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Three Months of Insurrection

An Anarchist Collective in Hong Kong Appraises the
Achievements and Limits of the Revolt

CrimethInc.

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to accomplish each projected initiative—be it shutting down a subway line, a highway to the airport, or the airport itself—even if, as in the case of the subway line, early attempts are tentative and unsuccessful. The will to accomplish objectives must be coupled with the collective determination to create the informational infrastructure to make it happen.

What can people outside Hong Kong do to support arrestees and prisoners in this movement—specifically anti-authoritarian ones? Are there other things you would like to see people elsewhere in the world do to support you?

In the coming days, we will disclose information about a global solidarity action that we are coordinating with some friends overseas. Watch this space!

Also, it would be extremely helpful if you would publish your own literature about the state of affairs that we are all facing, at this historical moment, in regard to China and the continuing development of surveillance technologies around the world. We cannot allow the narrative of this struggle to revolve simply around self-righteous denunciations of the Communist Party. The party is absolutely worthy of our contempt, but we must not imagine that the evil of this world is concentrated in China, we cannot allow this farcical facsimile of the Cold War with its laughable division between the upstanding citizens of the “free world” and the sentinels of *1984* to divert us from the demands of our time and the project of hastening the ruin of everything that continues to separate us from the life that awaits us.

Spread the spirit of proletarian mockery. Let us laugh in every language we know!

what you want about people in this city, they are extraordinary at solving practical problems with minimal fuss.

This struggle has played a pedagogical role for everyone who has participated in it. It is a phenomenological pedagogy in which the city that we inhabit has acquired an entirely new significance through the process of the struggle—every aspect of every city has taken on a deep tactical significance. You have to know which areas are frequented by triads; every bend in the road and cul-de-sac could make a difference in whether you come out of a demonstration in one piece. Over the last few months, we have found ourselves in neighborhoods that are foreign to us, but even the neighborhoods we have grown up in all our lives become strange to us when we are fleeing from rushing riot squads or perusing message board threads full of stories shared by those who, thanks to their employment or background, are intimately acquainted with aspects of the city that we could never access on our own. Couple this with the extraordinary real-time maps drawn by teams to indicate zones of danger and avenues of escape and you begin to grasp how the last three months have been an accelerated psycho-geographic and cartographic tour of our city, the value of which is inestimable both for this struggle and those to come.

Of course, at the end of the day, it isn't simply about those on the streets; there are many, even in our own collective, who prefer for various reasons not to be where street fights take place. The monumental contributions of those who draw maps and supply real-time information off-site, tirelessly verifying the accuracy of the data that continually streams in from a multiplicity of channels, have been instrumental in ensuring the safety of partisans and the elimination of false news (certain accounts on message boards continuously spread false information on a regular basis, the purpose of which remains unknown). It's also meaningful that people take the time, after exhausting street combat, to collectively debate the finer points of tactics on Telegram channels and message boards, openly and in a comradely spirit. This is what makes it possible

In the following timeline and interview, an anarchist collective in Hong Kong presents a complete overview of the months-long uprising, reviewing its achievements, identifying its limits, celebrating the inspiring moments of mutual aid and defiance, and critiquing the ways that it has yet to pass beyond a framework based in the appeal to authority and the outrage of the citizen. This is a follow-up to the interview we published with the same group in June.

The struggle in Hong Kong has been polarizing on an international level. Some conspiracy theorists are determined to read any form of protest against the Chinese government merely as the machinations of the US state department, as if it were impossible for protesters to set their own agenda apart from state oversight. Others cheerlead for the movement without concern about the nationalist and neoliberal myths that still hold sway within it.

The events in Hong Kong show how a movement can actively reject the legitimacy of one government and its laws and police while still retaining a naïve faith in other governments, other laws, other police. As long as this faith remains in some form, the cycle is bound to repeat. Yet the past months of insurrection in Hong Kong can help us to imagine what a worldwide struggle against all forms of capitalism, nationalism, and the state might look like—and help us identify the obstacles that still remain to the emergence of such a struggle.

Timeline of Events

June 2019

In spring 2019, the government of Hong Kong introduced a bill allowing for people to be extradited from Hong Kong to other countries, including mainland China.

A massive peaceful demonstration against the extradition bill took place on June 9, attended by millions of people. During the following week, some people on the online forum LIHKG proposed that the movement utilize economic protest tactics—for example, the comprehensive withdrawal of cash from savings accounts and general strikes. This did not occur on a visible scale until much later.

On June 12, when a meeting was scheduled in the legislative council about the extradition bill, protesters and police clashed around the government headquarters and the CITIC Tower. The meeting was adjourned. Police fired over 150 tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at protesters, injuring many people; they arrested five people, charging them with rioting.

Although the government announced on June 15 that the extradition bill would be suspended, a protester fell to his death later that day. In the will that he left, he called for the “complete withdrawal of the extradition bill, the retraction of the riot charge, the unconditional release of injured students; the resignation of Carrie Lam.” From that point on, most of these were counted among the demands of the struggle. Two million people participated in street protests the following day, on June 16.

Late June to July 1

On June 21, protesters carried out the first experiments in “guerilla” action, moving from the government headquarters to the police headquarters, the Revenue Tower, and the Immigration Tower in the adjacent district, blocking entrances and temporarily closing the respective departments. Some went back to the Revenue Tower the next day, June 22, to apologize to users for the inconvenience.

A crowd-funded global advertising campaign calling for G20 leaders to act on the Hong Kong crisis on June 26 generated no discernible response. Two more protesters committed suicide at

peatedly around the “hot spots” reported by the radio news, watching for running protesters who needed a quick ride out of danger.

In response to young people not having any work or enough money to buy food at the front lines, working people prepared supplies of supermarket and restaurant coupons and handed these out to people in gear before large-scale confrontations. This remarkable fact is often used by conservatives to suggest that foreign powers are behind this “color revolution,” because... where did all the money for these coupons come from? There has to be somebody bankrolling this! They cannot fathom that any worker would be willing to reach into his own pockets in order to help a person that he does not know.

In response to the suffering, trauma, and sleeplessness induced by long-term exposure to tear gas and police violence, whether experienced first-hand or via graphic live feeds, support networks appeared offering counsel and care. In response to kids not having enough time to do their homework because they are out on the streets all night, Telegram channels appeared offering free tutoring services. In response to students “not being able to have an education” because they were on strike, people organized seminars on all manner of political subjects at schools that were sympathetic to the cause and also in public spaces.

