‘Bouncing back’ to capitalism? Grass-roots autonomous activism in shaping discourses of resilience and transformation following disaster

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Resilience has been criticised in many fields for focussing on attempts to bounce back or
maintain the status quo following a disturbance. Such conceptualisations can uphold the
hegemony of discourses of stability and are potentially unhelpful to groups seeking to achieve
radical change. Despite this, the concept is fast subsuming sustainability as the latest catch
phrase for community organisations wishing to address social and environmental injustices.
Grassroots groups are mobilising activism to shape this interpretation through post capitalist
visions - creating alternatives to dominant capitalist narratives in the present. This paper will
discuss the expression of such radical notions of resilience through exploring how activism
intersects with experiences of disaster. Through the case study of Project Lyttelton, a
community organisation at the epicentre of the 22nd February 2011 Christchurch earthquake in
Aotearoa New Zealand, this research examines the potential for a radical notion of resilience to
challenge hegemonic understandings of every day capitalist life. By exploring this tension
between resilience and post capitalist activism, this paper contributes to an emerging area of
critique through articulating a more nuanced understanding of the radical potential for what is
often expressed as an inherently non radical concept.

Keywords: autonomous geographies, resilience, Christchurch earthquake, activism

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Introduction

Resilience is becoming a popular and dominant discourse, not only for disaster recovery and preparedness but for approaching broader social and environmental challenges.¹ The origins of resilience theory speak to a desire to retain the characteristics of an ecological system following a disruption through an ability to absorb and withstand shocks.² More recent theoretical advances seek to align ecological and social systems through Social-Ecological Systems (SES) resilience, including concepts such as adaptation and transformation.³ This theoretical framework has become an increasingly popular approach for anticipating and responding to the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters.⁴


A recent article by MacKinnon and Derickson\textsuperscript{5} deliberately critiques the increase in popularity of resilience, noting that this rise parallels the uptake of resilience based projects and organisations by anti-capitalist activists. This paper complements this work and offers further insight into why and how grassroots organisations mobilise resilience discourses. By acknowledging that the resilience paradigm is now present across both grassroots and top down approaches, this paper seeks to provide an understanding of how one community group is using the term in a radical way to counter-act the dominant status quo. While MacKinnon and Derickson\textsuperscript{6} advise against groups using the resilience concept and framework, the fact remains that many are engaging with these ideas. As critical geographers we feel the need to explore the ways groups are working with and against the concept of resilience, especially when faced with a crisis that requires immediate action.

Many groups using resilience, such as Transition Towns\textsuperscript{1}, plan for the onslaught of crises that are believed will affect the world during the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, yet few have had the chance to act in a time of crisis and put their plans into practice. But the earthquakes of 2010/11 in the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand tested one grassroots organisation, Project Lyttelton\textsuperscript{ii}. This group is a grassroots organisation located in the suburb of Lyttelton in Christchurch, close to the epicentre of the earthquakes. Since the earthquakes in February 2011, Project Lyttelton has been at the forefront of the immediate disaster response and recovery of the town. In this paper, we argue that grassroots groups such as Project Lyttelton are mobilising a radical politics of resilience that has the potential to provide valuable and workable alternatives to the political and economic status quo. Through discussing autonomous activism in a disaster zone, we explore the actions and politics of a group that aims to fundamentally (re)work societal relations through their pursuit of resilience.

This paper draws on qualitative research. In total 7 individuals from Lyttelton, Canterbury, were interviewed face to face or over the phone during June of 2012. A further 8 e-interviews were carried out. E-interviews utilised an open ended questionnaire format to engage individuals in a less time consuming and intense manner.

\textsuperscript{5} MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
given the sensitive nature of research in a post disaster situation. The information
gained from these e-interviews was, in many cases, as detailed as that given in face to
face interviews. Participant identity is protected through the use of numbers which are
indicated following quotes. In addition, websites, social media and a locally published
book containing 32 interview transcripts of individual’s experiences of the earthquake
were analysed (see Evans 2012).

Our research sheds light on the value of resilience as a radical concept while
exploring the value of current critiques. To illustrate our argument we first explore the
differences between mainstream resilience discourses and those mobilised by more
radical discourses of societal change. Following this we discuss the actions of Project
Lyttelton and how they occurred in the context of the 2010/11 earthquakes. Finally, we
assess the potential of actions by groups such as Project Lyttelton to influence
discourses of resilience, prior to, during and following times of crises.

