

Hong Kong's Fight for Life - It is imperative that the international left work with Hong Kongers

Friday 9 August 2019, by [CHAN Wilfred](#) (Date first published: 8 August 2019).

Hong Kong has justified its existence as an interface between Western neoliberal globalism and China's statist authoritarian capitalism. China no longer needs the city to play that role; Hong Kongers desperately need an alternative.

On the sweltering first Monday of August, Hong Kong residents—from bankers to broadcasters to bus drivers—launched a general strike, leaving thousands of normally hectic businesses barren. The city's meticulously on-time subway network was crippled as protesters jammed doors for hours; even the international airport was nearly empty as workers stayed home, grounding hundreds of flights, with ripple effects across the world. It was a desperate bid for a breakthrough after more than nine brutal weeks of massive anti-government demonstrations, originally sparked by an extradition bill that could expose Hong Kong citizens to the Chinese legal system.

By mid-morning, Carrie Lam—the city's obstinate, Beijing-backed leader—made clear she would do nothing to defuse the political emergency that has now seen more than 2 million on the streets, multiple suicides, and the arrests of nearly 600 people, including many students, who may each face up to a decade in prison on rioting charges. Instead, at a press conference—as her police battalions violently dispersed demonstrators—she defended China's sovereignty over the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and slammed the movement for “trying to topple Hong Kong.” By nightfall, protesters had also been attacked by armed thugs and hit by cars. Journalists were bleeding. Police reported firing over 800 rounds of tear gas on Monday alone.

More than any previous Hong Kong protest, the 2019 anti-extradition movement embodies bitter anguish over the city's place in a world that no longer seems to need it. In the twenty-two years since the former British colony's sovereignty was transferred to China, Hong Kong has justified its in-between existence by interfacing Western neoliberal globalism with China's statist authoritarian capitalism. Life under this coercive bargain has not been easy: the same state-business collusion that makes Hong Kong a famed financial hub—and a prime outlet for mainland Chinese capital—has also left the city with one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, where one in five people live below the poverty line, where skyrocketing rents mean the average college graduate must now save their entire salary for thirteen years just to afford a down payment for an apartment. But even ordinary Hong Kongers believed that their culture, language, and ways of life might be kept precariously intact as long as the city continued being a “window to the world” for China's elite. That was surely preferable to being swallowed whole.

Now that window is closing. China no longer depends on Hong Kong, which means the West no longer does either. It feels almost absurd to recall the hopes of Hong Kong's progressive politicians of the 1990s—a time when Hong Kong's GDP equaled as much as one-fourth of China's—that the city might one day bring liberal democracy to the mainland. Today China's GDP is over thirty times

greater than Hong Kong's, and China is the one remodeling Hong Kong in its own image. In the last two decades, Beijing has systematically captured Hong Kong's most powerful institutions, paid off oligarchs, consolidated monopolies, and rammed through white-elephant infrastructure projects—recycling the machinery left by Hong Kong's colonial ex-rulers to achieve its authoritarian ambitions.

Hong Kongers have responded to these changes with a mix of indignant protests and resigned accommodation, while holding out hope for an eventual political solution. The heartbreaking failure of the 2014 Umbrella Movement—in which protesters staged massive street occupations for seventy-nine days to demand universal suffrage—dealt a shocking blow to this expectation. The increasingly merciless police violence, publicly endorsed by Beijing, that has met this year's protests confirms Hong Kongers' most dreaded fear: that their lives are irrelevant to the central authorities' plan for the city's future.

There is a common saying among some protesters: 香港人自己救自己 —loosely, “We alone can save our Hong Kong.” Like so many Hong Kong slogans, the phrase speaks in multiple registers: it is both a rallying call and a pained observation of the city's existential isolation. In the same way, it points to the impotence of global neoliberalism and its empty promises to safeguard “freedom” in (wealthy) societies everywhere. Contrary to China's propagandistic accusations that the Hong Kong protests are being propped up by nefarious Western agents, there is little indication the West craves any involvement. Even as protesters have made desperate attempts at “people's diplomacy”—flying foreign flags, buying global newspapers ads, lobbying officials—British and American politicians have offered no more than a couple tweets, muted statements, and occasionally, symbolic legislation, much of it undermined by Donald Trump blurting out what others have been too polite to say out loud: that the protests are “riots,” and “China could stop them if they wanted.”

That the globalist gods won't even answer the distress signals of this Asian capitalist citadel should be the clearest example yet of what oppressed people around the world have long known: neoliberalism has never been a framework for transnational solidarity as much as a self-serving logic of global exploitation. To the extent that conscious observers, in Hong Kong and elsewhere, harbor reluctance to give up on the post-Cold War fantasy of free-market world peace, it is due to the lack of viable alternative frameworks. The crisis in Hong Kong demonstrates that neoliberalism is declining not because progressives are winning, but because it is being supplanted by a newer, more efficient ideology of authoritarian capitalist violence that is consolidating power everywhere against an alarmingly fragmented opposition. And it shows just how dangerous the world has become due to the lack of a coherent international left position.

For today's Hong Kongers, there are no obvious escape routes, no postcolonial models of self-determination, that would set the city free from the grip of Chinese state power. Even the protests' most popular slogan, 香港人自己救自己 (often translated as “liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times”) is ideologically muddled: the verb 救 can also mean “restore” or even “retrogress,” making it unclear whether it looks forward or backward. To pull through, Hong Kong's people must find a way to reclaim their historical agency and develop a positive vision for their own home. At the same time, it is imperative that the international left work with Hong Kongers to form a new analysis that does not simply transpose regurgitated Western frameworks onto Hong Kong's condition, but dares to reimagine an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian politics of survival from the perspective of this in-between place.

To do so would require remaking the world. This kind of solidarity from American leftists would include disestablishing the United States' key role—from the Marshall Plan through the Washington Consensus and beyond—in creating and maintaining a postwar geopolitical system that has intentionally overridden the aspirations of Third World self-determination with the logic of global neoliberalism. British leftists can start by demanding their government take responsibility for the

damage wrought by their former colonial systems, which have become potent tools of extraction and oppression in the hands of the new authoritarians.

A tiny border city of 7 million people cannot singlehandedly dismantle the hegemonies that ensnare it. But its struggle at this critical moment should be an urgent call for all leftists to help undo those structures—while rethinking the organization of societies beyond the capitalist model of nation-states. Then, perhaps, the people of Hong Kong would be able to join in building what Bernie Sanders has called the “international progressive front”—and, as he writes, “do everything that we can to oppose all of the forces, whether unaccountable government power or unaccountable corporate power, who try to divide us up and set us against each other.” From the death of this neoliberal city, an emancipatory new history could be born.

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P.S.

- Dissent, August 8, 2019;
https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/hong-kongs-fight-for-life
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