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Can the global city enable democratic autonomy? Re-reading David Harvey and Saskia Sassen

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Political economy section

Can the global city enable democratic autonomy? Re-reading David Harvey and Saskia Sassen

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The autonomy of global cities and the potential resistance of urban spaces

Saskia Sassen and David Harvey both argued that state power may face challenges to control urban spaces in global cities because the state cannot effectively control the dense networks formed by digital communication infrastructure, flows of finance capital, and relations between residents. In 1991, sociologist Saskia Sassen published the monograph *The Global City* in which she used London, New York, and Tokyo as three case studies to examine how digital technologies have increased their capacities of global operation, coordination, and control. These capacities, in turn, make these cities attractive hosts for headquarters of global corporations. In the book, Sassen is particularly interested in how these global cities facilitate flows of finance capital and digital information. In turn, these flows afford connections between global cities. The dense network between these cities led Sassen to argue that they are relatively autonomous from the nation-states to which they belong. Therefore, nation-state may no longer be useful category of analysis.

At about the same time period, Marxist geographer David Harvey began to examine how urban spaces offer a site of resistance for the working-class because factories, a place for workers to struggle against capitalists, have closed in de-industrialized cities. The streets and neighbourhoods in urban cities have become such sites. Since these spaces vary in functions and meanings, Harvey, appropriating Foucault's term "heterotopia" (1984), highlighted the heterogeneous nature of these spaces. These spaces are built with affects of and relations between residents, which state authorities cannot effectively control. The meanings of these spaces are not fixed, making its nature heterogeneous. This nature, in turn, unsettles the state's hegemonic understanding of space.

In comparison with Harvey, Sassen highlighted the role that global cities play in facilitating

capital flows and wealth accumulation. Global cities in one country imitate and compete with each other more than they do with small towns and rural areas in the nation-state. For example, Art Basel, a for-profit arts exhibitor, has its annual fairs in Basel (Switzerland), Hong Kong (China), and Miami Beach (USA). These cities all compete for deep-pocketed art collectors by highlight fine dining, exciting nightlife, and multilingual/multicultural populations. However, as noted by Sassen, these cities are not all alike for their functions and roles in the global economy differ. For example, Basel has a sizeable life science industry, Hong Kong is a global financial center, and Miami Beach is a hub of tourism and entertainment.

In comparison to Sassen, Harvey (2013) paid more attention to the potential of global cities being sites of urban revolts for political actions can disrupt urban economies. Two good examples are protests in global cities during the Occupy Movement and #BlackLivesMatter. The Occupy Movement was a protest against the widening wealth gap between the top one percent and the rest. The event that caused the protest was the collapse of banks that led to a global recession. The ripple effect caused by the failure of one bank in Iceland on global finance reflected the dense networks through which digital finance flows. The Occupy Movement also illustrated how dense communication networks allowed protestors to coordinate their actions in occupying urban streets in global cities. Protestors occupied physical locales in different cities while learning from each other experiences through digital media. In the case of #BlackLivesMatter, the protests were rooted in the United States, but protestors elsewhere have made the connection between systemic racism in the U.S. and the transatlantic slave trade in Europe from the 16th to the 19th century. The murder of George Floyd has not only called for the removals of confederate leaders' statues in public places in the U.S., but it has also probed British-based companies to apologize for its past engagements in human trafficking.

Urban spaces in global cities amidst the rise of authoritarianism

Despite the sanguine tone of Sassen and Harvey, rising authoritarianism in China and COVID lockdowns have challenged the assumed autonomous and rebellious nature of global cities. Since both theorists first began examining urban spaces in global cities, the ranking of global cities has shifted.

