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Hong Kong: Social Imaginaries and Post-Colonial Identities in the Umbrella Revolution

Hong Kong: Imaginarios sociales e identidades postcoloniales en la Revolución de las Sombrillas

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse to what extent demands for democracy apropos of the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong are the result of postcolonial determinations. We suggest that this is part of social discourses founded on narratives of cultural difference, portraying a distinctive Hong Kong's identity in contrast to Mainland China. Even though we recognise the influence of networked transnational movements in this movement, we establish that there is a postcolonial strategic essentialism guiding the demands for participatory democracy in Hong Kong.

This article is organised in three sections. First, we present the Umbrella Revolution characteristics, organisation, and demands. In the second part, we introduce a theoretical analy-

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sis about the existence of a particular social imaginary emanated from the island's post-colonial condition. In the third section, we elaborate about collective actions in the light of the New Social Movements theory. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the insistence on including a postcolonial route as to enhance the understanding of this kind of mass mobilisations, since it allows the aggregation of local features toward comprehending the formation and development of social movements in the Global South.

Keywords
Postcolonialism, social imaginaries, social movements, Hong Kong, Umbrella Revolution.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la relación entre determinantes postcoloniales en Hong Kong y las demandas democráticas de la Revolución de las Sombrillas. Éstas parten de discursos basados en narrativas de diferenciación cultural que muestran a Hong Kong identitariamente distinto con respecto a la China Continental. Si bien reconocemos la influencia de movimientos sociales transnacionales, establecemos que aquí existe un esencialismo estratégico poscolonial guiando demandas de democracia participativa.

En la primera parte del ensayo presentamos las características, organización y demandas del movimiento. Después hacemos una revisión teórica sobre la condición postcolonial de la isla y la creación de imaginarios sociales dentro del movimiento. Incluimos también una discusión sobre acciones colectivas a la luz de la teoría de los nuevos movimientos sociales. Finalmente concluimos con la insistencia de incluir una ruta poscolonial para comprender este tipo de movilizaciones, dado que permite la integración de aspectos locales hacia una compresión holística de la formación y el desarrollo de movimientos sociales en el sur global.

Palabras clave
Postcolonialismo, imaginarios sociales, movimientos sociales, Hong Kong, Revolución de las Sombrillas.

Introduction

In September 2014, pro-democracy mass protests broke out in the streets of Hong Kong. These demonstrations were driven first by university students and scholars, but soon spread throughout several areas of the city and had an unprecedented reach. The demonstrators demanded respect of the right to elect the next Chief Executive, the highest governmental post in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) democratically. The protests were the result of the Beijing's government announcement on the possibility of preapproving all of the Chief Executive candidates in the 2017 elections. The pro-democracy activists noted that this ruling did not correspond to the promise of universal suffrage established in the Hong Kong Basic Law ratified in 2007 by the National People's Congress, the highest legislative body in China.

Even though the rise of social movements in Hong Kong is not new at all, the spread and reach of these protests took on an exceptional dimension, being probably the main political challenge faced by the Chinese government since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Kozlowska, 2014). The so-called Umbrella Revolution aroused in many citizens of Hong Kong new ways of thinking about political affairs.[3] Before these demonstrations, and similar to other cosmopolitan and global cities around the world, most young citizens of Hong Kong were more worried about their lives, careers, and personal responsibilities than political participation and active citizenship. It was something similar to the case of Chinese megalopolises such as Shanghai and Beijing where a kind of "consumer democracy" have been promoted, inspired by the neoliberal individualism of the West, to avoid student protests such as the Tiananmen events in 1989 (Zhen, 2001).

This movement changed the current political scene in Hong Kong: it captured most media headlines, and awaken citizen participation persuading people to challenge Chinese central authority for democratic concessions (Shultziner, 2014). Thus, Despite the fact that most of the Hong Kong population is not properly against the current electoral system, the claims for full democracy by the youth was so strong that it influenced vast sectors of the society (Kurata, 2015).

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3 The Umbrella Revolution nickname is due to the use of umbrellas by students to protect themselves from the pepper spray used by the Hong Kong police to break up the protests (Iyengar, 2014).

