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Occupation as Prefiguration? The Emergence of a New Political Form in the Occupy Central Movement

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Abstract

Situated in Hong Kong's specific context, this article attempts to illustrate the practices and implications of "prefigurative politics" during the Occupy Central Movement. We argue that the occupation not only demanded, but also prefigured, new forms of democracy. But such prefiguration should not be seen as a pure "ethics" of politics, but rather as a new way of "doing" politics, raising deep questions about representation and leadership in contemporary protest movements. From the outset of the movement, there had been ensuing struggles over leadership among different actors in the movement, while none of them were able to assume effective leadership. The undecidability of leadership ultimately provided the condition for various kinds of experiments by the crowds themselves. We argue that these prefigurative practices have set seeds of possibility for future political processes, and imply the emergence of "occupation as prefiguration" as a political form in Hong Kong.

Keywords: *Hong Kong, leadership, occupation, prefiguration, representation*

1. Introduction

The 2014 Occupy Central Movement (hereafter OCM) in Hong Kong not only demanded, but also demonstrated, new forms of democracy. The protestors set up camps in the occupied areas, built up autonomous communities, assigned volunteer task groups, designated zones for sleeping, studying and discussing, shared resources like food, water, and medicine, and took care of each other, presenting a new picture of alternative democratic society in Hong Kong. In other words, the occupation had created a site for prefigurative democracy. But what exactly is prefiguration? How do acts of occupation create a dynamic political process that opens up new possibilities for political engagement? What are the organizational problems that persisted throughout the OCM? All of these manifestations raise deep questions about representation and leadership in the occupation, as we will investigate in this paper.

2. What Is Prefiguration?

The term of "prefiguration" or "prefigurative politics", coined by Carl Boggs (1977), was originally a "direct attack on statist Marxism", and was subsequently used to describe the tensions within and between organizations and communities in the US New Left in the 1970s (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1991), then was widely employed in the women's movements, lifestyle movements, anarchist movements, counter-institution movements and alter-globalization movements during the 1970s and 1980s. It plays a significant role in discussing the so-

called "new social movements" (Yates, 2015). As a relatively new form of performing political action, prefiguration was first defined as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977: 100). This "ultimate goal", aligned closely with anarchism, indicates the participants' attempts to "prefigure" utopic alternative by creating a limited scale but idealist type of world they envision in the present (Breines, 1989). Prefiguration, therefore, refers to a political movement, action, moment, development or practices in which the activists experimentally prefigure and actualize certain political ideals in the "here and now" rather than a distant future (van de Sander, 2013). Particular prefigurative practices are usually modes of social relationships and political forms that the activists strive to reflect the future society being sought by themselves, including creating alternative organization, communal living, and exercising participatory democracy, within the ongoing political practice of a movement (Cornell, 2009).

By these definitions, the central element that casts political actions as "prefiguration" is that it "mirrors means and ends" in the present (van de Sander, 2013); in other words, the means of the prefiguration in some way reflect the ends or are somehow equivalent to the ends, rather than ends justifying means (Calhoun, 1993: 404; Franks, 2003: 18; Maeckelbergh, 2009: 81, 89; Rucht, 1988: 320). The most typical example of "mirroring means and ends" is the "direct democratic" mechanisms of consensus-oriented decision-making procedures and horizontally organizational structures (Maeckelbergh, 2009, 2011). As David Graeber (2002) explained with the case of the protest against WTO in Seattle:

> When protesters in Seattle chanted "this is what democracy looks like", they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary. This is why all the condescending remarks about the movement being dominated by a bunch of dumb kids with no coherent ideology completely missed the mark. The diversity was a function of the decentralized form of organization, and this organization was the movement's ideology.
>
> (Graeber, 2002: 84)

Prefigurative practice demands a non-hierarchical, decentralized form of participatory democracy and collective decision-making that prefigures a society that it seeks to create (Breines, 1989; Boggs, 1978; Baker, 2016; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015). It is argued that prefiguration is a political process rather than a political structure. In other words, prefiguration should be regarded as a "present-tense" politics and an ongoing process continuously subjected to evaluation and reformulation (van de Sander, 2013).

However, in actual prefigurative practices, such political process is far from self-evident – there have been "complex alignments between often overlapping forces" (Graeber and Hui, 2015) as well as tensions and contestations throughout the OCM. Moreover, Hong Kong has its particular context that needs to be taken into account.