Resilience – to maintain or transform?

There exists widespread ambiguity surrounding a conclusive definition of resilience,
despite the rapid uptake of the concept across a wide array of disciplines. Original
conceptualisations of resilience were instigated in the disciplines of engineering and
physics, and referred to the ability for physical strength to be maintained. In the 1970’s,
work done by Holling developed the more commonly referred to idea of resilience in

7 Harrie Jensen, “The Logic of Qualitative Survey Research and Its Position in the Field of
Social Research Methods”, Open Journal 11, no. 2 (2010).

8 Fikret Berkes, “Understanding Uncertainty and Reducing Vulnerability: Lessons from

9 Rolf Pendall, Kathryn A. Foster, and Margaret Cowell, “Resilience and Regions: Building
Understanding of the Metaphor”, Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society 3, no. 1

10 Holling, “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems”.

7 Harrie Jensen, “The Logic of Qualitative Survey Research and Its Position in the Field of
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10 Holling, “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems”.

relation to biological communities as the ‘ability of these systems to absorb changes of
state variables, driving variables and parameters, and still persist’.\(^{11}\)
The main tenants of SES resilience build on this concept of ecological resilience by
emphasising the ability of a system to absorb and adapt to uncertainty and shifts in
critical thresholds without changing to a different state.\(^{12}\) The inclusion of social
systems has seen the resilience approach diversify and be applied to varying levels of
urban and rural development, including specific communities and cities.\(^{13}\) The aim of
this approach is to interlink systems involving society, the environment and the
economy.\(^{14}\) Accordingly, traits relating to social systems have been incorporated, such
as social learning and memory, various forms of social, human and natural capital,
governance and institutions, and adaptive capacity.\(^{15}\) Despite extensive literature on the
subject, scholars discussing resilience remain surprisingly silent regarding the relevance

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 17.
\(^{12}\) Carl Folke, “Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social-ecological Systems
\(^{13}\) Norris et al., “Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy
for Disaster Readiness”.
\(^{14}\) Lance Gunderson, “Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response to Natural
Disasters”, *Ecology and Society* 15, no. 2 (2010): 18; Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper,
“Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis
\(^{15}\) Folke, “Resilience”; Gunderson, “Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response
to Natural Disasters”.
of politics and culture to existing SES theories despite numerous recent papers raising these critiques.\textsuperscript{16}

To a certain extent SES resilience does not strictly follow earlier definitions of resilience which promote a bounce back approach. This is due to a shift in theory that incorporates the idea of adaptive capacity, or the idea of bouncing forward.\textsuperscript{17} Adaptive capacity involves a framework that acknowledges the multiple, ever changing nature of systems and the need to prepare for uncertainty and make changes in response to disruptions.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, there is evidence discourses that promote the status quo are still expressed through this new perspective, albeit in subtler forms. For example, Pike et al.\textsuperscript{19} note that adaptation can be used to strengthen arguments that advocate for minor changes towards a pre-conceived developmental path.

Another criticism levelled at theories of adaptive capacity is that they fail to consider the ability of individuals to challenge and shift the dominant social, political and economic system.\textsuperscript{20} However, in some instances, adaptive capacity has been used in such a way that emphasises the need to transition or transform a system when the


\textsuperscript{17} Berkes, “Understanding Uncertainty and Reducing Vulnerability: Lessons from Resilience Thinking”.


\textsuperscript{20} Pendall, Foster, and Cowell, “Resilience and Regions”.
current state is considered ‘undesirable’. In this instance, transformational capacity can be considered a more extreme form of change in which a system switches to a completely different developmental path.

Despite the many nuances and interpretations of resilience, adaptive capacity and transformation, there still remains considerable scope for these concepts to be utilised in a way that justifies and maintains the status quo. As a result, resilience is currently being widely used to indicate a desire for social systems and crucial infrastructure to either maintain function or quickly recover from disruptions. The widespread adoption and popularity of SES resilience by government and international organisations in the past decade is a testament to the broad ranging interpretations of the framework. The term ‘resilience’ is now used as a central element of policy for governments, the World Bank, the International Panel for Climate Change and the European Union. Such expansive development is seen as the infiltration of resilience theory into the arena of mainstream politics and culture.

