
The History Man: The Last Governor of Hong Kong

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At midnight on 30 June 1997, Hong Kong island, ceded to Britain in the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), along with Kowloon, the tip of the mainland ceded in 1860 under the first convention of Peking, and another portion of the mainland, called the New Territories, acquired on a ninety-nine-year lease in 1898 under the second convention of Peking, will revert to China. The form of the handover ceremonies and what Hong Kong will be like after 1997 are matters of speculation. Hong Kong has been promised that it can keep its way of life for the following fifty years as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) within China, a territory whose secure and guarded borders assume that it possesses a single identity. But what identity will Hong Kong acquire when the political framework that made it a British Crown colony has disappeared? What identity did it negotiate with the old colonial power? Did negotiation *ever* construct an identity in Hong Kong?

To think about what will happen to Hong Kong after 1997, it is worth reading critically the opinions of the British, who having run the territory for over 150 years and having agreed to hand it back, with various safeguards written in, may be assumed to have their own ideas about its future. This paper examines their sense of Hong Kong's future, what identity it will acquire and what it will preserve. It is a hybrid paper, for it is the record of an interview and an essay.

I did the interview because I wanted to get the British approach straight by talking with Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong; it was held on 12 September 1996 at Government House in Hong Kong. On Patten's part the interview

seemed like a rehearsal for his annual Policy Address (a state of the nation speech), delivered on 2 October to the Hong Kong Legislative Council: many of the phrases he used with me reappeared in the speech. On that humid 12 September, the English-language newspapers carried gloomy predictions about the future of Hong Kong: the *South China Morning Post* led with figures about people leaving the territory (but it is not clear that the figures would be different if the political situation was not as it was: Singapore and Taiwan both have an equally high mobility of population), and the *Hong Kong Standard* carried an inset section on how the Taiwanese perceived the coming changes to be disastrous politically.

I interviewed Patten to find out more about the last governor of Hong Kong during its time as a British colony—to get a last snapshot of that form of British colonialism before it disappeared. But this paper is also an essay because by reading Chris Patten, on the basis of the interview and other information about him, including looking at his last Policy Address, I want to examine British assumptions about Hong Kong. I describe what subtends the approach of the British government to Hong Kong and to its future, looking at first the British national ideology itself, which has a particular relationship to colonialism; second, the universalist reading of history that the colonial politician subscribes to; and third, the anxiety of colonial government to protect itself, which leads to what I call the melancholy of power. The hybrid format means that I shall have to describe things in detail first without overmuch comment and let their implications hang, hoping the reader will hold onto them until I bring out some of their ironies and resonances later.

The Governor

In the waiting room before the interview, where the governor himself came to collect me to take me to his study (I appreciated this, for I gathered this was not by any means an invariable practice), I looked at the coffee-table book on Government House and at the photographs of twenty-seven previous governors hanging in the room; there was a conspicuous place left for the last governor. I wondered at what point the last picture would be put up: presumably the moment it was time to hang it would be the time to take them all down. The first was Sir Henry Pottinger, in 1841, whose background was the East India Company and who was brought in immediately after Hong Kong became a colonial possession, but I looked for the only governor I have thought about before in detail—Sir John Bowring (1854–59), who was a radical M.P. in the 1840s, speaking for the Utilitarian Mr. Gradgrinds and Mr. Bounderbys, and before that an associate of Bentham

whose executor and editor he was, and before that a member of the Peace Society, responsible for bringing back Byron's body in 1824. One of Bowring's own distinctions as governor was to provoke the Second Opium War (1856), which further opened up China to Western capitalist expansion. The nonconformist, radical, Utilitarian, and Unitarian hymnwriter and litterateur (in the 1860s, he wrote for Dickens's periodical, *All the Year Round*), when on the other side of the world, exerted naval and diplomatic pressure on Siam to open up to Western trade and waged war on China in favour of open markets (including markets to sell opium).

Those two sides of the world symbolise the schizoid tendencies of Utilitarian laissez-faire economics, radical at home, repressive abroad, and they focus the question of what the dominant ideology of Victorian capitalism allowed people to see. The flavour of Bowring abroad can be caught from such an autobiographical reflection as this: "The powers of reason fail when coming in contact with the unreasoning and the unconvincible. No man was ever a more ardent lover of peace than I . . . but with barbarians, ay, and sometimes with civilized nations the words of peace are uttered in vain—as with children too often the word of reproof."¹

Bowring, because he was a career politician become governor, came to my mind when thinking of Patten, for most governors have come either from the Colonial Office or the Foreign Office, few being politicians. (Sir John Pope-Hennessy [1877–81] was an exception, and politicians are often put in post before a colony achieves independence, not that Hong Kong is getting that.) Patten had become in the 1970s a Conservative M.P., associated with Edward Heath and the Heath side of the party. Heath as Conservative prime minister in the early 1970s had signed Britain up to the now-called European Union, and so had a reputation for not being a "little Englander." As leader of the British opposition party, while visiting Hong Kong in 1974, he had spoken of China taking back Hong Kong in 1997.² In 1984, the next leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher,

