

A City and a SAR on Fire: As if Everything and Nothing Changes

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2019 will prove to be a watershed moment for Hong Kong politics and society. This seems the only, if obvious, consensus at the moment. There may be no going back from such a violent and shocking event as the recent protests, which have for much of, though not all of the city's population, transformed the police-society relationship into one of open antagonism, fully exposed people's fear and loathing of the mainland and their local government, and divided some families and large segments of society. These events have also caused an ordinarily quiet and civil society to become violent, enraged (at the police and government), openly racist/xenophobic, and emotionally traumatized.

And yet, it is hard, or at least far too early to say, what exactly will change in the short term. What will be the effects of the new directions, new flows of politics, legislation, and power once the smoke clears and traffic moves freely?

It is highly unlikely that the city's current protest movement will even eventually result in the attainment of their most radical demand (and which has been around since 1997): what is called by protesters "universal suffrage" but which specifically refers to the direct nomination and public vote for the city's Chief Executive (CE). Hong Kong residents and permanent residents already vote for and directly elect more than one-half (forty of seventy) of the city's Legislative Council (LegCo); the other thirty are indirectly elected through functional constituencies representing various commercial and professional interest groups. Interestingly, the rhetoric of protesters, and media commentators, in so far as they mention democracy and suffrage, specifically refer to the CE issue. It could easily be argued that these interest groups, especially their dominance by big money and professionals, are at least as much the problem as the CE selection system.

More broadly, as I will suggest later, the protesters speak more indirectly but clearly for a type of *de facto* independence or full autonomy from the mainland. This too is more than unlikely. But this reality will not stop demands by the pan-democrats and other opposition members of the current generations directly involved in this protest movement. This is becoming a chronic, painful condition of stasis for Hong Kong as a political entity and society. There has to be compromise and yet none is forthcoming.¹

Where does this leave Hong Kong and the Hong Kong – China relationship? In the short run, despite the violence, destruction, chaos, and even successes of the protests (the extradition bill that sparked the protests has been withdrawn), in the same place as before. The longer run will be different, but Hong Kong remains on borrowed time until its Basic Law is either abandoned or radically revised.

From within Hong Kong it seems clear that the upheaval or any return to it will not and was never likely to result in some type of military or police intervention by the mainland, despite such deliberately provocative gestures as flag-burning, mainland liaison office vandalism, and now, more recently, hundreds if not thousands of petrol bombs thrown at police, militants' occupations of universities to the point of violence and arson, disruptions of traffic and public transportation, and very real, excessive violence perpetuated by both police and protesters – the latter not only against the police but against suspected mainlanders or political opponents. If mainland authorities refrained from intervention at the height of the violence and the symbolic attacks on its sovereignty, or on the people who have supported the protests and riots, then it is hard to say when it would use its actual force to quell any

¹ If I am critical of the protests in some fundamental ways, and of the pan democratic cause, I should hope this does not imply an endorsement of the CE and the mainland liaison office in Hong Kong.

rebellion short of this spreading to the mainland (which is highly unlikely given the “Hong Kong versus the mainland” identity politics exposed and reproduced so far). The mainland government can point to all of this as proof of its restraint and tolerance, but this comprehensively misses the point that they are and were already perceived as interfering and encroaching.

The United States or any other foreign power was never going to intervene in Hong Kong, despite what some protesters have called for, whether sincerely or cynically. They did indeed succeed in getting a human rights act passed in the United States Congress, but this will hopefully be ignored, as it stands to only antagonize the mainland government further and place Hong Kong firmly within the U.S.-P.R.C. struggle.² In my view the foreign-funded and foreign-inspired aspects of the protests (politically Hong Kong has always looked West, i.e. been liberal or libertarian) are both undeniable – an open secret – and wildly exaggerated by many. While the 2019 Hong Kong protests have been a global media event and a part of geo-politics, the crisis can only be resolved, slowly, by Hong Kong and the mainland.

So it would seem that the political status quo will prevail within Hong Kong, with or without a new Chief Executive. However, legislative elections in 2020 could conceivably make some difference. The local district council elections just resulted in an overwhelming victory for anti-government candidates, very much as predicted. In themselves district councillors wield little power (and will now need to literally clean up some of the mess caused by the protests and riots) Yet these local elections could in turn lead to spin-off victories for the pan-democrats in next year’s more influential Legislative Council ballots.³ If history is any precedent, however, a sea-change in the Legco composition next year may result in little other than a pan-democrat majority denying or filibustering anything proposed by the government. Certainly such a deeply loathed government and Chief Executive (Carrie Lam) have no business being in power, even if it is also true that between forty and forty-five percent of the population just voted for *establishment* candidates in the district council contests. Status quo situations only benefit those who are well placed in the status quo. On the other hand, if a newly empowered, oppositional Legco can win some formal political concessions (e.g. a more representative CE selection committee) or pass bills that actually benefit peoples’ livelihoods, this would be a massive improvement and one beneficial outcome of the protests.

