

True communist practice is an art of humility, the ability to fail with grace and to fail better next time. Rather than the sorcerer, a better image of communist practice is perhaps the druid, attuned to rituals of falling leaves, shedding skin, and the shifting of the myriad forms—these rhythmic magics drawing up the newly born from the newly dead through the endless spiral of rot and rebirth.

UNDER THE NEON SUN



Phil Neel

Under the Neon Sun

As the hell money burned in the streets, I made my way to a local leftist bookshop in Mong Kok, where I was giving a talk to a small crowd of activists and scholars about the Occupy movement in the US and the theory – at the time just becoming fashionable in anglophone communist circles – that global class struggle had entered into a new ‘age of riots’ in the wake of the Arab Spring. Communist philosopher Alain Badiou had even deemed this the ‘rebirth of history,’ arguing that, in many ways, the era resembles ‘the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century.’¹ As described by the communist collective Endnotes, the tactics involved in these struggled included:

(1) mass riots, capable of widespread diffusion, but often focusing on a territory; (2) the transformation of that territory into an occupation, a centre of debate and display (and confrontation with the police); and (3) attempts to extend from that centre out into the surrounding areas, by means of wild demonstrations, neighbourhood assemblies, solidarity strikes, and blockades.²

Three major class fractions could be identified to have played central roles: ‘graduates with no future, the youth underclass, and organised workers.’³ Meanwhile, Badiou maintains that the sudden increase in the cadence and extent of popular struggles in the early 2010s signalled only the first stirrings of such an era, ‘as yet blind, naïve, scattered and lacking a powerful concept or durable organization.’⁴ These descriptors also became somewhat self-referential, as both Badiou’s work and that of Endnotes would subsequently become important points of reference for those who had participated in such struggles, experienced their collapse, and sought to inquire into their limits.

The issue was especially topical in Hong Kong in the summer of 2014, given that several major leaders in the city’s pan-democratic movement had been calling for an occupation of Central (the major business district and the location of the Central Government Complex where the LegCo convenes) seem-

¹ Badiou 2012, p. 5.

² Endnotes 2013a, pp. 32–3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Badiou 2012, p. 5.

ingly modelled on those that had recently spread across Europe and North America. Crammed together in a small space made over-intimate by the spiking price of square footage, I detailed for the audience the conflictual course of the Movement of the Squares in Europe and the different Occupy currents centred on different cities in the US, tracing out the polarity that arose between the more traditional activist approach of Occupy Wall Street in New York, initiated by established figures in the anti-globalisation movement, and the more antagonistic path taken by Occupy Oakland in California, where a newer generation of radicals and militant youth took the lead, often clashing with the established activist crowd. In popular accounts, this tension would often be cast in terms familiar to the established activists who controlled much of the branding: as a tactical struggle between 'violence' and 'non-violence,' or as a conscious political decision in which 'leaderlessness' was chosen in place of 'organization.' But these terms failed to capture the real complexity of the occupations, which had very quickly spilled beyond their bounds with an inchoate power drawn from the very inability of those gathered to formulate any adequately representative program or demands.

Though this inability expressed a concrete limit within each struggle, it was also what allowed these otherwise constrained moments to serve as a political 'event' in the sense used by Badiou: as a sort of social singularity that, through its own self-reflexive negativity and non-communication with the given terms of the political order, was able to exceed that order. Though inherently ephemeral, this rupture with the status quo can then trigger a sort of phase shift within politics more generally – a 'truth process,' in Badiou's terms – producing political novelties and thereby making previously 'impossible' tactics into conventional practices and obscure philosophies into widely acknowledged points of reference. As described by Michael Neocosmos, the 'event names the void, the absence, what is considered simply impossible, that which is not conceivable from within the knowledges of the situation ... something that is both located within the extant and that points to alternatives to what exists, to the possibility of something different.'⁵ Political events therefore always exist in tension with the 'situation' from which they emerge. On the one hand, they are obviously produced by this social context. On the other,

An emancipatory political subjectivity or consciousness can only exist 'in excess' of social relations and of the social division of labour ... Such a politics cannot therefore be understood as a 'reflection' or 'expression'

5 Neocosmos 2016, p. 56.

leaves, shedding skin, and the shifting of the myriad forms – these rhythmic magics drawing up the newly born from the newly dead through the endless spiral of rot and rebirth. Without any clear political coordinates, we can only proceed by dead reckoning. And this requires an ecumenical and experimental dexterity better attuned to the blurry, probabilistic contours of the antepolitical terrain. It is a process of pathfinding, more than adherence to a programmatic line. At every stage, there is a threat of becoming lost in the choking wilderness, our fidelity to the communist project eroded through pragmatic compromise and the many bitter realities that attend a world devoid of virtue. The formal parties that emerge from each uprising slowly die off and ossify, prioritising their own survival and jealously defending their small terrain of projects and campaigns. Even the practical orientation of the oath proves to be a curse, offering flexibility in the heat of any given uprising only for the same pragmatism to freeze us in place when the upwelling wanes and the darkness closes in again.

But each new eruption of the historical party lights our position anew, however briefly. We see where we have rooted ourselves and we have the chance to reorient. Writ large, it becomes a weary dance in the dark, desperately gripping the hands of whoever is still with us as each slips from the other in their very striving to never let go. Eventually, we may even find ourselves whirling alone, growing cold, calling out for others and hearing only the frail echo of our own despair. We learn to survive in the wilderness, even if we sacrifice something deep and holy. But eventually the spectre stirs again. And over time it stirs with greater force. The ground fissures and the flames rise in their hollows, alive. After all, communism is invariant. The material conditions of capitalist society will always generate that same occult force pressing up from below. We always find one another again, as the smoke of the burning necropolis rises to blot out the neon sun. Even after death, our own efforts are literally resurrected in the event, hands reaching through time forever, incandescent. We dance together through the firelight in the trees. Maybe our footfalls drum into the earth like a shower of sparks falling from some great machine being broken open like an egg. And maybe the great drumming is itself a ritual – an old one, perhaps, that summons powers older still.

of existing social groupings, their division and hierarchies. Without this ‘excessive’ character which ‘interrupts’ the reproduction of the regular, the habitual, politics can only be sought within the social itself and ends up being simply conflated with ‘the political’, with the state and its ‘political society’.⁶

Though their inability to cohere ensures that many of these uprisings will remain merely ‘nihilistic spurts’ or ‘immediate riots,’ in Badiou’s terms, this same chaotic indeterminacy is also what makes it possible for new unifying ideas to emerge and gain a consistency between these events.⁷ Though first visible in the simple mimesis of tactics, aesthetics, and tone, this consistency can (under partisan influence) eventually evolve toward something resembling revolutionary organisation.

The formless and nihilistic energy already visible in relatively minor events such as Occupy, I argued, was a sign of things to come. I introduced the small crowd to an equally small group of communist and anarchist thinkers attempting to articulate the changing cadence of global class struggle, pointing out the similarities between the occupation of central Bangkok in 2010, the insurrections of the Arab Spring, recent riots in Athens and London, and even the confluence of strikes and riots just across the border in the Pearl River Delta, where I’d just recently been living while conducting research. Over the previous months, I’d had the chance to make several visits to Hong Kong, where I’d observed some of the protests that had been building up throughout the summer, listened to different factions debate out the details of local politics, and found myself in conversation with a wide range of local activists – some of whom had set up this talk. But when I suggested that Hong Kong itself might soon follow a similar path to that seen elsewhere, I was met with polite disbelief. Politeness itself was, in fact, a sort of theme. One activist pointed that Hong Kong people were simply ‘too polite to riot,’ a common line that I’d heard multiple times over the course of the summer. One of the scholars added that this attitude was itself a form of colonial servility rooted in the cultural campaigns of late British rule. Another audience member gestured toward pan-democratic figures such as Benny Tai and Chan Kin-man, who had branded the campaign to occupy Central as an effort to ‘Occupy Central with Peace and Love,’ demanding strict non-violence from participants. Even the anarchists were unconvinced. After all, the city had rarely seen so much as a single window smashed.

⁶ Neocosmos 2016, p. 13.

⁷ Badiou 2012, p. 92.

1 Rawls in Hong Kong

Ever since 1967, even the largest of Hong Kong's protests had been extremely passive.⁸ Because of this, the city was often upheld as a global model for 'civil society' organising, enjoying an extraordinarily high concentration of NGOs, student groups, progressive politicians with a large base of popular support but little hope of taking power, unions barely strong enough to strike, and any number of assorted social movement institutions clinging to some distant aura of their 'grassroots' past. Rather than Milton Friedman's vision of the city as a neoliberal paradise, then, Hong Kong was instead something closer to the Rawlsian heaven of social justice: interest groups asserting their respective rights in the field of public discourse, patiently and persistently pursuing institutional reforms, speaking truth to power but not obstructing it, and never, ever challenging the basic rule of private property. Though its own self-image is constructed in contrast to the formal mechanisms of government, it is important to remember that civil society lies entirely within the realm of 'the state,' in the broader sense of the term. After all, most civil society organisations are ultimately financed by government subsidies or even by direct payments from the ruling class, operating as the 'philanthropic' arm of bourgeois power. Civil society is therefore simply the name for the informal operation of the state (i.e., the deployment of class power) across the border that supposedly separates state from 'society' – demonstrating, of course, that this divide is itself an alienated appearance generated by the very practice of class rule.

The notion that civil society serves as the engine of social change was itself an artifact of the defeat of the communist movement in the twentieth century and its subsequent dismantling. As Badiou explains:

Under the interchangeable rubrics of 'modernization', 'reform', 'democracy', 'the West', 'the international community', 'human rights', 'secularism', 'globalization' and various others, we find nothing but an historical attempt at an unprecedented regression, intent upon creating a situation in which the development of globalised capitalism, and the action of its political servants, conforms to the norms of their birth: a dyed-in-the-wool liberalism of mid-nineteenth-century vintage, the unlimited

⁸ One important exception was the 2005 anti-WTO demonstrations, which saw a series of more aggressive performance tactics and outright clashes with police. These efforts were, however, almost entirely led by the militant Korean delegation.

dictability of political upheavals guarantees that any given roll of the dice can reset the entire field of probability.

In the longer run, however, the individual uprising is not what matters. It is only through practice that we build our strength, remaining attuned to the seething force of the historical party pressing up from below. The question then becomes not only how we build our power within any given political event, but also how we retain and refine it between these eruptions of political potential. We practice a morbid, masochistic magic, casting our small gestures out into the dark. Alone so long, many of us fall into a special madness. Some become obsessed with increasingly esoteric spellcraft, convincing themselves that correct 'analysis' will reveal the correct strategy. These sorcerers lock themselves into their clouded towers where they study the ancient texts and elaborate star-charts of econometrics, releasing periodic proclamations to dwindling devotees from a distance. Drifting further from the world below, their minds grow dull and hands soft, each of their new stratagems more hyperbolic and less substantial. In the end, they are eaten by the mist like a stone gnawed to nothing under the slow flow of moss and dew.

Others become illusionists, summoning up chimerical apparitions of the world they want to see. The most minor matters of survival become the fuel for their fantasies – the donated pizzas and hastily constructed shanties of the occupation become communism in miniature, every interpersonal interaction pregnant with the weight of a new world – and eventually they may even decamp for the forest, seeking a commune never to be found. In the end they dissolve into wind and dust, billowing after the ever-receding mirage. Others still venture into darker, more violent magics, convinced that if action is all we have then more forceful action equates to more fruitful results. These warlocks grow increasingly enamoured with their own activity. They are obsessed with the power of small groups of 'militants,' bemoaning the lack of 'organization' and imagining that, if only there were more like them, things would be different. They splinter into their sects. They grow masochistic, distinguishing themselves through the praise of self-flagellation. Increasingly desperate when history refuses to stir to their call, they strike the atonal surface of politics with greater and greater ferocity. Eventually, they may even imagine that they alone can break through the veil to draw up the spectral party seething beneath. This only isolates them further. Their actions become adventurist and terroristic. In the end, the caustic substance of their politics cremates them from the inside out.

In such conditions, true communist practice is an art of humility, the ability to fail with grace and to fail better next time. Rather than the sorcerer, a better image of communist practice is perhaps the druid, attuned to rituals of falling

the basis of affinity, and contribute to creating mass structures which set themselves intermediate aims, while constructing the minimal conditions for transforming situations of simple riot into those of insurrection.¹⁰⁹ And, although he explicitly designates this as the 'end of the party,' it is in fact a precise description of how formal parties operate in their infantile and adolescent phases.

But what sort of concrete actions can even be taken when the right seems to have already succeeded in leading each tactical advance? To view the question from this angle is, however, to concede too much to the programmatic framework of the social movement or even the force-on-force paradigm of the military theorist. The politics of action operates neither in the discursive sphere of agitation and argument nor in the simplistic wargame of armed militants, but instead across the antepolitical terrain of the necropolis, where seemingly *apolitical* practices can suddenly take on an outsized tactical potency that then sees new actors shape the ongoing composition of political subjectivity.¹¹⁰ It is therefore possible to tip the scales at any stage. As Bonanno stresses, this does not downplay the importance of intentional organisation but instead enhances it: 'When riots break out we should not be there as *visitors* to a spectacular event ... We must be there as the realisers of a project that has been examined and gone into in detail beforehand.'¹¹¹ The exact tactics used will of course be entirely dependent on the context. But the rudimentary discipline of communications, mobilisation, and the channelling of resources are all obvious necessities for being able to operate at the tactical level in the first place. The curse of the communist is precisely this: fidelity is measured by the courage to act even when the odds are, as always, stacked against us. We must strike out in the dark. More than this, we must see the darkness of mass nihilism as a form of hope. After all, the very amorphousness of the necropolis and the subsequent unpre-

¹⁰⁹ Bonanno 1988, p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Wohlleben again offers a good summary: 'Since there are few preliminaries, prerequisites, or preconditions, memes allow individuals to move alongside one another while preserving their own respective reasons for fighting, thereby inviting each of us to trust in our own singular evaluation of the situation. This has the great advantage of allowing memetic movements to harness and leverage the antepolitical forms of life in which each of us already participate: think of the hooligans and ultras who fought in Turkey's Gezi Park uprising, the mutual aid networks and autonomous hubs that fed into front-liner formations, or the motorcycle clubs and sideshow drivers whose revving engines became a permanent sensory feature of the George Floyd uprising. When conflicts kick off, these antepolitical lifeforms suddenly become potentiated in new ways, they bend, criss-cross and weave together like so many shards of light through the kaleidoscope of the event, adding fuel to the fire.' (Wohlleben, Adrian 16 May 2021 'Memes Without End', *Ill Will*, 16 May 2021. <https://illwill.com/memes-without-end#ref5>)

¹¹¹ Bonanno 1988, p. 25.

power of a financial and imperial oligarchy, and a window-dressing of parliamentary government composed (as Marx put it) of 'Capital's executives'.⁹

The civil society paradigm therefore expresses what Badiou and Neocosmos call 'state politics' which 'concern the representation of interests (by parties, interest groups, social movements, NGOs, etc.) and the management of such interests, thus restricting them to controllable limits.' We can even understand the state, very broadly defined, as 'a machine for creating identities, as these are simply the subjective representations of interests.'¹⁰ In Badiou's terminology, the state therefore always operates through some array of 'identitarian objects.'¹¹

Within the fundamentally regressive mechanism of civil society, then, questions of structural power are essentially off-limits, with the very idea of the 'structural' dissolved into empirical issues of privilege and prejudice, all designed to measure degrees of inter-group inequity. This also means that questions of building power, taking power, or smashing the rule of those already in power were, in every practical sense, forbidden. Even among the most radical factions within the Hong Kong political scene, concrete political activity was focused almost exclusively on awareness-raising, consensus-building, policy advocacy, hosting vigils, and arranging a never-ending parade of non-violent, non-aggressive demonstrations in the vague hope that walking in these endless circles would somehow prove enlightening for society as a whole. In other words, politics proper – as the name for the force of human struggle in its historical unfolding – had been effectively euthanised.

Within the civil society paradigm, any incendiary political potential is smothered under a flurry of pseudo-political performances. In Hong Kong, by far the largest and most influential of these performers were the pan-democrats, a broad grouping of politicians, academics, and non-profit organisers advocating for increased democratisation. The oldest generation of pan-democrats could trace their roots to the new social movements that arose among students, professionals, and other middle strata groups during the 1970s. Over the course of the decade, this emergent 'social-action faction' was increasingly vocal in distancing itself from the 'Maoist faction' that looked toward the Cultural Revolution on the mainland and sought to continue the insurrectionary project begun in 1967. While both camps were mostly 'made up

⁹ Badiou 2012, p. 5.

¹⁰ Neocosmos 2016, p. 19.

¹¹ Badiou 2012, p. 93.

of university students and graduates' and distinguished themselves from the mainland-affiliated old guard that had dominated leftist politics for decades, they also settled on separate ends of the emerging political spectrum.

As its name might suggest, the Maoist faction was primarily influenced by the new 'Maoist' politics developing in the circles of the new left, with many of their central figures having been involved in politics while studying overseas in places such as the US. In contrast, the social-action faction 'was influenced by a wide range of political ideologies, including liberalism, anarchism, western Marxism and Trotskyism,' and tended to be unified less by their specific standpoint than by their shared focus on local social justice issues and ideological opposition to the Maoists.¹² With the end of the Cultural Revolution on the mainland, however, the Maoist faction splintered. Many members were gradually absorbed back into the official mainland-affiliated organisations of what was once the old left. Others converted to Trotskyism and essentially dissolved into the growing social movements. Meanwhile, the social movements they led grew increasingly comfortable operating in the interstices, addressing local issues left out of the colonial government's new social programs and attempting to shape the overall course of reforms, rather than trying to overthrow colonial authority as such.