Three Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen—have risen in terms of populations, capital accumulation, national and international influences, as well as innovation. The rise of these cities called into question whether the arguments of Sassen and Harvey require further appraisal because they have not experienced policy-making or decision-making autonomy from the state, nor are their urban spaces sites of resistance. On the contrary, China's dense digital networks and populated spaces allow states to effectively control the movements and activities of urban populations. For example, during the covid lockdown, cities controlled residents' movements through forced testing and isolation: once a positive case was detected in a household, the city locked down the entire building and foreboded residents from entering or leaving. The prolonged and oppressive control of residents' movement has led some young people to use social media to coordinate staging flash protests in urban spaces. However, they were quickly arrested by the police because Chinese platform companies shared their personal information with the state. In this case, global cities in China do not seem to be less autonomous of the state; and urban spaces are not sites of resistance. On the contrary, digital technology increased state surveillance because city government officials were eager to please the Central Chinese government by demonstrating loyalty to the state. In addition, digital networks allowed governments to effectively monitor communication and survey movements among protestors. In these cases of Chinese cities, urban spaces definitely do not enable democratic autonomy.

Hong Kong as a case study

In this paper, I focus on Hong Kong for a few reasons: first, Hong Kong is a global city; second, the city state has its own economic, political, and judicial systems that are relatively separate from, but not independent of, the nation-state; third, the autonomy of Hong Kong political freedom was compromised amidst the rise of Chinese nationalism and covid lockdown.

First, Hong Kong's status as a global city is an ongoing project which the government defines for itself as a strategic place to facilitate capital flow around the globe. Since the 1960s, the Hong Kong government has been refashioning itself as a central point where money and people meet. The labels have changed from a East-meets-West place, Asia's World City, to China's global financial center. The

forced concession of Hong Kong to Britain after the two opium wars fuelled a Britain-led global capitalism. Similar to many developing economies in the 1950s and 1960s, Hong Kong became a manufacturing center where local merchants contracted work from overseas businesses. The decline of the manufacturing industry in Hong Kong led the government to re-think its economic model. Upon the opening of China to the world, the government called the city a gateway to China that serves as a springboard to attract foreign investment via Hong Kong. The desire of China-based corporations for finance capital outside the country propelled Hong Kong to become a global financial center for China.

Second, Hong Kong—when it was a British colony and now a Special Administrative Region (SAR)—maintains separate, but not completely independent, political and judiciary systems from those of the sovereign-state to which it belongs. During the colonial era, Hong Kong's three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judiciary—mirrored that of the United Kingdom. However, the governor of Hong Kong, the head of the executive branch, was appointed by the British Prime Minister. Citizens could not elect any Legislative Council until 1991. After Hong Kong's return to China, the Hong Kong government continued the separation of the three branches. However, their independence has been called into question because of the direct interference from the Central Chinese government who vets all shortlisted candidates and hand-picks the Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR. After the handover, there mushroomed newly formed political parties vying for seats in the Legislative Council. Some of these parties were pro-democracy, others advocated for Hong Kong independence. The passing of the National Security Law in 2020 has disqualified pro-democracy parties because the Central Chinese government required candidates to be patriots who do not question the authoritarianism of the Hong Kong and Central Chinese governments.

The direct interference from the Central Chinese government had led to reduced political and press freedoms in Hong Kong. According to Freedom House, a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, Hong Kong's freedom score is 42 out of 100 in 2023, dropped from 61 six years ago. In contrast, Russia scored 16, mainland China 9, and North Korea 3. According to Reporters Without Borders, an international non-profit organization, press freedom index of Hong Kong dropped 80 places to the 148th out of 180 countries and territories. Russia, Mainland China, and North Korea took

the 155th, 175th, and 180th places.

The stringent border control imposed by the Hong Kong government also limited movements of local populations. When most of the countries had lifted quarantine regulations, Hong Kong continued to request arriving passengers to stay for 21 days in a hotel. The lengthy quarantine has driven many business executives away from the city. Even though medical professionals did not believe the policies were informed by science, the government maintained that the control was effective and necessary. One telltale sign that politics was the main driving force of covid regulations is the swift removals of any regulations once the Central Chinese government arbitrarily lifted theirs at the end of 2022.

