

## **From heterogeneity to plurality?**

[Tsang Shu-ki](#) (5/10/04)

### *Hong Kong's anomie*

I've been talking about Hong Kong's social and political anomie for quite some time, which arose from our long colonial past, the transition syndrome, and the half-baked "semi-democracy" defectively designed in the pre-1997 era of suspicion. It has since been aggravated by an increasingly inept and battered leadership under Tung Chee-hwa. In past articles, I also summarised the two most serious and deep-seated problems in Hong Kong as: (1) the heterogeneity of ideologies ranging from die-hard anti-communism to opportunistic patriotism; and (2) the underdevelopment of the political elite inside and outside the establishment. (See [Hong Kong of China, Hong Kong of the World](#).)

To overcome these setbacks, we need to develop social democracy in the broad sense: i.e. the promotion of a civil society that puts a premium on rational discourse and the peaceful settlement of differences ("[On socialising empowerment](#)"). This would help to nurture the maturity of local political culture. And with multiple, but non-extremist centres of "power" in the SAR, there is less likelihood for Beijing to turn over-sensitive. It may indeed be a second-best, non-radical, but long lasting solution for Hong Kong. We don't have to look too far in the world or very long back in history to find examples of non-functioning and failed democracies.

### *Social and formal democratisation*

I am not at all against the democratisation of the formal political institutions, as a starting point of my diagnosis is already the faulty, half-baked "semi-democracy". Of course, systemic malfunctions need to be rectified and forward steps should be taken. Earlier this year, I also criticised the ways that the Chinese central government pushed through the interpretation and the ruling on the future of popular elections in Hong Kong ("[Politics: Hong Kong style](#)").

Nevertheless, any one advocating "formal democratisation" has to live with the reality of "One Country, Two Systems" unless she or he chooses from the strategies of non-legal civil disobedience or outright rebellion. My own stance, "democratic reversion", has been different, and some would say too accommodative (see my 1993 article "[The Tightrope Among Nationalism, Democracy and Pragmatism](#)"). I

respect those who make any of the other choices, provided they practise it consistently (hopefully realising the ultimate consequences) and are prepared themselves to pay the cost rather than letting innocent people foot the bill. Also I think that one has to review one's position when significant changes take place in the overall environment ([“Politics: Hong Kong style”](#)).

In any case, things appear quite clear to me that, given Hong Kong's particular context, popular elections alone may not serve as a very useful conflict resolution and policy formulation mechanism if it is not augmented by a broader process of social democratisation.

Unfortunately, in the past at least, these two aspects did not seem to have a mutually enhancing effect. So we cannot assume a simple positive correlation between the expansion of the number of directly and indirectly elected seats in the LegCo and the actualisation of democracy. The Democratic Party, for example, has been criticised as being undemocratic in its internal governance. At the same time, we witness the deterioration of the quality of political commentary and dialogue by LegCo members and the popular media. One would justifiably feel irritated when people in the limelight who cried loud all days for “universal democracy” showed little tolerance, cultural depth and, in some cases, even sincerity themselves. Some of them just keep talking without communicating. I am not sure that they would become better political leaders than Tung Chee-hwa if they acquire power.

Both institutional democratisation and social democratisation are necessary for the development of Hong Kong. But we should not limit ourselves to shouting for “universal suffrage” in our “fight”, which means nothing more than demonstrations or set pieces of shows tailor-made for the media. We need to behave “democratically” in all aspects of social life, and should engage in rational discussion even with people who hold diametrically different views to ours. We ought to search for consensus and, in lieu of that, respect minority opinion and gracefully accept the majority decision.

#### *The paradoxical 2004 LegCo election results*

On the surface, the results of the recent LegCo elections are paradoxical. Despite the monumental “tide” of popular sentiments shown in the July 1 marches of 2003 and 2004, no landslide materialised for the “pan-democratic camp” (PDC). Top officials in Hong Kong and Beijing certainly would not need “tranquillizers”, as one

commentator put it. Indeed, their feelings of relief have been there for all to see.

In the direct elections in geographical constituencies, the PDC got about 60% of the popular votes and 18 (60%) of the 30 seats, quite below their original expectations. Together with the outcomes for the other 30 seats in the functional constituencies (the election system for which is not fair, but it was a “given” known to all before hand), the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) has become the party with the largest number of LegCo seats, followed by the Liberal Party as second, then the Democratic Party as third. So overall, the PDC took only 25 seats, 5 short of the simple majority mark. On the other hand, “Long Hair” Leung Kwok-hung, a radical direct-actionist, as well as former talk-show host Albert Cheng King-hon were elected through popular votes, possibly to some discomfort of the SAR Government and Beijing.

*Divisive heterogeneity or accommodating plurality?*

Such results were not what many had predicted. Why wasn’t “people’s power” realised in ousting “conservatives” like DAB candidates and achieving a resounding victory for the PDC? What did the voters try to express through these outcomes that every quarters of political power, the Democratic Party excepting, finds “satisfactory”, “acceptable” or at least “un-disturbing”? How could things have turned out to be so nice to so many people?