Meanwhile, people have started chat rooms on Telegram to discuss subjects that protesters may be curious about; we are in the process of starting one ourselves. The subject matter might be technical (how to take a subway ticket machine apart, how to pass through a turnstile without paying), it might be historical (we recently saw one about the French Revolution), it might be spiritual, or about self-defense and martial arts.

All of these efforts are breathtaking in their breadth and efficiency. Affinity groups form to make Molotovs and test them out in forests. Others develop friendships and trust playing war games in the woods, setting up simulations of crossfire with the police. Impromptu martial arts dojos are held in parks and rooftops. Say

shepherd, is the hope that Hong Kong's sovereignty will be backed up by the threat of international military force, its border policed so that our destiny is decoupled from that of the Chinese.

Dismantling this ideological matrix and undermining the bases of Hong Kong cultural identity in favor of dangerous cross-border work is deeply unpleasant and unpopular work. Truth be told, few of us know how to go about doing it on a significant scale, especially since all the information channels on the Mainland are subject to comprehensive controls. Our friends on the mainland have made extensive efforts to disseminate information regarding this struggle on message boards and social media, but this information is often swiftly removed and their accounts are quickly banned.

You can imagine how daunting this task is, the difficulty being magnified by its urgency—especially now that crowds are beginning to form choruses to sing a newly-penned “Hong Kong national anthem” in public spaces.

Give us a rundown on the tactical and technical innovations that have occurred over the past months and what they have enabled participants to do that was previously impossible. Imagine that you are addressing people who will be in a similar situation to yours at some point in the future.

Years from now, we will continue to look back and marvel at all the incredible things that emerged in response to the concrete problems that insurgents have faced over the course of the past three months.

In response to teenagers having no homes to return to because they were practically “disowned” by their parents for attending demonstrations and remaining on the streets when states of emergency were declared, people created a network of open apartments to which young partisans could retreat and stay temporarily. In response to minibuses, buses, and subway trains no longer being safe for escaping protesters, carpool networks were formed via Telegram to “pick kids up from school.” We encountered elderly drivers who didn't even know how to operate Telegram, but who drove re-

the end of the month. Desperation intensified, leading many to propose that the struggle was facing an “endgame” situation with the approach of July 1.

That day, July 1, protesters broke into the Legislative Council (LegCo) building. Pacifist demonstrators privately voiced concerns about this action, but ultimately chose not to condemn those who engaged in it. Four protesters who entered the council chambers refused to leave when the riot police arrived, and a dozen protesters went back in to “rescue” them. From that point on, the resolutions “not to split” into factions (🇭🇰🇭🇰) and “to come (arrive at the demonstration) and go (escape from the riot police) together” (🇭🇰🇭🇰🇭🇰) defined the collective ethos of the struggle.

Early July: The Conflict Spreads

During the Umbrella Movement of 2014, demonstrators had invented the Lennon Wall, an impromptu and unauthorized public bulletin board, as a way for “conscientious citizens” to “peacefully petition the government for redress” in a widely visible way. During June 2019, this model had transcended its strictly pacifist origins to take on the functions of disseminating information and coordinating strategy. On June 30, the police destroyed the Lennon Wall that protesters had set up at the government headquarters. In response, Lennon Walls began to appear in every major district, staffed and guarded around the clock.

Although no one was arrested on July 1, many people feared that there would be subsequent police reprisals. Some fled to other countries. Necessity compelled everyone in the struggle to memorize, by rote, what they should say—and not say—when captured by the police. The phrase “I have the right to remain silent” (🇭🇰🇭🇰) became a popular meme, and the repetition of this mantra began to be used as a way to upvote posts on the LIHKG message board.

On July 7, the first rally occurred outside the main protest areas on Hong Kong Island, with slogans and leaflets directed at the Mainland tourists frequenting the area. Protests spread to a variety of other districts over the following weeks, notably occurring in Shatin on July 14. People from the neighborhood showed support by throwing swimming boards out of their windows to protesters, to be used as shields, and yelling at the police who entered their housing estates. Police charged into a shopping mall for the first time, leaving the floor of the Shatin New Town Mall bloody. The train to Shatin was suspended on police orders, while self-organized carpool teams formed to facilitate protesters' escapes.

On July 17, after a few severe clashes, thousands of senior citizens marched to show their support for young protesters, declaring that they were not conservative knaves like so many of their generation, like the apathetic and apolitical ones young people call "old rubbish."

July 21

A march to the Liaison Office of China—the official PR outlet of the Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong—saw the national emblem of China smeared with a thick coat of ink. For the first time, people chanted the slogan "Restore Hong Kong to Glory, Revolution of Our Times" (XXXX XXXX) en masse. Police fired tear gas, rubber bullets, and sponge grenades¹ without prior notice.

Meanwhile, at Yuen Long station, white-shirted triads² assaulted protesters and civilians on the train. Some believe that pro-Beijing legislator Junius Ho was behind this attack. The assaults took place

¹ A sponge grenade is like a rubber bullet, except about twenty times larger and tipped with styrofoam sponge instead of rubber.

² Triads are gang members involved in the racketeering organizations that have a long history in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Their genealogy stretches all the way back to the secret societies that opposed the Qing Dynasty during the imperial period, a case study in how revolutionary organizations are recuperated.

a consequence of nefarious political arrangements that have seen the gradual decimation of much of Hong Kong's agricultural land in the northeast territories, which was cleared to make way for private residential compounds that are often subject to foreign (and mainland) speculation, as well as the grotesque water import deal that we have with Guangdong. That is—this dependence merely reinforces the ardor for independence and sovereignty rather than attenuates it.

Another necessary step would be to let go of the fantasy that Hong Kong is exceptional, the way people imagine the city as a world-class liberal entrepôt populated with free-minded, liberty-loving cosmopolitans, in contrast to the bootlicking, crass, and brainwashed peasants up north. Trite as it may sound, we have to empty "Hong Kong identity" of any positive content—all of its pretensions of civilization, urbanity, and enlightenment—in order to make way for the consummate negativity of *proletarian revolt*, which can cut decisively through the divisive brouhaha generated by governments on both sides of the border. It has to be said that whenever there has been an upheaval or report of a "mass incident" in China during this struggle, people have paid close attention.