1. See my *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 225–26.

2. See Frank Welsh, *A History of Hong Kong* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 472. I am grateful to the History Department Workshop at the University of Hong Kong for the loan of materials for this article, including press cuttings from the *South China Morning Post* and the extraordinary book by Russell Spurr, with its embossed cover and picture of a helmet with an ostrich feather on it—part of the governor's regalia which Patten wisely discarded—*Excellency: The Governors of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: FormAsia, 1995). See also G. B. Endacott, *A History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1964, 2nd ed.), and Jung-Fang Ysai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony 1842–1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

whose reputation in foreign affairs was the opposite of Heath's, signed with Beijing the Joint Declaration on the future of Hong Kong, ensuring that Britain would return the territory to Beijing on 30 June 1997 but that Hong Kong would remain a Special Administrative Region of China until 2047. Thatcher's successor as prime minister, John Major, made Patten chairman of the Conservative Party, in which capacity he played hardball and by doing so helped to secure for the Conservatives an electoral victory in 1992, fourth in a sequence of victories which had begun in 1979. Patten himself, however, lost his parliamentary seat in that election, and Major appointed him as Hong Kong's final governor. His predecessor, Sir David Wilson, a plummy-voiced figure from the British Foreign Office, had had much to do with the Joint Declaration, and his moment of total inefficacy was announced on the morning of 4 June 1989, when he had to comment on the Tiananmen Square massacre of students. His own history—as one of the diplomats engaged in pronouncing the Joint Declaration very good—and his quasi-head of state position (representative of a colonial power recognising the colonising might of China) made him audibly shaken, his plummy tones on radio unable to speak other than as if an earthquake had struck the students, completely unable, because of his position and its logic, to refer to causes or to agents in the massacre.

As a politician in the post, Patten made one or two significant changes. He committed himself to changing the Executive and Legislative Councils, the two bodies with a say in the running of Hong Kong. While the first remained a "kitchen cabinet" attached to the governor, the second was to alter its position as a governor-appointed body having powers only of consultation. The new Legislative Council was to become a chamber to which people were to be elected, and the terms of the elections, which brought in a new Legislative Council in September 1995, went far beyond anything Beijing was prepared to accept. Indeed, Beijing has said it will scrap the Legislative Council on 1 July 1997. Patten did not increase his popularity with the PRC (People's Republic of China) when he advocated that all Hong Kong people should be offered passports to the UK, thus virtually acknowledging that the UK might have the responsibility to cede land back to the PRC, and the PRC might have a right to take that land but suggesting that the legality of handing over the six million people on that land, many of them migrants or refugees from China, was dubious. This was all in the context of British attitudes to race and immigration, which had hardened in the 1970s and 1990s.

The British Immigration Act of 1971 effectively limited the right of abode in Britain to those who had previously registered as British citizens: it made a distinction between "patrials" and "nonpatrials." Patrials had been born, adopted, nat-

uralised, or registered in the UK. Others had to obtain permission to live in Britain. A further British Nationality Act of 1981, which was intended to “rationalise” the laws on nationality, had further affirmed the exclusion of Hong Kong people from holding full British passports—though not that of people from Gibraltar or from the Falkland/Malvinas Islands.³ Both of these acts were passed by Conservative governments, the first by Edward Heath as prime minister.

As a result of British government policy, not only will there be no place of refuge for Hong Kong people in Britain should they need it after 1997, but eight thousand people living permanently in Hong Kong who are not of Chinese origin—mainly Indian—will become completely stateless. After the Tiananmen Square massacre there was some question whether Britain should allow passports to all who wished to leave Hong Kong; this was resisted by the British government, which allowed, however, a token number of British passports to be issued, mainly to people who could prove their middle-class credentials (which means, domestically, their likelihood of identifying with the Conservative Party) or could demonstrate some specific “expertise.” On this issue, Patten stood separate from his party, and China, by its anger at the issue being raised, showed its inclination to feel that the spoils it was acquiring were both the land and the people: yet, of course, a Hong Kong where the professional class had moved away or emigrated would be much less viable as an SAR.

Prior to the interview Patten showed me what he called the Great Hall of the People, a private concert room in Government House seating 150 or so, where there was to be a charity piano recital that night given by a British artist to hand-picked guests who would all pay heavily for the privilege. The formalities finished, we went into a large sitting room Patten called his study. A smallish, grey-haired, and I thought likeable, man in his early fifties, dressed in a dark suit, looking and sounding as though he was working on resembling Edward Heath, Patten sat in a large armchair. Behind his desk on the wall could be seen a terracotta crucifix: a reminder of a Catholicism the media—or he—had drawn attention to at the time of his appointment.

“Shoot,” Patten said. So I shot him questions to which he replied courteously and fully, though he was always very politically conscious (nor were we alone: his press officer was with us all the time). Patten was obviously accomplished at delivering himself in long and impersonal periods (as in “I hope that there is sufficient momentum behind the attachment to and the institutions of civil society

3. On these acts, see Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea, *White Man's Country: Racism in British Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 69, 109.

[in Hong Kong], that civil society will survive and that will be at least partly Britain's legacy . . .") and thinking as it were on the hoof in a stepped pyramid style as he speculated that the legacy of Britain in Hong Kong would run from "the more mundane" ("investments and trade, personal connections between Hong Kong and Britain") to "the less mundane" ("the English language") to "the immeasurable" (which meant "a degree of respect, if not always affection" towards Britain). This last recalls the language in which British pupils are trained to think of their schoolmasters: respect for their discipline and occasionally knowledge, affection for their quirkiness, and, in all, something short of gratitude, but not much short of it.

