Looking at Hong Kong politics through a pair of affective spectacles

Pok Yin CHOW
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Chow Pok Yin

A Renewed View

In his recent newspaper article, local academic Hui contents that when trying to understand Hong Kong ("HK") political controversies surrounding such issues as Mainland-HK conflicts, the crisis of the rule of law, Old Age Living Allowance, and LGBT rights, it may not suffice just to look at the people's judgments and beliefs from a cognitive and ideological perspective. In a city undergoing affective turn, affect and emotions play an important role in mobilizing people's political participation. For instance, the fear of fundamental rights being corroded as a result of the post-1997 political changes may account for HK people's care for freedom, the rule of law, the June-Forth Massacre and the “suicide” of the mainland activist Li Wangyang; the hatred of “foreign enemy” from mainland together with the worry of local resources (jobs, benefits, opportunities etc) being unfairly allocated may account for the people's strong action against mainland pregnant women and new immigrants; and the fear of students being "brainwashed" may be a decisive factor in driving people to protest against the Moral and National Education subject introduced by the government.

While studying the changes in America's political atmosphere during recent decades, Lawrence Grossberg suggests that the New Right (the neo-conservatives) by recycling and appropriating the readily available postmodern sensibility (a sense of doubt, hopelessness and helplessness) in popular culture, quite successfully promoted a kind of affective politics, rendering politics confrontational in nature (via formation of frontiers), one resorting to fanaticism, wanting of serious debates on public affairs, and one which discourages people's investment in normal political activities. As a result of cynicisms generated by

1 許寶強, 解讀香港政治 – 從核心價值到核心情緒, 明報, 26-11-2012.
such politics, the New Right de-politicized politics, shrinking it into concerning only about matters within everyday life, for the convenience of advancing their own conservative political agenda. In the course of such argument, Grossberg analyzed the various strategies deployed by the New Right and explained why they were successful in constructing such a conservative-friendly environment.

Putting Grossberg's analysis into the context of HK, and seemingly echoing Hui’s claim of the society’s affective turn, we do see an increasing appeal to affect in the political arena, increasing fanaticism and simultaneous cynicism, and an increasing politically aware yet de-politicizing society. We also see the rise of a confrontational politics in which frontiers separating not only the government and the people, but also the different groups within the “anti-government” (pro-democratic) bloc are formed. In addition we see the various strategies that were used by the Grossberg's New Right being deployed today by different players in the HK political theatre. However, Grossberg’s analysis provides us with just another pair of spectacles to look at the HK political phenomenon, letting us see things from a different perspective, regrouping conflicting findings under a different umbrella. Factors underlying those phenomenon and findings are not able and supposed to be revealed by this Grossberg spectacles. After all, the political environment of America for the past decades and that of the post-1997 HK are two entirely different worlds. Blurs such as the authoritative nature of the mainland government, HK's lack of democratic system, and the different mediating agents within the HK society facilitating affect’s proliferation require the use of other spectacles to render visible.

Hence in this paper, Grossberg's analysis on affective politics and cynicism will first be laid out. Then by using this spectacles, the renewed “view” of the current situation of HK will be presented. Finally views that are beyond the pane of this pair of spectacles will be cursorily displayed.

**Affect in Politics**
In his book *Caught in the Crossfire* (2005), Lawrence Grossberg identifies 2 forms of ideological politics which define the forms and limits of political compromise. The first is “consensus politics” which involves the continuous effort to produce ideological agreement or unity about the fundamental values, institutions, and direction of the society. It seeks to persuade people to share a common universe of meaning, experience, and value, a common way of seeing and evaluating the world. The second is the politics of hegemony, whereby a group seeking hegemonic power does not attempt to create ideological unity around its worldview, but instead seeks to win people’s consent to its leadership. People may not agree to the “ideology” it offers, but they may agree to allow that particular group to lead the nation. It is a politics of strategic alliances, a struggle which is fought by strategically reforming one’s alliances for each issue and winning leadership in each instance. To Grossberg, the New Right has been waging and winning such a hegemonic struggle in America for the past decades, which was made possible by a significant change in the very nature of politics, political involvement, political struggle and political conversations in that period.

Origin of such change may be traced back to the collapsing distance between morality and politics in America beginning around the 1950s and 1960s, during which people sought ways of moralizing political discourse and politicizing moral ones. It facilitated the substitution of a politics of the frontier for the possibilities of compromise or consensus. Once morality and politics are equivalent, the fact that once cannot compromise on moral issues ends up absolutizing political positions. This in turn fueled up the rise of fanaticism which describes the kind of investment one makes in certain values, and which is the opposite of the attempt to find a balance, a negotiated middle ground as well as a distribution of power, making any public conversations about different

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid, p. 229.
imagininations of change impossible. However, to Grossberg, this growing fanaticism of political struggle and the abandonment of compromise are only part of a larger transformation of the culture of politics, which was enabled by the increasingly affective nature of politics.

Affect describes emotions, moods, desires, volition, attention, caring. It is about the investments people make in the world. People define themselves affectively by what matters to them, as much as they do ideologically, by the content of their beliefs. Affect is organized by what Grossberg calls “mattering maps” which identify where one belongs in the world. They define the things that matter to people, the way they matter, and the intensities with which they matter. Mattering maps are like investment portfolios which contain different kinds and amounts of investments, and investments can change and can be relocated; and they can serve different functions. One thing that matters may make it possible or impossible for another to matter. Mattering maps enable people to feel that they own their projects and possibilities and that they have some control over their loves and the world.

