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Occupy Hong Kong: Historisizing Protest

Street protests are among the most complex forms of political discourse, bringing together multiple actors, multiple modes of discourse, multiple media, and multiple historical trajectories (Alexander et al. 2006; Opp 2009). In recent years, a particular type of street protest — "Occupy style" movements or movements taking the "Occupy" name — has gained particular prominence. Such movements have developed in places such as New York and Los Angeles in the United States, Spain, the Ukraine, Turkey, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. What characterizes them is not just the protracted "occupation" of a segment of urban space by protesters, but also distinct *uses* of that space (Juris 2012; Martín Rojo 2014), distinct forms of discourse (Costanza-Chock 2012; DeLuca et al. 2012), distinct patterns of interaction and organization among protesters (Bennet et al. 2014), and distinct ways of negotiating with the media and with the authorities (Fuchs 2014). Although protest movements appropriating the "Occupy" label often share a similar ethos and similar discursive features, they also emerge in particular sociocultural contexts as a result of different political, social and economic conditions, and so also naturally involve unique sets of discourses and discursive strategies. This special edition of *Language and Politics* focuses on "Occupy Hong Kong", also known as "Occupy Central", or "The Umbrella Movement" a "case-study" from which we can learn about the relationship between these more generic features of "Occupy" movements and the particular historical conditions that give rise to particular "Occupy" movements.

An earlier issue of *Language and Politics*, edited by Luisa Martín Rojo (2014), was also devoted to Occupy movements, providing articles ranging across various different national

contexts, and focusing in particular on the *spatial* dynamics of such movements. This issue will focus on just the one particular Occupy movement, that which occurred in Hong Kong in the Autumn of 2014, attempting in part to understand in what ways this movement strategically appropriated discourses and discursive practices from other movements, how it adapted those discourses and practices to fit local conditions, and how it developed its own unique discourses and discursive practices. Whereas Martín Rojo's issue focused primarily on the *spatiality* of political protest— the ways discourse, in his words, serves as a means of "deterritorializing" and "reterritorializing" urban space— the main emphasis of the articles in this issue is *temporality*, or, more specifically, *historicity*. All of them, in one way or another, attempt to understand how discourses change and develop over time, how they travel along what Scollon (2008) calls "itineraries" -- pathways across different moments and different "sites of engagement", and how certain events become "historical", coming to serve as emblems of particular "historical truths" for different groups of people and as discursive tools for future action. In short, they are concerned with the ways history comes to be embedded in discourse, the way discourse comes to function as an agent in historical processes, and the ways producers and consumers of discourse during such movements contribute to "detemporalizing" and "retemproalizing" events in ways which serve particular political goals and ideological agendas. These issues are explored through an examination of a wide range of discursive forms including newspaper articles, protest songs, public opinion polls, television interviews, signage and street art, and videos of police violence shared on social networking sites, and they are examined through though a variety of theoretical frameworks including critical discourse analysis, critical historiography, geosemiotics, mass media studies, and mediated discourse analysis.

Occupy Hong Kong

In 1997, sovereignty over Hong Kong reverted from Great Britain to China. According to the terms of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and as specified in Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law, Hong Kong should gradually develop a democratic political system, a central component of which would be the election of the Chief Executive by "universal suffrage". As Hong Kong citizens and politicians debated the specific form such elections would take in the run-up to 2017, the year planned for the implementation of "universal suffrage" (the nature of which was open to argument, as it had been laid down in article 45 of the Basic Law), the Central Government in Beijing issued a "White Paper" laying out a number of controversial conditions for electoral reform, among which were the requirements that all candidates be approved by a selection committee dominated by pro-Beijing members, and that the number of candidates be limited to "two or three". In response to this, a number of political parties, activist groups, student federations and labor unions began plans for civil disobedience. Starting on September 26, 2014, protesters (mostly students) began occupying areas around the Central Government Offices. Early on the morning of September 27, police responded to the protesters, using tear gas and pepper spray, a response that shocked citizens, drew wide condemnation, and contributed to the growing support for the movement (Bhatia, this issue). Over the next several days thousands of people gathered to occupy not just the area around the Central Government Offices in Admiralty, but also two busy commercial centers in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. While the numbers participating rose and fell according to how the situation developed, the movement lasted for a total of 79 days and paralyzed large areas of the city. It took the form of participants building barricades, encampments of tents, and various support facilities, such as food kitchens, study areas, libraries, and first aid posts. The movement was accompanied by an outpouring of political discourse, taking the form of speeches, slogans, art work, all promoted by various forms of electronic social media. After 97 days, the protests ended peacefully,

with all protest areas being cleared, but with protesters dissatisfied that they had not achieved their goals and vowing "We'll be back". By "waiting out" the protestors without giving in to their demands, the Hong Kong government was able to gradually reduce the level of public support and to eventually end the demonstrations peacefully using bailiffs (supported by the police) acting on behalf of individuals whose businesses had been disrupted. There were a number of arrests of high profile democracy supporters, but, in line with their civil disobedience philosophy, they did not resist.