Such deliberation, allowing for no chinks in the wall being so patiently built up, made dialogue difficult. I had emphasised in my letter, and repeated again before starting, that I was not a journalist but an academic. His responses were as though given for the benefit of History (whose agency I and the tape recorder were) and with references to Tocqueville, Aung San Suu Kyi, Vaclav Havel, Zhao Ziyang, and other world-historical figures.

Though I referred to "Beijing," he always called it "Peking," and he answered questions slowly and deliberately (I could usually transcribe his answers from the tape recorder without having to do much running back), never asking for amplification of them nor at any time expressing a sense that any particular question was ill-timed or inappropriate. Whatever question was asked he would answer, in his fashion, a little humourlessly and drily, and usually opting for the future imperative tense. For example, when asked what future the Chinese leadership saw for Hong Kong, he said: "I think that Chinese leadership must recognise that every problem that China faces is easier to solve if they get Hong Kong right, and more difficult to solve if they get Hong Kong wrong." Wanting to get beyond this guardedness, I asked him for a prediction, but the tone of the response did not change, as he addressed the PRC over my shoulder: "I hope that China will be able to continue the extremely brave economic revolution that it has begun—it is important to the world as well as to China that it continues to succeed in that task. The increase in net disposable income in the pockets of Chinese and Indians is after all going to be the dynamo for economic growth in the next generation." That was the second "I hope" answer; I will return to the details of the reply. To my question whether he thought that dissent would be tolerated in Hong Kong after 1997, his reply was one sentence long: "Well, if it's not, Hong Kong will be a poorer place in every sense." No answer which might be taken as yes or no, and no reference to any specific agency that might make dissent impossible.

Once, in 1993, when I heard Patten speak at a public meeting at the University of Hong Kong, I was interested that while addressing a hall packed with Chinese students—which he certainly could not forget because his discourse had to be punctuated in the middle of every sentence by a Chinese translator, with odd and comic effects on his rhetorical arm movements and their solemnity—he referred (as do all British officials) to the PRC and to its government as “the Chinese.” The phrase implicitly alienated the sea of Chinese faces in front of him, denying their ethnicity, and I could not understand how he could not think he was being unintentionally offensive. Or did he think they were British? Further, the phrase “the Chinese” homologized the government with whom he was having such difficulties, laying him open to the charge that he was bringing them under the power of an Orientalising discourse. Could the phrase “the Chinese” have *no* racist resonances? As Patten has excited some much-publicised anger in Beijing, I asked him about the “cultural differences” which I then also called the “cultural problems” (I wanted to distinguish, here, though normally I would not, the cultural from the political) that he had faced in dealing with Beijing. He replied:

I don't think there are any particular cultural problems. I think there's been a straightforward problem of—from our point of view—of convincing Peking that there was nothing to worry about in Hong Kong, that they could trust Hong Kong, that they didn't have to be obsessed with political control. But that's probably less a matter of Chineseness than Leninism. I think the main difficulty we've had in our relationship with China is the refusal at this stage of the transition to do China's dirty work for it—to rig elections, or to retain our laws in a state which is inconsistent with the international covenants.

Leninism was thus distinguished from Marxism, about which Patten spoke twice approvingly: first saying that he was enough of a Marxist to believe that social changes followed on from economic ones, and then later referring to being taught at Oxford (Balliol) by a Marxist historian—I assume Christopher Hill. “Leninism” suggests a political intensity that “Marxism” does not—even remembering that Marx could say he was not a Marxist—and in one way it seemed that there was a skill by which obvious cultural differences were elided with the political, so that a hostile political ideology rather than cultural difference became the source of friction. The cultural difference of China could not be acknowledged in a context which spoke of “the international community” and of “the world” judging China's post-1997 dealings with Hong Kong. But not, apparently, finding cultural difference significant recalls the comments made earlier about

Sir John Bowring which said he was a reflection of the dominant national ideology, blind to the contradictions in his own discourse.

Patten was lucky to study with Christopher Hill, whose "history from below" research on the seventeenth-century Levellers and Diggers and Ranters is fundamental for British cultural studies, and at Balliol, an Oxford college with a Left tradition. But British Marxism, as is revealed by E. P. Thompson in his attack on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory* (1987), is limited by its failure to examine the question of ideology or the unconscious constraints that structure and produce discourse. It works with empirical materials, so that it does not look at what puts the text together from the outside or at what must be unspoken within the text itself. Said's critique of the Marxist Raymond Williams is relevant: never in Williams's literary criticism does he engage with British imperialism as the off-stage narrative that sanctions metropolitan nineteenth-century texts.⁴ Perhaps Patten by invoking his undergraduate career wished to suggest that he knew Marxism as well as his antagonists in Beijing, or perhaps he was genuinely in love with the insight that this Marxist spin on history had given him, but the comment awakened reflection on the "components of the national culture" that Perry Anderson discussed in *New Left Review* in 1968 (no. 50). Not only is Hill part of that national culture, being an icon within a class-bound institution (Oxford),⁵ but the national culture binds together left and right—or rather, it makes the British left wing part of its right wing.