From the late 1970s onward, the democratic currents within the social-action faction also expanded, drawing influence from the rising liberal and social-democratic milieus emerging at the time on the mainland. Novel forms of political participation also began to open to local activists as the British extended new governance mechanisms and cultural programs to native Hong Kongers. As the handover loomed, the colonial government rolled out increasingly rapid democratic concessions that expanded the scale and scope of the legislature and allotted more and more seats through direct elections. Ultimately, the strategy had more to do with geopolitical manoeuvring in the course of the handover negotiations than with any legitimate commitment to democratic principles. It was not coincidental, for instance, that the colonial government failed to implement universal suffrage even while its scheduled expansions of direct elections implied a certain timetable for universal suffrage to be met under Chinese sovereignty. Over the same years, it in fact 'promoted the corporatization and independence of government departments,' effectively insulating them from democratic influence.¹³ Nonetheless, the colonial charade of democratisation helped to stoke the hopes of the budding pan-democrats. Activists

¹² Yang et al. 2022, p. 17.

¹³ Jiang 2017, p. 163.

frontlines then open up a reflexive space in which new forms of political intuition are formed, and these intuitions then become the foundation for the potential construction of something like a political 'consciousness' in the traditional sense. As Rodrigo Nunes emphasises, political organisation is unavoidable and cannot be reduced to the colloquial polarity between the 'vertical' and 'horizontal.' At the same time, there also always exists a forward edge propelling any given struggle in some direction. In antepolitical conditions, something like the sigil necessarily arises to serve this function: 'Where there are no previously existing decision-making procedures or structures to coordinate action, let alone formally appointed or recognised leaders, the only way a new collective conduct can emerge is through the action of one or more initiating nodes (nucleation).' There is therefore no getting around the basic function of the vanguard and the question of leadership:

at its most fundamental, to lead means nothing more than *to be followed*. That is, to orient attention and action in a certain direction; to introduce a polarization in the environment that was not there before; to produce a modulation of collective behaviour that propagates across a group, a network or an ecology as it is adopted and/or adapted by others, triggering other transformations as it moves along.¹⁰⁸

And the immediate goal of communists is to 'orient attention and action' in the 'certain direction' of decommodification, building power and laying the groundwork for the longer-term project of communist construction.

Intent and consciousness obviously play a role here, insofar as there exists a minority of communists who have a specific goal in mind. They are self-aware to a different degree than others, but they are not bringing this awareness in from the outside so much as expressing the struggle's own awareness of itself. And, for this reason, their intervention cannot be primarily discursive or, in Bonnano's terms, 'illuministic.' Any change in consciousness that follows from this intervention must be an after-effect of the practical intensification of the struggle itself. Even while often rational and thoroughly planned-out, then, the basic form of engagement is something closer to a form of mysticism, seeking to manifest its thought in certain ceremonial motions capable of triggering the same awakening in others without seeking to 'communicate' any doctrine. Bonnano describes this as the deployment of an 'informal' strategy of organisation, defined as 'groups of comrades who come together with precise objectives, on

¹⁰⁸ Nunes 2021, pp. 180–81.

tactical advances and grappling with our dimly defined enemies through the fog of competitive control despite their strength and our own weakness. But, in such a context, it is difficult to imagine what, exactly, small groups of communists might be able to do. How can power be built from such a minority position? Of course we can agitate, opposing the flag-wavers and the racists and denouncing the civil society liberals shaking hands with right-wing Congressmen. And, of course, our actions should challenge the seemingly natural borders of various subsistence struggles, seeking to push beyond the scope of immediate interests and existing institutions and toward sustainable, substantial and scalable forms of decommodification. Yet this brings us directly back to our initial problem, since our own limited power seems to constrain us to advocating for minimal forms of theft and survival – practices such as looting, squatting, mutual aid, guerrilla gardening, and other microscopic genres of grift and piracy – that are not only parasitic on commodity society, rather than antagonistic it, but also essentially useless as a means to solve or exceed any but the most minor of subsistence struggles (since they are neither sustainable nor scalable).

Building power through action therefore remains the necessary precursor to any question of how that power might best be deployed or which practices are best suited to decommodification. Procrastinating about the precise political content of our actions rather than their practical effect (and ability to amplify our own further capacity to act) quickly becomes a form of paralysis. In Hong Kong, this paralysis is, in part, what allowed the far right to occupy the movement's tactical edge so early and so decisively. And this tactical edge is the most important factor in an antepolitical scenario. While such a claim appears to revive certain questionable elements of the classical vanguardist dogma – in which the movement can only advance through the essentially external intervention of a disciplined and uniquely enlightened cadre possessing a more advanced consciousness than the average proletarian – those who occupy the tactical edge of the movement in this case serve as a purely practical vanguard, rather than one endowed with any special insight. The oath to action is, in fact, counterposed to the programmatic interventions of the enlightened vanguard and is perhaps best understood as something like the decomposition of the very notion that such an external agent can exist at all. It is, in other words, opposed to the both the naïve idea that the party intervenes in the class from outside and the even more questionable notion that 'horizontal' and 'leaderless' forms of self-organisation will arise organically (read: magically) from the practicalities of the struggle itself.

Every movement generates a tactical edge that then becomes the most important theatre within the more general field of 'competitive control.' These

began to run for seats in the newly opened district boards, in neighbourhoods, and on the urban council, positioning themselves 'as representing the expanding "new middle class" constituted by professionals and managers in both the private and the public sectors, including teachers, social workers, and others.'¹⁴

Initially, this would lead to the formation of a Democratic Reunionist campaign, with the social-action veterans who served on the Basic Law Drafting Committee (tasked with determining the legal form to be taken by Chinese sovereignty) seeking to 'reform the colony into a social-democratic city-state' capable of modelling democratisation for the mainland. The rise of the Tiananmen protests in 1989 would see these hopes dashed, however, with Hong Kong democrats organising 'large-scale rallies supporting the students and rais[ing] an astronomical amount of donations' and then coordinating 'a rescue mission to smuggle persecuted dissidents out of China.'¹⁵ In response to the crackdown, they then called for a 'three strikes' movement – 'a labour strike, school strike, and market strike' – designed to shut down the city, but their strict commitment to non-confrontational tactics undermined the effort. When a small riot broke out on the eve of the strike campaign, they decided to call the entire thing off 'for fear of causing unrest and alienating their middle-class base,' with many spreading rumours that the riot had been instigated by outside agitators from the mainland.¹⁶ Because of their support for the student protestors in Beijing, however, even the more ardent of the Reunionist Democrats fell from the good graces of the central government. The mainland instead shifted its base to the city's business elite, who had wasted no time in endorsing the crackdown and even 'formed the first foreign delegation to greet Chinese leaders in the summer of 1989,' helping reestablish the country's legitimacy within international business circles.¹⁷

It was in the wake of 1989 that the modern pan-democratic current would begin to take shape, spanning both the more mainstream democrats and a much smaller, 'more radical wing consisting of student organizations ... and several fringe groups' including leftover Trotskyists.¹⁸ An electoral alliance of liberal parties swept the city's first direct elections in 1991 but, given the structure of the LegCo and the fact that the city was still under the rule of a British-appointed Governor, even the most resounding electoral victory could not lead to a meaningful majority. Political activity therefore shifted into the civic

¹⁴ Hung 2022b, p. 155.

¹⁵ Hung 2022b, pp. 128–9.

¹⁶ Hung 2022b, p. 158.

¹⁷ Hung 2022b, pp. 128–9.

¹⁸ Hung 2022b, p. 157.

sphere. The annual 4 June commemorative vigil became a living symbol of the movement, with the entire liberal current coming together to hold a candle-light memorial in Victoria Park, after which the 'radicals' would split off to conduct a non-violent march to some symbolic target. Despite their differences, however, both factions were imprinted with the peculiar and pompous politics of the era, fully embracing the drunken liberalism of the 'End of History' and imagining that the collapse of the USSR would be followed shortly after by a similar political crisis in China. Much of their strategy hinged on the notion of either such a crisis leading to a general political collapse across the border, or on the emergence of some new mass democratic movement on the mainland. Meanwhile, as globalisation accelerated and the handover loomed, their political allegiance shifted firmly toward the US and international institutions such as the UN, both of which funnelled money into aspiring liberal organisations in the city.

This was therefore the period in which many Hong Kong NGOs would become increasingly intertwined with both the global aid and philanthropy complex and the post-Cold War 'diplomatic' arm of the US security state – epitomised by institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy and US Agency for Global Media (funder of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia) – which took over an increasing portion of the 'soft power' activities once subsidised directly by the CIA. Nor were these relationships opaque affairs that have only become clear many years after the fact. The money was easily traceable, and, in 1991, NED president Allen Weinstein openly stated that 'a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.'¹⁹ Then as now, many liberal activists in Hong Kong had few qualms about courting the support of even the most conservative politicians in the US and Europe. Thus, the emergence of Hong Kong as the global capital of civil society organising was itself a product of the peculiar period of Pax Americana that began roughly when the Cold War ended. The Japanese crisis had eliminated US firms' major economic competitors, the collapse of the USSR had liquidated the empire's long-time political rival, and the opening of the Chinese mainland had seen the global market extended to one of the world's last and largest untapped labour pools. Worldwide, marketisation was accompanied by the collapse or mummification of remaining socialist parties, with many former leftists defecting to the liberal coalitions arising in their wake.

¹⁹ Quoted in ProPublica, 24 November 2010 'The National Endowment for Democracy Responds to Our Burma Nuclear Story – And Our Response', *ProPublica*. <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-national-endowment-for-democracy-responds-to-our-burma-nuclear-story>

to profit from production across the border without suffering its externalities – under the mask of cultural distinction. By reaffirming this division, the insurrection was effectively quarantined within its post-industrial prison, prevented from taking on a universalist character or orienting toward truly emancipatory goals.

Ironically, history may prove that the most progressive features of the insurrection were visible not in the supposedly noble demands of civil society – for democracy, human rights, freedom of expression or any of the other smiling masks periodically pasted over the grotesque reality of imperial power – nor in the aspirational nationalism of the localists, but instead in the shattering of civil society and the liquidation of any prospect for independence. By forcing political integration under the command structure of the central state, encouraging further migration from the mainland (today essentially the only counterflow to emigration), pushing for an expansion of Mandarin usage, sponsoring mandatory national tours for certain employees, enhancing economic ties in the face of rising sanctions, and doubling down on themes of patriotism and national belonging, the Chinese state ensures that any future politics in Hong Kong will no longer be so easily quarantined. Even more important, however, is the way that the crackdown decisively dissolved the puerile mythos of civil society, demonstrating the utter bankruptcy of any belief in the rule of law, due process, freedom of speech, or any of the other supposed 'rights' enjoyed by the populace. In other words, it unveiled in no uncertain terms that those in Hong Kong live under the same dictatorship of capital that prevails not only on the mainland but also – as many in the Hong Kong diaspora are now discovering – throughout the liberal democracies of the wealthy world as well. With civil society dead, politics proper again becomes possible. The kings of hell may have emerged from their court of darkness to assert their power, but the spectre of communism cannot be excised from the necropolis. It still seethes just under the surface of every alleyway, a mirror image of the cold flow of capital pouring through the financial towers above.

10 Anteparty

Since both the uprising and in its aftermath remain within the same antepolitical terrain, those seeking to act in fidelity to the historical party seem condemned to an interminable hopelessness. Beneath left and right, we have only the *act*. Only courage – here the localists were right, unambiguously – kindled and crushed and rekindled again and again in the wasteland. Communists have no choice but to engage with such uprisings, contributing to their

then, communists in the present moment are faced with an impossible choice. It goes without saying that fidelity to the historical party requires active and intensive participation in eruptive events.¹⁰⁷ But to do so is to fail again and again. To be thrown into jail, into exile and excommunication, even to be slandered by supposed allies for sullyng oneself with the suspicious amorphousness of the yellow vest or yellow helmet – since those trapped in the rotting corpse of the left can only see a latent fascism in any politics that prioritises action over program, which is to say in any *possible* politics at all. Nonetheless, fidelity requires unceasing experimentation and an unwavering engagement with the world, in all its failings. The political terrain must be sounded out, our palms to the paving stones feeling for the seismic shudder of the stirring force beneath.

Hong Kong thereby illustrates with brutal clarity the misery of the communist. There is no choice, no noble cause, no strategy. There is no good side to take and yet we wield insufficient force to make our own. Despite the power of the uprising, there was never anything even remotely resembling a path to victory. Even if every demand had been met and the central government shaken into acquiescence, the result would have been nothing more than an alternate alignment of bourgeois power. In fact, had the suffrage been won or localist policies pursued, the result would have only deepened the entire series of divisions that have long served to sever the city's political practice from that of the mainland, even while its prosperity would continue to be built on value siphoned from workers across the border. After all, despite the old democratic hope in a liberal revolution toppling the central government, universal suffrage was never designed to actually be universal – the factory workers across the border were never included in the plan. Both the pan-democratic and localist programs began from the presumption that Hong Kong retain its exceptional status as a 'special' region not fully integrated with the mainland. But integration was already a *de facto* economic reality. Thus, 'Hong Konger' is a duplicitous identity, disguising a privileged position within planetary production – the ability

¹⁰⁷ It is easy enough to call oneself a communist, a socialist, an anarchist and to act out the role on the internet or within microscopic social circles or activist projects, and then to exhibit the most despicable cowardice when faced with the emergence of actual social unrest. Conflictual and violent uprisings therefore also serve to draw those who are willing to learn from struggle on the ground and who hope to exert a real, if minimal, political force through action. This distinguishes those for whom communism is a 'theory' or a 'philosophy' from those attempting to build some modicum of communist power in the world of substance (however hopeless this prospect might seem). Perhaps one of the most important functions of riots and insurrections, then, is their ruthless threshing and winnowing of 'the left,' sorting communists from cowards.

While the pan-democrats had enjoyed success in the final elections of the colonial era, building up their base throughout the 1990s, it was not until after the handover, followed soon after by the Asian Financial Crisis and the SARS epidemic, that the camp came into its own, helping to orchestrate a series of large-scale demonstrations between 2003 and 2007 that catapulted many of the movement's leaders to the centre of both mainstream institutional politics and the various social movements that served as its radical counterpart.²⁰ From this position, the pan-democrats were able to construct an expansive institutional edifice that proved capable of coopting new grassroots movements and diverting potentially volatile political conflicts into established institutional channels. Over subsequent years, the exact structure of the pan-democratic camp splintered and recomposed itself, incorporating younger organisers into its activist wing – especially through student organisations (such as Scholarism) and the Hong Kong Federation of Students, elected by the student unions of the city's major universities – who helped to both lead new waves of protest and carry on liberal traditions of civility, non-violence, and pandering to political patrons in the West. But, throughout this period, the actual political program of the pan-democrats remained indistinct. The demand for universal suffrage has been able to align many different political factions over the years precisely because the absence of universal suffrage has prevented them from holding any power through which to implement their programs. The demand therefore evolved into a sort of empty signifier, with every faction imagining that, once obtained, suffrage would simply allow 'the people' to decide their own fate. Thus, though loosely allied by their liberal politics, the deeper unity of the camp was visible in their practical commitment to reformist and generally 'civil' methods, which remained the unquestioned foundation of political activity in the city until that summer in 2014.

2 With Peace and Love

In a certain sense, glimmers of a different politics had begun to emerge as early as 2011, when a small group of young protestors inspired by the Occupy movement set up their own encampment at the base of the HSBC building in the central business district, defying orders to leave. Lasting a full 10 months without suffering a single eviction, the original Occupy Central ultimately proved to be one of the longest-lived protest encampments of the early 2010s.

²⁰ Chan et al. 2007.

Nonetheless, the encampment was extremely small (at its height involving only a few hundred people) and, by the time of its eviction, was able to draw on little public support to prevent the forcible removal of the handful that remained. But the small occupation proved to be a strange sort of political nexus, hinting at new sentiments fermenting among the city's youth. In retrospect, the event even seems to have disjointed time itself, as if a fragment of the autumn of 2014 had somehow been severed from the sequence of history and eddied back to swirl ominously in the basement of HSBC.

Another glimmer emerged in 2013, when an independent group of crane operators initiated a wildcat strike at the Port of Hong Kong. The largest and longest-running labour action in years, the strike garnered international attention and drew in widespread support from activists. In a sense, it compressed the entire range of social conflicts in the city down into a single confrontation: the rising cost of living ensured that workers' take-home pay was effectively lower in 2013 than it had been a decade earlier; the massive surge of exports pouring out of the mainland accelerated the pace of work and put more pressure on operators, who were given breaks of only a few minutes; work itself was managed according to increasingly baroque subcontracting systems that enabled frequent violations of labour standards; and, maybe most importantly, the action was initiated at terminals operated by Hongkong International Terminals (HIT), a subsidiary of Li Ka-shing's Hutchinson Whampoa, the very symbol of the finance, logistics, and real estate interests that had shaped the city into its increasingly unliveable form.