Hong Kong illustrates a peculiar case of global city: its prominence as a global financial center is coupled with reduced political and press freedoms; a relatively free flow of finance capital while flows of information and ideas are endangered; an attractive place for mainland Chinese to abode but a closed society that drove middle-class Hong Kong Chinese to emigrate. The Hong Kong case will then provide evidence to show whether the theorization of Sassen's global cities and Harvey's urban space applies to global cities in the midst of rising nationalism.

In the following I will summarize how David Harvey and Saskia Sassen respectively theorize urban spaces being sites of resistance and global cities being relatively autonomous of state. Then I will assess whether we need to modify Harvey's and Sassen's theorization by applying them to Hong Kong. Finally, drawing on Harvey and Sassen, I will argue how network, time, and space are three organizing concepts to understand flows of capital, people, and ideas through global cities.

David Harvey

David Harvey, a Marxist geographer, contrasted a capital-driven urbanization with a people-driven one. From the vantage point of capital, Harvey investigated how surplus capital accumulation drove urbanization in modern cities (2000, 2008). In other words, the building of modern cities (Paris, for instance) was not accidental but a way for capital to accumulate and for capitalists to reap the profits from a surplus of capital and labour. A dialectical approach,

according to Harvey, will resist capital's domination in urban spaces. This approach is effective at critiquing a static understanding of space by assuming its fluidity (2000, 2013). I delineate below some of Harvey's arguments.

Harvey believes urbanization is a capitalist project. Commerce, transportation and infrastructure facilitate the flows of money and people, shaping the outlook of a city. Therefore, urban development is not a natural process, capital gave it a distinct outlook. Since the circulation of capital is essential to the survival of capitalism, this ideology constantly builds and rebuilds an urban geography in its own image. He also pointed out a change in capitalism since the 1970s; economic growth was fueled by finance capital. Urbanization was partly financed by debt. He gave an example that the Chinese government sped up urbanization on borrowed money (Harvey, 2008). The consequences of debt-funded urbanization endanger local lives. First, financial risks are spread to populations (Harvey, 2008). In addition, these risks endanger residents' social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies, and aesthetic values because capital sought to re-define their urban lives to facilitate its flow.

To counter capitalism from an urban viewpoint, Harvey (2013) advocated for the re-building of the common. Harvey (2008) differentiated the common from public and private goods. When space is a privatized good, the emphasis is on individual right and enjoyment (Harvey, 2008). This right to city space reflects a neoliberal ideal where privatized places are exclusive to select populations. However, Harvey (2013) also cautioned against the public space being seen as an equivalence as the common. The state uses its power through public administration units to control populations (Harvey 2013). One good example is how the prison controls the incarnated population. The state and businesses are not competing with each other. In the U.S., prisons are run by private companies! The neoliberal state and private businesses form an intimate relationship. The state uses publicly-funded projects to benefit a select few (such as landowners, developers, and financiers) where pushing residents to a state of dispossession and poverty (Harvey, 2013). As a result, space privatization has reduced public space. The protection of the common is then a way to protect flows of public goods that underpin the qualities of the

common (Harvey, 2008). In order to fight for the common, Harvey (2013) argued that the right to the city is a human right; residents should enjoy the right to change themselves so as to change the city in which they inhabit.

Harvey (2013) also recognized that the common lived by residents gives qualities to urban life. For example, up and coming neighbourhoods in North America are commonly resided by artists, immigrants, and young professionals. The human quality of these neighbourhoods is different from gated, middle-class neighbourhoods that put a premium price on privatized space rather than the common. However, Harvey (2013) also recognized that neighbourhoods with a quality common are quickly capitalized by developers who extract rents from the common life produced by the reproductive labour of the residents.