Different media have interpreted the Umbrella Revolution as a genuine search to counteract democratic deficits and as a desire for building a more just and inclusive society. Nonetheless, we suggest that in order to understand this movement, it is necessary to take into account social and historical particularities in Hong Kong. For example, their sense of identity that is different and distinctive from that of Mainland China; their historical roots inherited from the British colonisation; and their *sui generis* character as part of a unique administrative region. Hence, even as these demonstrations happen in the broader context of contemporary *altermundialisation* movements on a global scale, we propose that the postcolonial tone present in this one must be included to have a better understanding of the protests' *raison d'être*. Thus, we assume that their claims for democracy are also fashioned by a sort of idealisation of a political system paradoxically derived from their previous colonial experience, a condition that Hong Kong has never experienced, but they aspire to possess.

The Umbrella Revolution

Hong Kong has been governed under the "one country, two systems" political formula since 1997 when it was returned to Chinese rule (Tsang, 2004). Apparently, the principle is simple. The Chinese Central Government is responsible for the former British colony's international security and foreign affairs; meanwhile, the citizens of Hong Kong enjoy a sort of limited self-government and apparently ample civil freedoms, which include an independent judicial system and freedom of the press (Rao & Zhenmin, 2007). An Election Committee, with most of its members coming from elite classes with strong ties to Beijing's interests, elects the Chief Executive, the head of the HKSAR (Cheng, 2007). However, when China regained control of Hong Kong, it promised that in 2017 the people of the island would be able to elect their leader through universal suffrage (Kaiman, 2014a). The Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 that settled the future conditions for the transfer of Hong Kong to China, established that Hong Kong would have a high level of autonomy, except in matters of national defence and foreign policy (Scott, 1989). The Basic Law, the constitutional document of Hong Kong, states that universal suffrage is the "ultimate objective" for choosing the Chief Execu-

tive and the members of the Legislative Council. The Basic Law also decrees that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) applies to Hong Kong. Therefore, the guarantee of respect for universal suffrage means that citizens have not only the right to vote in elections but also the right to run for office, regardless of their political opinions (Human Watch Rights, 2014).

The Umbrella Revolution is a civil society response to the announcement by the Chinese government that the election of the next Chief Executive would include a restricted nomination process so that only candidates selected carefully by the Central Government would qualify to run (Chang, 2015). The beginnings of these student protests are in the activism fostered by the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement. Started in January 2013 by Benny Tai Yiu-ting, a professor of Law at the University of Hong Kong, this movement emulated the Occupy Wall Street protest (Lo, 2013) initially. The goal of these demonstrations, according to Tai, was the making of democratic culture, and to challenge the current electoral system, not being a pro-Independence or oppositional movement at all (Vidal, 2014).

The political tensions increased when the Chinese Central Government —days after thousands of people held a vigil with candles to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the repression in Tiananmen Square— sent a stark reminder to the inhabitants of Hong Kong that the Chinese authorities were in charge of the city. In a document published by the State Council on June 10, 2014, the government made it clear that it had full power to rule over Hong Kong. It noted that "[A]s a unitary state, China's central government has comprehensive jurisdiction over all local administrative regions, including the HKSAR". It also stated that "[t]he high degree of autonomy of the HKSAR is not full autonomy, nor a decentralised power. It is the power to run local affairs as authorised by the central leadership" (Yung, 2014).

Accordingly, the Occupy Central movement conducted a referendum wherein more than 780,000 residents participated freely deciding about their political future (Chan & McKirdy, 2014). The Chinese government responded quickly, denouncing this consultative vote as "illegal and invalid".[4] The organisers of

4 The organizers were expecting only 100,000 votes in favour. The turnout count reached 787,767, with the 42% of the participants in favour of the proposal, which established that citizens would elect candidates for Chief Executive (Chan y McKirdy, 2014). Evidently, the results were not mandatory for the government because the survey was not official. The participants voted via computers and mobile

the referendum promised to march into the city's business district and to undertake further protests if the Chinese Central Government and the government of Hong Kong failed to implement an efficient mechanism for universal suffrage, basing their actions on the principles of legitimate civil disobedience (Forsythe, Buckley & Wongjune, 2014).