3. Hong Kong's Trajectories

The prefigurative politics is deeply rooted in Hong Kong's political context. Since the handover, the political tensions have increasingly revolved around the representativeness of the political system which

privileges the elite class and has never been sufficiently representative of the population of Hong Kong. The OCM, with its intensified antagonism toward the restricted electoral arrangements, can be seen as the peak of this ongoing sequence vis-à-vis the elitist political system.

Hong Kong's social movements have also been criticized for being co-opted into the establishment and losing autonomy since the 1990s. The majority of social movement groups are characterized by hierarchical organizations, centralized and elitist leadership. This problem has prompted some local social activists to search for a more decentralized organizational form that is more independent of conventional politics and relies more on popular participation and spontaneity of participants. These movements were usually issue-based and supported by ad hoc alliances formed according to different situations – for example, the anti-high speed rail movement, the Choi Yuen Village (菜園村) struggle, or the anti-national education campaign. These alliances tend to be loosely organized, without clear leadership and hierarchy, adopting a relatively decentralized decision-making model and direct democracy (Ng, 2013: 186-187, 197-198).

Although the performance of direct democracy in those social movements could not be strictly defined as "prefigurative politics", it did pave the way for the following movements, notably the first Occupy Central action in 2011, when some activists occupied the HSBC headquarters for 11 months. Inspired by Occupy Wall Street, the participants deliberately employed prefigurative practices, such as direct democracy based on what they called "absolute consensus" that required all occupiers' consent on all matters related to the occupied site, in an attempt to resist the undemocratic political system in Hong Kong. Their prefigurative practices made the instance of occupation "a genuine watershed" in Hong Kong's social movement history, since it "set seeds of possibility, gave a sense of new modes of organizing, of direct

democratic expression" (Graeber and Hui, 2014). The non-hierarchical, cooperative form of self-organization was later succeeded by some of the participants in the second OCM in 2014, but with more complicated issues of leadership struggles within the movement.

4. Struggles over Leadership

The most recent OCM, originally known as "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" (讓愛與和平佔領中環 / 和平佔中, hereafter OCLP), had been carefully planned for about two years, but still had to deal with the problem of representation and leadership as it originally aimed at mobilizing middle-class citizens, lacking popular support at the grassroots level. Accordingly, the leaders of OCLP, known as OCLP Trio, launched a series of campaigns, struggling to reach out to a wider social base, and to legitimate their leadership of the movement. The ensuing struggles over representation and leadership, although did not deliberately employ the notion of prefiguration, did show some potential of fulfilling some of the objectives of prefiguration.

From the outset, the OCLP attempted to "convey the universal values such as democracy, universal and equal suffrage, justice and righteousness" (OCLP, 2013), an attempt to prefigure "tomorrow's society" through "today's social movement" (Farber, 2014). The relation between "today's movement and tomorrow's society" is illustrated in three aspects of prefigurative politics, namely a learning process for those involved, an instantiation of "tomorrow's society", and an exemplar of alternative forms of organization in "today's movement" (McCowan, 2010). These three aspects were clearly manifested in the OCLP's two major campaigns – "deliberation day" and "civil referendum".

Considering that the ideas of "deliberation", "civil disobedience" and "non-violence" were unfamiliar to ordinary citizens, the OCLP launched three deliberative sections as a learning process and a "civic education" to promote these ideas (Lee, 2015). These sessions, which were intended to figure out the proposals for nominating the Chief Executive candidates as well as the working principles and methods for occupation, attracted thousands of people including representatives from social organizations, churches, social workers, students and opposition parties. The form and organization of the public deliberation, to some extent, became an instantiation and exemplar of alternative forms of democracy in the context of Hong Kong. In particular, the attempt to employ deliberation as a form of participatory democracy, and to mirror the "ends" of alternative democracy as opposed to the status quo of the "unrepresentative political system", demonstrated the potentials of prefiguration. Moreover, with more people participating in these sessions, this kind of prefigurative practices not only bridged "tomorrow and today", but had to tackle the problems of representation and leadership "here and now". Although the three initiators of the OCLP were the recognizable "leaders" and "representatives" from the beginning of the campaign, they still needed some kinds of authorization by citizens to give more legitimacy to the movement and their leadership. The deliberative sessions, to some extent, increased the representation of different sections of society through the form of participatory democracy.