But the strike also signalled the enduring strength of the civil society apparatus. Though begun as a wildcat action, it was quickly endorsed by the Union of Hong Kong Dockers, which led negotiations despite only a small minority of workers being members of the union – itself affiliated with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) and the Labour Party, both led by the old guard of the pan-democrats. While the HKCTU was able to position itself as the progressive alternative to the state-backed and company-aligned Federation of Trade Unions, its commitment to established social movement standards was nonetheless a major factor in smothering the strike's incendiary potential. The result was predicable: 'With union representatives spearheading negotiations, the initial energies of the striking workers were quickly diverted and the strike was prevented from spreading to a majority of the workforce.'²¹ The basic pattern was visible in the HKCTU's refusal to push back against suppressive measures deployed against the strikers, which often found itself in conflict

21 Ultra 2014.

resembling more the petty-bourgeois uprisings of Europe in 1848 than the proletarian insurrections of the century that followed. Upon closer inspection, however, this resemblance proves to be a farcical facsimile reenacted on the political stage but lacking the substance or even the minimal program of these precursors. Instead, we remain largely in the era of the shapeless rabble, fundamentally apolitical even when cloaked in the shifting and easily discarded tatters of past revolutions. Peer behind the curtain of the play and one finds only an abyss – nothing but the pure, nihilistic rejection of the present world as it exists, expressed initially in whatever alienated terms that world has been presented to participants (in the case of Hong Kong, through the lens of Cold War geopolitics), but ultimately irreducible to these terms, as each political reenactor passes offstage with their signs and their slogans and their little lists of demands to be dissolved back into the seething void, hungry and angry and bottomless. At root, this is the same pit of vigorous, mad hopelessness that lies behind the pyrrhic suicides of the lonely truck drivers, and all those other desolate people fucked over one too many times. But, in this case, the suicidal germ is made contagious, allowing it to mutate into a collective nihilism capable of burning more than the suffering flesh. We can imagine Jin Deqing's suicide note scrawled in angry graffiti on some Hong Kong thoroughfare as protestors hurl Molotov cocktails and shoot police officers with crossbows fired from the PolyU barricades: 'be angry, be mad, live your life well.'

The far-right describes this striving void as a transcendent and purifying power that lies 'beyond left and right,' in some hyperpolitical space beyond the ideological spectrum. But there is no salvific order – no natural nation, no true community, no saving spirit, no unsullied tradition – nothing capable of descending from outside or above to shatter politics-as-usual. Instead, we might more accurately say that we lie *beneath* left and right rather than beyond it. Or perhaps *before* left and right: in the antepolitical space that precedes true partisanship. The historical party surges up spectral against the skin of the sensible without yet piercing through. This upward pressure generates certain contours of struggle within the landscape of class and conflict, even if it has so far failed to create a rift clearly dividing society into warring positions. Rather than a land of living politics, then, we find ourselves trapped in the necropolis. Without the illumination of any shared language, partisanship becomes a matter of probabilities. With no scission there are no clear sides and politics is a game of winding paths rather than a war fought by two clearly defined companies grappling back and forth across an established front of combat.

In fighting forward through the city of the dead, fidelity to the eruptive motion of the historical party is a guessing game, treading dim antepolitical contours traced across the desolation of a largely apolitical terrain. In essence,

a way as to transmit concepts capable of contributing towards turning situations of riot into insurrection.¹⁰⁶

The memetic sigil is, of course, just such an instrument, operating beneath language and therefore capable of spreading through social mimesis.

Subjectivity is self-reflexive, with political awareness spiralling in on itself to continually transform its own foundations as political actors transform the practical questions posed in the course of struggle. Because of this, the initial distribution of probable forms of political agency conditioned by productive knowledge and experience, though shaped by various structural forces, can undergo relatively rapid transformations in periods of open social conflict. These transformations then set the stage for the slower development and refinement of new forms of political subjectivity in the aftermath. In more concrete terms: the uprising demonstrates the particular limits of a politics that remains confined to the postindustrial core of the metropolis, not only unable to break the glass floor into the productive sphere but even unwilling to constrict the commercial and logistical flow of commodities pouring out of the territorial complexes that lie at the heart of the planetary factory.

At the same time, the rapid shifts in the practical potential of the insurrection also hint that such limits are hardly unbreakable. The upwelling of the historical party opens the field of 'competitive control' through which more definite forms of power can be built. Though the demiurge seems to be an eldritch entity composed of clashing structural forces, gargantuan and distant, it is ultimately our lives that animate it. Our actions therefore create spirals in its body, tearing against the status quo flow of work and wage that ensures its integrity. As more of these spirals dance together, their collective torsion can rip through the basic substance of society, opening wounds where new sociotechnical practices can germinate, at first saprotrophic – thriving in the decomposition of the body, repurposing dead capital to new use – and then slowly evolving their own autotrophic capacities as a new social metabolism becomes possible after and through the systematic destruction of capitalism. While it is not possible to escape hellworld, it can always be ripped apart by the very social forces that constitute it, of which we are all a part.

Nonetheless, given the long eclipse from which the communist movement is now emerging, we naturally find that almost every feature of our historical inheritance and economic environment seems to predispose the most organisationally advanced of these uprisings toward a loosely liberal-populist politics

with the strikers' own attempts to spread the stoppage to more workers and deepen its impact on port operations. For example, only days after the initial group of workers had walked off the job, HIT took the case to the local government and won an injunction banning strikers, unionists, and supporters from entering any of the terminals. Rather than pushing through regardless of the legal threat, the union acquiesced to the ban and instead set up tents on the sidewalk outside, holding signs and manning an entirely symbolic blockade through which scabs were allowed to pass without issue, with the result that 'behind the show, the port was running only slightly slower than usual ... still operating at 80% capacity even at the height of the shutdown.'²²

Throughout, workers and supporters who advocated for more aggressive actions were sidelined by union leadership. Eventually, the union determined that 'even the minor disruption caused by the roadside occupation was too much for the palate of civil society (who were, after all, the main contributors to the strike fund)' and therefore 'dismantled the camp altogether, setting up a second, much more meagre encampment' in front of the headquarters of Hutchinson Whampoa in the central business district.²³ In the end, the strikers won only a partial raise and most of their demands remained unmet. Ironically, older workers pointed out that two strikes that had occurred prior to the 1997 handover 'when the Labour Party was non-existent and most labour unions were illegal' had actually been more successful, 'since the workers had no union or party representation pushing them to appeal first and foremost to the tastes of civil society.'²⁴ Instead, they had been forced to conduct wildcats that used direct economic obstruction as their main tactic, winning far more substantial victories than the strike in 2013. Ultimately, then, there is maybe no better symbol for the particular form of soft repression that civil society and its 'state politics' specialises in: angry workers take aim at the beating heart of the city's economy only to have their actual strike smothered by civil 'supporters' negotiating on their behalf; the shutdown slowly sculpted into the shape of a social movement; the strikers themselves reduced to nothing more than protestors waving signs and shouting slogans; and the site of the struggle shifted away from the port entirely, to be strangled to death on the sidewalk under the skyscrapers of the central business district.

These were the basic conditions that defined politics in Hong Kong until the summer of 2014, when the glimmers of something else became visible in the

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bonanno 1988, pp. 23–4.

sudden spark of new social conflicts. In retrospect, that talk in the leftist bookstore would accidentally prove prophetic. First, that very week would mark a major turning point in the cadence of the very class conflicts that were the focus of the talk, with protests against a police shooting in faraway Ferguson, Missouri, initiating a sequence of riotous rebellions against police violence over the subsequent years – Baltimore in 2015, St. Paul, Baton Rouge, Milwaukee, and Charlotte in 2016, Anaheim in 2017, Memphis in 2019 – that would eventually peak in the George Floyd Uprising in 2020, which saw the downtown cores of nearly every major American city (and many minor ones) burned and looted.²⁵ Second, and even more unexpected, was that the end of the summer of 2014 would see a similar sequence initiated in Hong Kong itself, as an accelerating series of protests culminated in the ‘Umbrella Movement,’ which effectively shut down large portions of the central city from September until December of that year. As in Ferguson, however, the Umbrella Movement foreboded more to come, prefiguring the citywide uprising of 2019.

The first signal had already arrived a couple months earlier, in June of 2014, when a small but aggressive group of villagers and activists demonstrating against a land development plan breached security cordons around the Legislative Council building, tearing down barricades and scuffling with security guards.²⁶ Ever since the early expansion of public housing by the colonial administration, residential developments had tended to be concentrated in ‘New Towns’ located in greenfield sites on less developed islands and out along the further reaches of the mostly rural New Territories near the border with the mainland. Across that border, the glittering cityscape of Shenzhen offers a stark contrast to the green hills of Hong Kong’s forested fringe. Since economic activity between the two cities was only predicted to increase, real estate in the New Territories has become more and more attractive, with developers pressuring the city government to allot land near the border for future housing projects. The northeast New Territories development being opposed by the protestors

25 In total, protests occurred in 40 percent of all US counties over the course of the summer, and the uprising is estimated to have seen anywhere from 15 to 26 million people participate. Many protests in major cities, especially over the first weekend, also saw the near-complete abandonment of older mores dividing ‘violent’ from ‘non-violent’ actions, with property destruction and looting widely practiced and even more widely accepted. (Buchanan, Larry, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel 3 July 2020 ‘Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in History’, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>)

26 Chong, Tanna and Cheung, Gary 7 June 2014 ‘Protesters storm Legco over northeastern New Territories plan’, *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1526945/protesters-storm-legco-over-northeastern-new-territories-plan>

the police. This process of syncretic tactical evolution would also be witnessed in Chile, Ecuador, Thailand, Indonesia, and elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ Repressed in one location, the party of anarchy rises in another.

But the limits were equally salient. In fact, Hong Kong offers maybe the grimest example of the more general predicament that those attempting to build communist power face within any given insurrection in the world today, at a moment when history has only just been reborn and lies in its vulnerable infancy. At the largest scale, we can of course identify the influence of ‘structural’ forces operating behind what appear to be purely subjective limits – the post-industrial character of the city, for example, is an artifact of long-run changes in the technical composition of production and the geography of finance and industry – but structure also engenders subjectivity at a similarly structural scale. Whether speaking of productive knowledge or political awareness, subjectivity is itself a social substance neither confinable nor even identifiable within the individual mind. It is held together only through the collective mesh of relationships that we have with one another and with the world around us. And this is precisely why these sigils were able to traverse the social substrate so rapidly.

After all, sigils are essentially sub-linguistic. For Bonanno, one of the crucial divides between the included and excluded is the imposition of a linguistic barrier due to deskilling. The excluded are made to subsist on a ‘reduced language’ that has replaced ‘books and newspapers with images, colours and music,’ and which remains ‘modest and has absolutely elementary code to supply to the excluded so that they can use the computer terminals.’¹⁰⁵ Even when the included become disillusioned, breaking free of the ‘teutonic castle’ and seeking to organise among the excluded through interventions across civil society, they find those outside deaf to their carefully-crafted discursive appeals. Bonanno then offers a prediction that, in retrospect, can only appear prophetic:

In the future there will be more and more of these situations of subversive riots that are irrational and unmotivated ... we shall have to work towards instruments in a revolutionary and insurrectional vein that can be read by the excluded. ... Now that the owners and dispensers of the capacity to rationalise have cut communication, we cannot construct an alternative ... We can simply use the same instruments (images, sounds, etc.) in such

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105 Bonanno 1988, p. 15; p. 21.

the very forms of social anomie that Wang Huning witnessed in a deindustrialised America and which Industrial Party thinkers anxiously warn against as one potential future for deindustrialising cities on the mainland. The speed and ruthlessness of the crackdown was, in part, attributable to these precise anxieties, with the city also serving as a cautionary tale demonstrating the state's repressive capacity.

Ultimately, though, if the deployment of bourgeois power demonstrates relatively clear lessons, the sudden eruption of proletarian power offers only foreboding intuitions, as murky as the seething of black-clad limbs glimpsed behind a fog of tear gas. At a very general level, we can argue that the 2019 uprising in Hong Kong is maybe the most condensed expression of both the immense insurrectionary potential of 'post-industrial' existence and the immediate limits faced by any insurrection confined to thoroughly deindustrialised urban territories. For this very reason, it also demonstrates the initial or baseline probability distribution of political subjectivity most likely to take shape in areas where productive subjectivity has been particularly degraded through deindustrialisation. At the same time, however, it shows how these probabilities can be rapidly modified through the practical advance of political struggle, the limits of which will begin to pose increasingly concrete tactical questions to participants facing the basic constraints of their physical environment. In this sense, the retroactive image of a movement dominated by localists demanding autonomy and increasingly-revanchist liberals struggling to restore a fading American order ultimately fails to capture the real scale of events. Though these forces crafted the core symbols of the movement and, on these grounds, often sought to speak for it, sigils are given their power not by the sorcerers who etch them but by the occult forces pushing up against the fabric of the sensible. The meme is only given force through the momentum of the historical party.

In this fashion, localist sigils were soon overloaded with a destructive magic that spilled far beyond their intended function. Chaos poured into the songs and the banners and the yellow helmets drifting like sparks throughout the cityscape until liberal norms were dissolved in nihilistic vigour, and the practical logic of independence gave way to the ecstatic despair of *laam chau*. Full of memetic potential, the occult power of the insurrection even corroded its own borders, seeding struggles far afield with new tactics and points of inspiration. In the summer of the subsequent year, I would see literal memes describing equipment and battle tactics originally used in Hong Kong translated and distributed among rioters in the US. Many of these illustrated common tools and pieces of clothing to bring to a protest, while others diagrammed the roles played by different groups of protestors in sustaining 'frontliner' battles against

was one such case, with many seeing urbanisation in the area as a symbol of integration with the mainland, as if the industrial sprawl of Shenzhen were swelling up to spill across the border.

The June demonstration both prefigured a series of later political campaigns in the New Territories and presaged subsequent attempts to storm the LegCo in the years to come. But it nonetheless remained trapped within its moment, divided between the old politics of civility and a new militancy just beginning to take shape. On the one hand, the protest lay well within the scope of normal civil society organising. It was a local issue campaign serving villagers set to be displaced, with the support of a variety of social justice and environmental NGOs. On the other, the issue began to bring to the fore both more militant tactics and more extreme expressions of anti-mainland sentiment, with the latter signalling the ideological ascent of a distinctly right-wing localism that would soon prove particularly popular among poorer Hong Kongers confined to this suburban fringe. Over the course of that summer, both the June demonstration itself and the general themes it evoked had become regular talking points, helping build momentum toward the end of September, a mere month after that talk at the bookstore, when thousands responded to an ongoing student protest shortly before the pan-democrats' original deadline to Occupy Central, spilling into the heart of the metropolis in a massive wave of non-stop demonstrations and seizures of public space that continued into December. Though these protests were still somewhat civil, the strict non-violence of 'peace and love' proved somewhat negotiable.

The Umbrella Movement, as it came to be known, would be the largest and most sustained series of protests since the 1967 riots. More importantly, it served as

the first arena in which a younger generation of urban radicals began to confront the city's established liberal opposition and won, breaking through customary presumptions about the necessity of non-violence, the need to limit the scope of demands for the sake of pragmatism and popular support, and the more general constraints imposed by the concept of civility.²⁷

For at least a decade, young Hong Kongers had watched the pan-democratic strategy flail, sacrificing social struggles on the altar of pragmatic respectability. Now, this strategy began to be rejected by youth across the political spec-

27 Ultra 2014.

trum, ranging from the new generation of liberal leaders such as Scholarism's Joshua Wong, to new right-wing localists openly advocating for secession, to smaller grouplets of militant leftists who had watched popular upheavals take hold across the world and wondered if, just maybe, Hong Kong might be next. More importantly, larger and larger masses of otherwise apolitical young Hong Kongers also began to be drawn to the field of political action out of a general nihilism, expressed most often as a sense that they had no future in the city and that Hong Kong itself was dying.

The shift was visible not only in the size and demographics of the crowds, but even more so in their tactics. Though most confrontations with police remained defensive – the umbrella itself becoming a symbol because of its use as a shield against pepper spray – the movement decisively shifted the practical terms of protest toward the active blockading of public space, a tactic formerly forbidden by the activists' own standards of civility. But the blockades of the Umbrella Movement turned out to be nothing but a prologue, offering a preliminary political opening within which the initial terms of the subsequent insurrection in 2019 could be formulated. Over the following years, even the pan-democratic old guard would increasingly be forced to operate on the political field set by younger organisers who had gotten their first taste of politics building barricades out of trash cans and traffic signs in Mong Kok in the autumn of 2014. While the events of 2014 were, in their moment, the largest social disruption since the 1967 riots, it was only in 2019 that the same scale of rebellion was reached – and responded to with a crackdown similar in scope to that which followed the uprising fifty years prior.

The size and scale of the 2014 movement already signalled a much deeper discontent building among the city's youth. Although still clothed in the language of democracy, this disaffection was instead something more like a resonant, if somewhat nihilistic rejection of what life in the city had become:

People bemoan skyrocketing rents, the inhuman levels of inequality, inflation in the price of food and public transport, and the government's tendency to simply ignore the vast swaths of people sitting at the bottom of society. One speaker at an open mic made the common – if simply wrong – argument: 'Why is Hong Kong just a couple of rich people and so many poor people?! Because we have no democracy!' ... Democracy has thereby come to designate less the practical application of a popular voting system and more a sort of elusive panacea, capable of somehow curing all social ills.²⁸

28 Ibid.

At the more specific level of Chinese state formation and the relationship of Hong Kong to ascendant financial and industrial interests in places like Beijing and Shenzhen, the crackdown represented not the power-hungry overreaching of an unaccountable autocracy, but instead an extension of the state building project already underway on the mainland, driven by a complex and often conflictual negotiation of interests between different domestic factions of capital and their affiliates within the local, provincial, and central bureaucracies. Though this project is often attributed to Xi Jinping, it is essentially a continuation of the long-running modernisation of 'consultative' governance already visible in the fiscal and institutional reforms earlier implemented by Zhu Rongji and refined during the Hu and Wen years.¹⁰³ The ultimate aim has always been the establishment of the baseline systems of property and contract law, macroeconomic governance standards, and efficient chains of command and clear divisions of authority necessary for capitalist production to take place in the future. In other words, rather than an authoritarian abnormality, the centralisation and standardisation of state power within China is essentially a project of liberalisation, much like the Federalist project of the early US. Perhaps the most salient lesson is simply that the political and civil liberties enshrined by the pan-democrats are ultimately ancillary to the affirmation of liberal economic forms encoded in the property system. After all, whenever social unrest threatens accumulation in any country in any part of the world, these political liberties immediately evaporate in the name of preserving stability and order.

