Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Javnost - The Public

Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjav20

Against Resilience: The (Anti-)Ethics of Participation in an Unjust and Unequal Public Sphere

Shakuntala Banaji

To cite this article: Shakuntala Banaji (26 Feb 2024): Against Resilience: The (Anti-)Ethics of Participation in an Unjust and Unequal Public Sphere, Javnost - The Public, DOI: 10.1080/13183222.2024.2311012

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2024.2311012

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 26 Feb 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 247

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rjav20

Javnost: The Public, 2024
https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2024.2311012

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
Check for updates

AGAINST RESILIENCE: THE (ANTI-)ETHICS OF PARTICIPATION IN AN UNJUST AND UNEQUAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Shakuntala Banaji

If we define public spheres as social spaces in families, media, governance and policy making, workplaces, colleges, schools, places of worship and leisure where people can participate in sociopolitical debate and action, it is important to understand how imbalanced architectures of power ensure that the affective and physical costs of participation are higher for some than for others. While critiques of Habermas have engaged these power imbalances and their effects on the putative notions of the public sphere, public spheres and counter-publics, the notion of public and individual resilience continues to be invoked in a celebratory mode for communities and environments that survive and thrive despite political repression. Drawing on interviews and focus groups about disinformation and hate in legacy and social media, and on scholarship about resilience from health and ecology, my paper historicises and critiques the notion of resilience as currently deployed in communications and social theory. Based on this analysis, I argue that the concept of resilience now serves mainly to elude or defang valid and varied critiques of communicative inequality, discrimination and violence in the devastatingly flawed contemporary public sphere, while also feeding into double-edged celebrations of recognition as empowerment and neoliberal becoming.

KEYWORDS public sphere; critique of resilience; unequal participation; violence and disinformation

Introduction

With the concept of the ideal public sphere of free, equal, rigorous and consensus-based contention as its backdrop, this paper investigates and critiques the ways in which the parallel concept of resilience has come to be invoked in discussions of community survival, participation and systemic creativity amongst stigmatised and exploited communities. Moving over from the fields of education, ecology and development to media and communications and political science, the notion of resilience as a property exhibited by marginalised participants in the public sphere and of public spheres themselves (cf. Trenz et al. 2021; Trenz 2023) implicitly side-steps the insightful critiques of Habermas made by interlocutors such as Nancy Fraser (1985; 1997), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Charles Mills (1997) and Chantal Mouffe (1999). Broadly these scholars argue that Habermas's elucidation of his concepts of the public sphere and communicative rationality fall short when it comes to acknowledging and trying to alter material and discursive contexts of

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

sociopolitical suppression, oppression, inequality and extraction. While Mouffe, prescient about the ever-eroding legitimacy of liberal democracy, finds it fruitful to re-inscribe a public sphere of necessary contention and antagonism rather than consensus, Fraser's, Spivak's and Mills' work implies that even with such an agonistic understanding of the public space there are massive exclusions and absences because our understanding of the effortful work of communicative (political or civic) participation under hegemonic and dehumanising conditions falls far short. As Mills eloquently put it in a lecture just before his death "Liberalism as ideal turns out to be illiberalism in actuality" (2020, 4). Basically—if you are standing on my neck while you ask me for my opinion and if you do not even realise that I am speaking because you do not acknowledge that I am human, then the public sphere is a manipulative fiction is, at best, a manipulative fiction. Intersections of gender, race and caste with social class form the material bases for these scholars' collective critiques, leading all of them to insist on a view of the public sphere as fundamentally inequitable and necessitating massive political movements for justice. On the surface, then, it might seem that such critiques are consistent with those who draw attention to the supposed resilience of certain oppressed political actors and communities. As a metaphor, much like the public sphere itself, resilience is rarely viewed in a negative light. It is, apparently, the trait that both inspires resistance to oppressive systems and allows communities to survive discrimination or near annihilation. It seems almost churlish to argue that the discourse of resilience—specifically as conceived in the commonsense rhetoric about it—isn't necessarily the good that it's made out to be, and could, in fact be dangerous. Yet that is precisely what I will argue in the rest of this paper, evidencing this view with theoretical and empirical vignettes from others' research and my own. But first, why might resilience be needed for people to engage in rational deliberation, to enter politics, to make their voices heard in what has come to be known as the public sphere? What conditions are people up against, that require or perhaps foster, this trait?

Hierarchies of Hate and Barriers to Participation

In 2017 Waldomiro Costa Pereira, an activist with the Landless Workers Movement (MST)[1] was murdered by the rightwing neoliberal nexus in Brazil. Hired far right assassins stormed the hospital in Parauapebas where he was recovering from a previous attack in north-eastern Brazil's Pará state. Extreme violence against land defenders escalated under the far-right regime of Bolsonaro, bolstered by behind-the-scenes support from US logging and mining conglomerates. Entire communities are under constant threat of murder and dispossession from vigilantes connected to far-right parties and militias. Black, mixed and indigenous people are singled out for the highest levels of violence. The visceral nature of these attacks—shot to death in the face, beaten to death while taking one's children for a walk, ambushed on a motorcycle and dragged to death—is a feature of the targeted political atrocity and the atmosphere of terror deliberately aimed at those who speak up and speak out about damage to the human and non-human environment in the Amazon. While this is now the case across Colombia and Brazil in particular, it is also a feature of people's environmental movements in other locations such as Niger, Nigeria and the DRC. In Brazil, 2017 also saw the murder of rights activist Fábio Gabriel Pacífico, now followed by the murder of his mother, human rights activist Maria

Bernadete Pacífico[2], a community and religious leader in the Pitanga dos Palmares quilombo—an Afro-Brazilian settlement of descendants of escaped slaves in the northeast state of Bahia. The church, some wings of the state, and big business, are all implicated in silencing, through manipulated legislation and violence, those who would interfere with their plans to despoil the amazon for profit. For Black and indigenous citizens to exercise their civil rights in Brazil by speaking against these systems is a sure way to court death.