Even though some may argue that the state-capital partnership is too formidable to overcome, Harvey (2013) believed that capital can never control urban populations (Harvey, 2013). Therefore, claiming the right to the city should be built from the ground up; struggle should take place in sites such as the streets and the neighbourhoods. In this way, he departed from traditional leftist/socialist thought that views the factory as a site of class struggle. Harvey explained that the factory floor has become a less important site for class struggle due to de-industrialization and the elimination of manufacturing jobs.

To weaken capital's claim to space, Harvey (2006, 2013) argued that space is neither static nor monolithic. Harvey (2013) advocated for a city "heterotopia", a liminal social space with possibility even though capital and state often exercise social control to eliminate such diverse spaces. A heterotopia contrasts an utopia, which was contrived as an accomplished and rationalised spatial order of capitalism and the state. These spaces are built from how residents do, feel, sense, and articulate the meanings of social lives. He asserted that human qualities of the city arise from daily practices in diverse spaces in the city (2013). Relating to the concept of the common, space is a process rather than a thing. Space is also a changing set of social relations between self-defined groups and existing social order and physical environment (Harvey, 2013).

Another way to critique urban processes under capitalism is to destabilize the notion of

space (Harvey, 2006). He brought in the dialectics between time and space (2000) to provide the typology of space being absolute, relative, and relational. An absolute space can be measured; a relative space is relative to time. A relational space is understood from residents' past experiences, social relations, memory, and desire. The meanings of absolute, relative, and relational space are always dialectical. For example, a 300-square feet apartment in Hong Kong may appear to be cramped even to a New Yorker but a homeowner in Hong Kong believes that this space symbolizes a middle-class dream. To Harvey (2006), acknowledging the changing multiple meanings of space is important for the formation of political subjects and to seek alternative political possibilities because space is not seen as an unchanging “thing” that is external to urban life but a social process that is open to changes.

Saskia Sassen

Sassen (2000, 2001b, 2005, 2016) has written extensively about what a global city is. Rather than seeing global cities as powerful entities, she examined the practices that produce the capabilities of global operation, coordination, and control in economic globalisation (Sassen, 2000, 2001b, 2005, 2016). The focus on practices is believed to draw attention to places and work processes without neglecting the relevance of physical places in facilitating the hypermobility of capital.

In her writings, Sassen has used different terms to describe global cities. For example, she has described them as economic intermediation that offer diverse and complex intermediate capabilities (2016); advanced production sites for services (Sassen, 2001b, 2016); a complex location in a grid of cross-boundary processes (Sassen, 2016); a spatialisation of global power projects that may be located on global circuits (2001b); nodal points in vast communication and market systems (Sassen, 1995); the nexus between the country's wealth and the global market (Sassen, 2001b); and the gateway for the global market (Sassen, 2001b). All these descriptions point to, first, the important role played by global cities in the global economy and the financial sector; second, the important played by information technologies and digital infrastructures in

global cities. Sassen (2001b), however, does not believe that global cities play the same functions and compete with each other. Even though they emerged at about the same time due to digitisation and the booming financial market, they often specialize in different functions and work in conjunction with each other (Sassen, 2001b).

Global economic activities demand a new kind of organizational structure that requires a re-scaling of spatialization (Sassen, 2005). Global cities house a large number of company headquarters that require specialised firms such as accounting, advertising, and marketing. Both globalization and concentrated economic control have given major cities a key role in the management and control of such a global network (Sassen, 2001b). In addition, deregulation of the financial sector of financial innovation has stimulated growth in the financial sector (Sassen, 2001b). Non-bank financial institutions (such as hedge funds) have been dominating the financial markets since the 1980s and they have chosen global cities to be their sites of operation (Sassen, 2001b, 2005).

The focus on the global city as an unit of analysis implies that the nation-state is no longer a satisfactory analytical unit of economic entity (Sassen, 2005). Therefore, the categorization of the local, the national, and the global no longer held (Sassen, 2005). A case in point is the diminishing control of local and national governments and local firms in global cities (Sassen, 2016). Therefore, Sassen (2001b, 2005) proposed spatial categories to replace that of nation-state. For example, the sub-national (such as cities and regions), cross-border regions (which consist of two or more sub-national entities), as well as supra-national (such as global digitised markets and free trade blocs). Information technologies help global cities form relationships with each other; these networks are disconnected from national economies (Sassen, 2005).

