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PETER S. ALAGONA

I recently attended a lecture at the university where I work on the topic of urban ecology. The speaker began by noting that in the United States researchers in ecology and related disciplines have long ignored urban environments, choosing instead to focus on the wilder places they consider real ecosystems. This scholarly neglect had fostered misconceptions about how urban ecosystems work, how they can be managed, and the extent of their resilience. As a result, decision makers too often believe that they can cure complex problems with simple solutions, and that such solutions are easily transferrable from one time and place to the next.

The rest of the lecture was interesting enough, but that initial, almost offhand comment left a lasting impression—since the beliefs the speaker described were among the very same ones I try to purge from my classroom beginning on the first day of my Introduction to Environmental Studies course. This got me thinking. In an era of global environmental change, scholars tend to think of resilience in terms of physical things and the social and ecological systems that link them. But do ideas also have resilience? If so, where does this mystical power come from? And what might it mean for our ability to address the great environmental challenges that face humanity in the twenty-first century?

The answer to the first question is clearly yes; I am sure all readers of *Resilience* can identify numerous examples of problematic beliefs about the environment that have persisted in public discourse well beyond their time. To understand why, and to begin to answer the second and third questions, scholars in the environmental humanities can turn to authors in three other fields that can help provide at least some of the answers.

Other than ecology and environmental studies, the term resilience is perhaps most commonly used in psychology. A simple search reveals dozens of serious and popular psychology books—from inspirational memoirs, to self-help guides, to rigorous analyses of disability, disease, and disorder. Psychologists define resilience as an ability to cope with adversity. Resilience can be expressed by individuals or communities that have experienced trauma or are at high risk for distress. Social cohesion, self-confidence, and positive personal, family, or community narratives can all contribute to resilience. Yet these narratives need not incorporate the best or most up-to-date ideas. Communities of like-minded people might adopt dubious ideas to enforce solidarity, shield criticism, or insulate themselves from information that might destabilize their narratives or ideologies. Even false beliefs can enable people to deal with fear or adversity, at least in the short term, through weak coping mechanisms such as denial.

Economists also talk about resilience, often in the context of national economies, which can remain relatively buffered during downturns if they are diversified, have flexible and well-trained labor forces, or some other combination of factors. But, as readers of the economist and editorialist Paul Krugman know, flawed ideas can also have resilience in economics. According to Krugman, “a zombie idea is a proposition that has been thoroughly refuted by analysis and evidence, and should be dead—but won’t stay dead because it serves a political purpose, appeals to prejudices, or both.”¹ The classic example, he argues, is the idea that tax cuts for the wealthy pay for themselves, but he notes that there are many more. If the belief that we can, for example, manage complex and diverse urban ecosystems with simple, transferable solutions fits Krugman’s definition, then we must ask this question: What political purposes and prejudices does this zombie idea serve?

Science studies offers yet another perspective on the resilience of ideas. One of the field’s basic premises is that veracity of a claim is not what makes it stick. Ideas gain currency not because they are true or false, but rather because individuals and institutions adopt and mobilize them in ways that give them purchase and power. Science studies scholars tend to distrust progressive models of knowledge production, instead embracing more complex, contingent, and even cyclical narrative trajectories. A classic example is the recent resurgence of Lamarckian thinking in biology, after many decades during which students

learned about the inheritance of acquired characteristics only as a foil in the larger story of the triumph of Darwinian natural selection. From a science studies perspective ideas will come and go, then come and go again, under different intellectual or technological guises but often revisiting the same fundamental debates.

It is clear that ideas can have resilience and that this resilience is not necessarily related to their accuracy or reliability. For some scholars who still believe in some notion of transcendent truth, or at least consensual validity, this might seem a cause for despair. Yet viewing ideas, not just things or systems, as potentially resilient offers scholars in the environmental humanities an opening into a larger cultural conversation. Future authors in the journal *Resilience* can contribute to this conversation by asking why some problematic ideas seem so sticky, what gives them their toehold, and what kinds of scholarly interventions might loosen their destructive grip.

NOTE

1. Krugman, "Rubio and the Zombies."

WORK CITED

Krugman, Paul. "Rubio and the Zombies." *New York Times*, February 14, 2013.