On July 1, the very same day that marks the commemoration of the Hong Kong's return to China, a massive march of more than 500,000 participants took place in the city demanding the right to universal suffrage for the 2017 elections (Vidal, 2014). On August 31, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress determined that they had to pre-screen the candidates for Chief Executive, being this a committee profoundly loyal to Beijing (Spegele, Yung & Steger, 2014). Although the proposal would allow for the first direct elections for Chief Executive in the history of Hong Kong, the possibilities of choosing the next leader would be limited to two or three pre-approved candidates (Tiezzi, 2014). Indeed, it considered the same 1,200-person committee that selected to the current Chief Executive, CY Leung. Thus, for someone to be a candidate, it was required the support of at least 50 percent of the commission, which makes it practically impossible for anyone suspicious of having a critical position different from that of Beijing to run for office (Tiezzi, 2014).

A few hours after the announcement of the new norms for the election of the Chief Executive, Benny Tai declared that a new era of civil disobedience had begun (Silbert, 2014). Consequently, citizens announced that if the governments of Beijing and Hong Kong did not agree to implement universal suffrage for the 2017 Chief Executive and the 2020 Legislative Congress elections according to "international norms" of democratic elections procedures, they should block the roads and paralyse Hong Kong's financial district (Griffiths, 2014). Notwithstanding, two days later, Benny Tai admitted defeat: he recognised that the strategies of civil disobedience failed and that any mass sit-ins would have to occur on a holiday or weekend to inflict minimal damage to Hong Kong's economy (Silbert, 2014).

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phones. Leung Chun-ying, the Chief Executive, rejected this proposal indicating that it did not comply with the principles of the Basic Law (Forsythe, Buckley y Wongjune, 2014).

However, demonstrations that started out small took on momentum when thousands of students joined the struggle for democratic demands. They first boycotted classes on September 22. On the night of the 26, the police set the blood of the protesters boiling when they arrested Joshua Wong, a then 17-year-old student and the leader of the movement called *Scholarism*, which two years earlier had led to the successful protests against an initiative to introduce party-backed "patriotic" teaching in Hong Kong schools. Wong was released on September 28 (*The Economist*, 2014).

When the students burst into the plaza close to the government headquarters, the police responded with pepper gas. During the night, the clash spread to the streets surrounding this important part of the city, and the students led the protests in a direct challenge of the antiriot-squad agents. The next day, the situation grew dramatically worse when the police began to shoot rubber bullets and teargas at the crowd in Central, the city's famous financial district, hurting more than 40 protesters. Rather than persuading the residents of Hong Kong to give up their support of the students, the unexpected police brutality had the opposite effect. In fact, thousands of Hong Kong residents flooded the streets to support the protestors and show their outrage. The government's calls to put an end to the protests had been ignored, and the demonstrations continued to propagate (Fan, 2014).

The primary goal of the protest had been to paralyse Central. The demonstrators promised to strangle the financial core of the city, to cut off access to international banks, financial services, and luxury stores. Later, the students advanced their plans, holding a strike. The protests took root in the Admiralty district. There, the police also used tear gas against the protestors, a decision that contributed again to the growth of the demonstrations (Staline, 2014). On October 1, on the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the Communist regime in China, the protests against the Hong Kong government summoned to more than 100,000 people (*El País*, 2014).

The protests that had begun as demonstrations organised by Occupy Central had radicalised its actions due to the students' drive and determination, and the absence of dialogue with the authorities. The protesters split into three groups that settled in different points of the city: Admiralty, Mongkok, and

Causeway Bay (Wang, 2014). For more than two months, the protestors took main streets. After more than 60 days of street protests, the leaders of the mobilisations, Benny Tai, Chan Kin-man, and Chi Yiu-ming, asked for to put an end to the sit-ins. They also turned themselves in the police, as they felt that the movement had strayed from its original goal (Buckley & Wong, 2014). Likewise, the long street occupation undermined the widespread support that the movement had achieved at the beginning of the mobilisations. Thus, conservatism and pragmatism returned to a local society exasperated with the occupation (Wang, 2014). Benny Tai later accepted that the street occupation had lost public support, by admitting that in the latest survey carried out by the University of Hong Kong, close to 80 percent of those who were polled did not want the occupation to continue. Tai noted that it did not mean that genuine support for universal suffrage was in decline but that the supporters were questioning whether such an extended occupation was having a positive effect (Tai, 2014).

