The 2019 Hong Kong Protests: A role for historical sociology

Tim Newburn[1]

In what follows I offer a few observations stimulated by the paper 'Patterns of disorder in the 2019 protests in Hong Kong' (henceforward PoD). Stott and colleagues' social psychological analysis of the 2019 events draws together an impressive array of empirical sources, and offers a detailed and convincing picture of both the general aetiology of the protests, the policing of those protests, and the psychological processes that underpinned them both. The authors draw upon the 'Elaborated Social Identity Model' (ESIM), and deploy it as the basis for understanding the escalating tensions and violence that occurred through 2019. ESIM is now well-established and its strengths make it well-suited to the task at hand here. The model takes crowd action seriously, highlights the rational, organised and purposive nature of such conduct and pays careful attention to the wider context in which identity within large groups is formed and re-formed. In this regard, it is particularly attuned to the ways in which social interactions, most obviously between crowds and authorities such as the police, are often fundamental to the ways in which crowd behaviour alters, helping explain why protests turn violent or, by contrast, turn away from violence.

The first and perhaps most important point to make here is that this analysis should be seen as a counterpoint to the report released earlier this year by Hong Kong's Independent Police Complaints Council (IPCC, 2020). In particular Stott *et al*'s paper inserts into the narrative the perspective of the protester (largely absent from the IPCC report) which, though based on only a small number of interviews, balances elements of the police-centric viewpoint of the IPCC. The differences between the two reports can be most obviously illustrated by juxtaposing the respective conclusions they reach in attempting to explain what the IPCC refers to as the metamorphosis of the protests 'from initial peaceful processions and public meetings to extreme forms of violent protests in the streets' (IPCC, 2020, para 16.47). For the IPCC the escalating disorder is variously described as 'lawlessness', 'incipient terrorism', 'urban guerrilla tactics' and 'vigilantism' (paras 16.5-16.7). In their report police action is said simply to have 'resulted from the need for law enforcement action' (para 16.4) and they conclude that 'the use of force by the Police in the past months of protests has been in reaction to illegal action by protesters and for protection of themselves and others when attacked by violent protesters' (para 16.22). In short, the overall IPCC conclusion is that police conduct was generally proportionate and, where violent, was triggered and justified by the scale of the threat they faced.

By contrast, Stott *et al* argue that the escalation seen in the events in 2019 involved a process in which the protesters were gradually 'radicalised', and that this radicalisation was the consequence of the 'experience over time of illegitimate and undifferentiated police action' (typescript, p. 22). In short, it was unwarranted and excessive actions by the police that helped stimulate and forge a form of psychological unity, including a greater willingness to embrace more confrontational tactics, among the diverse groups making up those

---

[1] Professor of Criminology and Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, t.newburn@lse.ac.uk

protesting. Notwithstanding its own limitations, Stott *et al*'s report shines a light on some of the weaknesses of the IPCC report, and juxtaposing the two usefully illustrates the continuing need for a full and proper independent inquiry into 2019's events - one of the protesters' five demands.

As I have already intimated, though their conclusions differ in very important ways, what sets Stott *et* al's report from that of the IPCC is its willingness to take seriously, and seek to analyse, the actions of the protesters themselves. In this regard, ESIM, with its rejection of 'classical' crowd theory, takes an approach that is firmly in what is now the mainstream of social science where collective behaviour is concerned. The broad consensus that now exists developed as a reaction to previously dominant depictions of 'the mob' as irrational and atavistic and to attempts to dismiss violent protest as simply criminal and immoral. By contrast, modern scholarship, including social psychology's social identity approach, emphasises how social context – from history, politics and culture through to the more immediate circumstances in which citizens and authorities interact – provide a basis on which the patterns and logics of the actions of those involved in civil disorder can be analysed and understood.