Of course politics has always involved affect, but the balance between a cognitive politics (either rational or ideological) and affective politics is what Grossberg noticed to have been changing in America during recent decades. Contemporarily struggles challenge old mattering maps and offer new ones, which attempt to change structures of identification, authority and belonging. In other words, an affective politics attempts to redefine what matters to people, and the lines that pull them from one place that matters to another. The New Right in this struggle represents itself as the victim of the all-powerful liberalism. Passion becomes the end itself and politicians sell themselves on the basis of the intensity of their commitment, meaning that the fact of faith, or the faith in faith itself becomes the appropriate value. The investment overwhelms and erases all

7 Ibid, p. 229.
the limitation of a proposed solution, and what matters in politics and economics are conviction and will, not facts, social science or history. It also means that knowledge is no longer important, and people can be ignorant of the stakes in a dispute, or of what the competing positions are. Affective issues – how positions “feel” – are what matters. Serious political discussions around complicated issues become less visible and acceptable. Just as Richard Viguerie (a key figure of the New Right) who located the political success of the conservatives in their turn to “gut-level issues”, Grossberg contents more precisely that the conservative strategy transforms political struggles into “gut” issues by reducing the complexity of the debates, the various interpretations and contradictions that surround them, to matter of affective investment. By promoting a logic that “gut commitment” becomes more important than the content of the commitment itself, the New Right strategically seeks political power by tactically dissociating itself from politics.

Grossberg goes on to suggest that the ability to perform politics affectively depends on the techniques and cooperation of the media and popular culture. Politicians (especially from the New Right) have learned to use the resources of popular culture in their efforts to remake people’s mattering maps and to reorganize the possibilities of authority more effectively than anyone else. Here he introduces his concept of “rock formation” which is a kind of mood readily pervasive in popular culture and that the New Right could conveniently appropriate and rearticulate to advance their agenda. As he sees it, rock’s original historical conditions of possibility have undergone a radical transformation over the past 40 years. The rock era – born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with Sgt. Pepper’s, dying around 1976 with the Sex Pistols – turned out to be a by-way in the development of the 20th

12 Ibid.
14 Grossberg, Lawrence., We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 270.
century popular music, rather than any kind of mass cultural revolution. Rock is effectively dead as a mass-cultural force because for all its revolutionary energy and excitement, anger and anarchism, it has finally succumbed to capital and technology. Rock has become a commodity like any other commodity, at best a depoliticized form of fun and, at worst, Muzak to divert one while she/he is home shopping. It produces lines of flight which point to possibility of another space, yet it is still confined to everyday life. It is always infused by a paradox: a sense of seriousness and desperation, opening up the possibility of investing in the present without the necessity of a future which transcends it. It gradually transforms itself into a kind of postmodern sensibility which is filled with doubt, helplessness and a sense of irony containing both a knowing distance and emotional urgency, affirming difference by reaffirming that everything is the same. Such a prevailing postmodern attitude within the rock formation and popular culture is the best tool that the New Right can usurp and redirect the people’s mattering maps, thereby rearticulating their hegemonic struggle. No wonder the Bruce Springsteen’s song Born in the USA was opportunistically appropriated by Ronald Reagan’s campaign handler in his 1984 presidential election. Similarly, a right-wing political reporter John J. Miller published in May 2006 an article for the National Review titled “Rockin’ the Right: The 50 Greatest Conservative Rick Songs” wherein he identified some of the more “liberal” rock songs according to popular memory from the 1960s to present day as actually “conveying a conservative idea or sentiment.”

And because the media are masters of affective communication, the media are often able to transcend their supposed niche audience and bring them together diverse audiences. The significance of “branding” is precisely that information is erased in the effort to create an emotional or affective context of some product,
including politicians or political positions, so that it can claim a specific place in people's mattering maps. Taking as an example the story of the network news juxtaposing pictures of Ronald Reagan playing the part of “the education president”, the “environmental president” and the president who cares about Blacks with spoken comments highlighting the administrations' fallacies in those areas, Grossberg shows that the visual images were more effective than the words because the images pointed to Reagan's affective investment, his caring, and the fact that these things mattered to him. Through the power of the media and popular culture, affect makes political questions into signposts of peoples affective lives, and consequently it can pull people into political positions that they might not otherwise choose to occupy.

He identifies 3 tactics in particular in this struggle. The first is “affective disinvestment” which aims to weaken people's concern with particular issues and activities. The growing apathy of American people towards electoral politics is an example. The second one is “affective magnets” which involves restructuring people's mattering maps around particular social concern. By changing, redefining and relocating these markers, one can reorganize and reprioritize people's investment. The child and the family are the two most obvious examples, both functioning as an appeal around which values are organized and behavior disciplined. Yet the emptiness of the markers allow the New Right to make gay marriages a crucial issue which largely ignoring the problems of child abuse. The third tactic is “affective epidemics” which involves strongly negative investments – things to avoid at all costs. The markers are practically empty so that as they spread, their content can easily change. They elicit negative intensities disproportionate to their worth, and thereby driving away every other possible concerns. Drugs is a case and almost every social problem can be tied to them. Using a combination of these tactics, Grossberg argues that the New Right has constructed a political rhetoric basing on a

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21 Grossberg, Lawrence., We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 269.
23 Ibid, pp. 234-236.
constant mobilization of fear. Terrorism, environmentalism, sin, free markets, globalization, regulation and anti-regulation all function through an affective economy of fear in which they are either threatened by or threatening people’s survival. By constructing such a constant, ever-inflated sense of crisis, people’s faith in their ability to shape the future through “normal” political investment is undermined.\(^{24}\)

The lost of people’s faith in politics results in a general de-politicization, which to Grossberg is an intentional effect of contemporary political struggle. Disinvestment in politics has repeatedly been encouraged.\(^{25}\) For instance, by hiding or misrepresenting the ongoing commitment to politics and activism that engages many people, such activists are portrayed as motivated either by conspiracy theories or by moral and religious concerns. When activism is presented, it is presented as violence, framed not as crime but as irrationality and even terrorism.\(^{26}\) However, the real question is how this disinvestment from politics is connected to the emergence of an affective politics?

