

Make Hong Kong Great Again

Response to General Session

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Sara Hardman’s essay on “Wa.V. Teachers’ Strike as Counter-Conduct: The Fight Against Neoliberalism from a Feminist Perspective” vividly illustrates some of the most fascinating concepts related to power and resistance in social theory, through an insightful analysis of some contemporary events in US educational politics.¹ Among these key concepts is biopolitics, which Hardman explores in connection with a proposal in West Virginia for a so-called “health” program, to track teachers’ footsteps. This example demonstrates the way politics functions in paradoxical ways in much of Foucault’s work. That which seems to free the self—in this case, tracking footsteps for “improved health”—at the same time is an exercise of power and control. Here, the notion of health care is perverted, to better align with neoliberal values, while the proposal dehumanises those actors in the social order apparently being served with “care.”

Hardman also provides a great service in elaborating the concept of counter-conduct, an approach to understanding protest also developed by Foucault, which again draws attention to paradoxical aspects of political organisation. As Death puts it, “protest and government are mutually constitutive, and . . . forms of resistance have the potential to reinforce and bolster, as well as *and at the same time as*, undermining and challenging dominant forms of global governance.”² In Hardman’s case, W.Va. teachers wish to participate in governance, but not as currently practiced. They are thus implicated in the system, within “strategies, techniques, and power relationships they oppose.”³ The strike as counter-conduct also creates a new mindset and identity for the protestors. Although the strike was not entirely successful, Hardman empha-

sises that it developed a new subjectivity of solidarity, generating respect for teachers, empowering educators as political actors, and providing hope for the future.

Hardman's assessment of this case is compelling. However, in the remainder of this essay I would like to consider some darker elements of counter-conduct, elaborating on it not only as power-generating conduct taking place within the governing system, but also as conduct manifesting rhizomatic relations between power and resistance, wherein there is no "pure form of resistance."⁴ To do so, I will explore another recent protest, one which I am more familiar with: the ongoing anti-government protests in Hong Kong. I do this not to challenge or oppose Hardman's insights, but in recognition of the value of "the open and always turbulent atmosphere of a continual criticism" within Foucault's ethic of resistance, which Death describes as an "under-emphasized dimension of both social movement studies and radically democratic politics."⁵

As Hardman notes, counter-conducts "position agents within the system of government while simultaneously disrupting their governmentability."⁶ As Foucault elaborates, counter-conduct reflects desire for "not being governed quite so much": "not to be governed . . . like that, by these people, at this price."⁷ Counter-conduct is not a total rejection of government, or governance. Instead, it uses accepted techniques, strategies, and discourses, to disrupt and reinvent identities and relations. While the W.Va. strike was illegal, the state's "history with labor action and politicians' desire to stay in good public opinion made [it] fit into the system while resisting it."⁸ As Hardman notes, what also made it effective was its pervasiveness, with support across counties and professional sectors, indicating that "we are united."⁹

In Hong Kong, the anti-government protests are oriented toward a number of demands. Primary among them is electing the Hong Kong Chief Executive by universal suffrage, which was promised during the 1997 handover from the United Kingdom to China in the Basic Law. Hong Kong protesters appeal to guidance from local and international legal experts to make this case, thereby relying on established knowledge regimes and subverting them

to achieve their goal. Protests also fit into the Hong Kong story, as in West Virginia. Hong Kong protests succeeded in 2012, against a proposed curriculum for national education. On June 16, 2019, nearly two million people (out of seven million) came out against the extradition bill which started the recent protests, telling a powerful story of solidarity.

But what is the sense of identity and subjectivity formed? In West Virginia, an identity was formed, of civil servants and educators, valuing working in schools as communities. However, in Hong Kong, with two million people involved, Foucault's statement seems more relevant, that "there is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary."¹⁰ If there is a central value in the Hong Kong protests, it is first and foremost about preserving an order that is fast-becoming, after this last year, "the good old days." The vast majority of protestors do not generally support the idea of full Hong Kong independence. Rather, they have been inspired by government actions aggravating a sense of diminishing agency and autonomy for Hong Kong. This autonomous identity is relative, not rooted in anything "pure." Hong Kong people never had universal suffrage, or anything like fair representation under the British. This is rather a diminishing dream of limited autonomy.

