What is generated through rupture?

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Abstract
Our commentary explores the contested possibilities of rupture, disaster, and emergency, and reflects on growing fears around political extremism. Rupture as theorised by Mahanty et al. captures the generative potential that arises through the conditions of the Anthropocene. We emphasise the political ambiguity of these processes and their potential to spur progressive possibility as well as political change that leans towards oppression and violence. We discuss how rupture can be purposefully catalysed or co-opted as a political tool by actors with starkly different aims, underscoring the importance of understanding the types of ruptures being generated and for whom these processes of change serve.

Keywords
Activism, crisis, disaster politics, emergency, resilience

Introduction
There is no doubt that we are living through a time of cascading crises. As the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, the projected disasters of the Anthropocene will not occur within discrete timeframes or scales. Our repertoire for thinking through, and responding to, periods of drastic nature-society change needs to adapt to conceptualise the momentous transformations under way. Mahanty et al.’s article is therefore welcome and necessary, as it firmly places rupture as a core concept to understand this intense and adverse change.

In this short response, we expand on their contribution by exploring the interfaces of rupture with disaster and emergency politics. We take as a starting point their contention that ruptures occur ‘in places and as episodes of time’ (p. 3). As such, our response is situated in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where we both live, and the overlapping tectonic, climactic, and societal ruptures that have shaped the political landscape of the last decade. Drawing on our research and reflecting on growing fears around the far right, we consider how the various lenses of rupture, disaster, and emergency expand our understanding of the crisis-laden present and futures yet-to-come. We
do not seek to differentiate rupture from these ideas, but rather posit that a theoretical framing of rupture is further strengthened through engaging with the complexity of emergency and disaster.

**Rupture and a politics of post-disaster possibility**

Situated along the Pacific ‘Ring of Fire’, the landscape of Aotearoa is continuously shaped by geological processes of change. While often slow, the severity of these forces can spur periods of intense disruption. In Ōtautahi Christchurch, a series of devastating earthquakes shook the city between 2010 and 2012, resulting in the loss of 185 lives and irrevocably altering the landscape of the city and the communities within it. Both of our lives, as individuals and as academics, have been shaped by these forces.

The abrupt violence of an earthquake lends itself to contrasts between the perceived normality of ‘before’ and the disruption of ‘after’—a rupture in everyday life. One of the earliest works in disaster studies describes life following disaster as becoming like ‘molten metal’ that enters a ‘state of flux’ (Prince, 1920: 20). In the midst of destruction, there is a need to explore the spaces of possibility provoked in such times of rupture. As Cretney (2019: 504) argues, there is a rich multiplicity of politics that emerge in these contexts, particularly those at the localised and everyday scale, that ‘attempt to disrupt, restructure and experiment with the political and economic configuration of society’. Rancière’s theorisation of politics is also helpful. Disruptions to the perceived ‘natural’ police order, such as periods of drastic nature-society change, confront assumed ways of functioning and governing, generate new political imaginaries, and potentially open space for proper political moments (Cretney, 2019). Such ideas offer an opportunity to expand conceptualisations of agency to the more-than-human. For example, Booth and Williams (2014: 189) describe uncontained wildfires as provoking a ‘huge, sweeping, potentially brutal re-configuration within which areas, selves, roles and wherewithal are disrupted and redistributed on more-than-human terms’.

However, what is generated through ruptures is uncertain, as the potential for progressive change arises at the interface of existing power structures and the persistent injustices of colonisation and capitalism. In Christchurch, the earthquakes brought new actors and ways of collective being to the fore as the limits of existing institutions were exposed. Grassroots organisations acted to intervene in the political and physical landscape to re-politicise recovery and have had an enduring impact on the city. Yet alongside this, a number of depoliticising tactics foreclosed dissent and contestation, including through the centralisation of power and neoliberal market-driven rhetoric that marginalised some forms of Indigenous and community participation (Cretney, 2019; Phibbs et al., 2015).

Rupture, then, can be the grounds for cultivating progressive change, but it can also entrench the status quo. What is particularly valuable about Mahanty et al.’s contribution is that it opens up a productive space to explore how these contested dynamics of possibility interact with ongoing ruptures at different scales and temporalities. Disasters have long been framed as unexpected interruptions, prompting responses that seek to facilitate a temporal ‘loop back’ to pre-disaster ‘normality’. Yet crisis rarely, if ever, fits within discrete bounds. As Mahanty et al. note, crisis moments emerge across scales and through the accumulation of slow violence, facilitating irreversible effects that ripple through nature-society. Such theorising is vital to grappling with the overlapping crises that are increasingly part of the everyday condition of the Anthropocene.

**The interface of rupture and emergency**

The earthquakes in Christchurch were just one of many crises that unfolded across the city in the past decade, including floods, wildfire, devastating terrorist attacks at local mosques, and a global pandemic. It was in this context of compounding crises that two local governing authorities declared an ecological and climate emergency following advocacy from local activist groups. The
particularity of emergency declarations being made in the context of a city that has withstood a multitude of recent crises speaks to the ways in which rupture intersects with the contested politics of emergency.