In part, then, the crackdown was conducted to ensure that the city would be able to continue in its role as a finance and logistics entrepot serving international capital, the old guard of Hong Kong capitalists, and the new guard of capitalists from the mainland. But, since the interests of each of these factions are not entirely aligned, the repression also became one of the many forms taken by the supply chain struggles pitting the subordinate blocs of capital in China against the established industrial powers. Rather than a conflict between an authoritarian dictatorship and the liberal world order, the crackdown and subsequent realignment of local governance with mainland standards represents a clash between the mythos of a decaying but still potent liberalism descended from the aging American empire and the ascendant force of a locally vital but still globally weak and nominally 'socialist' liberalism rooted in the new, consultative bourgeois order being constructed in China. At the same time, Hong Kong also serves as a sort of political-economic canary in the coalmine, evoking

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before the protests began and would have almost certainly been implemented regardless of events in Hong Kong. In the end, mutual destruction proved to be less than mutual.¹⁰²

9 Necropolis

The Hong Kong protests also illustrate important lessons about both the general nature of the state within capitalist society and the specific process of state formation within China. As Tronti emphasises, state capacity develops only in response to the threat posed by the proletariat. There was therefore absolutely nothing uniquely authoritarian about the repression that played out in Hong Kong. In fact, in the same span of years, many of the exact same features seen in the Hong Kong crackdown were mirrored within the liberal democracies of the wealthy countries both immediately before (as in France in 2018) and immediately after (as in the US in 2020). Similarly, the National Security Law itself was modelled in part on well-established precedents set by anti-terrorism legislation such as the US Patriot Act, with the creation of new national security institutions and new surveillance and censorship capacities following institutional standards set by agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Agency. If anything, these were measures intended to catch up to prevailing international standards, rather than depart from them. Given the central role played by Hong Kong in both the global financial system and the day-to-day functioning of the planetary factory, this local response to an uprising that threatened to destabilise a central node in the global financial system was, in effect, the Hong Kong government acting – at the behest of the Chinese ruling class – as a direct manifestation of the total social capital and thereby ensuring the stable reproduction of capitalist society at the planetary scale.

¹⁰² In fact, the city's prospects as a financial hub were essentially unchanged in the aftermath of the protests. Similarly, its export trade, though declining slightly with the pandemic, reached record highs in the early 2020s. While US politicians made an enormous amount of noise about cracking down on Hong Kong – which no doubt encouraged the pan-democrats eagerly licking their boots – the business interests in control of these politicians' campaign funds had other ideas. Though surveys conducted by the American Chamber of Commerce among its membership initially found businesses skeptical of the city's prospects, by 2023 a majority had therefore returned to cautious optimism, with most already doing business in the city planning to stay for the near future (Leung, Kanis, and Soo, Zen 28 April 2023 'Hong Kong's economy is recovering, but its freedoms are not', *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-reopening-recovery-nsl-f4cbocdf2ce415ad3056bf88fdbb250>).

In response to the influx of new and often distinctly economic demands, both the old guard pan-democrats and the new liberals aligned with organisations like Scholarism and the Hong Kong Federation of Students attempted to reassert the core demands of the original occupation, holding small discussion groups to educate young protestors about the proper ways of protesting and posting signs that read: 'We only fight for DEMOCRACY, nothing else.'²⁹ In this way, the movement effectively bifurcated, with the liberal faction centred on Admiralty (near the legislative council building and the central business district) and a more amorphous faction unified mostly by their rejection of pan-democratic standards centred on the blockades in the commercial district of Mong Kok.

3 The City-State

As the liberals sought to pull the protests back onto the terrain of civil society, others pushed in the opposite direction. Signs began to be posted warning protestors to not trust 'leftist pricks,' emphasising that the movement had 'no leaders' and agitating against 'small-group discussion,' a common tool used by civil society groups to assert their intellectual leadership. Then, in November, a handful of masked youths burst through police lines outside the legislative building and smashed their way through the glass doors. This was the first window broken during a protest in the city for as long as anyone could remember. But the action was universally condemned by the pan-democrats, the young liberals, and the press, triggering calls for protestors to end the occupation. Always concerned with respectability – and of course the sources of their philanthropic funding – the leaders of the various civil society groups grew especially anxious when reception of the protests began to sour overseas, with the *Wall Street Journal* arguing in response to the window-smashing that 'the democrats have the strength, but using it effectively may require leaving the streets.'³⁰ Though controversial, however, there was little evidence that the action was unpopular. In retrospect, it was yet another sign of events to come. But it was also something more decisive, marking the point at which both the mainstream liberals and the smaller and much more marginal militant leftists proved unable to seize the tactical edge within the movement. Thus, the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Opinion 19 November 2014 'Broken Windows in Hong Kong', *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/broken-windows-in-hong-kong-1416443557>

smashed windows of the LegCo opened onto a darker path, as an ascendant faction of localists was able to play off popular resentment, seize the tactical initiative, and sharpen the mass nihilism of the movement to serve their distinctly right-wing political aims.

A new, far-right pole within Hong Kong politics had begun to cohere as early as 2011, when scholar and former government advisor Chin Wan (the penname of Horace Chin Wan-kan) published *On the Hong Kong City-State*, which advocated for the secession of the city from a 'neo-imperialist' mainland. Though Chin himself would later abandon many of these earlier positions in favour of a 'more enigmatic position of seeing Hong Kong as a bastion of Chinese spiritual renaissance,' the book nonetheless played a central role in the rise of what would come to be known as the 'localist' current.³¹ At a broader level, his arguments also served to reshape the presumptions of many liberals, triggering splits within established parties like the League of Social Democrats and influencing the younger activists within organisations such as Scholarism. At the heart of these differences was Chin's reappraisal of the core tenets of the city's liberal politics. Not only did he 'put forward a political agenda of Hong Kong First and Hong Kong People First,' which emphasised themes of cultural and economic 'autonomy,' he also explicitly 'opposed the "democratic reunification theory" initially advocated by the pan-democrats, arguing that, even if there were democracy in China, it would not necessarily be beneficial for Hong Kong' and that the pan-democrats had long wasted time and energy on attempting to support human rights and democratic reforms on the mainland.³² Against the liberal orthodoxy, he advocated for Hong Kong to become a fully independent city-state, similar to Singapore. More jarringly, he even went so far as to argue that Hong Kongers are ethnically distinct from mainlanders, endorsing popular racist portrayals of the latter as foreign 'locusts' descending on the city from outside.

By the time that Chin published his book, rising economic integration had been accompanied by increasing prejudice against mainlanders, with racist depictions conflating reasonable class critiques – for example, criticism of an influx of wealthy mainland firms and capitalists purchasing high-end properties and driving up real estate prices – with a more generic prejudice against all mainlanders, including students, tourists, and those engaged in minor forms

31 Hung 2022b, p. 183.

32 These quotations come from a comprehensive report on the 2019 protests and their historical context produced by an anonymous activist from Hong Kong in 2021 (Anonymous 2021, p. 49). No English-language translation of the full text currently exists. The translations here are therefore the author's own.

institutions and arrest those attempting to hold demonstrations. Though these charges were usually more minor, they worked alongside new national security legislation to subdue any prospect of revived political mobilisation and to constrain the space for political discourse.

Such measures helped to prevent a resurgence of protests while also isolating the millions who had participated in the uprising from one another. This not only prevented any new political force from taking practical shape but also hindered the collective process of reflection that often follows from such events and (by putting participants in ongoing communication with one another) plays a crucial role in the development of political subjectivity. Further organising and analysis was only able to take place at a distance, conducted largely within the Hong Kong diaspora. And this diaspora grew substantially. According to a 2021 survey, an enormous 42 percent of the population reported their intention to emigrate at some point.⁹⁹ Realistically, most would never have the resources. Those with greater means were able to escape the crackdown at far higher rates, leaving lower-class supporters of the movement at the mercy of the government. The result was still substantial. In 2020 some 89,200 people left the city, growing to 113,000 in 2021, and then declining slightly to around 60,000 in 2022.¹⁰⁰ The trend was large enough to turn the city's population growth negative.

Meanwhile, the hoped-for salvation of sanctions and other forms of Western intervention have proved underwhelming. While all the wealthy anglophone countries instituted new visa schemes to assist outmigrants, stronger economic measures were more minimal. Likely the most significant of these has been the decision made by the US to cease 'treating Hong Kong as a separate entity from mainland China in trade, investment, and visas,' with the US State Department nullifying the city's long-standing exemption from the US export control regime.¹⁰¹ But this has largely meant that the city is now treated in much the same way as the mainland, which is by no means closed to global markets. Though explicit sanctions were applied to a small handful of top officials, the impact was ultimately minimal. Similarly, most of the trade restrictions that were applied were in sectors that had been discussed as potential targets long

99 Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies 2021 'Survey Findings on Views about Emigration from Hong Kong', *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*. http://www.hkiaps.cuhk.edu.hk/wd/ni/20211020-110804_1.pdf

100 Yiu, William 16 February 2023 'Hong Kong's population drops for 3rd straight year, while city posts net outflow of 60,000 residents in 2022', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3210429/hong-kong-emigration-wave-net-outflow-60000-residents-2022-marking-09-cent-population-drop-3rd>

101 Hung 2022b, p. 207.

victed had been charged with crimes such as unlawful assembly, possession of offensive weapons, riot, assault on an officer, or charges related to property damage. For those who were incarcerated, sentences ranged from a few days to over a decade. On average, however, most sentences were in the range of three months to a year and a half, with another cluster of more serious cases averaging three to four years. Only a handful were sentenced to five years or more.⁹⁶

But most of these numbers refer to civil and criminal cases prosecuted through the conventional legal system. The passage of the National Security Law in the summer of 2020 also saw the emergence of distinct policing, judicial, and carceral standards to be applied in certain cases, allowing arrests to be conducted by specialised national security police and trials led by a small panel of handpicked judges, without a jury present and often with strict limits on what information would be made public or whether it could be reported on in the media. By the beginning of 2023, a total of 243 had been arrested on charges covered by either the National Security Law or the colonial-era sedition ordinance (tried in a similar fashion) and 149 of these individuals had been charged, with most accused of subversion or sedition.⁹⁷ In general, the sentences for such cases are much more substantial, with 'severe' cases given a mandatory minimum of five years.

National security charges have been the preferred method deployed against civil society organisations and pro-movement media outlets – either as a threat to force their disbandment, or as a means to seize their materials and charge their leadership – as well as leading figures in the movement, including the 47 democrats originally charged with subversion for conducting the unofficial primary (several of whom later turned witness for the prosecution), the board members of the Hong Kong Alliance, and the leaders of the HKCTU. The majority of those arrested in national security cases were civil society leaders of some type, with the single largest group composed of democrats who had formerly held seats in the LegCo or district councils, though those working at media outlets constituted a second large group, and lawyers a third.⁹⁸ Similarly, pandemic measures were also used in a punitive fashion to target pro-movement

⁹⁶ Kong 2022.

⁹⁷ HKFP 6 March 2023 'Explainer: Hong Kong's national security crackdown – month 32', *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/03/06/explainer-hong-kongs-national-security-crackdown-month-32/>

⁹⁸ Mok, Lea 30 June 2022 '2 years of Hong Kong's national security law – explained in data', *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/06/30/2-years-of-hong-kongs-national-security-law-explained-in-data/>

of daily cross-border commerce. Though portrayed as 'smugglers,' most of the latter were simply glorified couriers tasked with buying bags full of consumer goods in Hong Kong and transiting them across the border into Shenzhen. At the time, however, such accounts seemed to be confirmed by phenomena such as birth tourism, a rise in immigrants overstaying their visas, and periodic shortages of consumer goods in the suburban centres closest to the border. The cultural campaigns of the old colonial authority had not only succeeded in creating a certain self-image of the 'polite' and 'civil' Hong Konger but had, in classic British fashion, also ensured that this civility was propped up by an elitist chauvinism. Now, as the polite culture of old Hong Kong decayed, only the chauvinism remained.

Mainlanders were often portrayed as voracious, unrefined peasants harried by an 'authoritarian' government and hungry for Hong Kong's wealth and privilege. For the pan-democratic old guard, this had stoked humanitarian sympathy. For the new wave of liberals and localists, it earned nothing but contempt. Often, it was even cast in a conspiratorial light. Though Hong Kongers had long been free to cross the border to manage business affairs on the mainland, the gradual lifting of immigration controls in the opposite direction was seen as a nefarious measure by the central government to flood the city with rapacious immigrants. In response, 'self-proclaimed localists organised rallies and protests against mainland Chinese tourists and smugglers,' which often resulted in 'brawls between localist protestors and mainland smugglers, retail owners specialised in the mainland tourist business, and pro-establishment groups.'³³ Localists also pursued institutional campaigns, as in 2015, when a coalition of right-wing groups marched on the Immigration Department demanding that an undocumented 12-year-old be deported back to the mainland.³⁴

By the middle of the decade, Chin's 'city-statism' was an increasingly archaic variant among several divergent localist schools of thought. In some cases, new branches of localism took shape when former liberals split off from the pan-democratic establishment, as when well-known democratic politician and media personality Raymond Wong Yuk-man founded a political education arm within the League of Social Democrats which then led a split from the organisation, joining first the populist People Power Party and then cohering into an

³³ Hung 2022b, p. 183.

³⁴ Lai Ying-kit and Ngo, Jennifer, 22 May 2015 'Abandoned boy, 12, divides opinion in bid for Hong Kong residency', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-law-and-crime/article/1806767/abandoned-boy-12-divides-opinion-bid-hong>

independent localist organisation called the Proletariat Political Institute. Similarly, Wong's protégé, Wong Yeung-tat, went on to found localist group Civic Passion, which would become one of the most active right-wing organisations in the Umbrella Movement – with one of its members allegedly leading the charge to smash through the windows at the LegCo. Other localist organisations emerged independent of the pro-democratic establishment entirely, with many founded by young people who had participated in the Umbrella Movement and blamed its failure on the vacillation of the liberal leadership. Hong Kong Indigenous was among the most militant of these groups, going on to lead anti-immigrant marches and participate in clashes with mainland shoppers. When the government initiated a crackdown against street hawkers in Mong Kok during the New Year celebrations in 2016, Hong Kong Indigenous put out a call for supporters to come defend the streetside stalls, which were widely seen as a symbol of Hong Kong culture. Protestors swarmed into the area as police attempted to clear out the street hawkers, resulting in a series of escalating clashes that would come to be known as the 'fishball riots' or the 'fishball revolution,' which *The Economist* soon bemoaned as the 'worst outbreak of rioting since the 1960s.'³⁵

Similar groups soon arose among students and professionals, such as the Hong Kong National Party, which openly advocated for outright independence from the mainland. As early as 2014, the Hong Kong University student union newspaper had published a piece exploring the prospects of building a nationalist movement in Hong Kong. This article would eventually help lay the groundwork for an even more extreme program than that theorised by early localists such as Chin. In contrast to Chin's city-statism, which emphasised the supposed ethnic conflict between Hong Kong and China but maintained that 'Hong Kong has preserved the spirit of Chinese culture more than the mainland' and was therefore not a distinct nation, these younger localists cited Benedict Anderson's well-known study of the origins of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, to argue that the city's distinct linguistic (primarily Cantonese-speaking) and historic heritage (including the influence of the British) had constituted Hong Kong as a new nation sufficiently distinct from China to deserve its own sovereign rule. These nationalist impulses would later be expressed in the emergence of a 'self-determination faction' (自决派) calling for a referendum to decide Hong Kong's political future, including the option of independence. The new generation of localists also outperformed the earlier

35 The Economist, 13 February 2016 'Street Violence and Politics,' *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/china/2016/02/13/street-violence-and-politics>

education levels tending to be more supportive of the movement.⁹² Similarly, despite majority cross-class support for the movement throughout the city, in one citywide survey conducted in August of 2020, those who described their own socioeconomic position as lying within the 'middle strata' were slightly more supportive, with a total of 63 percent either supporting or strongly supporting the protests, compared to 61 percent of those in the 'upper-middle' or 'upper strata' (a single category in the data) and 57 percent who described themselves as in the 'lower-middle' or 'lowest' strata (also a single category). Outright opposition to the movement was strongest (27 percent) among those who placed themselves in the highest socioeconomic categories.⁹³

Given such widespread, cross-class support for the uprising, the crackdown was equally expansive. As of 5 August 2019, there had only been 420 arrests. That number had doubled by the end of the month (to 883 by 27 August) and then gradually increased throughout September and October. By 16 October, a total of 2,363 protestors had been arrested. But the biggest increase came in November, with the mass arrests made during the first two days of the Siege of PolyU contributing a large portion of this. After the police sweep on 18 November, a total of 4,491 protestors had been arrested. After campus had been cleared and other crackdowns conducted across the city, the number increased to 5,890. From there, it trickled upward, surpassing 7,000 by the end of January 2020. By February and March, public demonstrations all but ceased in the face of tightening pandemic controls. But arrests continued at only a slightly slower rate, surpassing 8,000 by the beginning of May, 9,000 by June and 10,000 by September, after which point the pace slowed but did not entirely cease.⁹⁴

By the summer of 2022, the best available records show that somewhere between 10,279 and 10,499 protestors had been arrested and, according to the Security Bureau, 1,754 of these arrestees were less than 18 years old.⁹⁵ By the beginning of that year, 2,944 had been charged and 1,171 had gone to trial (635 on charges of riot), with 870 convicted, 788 sentenced, and 620 of these given sentences that included some form of incarceration. Most of those con-

92 Anonymous 2021, p. 105.

93 Xie 2020.

94 Kong Tsung-gan 15 February 2022 'Arrests and trials of Hong Kong protesters and opposition leaders,' *Medium*. <https://kongtsunggan.medium.com/arrests-and-trials-of-hong-kong-protesters-and-opposition-leaders-2144f5d6895b>

95 Ho, Kelly 27 October 2022 'Almost 3,000 people, including 57 minors, prosecuted so far over 2019 Hong Kong protests,' *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/10/27/almost-3000-people-including-57-minors-prosecuted-so-far-over-2019-hong-kong-protests/>

said that they had engaged in various encirclement, occupation, and blockade activities, with just over 4 percent admitting that they had directly clashed with police. To place this into context: according to the same population estimate, 4 percent would be just over 250,000 people.⁸⁹ And these numbers were even more pronounced among the youth, with nearly 80 percent of those 15–29 years old reporting having participated in some form, 33.2 percent having manned the barricades and 12.3 percent having clashed with police.

