

Localism's Contradictions in Hong Kong

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written by Jason Schulman | June 29, 2019



Earlier this week, Hong Kong had been rocked by perhaps the largest demonstration ever in the city's history. In response to a murder case committed by a Hong Kong man in Taiwan, Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) proposed a bill that would establish the transfer of fugitives between the city, Taiwan, Mainland China, and Macau. As protesters argue, this would legally allow the Hong Kong government to transfer political prisoners to China, a huge step forward for China and Hong Kong government to continue curbing political dissent. Two million people reportedly participated in the protests, more than a quarter of the city's population. Chief Executive Carrie Lam had since agreed to indefinitely delay the bill, signaling at least a major, if not temporary, victory of the pan-democratic camp. Protests continue this week as the citizens surround the police headquarters to hold the police accountable for abuse of authority and violence in the last week and to pressure Lam to decidedly drop the bill.

Yet unlike 2014, media outlets and pundits across the globe struggled to make sense of the fact that Hong Kong's biggest protest is being led by no clear political entities. While the Umbrella movement and its aftermath saw the upsurge of youth-led groups like Demosisto and rising political stars like Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, this year's protests developed without any discernible leaders or political parties, and with that, particular ideologies, rising to the fore. Alice Su reflects in the Los Angeles Times that the protesters were "impeccably organized, yet no one is in charge." The rapid shifting of forces on the ground rendered each of the Umbrella movement stars merely some of many participants and organizers on the streets. Timothy McLaughlin, in The Atlantic, locates some central organizing responsibility to the broad, united front Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), which includes most pan-democratic parties and other NGOs and existed since 2002. But even CHRF's organizers themselves denied this theory, seeing themselves as widely pluralistic and as "facilitators," not "organizers." In any case, Ngok Ma's critique of the CHRF ten years ago still stands true: "while the form was flexible and organic, allowing maximum participation of groups without having a high level of consensus, the form did not have a stable core...it was relatively difficult for this organizational form to sustain a movement for long periods of time."

This lack of ideological consensus in mass movement makes it difficult and superficial to say that these weeks' protests are a definitive step forward for a left, anti-capitalist movement. This is not to say that there were not impressively progressive and radical forces, like the self-organized rally by thousands of mothers, the individual efforts of bus drivers helping to block the roads, or the teachers' union voting to suspend classes in support of the protests. But the absence of political leadership belies a key issue in Hong Kong's vibrant but contradictory history of political mobilization: the complex diversity of ideologies in the pan-democratic and localist opposition camp. Localism, as a recent political phenomenon in the Hong Kong political landscape, stresses Hong

Kong's political and cultural autonomy as distinct from that of China, while older pan-democratic organizations tend to stress this continuity between democratic struggles in Hong Kong and China. Localism has politicized the younger generations in many ways – but is localism a coherent political ideology, and how does it square with an anti-capitalist, mass-led political practice?

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Those trying to make sense of who's left and who's right in Hong Kong's political landscape in the States usually fall into three broad camps of analysis. The first view, more prevalent in mainstream liberal narratives, positions the pan-democratic and localist camp as generally progressive, standing up for human rights against the right-authoritarianism of the Chinese regime and pro-Beijing legislators in the LegCo. The second view, more nuanced, accepts that there is a complex jockeying of power between left-leaning, centrist liberals, and right-leaning forces within the large umbrella of opposition. The third view is essentially reactionary, and receives little support beyond a few pundits and ultra-left sects: parroting the Chinese government's official talking points, these 'left' critics demonize any opposition to China's neoliberalism and neo-colonialism as 'counter-revolutionary' and imperialist.

But all of these perspectives fail to understand that behind the fervent and inspirational self-organization of the Hong Kong people lies a different understanding of political organization. We can begin by noting the general weakness of political parties in building their base throughout the last few years. Demosisto, once hailed as the shining light of Hong Kong's youth movement, listed a membership count of 25 in 2017. Neighbourhood and Worker's Service Centre (NWSC), one of the city's oldest social democratic group in the left wing of the opposition saw a major internal split last year, in protest of long-time leader and founder Leung Yiu-chung's dissolution of the workers' rights committee. The liberal Democratic Party, the largest political party in the city, now boasts a membership of around 700, but presumably no more than one or two hundred are active organizing members.

This sobering reminder of the political parties' perennial inability to expand their membership base makes the occasional outbursts of mass-scale political mobilization even more striking. These contradictions are no more apparent than in this month's anti-extradition bill protests. Efficient and self-organized networks of first aid care and supplies support stations reported throughout the city are a definitive improvement from those in the 2014 mobilizations. The now-viral footage of Hong Kong youth protesters working together to swiftly douse a nearby can of tear gas with their water-bottles impressed viewers across the globe. The populace has cultivated these skills through the series of mass upsurges in the past years, not through the political parties. If anything, the Gramscian strategy of building political opposition in the electoral sphere has become less and less effective. With the disqualification of some pan-democratic and localist LegCo candidates in 2017 and 2018 like Leung 'Long Hair' Kwok-hung, Agnes Chow, and Yau Chi-wing, the prospects of influencing the council from within look increasingly grim. And political forces have largely failed to maintain the momentum in building their movements from the Umbrella protests – at least up to this point.