**Cynicism**

Grossberg answers the question first by using a term called “affective postmodernity” to argue that the New Right has successfully linked the affective frontier that defines its political project to another more widely experienced affective cultural frontier. This affective postmodernity is a form of cynicism that is embodied in contemporary popular culture (just like “rock formation” above). It marks a situation in which people no longer believe that the things that are supposed to matter and care about are worth the investment. It becomes unclear that anything can justify investing anyway. It is not that nothing matters, for something has to matter, but there is no way of validating the choice of what matters.\(^{27}\) However, one has to make choices in daily lives. Hence there develop 2 kinds of people, one survives ironically and the other sentimentally. The

\(^{24}\) Ibid, p. 237.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, p. 243.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, p. 244.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, p. 246.
former (people with ironic cynicism) treat choices with a sense of detachment and disinvestment. They see a particular option only matters as a temporarily choice. The latter (people with sentimental cynicism) takes choices seriously. A particular option has the magical possibility of making a difference by virtue of that choice and the intensity with which it now matters. It is that one cares so much about something that makes it matter, not what it actually is. Sentimental cynicism responds to uncertainty by “overinvesting” and as a result affirms faith itself – the act of investment – as the foundation of politics. Faith, the quantity of affect invested, takes on its own powers. All that is required is belief and commitment without requiring one to live the values embodied in the object of one’s faith. When Ronald Reagan declared to the Republican party that “facts are boring”, he was reaffirming the need to constantly reproduce a sense of cynicism within which ignorance and misinformation become reasonable states: knowing that one doesn’t know the truth, but making a commitment anyway, becomes an assumed, if not desirable, condition of activity.

Overinvestment also facilitates the growing interest in scandals. Scandal redefines the kinds of investment that are possible, not only in public life but in everyday life as well. It then takes politics out of the realm of public debate, and emotional confessions become the dominant form of political self-definition. Public life itself is increasingly constituted as the space of scandal, and scandal is the ambiguous machinery by which stars are made, remade and only rarely undone. It makes a politics out of the pure investment in a “kinder, gentler nation” even though it has no consequences for action. Politics is relocated from the realm of social conditions to that of the affective and scandalous. Sites of scandal produce enormous passions but not real political debate, for that would require discussions about priorities and resources, about real social conditions and real struggle to reorganize people’s lives.

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What the New Right did was to articulate these popular logics to its own morally constructed political frontier, resulting in a product (perhaps unintentional but certainly not unwelcome) of a de-politicized political culture. They enact its struggle against politics as one which stresses compromise and consensus by taking up the attitudes of a popular culture it simultaneously renounces and mimics. In so doing, it remakes the possibilities of a politics derived out of the feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. As a result, they successfully constructed a frontier which separate two sides, one moral-political (non-New Right) and the other popular-cynical.\(^{32}\)

However, how about the other type of people who are ironically cynical? Grossberg argues that the frontier that the New Right constructed results in these people withdrawing. The renunciation of the possibility of politics as a locus of human agency or meaning becomes the new common sense. Such withdrawal nonetheless doesn't necessarily mean that one is outside of the realm of political struggle. This detachment means that people might take up the beliefs of the fanatics as temporary commitments without content or consequences. The refusal of agency becomes a new and important form of political agency.\(^{33}\)

The gross result of the frontier that the New Right has constructed is an impossibility of political opposition. Because of its encouragement of disinvestment and cynicism via its appropriation of the media and popular culture, they re-define “opposition” as a denial of the reality. Any attempt to refuse fanaticism and apathy appears to be only a dream with no anchor in the reality. Anyone who talks about problems and their solution in purely political terms cannot be taken seriously. Also, any effort to embrace postmodern cynicism without abandoning the “old politics” necessarily arrives at an impossible and amoral relativism. This relativism will undermine the possibility

\(^{33}\) Ibid, p. 248.
of value and hence reduce politics to the empty struggle for power\textsuperscript{34}. All in all, the New Right’s reconfiguration of this frontier produces a reversal by which social concern is translated into selfishness, special interests, a childish refusal of reality, and a dangerous relativism. This reversal locates political opposition to the New Right’s own struggle on one side of the frontier in such a way that it can never cross the frontier to battle with the New Right, but is always tilting at its own windmills\textsuperscript{35}.

**The Pearl of the Orient**

*Appeal to Affect*

How then is the above analysis relevant to and helpful in facilitating people’s understanding of the HK scenario? Firstly, we see the rising appeal to affect in the political arena. However, unlike America, such appeal is not initiated (or predominantly initiated) by any particular political bloc, but by all the blocs within the political spectrum. We can first look at the poster under Exhibit 1 in the Appendix, which is designed by a group of “Netizens” calling for opposition against mainland pregnant women giving birth in HK hospitals. It contains countless signifiers denoting things that are supposed to matter to HK people such as money (“are you willing to spend that much for the children of the mainland mothers” in the headline), offspring’s well-being (infant formula especially imported ones are scarce), education and cultural integrity (traditional Chinese vs simplified Chinese characters). It also mobilizes fear in saying that those pregnant women are “invading HK in an exodus manner” in highlighted characters near the end, and an emotion of hatred through the most eye-catching headline “We can’t stand any longer!”. All these relate solely to the emotion and affect of the readers, and the only thing missing is empirical data or rational discussion about how and to what extent these mainland pregnant women are going to dilute the HK local resources.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
Similarly, campaigns against mainland parallel traders are promoted along this affective line. The 3 photos under Exhibit 2 are designed by Netizens to this end, and they all purport to highlight how annoying and disgusting those traders are, thereby boosting the fear of local lifestyle and social order (things that matter) being disrupted by them, and the hatred against them basing on such superficialities as nauseous facial expression, chaos they create in public places and “uncivilized” behaviors (like the kid peeing in MTR). It is however interesting to note that there are instances in which mainland travellers behave normally like any other tourist, but those instances are never captured by people behind this kind of campaign. It means that they are highly selective in presenting an extremely incomplete picture of who these mainland people are, thereby magnifying the threat they pose to HK people, generating the emotions they need for their agenda’s advantage.