Is it a case of continued divisive heterogeneity or newly found accommodating plurality? Before going into explanations, I’m afraid I have to quote myself again, at some length this time:

“Lack of concrete visions and the ability in implementation apart, policy swings in the SAR government are in my view a reflection of the heterogeneity of ideologies in Hong Kong. .... In the pre-1997 years, social researchers discussed the issues of “ambivalence” among local citizens concerning their attitudes towards the Beijing authorities, which showed both noted reservations and yet surprising deference. My suspicion was: the surveys that they carried out might have caught a “split sample”---indeed one split in multiple ways. Hostility and deference were actually expressed by different subgroups of respondents.

In any case, policy swings themselves are hardly beneficial to the

emergence of widely shared views. Every party can claim that its advocacy or policies have not really been adopted by the government and therefore tested in reality. Hence no position is verified or rejected by history. This contributes to the general loss of direction for Hong Kong's development.”  
([Hong Kong of China, Hong Kong of the World](#))

In that conference presentation last September, I was complaining about the “heterogeneity of ideologies” among the Hong Kong people, who behaved like “split samples” in surveys. Many of them just couldn't agree on anything important. That I think has been a key reason, albeit not the only reason, behind the lack of consensus, the swings in policies, and even the anomie in the SAR.

Of course, democracy does not require or imply homogeneity and uniformity. People may hold different, indeed very different, views. The crux of the matter is that they can agree to disagree, while behaving in civilised manners towards the majority opinion, which must then be put to effective implementation. After all, a democracy needs to function, and policies, most of which will always be unpalatable to some, have to be carried out.

In other words, it is a society of accommodating plurality, instead of divisive heterogeneity. Since communal harmony is like a public good susceptible to the “tragedy of the common”, citizens should not stick to their own idiosyncratic preferences in the name of freedom and become so self-centred as not to give a damn about social polarisation and its adverse repercussions. They should continuously interact as community members, so as to understand others' perspectives, reduce remaining differences and smooth out previous “extremist” positions. This is what academics describe as a “mature political culture”, which would help to overcome the “voting paradox” that might paralyse a society based on majority decisions (see my [microeconomics lecture notes](#) on the theory). Of course, new issues emerge all the time, and the above process never stops for a dynamic polity.<sup>1</sup>

Now back to the 2004 election results. There could still be a silver lining for faithful democrats who genuinely felt disappointed. The results might indeed not be paradoxical at all, if what happened was an attempt by Hong Kong people to “smooth out previous extremist positions”.

When even “Long Hair” Leung Kwok-hung bothered to join the race for a seat in the establishment, albeit dressed in his trademark [Che Guevara](#) T-shirt, something

must have changed. And a convincing victory for him! Could it be an indication that his voters actually expected him to “mature politically”? Or did they want him to bring about a revolution in the LegCo or in the SAR? Similar questions apply to the success of Albert Cheng. Was it the intention of many who voted in Kowloon East to add a sharp-tongued government basher to the LegCo? Or did they really see him as an all-round, smart but responsible politician making the best use of his time and energy?

*So two contending hypotheses*

Now out of the same election results, we have come up with the two contending hypotheses of (1) continued ideological heterogeneity and (2) emerging plurality and maturity in Hong Kong. Which is correct? In case the second hypothesis is, further and speedier institutional democratisation should become justifiable.

Do we have to wait very long for a preliminary answer?

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<sup>1</sup> Although I have been careful in presenting my analysis of Hong Kong’s political problems from the angles of history, system and ideology, and their reinforcing dynamics, there is still a danger that some readers might get the wrong impression that I only blamed the people. (No, I didn’t and I don’t!) There are many scholars who place the responsibility for the fall of democracies in history on the actions by the masses to support extremist movements (Fascism in interwar Europe is the favourite example). For an opinion from a different perspective, can I refer readers to the views of Nancy Bermeo, a professor of politics at Princeton University? She said in an interview, “If one looks at the cases in South America after the Cuban revolution, the democracies that collapsed were often led by people who were elected by small pluralities or who inherited power because a more legitimate leader died. Many disastrous democracies emerged from situations where leaders were not seen as legitimate from the very beginning.” (<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/03/1117/>). Eventually, biased and lopsided policies fed extremism. They were therefore cases of people getting mad, not going mad. Instead of the people, the leaders should be blamed. Well, many have been doing that here in Hong Kong. And given those leaders, why not? Since I also blame Tung Chee-hwa, I only want to raise one question: Why couldn’t politicians of “sufficient pluralities” (in contrast to “small pluralities”, as Prof. Bermeo pointed out) have emerged as *democratic* leaders in those countries? Or put in another way: Were there any “sufficient pluralities” at all at the beginning of, or during, the process of democratisation?