

Insurgent politics amid Hong Kong's existential crisis

A new politics born out of the old

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August 30, 2019

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Even in a city like Hong Kong, where mass protests are commonplace, it is undeniable that the current resistance sparked by the government's introduction of legislation to allow extradition to China is historic in scale and substance. For the past few months, there have been protests with attendances in the millions, almost daily confrontations with riot police, "non-cooperation movement" involving acts of civil disobedience targeting Hong Kong's infrastructure, a general strike, and even multiple suicides as political acts, with no end in sight. The protest movement has coalesced around five demands: withdrawal of the extradition bill, retraction of the riot designation for the June 12 protests,¹ amnesty for arrested protesters, inquiry into police conduct, and implementation of universal suffrage.²

Unfortunately, the coverage of these struggles both in the West and in China have been marred by oversimplification. There have been ongoing attempts by people to impose narratives on to an amorphous and divergent protest movement. For example, Western media and Chinese state media have been inundated with images of Hong Kong protesters flying colonial and American flags, despite flag bearers representing a small segment of the crowds. For Western far-right activists, it shows that the Hong Kong protest movement is serving as a flashpoint for the defeat of communism, "[a]s Berlin was to the Cold War." For the Chinese state and its supporters, these flags are evidence that the protests are symptomatic of a colonial mindset instilled by British colonizers and mobilized by Western forces.

Lost in the coverage is the fact that the waving of these flags have not gone unopposed. During a protest at the Wan Chai police headquarters on June 21, protesters chanted "take back the flag" at a colonial Hong Kong flag bearer who had climbed up a fence. Posters on LIHKG, a message board that has served as the main organizing platform for the protests, have also consistently criticized Western flag bearers. Conversely, the British colonial regime and its political framework is perpetuated in Hong Kong's current governance model—not in opposition to but intertwined with the Chinese state. Many of Hong Kong's Chief Executives and high ranking police officers have been inherited from the colonial government, as have police tactics and technology.³

The imposition of narratives by outside forces, including various regimes and capitalists, has been a consistent feature of Hong Kong's existence, with Hong Kong's *raison d'être* limited to that of an interface between China and global capital, or a pawn for geopolitical conflict. But Hong Kongers are fighting back and staking a claim for self-definition. One of the more prominent slogans of these protests has been Bruce Lee's "be water," a call for protesters to be adaptive to changing conditions. But Bruce Lee also reminds us that water does not just flow, it "can crash." Just as water crashes against the shore, slowly eroding cliff faces, imposed narratives are being eroded away by the tenacity, organicity, and participatory nature of the protest movement,

¹ The riot designation is a serious charge that carries a sentence of up to ten years imprisonment. Participants contest that the events of June 12 constituted a riot.

² Only half of Hong Kong's legislature—geographic constituencies—is elected through universal suffrage. The other half—functional constituencies—are elected based on membership in various sectors. For many of these seats, e.g. banking and textile, corporations make up a significant portion of the eligible voters. The Chief Executive is also selected through the 1200 member Election Committee, with the vast majority elected by corporate voters or appointed by the Chinese government. Hong Kongers have been critical of the undemocratic nature of this system and the undue influence of corporations. These concerns have driven much of the major protests in Hong Kong since 1997.

³ These tactics and technologies were also exported across the globe as Hong Kong was used as a testing ground for novel ways to control crowds, at a significant cost with at least 23 killed and countless injured by the police during the 1967 riots.

creating challenges and opportunities for the imagination of a new politics in Hong Kong and beyond.

What the movement is: Grassroots appeal, mutual aid, and participatory democracy

Despite attempts to characterize the movement through cohesive and singular narratives, the reality is that the movement as it stands is inchoate. There is involvement from right-wing nationalists, liberals, and anti-authoritarian leftists in the movement, but many of its participants are newcomers to political organizing and articulation. Au Loong Yu, a local leftist organizer, states that the protesters

genuinely believe in democracy but have a rudimentary understanding of politics. They can be xenophobic towards mainland Chinese, but this has not yet hardened into a program or perspective. At the same time, many young people think it is important to win over mainland Chinese [...] So there are contradictory positions.

While the threat of far right nativist elements within the movement needs to be taken seriously, this is a movement still trying to find a direction and to make sense of itself.

There have been consistent themes in the organizational form and tactics, even if the movement has been lacking in a coherent political outlook. Apparent with the scale of the movement, the protests have widespread grassroots appeal. This should not be surprising as the discourse of a united 㗎㗎 'lou baak sing' (commoners) fighting tycoons and corrupt officials has always been a fixture in Hong Kong's public consciousness, made especially visible throughout Hong Kong's social movement history. During the campaign to stop the demolition of Choi Yuen village for the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link in 2010, this narrative was especially apparent in a comment from the village spokesperson:

In the dusty, chaotic battleground that is Chou Yuen Village, villagers, security guards, construction workers first met without any animosity or vengeance. In the end of the day, when we all remove our uniforms, we're eating at the same BBQ pork shops. We're all lower class. But the state has put all these uniforms on us and pit us against one another.

