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Building self-determination without nationalism
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may move the struggle beyond nationalism
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turn of mass movements. But mass liberation also has no room for dogma and entails critically engaging with and struggling alongside the mass movement to increase its power of activity in its current conjuncture. Our principles of left internationalism and anti-discrimination aim toward the ever-increasing capacity of ordinary people to collectively think for themselves and democratically determine their own lives with others—a radically flexible and form-less political practice that has informed Lenin's revolutionary internationalism and Smith and Hill Collins' theory of autonomy.

Leong and Lee's film records a young protestor's speech at a rally after the LegCo siege, as he tearfully proclaims, "No matter where the movement ends up, at least we are alive to *bear witness* to these decaying times." In a similar vein, I recall James Baldwin's call for us, as artists, thinkers, and activists, to "bear witness to the truth." The left must struggle alongside the masses in the collective struggle for self-determination, not to reify national borders or set up layers of exclusion, but to witness a basic reality of democratic thinking that would stimulate and guide our internationalist commitments for a more equitable society for all.

Contents

boundaries of nationalism. Hong Kong still suffers from structural oppression of its minorities, like the hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers whose basic rights are continually exploited by both Hong Kong and their home governments, or the Mainland migrants who fill swaths of low-income jobs while facing discrimination. But this movement shows that self-determination—this unstable improvisation of "Hong Kong identity"—may offer a framework of liberation even for people in the margins, many of whom don the same black masks and feel connected to the larger struggle. The unlikeliest actors have been improvising and reshaping the form of Hong Kong self-determination, at times, into something radical and levelling.

Self-determination, not dogma

James Leong and Lynn Lee's 2020 documentary *If We Burn* gives a raw, unfiltered glimpse of the tumultuous decision-making process of the protestors as they were charging into the LegCo building on July 1: pro-democracy lawmakers attempting to physically block the more radical protestors from breaking in at one point; the protestors spending half an hour wandering around the building figuring out what symbolic statement to make; the disconnection between those outside the building and those inside about whether to occupy and lock themselves in or not.

It looks like mob rule par excellence, but the glimpses of radical democracy are undeniable. No bureaucrats or police were in sight, as anonymous protestors argued tactics through sweat and tears as they deface the building's stately facade of anti-democratic rule. This is Hong Kong self-determination at work, and for a moment, anyone could speak.

The radical left, indeed, should develop its own programs and principles for liberation, not be allured by every twist and

It should never be the strategy of the local and international left to embolden the nativist and nationalist sentiments in the movement. But we must also never forget about the powerful democratic impulse that characterizes a people's right to self-determination—a radicalism that may exceed the lure of ethnonationalism and separatism. Black feminist writer Barbara Smith, writing of Black lesbian women's self-organizing in the U.S., notes the difference between "autonomy" and "separatism," identifying the former with the capacity to deal with "a multiplicity of issues… a solid base of strength with those with whom we share identity and/or political commitment."[4]

While the experience of Black lesbian women, of course, cannot be entirely correlated with those of Hongkongers, Smith's insight about political autonomy points to a key vision of concrete socialist practice: lived autonomous decision-making by communities can be done in coalition and solidarity with others' struggles. Patricia Hill Collins' gloss on Smith's passage years later in *Black Feminist Thought* underscores this sense that "group autonomy fosters effective coalition with other groups… although Black feminist thought originates within Black women's communities, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups."[5]

Given Hong Kong's position at the nexus of multiple cultural and political influences, Smith and Hill Collins may offer a flexible and effective model for a powerful politics of self-determination. Practicing autonomous politics does not need to be linked to national boundaries, and it must be consistently improvising, drawing from the power of different identities, especially those in the margins, to increase the overall power of the mass movement.

Any class-based solidarity must take into account a people's messy and non-prescribed road to self-determination, beyond the

[4] Barbara Smith et al., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xl.

[5] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Hyman, 1990), 36.

