



# Survival Subjects: On the Psychic Life With(out) Resilience

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## Abstract

*Geographers study resilience at various scales, with human geography critically addressing its spatiality, power, and agency. However, the resilience of the subject receives less attention, as geography tends to focus on systems, cities, and infrastructures. This paper develops a critical geography of the resilient subject. Following a psychoanalytic approach, I aim to understand how the politics of resilience operates on and through the subject without the subject actually becoming resilient. My critical approach to resilience is based on the assumption that resilience is an ideological fantasy with a profound impact on various subjective political relations. Based on this, I illustrate how the desire for resilience revolves around the specter of a subject that reduces life to mere survival, how it requires a fantasmatic figure of a “less-resilient other” in order to perceive oneself as “more resilient,” and how climate resilience in particular rests on the dichotomy between a stable inside and an unstable outside that together form a fearful and apocalyptic imaginary. Stemming from these considerations, I conclude with a take on a politics of non-resilience. Instead of rejecting the concept of resilience altogether, I argue in favor of retaining resilience as a negative condition. I argue that all living beings share a certain lack of resilience. On this basis, a new politics can be thought that addresses challenges posed by the climate crisis through new relationships of equality and solidarity.*

**Keywords** resilience, subjectivity, psychoanalysis, ideology, politics

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There is not and never has been one “resilient subject.” (Anderson, 2015, p. 61)

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, geographers have consistently highlighted that the world is grappling with multiple and overlapping crises, emphasizing the interconnected burdens and spatial inequalities that define contemporary socio-ecological dynamics (Sultana, 2021). Financial turmoil, mass migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, public health emergencies, energy shortages, social instability, geopolitical tensions, democratic backsliding, and planetary distress all converge into a relentless, intertwined cascade of crises, resulting in new forms of precarity and vulnerability (Liverman, 2024; Petrova, 2024). Rather than being seen as “a moment of breakdown and stress that holds out the possibility of renewal and reconfiguration” (Castree, 2022, p. 11), crises have become an integral part of everyday life (Dimitrakou & Ren, 2025). In this crisis-driven context, climate change is just one among numerous crisis dynamics that keep disrupting and unsettling social life—yet it remains one of the most enduring. For decades, the accelerating breakdown of climate systems, coupled with worsening ecological conditions, has not only reinforced the pressing, yet ineffective, political demand to address the escalating environmental crisis, but also generated new forms of climate stress, depression, and anxiety (Boyd et al., 2023; Clark, 2020; Martin, 2024; Verlie, 2021). The Anthropocene (or whatever “-cene” one may call it) is an era marked by extreme weather and environmental disasters, with climate change becoming a manifestation of a system whose destructive impulses increasingly permeate not only its economic and political structures but also its ecological, social, and psychological conditions (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2025a).

In a state of ongoing (climate) crisis, *resilience* is becoming an important category for holding on to the idea of maintaining everyday life despite all the vicissitudes (Evans & Reid, 2014; Grove, 2018; Wakefield et al., 2022; Walker & Cooper, 2011). Resilience is commonly defined as the ability to withstand shocks without altering one’s state or to recover from them. Climate resilience, in particular, is defined as “the capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend, ... while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning

and transformation” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023, p. 7). As such, resilience is, at its core, a survival strategy in the face of (climate) crisis, and it is a specific appeal of the resilience concept to not determine whose survival is at stake—as the concept is often applied on a “system level.” This allows connecting “the emotional management of personal problems with the wider security agenda and the logic of accumulation during a period of crisis” (Neocleous, 2013, p. 6). While the power to survive by withstanding (climate) change can be applied at multiple scales, it probably finds its greatest appeal on the scale of *the human subject*, where resilience resonates with ideas of individual self-endurance, self-sufficiency, and self-adaptability. A number of scholars in the humanities therefore started to scrutinize the resilience concept in terms of its effects on and through the human subject by pointing out how resilience (re)produces the notion of “an individualized subject charged with the responsibility to adapt to, or bounce back from, inevitable shocks in an unstable world” (Anderson, 2015, p. 61; see also Aranda et al., 2012; Chandler & Reid, 2016; Evans & Reid, 2013; O’Malley, 2010; Reid, 2012).

Geographers, in particular, study resilience at all kinds of scales (for overviews, see also Grove, 2018; Weichselgartner & Kelman, 2015; Wilson, 2018), and it has been considered a particular strength of human geography’s engagement with resilience to critically address the spatiality of resilience and the importance of power and agency in resilience processes (Mullenite, 2016; Wilson, 2018). In human geography, the relation between resilience and subjectivity seems to play a rather subordinate role. Although many geographic works refer to the subject when critically engaging with resilience in one way or another (see for instance, Grove, 2014; MacLeavy et al., 2021; Wakefield et al., 2022), geography seems to be more focused on examining aspects such as the resilience of systems, networks, cities, infrastructures, and other spatial entities, rather than the resilience of the subject. This way of employing resilience “without reference to its subjects” (Bahadur & Tanner, 2014, p. 202) is surprising, since one could argue that the political appeal of resilience lies precisely in the fact that the concept “speaks to the subject.” If resilience did not monopolize the subject in the way it does, it would not be nearly as powerful. Any human geography interested in the power and agency of resilience must therefore, at least to some extent, deal with the subject because “resilience is a feature that

politics presumes, encourages and nurtures in the subject itself, and the measures designed to address and respond to the increasing global challenges rely on resilient subjects” (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019, p. 192). Beyond this, another reason for geographers’ reluctance to engage with the resilience of the subject could be that the existence of this subject has been deeply questioned by critical geographic research. If we assume that “there is not and never has been one ‘resilient subject’” (Anderson, 2015, p. 61) because subjectivities are too “multiple and contradictory, ever shifting” (Hill & Lerner, 2017, p. 270), it seems highly questionable why geographers should be concerned with this subject in the first place.