One of the foremost concerns of feminism between the 1950s and the turn of the century was to ensure that women could exercise their political and civil rights and participate in the putative public sphere. Feminist critics also took aim at the separation between the public and the private (or, to use more Habermassian terminology, "the system" and the "lifeworld") showing how these mould and flow into each other, forming a complex continuum of labour, ideology, visibility and invisibility. Likewise, during the civil rights movement and then during the anti-apartheid movement, protestors' calls were not simply for suffrage but also for equal representation, a seat at the table in classrooms and universities, on editorial boards and in the film industry, to have both visibility and representation. Along similar lines, successful decolonial movements came with the promise not just of a vote but also of being listened to and heard, valued, and validated. Much of this has yet to be achieved, in all domains (Dutt 2019; Farfan-Santos 2016).

Unprecedented levels of popular participation in the various decolonial movements and uprisings were followed by the challenges of secular governance within a geopolitical formation still shot through with inequalities and historic injustices. Where everyone—different genders, different religions, the educated and city-bred, the farmers and landless labourers had had a role to play in decolonial struggles—many postcolonial nations were faced with a dilemma: constitutional justice which appeared to be modelled on the public spheres of European colonisers in the face of extremely strong and provocative majoritarian ideological tendencies pushing against the notion of secular governance. So, while in theory women, indigenous peoples, minority religions could, for instance, vote, in practice centuries-old dictates on women's chastity, young people, bodies and resources became issues of public debate in the newly formed postcolonial public sphere. Likewise, the fate of indigenous peoples, Dalits, and people of different faiths than the majority were largely debated in a public sphere that consisted of a quite different constituency from the initial decolonial struggles: Elite men from majority communities took the lead in all areas of legislature and governance, media, and religion. Regardless of the brilliant or flawed constitutions drawn up (in India and elsewhere in postcolonial nations), practices lagged behind, and were kept deliberately obscure in order to avoid official censure.

Some of the most contested and contentious areas for debate in India and its South Asian neighbours related to the rights of women, and to caste; how to ensure fair representation and equity in the face of a history of violence and suppression. So, India passed laws against dowry and against violence against women, and pro-active legislation to try take affirmative action to allow Dalit and Adivasi children and those from Scheduled Castes a chance to go to school and university that they might otherwise not have had. Known as "reservations" these have been fought tooth and nail from inception by well to do groups of caste Hindus, the organised Hindu Right, and its supporters. How this tense situation has played out is a matter of historical record. Young people claiming their rights under reservation provisions were and still are belittled and degraded[3], treated with disdain and violence (Banaji 2017; Gupta 2022); Dalit families are often still relegated, 75 years after independence, to the periphery of villages and slums in cities (Dutt 2019);

as are many Black and indigenous communities are in Brazil (Farfan-Santos 2016) and Mexico. Similarly, increasingly, Muslims across India are forced out of central locations in cities and into peripheral ghettoes that are heavily and violently surveilled and policed.

Young women from Dalit and Muslim communities in India are prevented by financial insecurity from taking up educational opportunities while also being forced by financial necessity to work both inside and outside the home. Members of these communities are often curtailed into doing what the majority community see as the most menial jobs, frequently own little land, and when they "escape" the countryside through education or as a result of entrepreneurship, can still be "refused" entry to temples and housing societies, to the Indian public sphere more broadly, based on names that identify their caste status. In the past three decades, the discrimination and violence that was routinely deployed against Dalits (Teltumbde 2018) has now received official sanction and is utilised against Muslims and Christians, albeit usually against Christians who have links to Dalit or Adivasi communities. Their houses and land are grabbed or taken for caste Hindu neighbours or for illegal mining projects and dams, industrial sites, statues or temples. They have been made homeless and unemployed, refused entry to hospitals during the pandemic, tortured and burned to death, raped and lynched in unprecedented numbers (Kaiser 2023; Sebastian 2020; Banaji et al. 2019).

Since the ascendance of the fascist BJP government to power under Narendra Modi in the 2014 election, the fabric of India's so-called democratic public sphere—including the courts and the media—has been unravelled thread by thread (Banaji 2018). Citizens in name only, hundreds of millions are members of a country that treats them as *de facto* enemies within. Their political speech is silenced, their right to worship, work travel and even to just exist undermined, their mental and physical health destroyed. This is an existential emergency of vast and horrifying proportions. It has been documented, photographed, filmed and—with pretentions to transparency—broadcast across the social media sphere for all to see by the perpetrators.[4] Many Hindus in the US, Europe, UK, and Australian diasporas, supportive of the violent punishments meted out to those they see as non-citizens—and even as non-persons—send millions of dollars a year to prop up the regimes in question and position themselves as defenders of postcolonial democracy.

