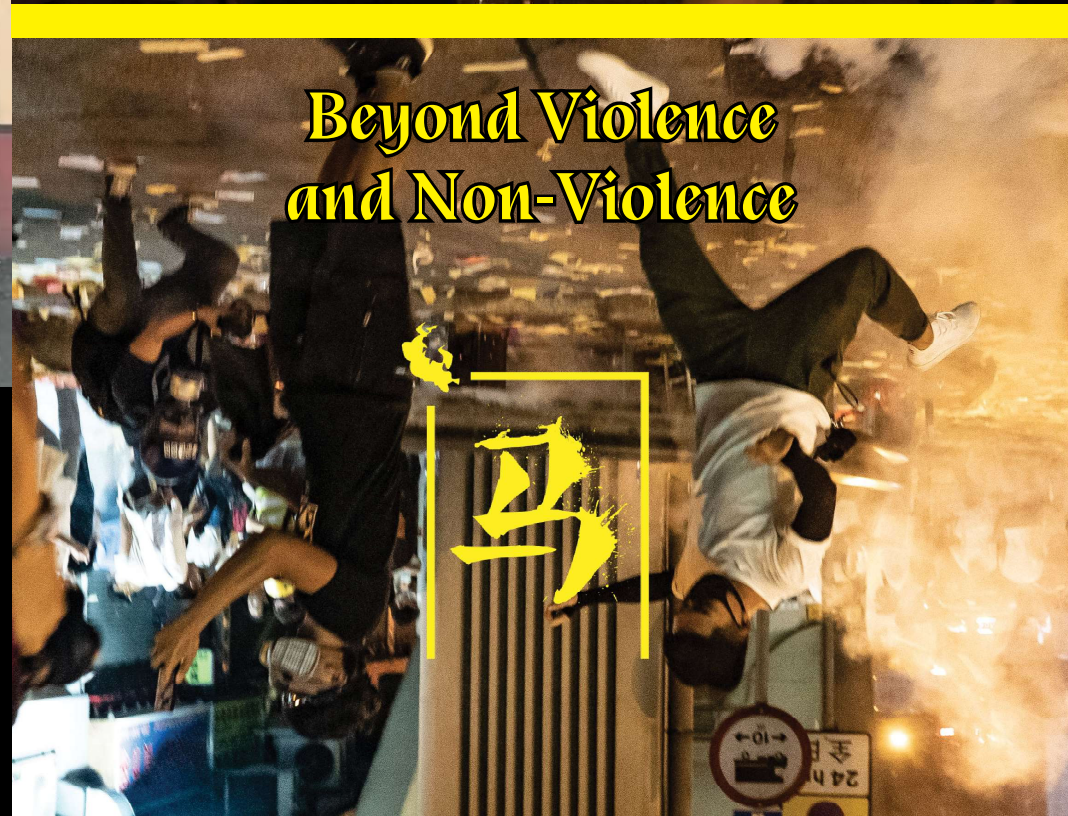




“I’m happy to struggle with you”
— “Me too, thanks, comrade”



**WELCOME
TO THE
FRONTLINES**



**Beyond Violence
and Non-Violence**

4. These statistics are all from the “Anti-ELAB protest” on-the-ground investigation report (“反逃犯条例修订示威” 现场调查报告)



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The full version, with embedded videos, can be found here:

www.chuangcn.org/2020/06/frontlines

tors, the live-streamers and everyone tweeting information from police scanners. Maybe this time we can all be in it together.

Notes

1. This analysis is the result of many conversations with friends in Hong Kong, Chile and the US, among whom we would like to single out Dashu and KW for their patient help with fact-checking and clarifying info for this article. They hope that their experiences from HK can be of some service to the struggle against police brutality and racialization in the US and beyond.

2. While the Pan-Democratic camp supports electoral reform in Hong Kong, it largely supports existing government policy—apart from the Labour Party and the League of Social Democrats, the only two member parties to hold any kind of left-leaning agenda.

3. While this organizational principle played an important role in helping the movement to grow more militant and sustain itself, according to our friends on the ground, it also seems to have become an obstacle for the possibility of anti-capitalist politicization, so should not be romanticized: “Although it sounds horizontal or anarchistic, in practice it’s not related to anything like democratic discussions among participants, but more ideologically associated with the Localists who opposed the Pan-Democratic group that was in power and controlled the stage. Eventually the term spread among the broader mass of participants, who feared that conflict among such political factions would undermine the movement, and a consensus emerged that nobody should take power. [...] But it doesn’t involve, and even actively prevents, the sort of onsite airing of different views normally associated with terms like ‘horizontal’ or ‘leaderless movement.’” (From “Remolding Hong Kong.”)

