. As such, the elements are not stable entities and social resilience resides in their interplay with each other.

Attaining Social Resilience

Arising from understanding social resilience as a complex system where its constitutive elements interact in a variegated manner are three obvious questions: How do we know if a society has social resilience; what are its constitutive elements; and how do societies nurture it?

With regard to the first question, the forthright answer would be that no society will be aware of its resilience until its people face adversity together. Encouragingly, there are signs that most societies do possess the ability to carry on during trying times. To use the extreme case of Baghdad, even with the uncertain and dangerous conditions people currently find themselves living under, everyday life by and large resolutely carries on.

With regard to the second question, different studies have proffered various constitutive elements that make up social resilience. Some of these elements include a well-integrated and inclusive society; a society with shared goals; a society that is diverse; and even a society with a history of continually facing adversity. Though this is by no means an exhaustive list, it is enough to carry the point. More studies have to be conducted to identify constituent elements and, more importantly, no element can

be taken for granted as what may appear a peripheral element today may not be one tomorrow.

Let Society find its own Way

Finally, as for the final question surrounding how social resilience can be nurtured, the answer probably lies with first accepting that there are no simple solutions. If social resilience is a complex system, then one should be wary of those touting magic panaceas. Governments can provide the framework and lend support to the development of social resilience in the form of, for example, better policies for greater integration. But society has to be given the space to organically find its own coping mechanisms during testing times. It is here that the British experience may be enlightening. No one trained baggage handler John Smeaton to do what he did and the public response to his actions has not been orchestrated. Thus, sometimes it may be best to permit one of the key constitutive elements of social resilience – that is, society – to find its own way.

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