



Hong Kong: Liberals, where are you?

Frank Hoffer

Thousands of people are fighting for freedom and democracy. They stand up against the rise of authoritarian power with determination, creativity and courage. While Europe seems to be shell shocked by Johnson, Orban, Salvini and the lot, and Democrats in the US are tearing each other apart over minor political issues instead of uniting against the assaulter in chief, these young people are fighting for our future.

The people of Hong Kong offer an incredible inspiration. They are rising up, against the odds. 'They can't win' is the wisdom of realpolitik. They can't win in the same way as the Polish workers at the Lenin shipyard couldn't win in 1981. At that time, reasonable progressive liberals told them that they have a good cause, but unfortunately they happen to live on the wrong side of the iron curtain. Today, the silent assumption of the liberal west seems to be that we should stay calm not to provoke mainland China. Access to Chinese markets or to Chinese overseas investment seems to be the highest western value.

Here are people who fight for what is dearest to us: freedom, justice and democracy. They are not remote-controlled by the Americans, they just want to determine their own destiny. They want a government of the people, by the people, for the people. They have shown incredible discipline and a variety of tactics to maintain the momentum through calculated escalation. Occupying the legislative council, blocking the Hong Kong airport, and taking the demonstrations into shopping malls show the flexibility of a simultaneously well-coordinated but largely leaderless mass movement. 'Be water' has been a successful strategy to be everywhere without exposing individual leaders. Attempts to denounce the protest as controlled and initiated by foreign agents or home grown 'terrorists' are laughable and ridiculous when more than 1.5 million people out of a total population of 7 million are in the streets. These people want their freedoms maintained and are worried about the increasing influence of mainland China. The extradition bill sparked the protest as it would allow extraditing 'legal offenders and fugitives' to mainland China. People see this as another step in undermining the political freedom and the rule of law in the city. The protest is not just about one single law but about defending the principle of 'one country - two systems'. Therefore when the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Ms Lam, finally offered to withdraw the bill after thirteen weeks of protest it was too little too late. People want free elections as safeguards against a further erosion of their rights and freedoms and have put forward five demands:

- The complete withdrawal of the proposed extradition bill;
- The government to withdraw the use of the word 'riot' in relation to protests;

- The unconditional release of arrested protesters and charges against them dropped;
- An independent inquiry into police behaviour;
- Implementation of genuine universal suffrage.

Should we help them and can we help them? The answer is yes in both cases!

But would Western support not provoke a crack-down from mainland China? No one knows. What we know is that western silence did not stop the massive Chinese crackdown on even the most modest forms of civil society and labour rights movement in mainland China. China is understanding western silence not as deliberate restraint in order to keep the door open for dialogue and moderate civil rights improvements, but understands what it really means, appeasement for the sake of business.

But can we do anything? Of course we can.

First, we should listen to the people of Hong Kong and give them a voice in our societies. Can universities, political parties, and parliaments organise regular skype conversations with people in Hong Kong and learn directly from them what is going on in their city and give them a chance to speak to the world? They are smart, they are courageous. They are pragmatic radicals who dare the impossible, because it is their only realistic chance to defend even the limited freedom of the status quo. They have something important to say for everybody everywhere who cares about freedom and democracy. When Putin supports a right wing anti-European international, Trump encourages a hard Brexit to foster European disintegration and the Chinese Silk road project successfully exploits Eastern European frustration within the EU, the most determined defenders of European values are sitting in Hong Kong airport. Their success will be a boost for genuine democracy world-wide and vice versa. This is not a local affair.

In a recent letter to Angela Merkel, the Hong Kong protestors called for her support, referring also to Ms Merkel's upbringing under a dictatorial party rule in East Germany: 'You have first-hand experience of the terrors of a dictatorial government. ... The Germans courageously stood at the forefront of the fight against authoritarianism during the 80s. ... We hope that you will express your concern about our catastrophic situation and that you will convey our demands to the Chinese government during your stay in China.'

Bild, the largest German tabloid newspaper, published the letter and Ms Merkel expressed in Beijing that the civil rights and freedom of the people in Hong Kong must be guaranteed and that violence needs to be avoided. That this carefully worded statement by the conservative and cautious Chancellor is the strongest reaction Chinese leaders have heard so far speaks for Ms Merkel and makes the silence of all the others even louder.

Second, western democrats have to call on business to stop business as usual. The strong message to the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing has to be not that the demonstrators put Hong Kong's vibrant economy at risk, but any authoritarian crackdown by the Chinese government does. Business leaders must say clear and loudly that disinvestment from Hong Kong will be the consequence if the authorities in Hong Kong or Beijing chose repression.

Western business needs to know that being silent also comes at a price. Those caring about democracy in society and governments have to call on western financial institutions and western multinationals that they need to speak up now. Western business has to know that they will face a public backlash if they blatantly put money before people.

Third, European governments need to be clear in their conversations with the Chinese government that diplomatic and economic consequences will be inevitable, if China shows no willingness to hear and respect the voice of the people of Hong Kong. China must know that a clamp down on Hong Kong has political and economic costs. Imposing these costs on China implies costs and lost business opportunities for western countries. However, silence over Hong Kong will convince China that it has a carte blanche.

Fourth, people in European cities should come to the streets in solidarity with the people in Hong Kong to send a powerful signal that they share their values. Not only the Chinese governments, but also Western governments and business need to see that Hong Kong has global support. Fifth, Europe needs to offer a safe haven to the courageous demonstrators for our common values, if the worst comes to the worst.

Frank Hoffer is an associate fellow of the Global Labour University

SWOP, University of the Witwatersrand

**Contact the editors for
questions or contributions:**

Mbuso Nkosi
Mbuso.Nkosi@global-labour-university.org

Claire Ceruti
Claire.Ceruti@global-labour-university.org