While I am entirely in sympathy with the broad thrust of such social scientific activity, I have argued elsewhere (Newburn, 2016, 2020) that one of the unintended consequences of the backlash against classical crowd theory is that it has concentrated scholarly attention on the *violent* crowd at the expense of a more inclusive understanding of collective conduct. There are important exceptions to this broad observation and, indeed, the social psychologists employing the social identity approach might reasonably claim to offer one of the more important examples of a broader theorisation of crowd conduct (see e.g. Cocking et al, 2009). Nevertheless, the dominant social scientific tendency currently is to focus on questions surrounding violence and, not least, to ask what causes it? Important as this is, it potentially deflects attention from other, equally important questions, including the consequences of violence and violent protest. Despite the widespread evidence that social protest can be consequential (see e.g. Duberman 2019) it remains rare for a consideration of the impact of protest, riot, and social disorder to form a significant part of social scientific inquiry. As a consequence, I have argued for the adoption of a broader 'life-cycle' model of violent protest and riot – one that sees these social phenomena as having lasting consequences and as containing transformative potential (Newburn, 2020). I raise this here because it suggests that there is considerable potential in expanding upon Stott *et al*'s observation that Hong Kong's 2019 protests 'were not an isolated outburst of dissent ... [but] were part of a much longer sequence of protests' (typescript, p. 20). Picking up on this, I want to use the remainder of this paper to sketch out four elements of an historical sociology which I think might profitably be added to the social psychological account of the unfolding of Hong Kong's protests. In doing so, I don't wish to suggest that these are the *only* elements that might make up such an account, merely those among them that I consider some of the more important.

The first, following Sewell, is to focus on the 'events' that punctuate the history of 2019's 'disorder' (for an outline of such an approach to the Umbrella Movement see Lee, 2019). 'Events', using Sewell's formulation (1996: 843), are important because 'they reshape history, imparting an unforeseen direction to social development and altering the nature of

the causal nexus in which social interactions take place'. One approach to an historical sociology of the 2019 protests is therefore to seek to identify those 'events' that have had the most significant impact on shaping the more recent social phenomena being analysed. These 'events' might be preceding protests but, equally, may be other social phenomena. This approach, using historical analysis as the basis for critical reflection on contemporary institutions and practices shares, at least in broad terms, the contours of what tends to be referred to as a 'history of the present' - a broadly genealogical approach which 'aims to trace the forces that gave birth to our present-day practices and to identify the historical and social conditions upon which they still depend' (Garland, 2001: 2). Second, given their nature, a necessary element of this historical sociological analysis of Hong Kong's recent experiences would involve an examination of the ways in which the 'events' identified as part of that 'history of the present', link with and help explain the development of its emergent social movements, the means for their mobilisation, and the nature of their activities. Third, and in turn, both of these require, I would argue, further historical work, in this case focusing on the changing nature, position and activities of the Hong Kong Police, an institution that lies at the heart of much that has occurred. Finally, any fully-fledged historical sociology must place all these within a broader analysis of Hong Kong's changing political economy. I take each of these, very briefly, in turn.

In thinking about 'events' in the pre-history of 2019's protests the question is where to start? Here, and this is slightly arbitrary, one might reasonably begin with Hong Kong's anti-colonial riots of 1967. It is arbitrary in the sense that just as 2019's protests were shaped by previous events, so of course were the 1967 riots, not least by the serious rioting that broke out the previous year after a decision by the British colonial government to institute a fare rise on the Star Ferry against a backdrop of already severe local economic problems. In the ensuing violent protests in 1966 one person died, 26 were injured and almost 1500 arrested. The events exposed serious political and social fault lines in Hong Kong and helped stimulate elements of the civic activism that were to be especially visible in the 1967 riots and subsequently (Scott, 2017). The 1967 riots arose out of a strike that began in the Hong Kong Artificial Flower Works, and which resulted in eight months of struggle during which 51 died and over 800 were injured. During this period there were over 1,200 bomb incidents and a further 8,000 devices dealt with by bomb disposal squads (Wong, 2017). These riots are widely seen as a watershed moment which 'prompted the colonial administration to introduce sweeping social reforms in labour rights, education, public housing and social welfare' (Cheung, 2009: 3). Indeed, the deputy colonial secretary at the time of the riots, Jack Carter, is quoted as saying that 'Before 1967 there was no real channel of contact between the government and the people … I don't think there would have been any reform at all [without the riots]' (in Cheung, 2009: 131). So serious were the events that the British government even made plans for the emergency evacuation of Hong Kong. More particularly, as Cheung (2017: 69) observes, 'the 1967 riots aroused a "Hong Kong consciousness" and a sense of belonging to the city amongst the young generation.'