Speaking of “threat magnification”, however, these Netizens may only be humble protégé of the great master, the HK government, which really is the expert in this respect and pioneered such tactics. As early as 1999 when the Court of Final Appeal ruled that the children of parents (mainlanders in that case) who have the right of abode in Hong Kong also have the right of abode, irrespective of whether their parents were permanent residents at the time of their birth\(^{36}\), the then Secretary of Security Regina Ip immediately threatened that an influx of 1.67 million mainlanders was expected as a result of this ruling, thereby stirring up fear in the public, and successfully lobbied some public support for the consequential move of the government in asking the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress to reinterpret Articles 22(4) and 24(2)(3) of HK Basic Law, which effectively overturned the court decision. More recently, in promoting the plan of North East New Territories New Development Areas (“NENT”), the government claims that it is just a town planning project in which 167 hectares (the magical numbers of 1, 6 and 7 again) of land is reserved for residential use\(^{37}\). In its campaign the government again threatens that if the plan cannot proceed as it is, housing problem will be seriously aggravated in the

\(^{36}\) In the case of *Ng Ka Ling v. Director of Immigration*

future when population grows (despite they are talking about aging in HK as a result of birth rate decrease at the same time!). They again appropriated the concept of “housing” which matters most to HK people, and were effectively saying that “you’ll be homeless if you reject the NENT plan”, creating at the same time confrontation between the general public who care so much about housing and those who oppose to the plan on the grounds of environmental preservation and protection of the present inhabitants’ lifestyle. But ironically, there are in fact more than 1,000 hectares of land in the urban area within the government’s reserves, and this fact is seldom brought by the government to public awareness and discussion. Even if raised (by the opposing organizations), the government tends to evade directly answering the queries, resorting to such shaky arguments as many of these lands are not suitable for building houses or are reserved for “countryside-housing use”, refusing to elaborate what the latter actually means. They blatantly reduce the complexity of the debates, the various interpretations and contradictions that surround them, to matter of affective investment.

**Strategies**

Since one of the major effects of an affective politics is to vacuumize the content of any political issues and reduce them all to matters of affective investment, strategies can be deployed to redefine the lines that pull them from one place that matters to another. One can see the various strategies of the New Right mentioned by Grossberg similarly used by the different players in the political theatre of HK. One obvious example is “affective magnet” whereby ”children and family” becomes the frequent choice of issue to attract investment. Taking again the above case of NENT, apart from resorting to the fear factor of housing shortage, the government launched a TV commercial (“TVC”) recently soft selling the plan. As shown in the pictures under Exhibit 3 and the actual TVC, one can easily note that “the happiness and benefit of our next generation” becomes the sole appeal. All it displays are shots of happy family life and a child delightfully wandering with his mother in various places. Ironically though, the TVC itself is entirely empty on the details of the NENT plan. The hidden but obvious message
is “if you want your child and family to be as happy, please support NENT”. The government promotes its NENT plan by usurping the issue of “children and family” which matters to most people.

However, as mentioned, this kind of tactic is employed not only by any particular power bloc, but also by EVERYONE in HK. In protesting against the Moral and National Education program introduced by the government for academic years to come since 2012 (“the Subject”), the 2 principle organizations, namely Scholarism and the Parents Concern Group on National Education equally resorted to affect in ways that can be described as “affective magnet”, equally focusing on the issue of “family and children”. Contents of the poster and the photo under Exhibit 4 are self-explanatory in that the messages of “our offspring being endangered” and “parents standing up to defend the children’s rights” are nothing but too obvious. “Brainwash” is the term that has been using throughout the campaign. This issue was so “magnetic” that many of the participants of the grand march against the Subject on 29 July 2012 were first-timers, driven to the street by the fear of their children being brainwashed or tampered with\textsuperscript{38}.

Other strategies such as “affective disinvestment” and “affective epidemic” classified by Grossberg are also seen in the HK political scene and are most frequently and successfully exploited by the young HK political party “People Power” (“PP”). If “affective disinvestment” is about weakening people’s concern with particular issues and activities, the one thing that PP promotes disinvestment is another political party called the Democratic Party (“DP”). Ever since DP held a secret talk with the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government (a local representative of the Chinese government), and their consequential agreement to support the government’s “Political Reform Bill” in 2010\textsuperscript{39}, PP has been attacking DP on all fronts ranging from net radio

\textsuperscript{38} Cable TV News of 29 July 2012.
\textsuperscript{39} The Bill was about reforming the structure of the HK Legislature effective after the 2012 election, details of which included, inter alia, raising the number of total seats from 60 to 70, 5 of which from direct election and 5 from functional constituencies. There was however no timetable for nor roadmap to universal suffrage, which was the fatal flaw of the Bill attracting the most criticisms from the pan-democrats in HK. DP once firmly warranted that they would not support any reform package without such timetable and roadmap. Nonetheless, after meeting the Liaison
commentaries (the man on the right-hand side of the photo under Exhibit 5 is a founding member of PP, a legislator as well as a famous political commentator), online columns, legislature debates and election strategies. The video under Exhibit 5 documents a press conference of PP held in 2011 prior to the District Election of the same year, in which they declared that their principal election strategy would be to “snipe” DP by sending candidates to participate in election wherever DP planted candidates. The purpose was said to be providing extra choices to voters, but in effect was one of diluting DP’s source of vote. It is nonetheless interesting to note that in the whole of the press conference, seldom did they mention what PP’s political platform and visions were. Little detail was provided regarding policies and implementation strategies on district affairs which District Election was supposed to be about. All they stressed was how DP had betrayed their voters and HK in the occasion of the Political Reform Bill, how they became “pseudo-democrats” since then, and why they should not be trusted anymore and deserved punishment. Such tactic of negative campaign has even reached status of “affective epidemic”, demonizing DP to be something to avoid at all costs.

