

## **Rethinking Resilience**

### **Reflections on the Christchurch earthquake and aftershocks**

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#### **Introduction**

Resilience has emerged as a policy response in an era of public concern about disasters and risk including fear of terrorism and environmental catastrophe. Resilience is both a refreshing and a problematic concept. It is refreshing in that it creates new opportunities for interdisciplinary research and vividly reminds us that the material world matters in social life, politics and planning. However resilience is not our only pathway to address environmental, economic and social challenges. Here I argue for expanding our political imagination by drawing on our experiences of compassion as shared vulnerability, and a rich political history of collective struggle for social justice.

#### **What is resilience?**

In defining resilience I note I am standing on very shaky ground. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011, at 12.51pm, Ruaumoko, the god of earthquakes unleashed his devastating energy, killing over 180 people, ‘munting’ the homes of friends and neighbours in my home city of Christchurch, and destroying iconic buildings. The February event was one of a complex series of 7000 aftershocks which have racked Christchurch since 4 September 2010. We have averaged one aftershock over magnitude 5 every 10 days. Each event renews our collective grief and exhaustion. New Zealand’s head of the Reserve Bank, Alan Bollard has described the Christchurch earthquake as "one of the biggest natural disasters in relative terms to befall an OECD country since World War II" (cited in Brett 2011). Residents of Christchurch, like those in Japan who are currently struggling with their own devastating cascade of disasters, don’t need to define resilience, we are simply living it.

However an important definition of resilience in environmental, urban and disaster literature is provided by Carl Folke (2006). Folke traces the roots of resilience to the ecological literature of the 1960’s and 70’s, particularly work by Holling which examined how populations of predators and prey maintained their functions and relationships in the face of sudden shocks and disturbances across time and space. What was significant about this idea was the way it challenged previous assumptions of environmental stability. It implied “that uncertainty and surprise is part of the game and you need to be prepared for it and learn to live with it” (Folke 2006: 255). Since then, ‘resilience thinking’ has inspired a generation of researchers in fields as diverse as ecological- economics and social sciences. The approach is focused less on environmental control, and more on how to cope, adapt and manage over time in an unpredictable, dynamic world (Perrings et al 1992; Constanza et al 1992; Thompson et al 1990; Scoones 1999 and Adger et al 2000).

The lens of resilience is important. It reminds us that in our rapidly urbanizing world we risk losing sight of complex signals of a degrading planet pushed to the limits of its capacity to support our growth (Jackson, 2009; Clark 2011). Folke notes that Adger et al. focused on social resilience,

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<sup>1</sup> A 12 min You Tube talk on resilient citizenship and the Christchurch [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ateZ2\\_z0Ekw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ateZ2_z0Ekw) While they are in no way responsible for errors, I am indebted to Kate Brown Neil Adger, and participants at workshops on rethinking resilience hosted by Tyndall and in 2008 and Sussex 2009 and to Tim Jackson and the Resolve team at teh University of Surrey, and Karen O’Brien and the GEHS group at the University of Oslo.

highlighting ways human communities can withstand a variety of external shocks to their social infrastructure (Adger 2000) while Anderies et al. used the term ‘robustness’ for the ability of a system to maintain ‘desired system characteristics despite fluctuations.’ (Anderies et.al. 2004)

However Folke argues resilience is *not only* about persistence or robustness in the face of disturbance it’s increasingly used as a lens to understand how communities can innovate in the face of complex fast or slow changes, drawing on institutional memory and their ability to self organise, recombine structures and processes, renew systems or find new trajectories. Viewed in this way disturbance creates ‘...opportunity for doing new things, for innovation and for development’ (Folke 2006: 253; also Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Berkes et al., 2003; Adger, 2000).

Whenever a disaster threatens a community, whether it’s a series of slow cumulative, almost imperceptible changes like a change in climate or a sudden cataclysmic event like an earthquake, these challenges test more than our physical resilience. They tear at the fabric of our economies, our democracies and our citizenship. However disaster also brings opportunity for new insight and a chance to rethink basic principles – here I turn to rethink resilience reflecting briefly on our experiences of ongoing grief and disruption in a provincial city experiencing significant aftershocks.

### **Rethinking resilience**

The Latin root for resilience is *salire*, to jump or spring. This concept is captured in the literature of psychology, especially in children’s research. In a review essay for the Scottish Government, the children’s welfare organisation Barnados, defined resilience as: a ‘cross-cultural’ capacity to "bounce back" from adversities... (or to maintain) ‘...*competent functioning despite an interfering emotionality*’. A resilient child is one who exhibits positive adaptation in circumstances where one might expect, due to atypical levels of stress, a significant degradation in coping skills to take place” (Newman and Blackburn 2002). However many commentators including the authors cited note the idea of resilience as a personal quality must be treated with caution. While some stress may be ‘character building’, the expectation of personal resilience can mistakenly imply suffering and grief is a matter of personal responsibility or that vulnerability is failure. The ability to ‘make and sustain intimate friendships, and the availability of support networks of friends, siblings and other important social ties is associated with individual resilience’ (Newman and Blackburn 2002) , yet these qualities are also affected by social, political and economic forces (for example, recession, unemployment, redundancy or war) that may lie well beyond the influence and responsibility of individuals.

Moreover while the definitions of resilience in ecological sciences and psychology capture something of strength I have been privileged to observe in my community this year, the concept fails to capture the subtle strength of compassion (Clark 2010) or the complexity of shared vulnerability. Shelia Jasanoff (2010) argues that tensions inevitably arise whenever ‘impersonal, apolitical and universal concepts’ or models of science are applied to the very political, local and everyday experiences of human life. Anthony Giddens (1986) has also noted a long running tension between those who think it’s appropriate to apply models from natural sciences to help us understand society such as adaptation and social theorists hostile to the use of systems theory to study communities.