From this point, and as mentioned by Stott *et al,* the signal 'events' continue with the post-Tiananmen Square rally on June 4th 1989 - which prompted very significant changes in stance by the British colonial government toward Beijing, and which influenced much in the political sphere in the period up to the handover in 1997 – and the July 1st 2003 rally, against the proposed national security law. The latter, which was the 'largest indigenous

social movement in Hong Kong' to that point, and which gave rise to a further annual rally, was not just of symbolic importance. Importantly, it helped inaugurate the type of 'post-modern mode of social movements', and their localist concerns, that have been increasingly visible in Hong Kong since that time (So, 2008). In fact, rather than emerging alongside the Umbrella Movement (UM) it is arguably in the years immediately after 2003 that the roots of the 'localist turn' (Chen, 2017) are to be found. Its initial incarnation has been described as a 'New Preservation Movement' (NPM) involving relatively spontaneous forms of collective action, utilising such tactics as non-violent occupation, aimed at resisting Hong Kong's 'development-at-all-cost ideology' (Chen and Szeto, 2015). This NPM, Chen and Szeto argue, was the dominant localist 'frame' until around 2010, forming both the backdrop to, and helping inculcate a series of new social movements and political campaigns.

If elements of the localism eventually embodied in very different form in the Umbrella Movement (UM) can be traced back at least to its preservationist predecessor earlier in the century then, similarly, the growing profile and particular visibility of young people, especially of high school age, in these protest movements and campaigns also has important antecedent influences, most obviously in the emergence of the Scholarism movement in 2011. Beginning with student protests against the proposed introduction of a new school curriculum – one that was to involve 'moral and national education' – the movement was gradually politically radicalised, its tactics slowly morphing from sit-ins and hunger strikes to a variety of forms of very public protest including the occupation of LegCo. Just as the abandonment of the extradition legislation did little to quell the protests in 2019, the withdrawal of the new curriculum plan in September 2012 was too little too late, as the leaders of the Scholarism movement were by then fully engaged in a swiftly mutating protest movement, increasingly prominent in the UM, founding Demosisto, a new political party in 2016, and becoming, especially in the case of Joshua Wong, a symbol of the pro-democracy movement (Wong, 2020) and of the profound impact of this new brand of localism 'as a political agenda and political identity, especially among the younger generation' (Lee, 2019: 21). In this context, the birth of Scholarism, the emergence of the UM (together with linked developments such as Occupy Central with Love and Peace) and the Mongkok riot in 2016 (Wong, 2019), can also all be thought of, in Sewell's terms, as 'events' that helped set Hong Kong on the path to its 2019 pro-democracy protests as well as shaping the forms they took.

As Stott *et al* convincingly illustrate, the nature and shape of 2019's events would have been very different, most likely profoundly so, were it not for the ways in which the police engaged in the management of protest, most obviously through an 'increasing reliance on a paramilitary policing model and legal framework initially designed by the British colonial state to suppress political dissent' (p. 20 of typescript). The third element of the type of historical sociology that I argue would be valuable therefore is one that expands upon this observation, tracing developments in the nature and practices of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) that have featured in, and themselves have helped shape, and in turn have been shaped by the 'events' highlighted earlier. The HKPF is characterised by its strong paramilitary roots, its close connections with colonial authority and distance from the public being policed, and its long history of suppression of political protest (Brogden, 1987; Jiao et al, 2005). For a period, however, there was a significant upturn in the public image of the HKPF, not least as a result of the legitimation project that was set in train in the aftermath

of the 1967 riots. Indeed, this appeared something of a turning point, with anti-corruption measures, greater professionalization, and the subsequent promotion of greater community-orientation, accompanied by wider social and political reforms, leading many to start referring to the HKPF as "Asia's finest". Although the scale and ferocity of recent police actions took many by surprise, even by the time of the handover in 1997 there was evidence in the public order arena of a drift away from a 'negotiated management' style of policing (della Porta and Reiter, 1998) toward something much more intimidating. While levels of public satisfaction with the HKPF remained relatively high until around 2007, it is from that point onward that a strongly negative trend became visible (see, Ho, 2020). In fact, the de-legitimation process affecting the HKPF has been a relatively long and complex one, lasting over two decades in which it appears we have witnessed the HKPF's return to its historic roots, albeit under a different colonial authority. In this sense, understanding the recolonization or, indeed, the 'mainlandization' of the HKPF is a third and potentially important strand in a broader sociology of the 2019 protests.