Since the protests, the electoral reform package proposed by the Beijing government has failed to win approval by the Legislative Council, all but guaranteeing that the direct election of the Chief Executive will be further delayed. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government has moved to prosecute many of the leaders of the moment and shown little interest in further dialogue, There have been other smaller scale demonstrations since the clearing of the occupied areas, aimed at, for example, parallel traders from the Mainland, which have taken up much of the political discourse that developed during the Occupy movement. Since Occupy, however, there has been much more talk of the possibility of "autonomy", "self-determination" and even "independence" for Hong Kong among a small minority and in the media, terms which were previously considered off-limits. "Localism" is another term that has entered the popular vocabulary. Furthermore, in February 2016, a bloody overnight confrontation between disgruntled youths and police lasting over 10 hours took place in the Mong Kok area. Only time will tell how the "itineraries of discourse" (Scollon 2008) initiated by the movement will develop as Hong Kong's political evolution and relationship with Mainland China continue to be debated.

Overview of the Issue

As mentioned above, while the articles in this special issue adopt a range of perspectives on the relationship between discourse and politics, they share a range of common theoretical concerns. First is the concern with *historicity,* both in terms of contextualizing the movement within the broader historical development of Hong Kong, and in understanding the moment by moment unfolding of key events. This focus allows authors to explore the *emergent* nature of the movement and the discourse associated with it, linking it to past protest movements and past discourses. It also allows them to examine how what Flowerdew calls "critical moments" and Bhatia calls "key moments" (moments like the use of tear gas by police analyzed by Bhatia, and the filming of the beating of a handcuffed protester by police analyzed by Jones and Li) come to be discursively constructed by different groups, and how these discursive constructions come to affect future events and how they are interpreted. A second important concern of the scholars represented in this issue is with the *mobility* of political discourse, how meanings change as discourse travels across different modes and materialities, across space, and across time, and across ideological contexts. This mobility of discourse is addressed using a range of concepts including intertextuality, interdiscursivty, resemiotization, recontextualization, and, as in the articles by Jones and Li and Lou and Jaworski, Scollon's (2008) idea of "discourse itineraries".

The first paper by John Flowerdew introduces the issues theme of historicization by outlining his historiographical approach to critical discourse analysis (Flowerdew, 2012). It also provides important background information for understanding subsequent articles by discussing the Hong Kong Occupy movement in the context of Hong Kong's on-going socio-political development, starting with the seizure of Hong Kong as a colony by Great Britain's in 1842, through the immediate period leading to the resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong by the People's Republic of China as a "Special Administrative Region" with a high

degree of autonomy in 1997, and up to the present day and the recent events of Occupy. This approach allows Flowerdew to gain an understanding of what has changed over time and what has stayed the same, the assumption being that an understanding of discourses of the more distant and the more immediate past allows for a better understanding for discourse of the present. Flowerdew illustrates this approach through the analysis of an interview on a local Hong Kong English-language television programme, *Newsline,* involving Benny Tai, the architect of the Occupy movement, and Priscilla Leung, a pro-establishment (and hence anti-Occupy) legislator. A micro-analysis of the interaction between the two guests and the programme host reveals intertextual traces of long-standing issues in Hong Kong's socio-political development (free-market economics, individual freedom, the rule of law, and democracy), revealing larger tensions within Hong Kong society at large, and lending support to the historiographical approach of the study and its contention regarding the relation between discourse and social change.

In the second article, Aditi Bhatia also takes up the question of history, asking what are the discursive processes through which certain events come to be seen as "historical". The particular event she considers is the firing of 87 rounds of tear gas at protestors by police on the first night of the protests, an event which functioned as what Kimmel (1990) calls a *key precipitant,* which allowed "deeply seated structural forces to emerge as politically potent and begin to mobilize potential discontents" (9-10). In her analysis she draws on her own framework of the "Discourse of Illusion"(Bhatia 2015), which brings together attention to historicity, linguistic and semiotic action, and social impact.

