Not only in the world of academia, but also in policy makers’ discourse, resilience is the buzzword of the day. Regrettably, the term is often applied without reflecting on its deeper meaning and the implications its use has. It was therefore a pleasure to review “On Resilience. Genealogy, Logics, and World Politics” by Philippe Bourbeau, a book that offers an in-depth reflection of this concept. Seeking to “develop a novel understanding of what resilience is and its added-value in world politics” (p. 1), the author follows a multidisciplinary and eclectic approach. His overall objective is to reflect on the normativity, practices, challenges, as well as opportunities of applying resilience to world politics and to offer a theorisation of the concept for this policy field.

First, Bourbeau investigates previous conceptualisations of resilience: using genealogy as methodology, he provides the reader with an inclusive analysis of the use of the concept and its evolution over time in the disciplines of psychology, engineering, ecology, and social work. The author demonstrates how these different understandings have shaped the notion of resilience and identifies three resulting logics under which the IR literature on resilience is organised. Two of them show significant weaknesses: the logic of persistence tends to conceptualise resilience as binary and ignores its transformational components; the agential self-reliance approach runs the risk of blaming the victim and transferring responsibility from institutions to individuals. Hence, Bourbeau draws on the notion of processual duality and defines resilience as the “process of patterned adjustments adopted in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks, to maintain, to marginally modify, or to transform a referent object” (p. 3, italics in original). He assumes resilience to be a process that involves both persistence and transformation components. The author concludes the first chapter by exploring three “premises of resilience”: he argues that resilience has a positive and a negative side, that knowledge about resilience is contingent, and that resilience should be seen as a socio-historically informed, dynamic, and varied process.

Co-authored with Juha Vuori, chapter 2 presents a model of the relationships between the statuses of security, resilience, and non-security politics, revealing how issues move along and remain within these nexuses. First, the authors outline securitisation and desecuritisation dynamics, using Sino-Soviet relations after the Second World War to illustrate how both can alternate. While research has so far focused on dynamics that lead from politicisation over securitisation to desecuritisation,
Vuori and Bourbeau emphasise that desecuritisation also occurs as a pre-emptive move prior to securitisation and present examples from Chinese foreign policy since the late 1970s. Second, the authors suggest drawing on resilience to explain variation in levels of securitisation, which would allow to “analyse in a scalar fashion how security performances are received, evaluated and approved by audiences.” (p. 74) The role of the latter in securitisation processes can also be better understood when including resilience. The authors show how resiliencisation is a process leading to or inducing security when the focus lies on persistence aspects, which is illustrated by the Russian dominant discourse on Chinese migration in the early 1990s. It is also argued that resilience can advance context-informed securitisation studies, for instance by providing insights on critical junctures. The last section, entitled desecuritisation and resiliencisation, describes cases where responses are shaped by a resilience-as-renewal logic and transform security policy assumptions, security practices, and social structures, resulting in non-security politics. An example is the current resiliencisation in the area of state-building interventions, which moves the issue out of the security realm. According to the authors, drawing on the concept of resilience also provides insights for explaining why desecuritised issues remain “locked-in” in this status.

Bourbeau starts the third chapter by providing the reader with examples from migration research, emphasising his focus on immediate reactions of host countries’ populations. Whereas scholars have investigated both processes of securitising migration and their consequences, the process leading up to securitisation has been neglected. Attempting to close this research gap, the author reveals how resiliencisation might precede securitisation. After the Cold War, when one could observe a remarkable increase in global migration, the perception of migration in France has changed dramatically (even though the country itself was not affected). Drawing on a data base of more than 1100 speeches by politicians (President, Prime Minister, Interior Minister) and more than 130 “Le Figaro” editorials from 1989 to 2001, Bourbeau shows how migration was socially constructed as disturbance with negative transformative implications for the country’s social cohesion. This insistence on resilience-as-maintenance created a perceived need for increased security and gave agents the opportunity to securitise migration. The securitisation occurred through new laws or amendments to existing laws enabling the government to deal with the “security issue” of migration and through a number of security practices such as the establishment of detention centres.