Meanwhile, a large majority of participants described their own political viewpoints as ‘localist’ (81.6 percent) or ‘pan-democratic’ (73 percent), with the high shares of each indicating that the two were not clearly opposed, as many respondents marked down both – in contrast, another survey of the general population, rather than participants, showed only 20 percent identifying as localists and 31 percent as pan-democrats, while a full 39 percent described themselves as having no particular political position.⁹⁰ Also interesting, however, is the fact that a large number of these individuals with no political allegiance nonetheless participated in the protests, with 24.3 percent of all participants refusing the labels of localist, pan-democrat, or pro-establishment. In terms of the most active participation, however, it was clear that those who explicitly identified as localists dominated, with 11 percent claiming to have clashed with police, versus just 5.6 percent of those identified as pan-democrats, and 0.7 percent of those with no political affiliation.⁹¹

Meanwhile, other polling confirmed that the movement enjoyed majority support among essentially all social strata in the city and that this support tended to grow over time, with ‘nearly 60 % of the public still supporting the movement’ as late as June 2020, shortly before the National Security Law was passed. But the strength of this support was uneven, with ‘those who are younger, those who identify more strongly with Hong Kong identity, and those with higher

89 It is important to note, however, that virtually all of these polls were conducted exclusively among Cantonese-speaking respondents who could read traditional Chinese characters. This excludes the city’s roughly 400,000 foreign domestic workers, many of the 600,000 residents classified as ethnic minorities, and many of the mainlanders living in the city as students or workers. The exclusion of such groups is itself telling: ‘Prior to the movement, these groups were not usually seen as members of the “Hong Kong People” in mainstream social discourse’ (Ibid, p. 107). Though this may have changed somewhat after certain excluded groups offered support to the movement, helping to build ties and hold joint events, it is nonetheless correct to say that the bias represented by the surveys remained the prevailing bias of the movement itself.

90 The former figures come from Anonymous 2021, p. 103, the latter come from a survey of more than 1,500 respondents conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, summarised in Xie 2020.

91 Anonymous 2021, p. 103.

city-statists in their antagonistic opposition to civil society, opposing endless marches, sit-ins, and big stage lectures in favour of open antagonism with the police.³⁶

Meanwhile, a wide range of right-wing groups began to spring up somewhat organically in response to local subsistence issues, mostly in the New Territories, and many of these would go on to field candidates in the 2015 and 2016 elections. Localist groups Youngspiration and Kowloon East Community won seats in the 2015 District Council elections and Edward Leung, one of the founders of Hong Kong Indigenous, received some 66,000 votes in the New Territories East by-election in early 2016. In the Legislative Council election later that same year, localist groups formed two major electoral coalitions. One was constituted by organisations that had emerged from the pan-democratic camp, including Civic Passion, the Proletarian Political Institute, and Chin Wan’s Hong Kong Resurgence Order; while another formed between six independent localist groups founded by youth who had been involved in the Umbrella Movement. In addition to Youngspiration, the latter coalition included a range of organisations whose local focus was evident in their names: Kowloon East Community, Tin Shui Wai New Force, Cheung Sha Wan Community Establishment Power, Tsz Wan Shan Constructive Power, and Tuen Mun Community, all joined together under the banner ‘ALLinHK.’ They were joined by a new generation of pro-democratic organisations founded by younger liberals, such as Demosisto, founded by Joshua Wong and Agnes Chow, from Scholarism, and Nathan Law, former secretary-general of the Hong Kong Federation of Students. Despite having several of their candidates invalidated by electoral officials, both the localists and the younger generation of liberals won major races, with Youngspiration’s Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching winning seats alongside Demosisto’s Nathan Law, making Law and Yau the youngest-ever candidates to be elected to the legislative council. Altogether, localist candidates won six seats and received some 20 percent of the vote.³⁷ Subsequent surveys revealed ‘that candidates with localist orientations were particularly popular among the unpropertied and younger voters.’³⁸

But more significant was their growing influence outside the electoral realm, symbolised by the rising share of Hong Kongers explicitly identifying with the

36 Anonymous 2021, pp. 61–4.

37 Cheung, Gary and Lam, Jeffie 5 September 2016 ‘Rise of localists in Hong Kong polls set to bring headaches for Beijing, analysts say’, *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2015349/rise-localists-hong-kong-polls-set-bring-headaches-beijing>

38 Hung 2022b, p. 186.

movement and by the growing influence of localist slogans across civil society. Following a global trend, Hong Kong's far-right had begun to adopt tactics and aesthetics elsewhere associated with the anarchist movement. Similar to neo-fascists in Ukraine, Thailand, and Italy, many groups even described their positions as a form of 'national' anarchism or 'autonomy,' contrasted to the authoritarian 'communism' of the mainland.³⁹ Others used essentially third positionist talking points, claiming to go 'beyond left and right.' Most important, however, was their ability to appropriate the popular visual language and antagonistic political practices normally associated with the far left. For example, as early as 2014, it was the city's localists, rather than its anarchists, who began to popularise both the tactic and aesthetics of the black bloc. Similarly, it was the localists who stood up to the police, leading militant defence campaigns in local villages and window-smashing assaults against the halls of power. Meanwhile, as localist organisations arose across the New Territories to address local subsistence issues, they set up a mixture of advocacy campaigns and anarchist-style mutual aid and solidarity networks. Because of the aesthetic overlap, localist branding even began to be circulated within the cultural currents of the left in other countries – a phenomenon that only accelerated as these symbols became associated with increasingly riotous activity.

These efforts retained a close and mutually reinforcing relationship with the changing sentiment of the population in general. Localists by no means caused these shifts in consciousness, which were instead rooted in the very real livelihood issues and the visible rise of mainland firms, which colluded with and gradually displacing Hong Kong capitalists from the upper echelons of power. But the localists helped to facilitate, intensify, and feed the popular reaction to these issues, channelling righteous anger into xenophobia and a mindless worship of the US empire as the only possible defence against an impending 'Chinese' takeover. In fact, this very narrative was only possible because of gradual shifts in identity, induced by the changing fate of Hong Kongers within the global order: Over these same years, public opinion surveys showed a sharp decline in the share of respondents identifying themselves as 'Chinese,' paired by a sharp rise in those identifying as 'Hong Kongers,' which was again most extreme when sorted according to age: 'In the 18–29 age group, Hong Konger versus Chinese identity was at a staggering 81.8 versus 1.8 percent in December 2019.'⁴⁰ This was a major shift from a decade prior when, according to the same survey in 2007, roughly 40 percent of the general populace had identified as

39 For an overview of these trends, see: NPC 2014.

40 Hung 2022b, p. 185.

candidates, including four incumbents, with 21 others placed under review (for context, this was in a election for a total of 70 seats in the LegCo). This was in line with Tai's predictions, and 'Plan B' candidates had already been lined up. But before further disqualifications were even decided, Chief Executive Carrie Lam cited a resurgence in coronavirus cases to invoke emergency powers and postpone the election until the following year.

Tai's strategy had envisioned a slow electoral chess match. Instead, the central government simply reaffirmed the basic fact that Hong Kong had never been and would never be a democracy, sweeping the pieces from the board. The passage of the National Security Law was followed by the revival of a colonial-era sedition ordinance, both of which were applied alongside new pandemic restrictions and criminal charges such as riot and illegal assembly to detain and charge thousands of individuals in the years that followed. More than 50 candidates in the primaries were arrested, charged, and found guilty of subverting state power, including Tai himself (he was ultimately sentenced to 10 years in prison). Pro-movement media tycoon Jimmy Lai was charged with a range of crimes including fraud and colluding with foreign forces to endanger national security. Leading independent media and civil society organisations were targeted one by one, each raided by police, their leadership charged under the new law, and the organisations themselves forced to disband. Universities cut their ties with their student unions. Meanwhile, by the fall of 2021, almost all the new labour unions founded in 2020 had been disbanded, alongside many older social movement unions. In October of that year, the HKCTU itself was dissolved and its leadership arrested. Government agencies began to require employees to take national security oaths. Books documenting the movement were banned. Pro-movement signage and products were gradually removed from the shelves as the 'yellow economic circle' slowly closed. Schools and universities fired outspoken staff and adopted new state-mandated textbooks and national security curricula.

At a more general level, the sheer scale of the uprising also ensured that repression would have to target masses of people, rather than just prominent individuals or leading organisations. According to the largest-scale survey conducted prior to the crackdown: '52.6% of respondents participated in at least one "anti-extradition" activity, which means that roughly 3.45 million people participated in some form,' a rate that was 'higher than that of the Umbrella Movement (18–20%) and the Arab Spring (35%).'⁸⁸ In total, some 32.5 percent of respondents said that they had directly assisted protestors and 16.3 percent

88 Anonymous 2021, p. 103.

nomic and political sanctions on China.⁸⁶ In other words, the entire strategy was predicated on a faith in the vitality of the liberal world order and the willingness and ability of the US to reassert its geopolitical hegemony in a strong form, even though such a decision would be against its immediate economic interests and even pose the risk of world war. Nonetheless, only the intervention of the world's leading imperial powers could ensure that the destruction would truly be 'mutual.' In this sense, the abysmal failure of the pan-democratic version of *laam chau* could be traced to its naïve faith in the persistence of a *pax Americana* that, viewed from any other perspective, had already begun to crumble.

Later, it became apparent that the logic of *laam chau* had also been incorporated into Tai's planning for the upcoming legislative election, as revealed in a subsequent trial over his involvement in the planning of an unofficial primary in the summer of 2020, during which he'd successfully encouraged other democrats to sign onto his strategy of using the budgetary veto as a weapon in precisely the fashion he'd laid out in his manifesto.⁸⁷ But Tai's forecast proved overly optimistic and his liberal faith in the imperial saving grace of the United States would be shaken. First, the central government moved in much more rapidly than expected. At the end of June, well before any election could take place, an expansive National Security Law was promulgated via the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress – thereby completely bypassing the LegCo – which gave the government widespread powers to unseat elected politicians, arrest those suspected of threatening national security, and imprison individuals under a range of new terrorism, subversion, and secession charges.

When Tai and other democrats nonetheless proceeded with their plan to hold an unofficial primary in July (in which more than 600,000 people cast votes) candidates associated with the localists and the younger liberals quickly pulled into the lead, entirely knocking out established candidates from the smaller pan-democratic parties (such as former Trotskyist Leung Kwok-hung with the League of Social Democrats and HKCTU chairperson Carol Ng with the Labour Party). The government then immediately disqualified 12 democratic

86 The Standard, 6 January 2021 'Explainer: what is Benny Tai's "10 steps to burn with us"', *The Standard*. <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/162727/Explainer:-what-is-Benny-Tai%27s-%2210-steps-to-burn-with-us%22>

87 Ho, Kelly 7 February 2023 'Hong Kong 47: Activist's voting campaign formed "backbone" of unofficial primaries, nat. security trial hears', *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/02/07/hong-kong-47-activists-voting-campaign-formed-backbone-of-unofficial-primaries-nat-security-trial-hears/>

Chinese, while just under 20 percent identified as Hong Kongers. Similarly, as early as 2016, another survey showed nearly 40 percent of those aged 15–24 in support of Hong Kong independence.

At the larger scale, the influence of the new nationalist politics became visible in the steady spread of localist slogans and visual styles throughout civil society: the colours black and yellow or black and white, violently splattered calligraphy, militant figures posed under overwrought language calling for heroic revolution against an evil, foreign elite. During the by-election that same year, Edward Leung, co-founder of Hong Kong Indigenous – who would ultimately be barred from running due to his earlier avowed support for Hong Kong independence – coined one such slogan: 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times.' Within the space of only a few years, flags bearing the phrase would be seen fluttering through clouds of tear gas, pale letters flickering orange in the firelight.

4 Excess and Extant

Over the past century, politics was slowly strangled to death through a series of deepening defeats. Worse still, the corpse of this politics was then propped up as a sort of puppet made to act out the motions of the once-living thing. In the absence of practical experience with real political conflict – which is replaced by empty and endless theoretical and historical debates, campaigns to 'raise awareness,' legalistic quibbles over the wording of policy, and a wealth of arts and media projects – people increasingly come to understand 'politics' as such to be a largely discursive, pedagogical or merely administrative affair. At best, political activity is seen as a sort of competition between beliefs, systematised in the programmatic positions of different formal groups, each of which seeks to attract converts by explaining its stance on various issues and arguing out the consequences. As political theorists Paul Torino and Adrian Wohlleben argue: 'Contemporary politics sees in action nothing but a *conversation* between constituencies and populations in society.'⁴¹ This notion of politics seems to make sense precisely because the major political forces of the twentieth century were able to lay out their own core projects in the form of coherent platforms. In fact, these platforms are all they left behind, like fossils that seem to express the essence of the extinct organism. But these fossilised remains also serve to veil the dynamic process that once gave them life.

41 Torino and Wohlleben 2019.

Within this prevailing paradigm, politics begins as an idea and then proceeds into reality through the practical commitment of self-aware activists who, if successful, spread this idea to others and thereby create new converts to the activist project. This is the fundamental presumption of liberal political philosophy and serves as the basis for both the civil society paradigm and the various formal and informal sects of the self-described 'left' in its multifarious forms. But, just as the fossil alone fails to capture the truly living aspects of the beast – from its basic phenotype to its ecological niche – this fossilised approach to politics fails to approximate the living thing. The attempts to emulate the political programs of these dead generations are much like those of the early palaeontologists building behemoths from bone fragments or Renaissance sculptors mimicking the blanched ruins of Rome. They can ultimately produce nothing but monstrous, melancholic facsimiles. This is because they take the endpoint of long sequences of political organisation as the starting point of struggle, rather than seeing in living proletarian antagonism the potential for the practical elaboration of a future politics.

Living struggles proceed in the exact opposite direction, beginning not from thought but from action. Consciousness enters the body through the skin. This is why, as Neocosmos frames it, the question of political subjectivity must be located in the 'excessive' elements of the event, which supersede the status quo rather than being simply 'expressive' of identities intrinsic to it. Subjectivity itself is therefore a fundamentally collective process rather than an individual articulation of static identity within the extant world.⁴² According to Badiou, this distinction also separates out the mere critique of capitalism from communism as a positive political project, with the latter building on but also exceeding the former: 'it is "class" that is an analytical and descriptive concept, a "cold" concept, and "masses" that is the concept with which the active principle of the riots, real change, is designated.'⁴³ But the excess inherent in the event is always, ultimately, born from and forced to struggle within a given expressive situation. Political subjectivity (which is a precondition for any grand strategic 'program') only emerges through the tactical organisation of partisan 'fidelity' to the excessive, universal elements of the event. Insofar as a communist 'idea' can be said to exist, it does so only through the practical elaboration of this excess within and against the expressive situation from which it erupts.

And it is this link to political action that distinguishes this theory of partisanship and social subjectivity from the more idealistic, individualist variant

42 Neocosmos 2016, p. 27.

43 Badiou 2012, p. 91.

Kong government officials, and then on China as a whole – it quickly came to encompass a much broader meaning, embodied in scorched earth slogans and increasingly destructive attacks against the urban fabric. As protests intensified throughout autumn, exhaustion was accompanied by a worsening sense of desperation. Mass arrests and the always-imminent prospect of military intervention (which never occurred, despite some plainclothes deployments of soldiers on the fringes) seemed to drive home the reality that even the most successful of insurrections in the city was ultimately doomed. Among many young people, this awakened a productive, if vindictive, nihilism that largely abandoned strategic questions, burning away the myths of both the liberals and the localists in a pyrrhic wave of proletarian rage, raw, tragic, and ephemeral. This amorphous, mass-political nihilism was no longer a rebellion against the death of the city but was instead an embodiment of Hong Kong as a city already dead. That year, the ghost festival had occurred shortly after the first of the general strikes and airport occupations in mid-August, almost precisely marking the point at which mass protests began to tilt toward insurrection. The carnival lifted itself from the shadows and into the streets. For once, it seemed that the hungry dead refused to be ferried back to the karmic millstone. In response, the kings of hell summoned their armies. Nothing would end quietly.

