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Comments on retail issues from Leigh Sparks, the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling

Towns, High Streets and Resilience: A Question for Policy?

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“It is all too easy to talk about “bouncing back to where we were” without asking which “we” is counted and without asking whether “where we were” is a place to which a return is desirable”. (Vale, 2014, p198)

Some time ago I was invited to contribute a manuscript for consideration to a Special Issue of the journal Sustainability entitled [Urban Retail Systems: Vulnerability, Resilience and Sustainability](#) and edited by Herculano Cachinho and Teresa Barata-Salgueiro. The pandemic delayed the work on this paper and the Special Issue, but did have the benefit of allowing me to spend more time thinking about the right topic and focus. This became especially interesting in the light of [chairing](#) the [Review Group of the Town Centre Action Plan](#). The referees have been very supportive and the paper is now available as a [full-text here](#).

One of the phrases that has become very common in discussion about the pandemic and towns has been the concept of resilience. I have used it on a number of occasions, but perhaps unthinkingly (or at least with insufficient care). This has become more apparent as the debate for post-Covid has switched to “return to normal” or “bounce back”. The often-stated desire to return post-pandemic to “normal” is confronting questions over whether the pre-pandemic “normal” was resilient, sustainable, or indeed desirable. Let’s be clear, what was going on before was **not** working and any return to that state or a bounce back without thought will fail society, community and I believe economy.

The aim of the paper is thus to consider how the current narrative in the UK (“death of the high street” and the decline of the town centre) has arisen, how this relates to the oft-demanded concept of resilience and what the implications might be for policy. Both conceptual and practical questions and contributions are identified and developed. It is necessary to note that this situation and narrative in the UK does not hold for every place, nor of course for every country. Large cities and towns and places elsewhere may be dominated, for example, by over-tourism or gentrification or be faced by other challenges. Different countries have experienced various dimensions of these issues in their towns and cities, and to differing extents and speeds. Within this, however, urban resilience and the place of retail is a common theme. The focus of the paper on Scotland provides thus both specific situations and responses but also allows wider principles, concepts and lessons to be considered.

The paper concludes as follows:

The “death of the high street” has become a commonplace way, especially in the UK, of describing the situation faced by retailers and town centres. Assailed by over half a century of disaggregation and decentralisation, retailing has become increasingly divorced from the communities it once served, and from their town centres. Discrete, car-borne trips to individual, decentralised spaces have become the norm for so many activities, including retailing. Public policy in the UK has more recently aimed at directing retailing to town centres and at protecting town centres. This has had some success, but the crisis of town centres has continued to develop, not least because the retail sector is experiencing massive change, now requires less space and is under severe commercial pressure. Sectors beyond retailing have been increasing their off-centre space and contribute further to the removal of functions from town centres. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the background to the rising interest in the concept of resilience for both the retail sector and town centres. Resilience, as shown in this paper, is a concept that has attracted increasing interest and its application to town centres and retailing has developed widely. Key topics include what makes a town resilient and how do we increase resilience of town centres, the retail sector and individual retailers? Increasing resilience has mainly focused on improving the attractiveness of town centres and retailers. Public policy in the UK has attempted to support this through protecting town centres, trying to improve the viability of town centres by easing new developments in town centres (housing, commercial and others) and by trying to reduce the extent of new competition. This, though, has only made small inroads to the situation. This may be because decentralisation in many sectors continues apace and the competition for town centres is already strongly established.

The example of Scotland used in this paper places policy towards town centres (and implicitly the resilience of town centres, high streets, and retailing) in a broad national context. Scotland has led the way in the UK in the last decade over how to try to support and enhance town centres. There have been successes. It is recognised, however, that even this approach does not go far enough, especially when new National Outcomes based around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are considered. The intersection of resilience and sustainability has become more important.

There is widespread acceptance that town centres need to be resilient. There is increasing agreement over what makes a good town centre. These reflect a set of implicit assumptions about benefits and desirability. Supporting “good” things has been seen as the way to deliver this resilience and positive places. The critique of the concept of resilience provided in this paper, and which implicitly underpins the proposals in the recent National Review in Scotland (and other work being undertaken by the Scottish Government), points to the need to confront a wider set of tensions. It also indicates a need to revisit the reasons we intervene in the market, particularly in the light of demands for places (towns) to be healthier, greener, and more sustainable, given the climate emergency and sustainable goals. Five tensions are considered here.

