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Hong Kong

Why 'Generation Catastrophe' is rising up

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There's a construction boom in Hong Kong, but no-one is getting paid to build the barricades everywhere around town. The youth insurrection is not only the biggest uprising in China since the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, it is one of the most explosive student radicalisations of modern times. The depth of their rage, and willingness to risk everything in a fight that most think they can't win, is almost beyond words. "Unrelenting" is the closest approximation.

Activists believe that mainland police are being rotated through the riot squad to quell the protests. They say that behind the scenes, the police and the mafia are carrying out extra-judicial killings and raping young women activists. Cops have started to use live rounds and have promised to unleash greater levels of violence to bring the situation under control. And news of the People's Liberation Army emerging from their barracks to clear Baptist University students' blockade of Waterloo Road – a not-too-subtle warning to cease and desist the disruption – was widely viewed.

Yet on Monday, after a weekend of the most intense fighting so far between activists and police, pitched battles continued to rage in Hung Hom around the Polytechnic University, which has been under an intense police siege. In neighbouring suburbs Yau Ma Tei, Jordan and Tsim Sha Tsui, where roads everywhere were blocked, it was the same story. In some places, it wasn't the back-and-forth of last week, when protesters and police fought largely at a distance – but street brawls at the margins as cops made arrests and activists de-arrests. Central district on Hong Kong Island has also exploded in protest, while occupations continue at Hong Kong University, Baptist University and, reportedly, City University. Incoming police chief Chris Tang Pingkeung, due to be sworn in today, is quoted in the South China Morning Post as saying that the police force has effectively lost control.

The last week at the Polytechnic is illustrative of the lengths the young people here will go to make the point that is scrawled in graffiti around the city: "If we burn, you burn with us". For days, hundreds of young women and men raced frantically to barricade every entrance and exit. In the canteen they stockpiled noodles, biscuits, muesli bars, and bottles of water. Along with their supporters, they took over the retail shops and turned them into 24-hour communal kitchens. They set up medical stations with boxes and boxes of supplies. They collected for distribution hundreds of gas masks, goggles, fresh clothes, towels and soap. They armed themselves with bins full of broken paving bricks and garden stones, baseball bats, hammers and metal bars pilfered from railings along the roadsides. And they built an arsenal of Molotov cocktails, gas bombs, flour bombs and dye bombs. By Saturday afternoon, there were hundreds of petrol bombs to feed the front lines – and for the next 36 hours, a group of about 30 young people worked tirelessly to keep production going as the war raged around them.

"The rule is dead, and our life is alight", Tin, a recent graduate from another university, said as he rested outside PolyU's smashed up administration building. "The world has been reversed. You are supposed to follow the rules and that makes things work smoothly. But now the rules are the problem; we have an obligation to protest." Tin is a member of what Au Loong Yu, a respected veteran activist and author, calls "Generation Catastrophe", otherwise known as the '97 generation – those born several years each side of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. "This generation is very unlucky", Au says. "At first, the older generation couldn't understand – why are they so without hope? Why do they talk about revolution? It's because they sense the catastrophe. Like Greta Thunberg and the climate, but much more intense in some ways. This generation has continuous bad news."

Generation Catastrophe is, like all generations living under capitalism, economically and socially alienated. There is extreme wealth polarisation and many jobs are menial and low paid. But the political issues, Au says, are decisive in this rebellion. Interviews with activists in the movement over the last week seem to back this up. I've asked every

young person I have spoken to about the impact of inequality, house prices and job prospects, but I've found them to be myopically focussed on the political demands, particularly universal suffrage and an investigation into police violence. And while some are arguing to add a sixth demand – for the sacking of the entire police force – there are no signs of the demands being broadened to include social grievances.

The rebellion is not animated by the same issues that have inspired young people in the US and Britain – poor health care, high student debt, high unemployment and so on – to rally behind Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, for example. Nor is it like the Arab Spring, which, while democratic in aspiration, was underpinned by class inequality and economic immiseration. Here there are problems, but unemployment is low, the health service is good and, while there is unease about the price of apartments, public housing abounds.