Soon, the nihilistic sentiment became so pervasive that the basic dead-end faced by the movement was recognised not only by its extreme fringe but even by the pan-democrats. *Laam chau* thereby came full circle, returning to the geopolitical themes of its earlier formulation. In a manifesto published in April of 2020 titled '10 steps to *laam chau*' (often translated as '10 steps to burn with us'), Benny Tai laid out a forecast of the movement's prospects, predicting 10 stages wherein the government would gradually disqualify pro-movement politicians from running in the upcoming Legislative Council election scheduled for September, requiring a series of 'Plan B' and 'Plan C' candidates who would nonetheless win in a landslide, just as they had in the District Council elections. Once in power, the democrats would gain veto power over the city's budget, and Tai argued that the veto should then be used as a weapon against the central government, intentionally forcing the city into a fiscal crisis if Hong Kongers were not granted universal suffrage.

But, according to Tai, this legislative assault would then impel the central government to declare a state of emergency, disband the LegCo, and detain members of the pro-democracy camp *en masse*. And it was in the final step of the *laam chau* electoral strategy that the basic failure of vision became most apparent: For Tai, the central government's harsh crackdown would at last see the US and other world powers move in to impose devastating eco-

fore unveiled an aporia baked into the liberal presumptions of most protestors, who saw no contradiction between encouraging commerce and advancing the movement. In fact, mercantile activities often took on a somewhat mythic form, with the city's many brightly lit malls, bustling streetside stands and, above all, the 'free port' churning somewhere in the background all seen as something like the life force of 'Hong Kong' itself.

In its strongest form, the Yellow Economic Circle was naively seen as a method to re-localise this commerce and thereby revive the mythic merchant spirit of the city. Its emergence during the pandemic – when the sudden disappearance of mainland tourists devastated the retail sector – seemed at first to confirm this potential, with many supporters praising the rise of a 'community economy' and numerous businesses turning to 'yellow' branding to boost sales. Similarly, unemployed professionals who had been supporters of the movement began to formulate their own start-ups in sectors ranging from advertising and design to tech, with some supporters seeing immense potential for growth via private investment funds not controlled by state-owned banks.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the turn to commercial ventures also prevented the movement from threatening further economic disruptions and arguably even helped to revive trade with the mainland. At a deeper level, both the new wave of social movement unionism and the turn to commercial ventures also illustrated the basic riddle that confronts anyone attempting to build any sort of sustained power in a largely post-industrial city where any assault or seizure of productive infrastructure was stopped dead by the 'glass floor.' In this case, however, the 'glass floor' separating most people's lives from production was a literal border dividing the city from its hinterland, inhabited by the very people that the localists scorned.

8 Burn with Us

This conundrum eventually led to an embrace of the dead-end itself, represented in the gradual adoption of the logic of *laam chau*. Usually translated as 'mutual destruction' or 'burnism,' the Cantonese phrase combines the words for 'to embrace or fasten together' and 'stir-fry' to communicate the sentiment behind popular protest phrases such as 'if we burn, you burn with us' or 'better ashes than dust.' Though *laam chau* had been coined to describe a specific strategy of petitioning for Western sanctions – first on Hong

offered by thinkers such as those in the French collective *Tiqqun* (and, later, the Invisible Committee), for whom anti-programmatic politics is, essentially, a voluntarist affair taking place outside of or above the expressive world from which it has departed. Recognising the same division noted by Badiou between structural analysis and political action, their conclusion is to simply jettison the former: 'To continue the struggle today, we will have to scrap the notion of class and with it the whole entourage of certified origins, reassuring sociologisms, identity prostheses.'⁴⁴ In its place, they treat the excessive as if it could be wholly severed from its origins in the extant social world and thereby boiled down an intrinsic battle occurring within the will of the individual: 'The front line no longer cuts through the middle of society; it now runs through the middle of each of us, between what makes us a *citizen*, our predicates, and all the rest. It is thus in each of us that war is being waged between imperial socialisation and that which already eludes it.'⁴⁵ From this perspective, politics is not a social affair so much as an ethical one. And, of course, the approach evokes a certain elitism, since the choice to 'scrap the notion of class' is neither novel in theory – it is in fact a common ideological theme taken up by what we might think of as the 'lumpen' portion of the middle strata – nor is it practically possible for the majority of the species, who have no choice but to experience class not as a 'notion' but as a daily torture.

Though this voluntarist approach drives to the gut of partisan affect, it also ignores the inherently dialectical relationship between event and extant, excessive and expressive, or politics and state. But it is precisely in this dialectic that subjectivity abides. As *Neocosmos* stresses, the process of subjectivation can only take place through an ongoing organisational struggle to maintain and repeatedly resurrect the universality of the event within and against the delimited nature of the 'identitarian objects' that compose the status quo. Only in this fashion can subjects 'be rigorously understood as produced and not as given; they can in fact be conceived as produced through a politics, as the products of subjectivities ... and not the other way round, thus avoiding the collapse into idealism.'⁴⁶ Subjectivity is therefore the contradictory process whereby the excessive universality that has emerged from some initial, identitarian expression of extant interests is turned back against the limits posed by these extant identities themselves, generating novel, universal forms of emancipatory politics that contain the potential to dissolve these identities in practice – in the

⁴⁴ *Tiqqun* 2016, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Neocosmos* 2016, p. 26.

⁸⁵ Shen 2020.

long-run, through the revolutionary process – and, for this very reason, must continue to engage with them as the material realities faced by the individuals involved in the struggle.

In simpler terms: political uprisings obviously have causes that can be identified in their environment and those who join in these uprisings do so at least in part because they themselves are a product of this same environment. Similarly, the impact of particular uprisings can be traced in their transformation of conventional political discourse, as when major strike waves elevate previously siloed demands for, say, wage increases in a particular workplace, into a broadly recognisable goal now expressed in the form of a general demand for an increased minimum wage across entire sectors or even national markets. But, once an uprising begins, it also becomes a sort of end in itself for those involved. From the outside, this can only appear irrational, especially when it appears to undercut the very material interests of the participants – as in the common objection against rioters who burn down ‘their own’ neighbourhoods or against workers who threaten to bankrupt their employer with a strike and thereby risk losing their job entirely. And yet, from within the space of the uprising, it is precisely this feedback loop of self-referential excess – the gut-feeling that drives participants to extend, intensify, and elaborate the uprising – that rapidly and collectively transforms those involved while also exerting a gravitational force capable of pulling and tearing the discursive fabric of the status quo in which the uprising takes place.

An uprising that was initially an expression of material interests by one group of proletarians – a strike at one factory or a call to investigate a single police murder in a single city, for example – thereby takes on an unstable universality, continuing to express those initial demands while also coming to encompass broader social interests and, beyond this, evolving into an expansive process worth sustaining in and of itself. The singular struggle thereby becomes a sort of mass noun within which all individual interests are but one part, with an agency that exceeds the sum of these parts: it thereby becomes ‘the’ struggle, ‘the’ rebellion, ‘the’ revolution, worthy of defence and requiring work of its participants. It compels its own creation, much as a piece of art can be said to compel the artist in the very process of its emergence across the canvas. In Badiou’s words: ‘The conservative “heartlands” disappear and all the focus is on what might be called a *massive minority*.’⁴⁷ For Neocosmos, this ‘massive minority’ embodies, in practice, the universality necessary for a struggle to take on a truly emancipatory potential.

47 Badiou 2012, p. 91.

the idea of the ‘Yellow Economic Circle,’ which was intended to be a collection of small companies openly promoting movement messaging, receiving preferential business from supporters, and even potentially pooling funds to assist in organising.

Soon, new maps began to circulate among residents, indicating ‘yellow’ (pro-movement) and ‘blue’ (pro-establishment) businesses. The goal was to divide the space of the city, making visible the underlying political commitments of each territory in the absence of outright occupations and attempting to strangle the flow of cash going to pro-establishment forces and increase traffic to pro-movement ones. In practice, however, this was a loose and largely aspirational effort, as commerce continued operating in the city much as it had before. Meanwhile, although ‘yellow’ businesses did see an initial boost of support during the pandemic, they also soon became targets of more stringent crackdowns, with police selectively enforcing social distancing policies to punish the pro-movement restaurants so conveniently pointed out on the map.⁸² According to one of the most popular mapping apps cataloguing ‘yellow’ versus ‘blue’ shops, the number of newly listed ‘yellow’ shops grew the fastest through the end of 2020 at just over 5,000, slowing thereafter. By early 2022, the number had climbed to nearly 6,000, but growing repression had already seen many forced to take down slogans and remove pro-movement items and books from shelves.⁸³ By 2023, some of the most prominent pro-movement shops and petty capitalists had begun to defect for the sake of remaining in business.⁸⁴

This failed drive to construct some sort of supporting infrastructure within the commercial sphere was representative of the more general deadlock of the movement itself. In broad terms, the Yellow Economic Circle symbolised the weakness of liberal and localist faith in the power of commerce. By trying to build up small businesses, the movement was diverted from deepening its own disruption of the economy. The shift to the commercial sphere there-

82 Shen, Simon 19 May 2020 ‘How the Yellow Economic Circle Can Revolutionise Hong Kong’, *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-the-yellow-economic-circle-can-revolutionise-hong-kong/>

83 Lee, Peter 12 June 2022 ‘“They haven’t gone away”: 3 years on, Hong Kong’s pro-democracy “yellow economy” has paled, but support remains’, *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/06/12/they-havent-gone-away-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-yellow-economy-remains-even-if-support-for-it-has-paled/>

84 Chan, Kahon 22 March 2023 ‘Hong Kong 47: AbouThai founder cuts ties with “yellow economic circle” as he vows to support city, nation’, *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3214471/hong-kong-47-abouthai-founder-cuts-ties-yellow-economic-circle-he-vows-support-city-nation>

'non-essential' staff, roughly 7,000 workers took part.⁷⁸ The strike also received widespread popular support, with surveys by the Public Opinion Research Institute showing some 60 percent support among a random sample of Hong Kongers.⁷⁹

Within international reporting, the strike would be portrayed as a noble effort to stop the spread of the pandemic and ensure adequate protections for medical workers. But the union itself initially stressed the political dimensions of the issue popular with localists, first calling for uncompromising border closures to keep out mainlanders and only later emphasising the wider range of demands, such as workplace safety. Many participants made the chauvinistic and racist undertones explicit, as when one participating nurse gave her own argument for the border closures: 'All of the Chinese always tell lies and cross over into Hong Kong, and they can spread the virus.'⁸⁰ Comments such as this expressed a more general sentiment that had taken hold as the pandemic spread. During that same week, two small bombs were discovered on a train headed for the border and, after being discovered by subway staff, a pro-movement Telegram channel claimed responsibility, explaining that the planned bombing was an attempt to scare mainlanders from crossing the border, accusing them of 'spreading disease.' The authors of the post issued a warning: 'We will defend our city. You're welcome to experience the power of the bombs.'⁸¹

Even more underwhelming was the turn to the commercial sphere. Among the stranger scenes I experienced in November was that of meeting some old friends in a bar in Mong Kok while small skirmishes with the police played out at nearby intersections. When the tear gas began to waft in too heavily or police began an approach, the staff would merely draw down the garage-style metal security door, temporarily locking everyone inside, where business proceeded as usual. Throughout the course of the movement, it was common for fleeing protestors to be rescued by sympathetic businesses in this fashion, providing one of many methods whereby they were able to melt back into the dense urban fabric. At its most developed, attempts to build up this sort of pro-movement sentiment within the commercial sphere eventually evolved into

⁷⁸ Tsui and Chan 2021.

⁷⁹ McLaughlin, Timothy 6 February 2020 'Democracy Drives Labour in a Hyper-Capitalist City', *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/unions-hong-kong-protest-coronavirus/606136/>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Cheng, Kris 3 February 2020 'Two homemade bombs found at Lo Wu MTR station train, Hong Kong police say', *Hong Kong Free Press*. <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/02/03/two-homemade-bombs-found-lo-wu-mtr-station-train-hong-kong-police-say/>

Often, the impact is only evident in the aftermath. Once the most volatile elements of the uprising have had their doors kicked down and been herded into their prison cells, the remainder pack up and go home, imagining it to all have been a resounding defeat. And of course it is. But, at the same time, previously unspeakable political positions have suddenly become commonplace. Think, for example, of how topics like 'mass incarceration' were once the exclusive purview of a few academics and several small Marxist study groups, before popular struggles rendered them broadly visible. In fact, for Tronti, this impact is precisely why the 'froth' of proletarian antagonism can ultimately, via its defeat, serve as a developmental force for capital. Thus, Tronti points to the massive and violent strikes that rocked the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, noting how, despite being driven forward and knit together by the efforts of organisations that retained at least some commitment to revolution, could ultimately serve to reform the mechanisms of capitalist governance. Though these strikes were, on average, defeated, they nonetheless forced the absorption of working-class demands into day-to-day governance precisely because these demands were universalised through the action of a 'massive minority' of militant workers. More importantly, this reshaping of the political landscape also helps to sculpt the very social environment that is among the causal factors in uprisings – implying that every event, although defeated, can help to create the very conditions conducive to its resurrection in a subsequent event of larger scale.

5 Parties of Action

After all, social domination will continually generate rebellion against it. Spurred on by material conditions, masses of people will always be attracted to concrete acts of disruption, sacrifice, and service in the name of something more than this darkling world. Marx periodically referred to this undercurrent of class struggle as the 'party in the broad historical sense,' which serves as the basic substrate on which more intentional political organisation arises.⁴⁸ The 'historical party' is thus the name for the repeated regeneration of political subjectivity by the conflictual reproduction of capitalist society itself. At any given moment, this historical party both expresses the contours of the given terrain

⁴⁸ The concept is latent in many of Marx's political writings. But it is perhaps most explicit in a letter written to Ferdinand Freiligrath in 1860, where Marx distinguishes the historic concept of the party from any empirical association with a single formal organisation such as the Communist League: 'I have tried to dispel the misunderstanding arising out of

from which it emerged and reshapes that terrain through its very emergence, creating a new ground for new iterations of the same process to continue in the future. Thus, the gains won by the strike wave of the 1920s and 1930s in the US, studied by Tronti, become part of the extant situation shaping the postwar strike waves in Italy, with which Tronti sought to engage.

Since social domination is fundamentally rooted in power over the productive process, this also means that the character of political subjectivity in any given place and time is also conditioned by the changing character of productive subjectivity – which itself shapes the specific forms of knowledge and particular image of the world held by individuals via the various relationships that they have to the process of production. However, the transitive dynamic at play here is not so much deterministic as probabilistic, with exposure to certain types of work and unemployment posing different questions of power and subsistence that then make different forms of political action seem more or less ‘natural’ or effective. This then shapes the political potentials visible to people in the first place. But transitivity also goes both ways. Since subjectivation is an ongoing process of struggle, its extant baseline can then be changed through the emergence of more intensive and intentional forms of political organisation, which help to breach the constraints imposed by the common sense of our productive subjectivity, making the machinations of the property system visible in a broader perspective and posing entirely different terms for the building of political power. In this way, the seemingly natural political conclusions drawn by the utopian socialists of the early workers’ movement gradually gave way to more mature political movements in a long process of practical failures followed by polemical defeats, as more organised socialist parties attempted to make sense of and move beyond the dead-ends they had inherited.

Today, we are left with little inheritance at all. The defeat of the global communist revolutions appears, to us, much as the defeat of the radical republican revolutions in the eighteenth century must have to those in the early workers’ movement: as little more than romantic ruins seen from afar. But even if we find ourselves in an era of diminished political organisation, we are nonetheless also in a period of rising political potential. The vitality of the historical party waxes and wanes over time – a process conditioned by both large-scale structural transformations of capitalist society and the contingent outcomes of ongoing social conflicts. Hong Kong’s civil society culture emerged in a period

functional constituencies. These include a ‘Labour’ constituency that draws its votes from all members of formally registered unions, as well as a range of professional constituencies, many of which directly overlap with the sectors targeted for unionisation. For example, the four largest constituencies with the most votes are: ‘Education,’ with the largest base, composed of a range of teachers, principals, university representatives and other full-time academic staff; ‘Medical and Health Services,’ the second largest, covering most medical workers; ‘Accountancy,’ the third largest, in which all certified public accountants get a vote; and ‘Social Welfare,’ the fourth largest, covering all social workers. Thus, the new unions were primarily ‘seen as an extension of the political movement and as a voting bloc to secure elected positions in the legislature,’ rather than as organs for building power directly.⁷⁶

In response to this strategy, the pro-establishment Federation of Trade Unions also began registering hundreds of new unions over the course of 2020, making it difficult to approximate exactly how fast the pro-movement unions were growing.⁷⁷ In fact, by largely failing to engage in workplace issues or put forward broader struggles over the cost of living, many of the new unions had already been struggling to even retain the members that had signed up in the final months of 2019, even before repression intensified in the summer of 2020. Meanwhile, rather than increasing, economic conflicts actually declined throughout this period, with the prospect of a more successful general strike receding despite the on-paper growth of the new unions. As political pressure intensified and the electoral strategy collapsed, affiliation with a union was soon turned into a liability. By the end of 2021, most had disbanded or were effectively defunct.

The sole strike carried out by the new unions was itself symbolic of the more general predicament. Conducted by the Hong Kong Authority Employees Alliance – representing medical workers employed by the city’s public hospitals, clinics and other medical institutions – the strike was held in February of 2020 in response to the government’s refusal to fully seal the border with the mainland during the first few months of the coronavirus outbreak. Particularly notable was the fact that membership in the union had skyrocketed after it had issued a public call to strike, growing ‘from 300 members in December 2019 – two months after its launch – to 10,000 by the end of January’ at which point it included some ‘20 percent of the city’s public medical sector employees.’ Even though the five-day strike was limited to

the impression that by “party” I meant a “League” that expired eight years ago, or an editorial board that was disbanded twelve years ago. By party, I meant the party in the broad historical sense’ (Marx 2010, p. 80). The concept was then developed in a more formal fashion by Bordiga (2020, p. 482) and Camatte (1974).

