

Occupy Central: Hong Kong's Fight against Neoliberalism

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As protesters flood the streets of Hong Kong demanding free elections in 2017, the international media puts on its usual spin, characterizing the struggle as one between an authoritarian state and citizens who want to be free. The left, meanwhile, has remained notably silent on the issue. It's not immediately clear if that goes down to an inability to understand the situation, to an unwillingness to stand for supposedly liberal values, or to a reluctance to criticize China.

As stories on Occupy Central flood the front pages of the mainstream news media, both the [BBC](#) and [CNN](#) have published handy “explainers” that confuse more than they explain, making no real effort to dig into the economic roots of discontent. The “Beeb” went as far as to [ask whether “Hong Kong’s future as a financial centre” was “threatened”](#) – giving us some insight into where the global establishment’s priorities lie.

But regardless of what the BBC wants the world to believe, Occupy Central isn’t so much a fight for democracy as a fight for social justice. It’s true that Hong Kongers are angry over Beijing’s interference in domestic affairs, whether these be immigration from China, encroachments on the freedom of the press, or the nationalistic-propagandistic “[moral and national education](#)” program. These issues, while serious, pale in comparison to the increasingly difficult realities of everyday life in Hong Kong. As City University of Hong Kong professor Toby Carroll [points out](#), one in five Hong Kongers live below the poverty line, while inequality has risen to levels among the highest in the world. Wages haven’t increased in line with inflation – meaning they’ve fallen in real terms. [The minimum wage](#), only introduced in 2010, is set at HK\$28 (US\$3.60) an hour – less than half of that even in the United States. There are no collective bargaining rights, no unemployment benefits and no pension. [The average workweek is 49 hours](#) – in case you thought 40 was rough. Housing prices are among the highest in the world. Even the neoliberal *Economist* placed Hong Kong [top of its crony capitalism index](#) by some distance.

The list of people who have spoken out against Occupy Central is particularly revealing – oligarch Li Ka-shing, HSBC, the world’s four largest accounting firms, among others in business circles. The main issue with CY Leung’s administration isn’t the fact that it wasn’t democratically elected, but that it serves two main groups: Beijing on one hand, and local elites on the other – in other words, far from democratic in its representation. It’s not hard to see why big business and the oligarchs are terrified of Occupy Central: any movement towards real democracy would see them losing power and losing their grip over the territory. The status quo, on the other hand, serves them well.

Hong Kongers are not an ideological bunch. We’ve never had a vote – not under 17 years of

Chinese colonial rule, nor under a century of British colonial rule before that – yet we were good colonial subjects and we stayed quiet because we were making a living just fine. But as the middle and working classes start to feel the crunch, the ruling class is starting to realize that it cannot simply let them eat cake. The battle for democracy isn't a battle for the vote, but a battle for real democracy: for the right of the people to govern themselves. The vote is merely the starting point to a long process of reform that takes the power out of the hands of Hong Kong and Chinese elites and, for the first time, into those of ordinary people.

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