Patten reminded me of this when I asked him what he thought of the Conservative Party's attitude to him over the issue of passports (i.e. their not granting full passport rights to all subjects of British colonial rule in Hong Kong and their general disapproval of Patten for suggesting it). He said that he thought the same towards it as he did towards the Labour Party's attitude (which was the same as that of the Conservatives). I had seen the answer coming before I asked the question. The Labour Party would not have put in a different kind of politician from Patten, or, to put it another way, Patten would not have acted differently in Hong Kong if he were a Labour Party politician, as he himself acknowledged: it being an added irony which he did not draw attention to, but which says volumes about the consensual power of the national ideology, that his own politics would make him a plausible Labour politician in the existing Labour Party.

Derrida discusses the metaphysics involved in historians thinking that there

4. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 61.

5. The memorial to Hill in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.) *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 1–21 gives a good sense of Oxford.

can be a narrative they can appeal to—of linear development, or of something unfolding gradually—or in thinking that there can be a single narrative, a universal history.⁶ Patten, as an historian, made several references to history in the course of his interview, but always to universal history, a history of world development which assumes the universal subject. Asked about the moves towards democratic representation that had taken place during his time, he speculated that whether these had happened too fast or too slow was “an argument that history will have with itself over the next ten or twenty years.”

Before the interview took place, I had looked at the subject of the British in Hong Kong in Frank Welsh's *A History of Hong Kong* (1993), an informative, journalistic, six-hundred-page work which begins with an introduction to present-day Hong Kong and works its way through the history from 1840 to 1992; its last chapter has the Kiplingesque title “Recessional” and deals with the end of British rule, and it ends with a short epilogue on Patten. The book was completed before Patten arrived, and his coming disturbed its drift, which was to highlight Britain's neglect of Hong Kong and to stress that Hong Kong's achievement was basically in spite of Britain's laissez-faire attitudes. Welsh presents the handover to China as the end of history: there is no more to be said about Hong Kong. And producing a history for Western consumption at this stage suggests roundly that this is the end of the road: after 1997 there may be no more Western interest—not enough to write another post-1997 *History of Hong Kong*.

Asked near the end of the interview whether he felt any nostalgia in the face of the British leaving Hong Kong, Patten replied:

Yes, I have a deep sense of the historic nature of the job I have to do, and read the last pages of Jan Morris with a certain elegiac sympathy. I think it's important that Britain departs from Hong Kong in as honourable and dignified way as possible.

Asked then if there was any part of him which regretted the handover:

No—because it's an historic necessity, and I don't think you can spit in the face of history. But many people round the world, ten years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, will ask us difficult questions about the transfer of sovereignty of a free city to a society which has a different concept of freedom, and we will have to provide pretty good answers.

The rhetoric of “history” here has much in common with Jan Morris. The last

6. See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 56-59.

pages of her reissued recent book *Hong Kong: End of an Empire*, whose title has the same end-of-history note as Welsh's (history here being the history of the West, or the decline of the West), begin on the apocalypse-postponed note of "But it is not over yet,"—having just discussed the implications of the Tiananmen Square massacre and the "need for bolder action" it seemed to impress upon the Thatcher-led British government.

The British government could, of course, steel themselves to let Hong Kong sink or swim. To many, their refusal to grant residence rights to all British passport holders seemed to show that this was indeed their decision, and some argued that in the eye of universal history it would be a correct one.⁷

But this laissez-faire position is clearly not Morris's, and she closes by asking the reader to imagine the British in the last days of rule, standing up to Beijing and establishing something else, using "nerve, skill, self-confidence" and a "robust" attitude.

To have created upon this improbable terrain, among an alien people, so far from home, a society not only stable, educated, prosperous and free, not only self-governed by the imperialists' own high principles, but also standing as a model and an inspiration to its mother China—that might be a last justification for the idea of imperialism itself. And even if that fulfillment were to survive only a generation, to be destroyed by yet another new brutalism, at least it would add a sad majesty to the aesthetic of Empire—a memorial to what might have been, as the shutters close upon the once exuberant colony. The British would have seized their last chance to give Hong Kong one characteristic it has always lacked: nobility, the balance of purpose and proportion that the geomancers strive for. (307)

This is journalism as tourism (on the same page, in a footnote, Morris says she has booked in for the last night of colonial rule in a Hong Kong hotel). The style is deliberately elegiac, fitting the last pages of a last chapter of British existence (i.e., the colonial existence), and marked with poeticisms ("sad majesty," which is always in a state of disappearance; "aesthetic of Empire"; "shutters," which Hong Kong does not use). It is hard to imagine such an unself-conscious endorsement of what Britain could have the power to do "among an alien people

7. See Jan Morris, *Hong Kong: End of an Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 305.

so far from home" (whose?)—Morris echoes Keats's "sad heart of Ruth when sick for home / She stood in tears amid the alien corn." The contrast between what is "exuberant" and "nobility" suggests a division which runs on age lines: the child—who is also the Eastern colonised subject—is exuberant and is put against the grown-up—the noble coloniser. (In Kipling's day, in "The White Man's Burden," addressed to America to urge intervention in the Philippines, the Filipino was "half devil and half child.") Jan Morris's use of the word nobility comes from the notion, most held to by the British themselves, that if there is one thing they are good at, it is traditional ceremony, at being noble that way.