On December 15, the police took down the last of the protestor camps left in the city, the one in Causeway Bay. A week earlier, the authorities had cleaned out the main protest and street-camps area close to the government headquarters in Admiralty, arresting 249 people, including a list of prominent legislators and movement leaders. A few hours later, Chief Executive Leung declared that the protests had officially ended (Kaiman, 2014b). Otto Ng, an 18 years old protester, said, "It feels a bit depressed and hopeless, but at the same time this is just the beginning, it's not the end. [...] We still haven't got what we wanted". Ng continues, "It's awakened the Hong Kong people" (Kaiman, 2014a).

It is highly significant that after all these events, the Hongkongese youth has become more politically active, and they have radicalised their means of protest and demands for universal suffrage and full autonomy (Yuen, 2015). Therefore, this political awakening is now evident in their effort of participating officially in politics through traditional mechanism of representative democracy. In line with this, in the legislative elections of September 4, 2016, six out of the 70 candidates who won a seat on the Legislative Council were individuals with a political agenda independent to Beijing. These "localist" candidates, including those who failed to clinch seats, won a total of 409,025 votes,

amassing almost 20 percent of the ballots counted (Cheung & Lam, 2016). Even though it is still a minority, and as long as the irruption of "localist" legislators on the political scene is a direct outcome of the Umbrella Revolution, it is considered as a serious threat for Beijing. Actually, the initial call for full democratic self-determination by Hongkongese demonstrators is now gradually transforming itself into a separatist aspiration.

The Game of Imaginaries: An Approach to the Hong Kong Post-Colonial Identity

Two central discourses (re)appear historically in the island's identity formation context, situated in intermittent processes of colonisation and nationalisation. On the one hand, the former use of Chinese nationalism as a differentiating singularity when compared to British colonisers in the past; and on the other, the use of its contemporary post-colonial modernity to distance itself from Mainland China (Chow, 1993; Erni, 2001). For example, the Central Government's effort in including narratives about the Great China into Hong Kong textbooks –in order to instill patriotic values and nationalistic identities- has been questioned by the counter-imagination of activists who promote a sort of social imaginary buttressed on the nostalgic reassessment of the colonial past (Vickers, 2004; Chin, 2014). In both cases, there is a hegemonic struggle that finds a coexistence of cultures based on power structures and an imagined tradition of collective subjectivities (Chow, 1999: 511).

This process creates a hybrid identity dialogically tailored on three-pronged discursive dynamics that are present in the Hong Kong's modern social imaginary: the British colonial past, the Chinese nationalism, and a globalised setting, not to mention the enormous cultural gap between China and Hong Kong created after years of separation (Ma, 2015). The use of English, the language of the former coloniser, is *the lingua franca* of globalisation that connects them to external realities. At the same time, their local traditions tie them culturally with Chinese nationalism. Thus, cultural practices such as cinema (Liew, 2012), martial arts (Li, 2001), and religion (Chan, 2007) also turn into a rhizomatic metaphor of discourses that intertwine them indistinctly. It makes up a post-colonial imaginary that constantly postpones such (re)created identities apparently contradictory

to one another. Hence, the idea of the colonial past as a historical humiliation also works as an assessment of the hotbed for modernity and modernisation. Likewise, the rejection of Chinese nationalist propaganda is at times paradoxically appreciated as a form to connect them with traditional identities.

Of course, identity does not appear in a void. On the contrary, it materialises in social structures displayed in forms of group cohesion, such as the nation. Benedict Anderson (1993, p. 6) defines the nation as an "imagined political community –and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". It is imagined, among other reasons, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". For that reason, "[C]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined". Accordingly, Charles Taylor (2004: 23) adopts the term imaginary based "on the way that ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends... shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society". Taylor states: "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy".