Several commentators have noted that through this infiltration, resilience theory is being co-opted by those whose interests lie in perpetuating neoliberal discourses and governance that privilege existing power relations and contribute to the maintenance of the current, dominant capitalist system. Neoliberalism in this context is defined as an

21 Engle, “Adaptive Capacity and Its Assessment”.

22 Béné et al., “Resilience”.

23 Engle, “Adaptive Capacity and Its Assessment”.


overarching ideology that claims to define not only an ideal economic state but the reality of human nature. Harveys describes neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that liberates individual and entrepreneurial freedoms through encouraging private property rights, free markets and free trade. Yet neoliberal ideologies are not confined to the economic and political sphere, discourses extend beyond commodities to infiltrate everyday lives, shaping individuals as consumers and rational market agents, thus producing neoliberal subjectivities.

The expression of neoliberal discourses and subjectivities may take a different shape and form depending on location, culture and governance. However, Walker and Cooper have noted that resilience discourses are being widely used as a tool to implement neoliberal ideological projects following a crisis. Broadly speaking, these projects are used to justify and motivate actions that increase inequality and disadvantage marginalised communities through the use of market driven rationale. In this context, disasters are seen as opportunities for furthering projects that selectively restructure urban space and social services. Such examples raise questions as to what outcomes state sponsored resilience programmes are aiming for. Cote and Nightingale

Resourcefulness”; Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation”.


28 David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.


30 Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation”.

31 Ibid.
echo this concern stating that when addressing the use of resilience discourses we must ask questions of resilience of what, and for whom?

Discourses of resilience may also be strengthening government initiatives to decentralise and roll back the power of the state through emphasising individual and community responsibility. Under the guise of encouraging community resilience, such policies can take an approach that sees populations left with all responsibility and little power or resources. This approach does not address underlying structural issues of power and inequality that may be contributing to the presence of disruptions or vulnerability. Such a dynamic is demonstrated in the British Government’s ‘Big Society’ project, as outlined by MacKinnon and Derickson, who argue that this focus on localism and community seeks to further market rationalising discourses and remove the government’s role from the provision of state services. Indeed these applications of resilience appear to be used to perpetuate such policies which may have a negative effect on the resources available to communities.

While this progression of neoliberalism and resilience has been emerging, groups concerned with challenging dominant societal structures and systems have also been mobilising resilience as part of a different ideological approach. In this articulation of resilience, aspects of adaptive capacity and transformation have the potential to defy discourses of bouncing back or forward and lend strength to anti-capitalist activist projects. Thus resilience is regarded as the strength of communities rather than the aim to maintain dominant economic and political systems. This is considered by some groups as the ability for their alternatively organised community to ‘ride out the waves of change’ resulting from outside ‘shocks’ that can occur as a result of unsustainable

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32 Cote and Nightingale, “Resilience Thinking Meets Social Theory Situating Social Change in Socio-ecological Systems (SES) Research”.

33 MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.


35 MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.
In order to do so, groups engaged in this alternative articulation of resilience largely carry out localisation activities to improve the conditions of their community and environment such as; establishing systems of co-operative ownership and management, nurturing social capital and networks, encouraging sustainability, and implementing practical projects based around food, energy and care in the community. Through these activities based around resilience, the argument can be made that such organisations are challenging the dominant values and norms of society. Transition Towns are one example of a grassroots movement utilising resilience as a vehicle for imagining and creating alternatives to mainstream society. Resilience is considered desirable in this context as it converges with concepts of sustainability to create a platform that addresses the interconnected nature of environmental issues and disasters in a global context. The Transition Town movement is strongly based around the philosophy of relocalisation, or the desire to encourage community economies and

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relations based on the scale of the local\textsuperscript{40} Transition Towns in particular carry this out by drawing on 7 core principles to promote their activities, one of which is embracing resilience.\textsuperscript{41}

One issue that arises from this use of resilience is the limits of the relocalisation philosophy for informing grassroots strategies. Concepts of local, place and community are socially constructed and variable but have risen in prominence as a way of countering the perceived homogenisation and disempowerment associated with globalisation.\textsuperscript{42} However, it is important not to assume an inherent relationship between the global and negative outcomes and the local with positive. As North\textsuperscript{43} elucidates, there is great complexity underlying the social and environmental costs and benefits of local and global trade and relations. While this is the case, there is widespread concern that the power relations involved in shaping discourses of local can also lead to exclusion and isolation of difference within a community.\textsuperscript{44} This is a pertinent issue for several reasons. First, ideas of place identity are commonly contested post disaster where the assumed static nature of physical symbols of place are compromised, increasing tensions that often surround recovery and rebuilding


\textsuperscript{41} Connors and McDonald, “Transitioning Communities: Community, Participation and the Transition Town Movement”.