One can expect eventual prison sentences for many of the violent protesters, and perhaps an amnesty or non-prison time for many others.⁴ There will be permanent, expanded police powers and the use of force thanks to the counter-productive violence of recent months by protesters. There may be an out-migration of severely disappointed or unhappy people with the means to do so. An independent inquiry into police brutality, as opposed to the current one, seems unlikely due to fear of alienating the police force further, which has become the face of the entire government as Carrie Lam hides from view. Clearly the

² For criticisms of the bill from a decidedly pro-protest group of writers in the Hong Kong diaspora, see the Lausan Collective statement, “Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act: a critical analysis” available at: <https://lausan.hk/2019/hong-kong-human-rights-and-democracy-act-critical-analysis/>

³ I distinguish between protests and riots, though admittedly this is somewhat subjective. Protests do not have to be non-violent to warrant being called protests. But many instances of what the media and well-wishers have been describing as *the* Hong Kong protest movement are in my view far more like riots—their purpose is less political (even if the five demands are referenced)) but more on creating disorder and crisis, turning on vandalism and destruction of property, both public and private, and more worryingly on xenophobia, hysteria, and moral panic (including rumors of hundreds of missing bodies and gang rapes).

⁴ The police have so far arrested over 4,500 protestors. It is unfeasible and even undesirable for the government to try and convict all of those arrested for rioting. If the opposition argues for a limited amnesty and a restricted use of the charge of rioting, there may be room for compromise on this demand. Of course it will be on the government to actually act!

government address the crisis of faith and trust in the police, who historically have not only been popular but in the absence of much crime in the city been akin to a social service organization.⁵

Even before the recent council elections, the actual number of protesters has been declining for months, even as the violence has increased.⁶ The government seems to be running out of possible blunders to make after the anti-mask law.⁷ Many people have expressed their dissatisfaction with the violence and rioting by, for example, cleaning up some of the roads and forming pro-police demonstrations. The government is still hated by many, even a clear majority of Hong Kongers, but this does not necessarily imply an endorsement of the more violent, riotous protests.⁸ So it is possible that as of late November, the protests are mostly over and relative calm will prevail. But they will return in some form or another when the stasis becomes unbearable and as conditions of inequality and precarity prevail.

The mainland government will most likely continue its policy of waiting and doing something by doing nothing. It can live with a burnt-out Hong Kong full of miserable people and inept politicians, as long as the city remains an active and functional financial hub (which is easy enough to imagine). It has refused to intervene directly or even indirectly in any significant way, aside from making statements condemning the protests and calling for economic reform in the city. But if they are not intervening they are nonetheless still being faulted by many in Hong Kong and in the media for being responsible for the protests by backing Carrie Lam and by creating the conditions for the protests (eroding liberties and freedoms in some way). I suspect there two very different mainstream political cultures at work: Hong Kong's individualistic, entrepreneurial liberalism versus the mainland's economistic but anti-liberal nationalism or communitarianism (for lack of better words). Mainland authorities will try to speed along the further integration of Hong Kong into China through political appointments and economic programs, but it would be surprising to see them court further disaster by proposing new national security legislation.

And yet once the toxic smoke clears, and the protest movement ends in some way, the return to some type of normalcy will be both welcome and yet unfortunate. Politically Hong Kong is a dysfunctional city; economically it is neo-liberal and fraught with precarity, uncertainty, and decaying infrastructure, even for the relatively privileged; and, while never a cheerful, boisterous, optimistic, or "happy" place, it has become noticeably depressed and despairing, even as some in the riotous wing seem to delight in destruction and atavism. And so it will be a return to an "unprincipled peace," to use a phrase of Mao Zedong.

For it to be otherwise Hong Kong will have to try to intervene within the terms and conditions of its re-integration into China, rather than fighting impossibly and full-frontally for an autonomy and de facto independence that has never been viable. It will have to do this without directly nominating its Chief Executive. This is a raw deal not of its own choosing.

⁵ I owe this insight to past conversations with Borge Bakken, Jeff Martin, and other criminology scholars at Hong Kong University.

⁶ According to most local reports, violent rioters have ranged from a few hundred in the guerrilla-style flash mobs smashing up MTR stations, to a few thousand during the riotous occupations of the Chinese University of Hong and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In the case of the Polytechnic in particular, only a minority of the participants were actually students.

⁷ On October 4, 2019, Hong Kong authorities used the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, a British colonial-era law, to ban protesters from covering their faces in public.

⁸ I am not suggesting there is some type of "silent majority" at work in Hong Kong which opposes the protest movement. But in my own experience, observations, and reading, there are far more people who oppose the protests now, or their violent turn, than has been reported in the mainstream international or local media. Hong Kong people are not stupid, see the limits of independence talk, and are disturbed by the racism and violence that have blossomed.

Ideally Hong Kong should have become independent many decades ago, or returned to Chinese sovereignty quicker and in a better planned manner than under the faintly ridiculous Basic Law negotiated between the United Kingdom and China in the run up to 1997. One can wish for the former on one hand and for the latter on the other; they will fill up at the same rate. So the point about better, more painstakingly politicizing and working the integration process, rather than staving it off, seems the only road ahead. This will require an opposition up to the task, one that drops its self-appointed, historical role of bringing liberal electoral democracy to Hong Kong and to China (which is almost impossible to believe now anyway). Politics are mostly about persuasion and the ability to win hearts and minds through rhetoric and practice. People love to bandy about the term “revolution” in Hong Kong (of umbrellas, fishballs, and now “of our time”) but the brute fact is that Hong Kong, for all its virtues, good people, and photogenic landscapes, is about the last place in the world to effect such a sea-change. The use of the term “revolution” is a perfect sign of how fake or merely semiotic it is.