Thus, social imaginary refers to the expectations of social affairs, their normativity, and the inter-subjectivity of what acts as a frame of reference for individuals to "imagine" their own identity and interpret social realities surrounding them. It is constructed by discourses that determine particular interpretations related to collective identities, so it is relationally tailored. In the most Nietzschean sense of the concept, the social imaginary is more interested in interpretations than in facts: it means, in a nutshell, the observation of reality through the prism of ideologies. For example, the meaning of the July 1st. Commemoration, marking the return of Hong Kong to Mainland China, was negotiated by the Umbrella Revolution demonstrators and defined regarding their own pro-democracy struggle. As a result, commemorations are also loci of hegemonic competition because of all their symbolic meaning.

The discursive dynamics of the Umbrella Revolution we observe is nothing if not a colonial *déjà vu* determining the modern history of Hong Kong. The right to self-determination has

historically been co-opted by external forces —first as a colony and then as a SAR— that limit citizens on having an active role in political participation, as they demand higher decision-making prerogatives to collaborate in tracing the island's political path. Therefore, the idea of "one country, two systems" seems illusory and restricts the island's sovereignty heavily.

There is no precedent of democracy in Hong Kong. Paradoxically, their colonial past seems to influence their democratic aspirations and idealisations, as wells as their strategies and tactics undertaken in this crisis of representativeness and civil disobedience that led to the Umbrella Revolution. The United Kingdom looks like a signifier, a mental imprint of a linguistic sound, not as an empirical reference of democracy, but an *imagined* one. That is to say, à la Baudrillard (1994), it is a precession of simulacra, a map that precedes the territory, notwithstanding with the creative force to (re)create democracy projects in actual territories.

Therefore, the power struggle is seen through a type of postcolonial mimicry, to borrow a term by Homi Bhabha (1994: 85-92), which acts as a double articulation that takes on the Other in so far as they represent forms of empowerment to the now postcolonial subject. As the author states, "mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other *as subject to a difference that is almost the same thing, but not entirely*". Likewise, even though colonisation produced a terrible epistemic violence –what turns out of the subordination of the periphery's cultural practices to Eurocentric hegemony (Spivak, 1985) - there are also forms of resistance propelled by the contradictory nature of such a discursive forces. It is what Michel Foucault (1978: 101) calls reverse discourse, meaning that discourse "transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it". In other words, even though discourse is a vehicle of ideology, it is also a hindrance, an impediment, a point of resistance and a starting point for counter-strategies. To this end, individuals and social groups can only envision and realise forms of autonomy in relation to particular forms of domination that they confront.

Thus, this hybridism does not consist only on the polarisation of cultures, but on an identity crisis in post-colonial subjects or unhomeliness, *i.e.* that psychological crisis of iden-

tity provoked by the cultural displacement experienced by subjects, of belonging not entirely to neither of both cultures that determines them (Bhabha, 1994). In the case of Hong Kong, colonial ideologies are objected at the same time that the return to a supposed homeland that is not entirely theirs anymore is refuted. However, this is not an entirely a negative force: this hybrid condition is an indelible form of identity that creates types of syncretism that allow subjects to navigate in both worlds productively and positively. The Umbrella Revolution combined such syncretism that characterise Hong Kong modernity: forms of collective action and demands for self-determination, sovereignty, and autonomy show them as *subject to a difference that is almost the same thing, but not entirely.*

The Demands of the Umbrella Revolution: A Continuum of Social Movements in Hong Kong

"Say no to fake democracy!" demanded the banners held up by the protesters in Hong Kong Civic Square in the final days of September 2014. The recovery of the public space erupted as a metaphor for the citizen's power struggle and the demands of their right to elect their government representatives. The fake democracy that the protesters referred to was perceived as one imposed by the Chinese government.

The lessons from contemporary global resistance movements like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados Movement, the student protests in Chile in 2011, the anti-corruption demonstrations in Brazil in 2014, among others, seemed fresh in the memory of the Hong Kong young demonstrators. Both global mass media information and mass self-communication networks are the raw material of the contemporary public sphere (Castells, 2009). As Arjun Appadurai (1996: 7) notes, "the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*". Hence, this global imaginary is also a stage for collective action. Along these same lines, the Umbrella Revolution also becomes itself a reference for other global mobilisations that people can connect to through communications technology and the network society. Even when the information is restricted through censorship, as occurs on Mainland China and the Great Firewall, it can potentially create global solidarities thanks to the

dialogic nature of digital networking on which social structures and communications strategies are based (Leetoy, 2011; Zuckerman, 2014). Likewise, identities are forged through flows of communication that occur among actors "who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions. Forms of organisation and models of leadership, communicative channels, and technologies of communication are constitutive parts of this network of relationships" (Melucci, 1996: 71). Suffice to say that a social movement with no communicative networking is a mere abstraction.