\textsuperscript{42} R. Feagan, “The Place of Food: Mapping Out the ‘Local’ in Local Food Systems,” \textit{Progress in Human Geography} 31, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 23–42,

\textsuperscript{43} North, "Eco-localisation as a progressive response to peak oil and climate change–a sympathetic critique."

strategies.\textsuperscript{45} Second, many socio-ecological resilience frameworks discuss the importance of social support and diversity.\textsuperscript{46} If the construct of place and local are being used to shape groups aiming for resilience, it is conceivable that issues will arise around how perceptions of place affect some resilience capacities.

Project Lyttelton, while not explicitly a Transition Town, follows a similar re-localisation philosophy through working as a democratic grassroots environmental and social change community group. The organisation is self-described as ‘an inspiration and a model for communities wishing to build community resilience and sustainability through innovative projects and collective creativity’.\textsuperscript{47} Whilst aiming for these goals, Project Lyttelton has established numerous projects such as a highly successful Farmer’s Market, a timebank\textsuperscript{\textit{iii}}, a community garden, film nights, a fundraising platform for other community organisations and a community owned and run food co-operative.

As Lyttelton was located directly over the epicentre of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} February 2011 earthquake that hit the Canterbury region, the town suffered widespread destruction and disruption including loss of life. In addition, Lyttelton’s transport routes were damaged, geographically isolating the town for several days. During this time the group played a significant role in supporting the community, providing volunteers and engaging with participatory elements of the local government rebuild process. Project Lyttelton has used this experience to learn how to cope and provide support during a disaster and have established a new project titled the ‘Harbour Resilience Project’. This project seeks to improve the resilience of the whole harbour region by focussing largely on food security and building skills in the community.


\textsuperscript{46} Norris et al., “Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness.”

\textsuperscript{47} Hall, “Project Lyttelton - Our Story” (Project Lyttelton, 2009), 3.
MacKinnon and Derickson\textsuperscript{48} acknowledge the alternative way groups such as Project Lyttelton are engaging with resilience but they argue this is not the best way for groups to challenge hegemonic societal norms. What emerged from the Project Lyttelton case study is that while the way resilience is being used at a governmental and global level is deeply troubling (see MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012 and Walker and Cooper 2011), the concept is increasingly being used as a key term for strategic purposes by community groups. Drawing on ‘resilience’, groups can gain access to funding and political buy in for activities that seek to empower local communities and shift norms and values. More importantly, there is evidence to suggest that the activities promoted in Lyttelton as resilience building do in fact challenge the dominant way that society operates. The following explores interview data that shows how Project Lyttelton engaged with resilience in a way that contests power relations and social structures to create and envisage workable alternatives to capitalist society.

\textbf{The Role of Autonomous Activism in Resilience:}

Grassroots groups, such as Transition Towns, challenge dominant societal discourses by localising social, political and economic interdependencies, in order to respond at a community level to the triple threats of peak oil, climate change and financial crises.\textsuperscript{49} These geographies of autonomous activism are often complex, contested, and revolve for the large part around the identities of activists and activist groups.\textsuperscript{50} Autonomous activists desire to use creativity and resistance as tools to imagine and embody alternatives to neoliberal, capitalist lifestyles through the practices of everyday life,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{48}MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{49}Connors and McDonald, “Transitioning Communities: Community, Participation and the Transition Town Movement”; Kelvin Mason and Mark Whitehead, “Transition Urbanism and the Contested Politics of Ethical Place Making,” \textit{Antipode} (February 2011): no–no.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{50}Chatterton and Pickerill, “Everyday Activism and Transitions Towards Post-Capitalist Worlds”}
challenging discourses of consumption, market provision and work.\textsuperscript{51} Gibson-Graham\textsuperscript{52} note that joining these groups engages individuals in a ‘politics of becoming’ and discourses of self-transformation as well as the creation of physical projects. They liken the actions these community groups are undertaking to second wave feminism which offered new practices of the self that resulted in the possibility for new discourses to emerge in the everyday lives of women.\textsuperscript{53} Likewise, Transition Towns and groups with similar aims are enacting discourses of transformation and alternative futures that challenge neoliberal values and norms through efforts to strengthen community, localise food and energy security and improve local resilience.