In a sense, Morris's pages create Patten, or he has been interpellated by them; that is, the imagery of empire-building that Morris uses in the passage quoted and elsewhere, where rugged, bulldog qualities are needed against what must be by implication the uninspired, unaesthetic, and nonexuberant mainland Chinese, is repeated in the rhetoric of Patten taking on Beijing and doing so as though he were in the situation of the original colonisers. The dilemma of being in history is of repeating the past, of not seeing that the situation has changed, that the language of colonialism no longer fits. We know who said that the great events of history happen twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

The grammar of Morris's last pages is conditional: *this* would have to happen for *that* to take place. But at the same time, while there may be these tergiversations, there can also be no change when the panoptical eye of universal history looks on with a gaze so comprehensive that it makes no discrimination between the way these things are seen West or East. Or rather, there is only one vantage point for universal history: the standpoint of the West, for there is no other history. On Patten's model, History will be in a state of internal conflict, unable to agree on the rate of democratic change, perhaps criticising Britain for handing over Hong Kong at this stage of history—ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet for Patten, the question to be posed to the British is only about the wisdom of handing over a sovereign state to a people with different ideas of freedom (read: no idea of freedom). History, in this, takes a pro-Western position, and the debate is univocal, monologicistic—history has the debate with itself, suggesting that there is no way of getting out of the point of view of that single history, which itself may actually fault Britain for being insufficiently Western. For the rest, it seems countries have no choice other than to go in the direction of an "historic necessity." The agent of historical change for the next century—the "dynamo"—is economic growth: economic growth brings about social and political changes. This I gathered was what Patten had learned from Marxism. China and India, whose spending power would be the dynamo, are read in Western terms; they

are to grow capitalistically in order to keep the momentum of history going. There is still no other historical model considered in order to think about these societies other than the Western.

It seems that a lasting legacy of imperialism is that it imposes a metaphysics on the people it buys up, which compels them to produce—but even more, to spend, for that is the dynamo for growth. The “historic necessity” for Britain to hand back Hong Kong is one movement in a larger history onto which is projected an increased spending power in China and India, though the rhetoric in Patten’s tone also acknowledges that such a history may be baffled if China takes retrograde actions with regard to Hong Kong. China can enter history by its approach to Hong Kong post-1997. Otherwise there is no history and no need to update *A History of Hong Kong*.

Patten’s appeals to history were deterministic, leaving little room for agency. I link that to the greyness of his replies, whose tone spoke of the difficulties of governing: a discourse of severity and puritanism, of the white man having a burden. Jan Morris thinks that after the British have gone, leaving democracy and aesthetics in place, such a spirit might only last another generation before a moment of “new brutalism.” The artistic terms of this reference are worth considering: it contrasts with the “aesthetic of Empire.” It suggests a moment of aggressive modernism, with an implied forgetting of history, and this gives it resonance for Morris; but what is the history that is to be forgotten? And why does she think it likely that this “improbable terrain” should prove barren soil for the growth of high-principled ideas? I think the answer lies in a basic pessimism which is characteristic of the right and is particularly marked in fascism—a melancholy which has to do with nostalgia, and a belief that power is always a matter of holding onto that which is slipping away, so that it is always reactive in character, always confronting disappearance.

The Governor as Politician

When I asked Patten what it was like being the last governor of Hong Kong, the response came fast: “I think the frustration is obviously that there is a limit to my ability to give people reassurances about the future. I can say what I will do . . . I certainly can’t go beyond that. By and large, I don’t think people think I’m going to go barmy or screw things up before I depart.” I was not expecting the primary emphasis to fall on the word “frustration,” nor was I quite expecting Patten to have to negate the possibility of becoming alienated from himself in the

process. And I think I was surprised by the emotional cathexis he put into the point that Britain must leave Hong Kong "in as dignified and honourable a way as possible." But the British will not be masters of the ceremony on 30 June 1997. And the language of keeping your dignity is unconsciously comic, a reminder that the god of melancholy, Saturn, is also the god of carnival, the Saturnalia.

The melancholy of power may relate to the situation of Britain as a world power obliged to decolonise systematically over the past fifty years, forced to recognise, too, the power of a superior replacing colonising force in the United States. National identity, like personal identity, needs to keep a sense of borders and of its own integrity, hence the talk of dignity in the process whereby Britain assents to the amputation of part of itself—the loss of a limb out East. Perhaps Patten might have done better if he had been a Labour politician in Hong Kong in the service of the Tories (a currently impossible scenario, though ironically not inconceivable *if* the British Labour Party is returned to power in the UK before the handover: there has to be a general election in Britain before May 1997). The identification of the Conservative Party, in government since 1979, with the ruling class and with the power of colonisation has nonetheless also been decisive for Patten's thinking about what he is and what he represents in Hong Kong. It has meant that he can allow no difference, no doubleness to supervene between what he is as a figure of a colonial government, anxious to maintain dignity and honour while recognising that these things are not in his power, and what he is historically, as a figure with a past in the Conservative Party. His situation is overdetermined. My first questions had been about him being a politician and a Conservative one at that. He replied that being a politician had made him more conscious of promises that had been given to Hong Kong (because politicians have to promise things to their electorate—though there is no electorate here because there is no self-governing); that it had given him a sense of the need to involve the people in matters concerning their future and of the need to be "open and accessible." Then, he added, his past made him more concerned

to establish a consensus in British public life for what we're doing in Hong Kong, and I've made a point of trying to avoid Hong Kong being a partisan issue, which reflects both my belief that it's important there should be cross-party support for what we're doing in the House of Commons, and perhaps reflects the fact that I've always believed that my background made it important that I should lean over backwards to avoid being seen as a Conservative Party politician. . . . The way Hong Kong has been run—a liberal market-based approach to economics and

social development—chimed in with my own philosophical instincts, though I hope that my lifelong belief in market economics being socially responsible has had some effect on my attitude to issues like the development of community programmes, the development of welfare, the development of assistance for the disabled and so on. . . .