Simplified Chinese characters (“SCC”) is similarly something to be promoted strong negative disinvestment, something to be avoid at all costs by way of “affective epidemic”. In its homepage promoting HK city-state autonomy (under Exhibit 6), the HK City-State Autonomy Movement (“HKAM”) criticized a local café printing menus in SCC only by such strong words as “cultural invasion”, “traitors” and “dignity of HK people being offended”. A local district councilor (now a legislator) Gary Fan even marched to the café’s premises performing some acts of protestation to express his fury. SCC have been articulated to become cultural means of the Chinese communist government in homogenizing HK with the mainland, thereby destroying HK’s uniqueness as well as the pledge of “One Country Two Systems”. Strong senses of fear and hatred have been mobilized towards SCC to an extent that anyone who uses or offers some kind of rational counter-argument in seeming defense of SCC is labeled as traitor. The

Office of the Central People’s Government in the HKSAR, DP voted for the Bill on the ground of the increment of the 5 direct electoral seats being "some kind of progress" for the democratic development of HK.
defense that the café’s principal clientele is mainland tourists and such SCC menus are printed for their convenience only was immediately disregarded as sophistry.

*Frontiers and Cynicisms*

The instance of SCC already sees a division of 2 groups of people: those who fear and hate SCC and those who do not openly express their fear and hatred of SCC. Similar frontiers and fanaticism that Grossberg discovers in his study of the American New Right seem to be present in HK. However, the frontiers here are far more in number and complexity, separating not only the pro-government and anti-government, but also the different blocs within the anti-government one. The marches on 1 January 2013 perhaps offer the best example. In that afternoon, there was a parade supporting the government, and another one afterwards calling for the immediate step-down of CY Leung, the present Chief Executive of HK (“the Grand March”) (See Exhibit 7). Between these 2 groups of people, one sees little room of consensus and compromise. Each of them is an alliance trying to win the public’s support in a hegemonic manner. Each of them identifies oneself by the difference principle, by “not being those on the other side of the frontier”. In Grossberg’s terms, these people are grouped and organized by mattering maps which contain issues that each group of these people thinks matter to themselves (such as stability, livelihood, economic development, patriotism for the pro-government side, and integrity of the Chief Executive, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law for the opposing side). One cannot say with certainty how many people from each side truly understand the ideologies behind and the complexities surrounding those issues, but one may easily note that these people heavily invest their emotions on the issues they respectively care about, sometimes to the extent of fanaticism (the fact that participants in a pro-government parade 2 days earlier used foul language to scold and even beat up a TV news reporter who had seemingly asked provocative questions shows how they care about the issues they own40).

40 http://thehousenews.com/politics/撐 cy 遊行人士打記者/
Within the grand frontier, however, there also exist secondary ones dividing people of the anti-government bloc. Taking again the example of the Grand March, people differed sharply in their opinions and strategies regarding how to achieve an imminent, if not immediate, step-down of CY Leung. While the Grand March’s principal organizer the Civil Human Right Front (“CHRF”) advocated peaceful demonstration and rally at the government headquarters afterwards, other parties like PP and HKAM encouraged their supporters to take on more progressive actions like besieging the Government House and road blockage at the Central District, with the intent on one hand to paralyze some sectors of social functioning and on the other to attract wider, especially international, press coverage, thereby exerting greater pressure on CY Leung. However, not only did they promote their own actions, they also actively criticized the futility of CHRF’s peaceful line of action and mocked it as some kind of formalism, having an indirect effect of “maintaining stability” for the government (See Fig. 8). Fig. 8. shows an excerpt of a Facebook post of a HKAM member (name intentionally concealed for ethical consideration) in which a photo shared by a CHRF member is attached. In that photo, lyrics of songs offered for participants’ optional use during the Grand March are listed. However, this HKAM member already ridiculed such act of inviting participants to sing during demonstration as one of organizing “karaoke gathering”. He also condemned the peaceful dismissal after the march as useless masturbation.

As mentioned, people like this HKAM member care very much about the issues they “own”, even though they may not have thorough understanding of the complexities behind (like the rationale behind CHRF’s preparation for the demonstrators’ chanting), not be able to engage in serious debates with others (like explaining why they think their proposed course of progressive actions are more effective in bringing about imminent result), or even live the values embodied in the object of their faith (one classic example of this is that the spiritual leader of HKAM Chin Wan boldly announced after the Grand March that he didn’t join it because his purpose was not just to demonstrate, but to engage in “revolution”). They are so ready to take side in their choices (whether to join the Grand March and what actions to take afterwards), and once a choice is made,
they go for it fanatically (at least on the surface). This is such a close resemblance of what Grossberg calls “sentimental cynicism” in which people deal with uncertainty and helplessness by “overinvesting”. The uncertainty and helplessness here of course spring substantially from the fact that no democratic system is in place in HK, leaving people no way to vote down or take effective measures against an unpopular Chief Executive and government. This results in them living in constant doubt about their ability to effect practical changes over their fate. And yet people like this HKAM member believe that their particular choice (along the “progressive” line) can really make a difference by virtue of that choice and the intensity with which it now matters, not exactly what it really is. The fact that no “progressive” actions were actually taken after the Grand March41 and no imminent result was brought about by their action (if any) doesn’t bother them or shake their “belief”. Faith or passion, the quantity of affect invested takes on its own power.

But it is interesting to note in this HK scenario that sentimental cynicism (overinvestment) can co-exist with “ironic cynicism” (withdrawal) even within one side of a frontier. The Fig. 8 example already illustrates the passionate side of this HKAM member. However, he is equally detached and disinvested in the choices of the others, those on the OTHER side of the frontier. His mocking comments are there to encourage his colleagues and supporters to be equally detached and disinvested towards the activities of CHRF. Again in Grossberg’s terms, they are like moving / redefining the lines of what matters and advocate investment on those they think matter and disinvestment on those they don’t. Strategically they are like operating “affective disinvestment” and “affective epidemic” at the same time, making “chanting during demonstration” look stupid, something useless and to be avoided at all costs.