The global city concept also emphasizes the significance of places and material infrastructures (Sassen, 1995, 2001a, 2005, 2016). The hypermobility of capital and dematerialization of information in fact require multiple material conditions for global cities to enjoy concentrations of resources and digital infrastructures (Sassen, 1995). She recognized that the global and the digital are deeply intertwined even though accounts of globalization and

digitisation have neglected place and materiality. The analysis of the global economy often uses a pre-digital mindset to analyze the digital: that something is either digital or non-digital (Sassen, 2000, 2001a). To Sassen (2001a), the boundary between the digital and non-digital is not that clear-cut: “digital space is embedded in the large societal, cultural, economic, and imaginary structuration of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate” (p. 15). In addition, the analysis of the global economy requires an analysis of space economy. This economy is transnational in nature and is partly embedded in electronic spaces that over-ride conventional jurisdiction and boundaries (Sassen, 1995). A space economy also allows that global cities be seen as a site for urban knowledge capital (Sasse, 2016). As strategic sites, global cities enable local initiatives becoming part of the global network. In addition, multiple localities are intensely connected digitally across the globe.

The focus on the global and the digital illustrate a contradiction in the global economy (Sassen, 2000). Digitisation has enabled a dispersion of activities yet spatialization gravitates towards a centralisation of economic activities. She explained this contradiction with the territorial centralisation of headquarters in global cities. These offices house top-level management and central operation level. However, digital networks have enabled the spatial dispersion of economic activities and the reorganization of the financial industry (Sassen, 2001b). Peripheral functions (such as customer service) can be relocated to somewhere outside global cities.

The attention to space economy allows Sassen to bring in urban issues in global cities, such as gentrification, income polarization, and the formation of immigrant communities. The influx of high-income professionals drove up property prices, resulting in gentrification and the expulsion of long-time residents (Sassen, 2016). High-income populations, unlike the middle-class, demand labour-intensive, specialized services rather than mass-produced, cookie-cutter services (Sassen, 2001b).

Global cities has witnessed an increase of inequality. On the one end, there are highly skilled global elites; on the other, lowly skilled new immigrants (Sassen, 2001b, 2005, 2016). In this reconfigured labour market, local agents may feel powerless (Sassen, 2000, 2001b) because global

cities reproduce inequalities in a number of ways. For example, the household has become sites for economic production with a proliferation of home-based workshops (Sassen, 2000); women and immigrants occupy most of the low wage, part-time, and temporary jobs.

However, she also recognized that the influx of immigrants have changed global cities. For example, immigrant women have become active agents in their immigrant/ethnic community. Also, immigrants have rehabilitated spatial and economic sectors of the city by investing in the communities (2001b). She also believed that global cities make possible the emergence of new types of political subjects due to the acute disadvantages experienced by some populations (Sassen, 2001a) from poorly-funded schools to inadequate housing. She also believed in the “spill-over” effects of digital infrastructure. Activists can use digital networks for global/nonlocal organizing, effecting alternative political global circuits. Lastly, she believes that the space of global cities is more concrete for politics than for the nation (Sassen, 2001a).

Harvey and Sassen use different theoretical frameworks to explain the metamorphosis of capitalism. Harvey saw post-1970s urbanization around the globe as a continuation of earlier urbanization in Haussman's Paris and early 20th century New York City. The state and capital have always worked hand in hand to build cities to accommodate surplus accumulation. In contrast, Sassen saw the Global City as something new because of the booming financial sector and fast Internet connection. However, both would agree that women are ushered into cheap labour to fuel the growth of urban space and the Global City. In addition, they believe urban spaces and Global City have the potential to decentralize core power of the state and capital, making it harder for both to control residents in urban cities.