The issue is impending totalitarianism. In the West, we have anxieties about the rise of figures such as Donald Trump and the mainstreaming of the far right over the last five years. This pales in comparison to the situation in Hong Kong. By law, the city will be subsumed under China's authoritarian dictatorship by 2047 – the end of the 50-year transition period, when "one country, two systems" ceases to operate. But the Chinese Communist Party is fast tracking the transition – it is integrating Hong Kong as quickly as possible through its control of nominations for the executive branch of government, through its influence over the composition of the legislature and through its effective control of the police and the city bureaucracy through the appointment of Beijing loyalists. This is what the young people are raging against.

Local factors also help to explain the apolitical nature of the movement, which is not quite the same as the sort of "anti-political" moods in the West resulting from the long-term decomposition of centrist parties and the decline of the union movement. The mainstream democratic forces in Hong Kong, the so-called pan-democrats, have been discredited in recent years. But the main issue is that Hong Kong is transitioning from a bourgeois colonial "democracy" to a form of state capitalism widely regarded as communism. Under the circumstances, it is next to impossible for the left to grow – after all, "communism" is what everyone is afraid of. But the absence of a recognisable left should not inform Western attitudes towards the rebellion. All its demands are ones the left should support. The movement may be messy, but it could not be otherwise, given the history and the circumstances.

There is a widespread belief that Beijing will prevail, which gives the uprising a distinct mood. Unlike the Western student rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s which built the last solid left wing generation and had slogans of hope figuring a new world – "All power to the imagination!", "Be realistic, demand the impossible!", for example – the spirit here feels vengeful, tied not to visions of a new society of equality and liberation, but reflecting the almost hopeless task of clinging to something imperfect before inevitably falling under the heel of something much worse. There is more bitterness and reflexive defiance than hope in the content of "If we burn, you burn with us" and "Liberty or death".

This extraordinary rage, manifest in the destruction of symbols of Chinese capitalism in the riots in the more working class suburbs, is precisely what has rallied behind them a huge section of the population, which continues to offer support to this city-wide uprising. One small example happened on Sunday: before police surrounded the Polytechnic on all sides to prevent anyone leaving while they gassed the place, an armoured vehicle approaching the protesters was hit by a Molotov. On a corner at the rear, a group of a dozen older locals walking past started cheering. One of them joined the young people digging up paving bricks, which were being smashed with hammers to use as projectiles.

There is, of course, talk about US influence. High ranking Beijing officials have accused the movement of being another attempted "colour revolution" – a movement purportedly for democracy but in reality just an intrigue to install a government favourable to Washington. Certainly, the students are groping around for allies, and many don't see any that are powerful enough, except perhaps the US. But the idea that the US can be a saviour is primarily a

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product of desperation, not a considered political analysis. And it certainly doesn't mean the US state is in a position to influence events. Any honest witness would be quickly disabused of such a notion if they saw firsthand what is going on: a widespread grass roots rebellion clearly reliant on the resources it can muster locally.

As gas and dyed water from the cannon rained on activists outside on Sunday night, medics worked overtime inside the campus tending to the parade of injured being carried up the entrance stairs. In one of the tutorial rooms turned into makeshift medical centres, a text from the library was abandoned temporarily: Ethics. It may not be Marxism, but the activists here are putting theory into practice. Even if the students recognised that an important potential ally is the mainland working class, they have incredibly limited means of reaching it. Perhaps workers across the border, in the Pearl River Delta industrial zones, would be inspired to act in solidarity if they witnessed the rebellion. But more likely, and perhaps Hong Kong's ultimate hope, is that those workers rise in their own interests and test the cohesion of the Chinese state.

The East Timorese, for example, were able to free themselves from Indonesian domination only because a revolution in Java loosened the Indonesian military's grip on the archipelago. The problem for the young rebels here is that the Chinese state is vastly more powerful and cohesive than was the Indonesian state in 1999. The students understand its power, but they are not going to die waiting for ripe conditions: they willed a one-day general strike and delivered a week of insurrection. That in itself was an enormous victory. And, as the streets yesterday attested, they are not done yet.

Late on Sunday, when police through loudspeakers warned that everyone would be gassed, sprayed with water cannon and charged as criminals if they did not disperse, the Polytechnic occupiers respond by playing the opening notes of Beethoven's Für Elise over the top of them. Not only do they brawl, they do so with panache. Generation Catastrophe is showing the world how to resist.

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