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Protesting the identity of Hong Kong: The burdened virtues of contemporary ‘pretty’ nationalism

Once again, images of Hong Kong in protest have caught the world’s attention. In some ways, today’s protests are similar to the Umbrella Movement, the 79-day youth-led movement for democracy in Hong Kong that took place five years back (Jackson & O’Leary, 2019). Videos and reports again showcase the exceptionally polite, well-organised, youthful nature of the protests. And once again, the protestors’ target pertains to mainland Chinese interference in Hong Kong politics and society. Yet local support of the protests is much greater today. Some estimate participation of nearly two million people, out of Hong Kong’s total population of seven million (Bradsher & Victor, 2019). This time, local businesses have also gone on strike, signalling the value within the business community of preserving Hong Kong’s liberal rule of law against possible threats—such as that posed by the new extradition bill that was introduced but now has been shelved, by the Hong Kong government.

Indeed, Hong Kong people have made continued appeals to the international community to recognise their cause in the past few decades, since the region and its people were ‘handed over’ as a colony of Great Britain in 1997, becoming a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China. Joshua Wong’s leadership in the Umbrella Movement caught the world’s attention, while the recent protests and their targets have found even broader public sympathy, among politicians in the United States (Wong, 2019), Australia and Germany (Creery, 2019), and in the strong words of Chris Patten, the final British governor of Hong Kong, who claimed that ‘Britain has a duty to help Hong Kong’ today, given its historical role in shaping Hong Kong law (Patten, 2019).

The way Hong Kong’s autonomy is defended today provides an interesting case study on the way nationalism is—and is not—acceptable in international public understanding. Critics of the extradition bill at the heart of the recent protests emphasise its potential capacity to threaten Hong Kong’s ‘cherished autonomy’ (Creery, 2019). Yet other Hong Kong-based calls for support, such as for Hong Kong’s absolute political autonomy and independence, have met with staunch criticism and dismissal, by Patten among others (Ibrahim & Lau, 2017), who argue that Hong Kong independence is infeasible, and that the very suggestion of it can merely serve as an impetus for conflict and violence.

This is not to hold the Hong Kong localist independence movement as beyond criticism. On the contrary, I have watched the Hong Kong nationalist movement since it emerged within the Umbrella Movement with fascination, and at times with deep scepticism. In the first place, localist and nationalist projects such as those we are witnessing today within Hong Kong are strategic social and political constructions (Jackson, 2019). Nationalistic projects aim to change politics, not preserve some natural order of things. As Anderson (1983) observed, national identities are historical articulations, as nation states are ‘imagined communities’. Nations are not natural entities, outside of the context of nationalistic writings that have emerged only in the past few centuries. Spivak (1985) famously coined the term ‘strategic essentialism’, observing that culturally and ethnically defined communities emerge through processes of communication, rather than being discovered, by anthropologists or by nationalists, in some natural or pure world.

Similarly, Kwong (2016) notes that localism as a variant of nationalism in Hong Kong has emerged as a result of political and social processes over the last decade that have pit Hong

Kong people against mainland counterparts. Increased consumption of local goods and public services by mainland people (and new residents from the mainland) has presented at times a sense of threat to the welfare of Hong Kong people. Yet a hateful gloss has come in to the fore of some public discourse at the same time, such as when Hong Kong people financed advertisements in local papers and engaged in protests describing mainland people as 'locusts' descending on Hong Kong. Although one cannot generalise about the views and sentiments of the diverse members of the varied political parties which have emerged with a localist agenda in recent years (such as Hong Kong Resurgence, Youngspiration and the Hong Kong National Party), the new localist groups emphasise Hong Kong people coming first, with little need to support mainland China in any way, at the same time *strategically essentialising* a sense of 'pure' or 'real' Hong Kong identity (Kwong, 2016).