Therefore, although the "deliberation day" campaign did not directly employ the notion of prefiguration, the idea of public sphere and deliberative democracy, especially the work of Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin (2005), did echo the theme of prefigurative democracy. But we should not overestimate the potentials of prefiguration and its mirrors of means and ends. In fact, there was still a big gap between the

ideal and the practice. For example, the campaign only attracted hundreds of participants from specific fields, especially political parties. The elite-dominated deliberation sessions became just yet another kind of "small-circle" politics, exactly the kind of political screening that they opposed (Chan, 2015). The problem of leadership was never settled either, since the entire negotiation process was split among the radical opposition parties and moderate democrats, challenging the OCLP's leadership.

Despite the limitation, the OCLP's effort still paved the way for further possible prefigurative practices – a civil referendum to achieve the authorization by citizens and to experience "universal suffrage". Different to deliberation that only had limited potentials of prefiguration in "small-circle", the form of referendum is deemed as "inherently prefigurative", because it involved much more citizens to demonstrate its legitimacy of representative (Franks, 2003, 2006). The civil referendum initiated by the OCLP attracted a total of 730,000 residents to participate in the poll, about 10 percent of the total population of Hong Kong (Jonathan, 2014). Through the practice of civil referendum, the OCLP seemed to have created a "micro-utopia" on the universal suffrage, "acting as if one is already free" (Graeber, 2009: 210, 527). In this sense, it directly pointed to and projected the future "ends" of a "genuine universal suffrage", through employing the "means" of civil referendum. It embodied a kind of prefigurative politics by which "the struggle for a different society must create that society through its forms of struggle" (Holloway, 2010: 45).

Despite the efforts, the OCLP's leadership had never been stable and strong enough to hold control of the entire movement. Paradoxically, its prefigurative practices had brought severe challenges to its leadership status in the campaigning process, leading to subsequent struggles over leadership. With more and more social organizations, student groups and

political parties involved in the campaign, the OCLP had found it increasingly difficult to control how the event unfolded; the leaders of the OCLP was gradually marginalized while the student organizations became more influential.

The shift of movement leadership from the OCLP to the two student organizations, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (香港專上學生聯會, HKFS) and Scholarism (學民思潮), not only indicated the continuing internal struggles of leadership within the opposition camp, but also echoed the inherent tensions between strategy and prefiguration within the theory of prefigurative politics. On the one hand, the student organizations had split from the OCLP, while building a broader alliance with various social organizations and political parties, as Alex Chow 周永康, the leader of HKFS, put it, "We don't believe in Tai and what he has done" (Xie, Jiang and Zhu, 2014), exposing the inner struggles over leadership. On the other hand, different from the OCLP's "rational" approach, the student groups insisted on taking more radical and strategic actions, which can be seen as a kind of response to the strategic dilemmas of prefiguration (Breines, 1989; Kulick, 2014; Polletta, 2002). By contrast, the student groups enacted a set of strategic practices, notably the "July 1 rehearsal rally", in spite of the OCLP's objections. The meaning of "rehearsal" here may be distinguished from the notion of "prefiguration": the former is more like a specific political strategy and performance. But if we regard the ultimate occupation as prefiguration, the rehearsal can be seen as a kind of "prefiguration of prefiguration", with prefigurative potentials for further political actions. Since then, the student organizations had become one of the most recognizable leaders of the movement; the OCLP was further marginalized, losing its control of the campaign. When the decision on the electoral reform was announced by Beijing, the student groups staged a large-scale class boycott to express civil disobedience in their

own way. They escalated their action by breaking into the Civil Square, which was not expected by the OCLP. In the wake of the student actions, the OCLP intended to join the mass protest but was heavily criticized by student participants as trying to "kidnap" (*qijie* 騎劫) and "control" (*choushui* 抽水) the emerging occupy movement. From then on, HKFS and Scholarism had assumed a de facto leadership, although they refused the title of "leader" and preferred to be regarded as "initiators", "conveners" and "advocates". Some of our interviewees, especially the protesting students, told us that they would follow HKFS and Scholarism rather than the OCLP, because "Occupy Central is a failing campaign" that "only belonged to Tai Yiu-ting 戴耀廷", and that "Occupy Central never happened".

