

The movements in Catalonia and Hong Kong: democracy advocacy or examples of global illiberalism?

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The Catalan independence movement has a new reference: the revolutionary movement of Hong Kong. They paralyzed Barcelona Airport, imitating what Hong Kong activists had done just days before. An idealized vision of the Catalan pro-independence struggle reached the international arena, and a faction of the Hong Kong movement held a mass demonstration of support for the Catalan independence movement. In it, the activists considered both social movements as “struggles against oppression.” Despite the different political nature of the state enemy they face, there are many elements in common worth mentioning between the two cases. The fear of a worse future, the tendency towards an ethnic struggle against other members of the dominant community, and the occasional use of violence by small groups of mainly young people are elements to consider. This article contends that factions of these two movements are not primarily driven by a desire for democracy but by a struggle for national—ethnic—sovereignty. I conclude that the Catalan and Hong Kong movements should dismiss violence as a viable means to their goals and forget ethnic factors as a reason to break away from the different “other.” Doing so, they could again become the spearheads of the global battle against neoliberal and illiberal values, instead of becoming a paradigm for those who promote nationalist discourses and advocate the destruction of liberal values.

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The Catalan independence movement recently adopted the revolutionary movement of Hong Kong as a new reference and inspiration: “We are going to do like Hong Kong!”, groups of people recently cried, exalted as they headed to paralyze Barcelona Airport, imitating what Hong Kong activists had done just days before. The Catalan independence movement’s explicit aspiration to emulate Hong Kong became exemplified with the assault on the airport, other public spaces, and the siege of the police on the streets of Catalonia. Previously, Catalan independence radicals (grouped in the “Comitès de Defensa de la República,” meaning “Committees for the Defense of the Republic,” CDR) studied, disseminated and emulated the methods of the so-called “Frontliners”—the equivalent of the CDR—in the Hong Kong protests: techniques and tactics of violent confrontation with police forces and infrastructure occupation, with the explicit objective of obtaining immediate international attention. The CDR achieved the expected success. Elisenda Paluzie, the president of the most

relevant pro-independence civil association in Catalonia—Catalan National Assembly (ANC)—supported that strategy. In recent statements, she defended that during the mobilizations in Catalonia, like in Hong Kong, the violent incidents made the movement finally visible in the international media on a continuous basis (Piñol and Baquero, 2019). It is worth asking whether visibility in the international media, by itself, confers any legitimacy. Especially when an intentional and well-designed strategy of violence has provoked it. We should also question the versions offered by the press, often falling into sweetened and romanticized versions of reality showing a clear ideological bias. In any case, the recent incidents in Catalonia and Hong Kong have introduced into the international media agenda a discursive struggle that aims to equate both movements with pro-democracy and freedom, despite the long distance between their spatial and political contexts.

The violent struggle of the CDR reached the international arena and found immediate support from a faction of the Hong Kong movement soon afterward. A mass demonstration of support for the Catalan independence movement was staged in Hong Kong on 24 October 2019. According to Ernest Chow (Arana, 2019), former president of the student union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in charge of reading the manifesto during that demonstration of support, the cases of Catalonia and Hong Kong had certain similarities, such as them being two territories with a different language and culture, enjoying higher levels of development than those of the rest of their parent countries, and finding themselves “facing the same sad and tragic fate.” In this way, a clear gesture of mutual rapprochement between both causes, self-identified as “struggles against oppression”, was made official. Of course, none of these actors mentioned a word about the different political nature of the state enemy they face, Spain and China. Moreover, whereas the government in Hong Kong is said to be a puppet of China, the government in Catalonia is precisely the one promoting independence from the institutions. But just mentioning these otherwise relevant factors, as the Spanish government and the Spanish media constantly do, should not be an excuse to foreclose the debate and lead us to dismiss an in-depth analysis of the similarities between the two movements. Because there are many elements in common worth mentioning:

1. Both movements have as one of their main roots the fear of a worse future. The gloomy mental picture of the future is caused, for example, by the threat of climate change or the disenchantment with the neoliberal system and the increasing economic inequalities (something shared with movements of protest emerging recently in countries like France, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Lebanon...). But, also, by fear of losing a position of privilege maintained in these regions, historically richer than their parent states. Ernest Chow talked in his manifesto in support of Catalonia about the higher standards of living in Hong Kong regarding China. Similarly, Josep Costa, vice president of the Catalan Parliament, also shared a tweet in a similar line on 13 August 2019: “What happens in Hong Kong teaches us some things, for example, that rich societies can also revolt with all the consequences” (Costa, 2019). The controversial “right to decide” or “right of self-determination” is not so much a pro-democracy claim as it is a way to camouflage the support for policies of isolationism and supremacy of dominant groups (like the proposals that made possible the election of Trump or the vote for *Brexit*).