First, in the context of town centres and retailing, there needs to be more clarity around the concept of resilience and particularly the purpose of resilience. The current assumptions about the benefits of resilience for a location need to be explicitly outlined for (by) that town and the community; too often this is not done, and it is not clear who benefits from resilience, why and to what effect.

Secondly, the focus in town and town centre resilience is often on capacity to rebound, absorb or counteract type constructs. The reality, however, may well be that the system is not working for the local community or town and there are many problems of access, unmet demand and a lack of wider, local inter-relationships and networks. Resilience thus has to encompass the idea that there could well be a considerable challenge to the existing order of things, ways of acting and types of organisations and impacts, if a place or town is to be resilient. Towns are about communities, and thus resilient towns need to be about resilience for the benefit of that community. The origins of the issues might differ in various towns and indeed countries, but the underlying principle holds.

Thirdly, there are clearly locational and sustainable tensions in town centre resilience. Many towns have been challenged by the ongoing decentralisation of activities (not just retailing). These are increasingly being recognised as unsustainable development, with wider detrimental effects. The challenge posed by the concept of the 20-min neighbourhood is about making locations work for the community using active travel modes, by having residences and facilities located in reasonable proximity. The challenge is to stop supporting damaging decentralisation and unsustainable activities. One approach is to rethink the cost structures of development. This implies changing cost burdens, including a greater recognition of the inappropriate balance currently between in-town and out-of-town development and operations, new build and renovation cost disparities and the imbalance between private and social costs and benefits.

Fourthly, there is a more fundamental issue over how the system works and for whom. The dominance of a small number of large firms in many sectors and their reliance on their national and international networks cause issues for the resilience of towns and local businesses. Community Wealth Building as a concept focuses on how activities are performed, who performs them and how well they perform them in terms of how they are organised, who is engaged and who benefits. This implies a different definition of resilience to encompass local networks and inter-relationships and to view these as integral to the resilience of a town. Developing resilience thus becomes a local matter about building capacity and diversity. This is readily applicable to towns and retailing.

Fifthly, these tensions and their potential directions of development bring the issue of why intervention occurs in the market. The current system has seen places and people left behind and without access to basic needs and facilities. In many towns, the current system makes things too hard for too many people and increases and perpetuates various inequalities. The widespread dominance of distant firms and businesses (and of that one model of operation) reduces local opportunities and leaves towns at the mercy of decisions taken hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away. All this is damaging to health, well-being, and local prosperity. Within this, the fact that policy makes it easier and cheaper to develop away from existing towns and town centres exacerbates the problems. Intervention is required as things are not working, especially to the benefit of many local communities, but also increasingly in terms of broader environmental sustainability.

The practical conclusions from this analysis imply a rethinking of policy to be more radical and more in tune with this revised concept of resilience. This must be not only about supporting activities but of stopping others. It requires national level policy frameworks but implementation at the local and community level. Individual towns are distinct, and those differences and their local needs should be accommodated at the local level, if resilience is to be developed and mean anything. This is important whatever the sources of the issues around the sustainability and resilience of town and city centres.

Conceptually, this paper is aligned with the stronger critiques of the use of the concept of resilience in social science. Resilience needs to be rethought and its underpinnings made explicit. Currently, too many papers on resilience in the urban, town or retail context ignore issues of space and scale, power relations and their consequences, and view protection of the prevailing status quo as inherently of benefit (“return to normal” or “bounce back” post-pandemic are the current manifestations). A conceptualisation is needed that is broader but more locally adaptable and one that recognises that the current system and position of towns and town centres were created within a system geared to do just that, and that consequently, resilience might well be about creating a new, more locally engaged situation. The “death of the high street” narrative in the UK reflects a socially constructed situation, but one that is not inevitable; it can be reversed by rethinking and stating what is important in our social, economic, and cultural identities at the town level.

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**About Leigh Sparks**

I am Professor of Retail Studies at the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling, where I research and teach aspects of retailing and retail supply chains, alongside various colleagues. I am Chair of Scotland's Towns Partnership. I am also a Deputy Principal of the University, with responsibility for Education and Students.

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