41 Some road blockages at the Central District did happen that night, but were participated by less than 30 persons, including members of PP and other political parties / organizations. These actions were quickly cracked down by the police when they substantially increased their manpower and took strong actions containing the protesters on site, ending with arrests of 8 persons. With hindsight, road blockages were more likely caused by the police than by the protesters.
As much as mattering maps can easily change and relocate like like investment portfolios, sentimental cynicism can become ironic cynicism as easy in HK. Fig. 9 shows a Facebook post of an HKAM supporter on 3 January 2013, expressing his disappointment over the Grand March’s “failure” and the indifference of HK people towards political struggle. In his earlier posts he expressly denounced “peaceful dismissal” after the Grand March and supported HKAM’s progressive line of action. He heavily invested in this issue of “bringing about the imminent step-down of CY Leung”. However, just after 2 days he declared near the end of his post that he would NOT join in this kind of demonstration anymore because he was so fed up with too many HK people being free riders, failing to stand up to fight for their own rights. In matter of days, his attitude can change from overinvestment to complete detachment and withdrawal, and he can justify such change as “revelation”, “vengeance on free riders” and “a form of rest”.

De-politicization

This HKAM supporter’s comments seem to echo the recent famous motto “I hate politics” of the HK pop star Ivana Wong which was made public via her Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter)42. They also seem to answer the call from Ambrose Lee, the former Secretary of Security of HK, who advised people not to “take things so politically” even when he was running an election to be the HK’s delegate to the National People's Congress43. While more and more people become politically awake since the 1997 handover of HK (as shown by the 0.5 million headcounts in the grand march on 1 July 2003, and the strong support of the recent campaign against the Moral and National Education program), others become tired of politics and try to withdraw from it as well. Cynicism, as identified by Hui, definitely plays a role44. But the city’s affective turn may more

42 She wrote on 30 November 2012 that while people were so busy uncovering the details of CY Leung’s illegal home construction, they should be more concerned about the aged who were so desperately waiting for the monetary allowance under the proposed Old Age Living Allowance scheme (a motion which was then being debated in the LegCo Finance Committee and attacked for having a “means test” mechanism). She ended her post by saying “I hate politics”.
43 His exact wordings on 10 December 2012 was “don’t treat this election too politically”. http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20121210/18096549
44許寶強, 解讀香港政治 – 從核心價值到核心情緒, 明報, 26-11-2012.
importantly have provided favorable conditions for the incubation of such de-
politicization. As opposed to ideology, affect, like mood, can easily change, and
mattering maps can easily be relocated. The basis of affect is weak and this
explains partly why the above HKAM supporter can undergo such an extreme
position change regarding political struggle. And since affect is so loosely
grounded, it can easily be manipulated by others, especially by those with
popular and charismatic appeal. That’s why the comments of the pop star Ivana
Wong or the founder of PP Wong Yuk Man who has long established himself as a
popular commentator weigh and have impact in restructuring followers’
mattering maps. A politics basing on such fluid kind of affect leaves people an
impression that it is not trustworthy, cannot be taken seriously and the positions
therein are always susceptible to change. This partly accounts for the people’s
increasing doubt of and distancing from politics.

What’s more, as mentioned above, in affective politics passion becomes the end
itself. People’s investment overwhelms and erases all the limitation of a
proposed solution, and what matters in politics are conviction and will. Knowledge is no longer important and people can be ignorant of the stakes in a
dispute. Ignorance and misinformation become reasonable states. That’s why
less and less people bother to go into details of political incidents and engage in
serious political discussions, and yet they don’t feel troubled at all by such
ignorance. That’s why they can proudly announce their “hatred of politics”
despite their non-knowledge of politics. That’s why people can deal only with
everyday life’s issues and matters, which won’t tax on their intellectual and
analytical resources as much as those regarding NENT or the Old Age Living
Allowance scheme. That’s also why scandalous affairs such as CY Leung’s illegal
home construction, or the drunk driving of the current Secretary of Development
Paul Chan can attract widespread attention, scrutiny, debates and criticisms.
That’s why activism is always portrayed by the media as violence and chaos
because the media understands too well that serious analysis won’t sell, while
violence, chaos, and photos / footages of police using pepper spray on

45 P. 3 above.
46 P. 6 above.
demonstrators appeal to the senses, mood, and affect of the audience. That's why those scattered instances of road blockages after the Grand March were so righteously condemned by taxi drivers as anti-social behavior jeopardizing their livelihood, even though they knew very little about the facts surrounding such instances. All these phenomenon of de-politicization in HK bear close resemblance with those in America under Grossberg’s study.

Coupled with such tolerance of ignorance, the easier formation of frontiers in affective politics (where mood and affect are vulnerable to change and people’s manipulation) renders a politics of consensus, compromise and solidarity, which requires serious debates and balancing consideration, more and more difficult in HK. The confrontations within the “pan-democratic” bloc, such as those regarding the lines of actions after the Grand March discussed above, is particularly frustrating for those who once have hope on this bloc to counteract the growing influence of the Chinese government on HK affairs. More pathetically, the number of “internal” frontiers and confrontation has been growing for the past few years, yet the quality of arguments is deteriorating, approaching mere clashes of passions and exchange of foul mouths, all wanting of meaningful content. Such an atmosphere only encourages hopelessness, cynicism and hence disinvestment in politics further, resulting in a true “affective epidemic” of social concern.

**The Views Beyond**

While Grossberg’s analysis of affect and cynicism in his American context does provide valuable tools for one to make sense of, and it seems to explain so well many of the conflicts, disputes and peculiarities in the HK political scene, it is limited to providing a different perspective for viewing such surface phenomenon, letting one regroup them under a different logic. Factors behind such phenomenon and the fundamental difference between the American and HK contexts need separate disclosure. However, since detailed follow-up enquiries indeed warrant discussion in another paper, only a cursory examination will be conducted here.
One basic difference between HK and America is the presence of the authoritative Chinese government within the former's constitutional system. Not being an independent country, HK is under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (“PRC”). In PRC, however, incidents like June Fourth Massacre, the “suicide” of activist Li Wangyang, imprisonment of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo on the ground of his initiation of Charter 08 being an act of “inciting subversion of state power”, home detention of Liu’s wife Liu Xia without trial, administrative arrests under “re-education through labor”, and countless incidents of human rights infringement can happen. It is a country of rule of man. Absolute power of the ruling bloc and its subordinates remains largely unchecked. This is a kind of political environment that HK people cannot accept. Besides, as a result of such environment, and for the purpose of survival, people in PRC have to live in a society of twisted morality. The eventual death of “Yue Yue” who was a 2-year old infant got run by 2 vehicles in Foshan in 2011 and left unattended on the scene despite 18 people passed by is a case where the prevailing PRC morality that “it’s better to stay out of trouble than to rescue” is best exemplified. This is a kind of morality that HK people will reject as well.