⁷⁶ Lin 2021.

⁷⁷ Pringle 2021, p. 135.

the high profile of the HKCTU, with a discrepancy between the high-level political engagement of the confederation and the weakness of worker power at the grassroots level.⁷⁰ This substitutionism was precisely what had hampered the dockworkers strike in 2013.⁷¹ It was difficult to see, then, how the emergence of new unions along the same lines would help to bolster the power of the uprising, rather than rein it in.

The new unions also tended to be concentrated in white collar and professional sectors rather than among the city's many low-wage service workers. This mirrored participation in the earlier 'general strikes,' with surveys of participants revealing that 'over 72 per cent ... were bringing home more than the Hong Kong median wage ... and 82 per cent had received some form of higher education.'⁷² Toward the end of the year, a new 'HK On Strike' alliance formed, bringing together a loose network of 43 unions representing 'civil servants, medical workers, finance industry employees, engineers, and speech therapists.'⁷³ Other unions formed among engineers, graphic designers, railway workers, and hotel staff. These unions expressed their support for the movement by signing joint petitions, holding flash mobs, and joining demonstrations, but were rarely large enough to strike. This is not to say that economic issues were not acknowledged within the movement. In fact, during the first and largest of the 'general strikes' in August, a survey among participants revealed that '89 per cent ... agreed with the view that working hours in Hong Kong were too long, 94 per cent ... agreed with the view that the gap between rich and poor was unfair, and 97 per cent agreed that the Hong Kong government privileged big corporations over ordinary people.'⁷⁴ However, while HK On Strike 'aimed to unionise 10 percent of workers in each sector' in order to 'provide a collective voice on political, labour, and economic issues' and even 'initiate a "real" general strike in the future,' it ultimately fell far short of this goal. Most new union activity remained centred on the same relatively higher-paid, better-educated sectors as before.⁷⁵

In part, the growth of the new labour movement was stunted because its energy was directed toward ulterior motives. Rather than aiming mainly at industrial action, the unionisation drive was, from its outset, also intended to ensure that pro-movement forces would gain a larger share of votes within the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Chan, et al. 2019.

⁷² Pringle 2021, p. 134.

⁷³ Tsui and Chan 2021.

⁷⁴ Pringle 2021, p. 134.

⁷⁵ Tsui and Chan 2021.

of waning global struggle and ascendant accumulation, when the communist movement was in its darkest eclipse. The forms of political organisation that had once structured that movement were in ruins and the once-proud political subjectivity of the old orthodoxy had shattered into a crumbling mosaic of slivering sects staffed by sad, splenetic zealots. In this context, the 'new social movements' of the social action faction appeared to carry with them precisely the grassroots vitality that the crumbling orthodoxy (represented in Hong Kong by the Maoists) had come to lack. Similarly, the new organisational models offered by civil society were attractive precisely because of their contrast with stultified sects bogged down in procedure and polemics.

But, sometime after the turn of the century, the falling tide slowed, paused, and then began to reverse. Spattered riots and occupations from Buenos Aires to Oaxaca to Paris to Athens to Bangkok signalled the stirring of the long-sleeping party. Then came Badiou's 'rebirth of history,' as insurrections spread across North Africa, riotous strikes rocked the factory districts of the Pearl River Delta, and public squares were occupied across Europe and North America. Though individual struggles would spark and sputter – usually fading out, sometimes triggering military intervention or degenerating into gruesome civil wars and NATO interventions – the overall cadence of global class conflict had undergone an undeniable change. At the empirical level, the shift is easily measurable in various datasets that track social conflict and strike activity at the global scale.⁴⁹ And yet the transformation is also so obvious that it eludes any simple description, existing as something closer to an intuition. In part, this is because the historical party awakened to find that its long hibernation had both caused and been caused by the world-shaking defeat and subsequent ruin of the communist movement that had once been rooted in it. Political subjectivity had therefore fallen back to its baseline. And this is why so many thinkers likened the uprisings of the early 2010s to the inchoate revolutions of 1848 in Europe – events which were in retrospect the first stirrings of the modern socialist movement but, at the time, expressed themselves in vague populist terms, and proved completely unprepared for the repressive response of the ruling class.

⁴⁹ It can, for example, be charted by using general news-aggregation data from the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), by using data from the Global Social Protest Research Group at Johns Hopkins, by combining country- or language-specific datasets, such as strike trackers in the US (for example, the ILR Labour Action Tracker) and China (China Labour Bulletin Strikes Map, and data collected by the Wickedonna group), or even by using more conventional datasets tracking open armed conflict, such as the ACLED conflict index.

The resurrection of the historical party over the course of the 2010s was therefore defined not by any single struggle or tactic (i.e. 'riots' versus 'strikes') and was not encoded in the emergence of any particular forms of organisation but was instead visible in a series of interrelated trends, which together offer the best summary: the generalisation of some degree of social upheaval across international boundaries, the increased frequency at which new struggles emerged, the degree to which the very visibility of these struggles was able to trigger similar conflicts elsewhere, and the new intensities that any given upheaval was able to reach. Tactically, the only consistency to these events was the very loose sense in which, given general trends in deindustrialisation, they tended to take as their targets the state (namely, its standing army of police) and any visible outposts of circulation (shopping centres, financial districts, etc.), rather than productive infrastructure, thereby reviving the importance of tactics such as riots, blockades, and occupations, which had been more common to struggles in the early history of capitalism, prior to the advent of modern industry. Regardless of the exact tactics, however, the vitality of the historical party ultimately lies in its insatiable drive to exceed the scope of any single subsistence struggle and its general inability to pass beyond 'immediate' issues of survival and resistance. Though this appears as a 'demandlessness' or even a nihilism – and it often is – individual struggles tend to actually overflow with individual demands deriving from such divergent sources and aimed at such distinct goals that they can only cohere through their shared rejection of the present order. The historical party is therefore an 'antepolitical' stage of subjectivation or perhaps the preface to political subjectivity as such. It is the question of organisation, asked again and again until some segment of the class attempts to answer.

Often, this antepolitical sentiment is expressed as nothing more than a loose agreement that the current regime must fall. Rather than unifying behind a political platform with clear objectives, then, these struggles therefore subsist and propagate through simple, reproducible symbols. Torino and Wohlleben call these symbols 'memes with force.' In 2018, the yellow vest became the prototypical example:

A meme does not necessarily alter the *content* of a struggle. In France, for instance, the catalyzing factors are without a doubt eminently familiar social pressures, such as the rising cost of living, diminishing social mobility, cuts to public services, a triumphant neoliberal government who spits in the eyes of the working poor, etc. What the meme of the Yellow Vest offers is a malleable *form* within which this content can assume the force of an intervention. Within every political struggle there is a minimal form-

Civic Party, where Alvin Yeung assumed the chairmanship from Alan Leong, an aging politician who had run for Chief Executive on the democratic ticket in 2007. Figures such as Yeung helped to bridge the gap between the older pan-democrats and the younger generation of liberals without fully endorsing the more extreme politics of the latter.

On the other hand, established pan-democratic figures such as Benny Tai – responsible for the original call to 'Occupy Central with Peace and Love' in 2014 – had toned down their earlier emphasis on civility and begun to put together a series of plans intended to mobilise the popular momentum to guarantee back-to-back electoral majorities. The first of these was 'Project Storm,' through which Tai designed the cross-party coordination mechanism and an overall strategy that had allowed the pan-democrats to win their landslide in the District Council elections. This, in turn, would give them over 100 additional seats on the Election Committee, which selects the Chief Executive.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, as street actions began to wane into the winter, the general strikes gave way to a proliferation of newly founded social movement unions spanning the service sector. Though seemingly novel, this move in fact represented a return to established civil society practices, albeit at a new scale and with renewed vitality. Even though many of these new unions refused to affiliate with the HKCTU itself, they nonetheless emulated the same basic model. After all, the confederation and its affiliates had not only emerged from the same social movement milieu as the pan-democrats – collaborating in their electoral schemes via its own Labour Party – but had also formed in 1990 and therefore 'found itself operating in a largely post-industrial economy ...' As a result, rather than tracing their heritage to mass manufacturing, Hong Kong's 'stronger worker organisations were instead white-collar, professional, and public-sector unions,' and it was for this very reason that '[t]he HKCTU and its allies developed a tradition of social movement unionism in which the lack of workplace-based power was compensated by the mobilization of social groups or solidarity action and public pressure.'⁶⁹ But this also reproduced a common failure of civil society organising, in which the work of NGOs, student groups, paid union staff and other specialised activists would become an increasingly necessary substitute for the non-activity of workers themselves: 'Union activity and mobilisation at the workplace level did not always match

68 Lam, Jeffie 30 April 2017 'Hong Kong Occupy co-founder Benny Tai unveils "Project Storm" to win more district council seats for pan-democrats', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2091875/hong-kong-occupy-co-founder-benny-tai-unveils-project-storm>

69 Lin 2021.

12.3 percent in the same period.⁶⁶ As the first election to occur after the initiation of the protests, it was widely seen as a referendum on the movement.

In the end, pro-establishment parties received the largest defeat in history, losing 96 of their seats, including those held by prominent incumbents such as Junius Ho. Parties affiliated with the democrats gained absolute majorities in all districts, tripling their seats from 124 to 388 (out of 479 total seats, 452 of which were directly elected). Maybe the most significant aspect of the election, however, was how it signalled the gradual return of the pan-democratic old guard to the forefront of politics, now alongside the localists. On the one hand, the localist parties performed well in the election. Civic Passion, for example, received some 14,326 votes, up from just over 3,000 in 2015; Tsz Wan Shan Constructive Power won 10,160 votes, compared to 3,633 in 2015; and the Tuen Mun Community Network (which had slowly shifted from more explicit localism to a sort of liberal-localist hybrid) won just over 20,000 votes, compared to 5,196 in 2015. But most of the losses suffered by pro-establishment forces came at the hands of the established liberal parties. Altogether, Tuen Mun Community and Civic Passion only won .69 and .49 percent of the total votes, respectively. In contrast, the Democratic Party won 362,275 votes (12.36 percent of the total), compared to 196,068 in 2015. Meanwhile, the Civic Party almost tripled its share, from 52,346 in 2015 to 141,713 in 2019.⁶⁷

Though the general upswing in popular protest guaranteed that the most established of the anti-establishment figures would see some increase in support, the return of the pan-democrats cannot be attributed to this alone. Instead, the old guard of civil society had themselves been transformed under the pressure of the localists and the younger liberals. Many pan-democratic parties had at least partially adopted the aesthetics and policy elements of the localist program, a trend already visible in the emergence of parties such as the Neo Democrats, who added anti-immigration measures to their platform, performed well in the 2015 elections, and even obtained the seat of disqualified localist Baggio Leung in a by-election in 2018. Elsewhere, leadership was transferred to a slightly younger generation of pan-democrats, as in the

66 Lam, Jeffie 16 November 2019 'Voter registration spikes in Hong Kong amid protests', *Inkstone News*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200514115233/https://www.inkstonenews.com/politics/hong-kong-protests-youth-voter-registration-spikes-amid-anti-government-unrest/article/3021139>

67 Election figures come from the official government reports, available at the Hong Kong elections government website and summarised on the respective Wikipedia entries for each election. The 2019 figures are available here: <https://www.elections.gov.hk/dc2019/eng/results.html>; and the 2015 figures are available here: <https://data.gov.hk/en-data/data-set/hk-reo-reopsisior-election-result-dc-2015dce>.

alization; to this extent, the meme reopens the basic question of the Party, and offers what is perhaps the minimal basis for organizing a force of rupture in the twenty-first century. The fluidity of the meme makes it possible to join a march, a blockade or a roundabout occupation without having to buy into the 'common interest' or the legitimizing 'beliefs' of a movement. It does not solve, but simply defers the question of a common grammar of suffering to a later point.⁵⁰

The very fluidity of the symbol therefore allows it to become a vehicle for action, imbuing the meme with an almost-magical power to construct new political subjectivities upward from the sightless, seething waters of the historical party. When a meme takes on such force it thereby becomes more than a mere meme – understood as the somewhat modular name for a fluid and reproducible symbol – and instead becomes a *sigil*. It obtains an occult power of attraction that enables the symbol to sculpt social substances that are otherwise inaccessible. Sigils thereby become the initial waypoints around which organisation is drawn upward from the surging tide of history.

Over the course of the 2010s, the momentum of the historical party only seemed to grow. Hong Kong was no exception. It was, however, an illustration of the structural limits that fetter such struggles, aggravated in this case by the region's Cold War history and the particularly strong separation imposed between the urban core and its industrial hinterland across the border. In such a context, localists and liberals had a pre-determined advantage. Because of their uncompromising focus on action rather than well-meaning discourse – contra the pan-democrats – the localists proved particularly capable of exploiting this advantage and amplifying their initially marginal influence. Here the work of Chin Wan was again prophetic. Against the established pan-democratic theme of 'peace and justice,' Chin emphasised motifs of 'courage' and 'heroism,' which were subsequently embodied in the brazen actions of the small group of localists who had led the assault on the LegCo. Though the window-smashing was condemned by the city's conventional left, the action itself spoke louder than any pan-democratic bullhorn. Soon, localist groups committed to similarly 'courageous' acts were springing up across the city, taking on practical tasks within local subsistence struggles and building out social bases among the most receptive segments of small businesspeople and petty professionals living in the cheaper housing complexes on the urban fringe.

50 Torino and Wohleben 2019.

In other words, rather than attempting to recruit others by simply advertising their positions and arguing out their program, they sought to build power directly. Within military theory, this process is understood as a struggle for ‘competitive control’ over an open field of social conflict. In such a struggle, groups ‘don’t become strong because people support their ideology; on the contrary, people start supporting a given group’s ideology in places where that group is *already* strong.’⁵¹ In such a context, political partisanship is defined first and foremost by what kind of actions are taken in the face of chaotic, rapid-fire struggles that exceed the conventional coordinates of the social movement. As Torino and Wohlleben argue, we must therefore speak of ‘radical actions, not radical actors.’ Similarly, politics does not descend down into the mind from the lofted heights of the political platform but instead percolates upward from mass activity itself. Rather than the platform, politics is therefore driven by an oath to action. Formal parties – the name for any group, whether makeshift or systematic, that is consciously addressing and attempting to overcome the limits to a struggle – cohere out of a shared commitment to acting together in fidelity to the political potentials opened by the conflict. Organisations are therefore appendages to action, not the other way around.

In the initial movement from riot to insurrection, this is precisely why formal parties that disavow their formal aspect, operating as ‘informal organizations,’ tend to prove most effective, while large, formal organisations tend to flounder. As Bonanno explains:

There must be areas in your own situations where tensions are being generated. Contact with these situations, if it continues on an ideological basis, will end up having you pushed out. Contact must be on a different basis, organised but different. This cannot be done by any large organization with its traditionally illuministic or romantic claim to serve as a point of reference and synthesis in a host of different situations; it can only be done by an organization that is agile, flexible and able to adapt.⁵²

In Hong Kong, what existed of the left remained largely consistent with the pan-democratic approach, making ‘illuministic or romantic’ claims to provide a platform that could serve to synthesise the demands of the excluded. And, of course, this synthesis was rejected by the excluded themselves, who rightfully saw it as a stifling and demobilising imposition from outside.

⁵¹ Kilcullen 2013, p. 125.

⁵² Bonanno 1988, p. 25.

7 Civil Society Strikes Back

In retrospect, November was likely the peak of the movement, bringing together a series of decisive events that set the trajectory of the uprising toward its slow unwinding. This decline was guaranteed not simply by rising repression, nor by the sudden outbreak of the pandemic a couple of months later – though both, of course, played important roles – but ironically by the very success the movement had enjoyed in garnering public support. The ‘three strikes’ actions helped to demonstrate this popularity, as the semi-paralysis of the city over the course of multiple days saw widespread support despite the disruption. The demonstrations in support of the besieged PolyU protestors also illustrated how the radical actions of black bloc protestors on the frontlines had come to be seen not as the separate activities of a radical minority but instead as a crucial component of a variegated but continuous body of protest rooted in a broad popular base. This ultimately resulted in the gradual dissolution of old ideological divides between ‘violence’ and ‘non-violence,’ with different activities taken on in context of a complex social struggle increasingly seen to play complementary roles. In June, only 38 percent of respondents had agreed that “‘radical tactics’” were useful in making the state listen to protestors’ demands.⁶⁴ But that number had increased to 62 percent by September. Similarly, by autumn, ‘over 90% of participants agreed with the statement that “Bringing peaceful and militant actions together is the most effective way to get results.”’⁶⁵ This knowledge was materialised in widely-distributed slogans emphasising this variegated unity – ‘no divisions, no renunciations, no betrayals,’ ‘each fighting in our own way, we climb the mountain together,’ ‘the peaceful and the brave are indivisible, we rise and fall together’ – as well as in memes illustrating the various roles that could be taken on by demonstrators in the midst of a protest.