Though autonomous movements are often aligned with philosophies that seek to build community resilience through familiar, everyday activities, the disruptions that test resilience constitute the deeply unfamiliar in that they are not usually part of everyday life. Consequently, many groups aiming for resilience have yet to experience their capacities in this manner. However, during the Canterbury 2010/11 earthquakes, Project Lyttelton’s resilience capabilities were tested.

\textit{Fostering Resilience Capacities:}

Despite the hardships experienced in Lyttelton from the disaster, the town became well known for its community spirit and ability to pull through the disaster. Several Project Lyttelton activities became integral to the disaster response in both formal and informal ways. Indeed, the existence of Project Lyttelton and activities such as the timebank were considered one of the reasons that Lyttelton as a community coped better than other communities:

\begin{quote}
It has fared better than other areas…because [of] those close knit [relationships], that resilience was already there, it wasn’t scrambled together after the earthquakes, it was in place before (6).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} J. K. Gibson-Graham, \textit{A Postcapitalist Politics} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
Here, resilience that is already there is seen as the ability for people to come together and rally around each other to receive and provide support.⁵⁴

The timebank became integrated with the local Civil Defence headquarters resulting in a network of individuals in the community who provided disaster relief alongside traditional providers such as the Navy and the Fire Service. Thus the timebank created an organised civilian division of the disaster response:

They’d have these briefing sessions every day…and timebanking’s skill was being able to have the ability to link people very quickly and so you’d send out broadcasts… people would read the broadcasts and then self-select (2).

As a result, the timebank was able to check on over 300 elderly people, provide childcare, provide minor household repairs and help establish a ‘meals on wheels’ system that fed vulnerable people for months following the quakes. These actions instigated by Project Lyttelton helped re-establish community life and showed the value of resilience actions that encourage individuals to regain a degree of control over their surroundings following a disaster.⁵⁵

Projects that promote the resilience capacities of social learning and adaptation were also utilised. Social learning involves the ability of societies and communities to retain and build on lessons learnt as a result of disruptive events.⁵⁶ Project Lyttelton has addressed this through several projects which seek to challenge the status quo and provide resilience in the event of future disruptions. The Harbour Resilience Project (HRP) is one such project. Project Lyttelton was able to secure funding for the HRP which has already established a local food store that runs on a co-operative business


⁵⁶ Gunderson, “Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response to Natural Disasters”.
model (2). Furthermore, the HRP plans to set up a resilience centre dedicated to
community education and the practical implementation of improving food security for
the region:

The main components [of the resilience centre] would be an organic farm which
could then sell produce at the farmers market and the coop and within a
community supported agriculture scheme…[and] a display of sustainable
housing solutions… (7)

This learning centre will act as a physical repository of social memories and learning
from the earthquakes as well as providing practical advice and skills to visitors. The
multi sector approach to the project will be likely to strengthen the community and their
responses to future events through collaboration and adaption.57 In projects such as the
HRP and timebank, resilience has provided a useful framework for the organisation to
respond to the disaster by focussing on uncertainty, change, social support and
adaptation.

Shifting Norms and Dominant Discourses:

Project Lyttelton activities combined with the experience of the February
earthquake not only provided support for the community but also strengthened the
group’s motivation to enact alternative futures and further work towards shifting
societal norms. For example, timebanks value different strengths and skills in the same
way -no one skill is considered more valuable than another.58 This results in skills and
roles that are not traditionally valued in a monetary sense, such as domestic child care,
being valued through the collection of time credits that can be ‘spent’ on other
services.59 The Lyttelton timebank appears to have contributed to shifting the norms in

57 Claudia Pahl-Wostl et al., “Social Learning and Water Resources Management”, *Ecology and
Society* 12, no. 2 (2007).


59 Ibid.
the community. One participant noted how important this was after each major earthquake:

You’ve already got a community that really knows each other and…is used to asking [for] and receiving help. So you can start to get the help that people need really, really, quickly…and people can volunteer really quickly and easily. There’s no stigma in saying ‘oh I’m on my own, can someone come and help me put my house back together’ because that’s a normal thing to ask before the earthquakes so it just normalised the whole thing (6).

