Occupying Movements: Youth, Precarity and the Art of Resistance

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Odd One Out?
Answers...
Activism and the Sociological Imagination

We located ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets... Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom.

(Berger 1963: 176)

• What can we do to change the society we live in?
Youth and Precarity
Introduction

• The rise of global cities has resulted in certain economic and socio-spatial convergences.
• One consequence, for young people, has been the increase of precarious employment and delayed transitions.
• Another consequence has been the spatial concentration of disadvantage in cities – the creation of stigmatised ‘urban outcasts’.
The New Stratification
(Standing 2011)

- **Elite**: hyper-rich, footloose economy
- **Salariat**: civil servants, TNC employees
- **Proficians**: professionals, creative consultants
- **Manual employees**: remains of previous working-class, declining and moving
- **Precariat**: unemployed or socially detached
One theme [of neoliberalism] was that countries should increase labor market flexibility, which came to mean an agenda for transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families. The result has been the creation of a global ‘precariat’ consisting of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability

(Standing 2011: 1)
Insecurity and Resistance

- Increasing insecurity over jobs, work, skills, income, careers, futures, stability.
- Precariousness of residency, labour, social protection; but likely to be educated.
- Resulting in increasing anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation => Indignados, Occupy.
‘Freeters’

• Term used in Japan, especially Tokyo, to denote young people in precarious working conditions
• Qualitative break from the ‘salary-man’
• Earn money from low-paid or freelance work
• Constitute 10% of workforce
• Some adopted as alternative lifestyle
Wacquant argues that neoliberal social welfare and punishment policies have created zones of exclusion in urban environments in which to control unruly populations.

Extension of the prison into the ghetto and the ghetto into the prison; workfare and prisonfare.

Spaces of advanced marginality go beyond social control to outright social exclusion.
The Ghetto

• The flipside of these changes are those ‘left behind’ by the global economy, who are increasingly spatially confined (Wacquant 2001).

• The ghetto’s function is to contain and immobilize the ‘wasted humans’ produced by modernity (Bauman 2004)

• Inability to move can be a result of technological surveillance, physical obstacles, security checkpoints and controls, as well as public transport prices and design, city planning and residential segregation.
Summary

• The rise of the global city has had important implications for young people
• On one hand, there has been an increase in precarity, insecurity and anger.
• On the other, there has been a growth in spatially dislocated housing estates, which concentrate disadvantage.
• These conditions have proven ripe for the development of various forms of both youth crime and political mobilisation.
Reading the Riots
London, England

- Population: 13m
- 2,000 year history
- Ethnically diverse
- Leading global city with extreme inequality and disadvantage
Introduction: The England Riots

• Four nights of violent disorder in August 2011
• Sparked by police shooting of Mark Duggan
• London, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester
• Concentrated in poorest London boroughs
• 5 deaths; 3,100 arrests; 1,000 charges; £200 m property damage
Reading the Riots

• Unique collaboration between LSE and Guardian
• Community interviewers in areas affected by riots
• Series of news articles, research reports and academic publications
• Key factors:
  – Opportunism
  – Perceived social injustice
  – Deprivation
  – Frustration with police
Riots in Contemporary Perspective

(2014)

- Speed and malleability
  - Role of social media and technology (‘BBM riots’)
- Looting and consumerism
  - ‘Shopping riots’, looting of branded goods
  - But also more mundane goods, and as expression of discontent
Shopocalypse Now

• Zizek: ‘violent consumerism’
• Bauman: ‘riots of defective and disqualified consumers’
• Treadwell et al (2012)
  – Absence of unifying politics
  – Embedded unemployment
  – Deep sense of inertia
  – Competitive individualism
• Riots as ‘fetishised extreme experience’ (Treadwell 2012: 7)
Depoliticisation and Consumerism

With the police temporarily caught short, the brief breakdown of order carved out a lawless space in which the rioters could have acted out their darkest or indeed their most deeply political impulses; yet, for most of those involved, the limits of their desires extended no further than the accumulation of consumer culture’s symbolic objects

(Treadwell et al 2012: 8)
Conclusion

• The 2011 riots can be ‘read’ in a number of different ways.

• Anger, anomie and alienation experienced by marginalised youth in the global city.