The fourth chapter opens up a research agenda. First, Bourbeau elaborates on the debate among liberals, resilience scholars, and governmentalists in the field of international interventions, who do not agree on whether there was a paradigm shift away from liberalism towards resilience. Doubting that the idea of resilience shapes all international interventions, the author still highlights the insights that the former provides to the peacebuilding community. Studies on the role of resilience in conflicts usually emphasise their specific context and do not generalise. While these in-depth analyses are deemed important, Bourbeau suggests that more theorisation is needed. Second, he explains how resilience can be fruitfully combined with the emerging practices approach: bringing it together with resilience can help researchers to discern and distinguish practices inducing change from those fostering continuity. Together with sociological institutionalist arguments, resilience can also be used to explain the persistence of regimes. The last section is dedicated to inter-conceptual
research and how it can be further advanced: the concepts with which resilience might be combined and confronted in an expedient way are vulnerability, resistance, mnemonic politics, critical junctures, and progress.

In the conclusion, Bourbeau repeats his plea for resilience as an intra-social sciences bridging concept, informing research on issues that do not solely belong to one academic discipline. Acknowledging possible “translation problems” and without claiming that resilience is the answer to every social science problem, the author reveals how in the case of traumatic studies, resilience can act as conceptual umbrella for political science and psychology. Subsequently, he elaborates on normativity and practices of resilience, arguing in favour of conducting research on resilience as a social construct and on the implications this has. Alongside this, Bourbeau emphasises the need to investigate differences in time and space as cause for variation in different aspects of resilience. Research on resilience should also make more efforts to include non-Western contexts. The last subject that Bourbeau touches upon is the relation between resilience discourses and practices. For instance, this includes the question which of the two come first, whether they operate at the same level (macro or micro), and if one of them is more salient than the other.

I consider the genealogy of resilience to be one of the book’s strongest parts: this comprehensive analysis allows the reader to truly grasp how the different notions of resilience have emerged over time. As a minor criticism, one could mention a certain redundancy (some points already being mentioned in the introduction) and that a section explicitly dedicated to the different conceptualisations of resilience by policy-makers would have completed the chapter. The author convincingly reveals the weaknesses of the persistence and agential self-reliance logics and, by elaborating on processual duality, presents an approach that overcomes these shortcomings. However, I would argue that a definition does not make a theory: in my opinion, the biggest flaw of the book is that the author does not reach his goal of offering a “theorisation of resilience as applied to world politics” (p. 3). At the same time, Bourbeau’s statements are somehow contradictory in this regard: for instance, he argues that knowledge about resilience is contingent and that it is “difficult – if not impossible” to develop a comprehensive resilience theory, “applicable across cases and times. However, […] this is precisely what makes resilience a particularly stimulating approach.” (p. 55, emphasis added) Elsewhere, Bourbeau uses the label of a “definition” (p. 17) or “conceptual basis” (p. 24). Noting that it is not unusual for a theory to only be applicable within certain scope conditions, I would have been grateful for more clarity about what the author intends to offer.

However, the term that is most often used is “theorisation”, which is why the book ought to be assessed accordingly. While the approach adopted indeed helps to describe and analyse resilience, it does not allow to derive any causal hypotheses and observable implications explaining it. For instance, it would have been interesting to learn more about variables determining whether persistence or renewal components dominate the resilience process. Probably, theory-building would have been easier if the author had spelled out a clear research question, asking for instance for the cause of an observed empirical variation. This would, however, make measuring resilience necessary: even though the author states that it should not be understood in binary terms, the book lacks an operationalisation of the concept. Since the term “world politics” was not defined, it is also not entirely clear what the theory’s domain of application is. Whereas Bourbeau sometimes also uses the term “IR”, I hesitate to
brand French domestic reactions to immigration as an IR issue. While I admit that one can have different views about what a theory should offer (e.g. whether it should include causality or not), a reflection on this would have been necessary.

When reading the table of contents, one would expect the chapters on security and migration to constitute two case studies, drawing from a previously developed theoretical framework. Instead, the second chapter presents a “theorisation” of the relations between security, resilience, and non-security politics. While I found it interesting to focus on pre-securitisation dynamics and to combine insights from resilience with security studies, it was not entirely clear to me which puzzling, so-far unexplained empirical findings can be explained this way. Again, I felt that a chance to derive causal assumptions was missed: under which conditions can we expect an issue to move from one status to another? Is it for instance necessary that the involved agents show some particular characteristics? Furthermore, I was not convinced by the fact that resilience is presented as a status, while it was conceptualised as a process before. The term “resiliencisation”, hinting at something process-related, is introduced without any explanation.