The talk was going straight over my shoulder, this time not towards the PRC but to the right wing of another right wing government with considerably less sense of cultural difference than Patten possesses: i.e., to the Conservative Party. For the Tories, with their current problems over the European Union (whether to hunker down as “little Englanders” or to accept the larger unit of “Europe” with its apparent threat to Britain as an SAR), are the party which has had the most trouble negotiating their own attitudes to otherness back in Britain—the prevalence of right-wing groups whose racism and violence on the city streets is patent, is a reminder that the loss of Hong Kong is also a domestic matter, for it touches British racism at the heart. The existence and the destiny of over five million Chinese, not to say the Indian and Pakistani populations, the Sri Lankans, and the huge numbers of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong, to say nothing of the Vietnamese refugees, needs to be negated by a government just about to go into a general election as much as by an opposition that seeks to win it by neglecting the question of racial otherness.⁸

After the interview, I came away with several feelings, the first, that the interview had not been an example of communication. While the occasion was not propitious for that, Patten's answers were also too global, too much addressed to that metaphysical History to be marked by any awareness of the difference between talking in Britain and talking in Hong Kong, or in thinking about the people whose destinies he spoke for and whose identity he assumed in his replies. Each statement contained its own self-justification; each pronouncement contained within its message a self-reflexivity which commented on the morality and integrity of the speaker. Part of the melancholy of power is to try to preserve a sense of personal integrity though everything else has changed. My last question to him, thinking about the question of the national identity he represented, was whether Hong Kong had changed him. This seemed to be the only question he was not expecting, for it was the only one that produced two paraprases in his brief answer.

8. The classic text on race in Britain remains Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

A bit—a bit. I think it's . . . I think I've never done a job in politics where the relationship between morality and political decision making seemed to be so close. I think it's . . . it's toned down—toned up—some of my views about economic and social philosophy.

The preeminence of the ethical here recalled the presence of the crucifix, and Patten as the melancholy man recalled Shakespeare's Henry IV or Verdi's Philip II (*Don Carlo*). Perhaps he wished to give the impression he'd become more of a thinker about economic and political issues since he'd come to Hong Kong. But what did he mean by his last statement? If he'd "toned down" he would have become more left of centre (his reputation, in Britain, is as a Conservative left of the centre-right). If he'd toned up, he'd have become more Thatcherite, more right-wing. Toning down and up are different. Toning down is what you do with an overloud sound system. Toning up is what you do with your violin when adjusting the strings. Yet they are also switch-phrases, like Freud noting that the word *heimlich* also means *unheimlich*. They suggest that going right or going left are equivocal: they mean the same in party terms. They imply that Patten was always and still is, in Hong Kong, a party politician. The place could not make him culturally different, could not "other" him or make him feel that he did not know his way about. Of course it could not do this for a person sent out to tell other people what to do. But that is the drawback of being a governor, or the drawback of imperialism.

The Governor on the Future

I asked Patten what Britain had done for Hong Kong:

I think that Britain has provided a framework of liberal values which has enabled Chinese men and women to thrive and excel and to keep the benefits of their work and excellence. I think what Britain has done has been to—as it were—in textbook de Tocqueville fashion to provide the ingredients which others have been able to turn into this success story. I think Britain has provided—or helped to provide—the rule of law, a meritocratic civil service and a plural society.

The reply works in three even-length sentences, each beginning the same way, and with the same implication: Britain has done the boring enabling work; Hong Kong people have taken the opportunities and run with them. There is both a home and a colonial message here. The answer suggests that Hong Kong is a suc-

cess in that it represents the Conservative Party abroad, that it provides a mirror of themselves, whose reflection they can take pleasure in. The language of Hong Kong having a "plural society" is a challenge to Patten's own right wing and represents his own attempt to negotiate his identity within that party. But while that is all true, it is more important to note that the tone accepts the logic of colonial rule. Britain has done certain things for Hong Kong. The careful modesty of the answer must be read as emanating from a politics and ideology that is sure of itself—that does not need to boast—for where would liberal values have come from if not from the coloniser? Hong Kong has been given an identity with which to identify itself.