However, HKFS and Scholarism had been struggling with holding the leadership role in the movement composed of many factions and tactical differences. In the face of mounting tensions and divisions among the participants, the student leaders had to strategically formulate an "assembly" (*dahui* 大會) to incorporate differences, but even so, they had never effectively coordinated the assembly but faced constant resistance from the crowds in other occupied zones. The occupiers at the occupied site of Mong Kok (旺角) and Causeway Bay (銅鑼灣) had different agendas, priorities and tactics from those at Admiralty (金鐘) where the student groups and pan-democrats were concentrated. Organizations such as People Power (人民力量), Civic Passion (熱血公民), and Proletariat Political Institute (普羅政治學苑) not only adopted a more confrontational approach toward the police, but were hostile to the assembly at Admiralty, challenging the leadership of the student organizations, and struggling for leadership of their own. These more radical groups regarded their occupied areas as "battlefields conquered by the crowd", and therefore refused to follow the advice given by the assembly. Although the Hong Kong government recognized

HKFS as the representative of the movement, many participants we interviewed at Mong Kok and Causeway Bay expressed their disappointment at the student leadership and said the two student groups could not represent them. To seek authorization from the occupiers on their decisions, the student leaders had sought to hold a referendum at the occupied zones, which was called off abruptly due to strong resistance from some occupiers. A participant told us "the HKFS has never consulted the participants in Mong Kok on the referendum...They did not try to communicate with us. We have been waiting … Thus, we think that the HKFS and the assembly cannot represent us." Some of them stated that "we don't need to vote to come up with a decision. We have already voted with our feet here." From then on, the movement became more divided among the student groups, democrat politicians and the radical nativist groups, with the "spontaneous crowds" coming to the center stage of the scenario. The leadership of the HKFS and the assembly only had a nominal existence.

By far, the prefigurative practices of the OCM mainly centered on the issues of representation and leadership. Moreover, these practices also revealed the strategic dilemmas of prefiguration theory. But none of these groups succeeded in assuming a stable leadership. As Gordon (2005) stated, prefiguration should develop "for its own sake". In the case of the OCM, although new possibilities were opened up and triggered more struggles, the problem of leadership remained. At later stages, radical changes were envisioned and even put into practice through a series of experiments.

5. Experiments of Leaderlessness

The prefigurative practices provided more opportunities for the occupiers to experiment with prefigurative politics in terms of

organization and leadership. Some of them embraced the notion of leaderless, non-hierarchical, horizontal, cooperative and voluntary forms of democratic participation (Gordon, 2005; Yates, 2015). Instead of romanticizing the "leaderlessness" of the movement and celebrating it as "a spontaneous one without leaders and without the need of leaders" (Ma, 2014), we argue that it is necessary to pay attention to the inherent paradox and ambivalence of the democratic experiment.

Indeed, the specific context of the OCM had facilitated the condition for the "leaderless" and "spontaneous" practices in the movement. Just as one protestor interviewee stated, "many people were trapped [by the notion that the movement should have leaders]. Hong Kong people, during this umbrella movement, have shown to others that leaders are not necessary." Another occupier added, "In this movement, we do not have representatives, we simply do not need them. The government can talk to the masses directly instead of choosing representatives. That's why we often said, 'The people picked up by the government [HKFS] did not represent us. They can't represent us.'" Another interviewee further explained, "Why don't we have a representative? Looking back at past rallies, such as 'protecting the Choi Yuen Village action', anti-high speed rail movement, and the anti-national education campaign, the participants at the time were often betrayed by the so-called representatives, who sang, encouraged the public, and raised money. At the peak of these movements, some councilors and activists would express passionate, but useless, opinions. They claimed that we had victory at the moment, but it was actually a failure." Fearing for the betrayal by the representatives, most of the interviewees insisted that it should be the people, the masses at the occupied sites, "to decide the direction of the movement", not a few "leaders". Sometimes we witnessed the clash between student representatives and the participants in Mong Kok shouting "The HKFS

cannot represent me".