Many have also explored inventive avenues for "smuggling" information to mainlanders, even going so far as to edit porn videos on Chinese adult sites, substituting footage of police brutality in Hong Kong for the money shots. This reminds us of our favorite ancient Chinese rebellions, in which contraband information circulated through parchment hidden in buns and pastries.

As we mentioned above, there are those who volubly advocate "independence" and "autonomy" for each region in China, the balkanization of the country following the collapse of the Communist party (the latter being the priority, the former being regarded as simply a favorable consequence). Yet for others a more plausible eventuality, considering how folks over the border are often imagined as lost sheep watched over by an almighty

sistance have rapidly formed to address the situation, offering employment, shelter, transport, and meals to those in need.

In short: the future, as a horizon of foreseeable advancement, an itinerary of fulfillable and forestalled plans and projections, has collapsed, and we are left consulting, moment by moment, the live maps drawn in real time by volunteer cartographers, telling us which stations to avoid, which roads to take a detour around, which neighborhoods are presently being gassed. Daily life itself becomes a series of tactical maneuvers, everyone having to exercise caution about what they say at lunch in cafés and canteens lest they are overheard and reported, experimenting with different ways to ride the subways for free without being too obvious about it, inventing codes to use on instant messaging or social media that evade quick decryption. It is quite extraordinary that so many are willing to forego the craven comforts and conveniences of the metropolis, the enjoyment of anonymity as they go about their business. It is necessary to find and maintain clandestinity in other ways.

It is impossible to deny that through it all, a sense of invention and adventure saturates the minutiae of our waking lives.

What would it take for the unrest to spread to mainland China—if not in this movement, in some future sequel to it? Or do the premises of the movement itself render that impossible?

For one, it would require us to confront the sobering fact that Hong Kong is beholden to China for much of our food and water. This alone should make it evident that any successful revolt here must necessarily involve active support from comrades in the regions that surround Hong Kong. This practical imperative would more readily find an audience here than abstract arguments, as Hong Kongers notoriously exhibit little patience for discussions about ideology.

Here we should note that this point is a contentious one; several in our collective suggest that this dependence is a point of intense resentment for many in Hong Kong, particularly as it is

with the assistance of the police, who sat idly by. Few of the perpetrators were arrested and none were charged. This incident aroused deep popular rage against the police.

Late July to Early August: Escalation

For the first time in popular memory, the police refused to issue a permit for the march that was to take place in Yuen Long on July 27, a week after the triad attack. Thousands took defiantly to the street regardless. Marching without permission has since become the norm. A misunderstanding occurred between the protesters on the “agreed” departure time, resulting in long discussions on LIHKG and calls for better communication between the frontlines and the rows of partisans behind them.

On July 28, 49 partisans were arrested; most were charged with rioting. From that day until early August, the protests became more spontaneous and ephemeral, with protesters traveling to different stations via the Hong Kong metro, MTR (Mass Transit Railway), chiefly targeting police stations. For the first time, people began hurling Molotovs and bricks at police stations, as well as using slingshots. More and more people from the neighborhood came out to support the struggle, yelling at the police and driving them back into their stations. Police repeatedly deployed tear gas in residential areas and around homes for the elderly.

People blocked the Cross-Harbor Tunnel on August 3. On August 5, a squad of male officers carried away a female protester in Tin Shui Wai, deliberately lifting her skirt and exposing her. At the same time, reports began to circulate about sexual assault in police stations.

On August 5, thousands participated in a “general strike” in different districts. People blocked the doors of train cars on the MTR early that morning, stopping almost every line of the MTR. (This had been “rehearsed” on July 30, when one station was shut down

early in the morning, followed by short and periodic blockages at various important interchange stations on Hong Kong island in the afternoon.) In many districts, the clashes around police stations lasted all day. That night, pro-government gangs dressed in blue or white shirts attacked protesters with iron poles and knives.

Mid-August: An Eye for an Eye

In response to the police arresting a young man for owning 10 laser pointers, describing them as “dangerous weapons,” people created their own harbor-front light show with laser pointers outside the Hong Kong Space Museum on August 7. That same day, the first press conference took place on behalf of the struggle, organized by a group of protesters as a counterpart to the daily police press conferences.

Flash-mob blockades appeared in multiple districts the weekend of August 10. On August 11, protesters from Sham Shui Po moved to Tsim Sha Tsui, where the police ruptured the right eye of a female first-aider using beanbag rounds. “An eye for an eye” became a viral meme, and the “Eye for Hong Kong Campaign” started by Kim Ui-Seong, a well-known South Korean actor, spread around the world later in August.

On the same day, police fired tear gas inside an enclosed space at Kwai Fong station and shot at protesters from close range, pushing them down an already crowded escalator at Tai Koo station. Undercover cops dressed as protesters made arrests without prior notice. This sowed distrust among protesters.

The next day, August 12, thousands gathered at the airport to condemn police brutality, causing hundreds of flights to be cancelled. Rumors that riot squads were about to arrive spread all afternoon; many left early, before 6 pm. Afterwards, feeling deceived, angry protesters returned to the airport on August 13 and actively blocked passengers from boarding. The atmosphere became tenser

As we described in the previous interview, for many years, it was believed that there were two paths in social struggle: pacifist, civic, and genteel protests accessible to housewives, the elderly, and others who could not hazard the risk of arrest, and bellicose, confrontational participation in the frontlines, employing various kind of direct action. These two paths persist, but what is unprecedented in the current situation is that *both* are illegal: the government rejects applications for protests and every assembly is de facto prohibited, however innocuous it may be. Simply being physically present at or near the scene of an illegal assembly already constitutes grounds for arrest and detention. When you are sitting on the subway train or the bus home, you never know whether riot squads will storm the vehicle and proceed to beat the life out of everyone on board, whether vigilantes have tipped you off to the cops or are following you home, whether the triads will be out in force where you live late at night. Partisanship renders you into a body that can be maimed, tortured and—it appears—killed by those whose acts are authorized in the name of “order.” As the guardians of order make clear, we are “cockroaches,” pests to be exterminated and disposed of so that business can proceed as usual.

In addition, professing sympathy for the struggle could very well leave you unemployed if you work for a company that has longstanding ties with the Chinese market. Consider the high-profile case of Cathay Pacific, the upper management of which demanded a list of members of a union that had participated in the movement or helped to leak flight information of the police; this company is carrying out a thoroughgoing purge of partisans among their staff, directed by careerist snitches among the crew.