In another sense, "making Hong Kong great again," as some put it, is a return to neoliberalism, in contrast to Hardman's case. As Elam writes, the chant, "Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times" is "a plea to let Hong Kong remain liberal: to . . . remain the island of unregulated global capitalism that it has been since the 19th century."¹¹ This is not a fight against the power imbalances and inhumanity of unfettered market rule; most emphasise that their fight is not about class or inequality. The movement does not particularly represent the most economically and politically vulnerable; "migrant workers and domestic help are too busy working in the protesters' houses to attend the protests."¹² Furthermore, "Hong Kong has never bothered with any distinction between 'public' and 'private' and . . . between the economy and politics."¹³ What is meant by "make Hong Kong great again" is not too far off, economically, from what Trump means, by "make America great again."

As mentioned, relying on existing tools, techniques, and discourses is one strategy of counter-conduct. This last year, Hong Kong protestors have waved American and British flags, and there is graffiti everywhere of Pepe the Frog, unironically used by many as a symbol for Americanism and pro-democracy, despite its association in the United States with the alt-right and racism.¹⁴ Lacking confidence in local government, some protestors wax nostalgic about Hong Kong's glory days as a western colony, requesting assistance and support from the United States and United Kingdom, and from politicians like Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell.¹⁵ That such leaders are hardly exemplars of the values of democracy, freedom, and justice, is not significant here.

Indeed, at its darkest and most extreme, the Hong Kong protests invoke a nativism and ethno-nationalism not far removed from white-supremacist ideologies employed by Trump and his kin. One local party calls itself "indigenous," not referring to the legally recognised indigenous people of the region, but rather to cast Hong Kong people as racially distinct from mainlanders.¹⁶ Since the handover, mainlanders have been dehumanised and described as locusts. Fear of coronavirus escalates this biopolitics. Homemade bombs were found at the border in February, accompanied by threats: "you come to our city to spread germs, but have you considered clearly if you would be able to continue living if you cross the border?"¹⁷ Some restaurants refuse to serve mainlanders, claiming they infect Hong Kong with inferior food culture, lifestyles, and health care.

One might object here that West Virginia and Hong Kong are a world away. I would not disagree. To conclude, I will end with a final word from Foucault: "one escaped from a domination of truth not by playing a game that was totally different from the game of truth but by playing the same game differently, or playing another game, another hand, with other trump cards."¹⁸ Thank you very much to Hardman for her important work in shedding light on some crucial aspects of the phenomena of engaging in educational politics today.

- 1 Sara Hardman, "W. Va. Teachers Strike as Counter-Conduct: The Fight Against Neoliberalism from a Feminist Perspective," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 1 (2020).
- 2 Carl Death, "Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian Analytics of Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 235–251.
- 3 Hardman, "W. Va. Teachers Strike."
- 4 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 96.
- 5 Death, "Counter-conducts," 248; Michel Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Vol. 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 457.
- 6 Hardman.
- 7 Death, "Counter-conducts"; Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer; trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2007), 45; 75.
- 8 Hardman.
- 9 Hardman.
- 10 Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 96.
- 11 J. Daniel Elam, "When We Burn You Will Burn With Us," *Public Books*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.publicbooks.org/hong-kong-when-we-burn-you-will-burn-with-us/>.
- 12 Elam, "When We Burn."
- 13 Elam.
- 14 Daniel Victor, "Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong->

protest-pepe-frog.html.

15 Kimmy Chung, "University of Hong Kong Students Wave American Flags," *South China Morning Post*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3029739/university-hong-kong-students-wave-american-flags-and-march>; Liz Jackson & Michael A. Peters, "Go Home, Team America: The New Paradox of Western 'Democracy' Around the World," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, online (2019).

16 Iam-chong Ip, "Politics of Belonging: A Study of the Campaign against Mainland Visitors in Hong Kong," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 410-421; Liz Jackson, "Protesting the Identity of Hong Kong: The Burdened Virtues of Contemporary 'Pretty' Nationalism," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, online (2019).

17 Laignee Barron, "The Coronavirus Has Brought Out the Ugly Side of Hong Kong's Protest Movement," *Time*, February 19, 2020, <https://time.com/5784258/hong-kong-democracy-separatism-coronavirus-covid-19/>.

18 Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York; The New Press, 1997), 295.