In Catalonia, one of the main reasons of the promoters of such discourses is the hope to cling to their privileges while avoiding economic solidarity with the “other” (be it the foreign immigrant, the ethnically different citizen of the state, the state institutions like the Spanish government, or the supranational institutions like the European Union). The recognition of a purported right of the richest regions to secede from the parent states would only give these privileged regions a perfect excuse

to blackmail the rest of the state from their position of domain and the possibility of seceding freely (Catala, 2017). The main consequence of accepting such a possibility would be the atomization between the wealthiest and poorest regions. Also, it would mean the annulment of intrastate distributive justice, which is an essential part of liberal democracy and the welfare state to function in existing political associations.

In the case of Hong Kong, the part protesting for freedom and sovereignty is not precisely that of the underdog, the working classes or the immigrants, but the privileged middle classes and the bourgeoisie. They seek to sustain their economic position and privileges after they felt it jeopardized by the decline of their economic position and the rising power of China and Chinese citizens. In both Catalonia and Hong Kong, a part of those self-identified as pro-democrats are dangerously drifting away from liberal values. On the one hand, they promote a nationalist search of ethnic sovereignty that is progressively causing a social polarization and differentiation of citizenship between the “real” Catalans and Hong Kongers against the Spaniards in Catalonia and the Chinese in Hong Kong. On the other hand, more than promoting freedom and social equality between citizens, these movements seek a reactionary defense of economic supremacy by the elites and the wealthy classes in both regions. In other words, it is not as much a debate about democracy as one about national—ethnic—sovereignty. There should be no doubt about the lack of democratic and liberal values of those who intend to impose their identity and their political will on the whole of the citizenship by violent means. The spokeswoman of the CDR gave an example of that dangerous drift in an interview on Catalan public television. She admitted that in her group they do not believe in individual rights, since “only collective rights are legitimate”. Moreover, she claimed that their limits when protesting are neither the individual rights nor the imposed law, but the use of reason, because they are the only ones who are right (“Preguntes frequents”, 2019).

2. Their struggle is not only against the Spanish and the Chinese states, but also against the part of their fellow citizens who do not share their ideas, goals, means, or ethnic background. Those who do not share the hegemonic project are automatically transformed into an “other” often defined as “Spanish” or “Chinese” in a derogative way. The vertical antagonism between an underdog and the state elites is facilitated by that prior horizontal antagonism—nationalist or ethnic—based on hatred towards the Spanish and Chinese otherness, which is considered a threat to “the people” of Catalonia and Hong Kong. The growing fanaticism and disrespect for other social groups entail a mounting spiral of silence and dehumanization of all Catalans and Hong Kongers who identify themselves as partially or totally Spanish or Chinese (See “Mainland Chinese are being attacked”, 2019). Or directly with those who do not wish to join the movements for ideological reasons beyond identity. Thus, “people fear being attacked simply on the basis of being Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese” (“Hong Kong stares”, 2019). These “others” become commonly labeled as traitors, sometimes are censored, insulted, and are suspicious agents of the Chinese Communist Party.

The same occurs with those Catalans who speak Spanish, those who are opposed to secession, or those who criticize the approach taken by the secessionist movement in the last years. The severe risk that entails both the dichotomous vision of the world between “us” and “them” and the increasing social polarization based on ethnic identities, is its proximity to the most retrograde and violent nationalist outbursts. Violence becomes justified by hate to everything that smells to Chinese or Spaniard, which is invariably considered vile, dictatorial, or morally inferior. Police forces included. Increasingly, the struggle becomes less about democracy and more about an identity duel between anti-China and pro-China supporters, or anti-Spanish and pro-Spanish citizens. There is an attempt

to hide this conflict by using words with positive connotations: one group is defined as pro-China, whereas its opponent is called pro-democracy instead of anti-China or pro-Hong Kong. For these movements to be authentically pro-democratic, they should start by accepting those Hong Kongers and Catalans who want to be part of China and Spain with due respect and with all their rights. Otherwise, there is a high risk that what they will become and achieve would not resemble a liberal democracy but an ethnic state with first and second-class citizens.