In this paper, I seek to develop a geographical account that engages with the resilient subject despite its empirical inexistence. Therefore, I will assemble the already existing elements of a geographical approach to resilient subjectivity and develop them further through a psychoanalytic framework. What does psychoanalysis have to do with geography, some may ask? As Steve Pile (1993, p. 122) put it: “It is inconceivable that subjectivity can be understood, and therefore that a truly *human* geography can be imagined, without drawing on the insights of psychoanalysis” (emphasis in original). What I am attempting to do, then, in psychoanalyzing the notion of the resilient subject, is to foster a truly human geography of resilience.<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalysis departs from the premise of a structurally incomplete, vulnerable, and thus “non-resilient” nature of human existence and allows us to critically examine the various processes involved in covering up this lacking existence. As such, it provides us with a conceptual lens to engage with the *desire for resilience* rooted in a lack of resilience. Such an approach contributes not only to the critical resilience research but also to the lively debate in recent human geography regarding the potential of psychoanalytic theory for advancing the fields of political ecology and environmental geography (Burnham & Kingsbury, 2021; de Vries & Kapoor, 2025; Fletcher, 2018; Healy, 2014; Margulies, 2022; Pohl, 2020; Pohl & Helbrecht, 2022; Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2023). The latter research assumes that psychoanalytic theory allows us to address the persistence of the ecological crisis by engaging with questions of desire, anxiety, or enjoyment, and by focusing on the intrinsic connections between material, symbolic, and psychic space.

In the following, I would like to contribute four inter-related arguments to a human geography of resilient subjectivity. Firstly, I propose a new psychoanalytically informed perspective on resilience as ideology. Taking inspiration from Lacanian political theory, I highlight the role of fantasy in resilience politics and stress how climate policy discourse rests on fantasy constructions that allow the subject to identify with it. Secondly, I propose a Lacanian approach to the resilient subject as a subject that desires resilience but never fully achieves it. Resilience, in this sense, functions as an *ego-ideal* with which the subject identifies, but which is never fully embodied by the subject. I then show what would happen if resilience were fully embodied by pointing out that the subject would risk becoming a *last human* in Nietzschean terms, a subject driven solely by survival. Thirdly, I focus on the role of fear in the politics of resilience and how it is linked to the fantasmatic figure of a *less-resilient other* who potentially threatens the subject in their striving for resilience. Using the example of the “climate refugee,” I point to the racist implications of this psycho-political relation and show how climate change migration functions as a *symptom* for the resilient subject. Fourthly, I focus on the possibility of thinking change in resilience. Through the topological distinction between a “stable inside” and “unstable outsides,” I show that change in resilience thinking primarily occurs from the outside, whereby immanent contradictions and change are structurally displaced. Stemming from these considerations, I conclude with a take on a politics of non-resilience. Instead of rejecting the concept of resilience altogether, I argue in favor of retaining resilience as a negative condition. I argue that all living beings share a certain lack of resilience. On this basis, a new politics can be thought that addresses the challenges and opportunities posed by the climate crisis through new relationships of equality and solidarity.

## 2. Resilience as Ideological Fantasy

A central tenet of critical research on resilience is to understand resilience as an *ideology*: “Resilience from this perspective is not simply a call to ignite some base level human instinct for survival, ... it is an ideological project that is informed by political and economic rationalities” (Evans & Reis, 2014, p. 31). Critical resilience literature, including contributions from geographers, has actively engaged with the notion of resilience as an ideology, highlighting its lack of

sensitivity to power dynamics and its implicit role in perpetuating and reinforcing dominant political narratives (Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Joseph, 2013; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). By objectifying and universalizing the inherently positive measures of resilience, mainstream climate discourse often tends to overlook whether resilience can have any negative side effects or problematic outcomes and “for whom” (Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Cretney, 2014; Cutter, 2016; Kaika, 2017; March & Swyngedouw, 2022; Phelan et al., 2012). Critical accounts in the humanities, therefore, stress the need to critically investigate resilience, thereby highlighting the potential to deconstruct the ideological “smokescreen of objective risk assessments” (Evans & Reis, 2014, p. 18) in order to explore the hidden power dimensions at work in many resilience approaches, as well as to critically situate resilience in the dominant modes of governing (Chandler & Reid, 2016). Building on this, geographers have argued that adopting a critical perspective on resilience is crucial, as it enables us to dismantle its “ideological mask” (March & Swyngedouw 2022, p. 3) by revealing that resilience is ultimately about “how best to maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of an externally derived disturbance” (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013, p. 258).