> "*The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content. There the phrase went beyond the content—here the content goes beyond the phrase.*" – Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)

For ten months and going, Hong Kong has seen its largest social movement yet with mobilizations against an extradition bill that threatens to subject dissident Hongkongers to the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s jurisdictional system. Previously under British rule since 1842, the city was allowed to maintain its own governmental system after the Handover in 1997, albeit under Chinese sovereignty in accordance with the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. But civil liberties continue to be threatened and class disparity deepens.

With a fifth of the population below the poverty line in the world's most expensive housing market, young people are increasingly stripped of job security and social benefits. Citizens only contribute a partial voice to the elections of the city's highest decision-making body, the Legislative Council (LegCo), and highest elected official, the Chief Executive, which are largely determined by corporate elites and pro-Beijing figures.

The recent introduction of the extradition bill was a breaking point. It ignited a whole new generation of protestors, many of whom were born with little to no memory of colonial rule. They have seen their own and their elders' economic and political rights eviscerated under an increasingly authoritarian neoliberal regime. Though the bill was subsequently retracted, the protestors' other

demands—including universal suffrage, release of their arrested comrades, and establishment of an independent commission to investigate police brutality—have not been met.

Despite these conditions, the left has struggled to maintain power or relevance within the mass movement. Left and labor movements have been traditionally weak in Hong Kong, and the establishment's association with "communism" and "the left" has made it nearly impossible to organize an anti-capitalist, worker-centered opposition under any left or socialist banner. In fact, Hongkongers seldom refer to (let alone understand!) the left-right political spectrum, and the city's core political marker is one's allegiance or opposition to the Beijing-controlled Hong Kong government.

Leftist collectives do exist in the movement, like the anarchist Autonomous 8A, the workers' mutual aid group Workers Committee (□□□), Student Labour Action Coalition (□□□□), and grassroots tenant organizing collective Old District Autonomy Advancement Group (ODAAG) (□□□□□□□□□). Local publications and media outlets like Borderless Movement (□□□□□), Grass Media Action(□□.□□.□□), v-artivist (□□□), The Owl (□□), and Reignite Press (□□) continue to promote important left-leaning perspectives. Many of them, especially the minority of leftists in the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), have been struggling to make interventions within the highly heterogeneous opposition camp.†

The opposition (also known as the "pro-democracy" or "pan-democratic" camp) has traditionally been led by liberal democrats, many of whom had helped negotiate the Sino-British settlement leading up to the Handover and had emphasized support for mainland dissidents. But their ideological hegemony, marked by political compromises with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has been upended in the wake of the 2014 Umbrella Movement—the last large-scale set of protests after the PRC's

year, abstained from prescribing a single, cohesive horizon of self-determination from the left. Whatever vision of self-determination can only articulate a formal set of principles of which the actual content remains to be enacted and practiced.

And in this movement, the struggles borne from this in-between city have emerged in myriad forms that have threatened again and again its ingrained neoliberal ethos. Newly-elected left-leaning district councilor Chu Kong-wai notes how this movement has challenged Hong Kongers to think in terms of radical solidarity with others in need, rather than personal gain, though "these anti-capitalist moments are in competition with the more reactionary elements, and we have yet to see which pole will become more dominant."

Indeed, the left must enter into this paradoxical space that is Hong Kong's movement for self-determination, to struggle with the progressive and reactionary elements within the masses of protestors, to show that building links between movements is no idealism, but a rational extension of the movement's material constitution.

Internationalist unity between the working-classes and the marginalized, of course, should be a central vision for all leftists. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the lens of self-determination as a crutch for Hong Kong to connect to other mass struggles. Lausan's Listen Chen provides a powerful critique of how the movement's uncritical dedication to self-determination precludes meaningful solidarity with the Mainland working class and flirts with Western imperialist elements. While these critiques are entirely correct, Chen limits "national belonging" and "independence" as the only available pathways for self-determination. In doing so, they rightly critique the reactionary, "cultural-national" forms of self-determination as Lenin describes—only to prematurely limit the different avenues from this demand and preclude the radical capacities for self-determination inherent in the mass movement that underscores democratic political practice.

the vision of democratic self-rule and self-determination more tangible than any of their forebears have as they physically held on, if only for a brief hour, the city's center of power on July 1.