Applying Harvey and Sassen to Hong Kong

Harvey's emphasis on the global city as a result of surplus accumulation may explain the state-planned, corporate-friendly urbanization in Hong Kong since the 1970s. However, Hong Kong was first in contact with a British Empire-led global economy as early as mid-19th century. The ceding of Hong Kong to the British fuelled the Empire ambition to expand world trade.

Running a trade deficit of importing porcelain, teas, and silk, the British exported opium to China to balance the accounting book. When the Chinese Court banned the imports of opium, the British and the Chinese fought two opium wars, which partly resulted in the ceding of Hong Kong to the British. Hong Kong had been run as an entrepôt that privileged a select few, such as traders from Europe, the British Commonwealth, and Chinese elites. The state hardly provided any public services (such as healthcare, education and housing) to the Chinese populations. This void was filled by religious groups and neighbourhood organizations.

The provision of public housing only began in the 1950s, government-run hospitals in the 1960s, and free education in the late 1970s. Many have attributed the left-leaning Governor Murray MacLehose for starting many public services to the Hong Kong population. What cannot be neglected though is the fast changing economic and political circumstances after WWII. The United States, coming out from the war with a strong economic position, helped the rebuilding of Europe and funding many anti-Communist wars in Asia. Meanwhile, there was a wave of decolonization taking place in the “Third”World. Hong Kong, being attached to the mainland China, could easily become the center for communist activities that threaten the U.S.'s political economic domination. The provision of public services in Hong Kong can then be seen as a way to discourage a disfranchised population from rebelling against the colonial government and leaning towards the Chinese Communist Party.

After more than two decades of economic prosperity, the U.S. experienced an economic recession in the 1970s. Political economists such as David Harvey have written that the sluggish performance illustrated an inherent contradiction in capitalism: that surplus created in the system cannot be absorbed by it, resulting in unemployment, unsold goods, and a slower circulation of capital. One solution was to move manufacturing to places with cheaper labour: Hong Kong and Singapore (with their ties to the British Empire), Taiwan and South Korea (with their ties to the U.S.) then became manufacturing centers for exported goods.

Hong Kong's fastest growing decades (1960s to 1980s) witnessed a few trends in other developed countries: a more educated and healthier population; a gradually de-industrialized

economy and a fast-growing service industry; higher wages and living costs; a more consumption-oriented society; exacerbated wealth gaps; more women in the workforce and lower birthrate. However, as Sassen (2001b) suggested, different global cities have to develop their own “specialities” to attract capital and talents. Hong Kong chose to bolster its FIRE (Finance, insurance, and real estate) industry. The financial industry is particularly vibrant because its stock markets are not regulated by the Central Chinese government and are thus seen to be more connected to global finance. Since 2018, it has attracted a number of high-valued IPOs of China-based companies, including the second listing of Alibaba.

Both Harvey's and Sassen's theorizations of urban spaces in a global city may explain the political economic development of Hong Kong and some consequences on local populations. First, Sassen underscored that a pre-requisite of a global city is its increased capacities of global operation, coordination, and control. The FIRE industries in Hong Kong require services such as investment banking, accounting, auditing, marketing, and advertising. Global investment banks (such as Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan), the big four accounting firms (Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst and Young, and KPMG), and advertising firms (such as Ogilvy, Leo Burnett, Saatchi and Saatchi) have branches in Hong Kong. Global luxury hotels chains (such as Four Seasons, Hilton, Sheraton, Marriott) were rapidly built to cater to business travellers.