So, on what should individuals and organisations or groups on the outside, who cast their gazes towards India or towards Brazil as representatives of large postcolonial democratic geopolitical blocs do? What evidence should they rely on, when it comes to imagining democracy or rebuilding the erstwhile public spheres of these countries? Increasingly, whether we're talking about the United Nations, the World Bank and other pillars of neoliberal developmentalism, or the global left, it has become apparent that no help is coming. In fact, one of the means for justifying a lack of political intervention is not only the idea of national sovereignty, but also the notion of internal resistance. The "resilience" of communities in resisting these regimes of violence and the natural and humanitarian disasters caused by unfettered neoliberalism—and in some cases the agency that apparently underpins resistance—are often the first ports of call in the media and communications sphere even amongst those who give a damn.[5]

Resilience as a Virtue: Success Spun from Failure and Neglect in the Face of Need

Interest in resilience as a property of systems and organisms is not new. The concept has been discussed for decades in the spheres of education, development psychology and

ecology. “Global concerns about the consequences of disasters, political violence, disease, malnutrition, maltreatment, and other threats to human development and well-being have sparked a surge of international interest in resilience science,” writes Ann Masten, at the opening of her review of resilience research in developmental psychology, following this with a discussion about the origins and connotations of the term, which it is worth noting:

> Resilience can be broadly defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development. The concept can be applied to systems of many kinds at many interacting levels, both living and non-living, such as a microorganism, a child, a family, a security system, an economy, a forest, or the global climate. … The word itself has roots in the Latin verb, resilire (to rebound). The concept has been adopted by many fields concerned with how well complex systems anticipate, adapt, recover, and learn in the context of major threats, surprises, and disasters … . Social scientists intrigued with understanding how some people escape the harmful effects of severe adversity, cope well, bounce back, or even thrive, eventually settled on this word to label the focus of their research. (Masten 2013, 6)

One of the most ubiquitous early pieces on resilience by Michael Rutter (1987) argued that repeated exposure to traumatic events has a “steeling” effect on some individuals, “better preparing them for future tribulations” (316).

Kathleen Tierney (2015) uses the example of the non-appearance and lackadaisical character of disaster relief after Hurricane Katrina to critique what she calls the collective surge in references to the concept of “resilience” in literature on development. As she puts it, “I seek to explore and unpack resilience as a social construct that in both theory and practice meshes seamlessly with broader processes of neoliberalisation, supports particular types of civil society–state relationships, envisions particular kinds of at-risk subjects, and privileges specific types of solutions to the problem of disaster vulnerability” (2015, 1329). Tierney explains that “[i]n most cases, the term is used broadly, incorporating both the capacity to resist and absorb disturbance and the capacity to adapt and bounce back from disruptive events. Newer formulations stress the notion that resilient systems do not so much “bounce back” as “bounce forward” toward higher levels of resilience” (1331).

There is neither space nor need here to go over details of the debates that began to emerge in the developmental psychology community about whether one could evaluate childhood resilience results based on single factors or at single points in time. Suffice to say that both the evidence and methodology of Rutter’s study have now been challenged multiple times on both technical and normative grounds. As Shalanda Baker remarks:

> Resilience has slipped into the collective consciousness as something to be desired, sought after, a normative good to which communities devastated by horrific events and individuals who have experienced tragedies aspire. Resilience appeals to the innate human desire for survival. However, the idea that we should all merely “bounce back” after experiencing trauma obfuscates important questions: What are we bouncing back into? Are the circumstances into which we are returning unjust or unequal? (Baker 2019, 2)

So, if resilience is the ability to endure, to “bounce back,” in the face of abusive or unwelcoming circumstances and inhospitable structural conditions, not only neoliberalism but even other more nuanced liberal political thinking invites us to view this process as

individual or collective achievement at a particular moment in time. It is classified as overcoming, as added value, something positive and wholesome stemming from something initially painful, tough, and challenging. In some cases, the conservative, protestant ethic (and allied rhetoric) of hard work, suffering, challenge and trial is even invoked to make the achievement of *mere survival* an act of political participation to be celebrated. All of this begs the questions that Baker asks in her invocation of the notion of *anti-resilience*, resistance to racism and classism in sociotechnical systems.

Yet the core message about resilience appears to have stuck when it comes to children, one of the constituencies I work with most frequently: To prepare children, communities and eco-systems for potential difficulties and challenges in future (notably those which go to the heart of industrial and digital capitalism's need for land, and for well-trained worker-subjects; and the state's penchant for racialisation and racist application of the carceral and justice systems as a mechanism for governance and enumeration) they are deliberately and repeatedly exposed to simulated or real challenges as part of urbanisation, digitalisation, international development, organised sport, religious practice, schooling and family life. The cumulative trauma from these exposures and from the ways in which communities are uprooted, racialised, marginalised and discriminated against, has now been shown to have anything but a "steeling" effect, rather leading to later complex PTSD and further trauma responses (Kinouani 2021; Roberts 2017; Rose 2022; Soundararajan 2022). This is as much the case when it comes to ecological systems as when it comes to persons. As a recent study of rainforest depredation explains, "[t]he Amazon Rainforest is losing its ability to bounce back from repeated disturbances … three-quarters of the Amazon has lost some resilience, or ability to regain biomass after disturbance. This loss of resilience is especially high in regions close to human activity and with less rainfall"; and:

> As the forest is slashed, burned and degraded, it's left with less vegetation, which means less evapotranspiration, leading to less rain. And less rain leads to further droughts, fires, tree death and forest degradation—a feedback loop of destruction and loss of resilience.[6]

Pushing a system too far, again and again, to profit from it, does not lead to further resilience; it leads to destruction and untimely death. Despite the numerous studies of trauma which now examine the long-term hidden effects of stress in early life (Maté 2018; Linton and Walcott 2022), and the dangers of being at the receiving end of hate (Banaji et al. 2019; Banaji and Bhat 2022) and connect these to social systems, the idea of a system (or an individual) subjected to extreme stress that comes out the other side stronger, which proved to be so attractive to those studying childhood poverty, has been almost as popular with those researching and theorising resistance to authoritarianism and democratic participation.