As the movement unfolded, there were more and more occupiers talking of the "autonomy of the masses" and the "spontaneity" of the movement. A student in Admiralty told us, "People listen to what they [HKFS and Scholarism] said. However, they are not the real controllers of this movement. They just act as a bridge for talks with the government. We, the occupiers, are the real character of the movement. We are independent individuals, and we try to figure out how to deal with problems and take responsibility by ourselves. This is the spirit of the masses." One occupier in Mong Kok said that "in fact, we did not have specific leaders. They were just spokesmen. If they could convince us, we would follow them. It was simple as that ... everyone can be his (her) own leader, and they decide their stay or acceptance." During the fieldwork, an open letter entitled "No nobility, be people! Let the government directly face the people", signed by "a group of firm Hong Kong protestors" was widely spread throughout the occupied areas: "The Umbrella Movement is going well so far (26th October). The reason for success is that we insisted on the principle of 'no leaders, no representatives'. Please believe in the wisdom, the will and the power of Hong Kong citizens because only the people have the capacity to force the government to make a series of concessions. When the government cannot find a counterpart 'assembly' other than the ordinary people, it has to face the people directly and negotiate with the people genuinely." (Anonymous, 2014)

To some extent, the "no leader, no representative" principle had become a type of "political correctness" and gained legitimacy in the movement. However, we cannot conclude that the OCM was a typical "leaderless movement", as Manuel Castells (2012) observed in various other uprisings worldwide; the issue of leadership and representation in the OCM was indeed ambiguous and ambivalent.

Firstly, some occupiers regarded themselves as ordinary participants in the movement, expecting some leaders to represent their interests and to negotiate with the government. As one interviewee said, "we need the representative to take the first step. Although the movement was largely self-organized, there must be a well-ordered procedure to reach a consensus. We can select some representatives to represent us to negotiate with the government." Although the student leaders did not call themselves "leaders", they actually performed the role of "soft leaders" in the movement (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Secondly, the occupiers not only relied on "soft leaders", but also created their own "small leaders" in the occupied zones. When the movement was divided into three independent occupied areas, and even smaller "villages", communities, or groups, the leadership did not disappear suddenly, but became more dispersed and fragmented. To some extent, the entire movement was reorganized and recentralized in every occupied area at the micro level, with some "small leaders" eventually emerging in these local ad hoc groupings. As one interviewee told us, "It is not necessary to have a top leader in the movement, but every division has their own small leaders, or at least someone in charge." These small leaders were more inconspicuous, usually recognized based on the tacit agreement among the small groups. As another interviewee explained, "If a person has the capability and reputation, and is recognized by the other participants, then he or she assumes 'invisible leadership.'" The small leaders had considerable influence on the members of their respective small groups, as one occupier further explained, "I usually follow the small leaders more than the HKFS and Scholarism because they talk to every participant in the small groups and know our opinions and appeals better."

The above experiences seem to suggest that the notion of "leaderlessness" should not be over-interpreted and taken for granted.

Otherwise, we may oversimplify the concrete process of prefiguration and reduce it to mere spontaneity of the people. The existing scholarly literature tends to focus on the novelty and potentials of leaderless organizing, yet the experiments of leaderlessness during the OCM show that the prefigurative process involves complex forces and relations that continue to affect how prefiguration works.

6. Conclusion

This article tries to illustrate the practices and implications of prefiguration during the OCM, as situated in Hong Kong's specific context. A prefigurative perspective on the OCM may have specific significance in the current research field. Because the mainstream literature tends to focus on either the "ends" (Chan, 2015; Yuen, 2015) or the political structure (Hui and Lau, 2015; Lee and Chan, 2015; Yin and Chow, 2015) of the occupy movements, the investigation of the "means" and practices of occupation may offer an alternative understanding of the OCM.

However, the experience of the OCM reminds us that the "means" in practice are much more complicated than in theory. Prefiguration's mirroring of means and ends is not straightforward, since different actors in the movement will have their own priorities and interests, leading to different interpretation on the "ends" and different practices in the "means". In this sense, we do not see prefiguration as a pure and final "ethic" of politics as some scholars argue (Luchies, 2015). Rather, we argue that it should be regarded as a new way of "doing" politics. By "doing", we mean that we should not over-romanticize prefiguration, but pay more attention to the internal tensions, especially the strategic dilemma of prefigurative practices, in specific contexts of protest movements.

The undecidability of representation and leadership provided the condition for various kinds of experiments by the crowds themselves, which demonstrated how the political form of occupation can become the "laboratories of experience" (Melucci, 1996) for its participants. Its significance does not lie in the romanticizing notion of a "direct democracy" at once a goal and a practice (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 94), but its potential to generate "social laboratories for the production of alternative democratic values, discourse, and practices" (Juris, 2008: 3). These democratic practices set seeds of possibility for future political processes, and imply the emergence of "occupation as prefiguration" as a political form in Hong Kong. The new political form has opened up new possibilities – as well as challenges – for democratic practices.

Notes

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