While critical resilience thinking allows us to highlight that resilience is not merely a neutral or universally positive trait but is intrinsically linked to maintaining and legitimizing established power structures, a critique of critical resilience has emerged in recent years, based on the idea that the critics of resilience seem to already “know all too well exactly what resilience is, and can thus confidently dismiss the concept accordingly” (Wakefield et al., 2020, p. 2). The equation of resilience and neoliberalism has a particularly strong influence in the critical resilience literature, and “the critique that notions of resilience are reinforcing neoliberal [ideological] pathways of development is the most important contribution of human geography to resilience research” (Wilson, 2018, p. 96; see also Grove, 2014). Neoliberalism is thereby treated as the ideological backbone through which resilience gains its attraction, while resilience itself is understood as a conservative and reactionary “tool of governance” (O’Hare & White, 2013, p. 276) based on an evocation of permanent insecurity and individual responsibility. Critiquing resilience through the lens of neoliberalism could lead to an overly simplistic conclusion, ultimately suggesting that further research on resilience is unnecessary. As put by geographer Ben Anderson:

This analytic strategy means that we already-always know what the consequences of resilience may be and what its politics are. It is just a question of identifying a resemblance and, if necessary, reminding people of the devious efficacy of a neoliberal project that can be found everywhere. (Anderson, 2015, p. 63)

I seek to approach the ideology of resilience in a slightly different way. Following a Lacanian conception of ideology, I argue that an ideology critique of resilience does not necessarily lead us into safe territories of the “already known” by accounting for the underlying neoliberal power dynamics and hegemonic structures. Rather, such an approach necessitates examining the *subjective* dimensions of resilience—how it shapes desires, identities, and perceptions. By doing so, we can uncover the intricate ways in which resilience operates as a deeply embedded and embodied element within contemporary ideological formations. Instead of treating resilience as an ideological smoke-screen that can be lifted by pointing at its concealed functions or deceptive appearances, I argue that we must delve deeper into how resilience is internalized, experienced, and practiced. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Žižek, 1989), a work that opened up the field of the Lacanian political theory, Žižek contends that ideology is not simply a false or illusory representation of reality; instead, it is reality itself that is *ideological*, suggesting that ideology resides not in people’s (conscious) knowledge but in their (unconscious) social practices:

What [subjects] do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know ... overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy. (Žižek, 1989, p. 33)

If it is true that “it is precisely to a Lacanian inspiration that we owe the first new ... conception of the nature of ideology since Marx and Nietzsche” (Jameson, 1977, p. 393–394), then this conception of ideology takes its strength from Lacan’s concept of *fantasy*. For Lacan, fantasy is part of, and not distinct from, reality and

thus undermines the standard division between psychic and material space. Against the dominant strand of psychology that considers reality as some kind of objective space, or “first” Nature, “a real order of relations, an objectifiable thing, a field with quite adequately defined boundaries” (Lacan, 1993, p. 7), into which the individual can integrate and with which it can establish a symbiotic, healthy relationship, Lacan (2017, p. 200) speaks of fantasy as “the fabric underlying the world of reality.” Strictly speaking, there is no reality without fantasy for Lacan, because it is fantasy that enables the subject to establish a sense of unity, coherence, and stability with regard to their own existence and surrounding environment. His point is thus that an “‘illusion’ structures our (social) reality itself: its disintegration leads to a ‘loss of reality’” (Žižek, 1991, p. 71).

Now, when engaging in a Lacanian ideology critique of resilience, it is not enough to liberate ourselves from ideology by unmasking the neoliberal reality behind it. Rather, resilience should be treated as an ideological fantasy that effectively *shapes* many social realities facing climate change today. Resilience as ideology is not a false belief to which governmental institutions, scientists, and development agencies are falling prey without knowing what they are doing. Rather, we should assume that they know *exactly* that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, and yet, they are still doing it (Swyngedouw, 2022). In the context of climate resilience, it is widely recognized among those studying the social effects of climate change that increasingly frequent and severe floods, wildfires, and droughts, along with long-term transformations caused by sea-level rise, will result in widespread social breakdown and destruction. And the same is true for most development aid agencies, political institutions, and the “international community” more generally. It is common knowledge how things stand with regard to the climate catastrophe. As it was aptly stated by Mami Mizutori (2022), Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, after the release of the latest IPCC report: “We knowingly continue to sow the seeds of our own destruction, despite the science and evidence that we are turning our only home into an uninhabitable hell for millions of people.”

Yet, not only does the knowledge of the catastrophe fail to prompt effective political action to prevent it, the notion of maintaining adaptive capacity furthermore persists as a political fantasy shaping climate

discourse (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2025b). Despite increasing awareness of and direct exposure to the devastating effects of climate change, the illusion of withstanding the catastrophe endures. In the context of German government discourse on adaptation, environmental scientist Elise Remling (2023) applies psychoanalytic theory to identify four fantasies embedded in official policy documents: fantasies of control and preparedness, fantasies of objectivity and reason, fantasies of a shared sense of place, and fantasies of “the good life” (p. 715). As Remling highlights, these fantasies are not exclusive to Germany; they implicitly shape climate discourse more broadly by providing “affective anchor points for national and collective identification” (Remling, 2023, p. 716). The performative power of fantasies surrounding resilience and adaptation lies in the fact that climate discourse cannot do without them. Once these illusions are dismantled, “the very texture of the social field disintegrates” (Žižek, 1989, p. 34). In other words, the unconscious dynamics that shape climate discourse in contexts like Germany depend on fantasy constructions that enable political actors to speak to the subject by fostering *identification* with climate resilience and adaptation. A psychoanalytic critique of climate resilience centers on these fantasies, because “unless we identify this important ‘force field’ behind techno-managerial adaptation discourses and come to terms with the unconscious investments that support ineffective policy discourses, we have little hope of explaining, let alone changing them” (Remling, 2023, p. 728).