Collective identities involve a series of definitions and lines of action shared by individuals that are not free of contradictions; still, these identities work by bringing together and interpreting their practices and their particular cultural uses. Thus, the social imaginary does not properly refer to a process of rationalisation of social life, but rather is a perspective of reality that turns empirically into a series of widely shared ideas: the common sense, the system of values, social and cultural practices, the understanding of reality. Accordingly, identities are the loci of mental representations that expose sociocultural practices of daily life. Following Habermas (1987), different discursive narratives interplay and grant symbolic meaning to the rituals of the lifeworld. The author distinguishes a terrain for human experience inside social existence from another one where "objective" parameters of social systems are developed. The lifeworld is the quintessential element of Habermas' theory of communicative action. According to him, it is in the "lifeworld" where the social world is constructed and it acquires meaning through intersubjective dynamics. Namely, socialisation conceived as spaces of human interaction that bear communicative rationality distinct to instrumental rationality. This sphere of interaction is constructed by the formation and reproduction of communicative action based on arguments and narratives. In this same line, we must to take into account that there is a series of emotions in collective actions that make individuals to base their decisions on feelings and emotions —loyalty, esteem, and admiration— that are not defined just for instrumental rationalities (Jasper, 1998). The solidary identification among individuals creates an entire symbolic system that empowers them as a social movement when they carry out these actions.

In the Hong Kong's case is also evident that the hegemonic struggle integrates diverse and at times conflictual identities. Despite this diversity, they found common ground —*i.e.* participative democracy and self-determination— from which the shared definition of resistance and common identity is developed. An approach using the New Social Movements theory is pertinent to observe demands for self-determination, plural discussion in political decisions, and cultural differences (Melucci, 1989, 1996; Boggs 1989), all of which are present in the Hong Kong protests. Furthermore, and following the premises of this approach, even though this movement arises from diverse groups of the Hongkongese civil society, they have found common ground on protests originally spurred in academic milieus. These improvised and sudden demonstrations, far from being a product of homogeneous collective actions previously planned, are spontaneous social rants against the lack of political representativeness that appear from time to time, and they continue to happen because the claims for self-determination are not met yet.

In view of that, the Umbrella Revolution did not come about as a historical singularity, but as a part of a continuum of social movements that have appeared on the island since the 1970s. Notwithstanding the existence of social movements prior to that time —that varied in intensity, reach, and motivations— it was from that moment on that social movements in Hong Kong gained strength, driving an ambitious agenda that led a number of demands. The most important included those attempting to change public policies: campaigns for affordable housing, claims for modification on civil marriage laws, or against abuses by large corporations (*e.g.* mobilisations against telephone hike rates). There were also nationalist movements for the construction of a Hongkongese identity (*e.g.* the movement against the adoption of Mandarin as the official language in the island or the Diaoyu Islands dispute). Also, a case apart was the anti-corruption student movement against the Chief Superintendent of the Royal Hong Kong Police, Peter Godber (Ma, 2009; Wai-man, 2015).

As previously stated, an essential catalyst of social mobilisations in the island was the change of its former colonial status to a special administrative region under the tutelage of the Chinese government, motivating a number of debates on democracy and the adoption of a new legal system. The opening of new po-

litical opportunities developed claims for political intervention in the electoral arena, as well as in the design of the future political structure. Activists and social organisers assembled to form new political groups with the intention of participating in elections, and thus come up with political programmes to express their opinion to the Chinese government on the provisions of the transition and the model of government that would be adopted after 1997 (Lui & Chiu, 2000).

Specifically, the mass rallies related to demands for democracy began to emerge at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, when several protests took place in front of Hong Kong's main government administration centre. The largest demonstration took place in July 2003 with 500,000 people marching against a controversial security law, which they feared would limit political rights. Since then, mobilisations have become customary every July 1. Recently, these demonstrations have been growing in number and have included different interest groups covering the entire political spectrum, as stated by Sarah Mak, a professor of Bowdoin College in an interview. Pro-democracy advocacy, rallies demanding development plans in particular villages, animal rights and minority group activists are some of the examples mentioned by Mak (Phillips, 2014).