The response to moments of intense nature-society change has often been through the lens of a ‘state of exception’ that requires extraordinary measures. While enabling rapid action, emergency also contains risks, which came to the fore following the Christchurch earthquakes, but have also been a focal point for debates about climate emergency declarations (Nissen and Cretney, 2022). In prioritising urgency over social justice, emergency holds dangers of excessive use or abuse of executive powers and may provide fertile ground for regressive politics, particularly if democratic norms are to be frequently suspended in the crisis-laden landscape of the Anthropocene. Emergency powers have acted as a direct tactic of oppression of Indigenous and minority communities, and their further use during moments of rupture may amplify these injustices (Whyte, 2020).

Yet as Honig (2009) notes, just as there are a variety of emergencies, so too are there a variety of approaches to emergency. A range of non-state actors have adopted emergency claims to make vivid the unbearable conditions woven into the everyday, such as an unfolding crisis or slow violence. These emergency claims hold human agency at their core; the hope that action taken now will avert catastrophe or at least prevent harm to something valued and at risk (Anderson et al., 2020; Cretney and Nissen, 2022). In this sense, emergency provides a language to articulate the gradual processes that Mahanty et al. note shape different future imaginaries and thus feed into the generative potential of rupture.

Important expressions of emergency are the multi-dimensional interface with rupture: moments of rupture can generate particular forms of emergency politics, but so too can emergency claims be used with an aim of generating rupture. Our research shows how climate activists used emergency declarations as an attempt to catalyse rupture to instigate radical change in the absence of a single triggering event but rather in the embedded violence of the climate crisis (Cretney and Nissen, 2022). So while rupture is a dynamic process as described by Mahanty et al., our work suggests that rupture is also a process that non-state actors can seek to catalyse. Emergency claims are one way in which rupture might be provoked, but there are undoubtedly other avenues through which groups may purposefully seek to utilise rupture as a political tool to generate change.

**Catalysing and co-opting rupture**

A common thread across critical emergency and disaster studies is the political ambiguity of crisis-prompted change, in that it holds the potential to spur both radical possibility as well as regressive politics. In this final section we want to underscore that this ambiguity also extends to rupture. We support Mahanty et al.’s premise that processes of rupture can be generative spaces for progressive responses to the multiple crises of the Anthropocene. However, rather than something that bends ‘towards justice’ (p. 28), we would caution that processes of rupture can be capitalised on by very different groups with starkly different aims. The risk of focusing largely on the progressive elements of rupture and agency is that it can obscure these other mobilisations. Progressive change can emerge in the ‘ruins’ of capitalism (p. 7), but so too can interests that seek to disrupt democracy, erode human rights, and impel political change that leans toward oppression and violence.

In particular, we have been increasingly troubled by the adoption of a language of rupture within extremist groups on issues around the Covid-19 response. In New Zealand, opposition to the government pandemic response has grown substantially, influenced by different social movements, including those of the far right. The growing influence of the far right on local and national scale politics reached fever pitch in February 2022 with a 23 day occupation or ‘siege’ of parliament grounds, which coalesced around rejection of public health measures, augmented through disinformation and conspiracy theories, and culminated in a riot.

While these emerging political dynamics are fraught with nuance, we would make two brief
observations in relation to rupture to encourage further engagement with the complex dynamics of crisis-prompted change. First, it is notable that the individuals and organisations variously aligned with the far right discuss their aims in terms of the potential arising from moments of drastic disruption. For example, following the occupation an email sent to supporters of one of these groups, Voices for Freedom, articulates a call to ‘absolutely disrupt and rip to pieces our local council’, with an ultimate aim of making the country ‘ungovernable’ (Cleave and Penfold, 2022). Such statements underscore how rupture can be envisioned and purposefully provoked by actors that are far from progressive, and in a manner that is not solely focused on reasserting state authority and power.

Second, we would note the use of the term resilience by these groups—a term closely intertwined with discussions of disaster, emergency, and rupture. While often oversimplified as a desire to ‘bounce back’ to the status quo, resilience is demonstrative of tensions between processes of change and perceptions of normality. Like the contested politics of emergency, the polarised use of resilience ranges from a tool of securitisation and marginalisation to potentially progressive change (Cretney, 2014). Yet here too we can see its mobilisation by vastly different interests. In the context of the far right in Aotearoa, Voices for Freedom leaders in a range of forums have noted the organisation is ‘setting up systems of resilience so that we will never again be subject to the whim of tyrannical leaders’ (Cleave and Penfold, 2022). Embedded in this combined mobilisation of ideas of rupture and resilience is a particular approach to change in which drastic disruption allows for the enactment of a particular form of society. This approach is not exclusive to the far right, but its use by these groups points to the dangers that can underlie the purposeful utilisation of crisis, and indeed rupture. The risk, as Mahanty et al. note, is that ‘spaces of rupture tend to mirror and reproduce social and political inequality’ (p. 12). Attempts to provoke rupture therefore intersect with the complex context of the Anthropocene and its ongoing trajectories of colonisation and capitalism, and have potential to generate or perpetuate tactics of oppression and violence.

To conclude, we would emphasise the importance of understanding the types of ruptures being provoked and for whom these processes of change serve. We see Mahanty et al.’s contribution in this context as vital in emphasising the need for grounded understandings of the complex and intertwined dynamics that produce ruptures in diverse and localised contexts. Rupture captures the generative potential layered through the present condition but its implications are politically ambiguous, cultivating space for both radical possibility as well as regressive change. In a time of multiple and cascading crises, Mahanty et al.’s contribution provides an important entry to these discussions and we look forward to further engaging with robust and grounded understandings of the processes that coalesce through rupture.

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