Fishballs, not umbrellas

After the peaceful, studiously non-violent and (in practical-political terms) largely ineffectual Occupy and Umbrella “Revolution” protests of 2014, the outburst of violence and militancy, as well as undeniable xenophobia and nativism, may have come as a surprise to many, even within Hong Kong. Of course the foreign media (and the popular Hong Kong tabloid *Apple Daily*) have attributed the violence almost entirely to the police (or thousands upon thousands of undercover agents). But this has been far from the case, especially in the months since July. One need not dismiss the excessive violence of some of the police force, particularly after a protester or rioter has been arrested and immobilized, to find the moral panic about an emergent totalitarian police state in the city quite a bit overdone. I know of no other example where protesters have literally attacked police stations and vans and not been subject to lethal force in return. The Yellow Vests Movement of France, for example, has seen far higher casualties. So too the degree of objectionable nativism and racism without race has been massively underplayed by the same major media outlets as well as by Hong Kong-based intellectuals. For example, a commentator writing for the Anglo-American publishing house Verso even failed to mention the well-known and extreme levels of racist and reactionary talk on LIHKG, a social media forum used by protesters to plan and discuss the protests and riots.⁹

The existence of such racialized, anti-mainland sentiment, while not dominant across Hong Kong society or all political parties, is an unfortunate and uncomfortable truth about Hong Kong that at least now has the status of some dirty laundry being fully aired in public. This particular genie will not be put back in the bottle, which in itself is not a bad thing. Hong Kong can be a remarkably tolerant and open society, but, like the mainland, it is also Han- and Sino-centric and far from embracing plural identities and multiculturalism. Its superiority-inferiority complex about the mainland not only reflects a pre-communist Cantonese or regional identity in conflict with the national center and north, but more importantly has much to do with its colonial history and educational systems. During the colonial era the study of politics was largely discouraged but there was a surfeit of anti-communist discourse and institutions, and Hong Kong was a kind of border-space hived off

⁹ See “Hong Kong’s Sinkhole” by Pan Laikwan <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4452-hong-kong-s-sinkhol00e> Interestingly, it is the Hong Kong protesters who share the Western “left” view whereas the (mainland) Chinese left view in Hong Kong is more scarce than public housing spots. LIHKG.com is a Redditt-like forum.

from the mainland.¹⁰ For perfectly understandable historical and sociological reasons, not least of which is this separation by colonialism and the Cold War, there has never been much love, understanding, or recognition on either side of the Lo Wu border just south of Shenzhen. This is now abundantly clear, even to the global media, so perhaps it may slowly change.

But the specific, immediate roots of the anti-extradition – better termed an anti-government -- movement are not quite the failure of the 2014 protests (i.e. the lack of any compromise in regard to the issue of elections or procedural democracy in the city). The stronger link is with the “Fishball Revolution” in the Mongkok district during the Lunar New Year holidays in 2016. What began as a conflict between citizen-pedestrians and hygiene officers who were trying to restrict food stalls and a lively night market quickly escalated on February 8 and 9, 2016 into a violent protest and riot, replete with arson, vandalism, and explicitly xenophobic, anti-mainland and nativist sentiments.¹¹ The latter riots – or protests, if one prefers -- were led by a group that called itself the “Hong Kong Indigenous,” a post-1990s generation of some former Occupy protesters who had made a hard turn to the right, albeit for independence, against alleged mainland incursions such as parallel traders or importers coming into Hong Kong daily due to visa loopholes. Since the end of the Umbrella Revolution, Hong Kong has seen the rise and fall (and now perhaps a return?) of younger, localist, and/or nativist politicians and activists who are vociferously anti-mainland and for full autonomy, if not independence explicitly. They have displaced the traditional pan-democratic parties, which may well share their anti-communist, full-autonomy/pro-independence politics, and even their xenophobic views, but are too slick to brazenly voice the latter. Some of these youth were disqualified after they managed to win legislative seats after 2014 for exercising the same nativistic, anti-mainland, and pro-independence feelings during official LegCo ceremonies.¹² The leader of the indigenous group, Edward Leung, was given a six year jail term for rioting and assault during the Mongkok event. His slogan, “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time” (光復香港，時代革命) has been adopted and is frequently chanted by members of the current protest movement.

Whatever else may happen, the centrality of anti-mainland politics, full autonomy or independence, and nativism to Hong Kong’s opposition movement can no longer be denied. At the same time it is important to note that these leaders and activists are, ironically, not elected so much as self-appointed and reified by localist and foreign media.¹³ The politics of full autonomy or de facto independence are now going to be on the agenda until such time as they are de-legitimated or somehow victorious.

The Mongkok protests had enormous effects despite being quite small compared to the Occupy Central campaign. These included violence against the police, who were ordered not to strike back when bricks were thrown at them, which no doubt created ill will amongst the force. These protests also made explicit, and helped popularize, xenophobia towards and racialized discourse against the mainland, as well as a demand for independence and self-determination, a la some oppressed, Third World nation struggling against the British or French Empires. The traditional pan-democratic rhetoric of autonomy had always stopped short of calling for independence. Yet in the years before and especially after the Occupy Central campaign, outright calls for independence have become ubiquitous. The Hong Kong

¹⁰ See David Faure, 2003, among others, on political education during the colonial era.