Popular support was also visible in the electoral realm. The District Council election held shortly after the end of the PolyU Siege saw record voter turnout and resulted in a landslide victory for democratic candidates. Though District Council seats were normally dominated by pro-establishment parties, years of preparation by both liberals and localists had seen a massive expansion in voter registration, especially among the young. Roughly 380,000 people registered in the year prior to the election and the number of those aged 18–35 increased by

⁶⁴ Chuang 8 June 2020 ‘Welcome to the Frontlines: Beyond Violence and Non-Violence,’ *Chuang Blog*. <https://chuangcn.org/2020/06/frontlines/>

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

overcoming the limits of both non-stop street action and further attempts to forcibly occupy territory, these mostly proved to be a return to the depoliticising conventions of pan-democratic electoralism and the well-trod path of social movement organising. Very loosely, we might identify three or four major dimensions to the trend. The first was electoral, building on years of work by pan-democrats struggling to outpace localist competitors. The second was broadly rooted in civil society and, specifically, within the rising tide of social movement unionism. And the third focused on consumption and commerce, visible in the emergence of a 'yellow economic circle' of pro-movement businesses. However, if these three trends defined the momentum of the majority, the movement's slow decline also stimulated a small minority toward increasingly extreme and even terroristic action, which composed a fourth aspect of the unsolvable puzzle that the movement now found itself faced with.⁶²

Despite their differences, all four dimensions of the decline were ultimately united by their mutual refusal to push the struggle toward certain terrains of conflict precluded by the zealous liberalism that had served as the movement's default political consciousness. Most importantly (and despite agitation by a far-left minority), both the actual economic base of the city – as a logistical and financial entrepôt – and any attempt to reach into its industrial hinterland across the border were *de facto* off limits. Over the preceding five years, crack-downs against labour organisers across the border and the gradual adoption of localist themes had seen even prominent pan-democrats turn their attention away from the mainland. Meanwhile, among the strangest facets of the movement was the fact that, despite widespread blockades of subways, thoroughfares, and even the airport, it never once sought to shut down the Port of Hong Kong. Similarly, although a number of new unions were formed across the city, very little attention was given to the very logistics and construction workers who had led the longest and most militant strikes in recent history (the port strike in 2013, and a barbenders strike in 2007). Even those who turned to adventurist terrorism chose relatively anodyne targets. The members of a group calling itself 'Returning Valiant' were alleged to have formulated a plan to bomb courtrooms, tunnels, subway lines, and trash cans distributed throughout the city, completely ignoring key infrastructures of economic power, such as the stock exchange.⁶³

62 In at least one instance (that of the group Returning Valiant, founded by highschoolers), bombing plans were formulated by a semi-formal organisation. But most cases involved only one or two individuals, taking on the familiar character of informal 'lone wolf' attacks.

63 Ni, Vincent 6 July 2021 'Hong Kong police say nine arrested over alleged bomb plot,' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/06/hong-kong-police-say-nine-arrested-alleged-bomb-plot>

Only the far-right were able to manoeuvre around this conundrum, flexibly providing a series of tactical interventions able to provide consistency to the series of political events pockmarking the decade and thereby intensifying each in turn. Thus, although the right benefited from the fact that structural trends had predisposed the general populace toward localist talking points, this alone cannot account for their success. It was their practical activity first within the Umbrella Movement and then in its aftermath – especially in places such as the New Territories, where they came to the aid of embattled villagers, disgruntled professionals, and an entire generation of disillusioned youth – that gave the localists the edge in the struggle for 'competitive control.' Through a combination of courageous street actions, local service provision, intensive network-building, and ongoing propaganda efforts, the localists were thereby able to amplify their power well beyond their own small numbers. This was possible because of the productive tension forged between their otherwise limited agency and the extant ground from which it emerged. The events of 2019 certainly had a straightforward series of social causes. Over the previous decade, the 'mainlandization of the economy [had driven] a wedge between its beneficiaries (the older propertied class) and its victims (unpropertied youngsters) ...'⁵³ But this content was only able to take on a political force through the memetic forms that had emerged from localist activity. Their success in this regard was visible in the rapid growth of their own formal parties and, even more so, in the way that the liberals and leftists were forced to tail after them, not only abandoning 'peace and justice' for similar themes of 'heroism' and 'courage' but even gradually adopting the entire visual language of the far-right itself, which would soon come to constitute the fundamental sigils of the ensuing insurrection.

Throughout, the details of the localist program remained undeveloped. When confronted about how, exactly, an independent Hong Kong would operate, given that the city was so economically dependent on the mainland, localists could offer no coherent plan other than vague references to the 'free port' or the saving grace of the US or UK. Most who attempted to think through the consequences of independence would soon conclude that there was no other choice but something like a protracted guerilla war – eventually turning the most extreme factions of the far-right toward increasingly terroristic activity as mass protests in 2019–20 were ground down by the dual blow of police repression and the outbreak of the pandemic – or some sort of *deus ex machina* dreamed up by the more idiotic of the city's liberals, in which Trump would slap

53 Hung 2022b, p. 187.

sanctions China and send in the seventh fleet to defend Hong Kong without, somehow, triggering a new world war in the process. By 2019, this latter hope would even see young liberals waving American flags and grovelling at the feet of right-wing US politicians like Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley.

For most, though, the desire for independence was little more than the vague and impossible idea that Hong Kong could enter the interstate system as a country like any other while somehow retaining its ties of trade and finance with the mainland. Basic questions of production and economic power were almost entirely ignored. In fact, this willing ignorance was one of the few factors truly shared between all the different localist currents. In one particularly laughable moment, a friend asked a young localist how an independent Hong Kong would get food supplies – obviously, nearly all the food consumed in the city is imported, often from the mainland – to which the localist gestured toward a series of small organic farms in the New Territories, none of which were capable of producing enough to feed a single residential building, much less one of the world's largest cities. In other words, the coherence or reasoned character of the localist program had essentially no influence on the political success of localist positions. Meanwhile, even the older faction of distinctly Hong Kong capitalists such as Li Ka-shing would mostly keep quiet about the political unrest, since they understood perfectly well their *de facto* dependence on the engine of accumulation across the border. Had there been any other option, there would have been a legitimate risk of rebellion among at least some of the city's elite. But none ever materialised.

6 Be Water

It is 2019 and I am watching a fire kindle in the middle of one of Hong Kong's busiest streets. Someone had tried to ignite a trashcan outside Prince Edward Station, but it was just barely smouldering. Tendrils of dark smoke rich with the incense of burning plastic reach up toward the fading neon sky. Nearby, a crowd of youths are hurling bricks and insults down from a pedestrian overpass toward a police line moving slowly up the thoroughfare. As a language, Cantonese is not simply rich in curses but embroidered in them. Behind me, another squadron of riot police sweeps in to clear one of Mong Kok's major intersections, shining spotlights toward the small crowd of protestors pushing back from the edges. The spotlights have a surreal effect, turning the armoured bodies of the police into mere shadows moving behind a veil of white, as if the intersection has been cut out of the fabric of the city entirely. The rest of us are left to move in the darkness left behind.

officer – but also saw demonstrators begin to amass outside the police cordon in an attempt to break through to free the besieged protestors. This second group rained Molotov cocktails down on the cordon and coordinated a series of offensive charges, to which police responded with tear gas, water cannons, and mass arrests. In the end, the siege stretched on for over a week, devolving into a war of attrition. Protestors inside the university were starved of supplies and slowly worn down. Some fled through storm drains, some were captured, others surrendered.

Overall, the Siege of PolyU resulted in the largest concentration of arrests in the entire uprising. In subsequent years, the siege would therefore be a recurring source of new prosecutions (usually on riot charges), resulting in a series of lengthy prison sentences. The siege was also significant insofar as demonstrators were forced to abandon, or at least evolve, the 'Be Water' strategy that had dominated the protests up to that point, in which protestors had explicitly refused to attempt to take and hold space against the police. Partially inspired by the quagmire of the Umbrella Movement's mass occupations, 'Be Water' tactics served multiple functions. Most importantly, the strategy inverted the roles of police and protestors. Rather than protestors seizing mostly symbolic corners of public space, converting them into a 'big stage' from which the messaging of the movement could be amplified, and then being forced out by police, 'Be Water' forced police themselves to take and hold space against the adaptive assaults of demonstrators who, when confronted, seemed able to melt back into the urban fabric at will. Protestors were able to erect blockades at multiple points in the city with minimal effort, while the government was then forced to commit time and effort to resolidify the city's suddenly fluid cartography. The siege then reversed these roles again, marking an inadvertent regression toward less developed and more easily defeated tactics of territorial protest.

Ultimately, the attrition of the protestors inside the campus also proved symbolic, insofar as it seemed to echo the gradual burnout being experienced by demonstrators more generally. Already drained from months of non-stop political activity, the turn to even more intense mobilisation across multiple fields of social conflict began to take a toll. The occupation itself seemed to have been induced, at least in part, by the desire to settle in somewhere and stop the ceaseless motion of day-to-day mobilisation. This suggested that certain tactical limits of the 'Be Water' strategy had been reached without any new practices able to further compose the movement immediately evident.

In the aftermath of the strike and the siege, many sought to step back, hoping to build more sustainable models for political power over the long term. Though initially posed as attempts at organisational adaptation capable of

ors responded by vandalising pro-Beijing businesses and shutting down the subway system. Then, in early November, a black-clad student fell from the third storey of a car park while protestors were clashing with police nearby, with many suspecting that he had fallen while fleeing from the tear gas, and some paranoid that he had, in fact, been pushed by the police (this was soon disproven, but the rumour continued to spread). The death triggered another general strike, this time accompanied by a citywide traffic blockade, which saw even more violent confrontations – including yet another instance in which police fired live rounds at protestors.

Over the previous months, calls had been made for traditional strike activity to evolve into a ‘three strikes’ campaign (recalling that originally proposed in the wake of Tiananmen but then abandoned), which would pair workplace walkouts with a targeted consumer boycott and the closure of sympathetic businesses. The general strike beginning on 11 November was the first instance in which the basic strategy began to be implemented, albeit in a circumscribed fashion. Work stoppages remained limited in scope. However, they were not only accompanied by boycotts and a few shop closures but now also blockades of major thoroughfares and the subway system, essentially paralyzing portions of the city. Particularly notable features of the November strike included the enthusiastic involvement of office workers in the central business district and the success of protestors in the suburbs in shutting down the subway system, preventing many from commuting into the city for work in the first place.⁶¹

Larger and more frequent protests also began to occur on university campuses, with student unions shifting into a mode of total mobilisation. Barricades were erected at Hong Kong Baptist University, and other campuses throughout the city saw running battles with police. Then, on 17 November, one of these demonstrations evolved into a full-on siege, as protestors occupied the campus of Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) and blockaded the Cross-Harbour Tunnel linking Hong Kong Island to Kowloon – one of the city’s most important thoroughfares. The siege would not only see the erection of extensive fortifications by the embattled protestors on campus, who met police advances with increasingly forceful measures – including one soon-to-be-famous case in which a protestor shot an arrow through the calf of a police

city increased. In the summer of 2022, he was caught attempting to flee to Taiwan and imprisoned for the next year, finally pleading guilty to contempt of court, rioting, and assault on an officer in April of 2023.

61 Ruckus, Ralf 18 November 2019 “Saam Baa” in Hong Kong – Three Strikes Paralyze the City’, *Nao Qingchu*. <https://nqch.org/2019/11/18/saam-baa-in-hong-kong-three-strikes-paralyze-the-city/>

In that moment, the abrasive character of the bright white light is itself symbolic. Over the course of the 2010s, one of the many symbols of Hong Kong’s alleged death was the slow disappearance of the city’s distinctive neon signage, widely seen to be a unique form of cultural heritage. As these signs were gradually replaced by cheaper LEDs, many Hong Kongers bemoaned the change as a sort of symbolic conquest, mirroring the influx of mainland capital and literally recasting the cityscape to resemble the cold-lit glitter of newly risen urban centres like Shenzhen. In contrast, the protestors are clad in black, pockmarked with warm yellow helmets and red flares sizzling in the shadows. Here and there, smoke bombs bloom like ink in water. On the edge of the intersection, people seem to emerge from everywhere at once, as if the very fabric of the city is alive against the alien intrusion of the police in their hypercube of LEDs. Protestors mill about in the middle of Nathan Road, indistinguishable from the pedestrians on the sidewalk. Graffiti covers every surface like a new skin layered on the old. In the space of only a few years, the long-banished spectre of the rabble had returned, backlit by a fading neon sky.

By then, the riots had been smouldering for months.⁵⁴ Similar to the mass mobilisations of the early 2000s that had catapulted the pan-democrats into leading positions within civil society, the 2019 unrest was triggered by ongoing attempts to legislate the anti-subversion and national security measures required by Article 23 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law, which is something like the mini-constitution laying out the city’s legal standards under the ‘one country, two systems’ paradigm, officially in place until 2047. While demonstrations in 2003 had been sparked by a particularly draconian version of the law, the 2019 protests were triggered when the LegCo was set to pass what should have seemingly been an uncontroversial amendment to the Fugitive Ordinance. The amendment was proposed to allow for the extradition of a Hong Kong man who had murdered his pregnant girlfriend in Taiwan and subsequently returned to the city, where he confessed to police. However, in the absence of a formal extradition treaty (which Hong Kong could not sign with Taiwan, given the unique political status of both islands) and with no general-purpose extradition law on the books, the police had no legal ability to send the man back to Taiwan to stand trial.

On its own, such an amendment would likely have garnered little opposition. However, the city’s pro-establishment ruling party seized on the issue to flesh out further elements of the long-unfinished Article 23 mandate, with

54 A concise but detailed timeline of events can be found in Anonymous 2021, pp. 69–70.

the proposed amendment not simply allowing for extradition to Taiwan or foreign territories but specifically giving the Chief Executive authority to approve extraditions on a case-by-case basis for an entire range of crimes. Of course, the most important feature was that the proposed law would include extraditions to the mainland. Ironically, one of the groups to initially voice opposition to the law were therefore the city's pro-business organisations, concerned that the amendment would be used to crack down on capital flight and other forms of tax evasion and illicit financing. But more vocal opposition came from civil society and the judicial sector, who pointed out that the law effectively circumvented the legal system and constituted a 'human rights violation' insofar as it would technically allow for activists who had fled the mainland to be extradited on political charges.

Thus, as pan-democratic lawmakers launched a filibuster campaign against the bill within the initial committee hearings, protests began to build up outside the Legislative Council Complex. In mid-June of 2019, hundreds of thousands surrounded the building, clashed with police, and successfully halted proceedings. In response, authorities declared the gathering a riot and forcefully cleared the area, tear gassing tens of thousands of individuals in one night.⁵⁵ Widely covered by local media, the confrontation then triggered a second round of protests against police brutality. At one of these subsequent protests, a man who had climbed up several stories of construction scaffolding to unfurl an anti-extradition banner fell to his death. The same day, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that the bill would be suspended. Despite this, the death only further invigorated the protests. On the following day, demonstrations again ballooned into the hundreds of thousands, with the dead protestor's slogans going on to form the basis of the 'five demands' that would serve as a central theme for the movement.⁵⁶ Even larger gatherings followed, peaking with the annual 1 July march, which likely reached half a million people. As the main 1 July event died down, a radical wing of protestors then successfully stormed the LegCo building, propping up a banner behind the speaker's podium that read 'there are no rioters, there's only tyranny.' Though denounced

55 SCMP Reporters 12 June 2019 'As it happened: Hong Kong police and extradition protesters renew clashes as tear gas flies', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3014104/thousands-block-roads-downtown-hong-kong-defiant-protest>

56 SCMP Reporters 16 June 2019 'As it happened: A historic day in Hong Kong concludes peacefully as organisers claim almost 2 million people came out in protest against the fugitive bill', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3014695/sea-black-hong-kong-will-march-against-suspended>

by the government, the action was cheered on by supporters of the movement. Thus, the very tactic that had proved so controversial in 2014 had, by 2019, become conventional.

After 1 July, protests permeated every corner of the city. Soon, conflicts with police were accompanied by clashes between protestors and anonymous thugs widely believed to be triad members aligned with the government. When one group of white-clad gangsters began indiscriminately attacking people (particularly anyone wearing black) at the Yuen Long metro station on 21 July, the police only arrived some 40 minutes later despite receiving thousands of calls reporting the incident. A week or so prior, pro-establishment LegCo member Junius Ho had called for the people of Yuen Long to 'wipe out' the protestors. After the attack he doubled down, claiming that the white-clad mob was just 'defending their home.'⁵⁷ The Yuen Long attack had the effect of eliminating any remaining faith in the police or the government, marking the point at which the movement began to win the support of an enormous portion of the city's population. Building on the momentum, a general strike was called in early August. While it fell far short of being truly 'general,' hundreds of thousands nonetheless joined from over 20 sectors and hundreds of flights were cancelled due to the participation of air traffic controllers.⁵⁸ Soon, the airport itself became a central theatre in the conflict, as protestors staged a three-day sit-in against police brutality, forcing the cancellation of even more flights. The strike also demonstrated the temporary outmanoeuvring of the HKCTU, which supported the action but 'on its own did not have the power to mobilise; rather, it required the disruptive power of a few determined unions and individual activists.'⁵⁹

Particularly violent confrontations then broke out on 1 October (China's National Day), during which an 18-year-old protestor was shot in the chest with live rounds at close range by the police.⁶⁰ Soon after, the government began ramping up legal measures against the demonstrations – for example, by banning the use of face masks in public gatherings – to which demonstrat-

57 Sum Lok-kei and Su Xinqi 22 July 2019 'Pro-Beijing lawmaker Junius Ho defends white-clad mob that attacked civilians in Hong Kong MTR station, says they can be "pardoned for defending their home"', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3019621/pro-beijing-lawmaker-junius-ho-defends-white-clad-mob>

58 Lee, Danny 5 August 2019 'Hundreds of flights cancelled leaving travellers facing chaos as citywide strike action hits Hong Kong International Airport', *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3021412/hundreds-flights-cancelled-leaving-travellers-facing-chaos>

59 Lin 2021.

60 The protestor survived but, after recovering, was forced into hiding as repression in the