Analogous to born blindness being better than acquired one, it would have been easier for HK people to embrace this kind of PRC modernity had it not have a colonial history. Unfortunately, they have experienced a certain extent of freedom, democracy and rule of law during the British reign, especially in the last few years before 1997. Together with the PRC’s promise of “One Country Two Systems” and “preservation of lifestyle for 50 years” under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, HK people are vested with a legitimate expectation not to be “contaminated” by PRC’s political system and morality, at least for some time. Telling them such an expectation is only a dream and they are about to be homogenized by PRC is particularly frustrating and frightening.

All these go to the source of fear. If Grossberg has enlightened us in seeing that these emotions (especially of fear) are largely mobilized in affective politics, it is argue here that such emotions are not unfounded. HK people have every reason
to fear in face of an invincible and indestructible machine like PRC. The phobic responses of HK people are not entirely disproportionate. Of course cases like the severe hatred of SCC and mainland pregnant women may look like overreaction, defending children’s freedom of thought in the campaign against the Moral and National Education program is totally legitimate (one will know exactly why after going through the then curriculum guide issued by the government). Grossberg may have pointed out how an affective politics operates, but the reasons why emotions and moods surrounding certain PRC-related issues are particularly susceptible to mobilization in HK are something that he could not have prophesied.

Another major difference with America is that there is no democracy in HK. Its political structure as prescribed in the Basic Law is handicapped in nature. The existence of functional constituencies and the split voting system in its legislature, and the selection mechanism of the Chief Executive have all ensured the triumph of the “executive led” principle, leaving people completely powerless within the establishment parameter to effect change. Together with such tactics as “de facto bribing” of elderly voters and “vote planting” employed by the pro-government / PRC political parties / organizations, one sees little hope of a true democracy coming even with the Basic Law’s promise of “progressive democratic development” leading eventually to universal suffrage. The sense of doubt, hopelessness and futility (postmodern sensibility) is not just a sense. It is a structural fact in HK’s political system. Cynicism, be it sentimental or ironic, becomes a natural consequence.

If Grossberg also tells us that in affective politics serious political debates tends to be displaced, and ignorance becomes a usual state, one has to ask a further question about how such a politics and its strategies are mediated under HK’s social circumstances. To put it simply, what makes affect “sell” in HK? It is argued that the agents are at least fourfold, namely historical, economical, cultural and technological. Firstly, it’s almost cliché to say that HK’s colonial history has nurtured generations of people who are politically apathetic. They have been used to not caring about politics anyway for decades. All that matters to them is
how to make a living and get rich. The idea that social concern is associated with selfishness, special interests, childish refusal of reality or dangerous relativism perhaps exists BEFORE the rise of affective politics. Seeds of affective politics and strategies only got sowed into such fertile hotbed and flourish consequently.

Secondly, HK’s economy is largely driven by the real property sector. Powerful cooperate blocs in the property business basically dominate HK’s economic ecology. Coupled with the colonial policy of high land price which passes on to the post-97 government and is still being implemented today, property price in HK has risen for more than 200% during the last 10 years, and mortgage expense comprises nowadays 46.4% of family income in average. A large proportion of HK people are “slaves of the flat” and in effect working for property developers. Changing jobs means working for one developer to another. Alternative lifestyles (like not having a full-time job and owning property) don’t quite exist in the general public’s imagination. Hence they think they have no choice but to succumb to a more and more inhumane work-life, leaving not much time and space for recreation, family gathering and self-reflection. Social concern and serious political consideration are just too much for them. What really attracts them is what appeals to their senses (if there are still some left). Therefore scandals of pop stars sell, yellow journalism sells, violence and bloodshed sell, and affect sells. Again, affective politics do not create a bunch of indifferent, ignorant and de-politicized HK people. They are already there for such a politics to prosper.

With a lifestyle like this, cultural mediation comes in. If Grossberg has identified “rock formation” in America, we have “TVB formation” in HK. Ever since the 70s, this TV giant has been producing tons of TV programs (including the famous “Enjoy Yourself Tonight”) which aim on one hand at entertaining a huge population of after-work audience, and on the other preparing them for the next day’s work-life. This falls so squarely on Adorno’s critique of the culture

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47 Ming Pao Daily of 18 October 2012. Meanwhile the increment of average family income for the last 10 years is only 10%.
industry\textsuperscript{48}. Anyway, viewing these programs doesn’t require the activity of a single brain cell of the viewer. And by way of “transferred belief”, these programs let the audience think that even they do nothing but gazing drowsily into the TV set all evening, they have had a really good time\textsuperscript{49}. Watching TV and “dining with TV” have long become an important part of HK’s cultural formation. Ignorance and brainlessness have always been the “core values” of HK. It is then hard to reject the charm of an affective politics the essence and strategies of which consummate so happily with such a cultural formation (of stupidity).

Technological advance is another thing that cannot be ignored in HK’s epidemic of affective politics. As of December 2012, there are more than 15 million cell phone users in HK\textsuperscript{50}. HK perhaps champions the tournament of average cell phone penetration in Asia. Together with the increasing popularity of such cell phone apps as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, SMS and Whatsapp, moods get spread around with utmost ease (it’s even more interesting to note the increasing use in text messages and emails of “emoticons”, which are themselves canned figures of emotions). If affective politics is also mood politics, how is HK not a heaven for its proliferation? Besides, all these applications are about sharing of one’s “status” at the moment, eye-catching photos or ear-catching soundbites. Not only do they invite people’s “gut” responses, they also encourage polarization of expression (the more critical one’s comment seems to be, the more “like” he/she will get in Facebook). With this infrastructure in place, how can fanaticism (overinvestment in the case of sentimental cynicism) or desensitization (withdrawal in the case of ironic cynicism) not thrive?