¹¹ But it must be said that in this 2016 event the violence was one-sided, against the police who were under orders not to strike back. Needless to say this was not a good thing for police morale, though it may have encouraged later protesters.

¹² This included using the slur “Shina” (支那) and faking the oath when sworn into office.

¹³ Mr. Leung, for example, has now been listed on *Time* magazine’s “100 Next.” See <https://time.com/collection/time-100-next-2019/5718822/edward-leung/>.

government and mainland authorities see this as scandalous, but it should not be a surprise. To claim full, not relative, autonomy – a traditional pan-democratic stance – is already a claim of self-determination or a type of de facto independence. And yet, as is well known, most Hong Kongers do not see independence as an option or even as desirable, because they are aware that Hong Kong simply cannot be so.¹⁴ It is doubtful that this overall sentiment – both a desire for and the material limits to any such full autonomy – will change in the near future

Protesters or rioters?

Just as the 2016 Mongkok protesters had an outsized footprint, so too have the militant and violent protesters of the last three months, which have included weekends of mass transit vandalism and destruction, airport disruptions of foreign travellers, physical assaults on Mandarin-speaking passers-by, counter-protesters, and police (resulting in two non-fatal shootings), and petrol bombs thrown at police, MTR stations, and mainland affiliated businesses. Estimates of participants in violent acts have ranged from the upper hundreds to a few thousand but are impossible to specify. Thus when the mass media and generic leftist commentators refer to weekends dominated by “the Hong Kong protest” or “democracy movement” please note this is highly selective and biased, every bit the equal of denunciations of foreign interference found in the *Global Times*, *People’s Daily*, or other mainland media outlets. The size and number of protests have been dwindling as they have gotten more violent (with less than 1,000 during a recent weekend attack on the Mongkok MTR and mainland friendly shops); they have also gotten younger, with students and teenage youth forming the bulk of those arrested. These people do not represent the protest movement as a whole, which began in June with a rally of a reported two million people peacefully marching. While a more responsible Reuters analysis suggested 500,000 participated,¹⁵ that figure was still more than enough to send a clear message to the Hong Kong and mainland governments that the extradition bill was a bad idea.

Sinophobia as well as principled critiques of the PRC are far from surprising; the latter are even welcome, as in the genuinely appalling case of Xinjiang. But the embrace of the protests in Hong Kong, even when they had, by October and November, degenerated into riots with ambiguous politics at best, if not reactionary ones, is not helpful to anyone except hardliners outside of Hong Kong. I would note the sleight-of-hand performed by the pan-democratic group “Civil Human Rights Front,” which organizes peaceful marches that have recently concluded with many black shirt marchers splitting off and moving into arson, vandalism, and clashes with the police and any opponents that may show up.¹⁶ It is thus not hard to see a certain symbiotic relationship between some of the traditional pan-democratic groups and radicals who are setting fires and fighting in the streets. Until such time as the pan-democrats explicitly denounce the violence and xenophobia, which by no means necessitates abandoning their goals of universal suffrage or even full autonomy, it will be hard not to conclude that their chief concern is not freedom so much as their own will-to-

¹⁴ For a useful discussion of some of the independence issues see Noah Lachs and Ryan Tang, “The Panda In The Room: Hong Kong’s Pro-Independence Movement,” October 2019. But not that it is debatable as to how much support the movement has now in light of the violent university occupations and traffic disruptions. Certainly it has lessened while still being supported by a majority or large minority of people.

¹⁵ See for example Simon Scarr et al, June 2019 and Reuters, July 2019.

¹⁶ See the work of the long standing Hong Kong independent journalist and author, Nury Vittachi, in various places online, including Facebook. Vittachi’s work is an important, if informal resource for this series of protests.

power. Although the pan-democrats may win more seats in Legco, this makes them neither democratic nor admirable.

Likewise for the “movement discipline” that forbids any protester, group, or pan-democratic politician from criticizing and distancing themselves from the racism and violence of their own side, even as they decry police violence and the hypocrisy of the government.¹⁷ This has been a consistent strategy from the very beginning. Even the adoption of the American alt-right white supremacist symbol of “Pepe the Frog” has been quickly excused as no big deal. When protesters lit a man on fire because he disagreed with their political views the silence was deafening all across the city.¹⁸ This very political and revealing silence was shocking but not surprising, at least not to some of us. “Xenophobia is no big deal, everyone is xenophobic,” is exactly what one celebrated literary theorist privately told me when I tried to inform her about the decade-long rise of remarkably racist locust imagery and nativism within anti-immigrant autonomy politics in Hong Kong.

But the rioters and violent xenophobes do not represent the bulk of people who protested in June of this year, participated in non-violent marches throughout the summer, or have legitimate grievances with the mismanagement of the HK-China relationship. The sheer difference in numbers and size between the June and November protests demonstrates this. The real question is why so much of the global media, including expert opinion, has been so monolithic in its coverage of Hong Kong. It is also worth noting that it is the pro-establishment or Beijing-friendly parties that garner the majority of working class and elderly votes in Hong Kong. This does not discredit the cause of full electoral democracy but it does suggest certain class- and generational limits to it in Hong Kong.

Misunderstanding and non-recognition

The ground was already well prepared for a deeply conflicted, emotionally charged, and politically ambiguous protest movement against the Hong Kong government and mainland presence in the city long before the June protests.