Teachers at school who tutored you in algebra just a few months ago could aid in your arrest; principals and heads of departments stand idly by as riot squads seize you and your friends outside your school building. This is the reality that protesters are becoming rapidly habituated to. As a consequence, networks of mutual as-

companies that bear the name “China” are covered in tags, the shutters of “China Life Insurance” recently having been tagged with “I Don’t Want A Chinazi Life.” If a storefront bearing visible American iconography were attacked in the same way (say, by us), we fear that we would likely be stopped.

We should also add that of late it is not simply American flags that are seen at protests, but the flags of other “friendly” members of the G20 as well—Canada, Germany, France, Japan, the UK, and the like—with the flag of the Ukraine also making an unfortunate appearance last week, presumably because screenings of “Winter On Fire” have been taking place in public squares and the public has little knowledge of what that documentary conveniently omits.

Meanwhile, there have been continued campaigns urging the United Kingdom to assume responsibility for the foundlings it left behind by issuing BNO (British National Overseas) passports to Hong Kong citizens once more. Though this passport does not grant its holder the right of abode in the UK, nor guarantee consular protection, for some it seems to embody the hope of escape from a city that many are beginning to regard as a death trap. “I’d rather be a second- or third-class citizen in a Western country than be thrown in a thought correction camp,” someone commented weeks ago on a message board thread.

Seen in this light, the waving of Western flags seems less like a deft act of strategic cunning and more like a desperate and pious plea for an almighty deliverer. This is a deadly mixture of fear and naïveté—the two feeding off and compounding each other—that we are making efforts to combat. Our American friends recently gave us a marvelous slogan that we hope to spread everywhere: “Chinazi & Amerikkka: Two Countries, One System.”

Which institutions and mythologies have lost legitimacy in the public eye in the course of the unrest? Which have retained or gained legitimacy? Can you describe the success or failure of efforts to critique these institutions and mythologies, or at least to open up dialogue about them?

later in the evening when protesters identified two men disguised as protesters—one a mainland security officer, the other a journalist from *Global Times* who had close ties with the mainland security department. Both were tied up and beaten by protesters. The incident was widely reported in the mainland, stirring strong opposition to the movement. Disputes raged afterward among protesters regarding how to treat infiltrators, leading to a public show of contrition on August 14. Despite the disagreements, a sense of “unity” persisted, a unity that protesters swore would survive a nuclear explosion (XXXXXX).

The End of August

Millions of peaceful protesters attended a march on August 18 despite heavy rain. On August 23, the “Hong Kong Way” action took place across the city. Aviation staff and Cathay Pacific union leaders who assisted the airport blockades or showed sympathy to the movement on social media were fired under pressure from Beijing. Multiple reports circulated about detainees being badly beaten and sexually assaulted, even raped. A #ProtestToo gathering against sexual violence took place on August 28.

On August 24, the MTR closed down several stations and stopped train service at the related districts immediately before a demonstration in Kwun Tong. From that day on, protesters began to refer to the MTR as the “Party Train” (XX); it became a target of vandalism. At the Kwun Tong protest, protesters presented what have become known as “the five demands”: full withdrawal of the bill, revocation of “riot” charges, unconditional release of all arrestees, establishment of an independent inquiry into the crimes of the police, and universal suffrage. Some also cut down the “smart lampposts” installed in the district, RFID-equipped streetlights that are set to be upgraded with facial recognition tech-

nology. They sawed the posts down, disassembled the circuitry, and identified where the component pieces were manufactured.

On August 31, despite the arrests of high-profile activists and councilors, thousands still took to the street. Water cannons had been tested for the first time on August 25; now they were used at full strength to douse the crowd with blue pepper liquid. Protesters set fire to roadblocks around the police headquarters; they also identified and surrounded an undercover policeman.

Later, in Prince Edward station, police indiscriminately beat and pepper-sprayed protesters and commuters in a train cabin. Seven people were seriously injured. At least three people are still unaccounted for at the time of writing; many believe that police murdered them. There has been no response to popular demands for the MTR to release the CCTV footage. After this, hatred against the police and the MTR reached new heights, and people circulated various methods to evade train fares.

Early September

On September 1, thousands gathered at the bus station and on the main road towards the airport, the airport building itself being off-limits since the high court passed a restraining order on protesters following the airport blockades. This action effectively paralyzed traffic towards the airport throughout the afternoon. Universities and secondary school students went on strike on September 2, with many facing assaults from police and supporters of the government in front of their schools. Students and alumni formed multi-school human chains in various districts throughout the week.

Finally, on September 4, the chief executive announced the withdrawal process of the extradition bill—a process that will begin after the end of Parliamentary Recess in October. Yet the movement continues to insist that the government must grant all five

his pithy opening remark, before he elaborated upon the murders perpetrated daily by the American state machine. This exchange was captured by a student press and circulated on Facebook for a few hours, engendering discussion and debate. Many of the comments were revealing: they dismissed our American comrade as the “American variant of left plastic” [an insulting term for old-fashioned leftists explained in our previous interview] and accused him of being an ignoramus. “Do you really think we are American patriots? We are just being practical, enlisting the help of somebody who can really help us!” They insisted that singing the American anthem, waving the American flag, and publicly declaring how much they admire the American way of life are just calculated appeals to the powerful sentimentality of *actual* American patriots. (Some such patriots have made the trip to Hong Kong, such as fascist organizer Joey Gibson, who had a blast taking selfies with unsuspecting protesters only too glad to applaud a hot-blooded flag-waving American who appeared friendly to the cause.)

The flag-bearers claim that those who criticize the flag-waving are naïve: they don’t know that the message that they are sending is a double-coded one. On the anniversary of September 11, some called for a city-wide cessation of protest activity in commemoration of those who lost their lives on 9/11—yet another shrewd move aimed at winning American sympathy. As clever as these play-actors think they are with their cunning grasp of *realpolitik*, the joke is on them—and, ultimately, on us if we fail to shatter this ongoing fascination with the sham tug-of-war between the “great powers” of the world.

