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Editorial to the special section “Geographies of Vulnerability and Resilience – Critical Explorations”

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In the past 30 years the concept of vulnerability has been an important paradigm in human geography and development studies. Vulnerability analyses have significantly enhanced our understanding of everyday life under conditions of poverty and food insecurity in the Global South and of people’s capacities to live with risks and natural hazards (Wisner et al. 2004; Bohle 2007c). A vulnerability perspective has also been adopted by practitioners and served as a guiding principle for policies and development interventions (e.g. IPCC 2015). In the last ten years, we have, however, witnessed a paradigm shift from vulnerability to resilience, a concept that has its roots in ecosystems science and psychology (Luthar 2003; Folke 2006). Some have argued that resilience and vulnerability are like two sides of a coin and are thus compatible (Miller et al. 2010). For many, resilience thinking seems to be more positive and promising. Others argue that the systems perspective of resilience thinking cannot fully capture the everyday life experiences of poverty, hunger and exploitation and people’s creative responses to crises, which stands at the centre of vulnerability research. Some have also argued that resilience thinking is largely apolitical and uncritical of power structures at different scales, and thus plead for an integration of social theories and politics in the concept (Bohle et al. 2009; Cannon and Müller-Mahn 2010; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013). With this special section we would like to take stock of the debate and reconsider some of the basic conceptual questions in

vulnerability and resilience research. What does the paradigm shift from vulnerability to resilience mean for doing research? What roles do social theories, political discourses and critical thinking play for each concept? Where is the geography in contemporary vulnerability and resilience research? And what is the role of human agency for vulnerability and resilience?

In the academic field of geography Hans-Georg Bohle – to whom this special section is dedicated – would have been the best scholar to address these questions, as conceptual reflections on and empirical research about people’s vulnerability *and* resilience shaped his academic life for over more than 30 years.¹ Before he died all too suddenly in September 2014, he had been an inspiring researcher and teacher in the interlinked fields of human geography, political ecology and development studies. Hans-Georg Bohle’s career began with studies in geography in Göttingen, where he completed his PhD in 1979 on the green revolution in the Indian Cauvery Delta. After his habilitation on South Asian farmers’ markets in 1985, he held a professorship in cultural geography in Freiburg (1989-1995), a professorship in geography of South Asia in Heidelberg (1995-2004) and a professorship in cultural geography and development geography in Bonn (2004-2013). He was inspired by innumerable personal encounters with marginalized people throughout empirical field studies for research projects in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal) and Africa (Chad, Sudan, Ghana, Egypt). Moreover, he always had a deep inter-

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est in social and development theories. On this basis, he contributed crucially to the establishment and success of actor-oriented vulnerability studies. The two key articles in which he, Michael Watts and Tom Downing formulate the concept of social vulnerability (Watts & Bohle 1993; Bohle et al. 1994) are some of the core references of the field (Janssen et al. 2006). Overall, his conceptual and empirical work has made a fundamental contribution to development studies, hazard research and human geography. As member of the editorial board of *DIE ERDE* from 1998 to 2013, he has influenced the scope of addressed topics and concepts in *DIE ERDE*, contributed to maintaining and increasing the academic quality of this journals' publications, and productively contributed himself to *DIE ERDE* with own articles (Bohle and Krüger 1992; Bohle 2001b; Bohle and Adhikari 2002; Etzold et al. 2009) and moderated special issues (Bohle 2002; Bohle and O'Brien 2006).

The authors who have contributed to this special section have all worked with and have been inspired by Hans-Georg Bohle's scholarship. Their contributions engage with and build on Bohle's meticulous studies on the spatial dimensions and social productions of vulnerability in terms of poverty, hunger, marginalization and violence (e.g. Bohle and Krüger 1992; Watts & Bohle 1993; Bohle et al. 1994; Bohle 2001ab; Bohle 2002; Bohle and Adhikari 2002; Bohle 2007a, b, c); his stimulating work on human agency, sustainable livelihoods, and the discourse of human security (Bohle 2001b; Bohle and O'Brien 2006; Bohle 2007b, Bohle 2009; Etzold et al. 2009); and his more recent reflections on the paradigm shift from vulnerability to resilience (Bohle 2007d; Bohle et al. 2009).