Youngspiration leader Baggio Leung's suggestion that this type of spontaneous efficiency suggests "a new model" of political mobilization may be an unsustainable optimism. By unsustainable, I do not mean the Hong Kong people's capacity for powerful episodes of mobilization, but its capacity to promote and sustain a truly radical movement of anti-capitalist insurgency. While the conditions for working class and disenfranchised people of all sorts – from street hawkers and small business owners to the elderly – continue to decline, the key factor that mobilizes people out into the street, regardless of political affiliation and even class status, is still the sense of opposition to Chinese encroachment of civil liberties. In other words, the discernible political compass for most Hong

Kongers is not left and right, but pro-Beijing or pan-democracy.

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The complex sentiment of xenophobia against the Mainland Chinese by some pan-democratic political parties is another symptom of this distinctive political milieu. Localist, pro-independence groups like Hong Kong Indigenous and Youngspiration run on this virtually single-issue platform that incoherently intersects with broader economic concerns. Increased Chinese influence in Hong Kong is an extremely diverse set of phenomena, involving actors from the Chinese government and bourgeois investors to the Chinese working-class, but this is often reduced into one thing. It would be impossible to simply correlate Hong Kong's anti-Chinese sentiment with the wave of anti-immigrant sentiment throughout the world, from Syrian refugees to Latinx populations crossing the U. S. border. On the one hand, studies have shown that lower-class Chinese immigrants suffer from wage and other forms of discrimination and mental health issues upon entry to Hong Kong. On the other hand, Chinese investors, often with the support of the Chinese regime, have been actively promoting efforts to gentrify long-time communities with small to large-scale development projects, like the 2010 displacement of Choi Yuen Tsuen village by the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link. Progressive grassroots collectives such as Land Justice League (also labeled 'localist') have been organizing and raising awareness of such projects, while other localist groups focus their efforts on targetting Chinese immigration in toto, regardless of class or gender background. In 2015, Youngspiration spearheaded efforts to deport an undocumented Mainland Chinese boy, arguing that this case may risk establishing a precedent for more illegal immigration. People Power, another localist party, developed from a complicated series of splits in some older pan-democratic activists and a new influx of younger leaders. Its vague adherence to 'populism' bypasses any coherent basis of political unity around economic policy and other key issues.

Localism, in this sense, designates a broad array of political forces and positions that often renders the relationship between material economic analysis and civil liberty obscured. There are also important differences between localist groups on what Hong Kong's political autonomy should look like. Advocates of 'independence' are different from those of 'self-determination', despite often organizing closely with each other. In most cases now, more civically-minded left localists like Demosisto and militant localist nativists like Youngspiration and People Power stand alongside older pan-democratic groups like the Democratic Party and League of Social Democrats (LSD). Just like the Tiananmen Square protests thirty years ago, the indigenous opposition to the Chinese regime is a contradictory mix of working-class interests and liberal and middle-class-centered youth politics. These are not simply contingent alliances between working-class and middle-class forces in the face of a common enemy: many are politicized in the same milieu, and their material conditions and concerns are refracted incoherently through the heterogeneity of the movement. The disturbing elements of the warm reception of the U.S. government's gestural support and even nostalgia for the British colonial past, while relatively fringe, stem from this confused populism.

To put it another way, many of these new parties and activists do not descend from any traditional leftist or right-wing tendencies. In fact, arguably speaking, left-wing formations have never quite existed as strong independent political forces in Hong Kong history. To be sure, there have been Trotskyists and anarchists in the city even before the communist revolution in China in 1949. But these tendencies have struggled to thrive (in the face of both British colonial suppression and internal sectarian conflicts), and survived only in very small numbers up to this point. Some of the few organized remnants of these movements formed the older left-wing of the pan-democratic camp, the social democratic LSD and NWSC. Anything traditionally Maoist lost almost all credibility with the Hong Kong people in the riots of 1967, when ultra-left insurgents, influenced by China's Cultural Revolution, set off a series of random and targeted bombs in the city that killed more than 50 people and injured hundreds. Many Communist Party sympathizers and members at that point followed the

late Chinese premier Deng Xiao-ping's turn to capitalist market reforms and established what is now the backbone of the city's pro-Beijing camp. Some, like Martin Lee and Sze-to Wah, distanced themselves from the party and became the founding members and stalwarts of the Democratic Party.

Localist leaders, in many ways, found their political identities in isolation from the messy histories of the 20th-century Hong Kong left. Only later as they found themselves propelled into the spotlight of the 2014 protests as new co-leaders of the pan-democratic camp did they work in close collaboration with traditional parties like LSD and the Democratic Party. Demosisto's leaders, for example, began as a pressure group of secondary school students against propagandistic school curriculum reform, Scholarism, that was propelled into the political center over the course of a summer. This generation of political leaders grew up fully in the ever-looming influence of the Chinese regime, not as leftists still making sense of the transition between colonial rule and authoritarian socialism. Their politics are decisively shaped by China and its contradictions.