But, in turn, what did or does Hong Kong mean to Patten? I found him to say very little about this in the interview, but the following quotation is from the Policy Address of 2 October 1996:

You don't have to be as savvy as a Hong Kong entrepreneur to see the opportunities that lie ahead. Hong Kong is a bridge, a vital link between East and West, and specifically, between the West and China. Hong Kong represents the kind of Asia with which both West and East are comfortable. An Asia committed to open markets and open minds. An Asia committed to the rule of law and respect for human freedom. An Asia in which East and West mix so well—commercially, culturally, socially, intellectually. It offers, in that sense, a vision of the future for Asia. (Par. 73)

* "Open markets and open minds" equates the imperialist expansion of the nineteenth century, which wanted China for its markets, with an expansion of the mind of the colonised. The rubric of liberal values, by a back formation, covers freedom of trade and pretends that this is not part of a structure of domination. Of course, in the nineteenth century such a domination was obviously one-way only. That cannot be true at the end of the twentieth century, where a unitary "Asia" appears five times in the paragraph to challenge another unitarily-conceived West. Hong Kong as a microcosm of Asia is "the kind of Asia with which both West and East are comfortable." This, on first reading, seems to be the opposite of the language of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*unbehagen*), where no one can feel at ease within culture because culture is a larger version of the superego. But actually Patten's language is very much like Freud's, because it makes both "the East" and "the West" into superegos for Hong Kong.

If Hong Kong is the kind of Asia where the West can feel comfortable, does that not suggest a structure where the powerful West feels that it is entitled to

find in Hong Kong what it wants? The superego constructs the ego-identity it wants. The language is unconsciously colonialist in not turning round the statement and wondering under what circumstances the West could be challenged by Hong Kong. I don't mean in what way Westerners might be treated violently: the point is that the words assume that Hong Kong's values could not offend the West's. But the unconscious of the speech assumes that it knows what the East—as an up-and-coming superego—wants. Nothing has been learned if the “East” can be spoken for in such a way that it can be assumed that it is also comfortable with Hong Kong. So where would that leave Hong Kong if it were comfortable with neither superego, neither superpower? Is it Hong Kong's function to make other people feel comfortable? Hong Kong is not treated seriously as an entity: it remains the Ariel to Prospero—the servant the master can be comfortable with, the subaltern. It is asked to stay schizoid so that two separate interests can equally feel at home, both finding it convenient for their national rhetorics to reify the other as a place where people think differently.

Of course, the speech needs decoding, since it is a way of encouraging China to keep its hands off Hong Kong. But while this is true, there is no reason to doubt the imperialist intention as well, in that it is conferring an identity upon Hong Kong, which clearly it would like to see more fully accepted, by complimenting Hong Kong on being a bridge or a passage to China. Talking this way makes the place exist only instrumentally, as a means to open up Asia—and specifically China—just as the instrumental nature of Hong Kong in relation to Britain speaks also in the colonial power's attitude towards passports for Hong Kong people, whether in denying them or even in thinking that to issue them and suggest that people leave Hong Kong in a new diaspora could be a realistic solution taking account of people's actual wishes.

In wanting to confer an identity upon Hong Kong, the speech fails to allow that there might be a Hong Kong culture outside these terms which are so unself-consciously using the territory as the image of a place to reconcile two essentialised opponents, reified as a unitary West and East. To acknowledge a Hong Kong culture would complicate that neocolonial dream. For a Hong Kong culture, expressed for instance in its cinema, might suggest that there was something in the place that wanted neither the old-style imperialism of the West nor the promise of a new assumption of Beijing-based power, so that the content of that culture was quite simply that it had little to do with either form of nationalism. The logic of a Hong Kong culture would necessarily be that it was pluralistic, but not in the sense Patten used the phrase, where plurality exists within carefully-put-together coordinates. Rather, it would be plural in that it could not adopt a single-

subject identity, since such would be the marker of colonialisation, emanating from either the reified West or the reified East. Decolonisation would then be a process of deterritorialising, not attaching values or cultural growth to any one place or identifying them with any single subject condition. Hong Kong would be a space of *différance* as opposed to a site for the presentation and imaginary reconciliation of a cultivated East/West difference.

The interview ended after forty minutes, amicably, with Patten asking as I left what I was working on. I referred to a current interest in Henry James, to which he said that he didn't get on with James, but he had read *The Spoils of Poynton*. Now this is a text of considerable interest, which Raymond Williams says should be read after the first chapter of *Capital* because it is about money, the commodity, and Mrs. Gereth's fight for possession of goods—the fetishes—what are called the Things.⁹ Mrs. Gereth fears the loss of the Things if her son Owen marries Mona Brigstock, who has no attachment to any of the Things that will fall to her by marriage. James writes, “‘Things’ were of course the sum of the world; only for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china.”¹⁰ To prevent the loss of the spoils, she wants the talented but poor Fleda Vetch to marry Owen; civilization keeps going at the price of manipulation of people. At the end, the house and its treasures—its spoils—are burned—spoiled—probably deliberately and nihilistically. The date of the novel was 1897. More spoils are around in 1997. The question is how they can be “appreciated” (a Jamesian word) for what they are worth. And to do that means, first, to know what they are. Spoils are always already spoiled, as the word suggests; it is a question of whether they can ever be rightfully appropriated—or whether any act of appropriation is also an act of destruction. If all acts of possession are also modes of dispossession, James's assumption would be that all possessions are spoils, and no form of ownership can be justified. This is the Marxist James I am interested in.