Gibson-Graham\textsuperscript{60} agrees that these projects can shift dominant societal values by fostering small scale shifts in the conception of what is possible. These actions do not require higher level transformations, although they do, in many cases prelude such patterns. Another example of challenging societal values is the Harbour Resilience Project share stall, where individuals bring excess food or produce and leave it in a covered stall. People then take what they want or need. One participant noted with amusement that:

It’s kind of encouraging a culture of sharing basically I think we’re not that used to it…It’s working pretty well…I think quite a lot of people really appreciate it and it was also nice to see puzzled faces, like when they were just like oh is this free to take? (7).

In a society that values individualism and monetary exchange, these localised economic shifts may indicate a change in values that could potentially challenge dominant discourses around ‘help’, reciprocity and the provisions of the market. Harris\textsuperscript{61}, who analysed alternative food networks, agrees, stating that activism that cultivates thought outside of normalising neoliberal discourses of market rationales and individualism is integral for effective change to be envisioned and realised.

As a result of the earthquakes Project Lyttelton has also been part of the creation of a food co-operative. The food co-operative is owned by a group of individuals who live in and around Lyttelton. The project was launched following the February earthquake as a result of the single grocery store in the town facing closure due to

\textsuperscript{60} Gibson-Graham, \textit{A Postcapitalist Politics}.

\textsuperscript{61} Harris, “Neoliberal Subjectivities or a Politics of the Possible?”. 
earthquake damage. After the event the town had no grocery store for several months. The lack of a supermarket left the town vulnerable in future crisis events as the geographical barriers of the hills could result in the community being isolated for several days without access to food supplies (as occurred on the February 22nd 2011).

Thus, the Harbour Co-op has been established to explicitly enhance the resilience of the town in the case of another earthquake, but also as a wider response to re-localise food supply and production in the region (2).

The latest project we’ve got is a direct result of the earthquake. Because the tunnel was closed, [we realised] that we could be cut off. So it’s making us realise that we need to look at how we can be resilient by ourselves (7).

In this case, the establishment of the Harbour Co-op has had several outcomes. First, the store is owned and run by the community and the individuals who shop there. This model is significantly different to the dominant neoliberal mode of food production which relies on globalised corporate supply:

Part of [resilience] is the whole harbour Co-op thing, so that you’ve got your own food place there that is owned by the community. And it certainly is owned by the community. I mean how many people put money into the harbour Co-op? 500 I think…that’s a big group of people (5).

The Co-op presents a different way of doing business that runs on democratic organisation, re-localising profits and providing proceeds from the store back to the owners and community. The store also supports local producers and potentially contributes to lower environmental food footprints through promoting local and sustainably produced food in combination with the Project Lyttelton run Farmers Market. These autonomous activist projects that radicalise everyday aspects of life show the value that a resilience approach can bring to a community group. Through envisioning the needs and desires of the community through everyday life and the

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62 Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California.”

possibilities that arise out of a crisis, the Harbour Co-op has established an alternative to the capitalist business model in the community.64

**Power, Autonomy and Self Reliance:**

Another trait that Project Lyttelton’s activities appear to have nurtured within residents of Lyttelton is that of self-reliance. Participants noted that residents of the town cultivated an atmosphere of autonomy following the earthquakes. Feeling empowered within the community led individuals to take control over elements of the community response without requiring consent from those in power. Examples of this included stories of people who started clearing debris or repairing community assets without ‘official’ permission (2, 4). Within Lyttelton these stories cultivated an attitude that suggested that the residents were empowered to take the fate of their community into their own hands. These actions aimed to aid support systems in the community.