China may be sovereign in Hong Kong but this fact is not simply a practical, political issue for Hong Kongers, it is an existential and identity- laden crisis. The current protests have always been about belonging and alienation (or separation) as well as Hong Kong’s “borrowed time,” not simply the extradition bill or the direct nomination of the CE and all LegCo members (the protesters’ “universal suffrage” demands).¹⁹

Hong Kong lacks an extradition treaty with its own national-state, despite the large flows of immigration and travel from the mainland; even murderers and money-launderers from the PRC cannot be sent back except through a protracted and non-binding way that essentially allows such criminals, especially white collared ones, to suffer no consequences. Xi Jinping has staked much of his own rule on anti-corruption drives, and Hong Kong has long been a quasi-legal hiding place for such ill-gotten gains from the mainland. It is no secret that the mainland legal system is highly politicized, radically different from Hong Kong’s British common law system, and notorious for occasional show trials (ask disgraced leader Bo Xilai), forced confessions, and detainment without charges. Thus the desire of many in Hong Kong traditionally has been to buy more time and stave off legal integration

¹⁷ See for example a Deutsche Welle interview with Ms. Joey Siu (2019), among other statements justifying xenophobic or clearly malicious violence or merely stating it should not be condemned.

¹⁸ See the editorial by Alex Lo, November 2019.

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3037383/hong-kong-ok-man-being-set-fire>

¹⁹ The PRC is simply not going to offer direct nomination, given the anti-communist politics of the opposition, mean electing an anti-regime CE.

until after 2047. In fact, this is the general liberal-democratic sentiment in the city: buy time, live on borrowed time a bit longer, delay all signs of integration, and hope for the best.

This may be a weapon of the weak, and it may even have worked until recently, but it can also be read as fairly hopeless and by definition conservative.²⁰ The failure of this approach to prevent integration – or at least perceived integration and a loss of liberties -- or improve Hong Kong in its own right can also explain this year's outburst of violence and the frustration, desperation, and anger in the city. The project of delaying and staving off, like the traditional pan-democratic practice of filibustering when in office, is meant to preserve Hong Kong's autonomy. If it is not working, as the youth-based protesters suggest, then it may be high time for something else, such as integration. Delaying this serves to keep Hong Kong in the colonial space of 'living on borrowed time.' But short of being pro-integration (as opposed to rejecting it *in toto*), which liberals and democrats are loathe to do, it is hard to think of alternatives outside of revolutionary posturing.

Nonetheless, given the fear and loathing many people in Hong Kong have about the mainland political and legal systems as well as the future of Hong Kong, the introduction of the extradition bill earlier this year was a catastrophic miscalculation. This bill was immediately taken as an anti-dissident, anti-subversion policing measure. In the highly legalistic democratic camp, and when human rights lawyers and others on the mainland have frequently been rounded up in the Xi era, this was going to be the very first thought of many activists in Hong Kong. The famous/infamous case of the four abducted or arrested booksellers in 2015 looms large here.²¹ Interestingly, some observers have argued that passage of the bill would have made such abduction cases less likely or less hidden and extra-judicial, as Hong Kong courts would have to be involved.²² In any case, what is clear is that much of this movement began in misunderstanding and ignorance. Carrie Lam did not understand her constituents; the protesters did not understand the specifics of the bill, or care to; and the mainland liaison officials in Hong Kong apparently in charge of advising the Carrie Lam did not understand that Hong Kong historically has been an alien part of China that is not going to naturally "get over it" and learn to belong to the PRC by virtue of being full of Chinese people. The mainland system will have to give people something better to identify with or benefit from, and the opposition will most likely have to accept its fate and find alternative ways of serving Hong Kong people.

An unfinished project of decolonization

Ultimately all of this gets back to two things: the "unfinished" – never begun? – project of decolonization in Hong Kong, and the limits, contradictions, and ambiguities of the Basic Law. The 2019 protests usually have been described as a democracy movement. It is worth asking why, or what type of democracy they represent, and if an apparently leaderless movement – albeit one grounded in Hong Kong political and intellectual culture -- can be politically effective. These are not just intellectual questions; they also are pressing practical, material questions for Hong Kong.

If the right to freely elect leaders defines a democracy, then this is a democracy movement, even with its racist, exclusionary, and violent dimensions. If, however,

²⁰ Scott 1985.

²¹ For background analysis, see among others David Bandurski 2017. The gist of the issue is that bookstore owners were arrested for allegedly selling books banned on the mainland through the post, and taken from within Hong Kong or while in China and held without charge for some time.

²² See the comments made by Ronny Tong to *Ming Pao* New Network, 2019. Tong is a moderate democrat and founder of the influential Civic Party, although he left it when it turned harder against mainland immigration and influence.

democracy means majority rule, egalitarianism, and social or even economic democracy, Hong Kong and this movement fall flat (of course it is not alone, as the world has seen liberal regimes fall into crisis in many places.) For historical reasons, including British rule and the class composition of the city from its beginnings, Hong Kong lacks a discourse of social democracy and inclusiveness, even in comparison to, say, the United States or Singapore. Although complaints about social and economic issues such as affordable housing and health care are found in the local press or in conversations, there has been no translation of these into a political discourse of social democracy or anything to the left of that. Nor have there been politicians or activist leaders (aside from very small groups) pushing such politics. Voting must come first, in their view. Ironically, perhaps, it is the mainland papers that have been calling for economic reforms and redistribution in Hong Kong this past summer.²³