The fourth element of the historical sociology I am suggesting is important, arises out of the need to put the first three - the preceding 'events', the emergence and mobilisation of social movements, and the history and practices of the HKPF - in a wider political-economic context. There is not the space here for any detail, but it is possible at least to point to some of the more important elements in this regard. Thus, in addition to the major political changes accompanying handover, changes that are obviously central to any account of Hong Kong's recent history, one must point to the very radical shifts in Hong Kong's economy, both in its transformation from a manufacturing to a largely service economy and, more generally of course, to its growing economic reliance on mainland China. Moreover, and importantly, the Hong Kong economy has seen sharply shrinking growth and vastly increasing social inequality. Its wealth disparity is 'among the most severe in the world' (Wong, 2017: 101) and its housing is among the most socially divided, with a growing concentration of Hong Kong's poorest in public rental housing (Wong and Chan, 2019) and private real estate regularly rated as the world's least affordable. This context of economic dependency and decline, rising inequality and social polarisation, and seismic political change, form the backdrop to, and are crucial elements in Hong Kong's recent history as a 'city of protest' (Dapiran, 2017), the most recent features of which are so interestingly analysed in Stott *et al*'s 'Patterns of disorder'.

References

Brodgen, M. (1987) The emergence of the police – the colonial dimension, *British Journal of Criminology,* 27, 1, 4-14

Chen, A. H. Y. (2017) Social movements and the law: The case of Hong Kong, in Ng, M.H.K. and Wong, J.D. (eds) *Civil Unrest and Governance in Hong Kong,* London: Routledge

Chen, Y-C. and Szeto, M. M. (2015) The forgotten road of progressive localism: New Preservation Movement in Hong Kong, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16, 3, 436-453

Cheung, G. K-W. (2009) *Hong Kong's Watershed: The 1967 riots,* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press

Cheung, G. K-W. (2017) How the 1967 riots changed Hong Kong's political landscape, with repercussions still felt today, in Ng, M.H.K. and Wong, J.D. (eds) *Civil Unrest and Governance in Hong Kong,* London: Routledge

Cocking, C., Drury, J. and Reicher, S. (2009) The psychology of crowd behaviour in emergency evacuations: Results from two interview studies and implications for the Fire and Rescue Services, *Irish Journal of Psychology,* 30, 1-2, 59-73

Dapiran, A. (2017) *City of Protest: A recent history of dissent in Hong Kong,* London: Penguin

Della Porta, D. & Reiter, H. (eds) (1998) *Policing Protest*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press

Duberman M. (2019) *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBTQ Rights Uprising That Changed America*, New York: Penguin Random House

Garland, D. (2001) *The Culture of Control,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Ho, K. K. L. (2020) Legitimization and de-legitimization of police: In British colonial and Chinese SAR Hong Kong, *Journal of Inter-Regional Studies: Regional and Global Pespectives,* 3, 2-12

Independent Police Complaints Council (2020) *A Thematic Study by the IPCC on the Public Order Events arising from the Fugitive Offenders Bill since June 2019 and the Police Actions in Response,* Hong Kong: IPCC

Jiao, A.Y., Lau, R.W.K. and Lui, P. (2005) An institutional analysis of organizational change: The case of the Hong Kong Police, *International Criminal Justice Review,* 15, 1, 38-57

Lee, C.K. (2019) Take Back Our Future: An eventful sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, in Lee, C.K. and Sing, M. (eds) *Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement,* Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press

Newburn, T. (2016) The 2011 England riots in European context: A framework for understanding the 'life-cycle' of riots, *European Journal of Criminology,* 13, 5, 540-555

Newburn, T. (2020) The causes and consequences of urban violence and unrest, *Annual Review of Criminology,* 4:3.1–3.21

Scott, I. (2017) Bridging the gap: Hong Kong senior civil servants and the 1966 riots, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History,* 45, 1, 131-48

Sewell, W.J. Jr (1996a) Historical events as transformations of structures: Inventing revolution at the Bastille, *Theory and Society,* 25, 6, 841-81

So, A.Y. (2008) Social conflict in Hong Kong after 1997: The emergence of a postmodern mode of social movements? In Chan, M.K. (ed) *China's Hong Kong Transformed: Retrospect and Prospects beyond the first decade,* Kowloon: City University of Hong Kong Press

Wong, H. and Chan, S-m. (2019) The impacts of housing factors on deprivation in a world city: The case of Hong Kong, *Social Policy and Administration,* 53, 872-888

Wong, J. (2020) *Unfree Speech: The threat to global democracy and why we must act, now,* London: Penguin

Wong, J. C. (2019) *The Mongkok Riot: Public order policing in Hong Kong,* London: Palgrave

Wong, J.D. (2017) Between two episodes of social unrest below Lion Rock: from the 1967 riots to the 2014 Umbrella Movement, in Ng, M.H.K. and Wong, J.D. (eds) *Civil Unrest and Governance in Hong Kong,* London: Routledge