One final word on frontiers. If Gorssberg has pinpointed the American New Right as those who excelled in hegemonic struggle via affective politics, the PRC government or its satellite organizations (surface or secret) may be those who are more and more aware of HK’s potential as incubator of such politics and are exploiting the relevant strategies in HK. One cannot rule out the possibility that


\textsuperscript{50} http://www.ofca.gov.hk/filemanager/ofca/common/media/data_stat/wireless_en.pdf
criticisms of HKAM on CHRF’s line of action in the Grand March (under Exhibit 8) are somehow initiated or seconded by PRC undercover agents. One cannot also rule out the possibility that the hidden agenda behind PP’s establishment (formed 2 years ago) or DP’s sudden change of its radical stance is to disintegrate the coherence of the pan-democrats. All these sound like paranoia or conspiracies, but having put on the Grossberg spectacles, the world just seems too dangerous.
References


許寶強, 解讀香港政治 – 從核心價值到核心情緒, 明報, 26-11-2012.
APPENDIX

Exhibit 1

你願意香港
每18分鐘
花$1,000,000
養育「雙非」兒童嗎？

香港人，忍夠了！
因為同情你們受毒奶粉所害，所以容忍你們來搶購奶粉
因為可憐你們沒有自由，所以歡迎你們來港「自由行」
因為明白你們教育落後，所以分享了教育資源給你們
因為理解你們看不懂正體字，所以下面用了繁體字
「來香港請尊重本地文化，要不是香港你們全完了」

強烈要求
政府修訂基本法24條！
阻止大陸雙非孕婦逃港式入侵香港！

* 統計處資料顯示：二○○九年出生的「雙非」嬰兒約二萬四千名，即每18分鐘出生一
名「雙非」嬰兒。請計算其他項目，每年「雙非」嬰兒數極數至三萬五萬人，最少需要消
費一百萬政府支援。

** 內地孕婦來港產子，父母均非港人數字，於2003年為62人，於2010年為32,000人，
數量大幅增加約500倍。
網友在火車上目擊：
母嬰車廁所隔間中驚見中國獨居男
女乘務員驚訝地蹲在地上，打開隔間，
驚見一名中國獨居男在隔間內。
女乘務員驚訝地問道：
“你膽子真大啊，敢在這裡上廁所！
你不怕人家看到嗎？”
中國獨居男回答：
“我一把屎一把尿的，
回家還要穿尿布，
這裡還要穿尿布？”
女乘務員搖頭：
“你這樣做，
會讓其他女乘客感到不安的！
你不應該這樣做！”
Exhibit 3

Full TVC: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJFmCQOGiY
別等下一代都成為「國民小先鋒」才反對
全民行動
反對洗腦
萬人大遊行
9月前必需撤回！

爸爸媽媽站出來
齊來喝停國民教育
Exhibit 5

Full video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4XyyzPwkjo
呢張圖，暫時有25個字，但大部分都係樂感。梅樹如下：
- 吾咪唱K宜道 bites K養唱，香港人係好火車，內心係好歌仔。
- 唔，正切咧，又係抗戰二十年，俾你個別，再搞啲帳清去，四十年都唔偈，俾國家係去？？
- 原來又係唱K大行家，當日唔會入難圍，只會在街上找艷
- 唱唱抗戰二十年？係抗到幾時？
- 其實有乜好唱，早些出發唔好？俾大家係下圖水大家精力～
- 狗連左腳又搞K歌家居嘅事嘅，喺啲歌仔自係一番然後倉促和時散去，一事無成。仲忘記在住地維繭有功，想重現自負！

你地又點譜？

[1月1日：三點，做完事去，已經在書檯放好音樂入了～緊upload一部份書大家先頭為貴！！歡迎到時選唱唔啲歌入開 XDID (想設計其他人請勿花)
我只在面書9UP, 轉貼, 寫歌而已
我甚至不是什麼社運份子
但我已經和父母(單親)反目
很多從前的朋友說「你為什麼變成這樣?」
天啊，變的到底是我，還是你們？？？？

香港不需要什麼閉路電視
只要香港人肯唔掂遊行，旅行唔掂KفحSHOPPING CNC火鍋唔掂佛山嘅
FACIAL唔掂劇場唔掂WARGAME唔掂WAKEBOARDING一日多
一日唔多，第二天亦有響聲響亦不會響。

我唔介意，真的唔介意，
給你們坐輪流車
只要你們唔參加政府罵我們
只要你們唔口頭上支持
我就很感動了
但是，你們坐輪流車的話，車，是駛不到目的地的。
若果只剩下十三萬人坐輪流車到目的地，你們坐輪流車又有何所謂？
你坐輪流車，當然可能有你的理由，正如我也不會每一次遊行都有參與。
但如果你在有輪流的情況下依然選擇坐輪流車，
你會不會是根本不了解情況有多糟糕？
若我告訴你，太多人坐輪流車會令車掉下山坡，
你會會選擇坐輪流車看風景，還是幫忙開車？
當你終於覺得有必要幫忙開車了，
而你發覺我卻手忙腳亂時。
我的答案可能是「現在才來太晚了，死硬了，等死吧。」

作為一種覺悟
作為一種報復
作為一種休息
在條件未有結構性改變之前，我不會再參與同類形式的遊行，因為
沒有用之餘，連上亦可以用「遊行」這項你的獨門武器來反擊
你。

這，是，多，麼，大，的，侮，辱？？？？

我七月一遊去多一次一次一樣的無用遊行？值的？
我還要受侮辱多一次嗎？
就算去，我去劇場政府分清那個維護蘇更冇實際作用？
祝你們好運。
我不會討便宜的，再辦一次，我有外國護照。
你呢？你一定都有降落傘，你的決定!!
有降落傘唔係火嘅，一樣可以死，佢有降落傘？死硬。

這個社會已經崩潰左邊，不喜勿幾，我可能都癱瘓左線未定。