Of course, being interested in exceptional outcomes, in those communities and systems strengthened by adversity, does not in and of itself mean that one abandons the notion of collective struggle against adverse conditions or against those who create them. Thus far the notion of resilience remains consonant even with the critiques made by Fraser and Mouffe of initial rationalist conceptualisations of the public sphere. Indeed, many adherents of orthodox historical materialism for whom class struggle and organised resistance to capitalism are key features might also be accused of imagining that the greater the injustice and pressure to which working class populations are subjected, the greater the likelihood of social and political revolution. They might never have used phrases such as "tipping point" or "resilience," yet European and North American

Marxist-Leninist groups of the 70s and 80s wrote and worked as if *moments of great stress* gave birth to *moments of resistance* in an automatic and even dialectical manner. This might account for the suppressed excitement amongst such groups at the beginning of a strike or social movement; and their quick disappearance to a more promising site of potential rupture when the progressive movement is crushed or co-opted.

Critiques of Resilience: What Happens to the Many and Why Should We Endure?

Thinking of the public sphere in the abstract whether as a plethora of antagonistic publics and counter-publics, or as a flawed, inegalitarian but potentially equalising commons, without tying it to the lives and contexts of those who inhabit, experience, are suppressed by and destroyed within these spaces in the name of "the public" leads classic liberals to share space with illiberal dehumanisation and violence (Rose 2022). Further normative invocations of freedom of speech, political engagement and overcoming barriers merely add to the rhetoric already used to justify allowing economic and social inequalities and historical wrongs to permeate the societies we inhabit, while claiming that these societies are democratic. What a close study of that which currently approximates to the Public Sphere in many nation states shows, however, is that struggles for justice, for voice, for dignity, for equity within that supposed public sphere (much like wars of the past and present) remain stratified and hierarchical; that some counter-publics construct themselves as such rhetorically while calling on the resources of state and military-industrial complex to suppress their opponents; and therefore the loss, pain and trauma incurred during attempted participation is so much higher for minoritised and marginalised participants that, were this to be demanded of those from majority groups, they would simply refuse and say it was impossible.

Critiquing the fundamentally "anti-political" adaptation of biological and ecological metaphors of resilience into social theory, MacKinnon and Driscoll argue that "[r]esilience is fundamentally about how best to maintain the functioning of an existing system in the face of externally derived disturbance. Both the ontological nature of "the system" and its normative desirability escape critical scrutiny" (2013, 258). Thus when it comes to studies of political participation by marginalised groups in political science and sociology, a small number amongst those who persist, who endure, are celebrated at a specific point in time that usually falls right after a momentous community movement has achieved a historic win and changed a national or international legal framework (for instance, abolition, the suffragettes, the civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movement) while the vast majority who fought and died, or fought and were imprisoned or fought and lost their families or spoke out and lost their jobs and fell into depression are simply relegated and forgotten. The "central characters" who animate this progressivist view of the history of the erstwhile public sphere or subaltern counter publics are regarded, particularly in progressive political circles, as the epitome of resilience, thriving and winning rights despite untold suppression and oppression. Until their children take up the fight against an aspect of the contemporary public sphere and are shot. Or beaten to death. Or silenced in some way through threats and fear; at which point our expectation of resilience, of someone picking up and carrying the torch of democracy or persisting in trying to get educated, or refusing to be deported, moves to their community or their next of kin. What does

not tend to happen, what resilience thinking makes moot, is the urgency of an anti-democratic backlash, an environmental disaster, an unfolding genocide or ethnic cleansing. This urgency rarely grips a large enough group of people, or people with enough power, who are not part of the population deemed to be immediately at risk, strongly enough for there to be widespread active[7] rather than self-serving or passive solidarity.

Indian Muslims are experiencing a slow genocide under Hindutva fascism, murdered and displaced, culturally erased. Upwards of 200 million people are already being publicly excised from the public in India. In UP, one of India's most populous states, the numbers of Muslim youth getting higher education degrees fell over the past 10 years from 35 percent to only 19 percent. Yet even the act of naming the process for what it is, is far too taxing perhaps even irrelevant not just for the natural allies of neoliberalism, but even for progressives in Europe, the UK and elsewhere, let alone the unimaginable act of going to India to form brigades to fight rampant fascism as might have happened in the 1940s. Amazonian land defenders forfeit their lives at many times the rate of white-skinned European or North American environmentalists; and, where factors such as class are equal, Black, Muslim and Dalit anti-racists, progressive journalists and politicians in India, Brazil, the UK and the US suffer hypertension and suicidality at far higher rates than their caste Hindu and white counterparts even when they are not subject to lynching and execution by mobs or assassins. While clearly of concern to community activists, scholars of the region and Human Rights bodies, all these chains of events that represent the dismantling of an already inequitable and unjust body politic into one that has violence at its very core, barely raises eyebrows in the Euro-American media and academia. Notwithstanding such ennui and ignorance, when it comes to writing about progressive causes, there are still ways in which these struggles are claimed, albeit partially and aspirationally, as evidence of the resilience of communitarian and communicative defence of democracy and emancipation, voice, and participation.

Taking an alternate pathway to critique the prevailing use of the term "resilience" in ecological and developmental literature, Emily Hutcheon and Bonnie Lashewicz (2014, 1387–1388). see the framings of the term as exclusionary when it comes to those with disabilities, predicated on an ableist model of strength and survival:

> Resilient people are often characterised as being able to navigate life events or tasks independently; indeed, this is problematic for those who are dependent on others for their care, well-being, or success, or who are perceived to be dependent regardless of their own views of themselves … . Ambiguous notions of risk, combined with the ability-centrism upon which definitions of resilience are founded, renders "disability" an inherent source of risk according to scholars (for examples, see Masten 2014; Hall, Spruill, and Webster 2002) … The supercrip discourse, which emerged separately from resilience scholarship, depicts people with presumed impairments as "heroic" or "super-able" in light of their ability to perform acts deemed not possible for them.