Many friends from the West have asked us repeatedly whether this sentiment is shared by a vast proportion of the struggle, or whether this fixation with the West is a fringe phenomenon. Let’s put it this way: at the present moment, anything that bears any relation to China is fair game for defacement and desecration—the government insignia is destroyed, flags are torn off of poles and thrown in the water, the premises of banks and even insurance

apparatuses as countless other insurgents across the world—that China is not the great Satan that “the free world” can deliver us from, the Antichrist that we have to slay at all costs, but *a shadow from the future*, a shadow looming over a disintegrating planet.

It goes without saying that China serves as a welcome distraction for Western audiences as well, offering Western governments the opportunity to decry Chinese excesses in order to parade their commitment to “human rights” while killing and jailing their own populations.

Let’s talk about the tensions and contradictions internal to the movement. Outside Hong Kong, we have heard a lot about protesters displaying the British flag, singing the Star-Spangled Banner, sharing Pepe the frog memes, and employing other symbols of Western nationalism. How visible has this been on the ground inside the movement? Has there been pushback?

We are sure that many of you will have seen images of the action that took place a week ago in which people congregated in full black bloc regalia outside the American embassy, waving American flags, singing the American national anthem, and exhorting the White House to pass an act on Hong Kong as promptly as possible. This led us to make the tragicomic observation that Hong Kong might be the only place in the world where the black bloc carries American flags.⁵

Many “flag-bearers” are dismissive of the critiques directed their way; this characterizes those who support the continued appeals to the White House in general. When a comrade from the US came to visit us recently, he approached the flag-bearers and made no secret of his contempt for his own government. “Fuck The USA!” was

⁵ Editor’s note: Sadly, this is not true. In Germany, where black bloc tactics originated, some “anti-Deutsch” left radicals became famous for marching with American flags, often in black bloc formations. The stupidity of seeking salvation from one empire in the arms of another knows no borders—and militancy alone is no proof against it.

demands. As of this writing, vandalism in MTR stations continues, along with inquests regarding the whereabouts of the “disappeared” and demands for the release of the CCTV footage from August 31.

Interview

We conducted this interview with an anarchist collective that has been active in the struggle over the last fifteen weeks. Between ingesting vast amounts of tear gas, they met to ruminate over these questions. The answers are the result of many sleepless nights spent in introspection and recollection, each member of the collective helping the others to fill in the lacunae in their overworked memories.

At what points has the movement plateaued? What has made it escalate, spread, survive?

The “plateau” was probably reached on August 5, on the day of the first proposed “general strike.” Though not properly a general strike in the technical sense, it effectively shut down much of the city for an entire day. In many ways, it was a momentous event, both in its magnitude and because it was the first time that a strike was called for political (rather than simply economic) reasons by working people operating outside a union.

At the same time, despite the fact that police stations were surrounded—and, in certain cases, subjected to continued attacks, torched, or even destroyed—the events of that day accomplished little in the way of tangible results, with the state remaining silent. Nobody could have anticipated that the day would have turned out as gloriously as it did, as popular revenge on the police took the most unforgettable forms across the city, but that was very much the point at which people began to feel as though they had done

everything they could to compel the government to respond, and the euphoria of that evening began to develop into exasperation.

Anger at police has been one of the chief factors that has propelled the movement since then.

Many of you must be aware of the unfettered brutality of the Hong Kong police, a brutality that they have been given greater and greater license to indulge in with each passing day. This is the same police force that went to painstaking lengths to stake a claim to being “Asia’s finest” after the riots of the late 1960s and decades of corruption. Certainly, it has been traumatic for many to lose the illusion that Hong Kong is a liberal metropolis in which producers and consumers can go about their lives unmolested, enjoying the unhindered traffic of opinions and commodities. But young graduates from the police academy have to come to terms with their own trauma, as well, having lost hope of obtaining a temperate and uneventful career with regular promotions and bonuses, without any of the risks of precarity that characterize the occupations available to others who have limited education.

We have no pity for the police, but it is clear that they are motivated by pure and uninhibited wrath. This wrath is what they share in common with those that they brutalize—the difference, of course, being that they are legally authorized and encouraged to enact it. One shudders to think what sort of perverse, *Full Metal Jacket*-style motivational talks they are given by their superiors before they are deployed in protests, what sort of disgusting discussions they have in their cadet Whatsapp groups, what other means they use to keep themselves foaming at the mouth, straining at the leash to crack a protester’s head open. While no one in our collective knows for certain what actually happens in police stations when you are captured now, there are widespread reports of torture, sexual abuse, even rumors of the gang rape of female protesters.

On the other side of the lines, one gets the feeling that any escalation in tactics that has taken place since August 5 has been a reaction to heightening police violence or to the ways that pri-

cial areas, and at sites such as the airport—including protesters finding novel ways to shut down traffic going towards the airport without violating the letter of the law—is thought to have discernible effects on the economy, tourist traffic, foreign investment, and the like. Meanwhile, counter-surveillance measures have become customary practices, including felling the RFID-equipped “smart lamp posts” installed in several neighborhoods and spraying or dismantling CCTV cameras before big demonstrations.

All this points to an intuitive understanding of a reality that the blog *Dialectical Delinquents* has outlined very well over a number of years (and we thank them for their continued painstaking efforts to sketch the rapidly emerging contours of this reality): Hong Kong is poised at the forefront of a struggle against the Sinification of the world. That is, it appears to us that, with neoliberalism dying a drawn-out, protracted death under the weight of mass revolts that all advocate secession from neoliberal global arrangements, the Chinese variant of the authoritarian surveillance state, complete with a panoply of carceral camps and quasi-legal institutions, is the only means by which the world as we know it can be held together by coercive force. We are not the only ones who perceive this; not so long ago, *Dialectical Delinquents* featured an interview with a Huawei executive that is illuminating in its frankness.⁴

As we described in our previous interview, Xinjiang is at the back of everyone’s minds, and the horror of Xinjiang, coupled with the rapid introduction of surveillance apparatuses across the city, gives the struggle a pronounced apocalyptic flavor: it is reiterated time and again that if we do not win, we will find ourselves in internment camps. We are in general agreement with this, but it is imperative that we recognize that we are waging the same “hand to hand fight” [Agamben, *What Is An Apparatus?*] against these

⁴ You can consult the interview here, along with many more examples of China’s extensive networks of control that the curator has collected over years of painstaking research.

as the world continues to fall to pieces and ecological disaster looms ominously on the horizon.