### 3. The Resilient Subject and its Shadow

To further approach the “intuitive ideological fit” (Walker & Cooper, 2011, p. 144) of resilience, I would like to proceed by offering a Lacanian take on the resilient subject. I suggest treating the resilient subject not as an *empirical* subject, but rather as an *ego-ideal* that serves as a guiding force for self-evaluation and self-regulation. The ego-ideal is a term originally introduced by Freud (*Ich-Ideal*), and further developed by Lacan, to grasp a kind of identification that represents an individual’s internalized standards of perfection and ideals. The ego-ideal consists of the goals and aspirations one strives to achieve, as well as the ideal behaviors and characteristics of the person one wants to be. And the ego-ideal bears a spatial mark, as Žižek (1989, p. 116) highlights, as it involves an “identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves

so that we appear to ourselves likable.” Resilience tends to occupy such a place from where we can look at ourselves to appear as what critical theorist Mark Neocleous coins a “good subject”: “Good subjects will ‘survive and thrive in any situation’, they will ‘achieve balance’ ... and just ‘bounce back’ from whatever life throws, whether it be cuts to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown” (Neocleous, 2013, p. 5).

An interesting aspect of resilience is that it can only be rejected up to a certain degree. Even the harshest critiques of resilience tend to accept that “one cannot be against resilience or resilient social relations in general,” as geographer Kate Derickson (2016, p. 163) puts it. While resilience as such seems to possess an indisputable (one is tempted to say, resilient) quality that can hardly be rejected for itself, I will try to speculate in the following on the consequences of *actually* achieving this ego-ideal and what a “fully” resilient subject would look like. What would happen if the subject were really to lose all its reliance on dependencies, needs, and other kinds of vulnerability? Critical theorist Julian Reid (2012, p. 74) argues that resilience ultimately leads to a “disastrous and politically debased subject,” a subject that accepts even the most critical living conditions as worth living. The resilient subject is inherently adaptive, and this adaptiveness enables the subject to make necessary adjustments in order to survive the challenges encountered in the world. Consequently, unlike a political subject “which can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility,” the resilient subject “accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world” (Reid, 2012, p. 74). The resilient subject is constantly involved in a struggle to keep going, and instead of taking the dangers and uncertainties posed by climate change and other existential threats as a reason to break with the existing social, political, or economic conditions, it is designed to survive even the harshest storm.

Stemming from this, one could argue that the subject, in its striving for resilience, bears a risk of turning into the figure of the Nietzschean last human as it was revisited by Žižek for a critique of the *post-ideological* society. The last human is an inflated figure of subjectivity that relies on the rejection of any larger historical questions for which it would be “worth dying for,” and instead sees the highest value of life primarily in the “continuation of life” itself, which is why Žižek speaks of it as “a kind of survivalist attitude” (Žižek & Daly, 2004, p. 104). The last human no longer

seeks to achieve greatness or societal progress and instead focuses primarily on maintaining their basic functioning and avoiding the worst. The richness of human experience is diminished, and the potential for transformative action is overshadowed by a narrow focus on survival. The last human casts a shadow over the subject that desires resilience. Abandoning the idea of a world beyond the world of crises, resilience promotes an imagination of “a world depopulated of properly human subjects” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 87), a world filled with demystified subjects that solely strive for a continuation of life.

Strangely, what prevents the subject in its desire for resilience from becoming a last human is precisely the clinging to a residual sense of security. Still rooted in the liberal imagination, the subject “imagines and dreams the possibility of its security globally through the mastery of the very antagonism it encounters in its gaze on life and world” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 87). The subject is thus split between a conscious awareness that there is no final security in life and the unconscious fantasy of realizing the very security it will never achieve. The subject, in its striving for resilience, knows very well about the distance between the ideological mask of security and the utterly insecure realities “out there,” but nonetheless still insists upon the mask. We find here a striking similarity to Žižek’s account of cynical distance as a contemporary form of ideology. Following Žižek, cynicism can be considered the ultimate ideology in our supposedly post-ideological world, as it neglects any naïve belief in the ruling official ideology and yet still does not fully renounce ideology altogether. Cynical subjects, for example, “know that their idea of Freedom is masking a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom” (Žižek, 1989, p. 30). Couldn’t the same be said about security in times of resilience? Isn’t the very idea of security also just masking a form of ontological insecurity and yet continuing to prevail as a fantasy structure to support all kinds of social realities?