Benjamin Etzold and Patrick Sakdapolrak have both pursued their Master's, PhDs and early Post-Doc studies under the supervision of Hans-Georg Bohle during his professorships in Heidelberg and Bonn. Hans-Georg Bohle's understanding of socio-spatiality and social vulnerability has deeply influenced their way of thinking and doing research. Behind the background of successive social-spatial turns in human geography and 23 years after the publication of “The social space of vulnerability” by Watts and Bohle (1993), they take stock of the role of spatiality in vulnerability research. In their review of the literature, they found that all four key socio-spatial categories – place, network, territory and scale – have been taken up by scholars for vulnerability analysis. Inspired by Jessop et al.'s (2008) theorization of social spatial relations, they

argue that a critical geography of vulnerability must acknowledge the polymorphy of socio-spatialities and assess the interplay of place, network, scale and territory in the (re)production of vulnerability. The argument is exemplified with case studies from Bangladesh and Thailand.

Michael Watts has been professor of geography and development studies at the Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley since 1979. During Bohle's visit to Berkeley in 1991-92, they worked together on their seminal paper “The social space of vulnerability” (1993) and thereby shaped the evolution of the concept of vulnerability fundamentally. In this paper, Watts juxtaposes the notion of vulnerability developed by Hans-Georg Bohle and other critical scholars with the now omnipresent and dominant concept of resilience. He demonstrates that resilience has emerged as a crucial aspect of the technologies of contemporary governance and neoliberal rule. The way that resilience building envisions enabling people to anticipate and tolerate disturbances, dangers and radical contingencies is, as Watts argues, far removed from the understanding of a political ecology of vulnerability, which is sensitive to people's embeddedness in unequal power relations and to the politicized and contested nature of coping and adaptation. The dialectical relationship between social theory and political economy is identified as the blind spot of resilience theory.

Birgit Obrist is professor of anthropology at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Basel and senior scientist at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. She and Bohle shared a common conceptual interest in vulnerability and resilience and have often met and exchanged their views, in particular ever since Bohle joined the International Scientific Board of the Swiss National Centre for Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South in 2002. In her paper, Obrist addresses one of the blind spots of resilience theory identified by Watts. She argues that a clearer definition of the notion of agency is crucial for understanding social processes of resilience building. The capacities of actors to act and to overcome threats rests upon their habitus and past experiences (i.e. their iterative agency), upon their judgement of a present situation and available options (i.e. practical-evaluative agency), and upon their imaginations of the future and the active generation of new opportunities (i.e. projective agency). A more comprehensive approach towards resilience building, she argues, would

enclose fundamental modifications of societal, political and economic structures. People’s capacities to resist discriminating power relations and to change the fields in which they are embedded are termed transformative agency. The conceptualization is illustrated through empirical findings from research on ageing and health in Tanzania.

Overall, the three contributions of this special section can be read as pleas for a critical scholarship of vulnerability and resilience that puts marginalized people’s everyday lives, the webs of power in which they are entangled and their potentials to seize opportunities, to overcome risks and to resist patterns of discrimination and exploitation at center stage. Such scholarship also needs to engage critically with the re-production of specific socio-spatialities, i.e. places, networks, territories and scalar relations, how they underpin people’s vulnerability, and how they can serve as foundations for their social resilience. We are certain that is such a geographical scholarship that Hans-Georg Bohle always envisaged.

Notes

A complete archive of the scholarship of Hans-Georg Bohle (5 books, 110 articles and 53 chapters in edited volumes in between 1979 and 2014) can be found under: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hans_Georg_Bohle

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