However, there is a danger that such a desire for autonomy and control can be used for what Peck and Tickell 65 describe as ‘responsibility without power’ whereby governments and institutions support policies that roll back the responsibilities of the state. This leaves communities with more responsibility but less funding and resources to carry out previously provided services.66 However interactions between Project Lyttelton, the wider Lyttelton community and government organisations show that rather than accepting sole responsibility for the well-being of the community and shunning the role of the government, individuals are, following the earthquakes, attempting to hold centralised political structures to account and work in negotiation:

We live here, we know what these things are… So people here approached the council and said we don’t want to be consulted anymore we want partnership and the council didn’t quite know what partnership meant (2).

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64 Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

65 “Neoliberalizing Space”, 386.

66 MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.
The same participant also acknowledged and linked these political struggles to the wider dominant capitalist discourses of mainstream society that their activities are attempting to challenge:

People [in Lyttelton] are stroppy they’ll go and say no, no we’d don’t want that, we want this …and I think the way the world has been going through capitalist consumerist society, we’ve tended to numb people [from] thinking (2).

Here the interviewee indicates that far from abdicating responsibility solely to the government or the community, individuals are becoming aware of the power dynamics at play in the complex interactions between politics and everyday communities. In many ways the group’s activities decentralise power in the community resulting in local residents taking action towards their own future post disaster, while simultaneously seeking to hold government and other centralised power structures to account. This approach takes into consideration a much more nuanced reality of social relations, power and policies in their struggle for resilience.

Obviously Project Lyttelton does not reject the dominant capitalist model in its entirety – the Harbour Co-op and Farmers Market operate as businesses that exchange goods for monetary currency, and the organisation itself hires and employs members of the community. However the difference is that these projects are run democratically as community owned and operated entities which re-invest profits back into the community. Through engaging in such activities which are creating tangible alternatives to dominant capitalist practices, Project Lyttelton is using resilience as a platform to extend these ideas and shift societal norms.

The Future of Resilience?

Community and activist groups engaging with resilience often do so in a way that seeks to build, from the ground up, a transformative alternative to capitalism. Their aim is to create communities which can resist disruptions from environmental, economic or political crises. A disaster as a time of crisis is an opportunity for such groups to take

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control during a momentary lapse in dominant capitalist life. Through the case study of
Project Lyttelton there are several examples of resilience being used as a framework for
building a working alternative to current capitalist norms and discourses. The first is the
implementation of projects such as the timebank that actively shift social relationships
and norms from individualism to community and reciprocity. The experiences of
participants in these projects, during the series of earthquakes, show how ideas of
resilience can increase the support available to a community during a crisis. Second,
Project Lyttelton’s activities are actively building and experimenting with physical and
practical alternatives to everyday capitalist life. The experience of disaster, influenced
by ideas of resilience, has supported the community in extending these projects
following the earthquakes. Finally, the earthquakes provided an interesting insight into
how communities which have been self-organising respond during a crisis. In the case
of Lyttelton an attitude of autonomy was nurtured which encouraged people to take
control in the absence of governing organisations. Following the immediate disaster
response phase individuals in the town have been negotiating the restructuring of power
relations with government through their participation, or lack thereof in official
processes.

From this case study we can see that despite the worrying application of
resilience theory at certain levels of governance and policy, the way grassroots groups
are mobilising resilience may prove useful to create workable alternatives to capitalism.
The most obvious element of existing resilience theory that co-exists with autonomous
desires for societal change is that of social learning and transformation. If a community,
nation or organisation does not learn how to adapt and shift with the challenges they
face then it can be argued that their vulnerability to future disturbances will plateau or
increase. As with most theories, this principle can be interpreted in several ways. The
way that Project Lyttelton appears to interpret this is to respond to future concerns
through interpreting and identifying the layers of instability in the political and social
system as is expressed through the earthquake recovery process. In one participant’s
view:

   everything else that goes on with the rebuild and recovery is impacting on that
ability to be resilient and go forward and for it to be a positive thing and to

\[68\] Tobin, “Sustainability and Community Resilience”.
rebuild better…I think that lack of information, that lack of accountability, transparency out of local government and [Parliament] is a real concern [for future resilience] (5)

Project Lyttelton uses resilience, in a way which emphasises political and cultural understandings in order to use the concept for its potential to advocate for pre-emptive, transformative change in the face of encroaching social and environmental issues. While theorists and academics debate the implications of using certain frameworks, a number of groups such as Project Lyttelton are working at a grassroots level to interpret resilience in a way that suits their aims – to build alternatives to capitalist society.