Žižek (2003) further describes the “survivalist stance” (p. 95) of the last human as a hedonistic asceticism that is based on a particular regulation and balancing of enjoyment. In psychoanalytic terms, excessive enjoyment always harbors the potential for unhealthy, harmful, if not even fatal, side effects. Therefore, according to Žižek, a well-balanced relationship to enjoyment is needed to keep the subject alive for as long as possible. The credo behind this is

that “everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, but deprived of its substance, which makes it dangerous” (Žižek, 2003, p. 96). In the context of sustainable development, it has become particularly fashionable to invent, market, and sell products that have been stripped of their unsustainable, unhealthy substance. Like coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, and similar consumerist inventions, sustainable consumerism also seems to offer a fantasmatic opportunity to consume us out of unethical ways of producing (by buying responsibly and ethically “sourced” products) or of unsustainable ecological practices (by consuming local food or offsetting our carbon footprint; Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2023; Watt, 2021). It is precisely in this spirit that the subject is given the fantasmatic promise of mastering the very antagonism it encounters in its gaze on life and world. Sustainable consumption allows the subject to enjoy without putting themselves and others in danger.

#### 4. Politics of Fear and the Less-Resilient Other

Geographer Kevin Grove argues that the incorporation of resilience thinking into areas like urban planning, public health, finance, disaster management, and capital risk management has introduced new dimensions to the politics of security. This approach transforms everyday activities and routine social and environmental interactions into security concerns, thereby even extending, instead of diminishing, the politics of security into daily life (Grove, 2018, p. 46). As a result, resilience creates atmospheres of heightened uncertainties, constant vigilance, and a perception of ongoing risk and inevitable crisis. The persistence of security thus creates a paradoxical condition in which security is both impossible and omnipresent. While security can no longer function as a stabilizing condition for the subject, it still functions as a fetish that actively shapes the very realities in which the model of resilience is implemented. As geographer Dugan Meyer (2021, p. 280) points out, a Lacanian perspective allows us to investigate how “subjects exist only *through*, not in spite of, the objects of threat and insecurity around which liberal social order coheres” by insisting on the relationship between the secure(d) subject and an “other.” In the same vein, the subject striving for resilience presupposes a threat: “From the very outset, resilience depends on disaster or threat, without which it cannot exist” (Bracke, 2016, p. 59)—which is why resilience is essentially rooted in a politics of fear.

Several scholars, including geographers, have drawn on philosopher Michel Foucault to critically examine the role of fear within the resilience paradigm. Following Foucault (2004/2008, p. 66), the persistent danger or threat of insecurity is “the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism” and serves as “the general framework of biopolitics” (p. 22), which is understood as a politics centered on the survival of a population. In biopolitics, it is “the biological existence of a population” that is at stake, meaning such politics is primarily “informed by the naked question of survival” (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 137). In biopolitical terms, fear is not irrational but rather “the basis and motive for the constitution of the responsible, reliable, and rational self” (Lemke, 2014, p. 68). Fear, as such, can thus be considered a structural precondition for (neo)liberal subjectification, which is why Žižek (2008, p. 40) argues that in the supposedly neutral and socially objective administration of life that lies at the heart of biopolitics, fear turns into the only way to infuse emotion and passion back into the political arena. If we now assume that resilience can be considered “the name for our contemporary form of biopolitics,” as geographer Bruce Braun (2014, p. 61) puts it, we can furthermore address the intimate links between resilience and fear.

With regard to climate change, fear shapes the political arenas in various ways: fear of severe weather phenomena and natural disasters, mass migration, climate wars, and more generally, the fear of losing the (fossil-fuel-based) world “as we know it.” The point is not to assess whether these fears are justified. Rather, from the standpoint of the biopolitics of resilience, only those who fear these threats can establish a responsible, reliable, and rational (i.e., resilient) way of life in the face of the challenges posed by the climate crisis. To fear climate change is to care about the survival of the population. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it is furthermore crucial to recognize the political role fantasies play in transferring fear to the subject. While fantasy is usually seen as a means of obscuring the “horror of the Real” (Žižek, 1997, p. 6), a Lacanian approach allows us to insist that fantasy not only conceals the horror but also actively produces it. The “horror” of the climate catastrophe lies not simply in an unambiguous and unbearable Real that poses a threat to the subject, but is also something enacted through fantasy. One of the most prominent examples in this context is the figure of the climate refugee. For years, the climate catastrophe successfully served “as a proxy for deep-seated anxieties of racialized Others

‘taking over’ the planet” (Gergan et al., 2020, p. 93)—be it in reports that focus on the environmental dangers of high birth rates in the Global South or in visions of “hordes of climate refugees knocking on developed countries’ doors” (Bettini, 2013, p. 68). While there is no doubt that increasing climate change, and the associated failure to politically respond to it, is drastically worsening the living situation in many parts of the world, leading to ever more uninhabitable conditions in various regions worldwide, the figure of the climate refugee that is mobilized in the (bio)politics of fear can only be adequately understood when taking into account how this “other” functions as a fantasmatic screen for the projection of the desire of the resilient subject.