Whilst the Hong Kong government heavily advertises its capacities to host global firms, expats, and business travellers, it often does not mention the many foreseen consequences which drastically changed the social fibres of the city. For example, the push to increase productivity ushered many young women to seek higher education and work full-time after giving birth. To solve the unmet reproductive duties problems, the government implemented overseas domestic workers schemes to recruit women from other Asian countries (most notably the Philippines and Indonesia) as live-in servants. Unlike some countries where a period of residency will qualify one as a citizen, the government refused to have a plan to pave a citizenship path for these workers. Even though some have lived in Hong Kong for a few decades, they are still seen as “foreigners”. Sassen mentioned recent immigrants to global cities setting up their own social and economic

networks. Domestic helpers in Hong Kong set up their informal economic networks by hawking home-made meals and providing services (such as shipping goods to the Philippines). The consequences of women being asked to increase economic productivity are different in global cities. For example, in some European countries, the state provides free childcare for working parents. In the U.S., working mothers created a demand of private childcare services that hire a large number of women of color and recent immigrants. In some Asian countries, most notably Japan and South Korea, the states use gender ideology to discourage women from working outside home after they get married, including legalize discriminatory workplace practices. The states' urges of women staying home in these countries made possible strict immigration controls, keeping the populations relatively homogeneous.

Harvey's theorization of urban places is also illustrated in Hong Kong. While the state and global finance have overwhelmingly reconfigured the daily life of most of the populations, such as their commute routes or how they shop, the local populations also use their affects and social relations to resist against these totalizing forces. For example, the rapid gentrification and re-development of older districts have raised awareness of the collusion between the state and real estate developers. There have been renewed interests in preserving historic buildings and older residents' voices to counter the breakneck speed of urban development. Street protestors are other ways to counter the re-configuration of urban spaces from the state and real estate developers. For example, during the 2019-2020 anti-extradition bill protests, white-collar professionals gathered along pedestrians' bridges around Central's financial district during lunch time to support protestors. These flash protests challenged the functions of urban structure that serves as conduits to move people as quickly as possible. These bridges connect subway stations to commercial buildings, moving workers from their homes to their offices, shoppers from one mall to another. Standing for an hour in the bridges is then an act of resistance, a refusal to engage in movements that move global capital. During this act of defiance, the identity of the white-collar professionals also changed from an economic being to a political one during the hour. Rather than engaging in economic activities such as buying lunch or eating lunch in front of the office computers, they

demonstrated their support of protestors in a public place. The flash mob protests are only possible in an urban space because of pre-existing architectural structures that allow for quick gathering of dispersed crowds. The space also allows for an audience who happens to be in this space, such as those who do not support protestors or tourists.

The theorizations of Sassen and Harvey, however, cannot be applied to Hong Kong as an urban space/global city *en tout* for a few reasons. As suggested, the Central Chinese government has been tightening up political control in Hong Kong by vetting candidates for the Chief Officer position and members of the Legislative Council and by prosecuting pro-democracy activists. The Central Chinese government appears to be relatively hands-off on Hong Kong's economic activities, in particular those of the financial industry. For example, in the summer of 2021, the Chinese government cracked down on the private tutoring sector after parents complaining about the uber competitive education in urban cities. As a result, the values of private education companies' stocks have plummeted. But the relative independence of Hong Kong financial sector has to be understood in the context of the Central Chinese government's long-term economic planning. Economic development of the country relies on financial well-being of state-owned corporations that are listed in stock exchanges, including in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Some of the earliest IPOs of China-based corporations are state-owned companies. In addition, loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party depends on financial well-being of comrades, many of whom have assets outside the country. Hong Kong, being a financial center, houses many wealth management firms that help these communist party members invest.

Sassen also suggested that information technologies, a pre-requisite of global cities, will have positive "spill over" benefits for local social movements to connect to global movements. In other words, the local populations enjoy fast Internet connections because businesses in global cities rely on them for communication and money transactions. In the case of Hong Kong, activists made use of high-speed Internet to live-stream street confrontations with the police, to update each other locations of the police, and to post messages on social media. The protestors' produced contents were very often embedded by local and international media in their reports.