MacKinnon and Derickson⁶⁹ suggest that grassroots activist groups employ the alternative concept of ‘resourcefulness’. While it is important to critique and suggest alternatives to neoliberal discourses, especially in the face of increasing inequalities and increased marginalisation in communities, we question the need to design a new framework, with a different title, that shares concepts used in the interpretation of resilience by grassroots groups. Resourcefulness as a concept has many cross overs with the broad interpretation of grassroots resilience. For instance, autonomous activism, Transition Towns and Project Lyttelton all put a large emphasis on skills and technical knowledge. This is illustrated by the push to reinvigorate traditional skills to enact alternatives to current day society, but also through the way in which Project Lyttelton has become adept in small scale governance and fundraising. These similarities can also be seen between the reskilling movement in Transition Towns and the resourcefulness model’s emphasis on indigenous and ‘folk’ knowledge. This case study shows that in this instance, while resilience is being used as the framework, similar elements of ‘resourcefulness’ are also being engaged albeit under a different title.

In addition, resilience has become a term with increasing political and popular buy-in. In Project Lyttelton’s case, through pushing an openly resilience based agenda they have been able to secure funding for projects that subtly yet surely seek to build alternative futures. As a member of Project Lyttelton claimed:

So [the Ministry for Social Development] start up and go ‘so there are different definitions of resilience’ and I thought – who cares? … Some of the things like resilience we just use that word because it seems to currently cover what we’re

⁶⁹ MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.
doing. We’re not that hung up on what it means… We in Lyttelton are quite good at surfing the wave and knowing where we want to go but also knowing what the keywords are (16).

As well as securing funding through these means, Project Lyttelton has become a model community serving as inspiration for other groups seeking to relocalise and improve resilience. Main organisers of the organisation speak regularly at events across New Zealand and internationally. Following the earthquakes, their profile, and use of resilience, has risen further, with media coverage and an exhibition of the group’s post disaster street art at the National Museum Te Papa in Wellington (2,5).

While Project Lyttelton has achieved remarkable success in their activities at a local scale, there are likely to be many similar groups operating under resilience visions that do not know about or acknowledge the issues of power and inequalities. It is also likely there are many ways in which Project Lyttelton could improve their activities in the community. However, what this case shows is that the verdict on resilience as a framework for grassroots activists is not clear cut. Critiquing resilience at a theoretical level is indeed a valuable and much needed process. However, a constructive dialogue with grassroots practitioners is also required. It is our concern that strongly opposing grassroots activist work through academically situated criticism could ostracise those working for social and environmental change in communities. As critical geographers we want to provide insight that is useful at both the academic and grassroots level. To this end we believe that there are significant issues with resilience concepts in that they are undoubtedly being used to push a neoliberal policy agenda that sacrifices the wellbeing of communities and places additional stress on social and environmental concerns. However, a radical mobilisation of resilience appears to be occurring. As exemplified in this paper, grassroots groups are using resilience as a way to gain purchase for their actions that aim to deconstruct capitalist norms through radicalising the everyday. Through Project Lyttelton’s experiences in the earthquakes in Canterbury

in 2010/11 we can see how ideas of resilience have pushed the boundaries of neoliberal norms and contributed to the scaling up of ‘resilience’ projects that also challenge mainstream societal values such as the Harbour Co-op and the Harbour Resilience Project.

REFERENCES:


http://www.transitiontownstotnes.org/about/what-is-transition/what-is-resilience/.


Transition Towns are community groups based around a re-localisation philosophy as a reaction to the threats of peak oil, climate change and financial collapse. Transition Towns often carry out locally based actions such as community gardens, alternative currencies and awareness raising activities.

Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced over 12,000 of earthquakes in the past three years. 4 major events have occurred, with earthquakes over magnitude 6.0 on the Richter scale, one in 2010 in September of 7.1magnitude and three in 2011 in February, June and December. The February 22nd earthquake was the most destructive resulting in the loss of 181 lives and widespread damage to buildings and infrastructure.

Timebanks are an alternative currency which operates on the basis of earning credits for labour, skills or teaching that can then be exchanged by the individual for other services. Timebanks operate on the philosophy that every individual has valued skills and these should be traded at equal value.
Civil Defence is the colloquially referred to local emergency management centres and response as part of the New Zealand Ministry for Civil Defence and Emergency Management.