For others, the imagined catastrophe is seen as a means by which to restore Hong Kong's rightful place among the foremost cities of the world, something that is indicated in the most popular slogan of the struggle: "Restore Hong Kong to glory, revolution of our times." The "glory" referenced in the slogan is a fantasy of prelapsarian purity—the Hong Kong of hard work, the individual initiative of the honest, entrepreneurial common man, whose life is unsullied by the machinations of big politics.

While it's fine to hypothesize about a situation of common ruin, why can't we also think about how to create the material basis for everyone to thrive and flourish together? And what could this "together" mean, who does it encompass, when everyone we customarily exclude from the picture—ethnic minorities and their second-generation offspring, domestic migrant workers, new migrants from China, and mainlanders who await the right of abode—is implicated in the future of the city? Why do we believe that these questions should be deferred until a government is elected to address them, when there are so many instances of autonomy in this struggle that could serve as premises upon which to develop these conversations right now?

Almost three months into the unrest, what are the goals and strategies—avowed or implicit—of different currents within the movement?

As we mentioned above, the tacit intention of the struggle at this point in time is to find the means to escalate the situation until that the "global community" is compelled to intervene. Maintaining mass mobilizations and creating affecting viral spectacles that can be disseminated on international networks—such as the "human chains" of protesters holding hands on sidewalks and, more recently, outside secondary schools during the student strikes—keeps the struggle at the forefront of public attention. More immediately, continued insubordination in the subway, in busy commer-

vate companies facilitate this violence—such as the company that runs the MTR, which has made a massive fortune building private malls and apartments adjacent to their subway stations, or the New Town Mall, the shopping center that inexplicably allowed squads of riot police to storm it and bloody the floors of one of the city's oldest consumer citadels. The struggle often resembles a blood feud between protesters and the police.

Last week, the police laid siege to Prince Edward MTR station. They rushed into a subway car, began indiscriminately beating anyone who looked like a protester, and left the victims in a bloody heap on the station floor, prohibiting them from receiving medical aid. They transformed the station into a sealed internment camp for hours, disappearing three people who are rumored to have been beaten to death. As the stakes continue to rise in the conflict, this spiral of retribution is likely to continue. With so many people fixated on live feeds, aghast at what is transpiring before their eyes daily—journalists losing their eyes, bystanders being apprehended for questioning police authority—this fixation on the police is difficult to break, though certain threads on LIHKG have been started to plead with those in the struggle to look at the larger picture rather than concentrating all their efforts on acts of popular vengeance against the police. Such acts are clearly encouraged by the police themselves, who need a sensational retroactive alibi for their activity—to such an extent that they have been caught disguising themselves in the frontlines in order to throw Molotov cocktails.

Loath as we are to admit it, this struggle thrives on police violence. We should address and reflect upon this.

For example, on August 11, a medic behind the frontlines lost an eye after she was hit by a rubber bullet. This was hardly accidental "collateral damage"—the police have been aiming at peoples' heads for a while now. The next day, a huge mobilization took place at the airport, with a meme demanding that the police return an eye going viral, supplying a powerful emotional impetus to the events

of that afternoon. That evening, protesters made a citizen's arrest, apprehending two people suspected of being agents of the Chinese communist party and skirmishing with elite airport police squads.

As long as the struggle continues to feed on popular indignation aroused by police transgressions, pleading for a higher tribunal to bring the police to justice—be that the United States, the Western world, or the United Nations—its momentum will be contingent on police provocation and it will remain arrested at the precise point that social struggles in Hong Kong have yet to overcome: *the righteous indignation of the citizen*.

What will happen when the reservoir of civic outrage about this or that injustice is exhausted? Is it necessary for those in the struggle to always situate themselves on the higher moral ground, legitimizing their illegal activity as a reaction to the excesses of the state? How can they take the initiative, *take the offensive*? This doesn't necessarily mean striking first in a physical sense, but "becoming-active" in the sense Nietzsche spoke of, dispensing with the "slave morality" of dependence upon—and fascination with—the enemy.

The scandal of police violence has polarized the city to such an extent that entire neighborhoods have come out in support of the black-clad, gas-masked protesters amassed outside police stations in various districts. The most famous of these events took place in Wong Tai Sin and Kwai Chung, where hundreds of people came downstairs in shorts and flip-flops to harangue the police, making one officer so unnerved that he pulled a loaded rifle on unarmed uncles and aunties. Police violence has also served as a nucleus to organize various neighborhood endeavors around. For example, in an effort to combat misinformation spread by mainstream media outlets, people have held neighborhood screenings in public squares so people can see the footage what really happened; likewise, the space adjacent to the information counter of New Town Mall in Sha Tin has been transformed into a counter-information bureau, staffed by protesters who are always available to chat with curious

the Police to action? How do we convince the magistrates that this crisis has to be at the head of their list of priorities? Here we are, gathering and archiving evidence with our very bodies, amassing recriminations and grievances from all quarters in our inquest into a failed state, soliciting influencers everywhere to speak on our behalf, in the hope that all this blood will be redeemed by prosecution and legitimate retribution. When civil disobedience escalates into property damage, street fights, airport occupations, and general strikes only to meet with state indifference, then the popular imagination begins to conceive of ways to precipitate the ultimate catastrophe, the arrival of the People's Liberation Army into Hong Kong, an event that many anticipate would be the catalyst for international intervention. Surely the Police wouldn't ignore us then?

This is the apocalyptic disaster theory that is beginning to circulate on LIHKG and elsewhere, the embrace of "common collapse," a "let's all burn together" fantasy in which protesters imagine the city being swallowed up in the abyss, awaiting international sanctions on a Communist Party gone amok. In this hypothetical scenario, as a consequence of the unrest in Hong Kong spreading into the mainland like some sort of variant of the Arab Spring, China—reeling from the pressure of tightening international trade embargoes—balkanizes and fractures into a multiplicity of territories, each formally and juridically independent (such as Fujian, Wuhan, Xinjiang) alongside a democratic Hong Kong, which might form a state with Guangzhou.