In my reading, the subsequent chapter on migration represents a case study drawing on the model being developed in the second chapter, more precisely on the “resilience as a precursor to security” mechanism. If my understanding is correct, I would have liked this to be stated more clearly, and to be reflected in the table of contents. Instead, there are some rather confusing statements in this regard. In the introduction, Bourbeau writes that he will “explore one leg of the security-resilience-desecuritisation triangle through the lens of migration” (p. 24) – usually, it should be the theoretical framework that serves as “lens”, not the empirics. Later, he argues that a “broader theorisation of the link between migration, resilience and security” (p. 86) is needed, which would mean the creation of yet another theoretical framework.

With regard to the analysis itself, I was not fully persuaded by the suggested causal relation between resilience and securitisation. Instead of a genuine unpacking of the proposed causal mechanism, the reader is provided with a description of a sequence of statements and events. It was not clear to me when exactly the alleged shift from resiliencisation to securitisation happened: many quotes Bourbeau uses to illustrate resiliencisation include security components, for instance notions of an “invasion” or the reference to the time of German occupation. This overlap made it even more difficult to detect a causal relationship. Working with a clear methodological approach – such as process tracing – could have probably helped to avoid this. This would also have allowed the author to draw inferences and detect scope conditions necessary for the mechanism to occur: for instance, could we observe domestic problems from which leading politicians wanted to distract by creating a “common enemy” threatening social cohesion? Last but not least, I felt that an elaboration on alternative explanations was lacking. Altogether, the added value of using a resilience approach was not evident: the depiction of migration as a threat to social cohesion and a subsequent securitisation of the issue are very common phenomena, and I am not sure whether one needs to draw on the idea of resilience in order to understand the present mechanisms.

The proposed research agenda regarding international interventions gives a good overview of the state of the art. However, more concrete suggestions for further research were absent, including details on how the approach provided by Bourbeau can contribute to this. For instance, he argues that narrative conflict studies would
benefit from a deeper theorisation of resilience, but does not elaborate on how his book could advance research in this regard. The section on change and continuity, which offers more concrete ideas, could have been brought together with the parts of critical junctures and progress from the concepts section.

The book’s contribution to the literature can be assessed along the three lines that Bourbeau himself mentions in the introduction. First, he systemises existing IR research on resilience in a very helpful way by identifying the logics of persistence, agential self-reliance, and processual duality. His evaluation of these approaches, as well as his own definition, also constitute an important contribution. However, as indicated above, I would argue that this does not represent a genuine theory of resilience. Instead, I agree with his more modest statement that the “book moves IR’s scattered scholarship on resilience a step further towards the theorisation of its application into world politics” (p. 2, emphasis added) and would wish for the opportunity to derive (causal) hypotheses from the next publication.

Second, the author claims that he reveals how resilience can serve as an intra-social sciences bridging concept by providing a conceptualisation of the relationship between resilience, security, and migration. As already mentioned, the framework only implies resilience and security, whereas, in my opinion, the migration chapter represents a case study thereof. However, Bourbeau does move the literature towards a conceptualisation of pre-security dynamics, a sequence of the securitisation process that has so far been neglected. Whereas these suggestions on how security and resilience studies can be fruitfully combined are insightful, it was not entirely clear to me how the findings can be transferred and advance resilience as an intra-social sciences concept in more general terms. Instead of numerous rather brief, isolated sections on resilience and other concepts, a more systematic approach to the question of how resilience can fulfil the function of an intra-social science concept would have constituted an even greater contribution.

Third, Bourbeau offers a comprehensive multidisciplinary genealogy of resilience. Indeed, being more inclusive than previous analyses, this chapter fills a gap in existing research that has so far focused on the ecological roots of the resilience concept. A profound knowledge of these roots seems to be a crucial basis for any application of the concept.

Altogether, I would argue that readers in need of guidance for empirical studies on resilience should supplement the book at hand with another publication, offering further elaborations e.g. on how to explain the phenomenon. However, Bourbeau does give his audience the opportunity for an in-depth reflection on resilience. Moreover, the author’s distinction between the logics of persistence, agential self-reliance, and processual duality helps to make sense of the rapidly growing body of research on resilience. In order to grasp these current debates, Bourbeau’s analysis of the emergence of the concept over time is equally helpful. In particular, this genealogy might advance critical scholarship, which has so far focused on the ecological roots of the concept and predominantly understands resilience as a neoliberal strategy of governance.