Therefore, this is a historical continuation of a more significant conflict for citizen empowerment, not a particular crisis. Melucci (1996: 22) states that a crisis denotes a "breakdown of the functional and integrative mechanisms of a given set of social relations." To put it differently, collective actions might be considered as pathologies within the social system if they are deemed as a crisis of such a system. The author adds, on the other hand, that a conflict "is defined by a struggle between two actors seeking to appropriate resources regarded by each as valuable". Therefore, we consider the Umbrella Revolution not as a dysfunctional social mechanism, *i.e.* a crisis, but as a conflict constituted by actors "definable in terms of a common reference system", having something at stake "to which both, implicitly or explicitly, refer". Alain Touraine (2000: 122) agrees on that prioritising the subject's liberation as the central element of all societal movements. According to Touraine, the subject "does not exist in the social void of political freedom, but, on the contrary, within social relations of domination, ownership and power. A societal movement is therefore both a struggle against power

and a struggle for a vision of society". Likewise, the demand for deliberative routes in the Umbrella Revolution is more than evident, not restricting democracy to be just an arena for the election of representatives, but a real instrument of participatory publics. It is the fake democracy that is challenged: one in which the options are given beforehand, a vice that Western representative democracies have also been unable to escape from. It has produced forms of electoral elitism concentrated in dominant antagonist groups that do not necessarily open the democratic spectrum to subordinate groups (Avritzer, 2002; Olvera, 2003; Lukes, 2005).

Notwithstanding, we also note an over-idealisation of Western democratic referents that has even led Occupy Central to take Occupy Wall Street movement as a paradigm, being that an economic uprising, not a political one. It is is possibly a Eurocentric bias that blurs their social imagination to relate their movement to others closer to their political principles, like those of the Global South that are certainly founded on postcolonial struggles for democracy and self-determination.

In spite of that, this movement does show claims for a deliberative democracy as an *a priori* condition of representative democracy. The quintessential issue on the discussion about the public sphere lies precisely in its ability to modify and challenge governmental actions using deliberation and active citizen participation. Accordingly, the politicising of social life is necessary for the competition for political prerogatives (Young, 1996: 487-488), something notorious in the political agendas of both Scholarism and Occupy Central. The possibility of transforming the political system resides in the impact of citizen mobilisations that eventually —and hopefully— might influence the public opinion, and by extension to state institutions obliged to respond. In Hong Kong, a state of exception exists granting access to free elections of local authorities with a relative political power regarding the island's sovereign decisions. The problem is that in practical matters, Chinese centralism has nullified any form of self-determination resulting in the presence of diverse forms of civil disobedience. Likewise, the flourishing pro-democracy demonstrations brought about a double meaning. On the one hand, the permanent accusations against the Chinese government for not complying with the commitments of the Sino–British Joint Declaration about the democratic future of Hong

Kong, has kept alive the discussion about democracy and has fostered a pro-democracy political culture. On the other hand, the cooperation among different pro-democracy organisations has encouraged the formation of political parties (Sing, 2000).

The strengthening of specific collective action requires the development and proliferation of areas of expression for all of the antagonisms in a given society, as long as notions of freedom and equality guide them. For this reason, the symbolic significance of restoring the public space is especially important: the competition for the communicative axe of Central, Admiralty, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay avenues constitutes the creation of social capital through the recovery of the public space by citizens. Social capital, as posited by Robert Putnam (2000), "Refers to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Accordingly, Putman continues, it is "Closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue.' The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations". For that reason, the importance of taking back the public space by the protestors of the Umbrella Revolution was symbolical of great pertinence to wave common networks of solidarity and resistance. Thus, the multiple identities interplaying in the mass rallies found common ground by (re)gaining an actual territory, motivating the formation of participatory civics.