Even in light of the recent protests a sizable minority of non-pan-democratic voters exist (between forty and forty-five percent in the last election), along with many adults who do not vote. Nevertheless, opposition democrats – those who either fit or be perceived to fit this profile -- are not only the most politically active but usually the most successful in winning open LegCo seats. However, the bottom line is that there is as much a chance of Hong Kongers gaining the right to directly nominate the CE as getting the return of Jesus; the Chinese government is simply not going to allow direct voting for the CE because it would likely mean the election of an anti-regime democrat or separatist/independence/full-autonomy advocate. This line in the sand is an unspoken rule in Hong Kong that few talk about. The Basic Law helps prevent such an outcome by having the CE nominated by a committee consisting of six hundred representatives of various economic and professional sectors as well as Hong Kong members of the National People's Congress and the People's Political Consultative Conference.²⁴ Thus it is highly unlikely, barring a collapse of the PRC and the independence of Hong Kong, that democracy in the sense of freely nominating and electing the CE will ever arrive in Hong Kong.

But the protests are about more than voting rights or an inquiry into police actions. The other media refrain, originating in part from some of the protesters, is that they are fighting for freedom (among other named abstractions like sovereignty and autonomy). This is not surprising and should be taken seriously. But it is hard to say what freedoms have been taken away from Hong Kong citizens. The British only introduced (limited) voting rights in the colony shortly before their withdrawal. Which freedoms and liberties have been lost or constrained? How can these be restored other than through CE elections? Is voting or filibustering the best way to get these back, or would these strategies just perpetuate the status quo, albeit with an enormous expenditure of energy?

There is no doubt that Hong Kong is a very hierarchical, corporate, and undemocratic place in its lack of welfare, fetishization of wealth, and high inequality. But among its many other problems, there is one less remarked upon: Hong Kong runs by a politics and culture of appointment, which while aided and abetted by the politics of *guanxi* (關係, networks), stems directly from the colonial era, when this entire arrangement was out in the open and a *modus operandi* of British colonial rule. In this sense the allegedly leaderless nature of the movement of 2019 may undo some of the deeply anti-democratic qualities of Hong Kong's intellectual political culture of appointment.

Yet protesters have not aimed at such economic or colonial targets, but instead have focused on the government in a general way, on the mainland, and on the significant but procedural issue of voting.²⁵ It is true that many people are enraged at the government's

²³ See for example a September 12 report from Xinhua News as well as an article on Guancha, Sept 2019.

²⁴ See The Basic Law, p. 53.

²⁵ See Toby Carroll, 2019

failure to respond adequately to abundantly demonstrable public sentiment. This gets at the issue of accountability, though it must also be said that accountability is something that the Chinese state prides itself on having and practicing but which it also serially abuses. Grievances are not necessarily remedied by voting, as the American example shows. The failures of most governments in being accountable towards and representative of their citizens – and their so-called “illegals” or non-citizens -- is arguably the political issue of our time. My own take is that a liberal, capitalist democracy in Hong Kong (which it mostly is already) is unlikely to ameliorate its fundamental social and economic problems. That it is a failed state or system (or two systems) is not in doubt. But what is to be done? Hong Kong needs to decolonize.

How to decolonize?

What form would decolonization take in Hong Kong? Decolonization typically takes a self-consciously anti-colonial movement grounded in a powerful nationalism – or, as in this case, an impassioned localism/nativism– and a politics of independence aimed at national liberation, self-determination, and sovereignty. “Reclaim Hong Kong, the Revolution of our Time,” which is the slogan of the current protest movement, originated with the xenophobic independence group, “Hong Kong Indigenous.” Post-colonial scholars suggest nationalist imagined communities are defined by hierarchical exclusions, are often nativistic if not baldly racist, and draw on logics of blood and soil as well as fantasies of an illusory, pre-lapsarian past of freedom, noble traditions, and purity. All of this fits rather well with nativist and other democratic groups, as well as the work of the influential public intellectual Chin Wan (author of a pop-history of Hong Kong that presents the territory as an autonomous city-state a la classical Venice).²⁶ During 2019, “independence” and “self-determination” have become clarion calls for anti-government groups and parties. And yet independence is not only a taboo word to both the Hong Kong and mainland governments but more likely to inspire smirks than outrage within the populace at large.²⁷

As I have argued elsewhere, the traditional Hong Kong pan-democratic call for autonomy – understood to include *political* autonomy – is clearly a not-so-hidden code word for independence, as full autonomy would mean de facto independence, in practice.²⁸

Recent protests have the virtue of clarity in this regard: protesters’ demands for self-determination and sovereignty are clear calls for independence (de facto or otherwise). From the general pan-democratic standpoint, this means the true decolonization of Hong Kong: Hong Kong would finally be free because citizens could directly nominate and vote for their Chief Executive. As one of my students put it to me in 2014, this would quickly fix Hong Kong through legislative acts. This is a powerfully naïve if also genuine sentiment, and what the end of colonialism or decolonization means to local liberal intellectuals. The result would not be a “western” system but a universal, free one; or perhaps whether or not it is of colonial or “western” heritage makes no difference – although this may matter to non-liberal democrats or more China-identified people in the city. In terms of further decolonizing, pro-independence advocates would presumably have little to do in the way of detaching from China’s political or intellectual worlds, as these are not firmly rooted in the city.