Leung, now a graduate student at the University of Washington, returned that summer to participate in the struggle. He famously tore off his mask that night in the LegCo room in front of the world through the journalists' cameras, in a desperate attempt to give a narrative and legitimacy to the protestors' occupation: now that we are holding LegCo, what future does Hong Kong's self-determined generation want?

The total spontaneity of the LegCo struggle and its lack of answers do not necessarily imply a regress in the praxis of self-determination, though the movement has its limitations indeed. Rampant xenophobic attitudes toward mainland Chinese continue to plague the movement's ranks, and the city's class disparity and the excesses of neoliberal policies remain little-discussed in the mainstream political discourse. Despite this, the freedom and self-activity of mass action, driven by the determination to take ownership of one's political conditions, have also opened up new practices of radical mutual aid and solidarity.

In other words, though the established left has long lost control over the discourse of self-determination in Hong Kong, and today barely exists as a coherent political force, the framework of self-determination continues to be remade and improvised by new activists. This may even remake the terms on which the radical left can be sustained, holding open new avenues of building a democratic future.

Left-wing alternatives today

It is in this context that Lausan (□□) Collective, an explicitly left-wing collective of Hong Kong and Chinese activists on the ground and in the diaspora formed in the late summer of last

National Committee introduced a motion to explicitly pre-screen candidates for Hong Kong's Chief Executive election.

Localism, an often-confused mix of political tendencies centering around the interests of local Hongkongers and their political self-determination, was the Umbrella Movement's reaction to the entrenched political orientation of the pan-democratic camp: a liberal-democratic focus on universal, democratic values for both mainland Chinese and Hongkongers. Some localist supporters even argue for the prioritization of local Hongkongers' interests over those of mainland immigrants, who are seen as threats to local resources and Hongkongers' distinct cultural identity.

These sentiments can turn into reactionary and xenophobic demands, treating mainlanders as the key problem for local Hongkongers by filling up the city's already-thinning pool of jobs and other social resources. These positions occasionally put some of the more radical localists at odds with the pan-democrats' conservative, electorally-minded political tactics, though for the most part, both continue to be close allies in the opposition.

Localist sentiments have continued to gain traction since then and have become the dominant political ideology of protestors today, with self-determination remaining a key demand for the movement. But what self-determination means for localists is still highly unstable. It does not necessarily mean national independence. Polls show that support for Hongkongers' national independence remains low—only one out of every six people. In other words, this protest movement is only beginning to define Hong Kong's movement for self-determination, constantly improvising its limits.

In the face of this formlessness, a common response across the political spectrum has been to prescribe its limits, in effect putting brakes on the radical and transformative nature of the demand for self-determination. Though the left has been sidelined in these protests, our role should neither be simply tailing these demands nor opposing them. We must understand self-determination's com-

plex history and roots in the city, and amplify its democratic power in its current manifestation in today's movement.

Localism beyond Lenin

Many progressives and leftists have developed reductive understandings of this struggle. *Socialist Review*'s Lawrence Wong, for example, has characterized Hong Kong self-determination as a "reactionary demand…a cover for independence." Indeed, Hong Kong's entangled history vis-à-vis China makes it inaccurate to simply treat it like any other self-determination struggle, as if it were comparable to Rojava. By the same token, writing off self-determination as purely reactionary goes too far and ignores the nuances of Hong Kong society and cultural identity. The subtext for Wong's position is, of course, Lenin's theory of self-determination, succinctly summarized by Paul Le Blanc:

> *[F]irst, that only the freedom to secede makes possible free and voluntary union, association, cooperation and, in the long term, fusion between nations; second, that only the recognition by the workers' movement in the oppressor nation of the right of the oppressed nation to self-determination can help to eliminate the hostility and suspicion of the oppressed and unite the proletariat of both nations in the international struggle against the bourgeoisie.*

However, the case of Hong Kong is an exception that does not neatly fit within this description. Lenin's analysis does not account for cases in which a territory is detached by imperialism and subsequently returned after a century or more of immense cultural and economic development. The city's complicated sense of removal and identification with China makes it such that the most transfor-

nationalism" in fact limits Hongkongers' material interests by pitting people against one another, instead of uniting their power and interests to oppose the CCP, not to mention the Hong Kong and Chinese capitalist elites that the party promotes when it sees fit.