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004: 7) attest that deliberative democracy is a form of government "in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reason that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible". In the case here discussed, it is quite problematic to foster deliberative prerogatives since one of the actors, the Chinese State, is all but democratic, not to mention that the aim of this form of democracy is to reach "conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future". Historically, the Chinese central government has not been empathetic with challenges posed by their civil society, as occurred in Beijing in the spring of 1989, also preceded by several intermittent collective actions since the Cultural Revolution (Gold, 1990: 31-32).

It is of course not appropriate to make parallelisms between what happened in Beijing in comparison to Hong Kong.

Even though in both cases the mobilisations emerged from citizen demands for greater spaces of political incidence, the political, economic, and social conditions are entirely different in postcolonial Hong Kong. For example, Heath Chamberlain (1993) sustains that in Mainland China, the birth of an active civil society would not have been possible without the participation of state officials, especially by breaking traditional links with their society, which is paradoxical because it paved the way for later mobilisations that have happened since the Cultural Revolution on. In Hong Kong, there is a most evident distinction between civic agents antagonising with political elites. Here, the formation of collective actions is still in progress deferred by conflicting forces proper of a hybrid and mimetic society. Hong Kong is then a creature determined by both, its colonial legacy and the Chinese nationalism.

Conclusions

Even though the free election for the 2017 Chief Executive position was the main demand of the civil disobedience mobilisations of the Umbrella Revolution, a close analysis of this movement exposes the transcendence of their claims to mere demands for choosing among candidates. A good part of the Hong Kong's youth is not satisfied with the economy, and they think that wealthy tycoons rig the current voting system against them. They are also upset about the influence of Mainland China on the sovereignty affairs of the island. There is also a widespread feeling in Hong Kong that educated Mainland Chinese citizens have a privileged status for taking the jobs of local graduate students. Furthermore, Hong Kong media is often reluctant to cover the critiques against the Communist Party.

There were two important precedents in the recent history of Hong Kong when demonstrators obliged the government to give up initial proposals. In 2003, they pulled back plans to introduce a new security law; and in 2012, they kept from launching a new educational program that included Beijing's plans to add patriotic teachings in Hong Kong Schools. However, although these policies were deemed important by Chinese authorities, these were considered as manageable concessions to be granted. The current circumstances surrounding the Umbrella Revolution are entirely different because the idea of imple-

menting a full-fledged model of liberal democracy in Hong Kong goes against the Chinese political system itself.

Now, it is quite restrictive to consider this movement just as a part of a continuum of global collective actions reacting against democratic deficits, and propelled by the expansive dynamics of the network society and mass-self communication. It is undoubtedly important, and it is not possible to deny the influence of the global public sphere in the internationalisation of dissidence. However, the so-called Umbrella Revolution cannot be entirely understood without the history of 150 years of British colonial rule, and the local resistances that sprung up at that time and still is in progress today now aimed at another authoritarian power.

As stated before, a social movement is both a struggle against power and a struggle for a vision of society. Therefore, the Umbrella Revolution is just partly defined by the claims for openness to participatory citizenship in the public arena. The other side of the coin is the construction of a society that reflects a collective imagination about what Hong Kong *should be* concerning Mainland China and the international community. The perceived loss of belongingness and threat to local cultural identity in the face to *sinicisation* is what seems to be at stake in contemporary Hong Kong: a new double (re)articulation bonding the Island's identity to traditional China, but with specific social and political traits resulting from its (Westernised) colonial past.

What is also at stake is the loss of certain freedoms inherited from the former colonial regime in Hong Kong: a relatively free press, freedom of worship, freedom of assembly, and even being able to hold free elections for most of the local posts, which does not happen in Mainland China. It presents itself to the international community as a prosperous society, where previous decades of economic growth turned the city into a first-class global financial centre and a cosmopolitan urban space in contrast to the Beijing's authoritarian practices.

Paradoxically, the same political system endorsed by the former dominant colonial power is the one proposed to counteract nowadays to the Chinese regime. It is the idealisation of a colonial past: it blurs historical conditions of exploitation and discrimination, now appropriated differently by means of a certain strategic essentialism and postcolonial mimicry. In a nutshell, the Umbrella Revolution is more than a pro-democracy so-

cial movement: it is also about hybrid identities and struggles for self-determination rooted in both the colonial past and Chinese nationalism, and the construction of modern social imaginaries adapting the political and social structures of contemporary global world.

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