Hutcheon and Lashewicz go on to critique the ways in which even the term vulnerability has been co-opted both by those with a neoliberal agenda as being a property of people rather than an outcome of the social relations and political systems that constrain and oppress them. The authors remain critical of the patronising, belittling and flattening generalisation of this term—and associated terms such as agency and risk—as used even by those who acknowledge the effects of systemic harm, given the multiple complex political-economic and socio-material circumstances that different members of oppressed and

marginalised communities find themselves in. "[O]ne's vulnerability, as well as one's resilience, is measured by one's capacity to marshal resources and adapt to changing environments—more specifically, to maintain one's body health and independence" (ibid., 1329). Meanwhile in the context of US health care, Arlene Geronimus' coins the concept of "weathering" (2022, 2) to pinpoint the destructive effects of racialisation on human bodies. When she does so, she's also pointing to the dangers of the notion of resilience. Weathering, she argues, is crucial to understanding and critiquing stances about health inequity that place the burden and the blame for health disparities on individual or community habits and cultural traits or lack of knowledge and will power.

These interlinked critiques of risk, vulnerability and resilience in health and in disability studies are highly pertinent for all discussions of participation in the erstwhile "public sphere," speaking to common and widespread misconceptions and misrepresentations of "apathetic," "at risk" communities and "the voiceless" which position lack of speech and participation as either a moral failure or as primarily a result of information deficit and systemic lack (such as lack of resources, lack of education, lack of the right to vote, lack of access to technology and so on). Likewise, in the field of health policy and implementation, the notion of resilience can and does work to stigmatise individuals and communities who cannot heal themselves and appear to be constantly unwell or suffering. In this regard, it's worth recollecting that at the outset of the pandemic, culturalist explanations floated around the UK as to why Black and Brown citizens were dying at a higher rate than their white counterparts (Bentley 2020). Many of these referenced a refusal of optimisation, the traditional living conditions, and other elements of community life. Such explanations are still touted despite evidence of structural inequalities that have since been provided.

Dehumanisation, Stress, and Fear as a Price for Participation: The Erosion of Life

Those who attempt to communicate about rights in public, or even simply to be publicly visible through communication about every-day matters such as cricket or parenting in order to contribute to whatever counts as the public sphere, are subject to a multitude of disciplinary mechanisms. These mechanisms are not, however, applied equally to all. In our 2022 book *Social Media and Hate*, based on half a decade of research in the sphere of hate and disinformation across continents, Ram Bhat and I delineated a typology of those who perpetrate and those who receive hate or hateful dehumanisation. Our analysis can be summed up in the conclusion that there is a *hierarchy of hate*, with most violent and dehumanising content aimed at particular groups who have been on the receiving end of genocide, historical racism or other forms of suppression and violence. So, what does this mean for the idea of participation and deliberative democracy as it is being enacted in the present? It's old hat to say that the public sphere is unequal in terms of who can speak and who can listen and the burdens that these communities bear, but how does the further unequal distribution of hateful affect and violence post-participation have repercussions for those who do participate? "Members of dominant groups benefit from the fact that their own values and life experiences are considered the norm throughout society, and institutional structures and priorities are shaped accordingly" writes Geronimus (2023, 221), going on to argue that these groups, "do not have to expend bandwidth on

being vigilant for cues that their social identity is putting them in harm's way, or on trying to disconfirm negative stereotypes" (221). This argument holds true in the arena of local and national politics as much as it does on the shop floor, the workplace and in healthcare, which is the one that Geronimus has spent half a lifetime studying.

Even if we agree that they do exist as cohesively as she theorised, the work that is required of Nancy Fraser's "subaltern counter publics" (Fraser 1992) is almost unimaginable by members of dominant groups, even those who have radical and progressive credentials. If we step back and examine the amount of extra labour and stress required for certain non-dominant or oppressed groups to participate, to voice their concerns or ideas, as described in their own words and narratives while within the framework that posits "compromise" and "agreement" as being aims of rational deliberation, the high cost to their health and quality of life becomes evident. To illustrate this, I present two vignettes, one from India and one from Brazil.

Anielle, recently elected Minister for racial equality in the workers party progressive government, was an English teacher and, with her family, runs the Marielle Franco Institute[8] whose goals are to protect Marielle's memory and "water the seeds" in order to bring young Black women and kids from the favellas into social justice politics. For those who have not heard of this tragic case, Anielle Franco's sister Marielle was an elected Rio city councillor in 2016 shot dead alongside her driver in 2018.[9] Two former policemen are awaiting trial for the crime; their motivation, Marielle's work as a left-wing politician from a favela Maré, in Rio's North Zone, and her identity as a visible Black queer woman who entered Brazil's public sphere fearlessly to fight for social and economic justice. Since Marielle was murdered, Anielle has been the target of endless hate speech and violent threats, against both herself and her dead sister. Disinformation is constantly circulated alleging her murdered sister's connection to drug gangs and involvement in paedophilia. And far right trolls have shared photographs of Marielle's body alongside jubilant comments. Anielle, who has a 99 K following on Twitter and 112 K following on Instagram continues to post messages about justice, equality and in her sister's memory, as well as occasional personal updates; for this she receives a daily avalanche of racist and misogynist attacks, most of which she tries not to read. She has also been threatened and, a day after Bolsonaro was elected, a man spat in her face. She deletes most hate messages, and she tries not to engage. According to Anielle, she herself, and their other family members, and Marielle's memory, have only become greater targets of hate speech after Marielle was murdered, as if the post-facto justifications of the assassination are being constructed constantly through dehumanisation and hate. Still, she persists. In her own words:

> Someone spat on my face when I was holding my baby right after Bolsonaro was elected. It is always connected to the fact that we are "fucking feminists", I must have this written on my forehead because people keep repeating it; they also say, "black woman who thinks she can speak English"; "uppity *favelada*". There were a lot of people saying Bolsonaro had *come to finish off* people like Marielle. I also received many racist messages calling me a monkey. … I was really scared in the beginning. Sometimes I got and still get very sad; I have thought about giving up. But I think the Institute's work and our family's work are very important. We need to carry on. At the same time that we get hate messages … People were spreading not only fake news, but also photos of my sister with her face perforated by bullets. Real photos and doctored ones. It was gruesome. … I may be wrong, but I think it is because of everything she represented. I

> think our country is still very racist, homophobic and misogynist. Marielle broke barriers. She got to a place where many white people did not get. There is a mix of factors: hate against women; hate against black women; hate against women who are openly bisexual or lesbian. To sum up, there is hate against everything she represented and, after she was dead, people felt legitimised to talk about her. And people got even angrier when we decided to fight for her and for what she believed. [Interview transcript, *social media and hate project*, collected and translated by Marina Navarro Lins]

After five years of harassment, discrimination, and brutality against the Indian Muslim population by state and state aligned vigilante actors (Banaji et al. 2019), the Hindutva fascist government of India pushed their anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Bill through parliament making it an Act, triggering a wave of protests by citizens across communities who knew that it spelt the death-knell of secular democracy. In Delhi a prolonged and courageous sit-in at Shaheen Baug (Sharma and Singh 2023), led primarily by Muslim women who are some of the most viciously caricatured and stereotyped citizens, started to gain international attention. Widely viewed as an excuse to silence and displace these protestors, a Hindutva fascist pogrom then took place, orchestrated in a systematic manner and protected by the police. Organised Hindu fascist mobs supported by the state and the police roamed Muslim neighbourhoods, torturing and murdering, stuffing bodies into gutters. This was swiftly followed by the arrest of both male and female Muslim student leaders of the anti-CAA protests and by the nationwide Covid lockdown in March 2020 which gave people mere hours to leave the streets. Anisa, though not arrested, was a keen and pained observer of these events, commenting on them through her Twitter and Instagram presence. A teacher in Delhi, she chose to use a pseudonym to avoid the routine death-threats she receives from supporters of the far-right RSS and the BJP. We spoke at length eight months after the events of 2020[10]:

> It was so frightening hearing about the arrests of these young people through the news, the fake FIRS accusing them, naming them as anti-nationals. That is to say, the news was full of lies, of made-up talk about them being instigators and them having called for violence. So basically, the government, the courts, are saying that for young Muslims in India to ask for dignity and respect, to ask for the constitution to be honoured and the acts and bills to treat us as human beings with the same rights as other fellow citizens is an act of violence which justifies real violence against us. This makes a mockery of the idea of violence, and it shames the idea of citizenship. So, two days after watching this, and after discussing with my father who was telling me that I should keep my mouth shut, it's too dangerous to talk out now, I posted something on my Insta story. It was a poem; I was trying to get out the pain in my heart. And don't mistake me: I have never been very interested in being "a Muslim" as such. We come from a family that has worked in professions for years; we practice but we do it quietly. And here I read a poem about my faith and how it was growing and how our young people would keep standing up as they are being shot down. I was very sad, very uncertain, and this showed even in my story. My account is private. But still. What happened was that I woke up and someone had screen-shotted my poem and sent it to others in one of the WhatsApp groups … . For 24 hours I felt like this is not my life at all. I received thousands of hate messages, thousands. I became very scared. I shut down my accounts. I received the hate messages in my inbox, some of them said "you think we can't kill you, filthy meat-eating sister-fucker, filthy Muslim", and so on … I couldn't work those days. I cried all

> those days. My father, my family was fully supporting me, though he had warned me. Since then, I am cautious, I do listen, but I don't speak much. I don't want to end up like Umar Khalid[11], lying in jail for fighting for dignity and peace. But also, I don't want to be like my father, who is too frightened all the time. What has happened to me is that I have been somewhat unwell since that time. Very unwell. I have pains in my arms and legs day or night. I feel like I will fall down. My heart beats fast when we turn on the news. We've seen many doctors. No one knows what it is. My BP [blood pressure] is okay.

While these two vignettes may appear to tell the stories of isolated individual cases, they are illustrative of wider tendencies apparent through analysis of a much larger corpus of data from minoritised and marginalised populations (Banaji and Bhat 2022; Sethi 2018). Especially when marginalised persons decide to comment on or participate in political action or speech, but even when they simply exist in their life-worlds, aspects of identity as perceived by hostile publics are the first things which are picked up for hate and dehumanisation. Both contexts speak of a targeted, historically contextual, genocidal intent on the part of state and non-state actors working in collusion.[12] That these marginalised and progressive speakers tried to communicate some of their pain, their desire for justice and are still alive (one lost a relative, the other watches community members jailed or murdered) and that they can continue to speak is no grounds for complacency. If the targeted and protected ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence inflicted on the democratic opposition to Assad in the past ten years and also unfolding against Palestinians between 2023 and 2024 is anything to go by, populations may conform in every detail to the notional resilience thought so desirable for continued engagement in the public sphere and yet be annihilated at the hands of objectively well-funded and well-armed military regimes. And yet we are complacent because we have no other recourse than to call for a return to the table, to rational deliberation, in a time of fascism. Thus, the very agency and resilience on which their communicative interventions are predicated continues to provide a shield for those who harm them and those who do nothing to set right that harm.

Conclusion

This recent tendency to celebrate resilience has led to increased attention to those peoples and activists who appear to survive and thrive despite the pressure of social intolerance and hate. Some might view this as a good thing, which encourages appreciation of social justice goals. We have seen the feminists of Pakistan and Iran, the journalists of Gaza, the protestors of Sudan paid tribute, even as many of them are assassinated, murdered and imprisoned. And of course: Recognition is also a key feature of humanisation in fights for justice, so it would take a hardened cynic to suggest that Malala Yousafzai did not show incredible courage in speaking out; or that Nelson Mandela did not deserve to be lauded. Similarly, in the sphere of digital disinformation, misinformation and fake news, studies repeatedly look into the factors which appear to characterise the lives and life-worlds of those who are "resilient" to disinformation so that these can, metaphorically, be bottled and given to others who are, perhaps, less resilient (cf. Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel 2023; McDougall 2019).