However, why the content was able to spill beyond the border is also because the major social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google) are allowed to operate in Hong Kong, but not in mainland China. When the Hong Kong government asked these companies to share users' data during the protests, they deferred them to the State Department for permission. These U.S.-based companies were able to refuse Hong Kong government's request not because of their respect for privacy or human rights, but because of the fact that the U.S. Congress has increased scrutiny of the monopolistic nature of some of them. If they comply with the Hong Kong government, U.S. politicians may accelerate the breakups of these companies. Even though Hong Kong is the only place in the entire country that has access to Facebook, Twitter, and Google, its small market is insignificant to these companies' global profits. Therefore, they rather risked being banned by the Hong Kong government than giving a reason for U.S. Congress to scrutinize its business practices.

Harvey's belief that urban space could create a commons to resist the power of the state and capital is also overly simplistic to apply to the case of Hong Kong. First, Hong Kong protestors may appear to share the common enemies—the Hong Kong police, the Hong Kong government, and Central Chinese government, but their social class and material resources differentiated their experiences. For example, some protestors were able to continue their higher education in the U.S. or the U.K. after the summer of discontents while some found themselves unemployed and suffered from mental illness while being “stuck” in Hong Kong. Scholars also found that protestors in the previous mass protests, the Umbrella Movement, self-segregated themselves based on social class. For example, working-class protestors believed the middle-class protestors were not confrontational enough so they started street occupations in another site. When the movement failed to secure a more democratic electoral process, protestors from different social class blamed each other for the failures.

Another example to show why Harvey's theorization of the common in urban space does not entirely apply to Hong Kong is the brief occupation of privatized spaces for the protests. As I previously mentioned, white-collar professionals gathered in pedestrians skywalks during lunch

hours to chant their support for protestors. This occupation of a private space and transformed it into a common, however, was temporary. After the lunch hour, professionals resumed their middle-class identities as workers and shoppers in a capitalistic society. Another example to show the temporary nature of the occupation of a privatized space is protestors escaping from the police in shopping malls. During the protests, black-clad protestors would stage flash mobs in shopping malls. Why these highly privatized spaces were seen as safe was because the mall management had to ensure customers would continue enjoying shopping without the presence of the police. Some malls posted a note on the doors to state that unless if there is a confirmed crime in the mall, the police should not enter the space. The shopping malls temporarily became a surprising site of commons during the protests.

What is urban space in global cities? Network, space, and time

In the concluding section, I lay out a possibility to re-read David Harvey's right to the city and Saskia Sassen's global city in the rise of nationalism and totalitarianism globally. In the future, I hope to use three organizing concepts—network, space, and time—to strengthen the theorization of Harvey and Sassen.

To re-cap the premise of the paper, the global city is imagined to be a space that accommodates flows of people, ideas, cultures and—most importantly—capital. It is also imagined to enjoy a high degree of decision-making autonomy from the nation. However, the rise of nationalism and covid lockdowns have called into question what a global city means when nation-states can abruptly stop global flows in and out from a city.

Hong Kong is a good case study because the international community has been questioning this former British colony's global status due to overt political control from the Central Chinese government and stringent border control during the pandemic. However, these worries tend to focus on economic issues without paying attention to how democratic autonomy shapes city space and configures time.

The Hong Kong case shows that even though the development of Hong Kong as a global city

from the colonial era to present has been meticulously planned, state planning had also created many unforeseen consequences. One example given is the “import” of domestic helpers from Southeast Asia, which changed gender relations in Hong Kong. I have also shown that protestors were not an unified group, their social class identities framed how they chose their protest tactics. The urban space in Hong Kong also afforded the “commonization” of highly privatized spaces (such as shopping malls or skywalks between commercial buildings) during protests.

To describe and explain the unforeseen consequences of developing global cities, citizens, activists, and academics ought to reject the typologies of local/national/global, and politics/economy/culture. Instead, they need to interrogate the multi-directional and often contradictory flows of capital, information, culture, and people. Three organizing concepts that are useful for examining such flows are network, space, and time. The focus on these three concepts will help re-imagine new spatialities and temporalities that realize citizens’ agency.

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