The rise of localist politics, in other words, is a double-edged sword. The insidious extradition bill spontaneously mobilized millions on the street, most of whom have not been politically active besides participating in the 2014 protests. But this force can cultivate a sense of myopia for the city's populace when it comes to the globalized threat of neoliberal capital that threatens the everyday people of Hong Kong. The widespread support of even international bankers like HSBC and Standard Chartered, that allowed flexible working hours for employees to participate in the protests, further erodes any possibility of anti-capitalist leadership in the movement. The threat of capital to one of the world's most inequitable cities, in reality, deeply connects Hong Kongers to their counterparts in the Mainland. The ever-growing population of migrant rural workers from China's countryside and the country's increasing wage gap continues to be exacerbated. The government's ambition to virulently deregulate its markets for the bourgeoisie renders any attempts to attend to the interests of the working-class, rural population, and environment as merely half-hearted. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand its influence affects the geopolitical, socio-economic, and ecological security of regions from Malaysia to Gabon.

But Hong Kong's recent pattern of mobilizations suggests that these larger phenomena are still not the motivating factor for mass politics. In fact, the key struggles for workers' rights often still exist in isolation from each other in recent history. Filipino, Indonesian, and other Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers, almost all women, comprise five percent of the city's total population. The rampant forms of wage, gender, sexual, and racial discrimination faced by these people are only ameliorated by their consistent militancy and brief, but powerful, history of activism. These movements generally operate separately from the mainstream localist and pan-democratic parties, and both sides reach out in collaboration only on an occasional basis. Hong Kong-based migrant worker organizer Eni Lestari observes that

"Much of Hong Kong's political movement does not recognize globalization as a major issue. While political groups would often organize against symptoms of capitalist exploitation, the deeper structural issues of globalization and imperialism are not talked about as much. Many groups understand their fights against the Hong Kong government as independent issues, so it is difficult for our movement to campaign, even among migrants, against neoliberal globalization."

Some mainstream Hong Kong unions under the pan-democratic Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) will collaborate with some of these migrant workers groups in some demonstrations with common interests like wage increase, but these groups struggle to build a collaborative movement to engage larger numbers of people against broader issues of globalization and neoliberalism. These disconnections and ambiguities continue in even today's massive protests.

While the pan-democratic camp wins an important victory against the pro-Beijing forces and China in the anti-extradition bill campaign's temporary success, the problem of mobilizing civil society and workers against the deeper roots of exploitation and social injustice remains in the city. The protests continue its momentum now into the second and third weeks, with demands for the chief executive's resignation and accountability for police violence. But what of explicitly class-based demands? Chuang magazine's interview with a local contact and participant laments that "we haven't seen even a single clearly left-wing banner in this movement." Upsurges of political consciousness do not necessarily translate into class consciousness - of material support for the working classes against Chinese state capitalism and its bourgeoisie. China's recent workers' strikes, while comparatively much smaller in scale, may be even more substantively radical than the Hong Kong situation. But as some recent commentators note, it may be premature to speak of a developed working-class movement there as well. Hong Kong-based labor activist Au Loong-yu recognizes the radical possibility of students risking their lives to organize with workers in the Jasic situation, but ultimately questions whether it is now feasible to speak of a developing sense of class consciousness "based on the actions of a less than 100 people in a single workplace."

These views, while sobering, can help us come to a more objective analysis of the material conditions of forces in Hong Kong, China, and beyond, in the aftermath of the anti-extradition bill upsurge. The mass mobilization of youth this year and in the Umbrella movement undoubtedly have demonstrated that the city can be politicized in powerful ways. But so far, every large mobilization has failed to see a corresponding growth in the actual movements and political groups. This new type of insurgency, in the form of the leaderless masses of Hong Kong self-organizing like a well-oiled machine, may expose less the rise of a budding anti-capitalist movement than a core weakness of how politics are conducted and directed in the city. The absence of a vigorously anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist left leaves the increased sympathy for the U.S. government and its neoliberal ideology a constant potential for some young localist leaders and participants. And despite the efforts of new political parties to politicize more individuals, the reality is that the aims and direction of localist politics, with respect to neoliberal globalization and the interests of the working class in and beyond Hong Kong, often remain sharply contradictory or muddled.

At the same time, we must remember the last week's protests are a powerful reminder of the Hong Kong people's explosive political potential. Years of struggling in the streets cultivate the best kind of political education. This victory may be an important step to a long struggle, and the stakes are only going to increase in the shadow of China's ever-threatening but also highly unstable geopolitics. The contradictions of the localist parties do not necessarily suggest inevitable political failure. If anything, only by attuning ourselves to these contradictions, not any paradigms of the past, can the masses find the ways to liberation.