In my observation of our local battles to distribute portaloos and information, to restart businesses from shipping containers, or engage in paper wars and telephone tag for insurance claims, some in the community have learned a new language of liquefaction, others shared details of shattered infrastructure or family lives, others have danced, or withdrawn (Brett 2011). Local students lead by Sam Johnson, organised a remarkable facebook campaign growing a communication network in the space of a week from 5000 to 24,000 people and coordinating 10,000 to help clean up the city. Others formed new networks, or supported timebanks and local support groups. Many grieve for the loss of public space but all have experienced life in a way not easily captured in textbook notions of resilience, no matter how finely observed the field work. These complex life experiences are better captured in the tentative humbleness of Japanese philosopher and architect Tanizaki’s essay “In Praise

of *Shadows*<sup>2</sup> or in the political writing on failure and limits of knowledge by theorist Michael Freedon (2009).

Furthermore, as a lens for understanding community, resilience struggles to deal adequately with questions of political power, justice and inequality. Many of the communities most vulnerable to hazards are doubly exposed to economic or social risk (Lechienko and O'Brien 2009). The language of resilience fails to reflect the non material values of lives, like iconic places and cultural treasures (Adger et al 2011). While much resilience literature eschews normative or moral debate-it is important to ask, resilience of what, for whom?

Brown (2011) argues that resilience research is often depoliticised. She notes the World Bank and the World Resources Institute encourage communities to become economically resilient by engaging in a market economy. Yet this strategy can undermine the resilience of indigenous or local economies. Market thinking for growth is so embedded in our policy processes it is very difficult to embark on new trajectories of economic thought (Jackson 2009). Moreover the resilience lens focuses attention on disturbance as if shocks were external to a system. In reality our internal relationships of class, gender or ethnic inequalities exacerbate community vulnerability (O'Brien et al 2009). The depoliticized language of resilience and a case study approach to research can obscure the way economic and power relations are privileged across time and space or underestimate the extent to which transformations of power will require concerted political struggle (Klein 2008, Honig 2009).

Finally in my observation the rhetoric of resilience drives communities to make decisions quickly. In reality political speed comes at a steep democratic price. No one denies the urgent need to house people warmly and provide security as winter descends. However the drive for efficiency is used to justify a governance response of command and control. A new centralised planning authority (the Canterbury Earthquake Response Authority or CERA) was created to replace local elected authorities. Rather than reinvigorating our struggling council by investing in staff and advisors to lift the capacity of elected representatives, democracy was supplanted by professionals. In the process institutional memory was eroded and pre-existing lines of communication disrupted. Most disturbingly it removed effective public accountability and scrutiny. Ironically these responses are the antithesis of resilience planning (Folke, 2006). CERA's one redeeming feature is perhaps the calibre and local popularity of its new Chief Executive, Roger Sutton.

### **Summary: the imaginative politics of shared vulnerability, social justice and collective action.**

Today, citizens, everywhere, young and old, face challenging economic, social and environmental circumstances. To address these effectively we will need political imagination, creativity and courage. We have the chance to act with 'agency', to shape our life circumstances through new habits and practices, acting with purpose, careful reflection and judgement (Emirbayer, and Mische 1998). While many complain that citizens don't or can't take action on long term issues and serious threats, around the world from Tunisia and Spain, to Greece and the pavements of my home town, citizens, particularly young citizens are taking action now (Hayward 2010). This sea-change in political agency is driven in part by the grim economic reality of unemployment, lack of educational opportunities and limited citizen voice in decision making. It's a strong collective protest that is not adequately captured in the research focus of resilience, and it has the potential to challenge the complex drivers which threaten to destabilise our climate, increase social inequality and degrade our environment.

This desire to 'make a difference' is striking (Hayward and Jackson 2011; Hayward et al 2011). If, as a society we wish to help unlock this potential for collective action we don't need to wait for an earthquake. Our first steps might include rethinking our employment and social policies in ways that are more just, reducing the stress of long hours of work, financial insecurity and social isolation.

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Tim Jackson and Midori Aoyangi for drawing my attention to the work of Tanizaki J (1933) *In Praise of Shadows* (1977) Sedgwick, ME: Leete's Island Books.

David Willets has argued that the political clout of the baby boom generation at the ballot box has set the political agenda on a range of issues, including, I suggest, how we define resilience and sustainability. It is the baby boom generation who has benefited from low cost home loans, education, low inflation and ability to travel and global export. Yet, Willets argues, baby boomers have failed to invest in future assets and infrastructure to enable their children to enjoy similar opportunities.

While I agree with Willets, I also think he overlooks two fundamental contributions the baby boom generation has made to our political imagination for collective action and social justice. The movement for women's rights has helped enable the education of generations of young girls and women, a legacy that is as good for the environment as it is for citizen flourishing. Similarly the international environmental and civil right movements and movements for Maori rights and bilingual education here in Aotearoa/New Zealand were examples of collective political action that were not only concerned about the resilience of our conditions of life but aimed to achieve a more just future.

For all their contradictions, the experiences of the baby boom generation serve to remind us that human prosperity and flourishing requires more than resilience. It requires creative political imagination and agency (the ability to take action to shape our life circumstances). Significant transformation is unlikely to be achieved without citizen struggle to regain control of collective political and economic life. Creating new taxation or pension schemes, or forms of social employment and a commission for children with the ability to veto decisions that limit the life chances of future generations, are just some of the changes required. To achieve more significant political transformation in our future we need rather less resilience and more vision- for compassion, social justice and collective action.

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