The Spoils of Poynton suggests an allegory of Britain and China over Hong Kong, but it would have to be added that not only are the Things spoils, but Fleda Vetch is spoiled by being manipulated. As the subject of colonial domination, Hong Kong represents spoils, and however much Patten as the voice of the government may stress that Hong Kong has been a success story produced by Hong Kong people themselves, Walter Benjamin's comment remains apt for recalling

9. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 258.

10. Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, New York edition (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1908), X.24.

the importance of ownership: colonial spoils are called “cultural treasures” and act as a reminder that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”¹¹ Benjamin’s point would ask for an acknowledgement that being colonial subjects had done damage to people’s lives too, which would require that the narrative of success be read, as Benjamin puts it, “against the grain.” To read against the grain might make people in both West and East “uncomfortable”—it would be the other half of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where cultural values and “civilization” are called to account by the unease of the subject within them.

Has Hong Kong yet been given the capacity to read against the grain in terms of its reaction to British rule? Obviously not, when it is expected to assent to the Utilitarian-Conservative ethos promulgated by the governor. Will it have the ability to read China against the grain? Much of the rhetoric about Hong Kong’s future has been from business interests telling Hong Kong people not to make China feel uncomfortable. Britain has been made uncomfortable by the passport issue—the possibility of the Chinese coming to Britain—and China by the existence of cultural otherness in Hong Kong. Both the decolonising and the colonising powers feel their boundaries and identities threatened; colonialism and national paranoia intersect. The swing between being made to feel comfortable and being made to feel discomfort becomes a clue to understanding the politics and practice of everyday life.

On reflection, I felt that Patten in the interview had been quiet about Hong Kong, about the “spoils,” as though the problem was to describe them, to say what they were, because to do so would acknowledge they were spoils. An anecdote in the *South China Morning Post* on 3 October reported that many Hong Kong politicians—non-Beijing oriented—reacted to his address by saying that Patten had said nothing about Hong Kong, the reply from an aide being that this reaction had left the governor “gobsmacked” since the whole speech had been a “paean of praise for Hong Kong.” But much had been directed, in the interview, as in the Policy Address, at Beijing, much at London, and both sets of statements had addressed History, which Patten finished his Policy Address by saying “would stand and cheer” if “Hong Kong [took] tomorrow by storm.” The address spoke on behalf of Hong Kong: it was what the government had done for the people. Though it spoke about his “frustration” (Par. 93) that he had been unable to put his views to the test by having them voted on throughout Hong Kong (i.e., in a referendum), the vote would have confirmed Patten’s identity and politics, not Hong Kong’s.

11. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 258.

There is no question of Hong Kong having “othered” Patten, or that he himself has undergone the cultural crossover implied in the image of the bridge. In his praise of Hong Kong, Patten has always stayed mercifully away from discussing expatriate living—the food, the bargains, the junk-rides, the walks in the New Territories, experiencing “Chinese culture.” The absence of these kitsch reminders of the colonial inheritance and the sense of colonial possession is welcome, a reminder that Patten believes in the importance of being earnest. But it goes with something else. The Policy Address began with saying how “we” (but who is or are we?) “have tried to lay down the best possible foundations for [the] future.” Continuing that government is not going to “close down” for the next nine months (before the handover, that is), he adds, “It will be business as usual, punctuated admittedly by some unique events. We still have plenty to do. And we intend to do plenty. There are few things more damaging in governing a community than drift.”

I am not sure, as an incidental point, about the narrative that is implied here. It suggests that the handover, presumably one of the unique events—but how can you have more than one unique event?—will not interrupt “business as usual.” The attempt is to elide the change of sovereignty and to efface the point that the British will no longer be “we.” But the gravamen of the point about government is that the people ought to be grateful that the government is not drifting. Patten is, of course, reacting to suggestions that the British government should fade away gracefully before the handover. But would the rhetoric be any different if he were a politician in the dying days of a government in Britain when everyone is thinking about an election? He suggests that the people should remember the colonial administration with respect, if not affection.

Hong Kong could never “other” Patten, because the subject-position of the politics he stands for is based on *ressentiment*—the frustration that befalls anyone who realises that time is not in their gift and that they are not able to control destinies, or events, especially not what are catechrestically called unique ones, ones you should be able to forestall. *Ressentiment* involves reaction to events and the melancholic sense that all you can do is react to things not in your power—or else drift. The colonial power, unable to control the desire of the other, therefore unable to admit its autonomy—having no sense of Hong Kong culture, even the recognition of which would be inadmissible—must have a politics of *ressentiment*, wounded, frustrated, disappointed that nobody understands. Being a hegemonic, Conservative politician gives a special angle on feeling Western, but it is not to be thought that it is a position of a spontaneous, active will to power. And the demands that may be felt by a politician to keep the boundaries of a

secure, masculine, and melancholy identity mean that the politician in Patten could never seriously confront Hong Kong.

But melancholy is never that serious. Patten will go back to what may be a bright future as a British Conservative Party politician, especially if the next election leads to the fall of John Major, or perhaps he will have a future in Brussels. Melancholy, as a fetishized quality, experienced in the face of the loss of colonial power, makes for good middlebrow entertainment, as it was with the British television series about withdrawal from India, *The Jewel in the Crown*. Can it be that long before there is a dramatisation of the nostalgia of the last Brits in Hong Kong? It surely cannot be long before it plays on British television screens. It will not be the last incomprehension.

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