Some early critiques of resilience were made on the basis that it has become institutionalised, a "boundary concept" which allows different disciplines and public services to feel as if they are talking about the same thing and fostering "growth" while diverging wildly in their understandings and intentions. It is said that it has been stretched to the point of meaninglessness when it comes to both child development and international development. Other critiques are more pointed, evidencing how resilience, like previous concepts such as "efficiency," is being used as sinister tool of the imperialist, neoliberal state and of capitalism, dangerously implicated in unfair practices of land occupation, growth, governance, and resource allocation, from the slow and uneven distribution of economic aid at times of crisis to the unequal access granted to therapeutic help when populations appear to have survived other shocks and crises. As Tierney argues, "resilience discourse frames members of at-risk populations as increasingly pressured to adapt to depredations that are the direct result of the historic and contemporary forces of neoliberalization … " (2015, 1333). And, since a lot of research on resilience is about measuring differential survival in the face of hostile conditions, the notion of the *moment in time* is important, because it is rare for theorists in the field of political science and democratic participation to go back to communities who were parts of major struggles twenty, thirty or forty years ago, and to examine what price they have paid individually and as groups for their participation, their survival or their victory, particularly in terms of long-term mental and physical health, family relationships, jobs, housing and community status. We all know that war veterans come back with a multitude of afflictions, regardless of which side won the war, that subject populations in occupations and political prisoners have nightmares and suffer untold stress for decades after. For some, such as the Indigenous environmental rights defenders in the Amazon, anti-racist activists across South and North America, Muslim and Dalit communities in India, the very act of participation, even of existing, is like being up against an opposing side in a war. For others war is not a metaphor. The act of gaining voice and attempting to have influence in the public sphere, the act of asserting their own humanity and right to exist qua human beings, takes place during ongoing deprivation, campaigns of disinformation, police brutality and/or military atrocity. Neoliberalism plays a part in this, but is intertwined by more visceral hate and destruction, as in the case of the sustained, genocidal attacks on the people of Palestine in 2023-24 where the aim has been to obliterate the people, the infrastructure and any communicative mechanisms beyond repair.

When it comes to the notion of access to whatever now embodies the closest to a public sphere in each different country and worldwide—regardless of whether one believes that a public sphere of rational deliberation is possible or desirable—the notion of resilience now plays a sinister role. Counterposed with ideas of "wokeness" which takes on the negative connotations of treachery (to the nation), weakness and hysteria, the notion of resilience gives both scholars and governments a way out of having to reflect, work and act in ways which position the complexities of history, affect and everyday life in discriminated, marginalised and impoverished communities at the heart of planning for economic, political, and social action. Thus, from Shalanda Baker's brilliant work on racial justice and energy systems, we can draw the insight that "resilience of the … system may actually reify structural inequality and exacerbate vulnerability. A hardening of existing … infrastructure may also operate to harden existing social, economic, and environmental injustices that disproportionately burden the poor and people of color" (Baker 2019, 2017).

The reification of injustice through a fetishisation of resilience, repeated multiple times in different locales from day-care and schooling to housing and health, accretes the effects of climate change, colonial occupation, and carceral policing. The unequal toll of these processes on the bodies of marginalised and oppressed citizens intensifies loss and trauma for some, all the while appearing to validate those who view unequal systems as self-sustaining, and injustice or strife as character-building. For every moving or authentic Instagram post which celebrates the overcoming of adversity through an imagined trajectory from abuse to success ("I was in foster care at 13, homeless at 18 … and now I'm a small business owner") there's also someone who wants to take the secret of community resilience from an indigenous community without centring them, who invites a member of a discriminated group to take a public stance against injustice to validate the credentials of their group, regardless of the differential risks. And then, of course, there is "weathering."

The almost polar opposite of "steeling," and in actual fact often invisible, weathering, as Geronimus urges us to see, is a process "that encompasses the physiological effects of living in marginalized communities that bear the brunt of racial, ethnic, religious and class discrimination" (2023, 2). An assumption of resilience amongst those from minoritised and marginalised groups who appear to succeed in having "voice" in the toxic public spheres of contemporary nations is at one and the same time a *denial* of their right to participation and an almost certain consignment of their communal and individual bodies and minds to weathering of a kind that is neither just nor liberating. So, as we think about whether the scholarly community would be better off replacing Habermas's conceptualistion of the public sphere with one that acknowledges historical inequality, contemporary oppression, and centres justice by redefining its parameters as Mouffe, Mills and Fraser have suggested, we need to do better and be more reflexive—and more *active*—when it comes to preventing ongoing social, economic, material and militarised violence against those we think should be standing beside us or across the table in any putative space of democratic debate.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTES

1. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/feb/13/brazil-landless-workers-movement-mst-protest-30th-anniversary
2. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/21/black-community-activist-maria-bernadete-pacifico-killing-brazil
3. https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices
4. https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/india-destructive-lies/
5. https://www.resilience.org/stories/2022-05-06/dare-to-win-lessons-from-the-indian-farmers-movement/
6. https://news.mongabay.com/2022/03/giving-up-amazon-is-losing-its-resilience-under-human-pressure-study-shows/
7. As there was say, there was when the red brigades went to fight fascism in Spain.