There is an implicit recognition that a line had been drawn between the lower classes and elites, and that animosity must be directed at the latter. Today, grassroots support is especially evident in political actions unique to this round of protests: the organic, sometimes spontaneous, interventions at the 㗎 (neighbourhood) level and at the workplace.

On 6 August 2019, when Keith Chung-Yin Fong, the president of the Baptist University Students' Union, was arrested by plain-clothed police officers for purchasing laser pointers, local residents quickly surrounded the police officers and offered support to Fong by chanting for his release. An auntie can be heard yelling, "Why are you bullying this youngster?" with the crowd repeating in unison. After a scuffle between the crowd and the officers, Fong was brought to the Sham Shui Po police station. The crowd followed and encircled the police station, staying hours into the night before their dispersal through tear gas. As is common in the aftermath of

police operations in residential neighbourhoods, residents from apartment buildings could be heard yelling that the police were not welcome and for the police to leave. In recent days, local residents have also demanded for accountability at Tai Koo Station after subway management failed to protect people from being tear gassed and arrested in the station. Residents from the Chung Ming Court housing complex also staged an impromptu rally at the building management office, angered at the failure by building management to respond promptly after three activists were attacked with a knife nearby.

People have also organized at their workplaces, often in support of coworkers who were targets of police violence or arrest, or in opposition to management's response to the protests. Health-care providers from 15 hospitals staged rallies at their respective workplaces after a medic was permanently blinded when she was shot in the face by a bean bag bullet. At one such rally held at Ruttonjee Hospital, Dr. Wilson Cheng condemned "the intentional disturbance of the rescue work of medical workers as well as violent assaults on and arrest with false accusations of onsite medical workers." Transit workers, Disneyland performers, social workers, civil servants, and teachers, have all engaged in strike actions and protests during the past couple months.

This comradery in neighbourhoods and workplaces also expresses itself in mutual aid practices. This is evident in the supply stations that have formed wherever protests happen, containing rolls of toilet paper, saline, asthma inhalers, eye masks, and the ubiquitous umbrellas. A sign language system has even been developed to signal for specific items to be ferried to front lines. Local residents also often distribute food to protesters, and single-use subway tickets and non-black t-shirts (to allow protesters to avoid detection) are often left at subway stations during protests. And after reports emerged that management failed to properly decontaminate subway stations in Kwai Fong and Sham Shui Po, protesters volunteered to clean the facilities.

Underpinning these acts of mutual aid and the coordination of the protests has been an organic form of organizing. Partly owing to the imprisonment of a number of organizers during the 2014 Umbrella Revolution, protesters have engaged in participatory and decentralized forms of decision-making. Decisions are often made on LIHKG, which allows users to discuss protest strategies and vote on how to proceed. According to Jacky Man-Hei Chan, a former general secretary of the Hong Kong Student Federation, protesters favour LIHKG given the anonymity it provides. And unlike Facebook, which promotes controversial posts through its algorithm, LIHKG helps build consensus by promoting posts with the highest number of votes. As a result, protesters are "no longer focused on the aspect of the clash but on issues such as the relationship between people and the feeling of community." The Telegram instant messaging apps' poll feature has also been used extensively to make on the fly decisions, such as whether to stay or disperse during street actions.

The protestors' policy of 反大台 (anti-big stage) also shows an intentional distrust of established political organizations. The big stage referenced here is the platforms set up at major rallies where political leaders make speeches. Today, organizers reject elevation of individuals to represent the broader movement and have marginalized established political parties of all stripes. At the weekly civil press conferences, spokespersons are careful to emphasize that they are not the movement's leadership, but "merely wish to create a platform on which voices of the public can be adequately expressed." They identify themselves as aggregators of public opinion—unable to make decisions or represent the broader movement. According to some protesters, "this lack of leadership encourages everyone to get involved and contribute to the movement. In this way, the protesters are enacting the kind of participatory democracy they would like to see."

What the movement can be: A new politics born out of the old

With millions of participants in open defiance of the state, this is a historic moment for Hong Kong. It is also an important moment for the development of an insurgent politics in Hong Kong, as the mass movement has provided a platform for anti-authoritarian leftist activists to critically engage with the current political context and illustrate new possibilities. These activists situate the current struggle in the broader context of Hong Kongers' historical struggle for self-determination, whether it is against British colonizers, Chinese and local authoritarians, or globalized capital, as well as connect with the ongoing histories of resistance across the globe. With this historical and internationalist lens, activists interrogate how the protest movement serves as "both a chance and a challenge" for those fighting for emancipatory goals.

The movement provides a chance for protesters to practice prefigurative politics, as organizing practices like participatory democracy and mutual aid serve as an articulation of the movement's goals. Just as the 2014 Occupy Central Movement involved efforts to "cultivate a culture of participatory democracy," protesters have explicitly expressed this desire to model the type of society they aim to create. The lessons learned on the streets can also inform a more substantive critique that can serve as the basis for a new politics. One such critique is drawn from the daily confrontations with the police. Protesters no longer understand criminality as self-evident, given its malleability when used to justify arrests. This has allowed for a shift by protesters from the narrow focus on extradition and towards "questioning the right of the HKPF—and the government from which it takes its orders—to uphold law and order, and what 'law and order' even means". This questioning is apparent with the multiple posts advocating for the abolishment of the Hong Kong Police on LIHKG receiving significant support, the constant rallies at police stations, and the chant "black police" that rings out at any interaction with the police—a reference to the Cantonese term for triads. In fact, an August 4 survey indicated that police violence has overtaken the extradition bill as people's primary motivation for joining protests.