Furthermore, while diverse people have engaged in the varied protests and related recent movements in Hong Kong, including those identifying as mainland Chinese, as local ethnic minorities and as other non-ethnic Chinese Hong Kong residents (of varied races, ethnicities and geographical origins), localists sometimes employ a highly exclusionary discourse about 'who' is Hong Kong. For a long time, Hong Kong people who are not ethnically Chinese have faced exclusion and discrimination in the society (Kapai, 2015). They are frequently misrepresented in mainstream discourse as unconcerned with Hong Kong, despite the fact that many have lived in Hong Kong for generations (as long as Chinese Hong Kong families have). This same discourse thrives in forums which discuss Hong Kong's future and the best way to protect it today. For example, in one online discussion exploring the place of white Hong Kong people in facing anti-protest local police, participants heatedly debated whether white people were 'really' Hong Kong people, with some commentators urging fellows not to collaborate with white protesters.

Hong Kong basic law generally protects and grants rights to individuals based on legal statuses that are not tied to race or ethnicity. Yet Hong Kong localists can regularly be seen invoking ethnic-based notions of belonging in their activities today. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the description of Hong Kong-based Chinese residents as 'Hong Kong Indigenous', a party name that flies in the face of claims in Hong Kong (as elsewhere) made on behalf of the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories, a group with special rights under Basic Law and recognition as the original inhabitants of the region, having arrived long before others. It is therefore unclear whether localists who call themselves 'indigenous' recognise Hong Kong as a multicultural, ethnically plural society, even if the main target of their policies and discourse is to separate Hong Kong from China, through suggesting (constructing?) ethnic difference between the two places.

Thus, an ethnic notion of nationalism undergirds some Hong Kong localist efforts and discourse. This is not the sort of Hong Kong localism that has found widespread international support. Yet tragically, it is only different *in degree* from the nationalism that international leaders seem willing to accept, in enabling Hong Kong as and only as an administrative region of China, with an autonomy that is highly limited and unlikely to self-sustain over time. Patten has described those advocating independence in Hong Kong as having strayed 'too far' from 'the moral high ground', while David Wilson, another former governor of British Hong Kong, has commented that they are waving 'a red rag to the bull in terms of Beijing' (Ibrahim & Lau, 2017). Yet arguably, it is hardly immoral for people to protest ongoing nation-state construction that they see as harmful to themselves and others, and negligent of their rights to political representation and self-governance in matters that impact them. Such calls for independence, from the perspective of those articulating them, certainly do have a purpose and intention, apart from mere provocation.

Patten, Wilson and world leaders today at large tend to apply a sense of nationalism in their dealings with Hong Kong as part of China, that invokes an idealisation of social contract liberalism, which may not ultimately be beneficial for Hong Kong people. By 'social contract liberalism', I refer to the idea that each nation state is a social contract, where individuals make a deal with

each other via practices of self-governance, developing constitutions and laws, and so on. This idea has been defended as the foundation for 'constitutional' or 'contractual' patriotism by Habermas (1990; see also Ingram, 1996). This is the notion that one is politically bound to particular legal communities, with human rights and democratic processes within them shaped by distinctive cultural traditions of those communities.

This contractual patriotism is seen as one of the 'prettier' variants of patriotism, as the term, like nationalism, has been negatively connoted at least since the Second World War, by thinkers who equate it with racism, ethnocentrism and a justification for scapegoating and launching of genocide. The problem with this 'pretty' patriotism or nationalism is that it does not very well capture the situation of many places where people actually live in today. It certainly does not reflect the situation that Hong Kong people find themselves in today.

This 'pretty' contemporary nationalism seems to imply, first, that people get asked how they would like to live in communities, or at least are at some point placed in the position to give genuine consent about it. On the contrary, people very rarely are in place to give genuine consent about the so-called social contract which they have apparently been party to, and people are often punished, or penalised in some way, for daring to act on political dissatisfaction in the public sphere. Thus in Hong Kong, people who request political representation within a system that has always been unrepresentative, and is likely to become less representative over time, are regarded as immoral troublemakers, as if they were before happy with things, and as if they therefore reasonably have themselves to blame for any contemporary dissatisfaction. Particularly for young Hong Kong people today, this is likely to be experienced as a kind of victim blaming, and as turning a blind eye to their particular experiences and reasonable hopes within a global community that is otherwise full of praise for democracy, and for nationalism as a reflection of self-governance.