While the consequences of such a development are left unexplored—for example, the fact that these "autonomous" territories would be lorded over by party apparatchiks all the same—this speculative perspective is welcome on one level. If nothing else, it represents an effort to come to terms with a future that could be completely different from the one that we have been habitually accustomed to in times of affluence—a future in which our internet could be shut off, in which we would have to work collectively to secure food, water and electricity, such questions being imperative

of the party and the big Hong Kong tycoons and politicians who ingratiate themselves into the company of this cartel. Beyond “capitalism,” however, we find the sacredness of the law, which remains *the* transcendent horizon beyond which social struggle has yet to cross. Yes, everybody across the world continues to bear witness to the feats of heroism that black shirts take part in every day—reducing the façades and machines of subway stations to rubble, devastating police stations, and the like—but there is still a latent belief that this is all done *on behalf* of preserving the rule of law and the institutions that specific personnel have betrayed.

Seen in this light, all these acts of illegality can be apprehended as a means of reminding the authorities that the “mandate of heaven” has been withdrawn from them. While it might seem “mythological” to utilize an archaic conceit to describe current events, as if we were speaking about a “collective millenarian Chinese unconscious” that has persisted from the ancient dynasties up to the present, it remains apposite, because everything leads us to believe that we continue to live in mythical times. How else can we explain the continual appeals to the courtiers of the “international community,” utilizing the international mass media as a tribunal through which we hope to gain an audience with the emperor—i.e., the United States? There remains the faith that at a higher court of appeal, the criminality of the rogue states that govern us can be brought to justice and punished, in the name of elemental, natural rights that have been violated in the full light of day. Somewhere, we believe, even if only in the hearts of decent, right-thinking people everywhere, there is a sense of solidarity with this primordial and transcendent law, and justice will be done, justice will descend from the skies.

It’s all depressingly Kantian, actually. The failings of the local police do nothing to discredit the Idea of the Police, who will arrive on some messianic day.

So the question the movement has posed itself seems to be this: what would it take for us to put together a case that would compel

passersby. Meanwhile, the “Lennon Walls” that have emerged in every district, typically around public housing estates, have become convivial sites as well as places of deadly confrontation and murderous rage; as banal as their content often is, it has been necessary to defend the walls of post-it notes against late-night arsonists and knife-wielding thugs. These neighborhood initiatives are momentous and important. They may indicate a path out of the impasses of the present, possibly stretching into a nebulous future held in common.

This brings us to our final point regarding the question about what makes the movement survive. One thing that surprises friends who come to visit Hong Kong from elsewhere is the unity and unanimity of the movement, which has seen insurgents of all manner of ideological persuasions and backgrounds working together on concrete actions rather than squabbling over ideological niceties. Adherence to this unanimity has been almost religious, a mantra that has been repeated *ad nauseam* on message boards every time a dispute arises that could jeopardize it. The significance of this solidarity in everybody’s eyes, this consensus that keeps the mass together against the continued efforts of the state to exploit tactical disagreements within the struggle, is summarized in a hilariously over-the-top statement: “I won’t excommunicate anybody from the struggle even if they decide to detonate a nuclear bomb.” The gulf between pacifists and Molotov-throwing insurgents still runs deep, but these are not roles that are set in stone. While the ranks of those at the front continue to be decimated by mass arrests, some who were spectators a few weeks ago are moving to fill these gaps. Message boards and Telegram channels offer circuits of communication for both sides to exchange reflections and feedback after each episode of struggle. This is marvelous in many ways; it is undoubtedly a formidable achievement that it has persisted for so long and will conceivably persist for a long time yet.

At the same time, the enforcement of this unanimity obscures systemic problems in the movement and forbids people to evaluate them, something that we will shed further light on later in this interview. It goes without question that it is necessary to sustain popular morale in a mass movement, that we must constantly attend to the affective climate of the struggle, that people should encourage one another in times of tumult and despair. But when this affirmative ambience masks an aversion to difference, divergence, and disputation, for fear of alienating people and diminishing the turnouts to the demonstrations, positivity begins to be indistinguishable from paranoia—and the singularity of each person present is effectively nullified, everyone being reduced to a body standing alongside other bodies en masse.

This atmosphere makes it very difficult to conduct a critique, especially of highly questionable phenomena such as the waving of American or colonial flags. Throughout the struggle, the principle of liberal tolerance has been weaponized in an unprecedented way—*brothers and sisters, you have your opinions and I have mine, we all respect each other's right to hold contrary opinions, so long as they don't threaten to create antagonism among us*. The fact that this has worked up until now is no proof that it is healthy for the future of social struggle in Hong Kong. This sort of culture pretends to marginalize no one while effectively *marginalizing everyone*, excluding everyone from engaging with questions that could be painful, disquieting, or unsettling, that require us to probe the depths and confront the conditions that constitute us as subjects. To do so, we would have to go beyond the trauma of immediate events and confront a trauma of much vaster scope—the “order” that we participate in reproducing on a continuous basis.

After all, it is this “order” that renders certain people effectively invisible. For example, few have stopped to consider the plight of foreign domestic workers over the last few months. Ordinarily, every Sunday, these women congregate en masse in the public squares of major districts including Central, Causeway Bay, Mong

various parts of the country is an everyday occurrence, there being no established protocols that distinguish the proper use of “public space” from an exceptional use.

Chinese police have the license to operate entirely outside their professional remit, behaving in ways that would be unfathomable anywhere else. For example, until recently, our friends in the aforementioned district of China ran a common space that held cultural events open to the villagers that live around the area. This space was open to all comers, its doors being unlocked at all times; drifters and vagrants would stumble in, often staying for days or weeks. This also meant that plainclothes policemen would come to the space when they were “off duty,” offering gifts of American cigarettes, alcohol, and car rides into town, buddying up to the inhabitants of the space while making it clear that the police were very much aware of the fact that the participants were opposed to gentrification in the area. “We’re friends—you wouldn’t mess around and ruin our friendship, would you?” The same policemen were doing this with villagers in the area, inviting themselves to tea at villagers’ houses and lavishing them with gifts while gently reminding them that visiting the space up the hill was very much discouraged, that they could become *persona non grata* if they mingled with the folks living there. A horrific situation, to be sure. In such conditions, in which everybody is compelled to live in a permanent state of exception, enmeshed in elaborate networks of formal and informal surveillance, our friend told us that to many people, liberalism—the rule of law, a rule that would enforce private property, proper boundaries that they imagine would safeguard the individual from state powers—appeared to be the most radical thing that there was.