The chance and the challenge posed by the movement are intertwined. Just as the critique of police violence is leading to abolitionist imaginations, critiques of the movement can aid in the articulation of substantive emancipatory goals. Activist writers have identified right-wing nativist forms of localism that permeate the movement as a major challenge to these goals.⁴ This nativism builds on a Hong Konger identity that can be traced back to the British government's introduction of the border and immigration controls from the 1950s onwards. Nativist mobilization of this identity is predicated on notions of superiority over mainland Chinese people and embracing Western imperialism. One such mobilization was a protest action in Tuen Mun targeting women labelled as "Mainland sexworkers." ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~, a coalition of Hong Kong sex workers and allies, decried this protest, framing it as a betrayal of sex worker comrades who have actively participated in the movement and a hypocrisy, as the police violence criticized by the movement is a daily occurrence for sex workers. Ironically, this "local brand of Han ethno-supremacy," specifically in its anti-Mainlander formulations, reinforces Chinese nationalist logics that equate the Chinese state with the Chinese people.

⁴ <https://newpol.org/localisms-contradictions-in-hong-kong/>
<https://medium.com/@chrischien.cn/thoughts-on-june-and-july-2019-in-hong-kong-1e0b5ecd01b0>
<http://thevolcano.org/2019/08/20/the-perils-of-imperial-alignment-hong-kongs-anti-extradition-movement-at-the-crossroads-of-chinese-class-struggle-and-western-backed-self-determination/>

This nativism, with its essentializing logics, leaves the movement ill-equipped to critique and challenge pro-government mobilization of racial and ethnic division, such as claims that the Fujianese community is under threat from protesters or that protest leaders are descendants of unruly Vietnamese refugees. The movement has been similarly unable to build meaningful relationships and solidarities with migrant workers and racialized communities in Hong Kong, as the failure to critically engage with questions of race leads to an erasure of the ongoing systemic and physical violence experienced by ethnic and racial minorities, especially those with darker skin. This erasure must be challenged in order to ensure that emancipation is not limited to those that fit the exclusionary definition of Hong Kongers presented by nativist localists.

The troubling lack of economic analysis in the movement, with protesters openly denying that economic concerns have anything to do with the movement, also limits its emancipatory potential.⁵ This denial represents a failure to articulate the anger at the worsening material conditions experienced by Hong Kongers and “renders the relationship between material economic analysis and civil liberty obscured.” There needs to be recognition that the political system—the system that the movement has made its target—is partly responsible for these material conditions. Half of Hong Kong’s Legislative Council is made up of functional constituencies, representing sectors like banking and textiles, where corporations have undue influence and directly elect legislators to the body. And considering fears that the extradition agreement may be used to persecute labour organizers, the fight against the extradition bill also helps safeguard class struggle in Hong Kong and China. Articulation of these realities will help the movement centre class struggle as the focal point for resistance, a necessary step if it is to build the cross border alliances necessary to truly challenge the Chinese state and work towards a new society that meaningfully improves the life outcomes of workers in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has operated in a constant state of existential crisis, with its right to self-definition taken time and time again. But this crisis and the feelings it engenders also has revolutionary potential. In fact, Sara Ahmed⁶ argues:

that revolutionary consciousness means feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd. You become estranged from the world as it has been given: the world of good habits and manners, which promises you comfort in return for obedience and good will ... you are no longer well adjusted: you cannot adjust to the world.

Hong Kongers, through centuries of struggle, are learning that obedience does not lead to comfort and this realization can have productive ends. As is apparent with the burgeoning collection of perspectives that critically appraise the movement and broader society, Hong Kong’s existential crisis and feelings of being at odds with the world can trigger a crashing of the false dichotomy between neoliberalism and authoritarian capitalism in Hong Kongers’ imagination of the way forward. Out of this crashing emerges an insurgent politics capable of directing the movement towards substantive emancipation.

⁵ <http://thevolcano.org/2019/08/20/the-perils-of-imperial-alignment-hong-kongs-anti-extradition-movement-at-the-crossroads-of-chinese-class-struggle-and-western-backed-self-determination/>
https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/hong-kongs-fight-for-life
<http://chuangcn.org/2019/06/anti-extradition-translations/>

⁶ Promise Li helpfully pointed out that Ahmed’s quote from *Promise of Happiness* directly follows her analysis of the affect of anti-colonial struggle as it appears in Fanon. In no way am I suggesting that the colonial context in Hong Kong is consistent with that of Algeria in the 1950s. That said, there is an important need for theorists to consider what colonialism means in the Hong Kong context and how it relates to colonialism operates elsewhere in the world.

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