In the same issue, we find Joseph Lian Yi-zheng taking an unexpected detour to Stalin's theory of nationalism in which he makes a similarly nativist determination to define the formal contours of the Hong Kong identity. Stalin prescribes highly specific requirements—"common language, territory, economic life and 'psychic formation'"—for what constitutes as a nation, and ethnic communities that fail to qualify are considered "national minorities."

This theory of nationalism, in other words, assigns self-determination to specific ethnic movements with a set of preset criteria, in contrast to Lenin's, for whom the conditions for self-determination dynamically mediate between the shifting forms of autonomous mass movements and democratic internationalism.

Indeed, it is also unsurprising that the most dogmatic and anti-Marxist thinker of nationalism on the left would prove useful for Lian's reactionary nationalism, which applies Stalin's four-fold criteria to Hong Kong in an earlier essay of his own. That is, despite the kinds of exceptions (e.g. Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers, who Lien parenthetically notes are "too few to discuss"), and historical amnesia of the tight exchange between Hong Kong and China, needed to make his case. Lian makes no attempt to clarify Stalin's infamously vague criterion of "psychic formation," nor explain what that means for Hong Kong beyond anti-Mainland sentiment as Hongkongers' defensive, culturally unique stance toward years of "Chinese" violation of political and cultural autonomy.

Despite *Undergrad*'s resolve to bring "Hong Kong nationalism" into mainstream political discourse, what self-determination means seems more abstract than ever, let alone its connection to nationalism, by last year. Yet, the young protestors have made

strength, but would be our greatest ally, and fight with us to take back their sovereignty from the state." However optimistic and impossible, this demand indeed aims to reform and intensify the struggle, articulating a vision of autonomy that looks outward to internationalist unity.

Defining 'Hong Kong nationalism'

Thirty years later, the discourse of self-determination has re-emerged in new terms. The influential February 2014 issue of Hong Kong University Student Union's journal *Undergrad* published a series of essays on the topic of "the Hong Kong people/nation (□□□□)". Published just half a year before the Umbrella Movement, the issue was edited by Brian Leung Kai-ping, who would later emerge as a key figure in last year's protests after revealing his identity during a speech he gave at the valiant occupation of LegCo on July 1.

Leung's contribution borrows French philosopher Ernest Renan's theory of "civic nationalism" to articulate a Hong Kong nationalism that transcends ethnic boundaries. Leung's nationalism doubles down on a liberal democratic notion of citizenship that only includes those who "put Hong Kong interests first" and "defend local culture and people's interests."

Leung's imperviousness to Hong Kong's class dynamics and overdetermined place in global capital in fact upholds local autonomy at the expense of social and economic reality. Indeed, he is right that the ideology that "we are all Chinese" has "lost its purchase" in the city. But ultimately, his insistence on establishing exclusionary criteria for Hong Kong citizenship sacrifices the radicality of self-determination in order to pessimistically play by the rules of the faulty, existing economic status quo.

Instead of fundamentally restructuring how social resources can be more equitably distributed for all Hongkongers, Leung's "civic

mative kind of political consciousness in Hong Kong grows from an affiliation with the local, rather than ethnic or national identity.

Existing in the gaps of ready-made theoretical paradigms, Hong Kong's framework of self-determination appears slippery to both its participants and its onlookers. Indeed, localism at times bleeds into more rigid demands, like the minority position of Hong Kong separatist independence, dominated by the more visibly right-wing and pro-Western parties that sprang from Umbrella. But Hong Kong's postcolonial condition always threatens the limits of ethnonationalism, and the boundaries of "Hong Kong identity" remain highly protean. Cross-racial solidarity exists in instances like the demonstrations of support for the movement in Chungking Mansion in October of last year, involving a hodgepodge of ethnic minorities from Indian migrants to African traders. Many Mainlanders are ostracized in this movement, while many other mainland Chinese have expressed solidarity with the movement both in China and abroad.