• Importance of local history and culture in understanding street-based movements.

• Filtering of precarity through marginality, consumerism and depoliticisation.
Occupying Movements
Hong Kong as a Global City
(Chiu and Lui 2009)

Since its inception, Hong Kong has been a key intersection of different worlds, forever a strategic exchange node for firms from China to the rest of the world and form the rest of the world to China, as well as among all of the overseas Chinese communities.

(Sassen 2001: 74)

• World’s 11th biggest trading economy, sixth biggest foreign exchange market. 4,000 international HQs.

• Historically a ‘regional and global network of economic ties via organizational and personal linkages through Chinese networks’ (Chiu and Lui 2009: 3)
Social Inequality in Hong Kong

Figure 2
Income inequality is greater in Hong Kong than in any OECD country

Gini coefficient of income inequality, mid-2000s, and inter-decile ratio P90/P10

Source: Henrard (2011)
1 in 5 people in Hong Kong live in poverty.

40% of the population live in subsidised housing.

100,000 people live in coffin, cage homes and rooftops.

Over 1,000 are homeless.

Minimum wage introduced in 2011: HK$ 28 per hour.

There are 650,000 working poor.

1 in 4 children do not get 3 meals a day.

The poverty line for one person is HK$ 3,275 per month.

1 in 3 seniors struggle to meet their basic nutritional needs.

Highest income gap between the rich and the poor of any developed economy.

Source: http://feedinghk.org/hunger-stats/
Public Housing Estates

• In Hong Kong, due to high cost of rental >50% of the population live in public housing estates.

• Unlike other global cities, public housing involves a mixture of social classes and occupations.

• There are some estates – particularly more isolated communities – that have developed a reputation for social problems.

• For many in public housing estates, however, there remains very little physical space.
Consumption in Hong Kong

• Highly competitive education system
  – 47% receiving private tuition
  – Leisure time spent avoiding stress
  – TV, computer, Internet
• Consumption as a release; shopping as entertainment
• Class distinction and luxury goods
• 18% either neutral or disagreed with the statement: ‘it is foolish to break the law for money’
  – Merton with energy, Katz with structure?
Social Movements in Hong Kong

• Argued that traditional social movements in Hong Kong had difficulty in mobilising the population due to:
  – Elitist colonial political administration
  – Laissez-faire sensibility
  – Utilitarian familism
  – Non-adversarial politics
  – ‘Refugee mentality’

• Lui and Chui: Researchers focused on large-scale political instabilities, rather than grassroots resistance

• Historiography and revisionism
Riots and Reform

• 1966 and 67 riots
  – Wealth and racial inequalities
  – Lack of social provision
  – Weakness of trade unions
  – 60-70 hour working-week

• Four Pillars:
  – Housing (New Towns, increased provision)
  – Education (compulsory secondary education)
  – Health
  – Social Services

• Minimum working hours, maternity leave, severance, compensation, holidays.
Protest and Post-80s Youth
(DeGolyer 2010)

• Survey from 2010 demonstrated significant dissatisfaction among under-30s with government
• Dissatisfaction with government performance tends to rise with education
• Strong feelings of dissatisfaction related to stress over the past few years related to job prospects and extended youth transitions
• Increase in precariousness in relation to future aspirations.

• ALIENATION, ANGER, ANOMIE
The sources of social instability in Hong Kong are similar to those across mainland China: inequality of representation. A privileged few persons and even fewer corporations vote for fully half of the Legislative Council. Dissatisfaction with government is growing particularly among those under 30. Hong Kong appears to be heading towards a crisis.
The Art of Resistance?
Conclusions

• Value of sociological and criminoloogical imagination
• Concepts as bridge between academic and geographical contexts
• Importance of global and comparative perspectives
• Reflexivity and activism; rethinking the street
Youth Culture as Carnival
(Presdee 2000)

One of the enduring myths of political and social life is the one that sees young people as the central cause of forms of crime and disorder that strike at the very heart of the stability and prosperity of contemporary social life...

Being ‘young’ is characterised by a culture created out of the tensions that emanate between regulation and rebellion; control and care; the civilised and the savage. The result is a contesting carnivalesque culture that forever pushes at the boundaries of transgression.

(Presdee 2000: 107, 115)