When friends ask us why “anti-capitalist” discourse and rhetoric seem so outlandish to people in Hong Kong, we must answer that this is very much a matter of context and circumstance. For Hong Kongers, capitalism represents enterprise, initiative, and self-reliance, which they juxtapose with the corrupt nepotism

reiterated this narrative. In addition, there is the fact that for many who continue to cross the border for work or other personal reasons, the independence of Hong Kong would not be a welcome development. There are a lot of people who simply want to see the “one country, two systems” stipulation that was outlined in the Basic Law observed and enforced.

For the benefit of foreign friends who are unfamiliar with the political and cultural climate here, we have to emphasize that—at least in our estimation—rumors about the impending demise of liberalism as a political culture are unfounded, at least as far as Hong Kong is concerned. We would go so far as to suggest that the logic of liberalism, understood as a form of intuitive “common sense,” may be stronger here than anywhere else in the world. Much of this has to do with the context that we elaborated upon in our previous interview, with the fact that this city was built by refugees from communist China. The following anecdote illuminates the ways in which this condition is not simply endemic to Hong Kong, but is shared with kin on the mainland as well.

At a panel on the subject of art and politics that took place a few years ago, one of us participated in a discussion with a dear friend from a certain punk rock capital in China, where resistance against gentrification and the construction of “ecological theme parks” is ongoing. Talking late into the night afterwards, over drinks and blunts, that friend began to expound upon the difficulties of speaking about anarchy in China. As Mao made so eloquently clear in his red notebooks and essays, the Communist Party is the anarchic force, the “constituent power” that transcends and enforces the *arche* as it sees fit, instituting a perpetual state of emergency for the sake of the revolution; consequently, quotidian life in China is “anarchic” on a mundane level. That is to say—when comrades in the West speak of “use” (in the sense in which Agamben employs the term in *The Use Of Bodies*) in reference to occupying plazas, throwing parties on the streets, and so on, this term loses its meaning in China when such “use” of roads and public thoroughfares in

Kok, and Yuen Long, all of which have been swept by clashes in the recent conflicts. Not having access to the real-time maps that are created for partisans, they are often not forewarned when these areas are being gassed. Consequently, they are forced to move somewhere else on their only day off.³ This would be an unfortunate but acceptable consequence of the struggle, if only protesters made some kind of effort to acknowledge this and communicate their sympathies to them.

Ordinarily, the situation of domestic workers goes without notice, despite the fact that so many families in the city employ them; hardly anyone affirms the brave, sustained protests they organize via their independent unions against the arrangements between their own governments, the employment agencies, and the labor department in this city. Their active support for and perceptive understanding of local social struggles goes unremarked. At the same time, participants in the movement against the extradition law go out of their way to solicit the sympathy of upstanding citizens of “the free world,” taking the time to explain the plight of Hong Kong to tourists arriving at the airport.

This is currently a major blind spot in the struggle. Having been left unexamined, it recently culminated in a grotesque and inexcusable campaign *against* domestic migrant workers hanging out in the public places where clashes have taken place. Over a period of weeks, LIHKG threads appeared asking why migrant workers were allowed to congregate and have picnics on the street while protesters were arrested and tortured for participating in “illegal assemblies.” Their tongue-and-cheek tone did not conceal the repulsive implications of their content. Why the double standard, these posters asked—shouldn’t we force these nonchalant, karaoke-singing aunties, enjoying themselves while protesters feared for their skins, to understand what kind of city they were living in?

³ By Hong Kong law, employers are only required to give their helpers one day off a week and many find ways to contravene this law.

Why were we being denied the license to protest when they could have parties on the street without ever having to submit a request to some government bureau?

All this nonsense came to a head a few days ago, when some complete idiots started pasting stickers on public thoroughfares and bridges stating that all foreign domestic workers are not welcome to hang out in public places without a license. These disgusting stickers represent the tragically stunted extent to which protesters have attempted to communicate with the sizable population of migrant workers whose plight nobody has taken the time to contemplate and ponder—before, during, and likely after this struggle. Admittedly, those who made and posted the stickers should not be considered representative of the movement at large, but at the same time, they have not been openly denounced in public.

The “order” that characterizes daily life in this society also reproduces the noxious sexist culture that has repeatedly reared its ugly head within the movement. Protesters have unearthed the Instagram profiles of policewomen and called them whores that they would like to violate; demonstrators taunt policemen by suggesting that their wives are out banging other men while they’re gassing people late at night; hot-blooded chest-beating male protesters prevent women from standing in the frontlines, or pledge on message boards to “defend their women” from being captured and raped by police forces. When news of sexual abuse and possible rapes in the police stations first spread and women on LIHKG put forward the idea of organizing women’s marches, men began to panic, worrying that maybe the women had it in their heads to march on their own without the protection of men. This led to the ludicrous spectacle of men swearing that even if they weren’t permitted to march alongside their sisters, that they would stand behind the march in full gear prepared to defend them to the end. That was their idea of militancy.

We don’t mention all this stuff to further the proliferation of “cancel culture,” which all too often results in sanctimonious disen-

agement, moral soapboxing, and the perpetuation of social stratification, none of which do anything to alter the social relationships that we are all entangled in. Rather, we want to acknowledge the mess we’re in and the fact that this mess is far more complicated than the simplistic narrative of an oppressed, victimized people pushed to the wall by a ruthless “communist” killing machine.

As long as examining these problems is treated as peripheral or demoralizing on the grounds that the most pressing exigency is to vanquish the Great Beast China, we will see little progress towards accomplishing the purported aim of this struggle, “liberating Hong Kong.”

When we communicated in June, you described an inchoate new social momentum, a sort of headless nationalist populism arising from the failures of past pacifist, democratic, and parliamentary movements. Have new leaders, new narratives, new internal structures of control emerged yet? Have new frameworks or horizons opened up for what people could fight for or imagine beyond national sovereignty?

No, things haven’t changed in a dramatic way since the last time we spoke. The general understanding is that those who take part in the movement have to speak in a unanimous, collective, and consensual voice, as opposed to a multiplicity of different, possibly dissensual ones.

In Telegram groups and message boards, one encounters the occasional voice calling for Hong Kong’s independence; while one cannot escape the sense that this desire is tacitly held by a good many participants in the struggle, they are often shouted down, for fear that the movement will lose sight of its immediate agenda (the five demands) and out of a general wariness of the dangers attendant to articulating this desire—as establishment politicians have repeatedly asserted that this struggle is not really “about” the five demands but is actually a “color revolution” organized by foreign powers and separatists, and the Chinese press have repeatedly