Hong Kong's leftist past

In the face of these complexities, the left has long been seen in Hong Kong as either synonymous with the CCP establishment or simply too dogmatic to have any relevance for Hongkongers' aspirations. But in fact, some of the first to think through the framework of self-determination actually came from the radical left—a history fully disconnected from today's movement.

Some of the earliest instances of demands for self-determination emerged from worker-student organizing debates in the anti-imperialist and social movement upsurge of the early 1970s. In those discussions, the pro-CCP Maoists, in an unsteady alliance with other left-leaning groups against the colonial government at the time, reportedly accused other activists of promoting "Hong Kong independence" at one point.

In the 1980s, around the time when the British and Chinese state elites met behind closed doors to negotiate the future of Hong Kong, small, radical left formations like October Review (□□□□), Revolutionary Marxist League (□□□), and Sun Miu Group (□□□)[1] argued for the right of ordinary masses of Hongkongers to democratically decide their own future. In a joint statement by October Review and Revolutionary Marxist League in 1984, the writers demanded that, upon the Handover, the Chinese government should allow for "a generally elected, full-powered General Assembly" wherein "the Hong Kong people should grasp the opportunity to mobilize and strive for democratic self-rule."[2]

While the authors affirm Chinese sovereignty over the city, they emphasize that Hongkongers' have the "full right to decide on *how* to recover sovereignty" and "decide Hong Kong's future social system and policies" in a way that builds the socialist struggle along with working-class counterparts in Mainland China. In other words, they stop short of defining what Chinese sovereignty should actually look like for Hongkongers, while still working within that framework: the point is that only Hongkongers themselves, through democratic process, can give form and content to the material reality of Chinese sovereignty in the city.

Similarly, Sun Miu's statement in 1983 emphasizes Hongkongers' right to self-determination (□□□) as a way to reject bourgeois separatism and empower the voices of all Hongkongers, not just political elites, to determine their own political future in the eve of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. For Sun Miu, self-determination does not have to be a bourgeois demand and can serve as the basis for class struggle. Central to this analysis is Lenin's idea that even

[1] Sun Miu later changed its name to Pioneer Group (□□□) in 1994, and still continues to infrequently publish new materials and archive older work on https://workerdemo-hk.com/

[2] "Joint Statement on Hong Kong Accord: Hong Kong Trotskyists analyze China-Britain Agreement," *Intercontinental Press* Vol. 22, No. 23, Dec 10, 1984, 742–3.

though "full political democracy" cannot be entirely achievable under capitalism and imperialism, revolutionary leftists should not

> *reject the immediate and the most determined struggle for all these demands—such a rejection would only play into the hands of the bourgeoisie and reaction, but on the contrary, it follows that these demands must be formulated and put through in a revolutionary and not a reformist manner, going beyond the bounds of bourgeois legality, breaking them down, going beyond speeches in parliaments and verbal protests, and drawing the masses into decisive action, extending and intensifying the struggle for every fundamental democratic demand up to a direct proletarian onslaught on the bourgeoise.*[3]

The most immediate demand for Hong Kong, as a city in transition caught between two administrations, was to have a seat in the table in this process—to have its own recognized voice, regardless of national or ethnic determinations. Following Lenin, Sun Miu members did not separate themselves from this demand, but intensified it according to left, internationalist principles. Self-determination that links up to other self-determination struggles in both the Chinese and Taiwanese working-classes should be a practical necessity, since "there is no hope of victory if we just use the power of five million Hong Kongers against the CCP, which leads over ten billion."

"If Hongkongers… publically aim to return power to all people, that would empower the people of China and Taiwan to struggle in solidarity," the authors write. "Then, the ten billion Chinese would not be swayed by the CCP bureaucracy to oppress Hongkongers'

[3] VI. Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination," *National Liberation, Socialism, and Imperialism: Selected Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 112.