Second, national social contracts as such can be changed as contemporary proponents of nation-state patriotism argue, but this is obviously very difficult to do in practice. Contracts can be exchanged in some cases for better ones, but it is not easy for an 18 year old anywhere in the world to repatriate to a country with more agreeable laws and practices. Hong Kong youth in this case feel voiceless and trapped, when their appeals for change are dismissed as they have been (Jackson, Kapai, Wang & Leung, 2016).

Finally, many (if not most) societies are not ideal when it comes to their protections of human rights and of genuinely democratic processes. To put it plainly, we do not live in the world described by proponents of nation-state patriotism, of great societies upholding right values in slightly different cultural flavours. Thus, as Canovan (2000) notes:

To the vast majority of citizens, even the most Habermasian polity is 'ours' because it was our parents before us. One of the main purposes of the discourse of 'constitutional patriotism' is of course to play down this obvious point and to lay stress on the kinds of solidarity that settled populations can share with the increasing number of immigrants in their midst ... even the most apparent cosmopolitan constitutional patriotism does not alter the fundamental truth that citizenship is first and foremost an inherited privilege.

To repeat, Hong Kong people were not democratically consulted in a genuine way about their being 'handed over' to China by the British, while young Hong Kong people see their society being changed due to the results of non-democratic, unrepresentative processes. Today, young Hong Kong people are being expected to conform to a society with a legal tradition of a very different 'flavour' than that they have been brought up in, which they did not willingly consent to join and assimilate to, in contrast to the idea that national social contracts normally bind people together largely within a singular (or at least cohesive) cultural tradition. It is in part attributable to ignorance that many people around the world assume that it makes sense for Hong Kong to be 'handed back' to China, as if Hong Kong people's shared 'Chineseness' with mainland counterparts outweighs or should outweigh a century of separate political, social and cultural development—and the protests of millions of Hong Kong people.

While contemporary Chinese mainland political discourse does invoke democracy and human rights, an ethnocentric variety of nationalism is at the same time strongly favoured there today. This nationalism assumes the superiority of ethnic Han Chinese in relation to Chinese ethnic minority groups, who are treated differently according to law, often compelled to culturally, socially and linguistically assimilate, and understood in the educational and legal systems as undeveloped, backward and dependent upon the Han Chinese (Jackson & Cong, 2019). Older generations of Hong Kong people and historians of Hong Kong may recall the commonplace Chinese discourse describing Hong Kong people in similar terms, as weak and backward compared to mainland counterparts, in popular culture and politics (Choi, 1990). In this context, Hong Kong people reasonably fear for the preservation of their distinctive culture, language and social and political traditions, when they are positioned as different and deficient from a nationalistic Han Chinese ideal within the mainland.

For ex-colonial governors like Patten to appeal to Hong Kong people to maintain ‘moral high ground’ in this context reflects a lack of appreciation for the position of Hong Kong people. Today, they face what Tessman (2005) has referred to as ‘burdened virtues’—to be upstanding towards those who have not been upstanding towards them, in a dangerous environment, where they face serious harms and risks for protesting and demanding human rights, just as they do in accepting a status quo which impairs their current and future capacity to develop human rights. Although there was a hope that Hong Kong would influence the mainland to enhance its orientation towards democracy and human rights (Kwong, 2016), it is not necessarily helpful or reasonable for Hong Kong people to continue this line of carefree, optimistic thought. Nor is it necessarily beneficent to Hong Kong people for non-Hong Kong people to expect such optimism from them, moving forward.

It is easy for former Hong Kong expats to defend the Hong Kong they handed over to China, as such—as dependent, with a limited and ultimately superficial sense of political autonomy, and a disingenuous political orientation towards future self-governance. Yet it is becoming less feasible for self-respecting Hong Kong people to defend and pledge allegiance to this same system, as it stands and begins to sway to the north more and more with each passing year, from the handover to the planned end of ‘one country, two systems’, in 2047.


Disclosure statement

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