3. It is equally important to mention that in both movements violence has been exercised by small groups, mainly anti-system and formed mainly by young people. These young people, feeling they are leading a historic moment for their nation (“The revolution of our times”), are also the most desperate about the negative future our societies face, and the more easily influenced by the antagonistic discourse and the hatred speech. On many occasions, both in Catalonia and Hong Kong, the activists engaging in violent acts against the police do not have reached the age of majority. They have opted for violence as a method of struggle opposed to the peaceful protests carried out by the majority of the supporters of the movements. At the beginning of this article, I already exposed the whitewashing and justification of violent actions by certain socio-political actors from Catalonia and Hong Kong, considering violence as a valid means to an end. The great danger of these narratives is that it becomes increasingly probable that the violent elements end up imposing their strategies in the core of the movements, displacing the moderate voices, accusing them of being weak, cowards, disloyal, or directly treacherous.

There are already numerous examples of that tendency. Also, the use of violence as a tactic to make the conflict visible internationally requires the conscious search for shocking images of state repression and, therefore, needs increasing provocations until these images of *force majeure* appear. As the young Hong Konger that was shot by a policeman said, if he had been shot in the head and killed, it would have been a good thing because that could increase society’s awareness. The search for a martyr able to touch the sensibilities of the international community supposes a double-edged sword. By increasing the hatred towards the “other”—describing it as anti-democratic and fascist oppressor, in short, dehumanising it—this escalating violence can bring and, in fact, already brought, casualties in all sides: the protesters, the policemen who risk their lives to do their job, and random citizens who support the “enemy” state.

In Hong Kong, for example, one man was killed recently by a brick allegedly thrown by an activist and anti-Chinese radicals severely burned another one. In Catalonia, the same pro-independence government that encouraged mass mobilization then had to order its regional police, formed by Catalan people, to suppress those protests, showing a total lack of criteria and institutional responsibility. People got severely injured. Afterward, the pro-independence president of the Catalan government blamed alleged infiltrators and troublemakers for the violence, suggesting that they had nothing to do with the peaceful independence movement that he supports (Rodríguez, 2019). He focused not so much on those who threw Molotov cocktails at the police and sent a policeman to the hospital severely injured, but on the alleged excessive use of the force of those riot police that subsequently acted against those very same violent activists. Something similar had occurred in Hong Kong when masked people attacked police officers attempting to cause them the maximum physical damage. Many ordinary Hong Kongers are repelled by the scenes of violence. Still, they are repulsed even more by the “Chinese police”, in an escalation of ethnic dehumanization: “‘dogs’ for the police, ‘cockroaches’ for the protesters” (“Hong Kong stares”, 2019). Members of the Hong Kong movement and large sectors of the international press have interpreted every police action in Hong

Kong as an example of Chinese dictatorial repression, which is an exercise in hypocrisy that forgets the essential role of police in all states. During November 2019, in democratic countries like Chile or Colombia, the harsh reaction of the security forces against similar protests has caused dozens of dead; in countries like Iraq, the number of dead rose to the hundreds, showing that the responses of Spain and China have been quite measured in comparison.

Catalonia and Hong Kong are plural societies with no unique identities, as democratic elections have shown: only 47.5% of Catalans voted for pro-independence parties in 2017, whereas 57% of Hong Kongers voted for pro-Hong Kong parties and 42% voted for pro-China candidates during the local elections of November 2019. Hong Kong was a positive example that could have positively influenced China towards higher degrees of freedom and liberal values. Catalonia had the same role within Spain and was recognized as a particularly open, enterprising and welcoming society. Hopefully, in Catalonia and Hong Kong people will remember what the real struggle should be, dismissing violence as a viable means to their goals and forgetting ethnic factors as a reason to break apart with the different "other". In doing so, they could once again be the spearheads of the global battle against cannibal neoliberalism and illiberalism, instead of becoming a paradigm for those who advocate the destruction of liberal values and nationalist discourses of exclusion.

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