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URBAN RESILIENCE IN ACTION? — THE CASE OF TOTTENHAM (LONDON, UK)

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Abstract: This essay considers how resilience might best be understood from a socio-political perspective, using a neo-institutional framework. It is informed by a case study of Tottenham, London, where the English riots of 2011 originated, and reflects on Tottenham's recovery process to date: the return, to some sort of normality in social relations, the restoration of economic activity, as well as the rebuilding of destroyed urban fabric and infrastructure. However, considering Tottenham to be a model of urban resilience risks overlooking a number of factors – the problems of deprivation that gave rise to the riots in the first place; persisting social inequalities; power dynamics and imbalances; and cultural habits and norms that shape the path towards urban resilience. One way of addressing these shortcomings may be to pay closer attention to the role of institutions – formal rules and regulations, as well as informal routines and practices – in enabling or constraining political processes such as recovery from riots and initiatives in resilience building. The case study was conducted as part of a doctoral research project on urban resilience.

Keywords: urban resilience, socio-political perspective, neo-institutionalism.

Urban resilience is one of the latest fashionable topics discussed internationally in academia, politics and consultancy. The concept addresses the challenge of cities and their future development in times of high complexity and uncertainty. A dominant reading of urban resilience is the capacity of cities to 'bounce back' from various shocks and crises. From a historic perspective, cities can be seen as inherently quite resilient, as highly durable human artefacts which have survived a multiplicity of natural disasters, social and economic upheavals and even wars across time. At the same time, cities have shown themselves to be continuously adaptable

to changing human habits and needs for housing, working and recreation - to name just a few of their many vital functions.

However, these functions and their accessibility are often not equally distributed within cities - and this is particularly the case for global cities, such as London. Here, the socio-economic fabric is made up of a patchwork of oases of prosperity and pockets of deprivation, with vast contrasts in e.g. the levels of employment, access to housing and crime rates. One of the areas officially classified as deprived is Tottenham, part of the London Borough of Haringey and home to a highly diverse population of approx. 100,000 inhabitants. It was here that the trigger event for the English Riots of August 2011 occurred: the fatal shooting of Marc Duggan by the police served as 'the spark that lit a tinderbox'. The unpredicted speed and extent of the riots' spread across England are unparalleled in British history. While the rioting was mostly characterised by acquisitive crimes such as burglary and looting, it also led to countless injuries, and even some deaths; hundreds of people lost their homes or businesses, and many more had their daily routines interrupted due to the havoc created on high streets and city centres.

Revisiting Tottenham in spring 2014, two and a half years on, reveals some of the progress in the physical, economic and social recovery made so far. The burnt-down iconic Carpetright building on Tottenham's High Road has been fully restored, and will soon re-open for business and re-house some of the families that have been displaced from the site in 2011. Across the road, an employment centre and a café have opened in a fire-damaged building previously owned by the Council, with the financial support of the Greater London Authority and the Prince's Trust. Elsewhere, the job centre, a supermarket and a gym are operating once again in their original locations, while other public services, such as Haringey Council's planning department and the post office, have relocated. Much attention has been focused on restoring economic activity by assisting local traders in making claims for compensation from insurers and the police. Although the majority of claims have been settled, the compensation process - according to representatives of Tottenham's traders in London Assembly meetings and an independent review of the riot damage act - has been a far from smooth one. Concerns also remain about fragile relations between the community and the police, although police tactics such as 'stop-and-search', which disproportionately affected black and ethnic minority groups, are said by the Metropolitan Police to have improved. These relations were tested following the verdict of lawful killing in the Mark Duggan case in January 2014; this time, Tottenham experienced peaceful protest.

The return, following a disaster, to some sort of normality in social relations, the restoration of economic activity, as well as the rebuilding of destroyed urban fabric and infrastructure are all undoubtedly key processes in urban resilience. In Tottenham, these processes have in turn relied on what scholars have called 'the facilitators of disaster recovery'. They include the mobilisation of a broad variety of stakeholders ranging from individuals to professionals in the public, business and voluntary sector, as well as the leveraging of financial resources originating from national to

local government funds, charities or private donors. Tottenham's recovery has been also underscored by a strong commitment to 'bounce back' from adversity, as expressed by many actors including community representatives and political leaders such as David Lammy, the local Member of Parliament. Furthermore, new cross-community deliberative forums have been created and a series of consultations have been run to identify the needs of the local population.

Can Tottenham, therefore, be considered a model for urban resilience? Maybe, but this approach to urban resilience rests on a very reductionist understanding of the concept. Critiques have highlighted some of the general shortcomings of its application in the social-political realm: the insufficient attention paid to persisting social inequalities, the under-theorising of power dynamics and imbalances, as well as the neglect of cultural habits and norms that shape the path towards urban resilience. One way of addressing these shortcomings may be to pay closer attention to the role of institutions – formal rules and regulations, as well as informal routines and practices – in enabling or constraining political processes such as recovery from riots and initiatives in resilience building. Institutions themselves are not necessarily stable; and riots can act as a potential trigger for institutional change. Examples from the USA and France illustrate that such institutional change following riots may occur within the judicial system or policy areas such as employment, security or education. A consideration of the role of urban policies also highlights the importance of this perspective – particularly those which enable 'regeneration' initiatives. Such initiatives particularly aim at bringing lasting economic, social and environmental improvements to disadvantaged urban areas. On the one hand, they are directly linked to government initiatives to accelerate recovery; on the other, they reflect – in the case of Tottenham and elsewhere – the institutional desire to prevent further riots. Regeneration, moreover, potentially constitutes an arena for inclusive, participatory practices of governance and community capacity building efforts that can address some of the underlying causes of the riots.

The doctoral research project *Post-riot institutionalisation of regeneration efforts in deprived urban areas: towards 'more resilient communities'?* aims to bridge natural and social science understandings of urban resilience in relation to an internal social disturbance. The thesis builds upon a constructivist, neo-institutional perspective on disaster recovery, governance and urban planning. It draws particularly on theoretical contributions to neo-institutionalism in the urban political realm by Vivian Lowndes, as well as empirical insights from Patsy Healey's studies on institutional change in urban governance in the UK. The example of Tottenham serves as a qualitative case study to illustrate the recovery process from riots, to assess institutional change (or stability) in the field of regeneration governance, and to elucidate whose resilience is privileged in the communicative accounts of the term.

Martin Stumpler conducted his case study of Tottenham whilst he was Visiting Researcher at the University of Westminster in early spring 2014, as part of his doctoral research project on urban resilience. This doctoral project is supported by the Leibniz-Dresden Graduate School (Dresden, Germany); it is supervised by Professor Karl Lenz, Institute of Sociology, Technical University Dresden, and Professor Simon Joss, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster, London.

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