8. https://www.institutomariellefranco.org/en
9. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/15/marielle-franco-shot-dead-targeted-killing-rio
10. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/24/why-the-2020-violence-in-delhi-was-a-pogrom
11. https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/umar-khalid
12. The Polis Project. (2020). Manufacturing evidence: How the Police is framing and arresting constitutional rights defenders in India. Available at: https://www.thepolisproject.com/manufacturing-evidence-how-the-police-framed-and-arrested-constitutionalright-defenders-in-india/#.X9SBll5S_OQ

REFERENCES

Baker, Shalanda H. 2019. "Anti-Resilience: A Roadmap for Transformational Justice Within the Energy System." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 54: 1–48.

Banaji, Shakuntala. 2017. *Children and Media in India: Narratives of Class, Agency and Social Change*. London: Routledge.

Banaji, Shakuntala. 2018. "Vigilante Publics: Orientalism, Modernity and Hindutva Fascism in India." *Javnost - The Public* 25 (4): 333–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463349.

Banaji, Shakuntala, and Ramnath Bhat. 2022. *Social Media and Hate*. London: Routledge.

Banaji, Shakuntala, Ramnath Bhat, Anushi Agarwal, Nihal Passanha, and Sadhana Pravin Mukti. 2019. *WhatsApp Vigilantes: An Exploration of Citizen Reception and Circulation of WhatsApp Misinformation Linked to Mob Violence in India.* Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104316/.

Bentley, Gillian, R. 2020. "Don't Blame the BAME: Ethnic and Structural Inequalities in Susceptibilities to COVID-19." *American Journal of Human Biology* 32 (5): 1–5.

Dutt, Yashica. 2019. *Coming Out as Dalit*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Publishers.

Farfan-Santos, Elizabeth. 2016. *Black Bodies, Black Rights: The Politics of Quilombolismo in Contemporary Brazil*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Fraser, Nancy. 1985. *Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History: An Introduction*. 2012. https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00725055/file/FMSH-WP-2012-17_Fraser1.pdf.

Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." In *Habermas and The Public Sphere*, edited by Craig J Calhoun, 109–142. Massachusetts, MA: MIT Press.

Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge.

Geronimus, Arline. 2023. *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life on the Body in an Unjust Society*. London: Virago.

Gupta, Charu. 2022. *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Hutcheon, Emily, and Bonnie Lashewicz. 2014. "Theorizing Resilience: Critiquing and Unbounding a Marginalizing Concept." *Disability & Society* 29 (9): 1383–1397. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2014.934954.

Kaiser, Nidah. 2023. “The ‘Securitisation’ of Muslims in India: Anti-Minority Violence as Governance.” Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Los Angeles, California, USA, August 2023.

Kinouani, Guilaine. 2021. *Living While Black: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Racial Trauma*. London: Ebury Press.

Linton, Samara, and Rianna Walcott. 2022. *The Colour of Madness: Mental Health and Race in Technicolour*. London: Bluebird.

MacKinnon, Danny, and Kate Driscoll Derickson. 2013. “From Resilience to Resourcefulness: A Critique of Resilience Policy and Activism.” *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (2): 253–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512454775.

Masten, Ann. S. 2014. “Global Perspectives on Resilience in Children and Youth.” *Child Development* 85 (1): 6–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12205.

Maté, Gabor. 2018. *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. London: Vermillion.

McDougall, Julian. 2019. “Media Literacy Versus Fake News: Critical Thinking, Resilience and Civic Engagement.” *Medijske Studije* 10 (19): 29–45. https://doi.org/10.20901/ms.10.19.2.

Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Mills, Charles W. 2020. “Theorizing Racial Justice.” The Tanner Lectures. https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/m/MILLSTANNERLECTURE.pdf.

Mouffe, Chantal. 1999. “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 66 (3): 745–758.

Roberts, Dorothy. 2017. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Representation and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage Books.

Rodríguez-Pérez, Carlos, and Maria Jose Canel. 2023. “Exploring European Citizens’ Resilience to Misinformation: Media Legitimacy and Media Trust as Predictive Variables.” *Media and Communication* 11 (2): 30–41.

Rose, Jaqueline. 2022. *On Violence and Violence Against Women*. London: Faber and Faber.

Rutter, Michael. 1987. “Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms.” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57 (3): 316–331. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1987.tb03541.x.

Sebastian, Shawn. 2020. After COVID-19 Outbreak at Tablighi Jamaat Conference, Fake News Targeting Muslims Abounds”. *The Caravan*. Accessed 29 June 2023. https://caravanmagazine.in/media/after-covid-19- outbreak-at-tablighi-jamaat-conference-fake-news-targetting-muslims-abounds.

Sethi, Arjun Singh. 2018. *American Hate: Survivors Speak Out*. New York: The New Press.

Sharma, Yash, and Shatakshi Singh. 2023. “Shaheen Bagh and the Politics of Protest in the Anti-CAA Movement in India.” *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 7 (1): 01–14. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/12879.

Soundararajan, Thenmozhi. 2022. *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing and Abolition*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson, and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Teltumbde, Anand. 2018. *Republic of Caste*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing.

Tierney, Kathleen. 2015. “Resilience and the Neoliberal Project: Discourses, Critiques, Practices—And Katrina.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (10): 1327–1342. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215591187.

Trenz, Hans-Jörg. 2023. "Does All This Really Happen? The Experimental Setting of Public Sphere Resilience." In *Democracy and the Public Sphere: From Dystopia Back to Utopia*, 115–208. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Trenz, Hans-Jörg, Annett Heft, Michael Vaughan, and Barbara Pfetsch. 2021. "Resilience of Public Spheres in a Global Health Crisis." *Javnost-The Public* 28 (2): 111–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1919385.

Shakuntala Banaji (corresponding author) is Professor of Media, Culture and Social Change in the Department of Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Director of the Masters in Media, Communication and Development. Email: S.Banaji@lse.ac.uk