The climate refugee serves as a fantasmatic reference point from which to distinguish a “good” resilient way of life. Climate migration incites not only fears of an expanding global surplus population of climate-dispossessed and displaced individuals, often framed in strongly racialized terms (Baldwin, 2016; Telford, 2018), but also creates a figure of the less-resilient other that needs to be protected and/or controlled. As sociologist Thomas Lemke argues by drawing on Foucault, fear has an “important segregatory function” in biopolitics, in the sense that it is based on the distinction “between endangered and dangerous individuals,” which in turn arises from the ability to sense fear: “It [fear] has a civilizing quality: barbarians lack fear—this is why they are so dangerous” (Lemke, 2014, p. 68). In the case of the “climate barbarian” (Bettini, 2013), we can find similar tendencies, for instance in right-wing populism today, to construct “the refugee” as a fearless other: “Time and time again [climate] refugees are imagined as barbarous – uncultured, uncivilized; rude, rough, wild” (Krüger, 2017, p. 2). Without fear, the climate barbarian not only lacks the ability to bounce back from inevitable shocks, a willingness to adapt to crisis-driven conditions, and to practice renunciation through a more sustainable lifestyle, he (sic) also harbors the danger of crossing the borders that the resilient subject regards as necessary for maintaining their own resilience.

This racialized notion of the climate refugee can be further enriched by supplementing the Foucauldian biopolitics of fear with the Lacanian notion of the other as a *theft of enjoyment*. Following Lacan, racism essentially revolves around the fantasmatic possession of enjoyment by the other.<sup>2</sup> The racist fantasy is captured in the idea that “the ‘other’ wants to steal

our enjoyment (by ruining our ‘way of life’) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” (Žižek, 1994, p. 203; see also McGowan, 2022; Proudfoot, 2019). Above, we already proposed considering enjoyment as a political factor through which the subject maintains a restrained relationship in order to secure its survival. Enjoyment is essential, as it allows the subject to participate in social life, but uncontrolled enjoyment is dangerous. Following on from this, we can now argue that the fear of the climate refugee is rooted not only in a racist fantasy but also in a “libidinal geography” (Proudfoot, 2019, p. 220) insofar as the refugee is thereby constructed as an enjoying other who does not respect any borders, therefore harboring the danger of invading “our” country and stealing “our” enjoyment. At the same time, this other is considered dangerous because he seems to know no boundaries of enjoyment itself. The unsustainable enjoyment of cars, plastic, and other elements of fossil capitalism, as repeatedly evoked in images from cities in the Global South, bothers the subject striving for resilience, not only because it is bad for the environment but also because of the unconscious appeal of the unsustainable “thing” it seeks to defeat. In this way, the other’s enjoyment (e.g., of fossil fuels) appears not only problematic, disgusting, and evil to the resilience-seeking subject but also serves, in a displaced way, as an imaginary reference point to their own (rejected) enjoyment.

While climate change migration allows us “to trace a new racism in the making, a future-oriented racism that is perhaps specific to the Anthropocene” (Baldwin, 2017, p. 299), it can thus furthermore be understood as a symptom in the precise psychoanalytic sense of the term (Bettini, 2019). In Lacanian terms, the symptom (or *sinthome*, as he also calls it) is not only a perceptible manifestation of certain pathologic phenomena but can also be understood as a “signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment ... that gives consistency to the subject” (Žižek, 1989, p. 81; see also Kingsbury, 2021). With regard to the desire for resilience, one could conclude that it is the constant preoccupation with less-resilient, maladapted, or unsustainable others that provides the subject, in its desire for resilience, with a certain kind of consistency. A resilient way of life revolves around the “art of living dangerously” (Evans & Reid, 2014), yet not in the way that the resilient subject confidently deals with danger, but insofar as the subject is inevitably drawn into a vortex of fantasies surrounding the disturbing presence of less-resilient others.

## 5. Stable Insides, Unstable Outsides

In topological terms, one could state that resilience structurally distinguishes between a more or less stable “inside” and an essentially unstable and potentially disruptive “outside.” As Grove (2018) puts it:

Resilience involves a common relation between a system’s interior and exterior: the ‘inside’ of a system—whether this is an ecosystem, an individual psyche, or a technological system—is normally more or less stable, but is subject to unexpected disruptions from its ‘outside’—ecosystems at larger or smaller scales, the individual’s socio-cultural setting, or the wider biophysical-technological environment. (pp. 33–34)

In resilience thinking, everything is thus centered on the outside. It is through the strategy of demarcation and exclusion that resilience is internally distinguished. In this respect, the resilience paradigm is no different from previous epochs of human society, as “all ages have thought they had reached the most extreme point of vision in a confrontation with something terminal, some extra-worldly force that threatened the world” (Lacan, 1992, p. 104). The key difference between former modes of governing and the “governing through resilience” is that resilience no longer strives for the promise “to secure a better future” (DeVerteuil & Golubchikov, 2016, p. 145) but “to prepare for a future where crisis is ubiquitous and catastrophic outcomes are to be confronted” (Lemke, 2021, p. 175). Resilience takes the business slogan “crisis as opportunity” as its mantra. Through crisis, the subject learns how to survive even under critical conditions and to prepare for the next disaster. Various problems have been identified regarding this affirmation of crisis. Not only does it bear a tendency towards a “permanentization of crisis” (Walker & Cooper, 2011, p. 17) that blurs the boundaries between crisis response, post-catastrophe reconstruction, and planning efforts, it also neglects the initial question of whether “the disaster [needs to] occur in the first place” (Marcuse, 2015, p. 154). By constantly meandering between recovering from the last crisis and preparing for the next, resilience creates a sphere in which the possibility of crisis tends to be naturalized.

