Rethinking resilience: reflections on the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand 2010 and 2011

Bronwyn Hayward

1School of Political and Social Science, University of Canterbury, New Zealand (UC, New Zealand) – School of Political and Social Sciences, University of Canterbury Private Bag 4800. Christchurch 8140, New Zealand

Abstract

Resilience has emerged as a policy response in an era of public concern about disasters and risk including fear of terrorism and environmental or economic 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 our social lives, political economy and planning. Yet the concept of resilience is also problematic. Widespread, uncritical calls for greater resilience in response to environmental, economic and social challenges by governments and nongovernmental organisations alike, often obscure significant questions of political power, in particular: resilience of what, for whom?

This paper builds on both personal and professional experience of grief, disruption and community protest in the author’s home city of Christchurch New Zealand, a city which experienced 59 earthquakes at magnitude five or more, and over 3800 aftershocks of magnitude 3 or greater between September 2010 and 2012.

Drawing from this perspective, discussion revisits resilience through a critical lens. Discussion examines how the language of resilience was commandeered in a small English speaking, neoliberal democracy to both reinforce dominant assumptions about unsustainable economic growth, and marginalise communities that sought to challenge ongoing injustice and inequality.

In conclusion, the author calls for expanding our political imagination about resilience to include ideas of compassion experienced as shared vulnerability, transitional economics and political resistance forged through ongoing, collective struggles for social-ecological justice, democratic voice, and alternative visions of hope.

Keywords: Collective action, Empowerment, Governance: Justice, participation, Community engagement, Political ecology, Urban resilience

*Speaker

sciencesconf.org:resilience2014:25219