But from the standpoint of the Hong Kong and mainland governments, such a version of decolonization would be a betrayal and tantamount to an imperialistic splitting of Hong Kong from China. It is certainly clear now that organizations like the Oslo Forum and

²⁶ See his Xianggang Chengbanglun. (City-State Theory of Hong Kong), 2011.

²⁷ See Eleanor Albert, 2019.

²⁸ See also my discussions of Hong Kong politics in *Illiberal China*, 2019.

National Endowment for Democracy have funded various Hong Kong groups and individuals for years.²⁹ And we are now faced with the ill effects of the U.S. Congress' "Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act," thanks to the efforts of Joshua Wong et al. But it is also easy to over-state the importance of China-U.S. or China-European geo-politics in the specific Hong Kong dynamics, notwithstanding the current trade war. This is not a conspiracy but right out in the open and therefore presumably less dangerous. But China does not need too much help, in my view, and Hong Kong's discontent and miseries are mostly home grown and stem from its political and economic history as much as from its own dysfunctional political classes (whom are really bureaucrats and activists more than actual politicians).

From the PRC perspective, decolonization in Hong Kong obviously means the city will integrate with the nation-state (or empire-state if you prefer). This would actually mean abandoning or growing out of the Basic Law, not overnight but hopefully sooner than later. It is not simply a colonial-era document co-authored by the British; it has preserved the power of the old elite, especially in the financial and property sectors, and built a system in its favour.³⁰ Integration has been working in the favor of the established elites but for few others. The Basic Law has not decolonized much of anything in Hong Kong other than replacing the skin color of people in certain, powerful positions. The Basic Law actually works against decolonization. Economic integration is not the same thing as decolonization, but it can certainly be made to work better for greater numbers of Hong Kong people and win them over to the side of integration as opposed to separation. Removing some of the enormous power of the old tycoons and newer ones is necessary, as is eliminating the colonial-era village governing body, the Heung Yee Kuk.³¹ Perhaps the most glaring connection to the British era (alongside political liberalism) is the power of a trickle-down, austerity economic ideology that militates against redistributionist politics and state control of markets. If economic integration were to benefit far more people, and if the Hong Kong and Chinese governments were smart enough to make that happen and to promote awareness of the benefits, the protests would be far smaller and less angry, despairing, and xenophobic. One does not desire autonomy from people and things one likes.

Decolonization would also mean that Hong Kong, or its officials and politicians and bureaucrats at any rate, would need to learn how to be part of the mainland's party-state system, to take it seriously, and to work it. So too would it require a strong political culture of protest and demands from the street but from a progressive or social democratic or perspective that is not hell bent on full autonomy, and does not have all the trappings of a secessionist or xenophobic movement. The universities and public educational institutions, to take another example, would have to teach and foment discussion and knowledge in a more plural, diverse way when it comes to the politics and social realities of contemporary China and the Hong Kong-China relationship.³² In short, integration needs to be on the agenda in an explicit and open way, subject to healthy and rational debate and politicization.

²⁹ I discuss the NED in my 2019 book, but a grant search of the NED reveals 200k USD to Hong Kong in 2018 alone. (The Oslo Freedom Forum training sessions with Hong Kong activists are freely available on their website, and date back to at least 2014.) I thank Kaiser Kuo for the NED reminder.

³⁰ See Alice Poon, 2011 for the background and basis of this argument including the connection to the Basic Law and Sino-British agreements.

³¹ For background, see James Hays, 2006. For the contemporary critique, see Kent Ewing, 2019.

³² I attempted to argue for this in an editorial of 1 September, even before the escalation of the violence and racist attacks. Interestingly, my column was received favourably by China and Hong Kong born colleagues but attacked by expat colleagues from the US in particular. The online version also changed my original title to something more sensationalist. But the Sinophobia in Hong Kong is massive and can only be defeated through reason

But as unlikely or as merely theoretical as my case for re-politicizing and embracing integration might seem – and note that the mainland is as firmly committed to the Basic Law as Hong Kong activists and politicians have been -- it nonetheless strikes me as the only way forward. The other option amounts to living on borrowed time, in stasis, or worse. 2047, the final year of the fifty-year limbo built into the Basic Law, is not far away. The mainland government may or may not be paying attention to the question of decolonization, instead preferring to let the market sort it out. But it ignores decolonization at its own peril.

The Basic Law: a time-bomb

In addition to conflicting ideologies and ways of seeing, the roots of this conflict, as was the case in 2014, have to do with the embedded ambiguities and contradictions in Hong Kong's Basic Law. Curiously, while references to this were omnipresent during and after the Occupy/Umbrella protests in 2014, they have been a relatively minor affair in this case, especially as the current protests have morphed into a clearly law-breaking conflict between police and protesters. But the problem remains the same: the Basic Law (and related statements from China) stipulates both “a high degree of autonomy” for Hong Kong *and* a complete transfer of sovereignty to the PRC, putting Hong Kong “directly under the Central People's Government.”³³ Sovereign power always trumps any degree of autonomy granted by that power. Given this power, the P.R.C. can interpret “high degree” in the way it wishes (Hong Kong clearly has more autonomy than, say, Shenzhen) and impose this over the competing interpretation from pan-democratic people (for whom “high degree” means *full* autonomy). The election guidelines in the Basic Law (outlined in Article 45) offer both universal suffrage (“the ultimate aim” for how the C.E. is selected) according to “democratic procedures” *and* a selection committee in charge of vetting candidates. Article 5 promises that China will remain socialist whereas “the previous capitalist system and way of life [in Hong Kong] shall remain unchanged for fifty years.” The net effect is an implied autonomy for Hong Kong, no change within Hong Kong, and no change in the Hong Kong-China relationship. Was this ever possible? That China has become capitalist, quasi- or state-capitalist, or almost-capitalist should change everything in how we understand the Basic Law because capital is precisely what, to use Marx and Engels's language, makes “all that is solid melt into air,” just as it “batters down all Chinese walls.”³⁴ If this is the global logic of capitalism (and of modernity) it is hard to see how a document such as the Basic Law can act as a magical talisman and keep the systems separate.