In the third article, Rodney Jones and Neville Li trace the historical trajectory of an iconic video of seven police officers beating a handcuffed protestor, from when it was first

broadcast on a local television station, through its various re-appropriations and re-interpretations on different social media sites, to its status as a piece of evidence in the eventual trial of the seven officers. They bring together Scollon's (2008) notion of "discourse itineraries" with Goodwin's (1994) work on "professional vision", arguing that the ways the video was re-entextualized and recontextualized over the course of this trajectory are indicative of the different "practices of seeing" associated with different communities, including communities of journalists, communities of pro-occupy and pro-establishment activists, and communities of lawyers and law enforcement officers, and that these "practices of seeing" functioned as important means through which members of these communities displayed group membership and reinforced group norms and ideological values. Understanding how visual representations of events at protest movements, especially representations of police violence, travel through different interpretive communities, and the discursive practices they are subjected to along these itineraries, they contend, has important implications for understanding broader issues having to do with the evidentiary nature of photographic texts in the digital age, and with the ways ideology is expressed through practices of visuality (Mirzoeff 2011) in which political actors attempt to control not just what is seen but how it is rendered "seeable".

The fourth article, by Francis Lee, takes up the important issue of public opinion polls and how, as they are taken up and interpreted by newspapers of different political orientations, become potent ideological tools for legitimizing or delegitimizing social movements. Despite their ostensibly "scientific" nature, he argues, polls are always produced through a combination of the social practice of polling plus the discursive negotiations and contestations about the meanings and implications of poll findings in the public arena (Herbst 1993; Lewis 2001). In the article, he analyses the media discourses surrounding opinion

polling during the Occupy movement, focusing particularly on how news organizations and writers with different political predilections constructed images of public opinion through selective highlighting and interpretations of the poll results. Specifically, he shows how mainstream news media, many of which were coopted by pro-establishment forces, produced an image of a public which was supportive toward the movement at the beginning but then grew increasingly impatient toward the occupation. This image, he argues, "over-interpreted" and "exaggerated" the shift in public sentiments and contributed to the de-legitimation of the movement in its later stages.

In the final article, Jackie Lou Jia and Adam Jaworski focus on the material forms of discourse at the protest sites — objects like signs, posters, banners, flyers, graffiti, stickers, scrolls, photographs, post-it notes, artworks (including sculptures and installations, children's art, and chalk drawings), t-shirts, maps, flags, toys and other "ephemera". Their interest is in understanding the *mobility* of protest discourses, how they travel along complex "discourse itineraries", taking on different forms, modes and materialities as they are embedded into different contexts. One example they give is the iconic yellow and black bilingual banner with the words "我要真普選 #Umbrella Movement" ("I want true universal suffrage #Umbrella Movement"), which originally appeared on 23 October hanging from the highest point of Hong Kong's Lion Rock, a long-standing symbol of Hong Kong peoples' perseverance and tenacity, and was later copied in various modalities and firmly established its presence in the protest areas and around the city, most noticeably on university campuses, and in print media (newspapers, magazines, postcards, etc.), attached to walls, street lamps, and even pets. Such objects, they argue, are a form of "spatial practice" that bridges "conceived space" and "lived space" (Lefebvre 1991), re-branding the city with a small pool

of recognizable trademark-like logos, slogans and toponyms, as a critical step towards regaining the right to the city (Harvey 2008).

The idea for this special issue came from the realization that Hong Kong has a large number of scholars working in the area of discourse analysis (in fields such as linguistics, media studies and political science) who would be able to provide a uniquely intimate perspective on the events, both analytically and as they experienced them either first hand, or as teachers whose students made up the bulk of the participants. The multiple perspectives on one single Occupy movement complement the previous special issue referred to above on Occupy movements across various different national contexts (Martín Rojo 2014). As we have noted above, that issue also focused in particular on the *spatial* dynamics of such movements. While the present issue also considers the important spatial dimension of Hong Kong Occupy (especially Lou and Jaworski), the emphasis is more on the notion of historicity, the feature that unites all of the articles. As editors, we hope this historical perspective offers readers further food for thought on the nature of Occupy movements in particular, and on the relationship between discourse and history more generally.

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