The resilience imperative to survive all the crises that befall us from the outside can be linked to a diagnosis made by Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič according to which today’s post-ideological world-

view systematically denies *intrinsic* social antagonisms in favor of emphasizing *external* threats. This denial becomes particularly evident in apocalyptic fantasies of “the end.” Today, it seems that “the end, or any kind of serious transformation, can only come from the great *Outside*” (Zupančič, 2020, p. 834), which often means a more or less total destruction of Earth. It is precisely through the ecological crisis that we find a powerful mobilization of the apocalypse as a vehicle for imagining this external cause of the end (Pohl, 2025). Hollywood blockbusters such as *Don’t Look Up!* (2021) are supposed to be interpreted as allegories of climate change denialism, and yet they nonetheless fuel the fantasy of the end of the world as being triggered by an external cause (in this case, a comet). What gets lost in this apocalyptic imagination is the possibility of internal threats and intrinsic reasons for change. As pointed out by geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2010):

Our ecological predicament is sutured by millennial fears, sustained by an apocalyptic rhetoric and representational tactics, and by a series of performative gestures signaling an overwhelming, mind-boggling danger, one that threatens to undermine the very coordinates of our everyday lives and routines, and may shake up the foundations of all we took and take for granted. (p. 218)

In light of the resilience paradigm, it seems equally impossible to think of radical change as something that intervenes *from within* into the existing state of the situation. When a system is primarily focused on self-preservation and tries to maintain itself from within against possible disruptions from outside, it inevitably falls silent when facing internal instabilities. This also “explains why the rallying-cry of the early 21st century is not ‘revolution’ (as in the early 20th century), but ‘resilience,’” as human ecologist Alf Hornborg (2009, p. 252) put it. While the causes of external threats are usually easy to identify, making it possible to isolate and encircle the intruder by sequestering it or by implementing preventive measures, such managerial approaches are not sufficient to deal with internal shocks. Internal change does not emanate from a clearly identifiable cause but from the immanent contradictions of the system itself (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2025a, p. 97). To follow these contradictions is a task that critical resilience research can take on, yet only if it is based on a lack of resilience.

## 6. The Political Subject of Non-Resilience

As a final step in the argument, I would like to propose a way out of the political deadlock posed by the ideology of resilience without dropping resilience as a concept altogether. We have already discussed the problems involved in the desire for resilience, such as the risk of turning life into a mere administration of survival, the reliance on a less-resilient other, or the inability to address internal instabilities. Stemming from this, we can conclude that the “race to resilience” will be a long and bumpy ride with many barriers along the way that will prevent us from getting there, both on a systematic and subjective level. Most crucially, however, resilience seems to be unable to address equality as a political goal:

Resilience is fundamentally about how best to maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of an externally derived disturbance. Both the ontological nature of “the system” and its normative desirability escape critical scrutiny. As a result, the existence of social divisions and inequalities tend to be glossed over when resilience thinking is extended to society. (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013, p. 258)

So, what if we put resilience back on its feet by insisting that *not being resilient enough* is the common feature that unites us all? With regard to urban planning in Miami Beach, a city severely threatened by climate change, Kevin Grove remarks that “the demand for resilience is practically unlimited. There is no such thing as too much resilience, and city officials have a remarkable number of paths ... to explore how they might realize the promise of resilience in practice” (Grove, 2018, pp. 3–4). I would like to propose to universalize this statement: *Resilience is never enough*. The truly emancipatory potential of resilience, as a concept, lies in approaching it as a *negative* condition of human life. If it is true that the “underlying ontology of resilience ... is [still] actually vulnerability” (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 84), then we should openly approach the lack of resilience as the ontological foundation of subjectivity (see also Butler, 2009; Fineman, 2008). In the words of geographer Paul Harrison (2009, p. 1006): “What if ... we were to define subjectivity or individuality not through its potential for self-willed action and presence but, rather, through its adynamia, its impotentiality, its intermittence, misalignment, dislocation, and withdrawal?” One might answer that this would involve a shift from “governing through

resilience” back to a political “thinking through vulnerability [that] could affect how we think about embodiment and, indeed, subjectification, signification, and sociality in quite fundamental ways” (Harrison, 2008, p. 424).

The subject, stripped of its desire for resilience, loses its identity by entering what one might call a politics of non-resilience. Instead of striving for self-preservation, a separation from “others,” and a relationship to external threats, such politics relies on the recognition of internal dependencies, needs, and other kinds of vulnerabilities, and on an open confrontation of the subjective traces and spaces of distress, violence, trauma, anxiety, and death (see also Deberdt & Le Billon, 2024; DeBoom, 2021; Pain, 2021; Siddiqi, 2022). As soon as we shift from identifying ourselves with resilience to identifying ourselves with a lack of resilience, we can bridge the gap between entities that otherwise remain segregated and separated from one’s resilient identity. Those who were previously regarded as less-resilient others are not met with suspicion, envy, or hatred, but are recognized as equally lacking beings. A psychoanalytic critique rests on such a universalization of non-resilience that allows us to take a different look at the climate crisis. As Lacanian political theorist Todd McGowan (2020) puts it:

The climate crisis presents us with a unique opportunity for recognizing universality. The climate crisis is universal not because it affects everyone but because it is the point of absence within every social order. What every society shares today is the environmental catastrophe that it cannot master. This hole within every society doesn’t affect every society in the same way, but it marks the limit that no society can eliminate. (p. 200)

After Hurricane Katrina hit the United States in 2005, Tracie Washington, President of the Louisiana Justice Institute, initiated the campaign “Stop calling me resilient” after media and policymakers persistently asked survivors of the storm about their resilience (see also Kaika, 2017). While her point was not to oppose resilience as such, but to initiate a struggle “over the meanings of resilience and the resistance to its cooption into neoliberal strategies of individual responsibility-based and techno-managerial postdisaster recovery plans” (Davoudi, 2018, p. 6), we can take some political inspiration from this rejection of resilience by proposing that whenever we are called upon to join

the “race to resilience,” our instant response should be: “Stop calling me resilient.” This claim bears some similarity to Žižek’s insistence on the phrase “I’d prefer not to,” which he coins as the minimal condition for a new politics. Drawing on a short story by Herman Melville that features a character named Bartleby, Žižek mobilizes this claim as a way to withdraw from engaging “in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly” (Žižek, 2006, p. 334) in order to foster new alliances with those produced by and otherwise excluded from the social order. Similarly, being united as non-resilient subjects means distancing oneself from the incessant demands to participate creatively and proactively in a system whose primary objective is its own reproduction and to join the fight against the climate catastrophe and for new relationships of vulnerable equality.

### 7. Conclusion

Given the recent attempts in geography and elsewhere to promote critical adaptation research and critical climate resilience research (Bauriedl & Müller-Mahn, 2018; Pohl & Swyngedouw 2025b), this paper contributes a perspective that traces the role of desire, anxiety, enjoyment, and other subjective relations as crucial political factors in shaping the imaginary, symbolic, and material landscapes of the Anthropocene. If it is true that it is precisely in “times of crisis” that we need “a psychoanalytic theory of ideology” (Žižek, 2020, p. 109), it is because such a theory enables us to point to the fantasies that implicitly (or unconsciously) shape the way the subject deals with their crisis condition. In a time overshadowed by overlapping crises, with the climate crisis looming over us as the “crisis of all crises,” the desire for resilience generates such a fantasy by allowing us to perceive ourselves as adaptable, enduring subjects who can withstand systemic collapse without fundamentally transforming our identity. While the merits of such a view seem obvious, such an (ego-)idealization of resilience comes at a price: the reduction of life to mere survival, the persistent fear of less-resilient others, and the constant externalization of threats are some of the costs the subject pays in their pursuit of resilience.

Geographers can make promising contributions by further exploring the subjective (non-)relations to resilience, and a psychoanalytically inspired perspective can help advance this exploration. By taking the

socio-spatial entanglements seriously through which resilience “speaks to” the subject, psychoanalysis provides insights into the fantasmatic forces that make resilience desirable. A psychoanalytic critique helps us to understand how the politics of resilience operates on and through the subject without the subject actually becoming resilient. It helps us understand why and how resilience can be enjoyed, even in its absence, and how resilience functions as an “empty” signifier, that is, a representative stand-in whose performative power stems from its own lack. Although psychoanalytic geographies are sensitive to the subtle differences in specific local conditions, they are founded on the premise of grasping “the world as always lacking and marked by antagonism; as an unstable, shifting and necessarily incomplete register, which constantly struggles with its immanent contradictions and never really gets to a point of serenity, harmony and balance” (Pohl, 2023, p. 308). Stemming from this, psychoanalysis allows us to engage with resilience as a negative condition that appears in various crisis-driven forms and contexts and is shaped by unequal social relations, yet without actually producing resilient subjects.

Given geographies’ ongoing attempts to “broadening political ecology’s horizons” (Rusca et al., 2024, p. 378), psychoanalysis furthermore paves the way for a decentering of ecology in relation to the ecological crisis. Psychoanalysis actively aims at recentering the human—or at times inhuman—aspects that shape living conditions in the Anthropocene, which not only allows for a radical critique of persistent ideological configurations that perpetuate the crisis but also points to the possible “emergence of new socio-ecological structures” (de Vries & Kapoor, 2025, p. 8). Instead of asking how people can develop a stable relationship with nature in order to develop a resilient way of life, psychoanalysis assumes a fundamentally unstable relationship with nature and instead asks how we can build relationships among each other in order to withstand this ontological instability. As emphasized by critical psychologists Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar (2021):

Our lives are linked together in networks of solidarity and political consciousness in such an ecological way that we feel the pain of others in struggle, and know that we will only make this world worse if we try to dominate and exploit others, whether they are fellow human beings or other sentient beings. This ecological conscious-

ness of our link with others is at the heart of psychoanalysis. (p. 8)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While this is not the place to give an overview of the geographical research that has mobilized psychoanalytic approaches in the past, I at least want to highlight that psychoanalysis has been part of the established repertoire of human geography for over 30 years and has already led to the creation of some kind of sub-discipline (for overviews, see also Kapoor, 2018; Kingsbury & Pile, 2014; Pohl, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, Lacan already predicted a rise of racism and “an increasingly hard-line extension of the process of segregation” in Europe and elsewhere (Lacan, 1995, p. 12).

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