This is a false promise of autonomy because like most major cities Hong Kong is (and has always been) rapidly changing, not least through Chinese immigration (also enshrined in the same handover documents), and because China's own development cannot be warded off by protests in Hong Kong or by thousands of petrol bombs and bricks. The city has been and is inevitably becoming integrated with the mainland economically, via finance capital, property and other investments, and immigration. This is less true of Hong Kong's universities, public schools, and media outlets, which have been the main sites of liberal democratic hegemony since the 1997 handover. But changes and forces within the economic base entail spin-off effects within the superstructure, i.e. political and legal institutions amongst other realms of society. These will eventually register in the intellectual, educational, and cultural spheres more than they have so far.

The formula of “one country, two systems” hides the larger, surreptitious story of economic effects and integration. Notable/notorious development projects like the high speed

³³ These are the first two Articles of the Basic Law. See also *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China* 1990, 73.

³⁴ Both lines hail from the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*.

rail link in Kowloon (with its own PRC immigration channel) and the massive bridge that links Hong Kong to Macau and Zhuhai across the Pearl River are cases in point, as is mainland tourism. The mainland government plans to integrate Hong Kong's economy even more via the "Greater Bay Area Transport and Internet Technology Hub" (a la Silicon Valley), linking Hong Kong with Shenzhen, Macau, and Guangzhou. There is no doubt interdependence with the mainland is the future, but like plans for land reclamation off of Lantau island for housing projects, these are things that will mostly benefit future generations or today's youth.

All sides, back in the 1980s and 1990s, had expected the economic party to continue, making everyone happy. But in reality it takes generations and much planning and intelligent governance to make a more social economy. Capitalism is not helpful in this regard. The sociological and cultural dimensions of integration are more subtle, less visible, and more meaningful. The widespread perception even amongst non-violent protesters that the mainland is taking over and radically changing Hong Kong – or merely wants to -- indicates something fairly indescribable yet profound is happening.

The Basic Law is an expedient, diplomatic document that allowed the United Kingdom to depart its colony and the PRC to ascend with some self-understood dignity and gravitas, whilst masking the fact that absolutely everything would be in the details to come, not what was written in the document. The British could drop their "white man's burden" pretense after having gifted Hong Kong wealth/finance capital and gaining a vague promise of democracy or suffrage of some type someday from mainland authorities. For the Deng-era CCP, the Basic Law allowed it to proclaim it was smoothly reuniting the territory with the motherland, enlisting patriotic Hong Kong tycoons, and still controlling the contours of any political reforms. In short, the document and its ambiguities and allegiances to capital and capitalists could not (and cannot) lead to democracy, preserve autonomy, or form some type of functional social contract. The eruption of protests this year, including their violence and xenophobia, are the case in point.

The CCP's fervent belief in economism, market forces, and a getting rich-is-glorious mentality harmonized with the British laissez-faire project and sought to deeply de-politicize the handover, which is to say the end of colonialism. Apparently the idea was to decolonize by ignoring politics in favor of capitalism. In other words, the Basic Law says and does nothing about colonialism or the need for decolonization, and this is precisely where Hong Kong is still at. It is not so much that China has re-colonized its stolen territory but that Hong Kong has never gone through a moment of decolonization. Perhaps these latest protests are not so much indicative of a democracy/suffrage movement as a semi-conscious movement on the part of many, and then a riot, against a still-colonial, still-unpopular political and economic system.

The system is broken. Hong Kong political parties are largely dysfunctional and amount to either social activist groups (the various pan-democrats) that want regime-change (including of the mainland in many cases) or even more inept and ineffective establishment groups defined as "pro-Beijing." The Chief Executives since the handover have been tycoons and bureaucrats, not politicians. Were it not a serious matter of livelihood and now even life, death, and trauma, it would all make for a great comedy on the BBC.

But the problem with economism is that it does not work — politics can never be fully neutralized, by liberalism, markets, or China's post-Mao state. The protest movement, to whatever extent we can call it one, and notwithstanding its reactionary and self-defeating aspects, has made this clear. There does need to be a political solution to the current crisis of governance –some type of compromise for the time being. But longer term, which also begins urgently and now, there needs to be a better, more rationally planned, and realistic re-politicization of the Hong Kong-China relationship. The Basic Law will not help. What

would help is a politics of integration and inter-dependence, as opposed to impossible and confrontational battles for autonomy and separateness. The threat to Hong Kong is not PLA tanks but an illiberal or degraded “liberalism” pitted against a silent yet dysfunctional government.

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