Over the past two weeks, the US has seen some of the largest, most militant protests and riots in decades. The now nationwide movement began in Minneapolis following the police murder of George Floyd. The anger that followed led to mass demonstrations, confrontations with the police, arson and looting, mourning and rebellion that spread across the country within a matter of hours. The Minneapolis Third Precinct station house, where the murderers had worked, was burned to the ground, and police cars were set aflame from New York to LA in the most widespread damage to the punitive edifices of the US state seen in this century, fueled by decades of anger at racist policing and the ceaseless stream of police murders of Black people. Now, even the reform-oriented electoral left is seriously discussing a softened version of police abolition on a national lev-

el, re-imagined as “defunding,” and the Minneapolis City Council has pledged to “disband” the city’s police department. Not long ago, such a demand would have been considered utopian.

As the movement against police brutality and the institution of the police itself rapidly unfolds across the US, we have already seen in it the marks of other riots and mass struggles that emerged across the globe in the past year, from Chile to France, Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador and Catalonia, to name but a few. Here, any broad analysis of the rebellion in the US would be premature, as the fires of the riots are literally still burning in cities across the country. Instead we would like to offer a few brief observations regarding the struggles in Hong Kong, which we’ve done our best to follow closely, focusing on one particular tactical innovation that we feel might be a helpful contribution to ongoing protests in the US and beyond. We have already seen people in the streets adopting scattered lessons from Hong Kong and other hotspots in past year’s global cycle of rebellions: an arguably Hong Kong-style barricade of Target carts outside the embattled third precinct building in Minneapolis, techniques for extinguishing tear gas in Portland, reports of lasers dazzling police cameras and visors in several cities, umbrellas held up against pepper spray at protests in Columbus and Seattle, and graffiti shout-outs to Hong Kongers on boarded-up or looted storefronts in multiple cities. The similarities were so striking, in fact, that it led the paranoid editor-in-chief of Chinese state media tabloid *The Global Times*, Hu Xijin, to conclude that “Hong Kong rioters have infiltrated the United States” and “masterminded” the attacks.

We can do little to guide the way this movement unfolds (nor would we want to), but we hope that some of the tools and tactics employed by our friends and comrades in Hong

lice departments when in fact they are only conducting fractional budget cuts. In this sense, “defund the police” seems to be taking on a character similar to the demand for body cameras in 2014.

With or without such demands, we see the core innovation of the role of the frontliner as being embedded in the new relations that become possible: between the “frontline” and the second line, the third, and other supportive protesters. One similarity between the experiences of Hong Kong protesters and those in the streets of the US is that, while many have long experienced the ways that police repression functions, this is for many the first time (or at least one of the most severe moments) when police repression of peaceful protest is visible. In some sense, the evolving role of the frontliner was actually forced into existence by police action. Once repression of the movement in Hong Kong passed a certain point, two facts became apparent: First, police are fundamentally violent, and they will dispense that violence regardless of whether their targets are protesting peacefully or not. Second, it became apparent that if the movement was to continue, protesters would have to be able to defend themselves.

As police and National Guard reinforcements try to disperse protests in incredibly violent ways on the streets of almost every major city in the US, it seems possible that the country might see a similar tipping point in terms of the scale and intensity of repression. For those looking for ways forward—ways to support our friends and comrades, to work in solidarity, to mourn those killed by police, and to ensure that such systemic violence will end someday—one method of continuing the struggle might be found by recognizing that the role of the frontliner is to protect everyone else. So we say: welcome to the frontlines, and also to the second and third line, and to the medics and supply lines, everyone holding spaces, the illustrators and printers and distribu-

While the racial structure of US politics makes right-wing participation in the ongoing cycle of rebellion a near impossibility (despite politicians promoting lies to the contrary), the structure of the Hong Kong movement around a unifying set of five demands is also somewhat alien to the US context. While their very impossibility gave the movement room to grow, the use of even untenable demands has fallen out of fashion in the US. Following the failure of first the anti-war protests in the mid-2000s, the rise and fall of Occupy a few years later defined what would become the norm, in which an excess of demands led to the general inability to “agree upon” any at all. In the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests following the uprising in Ferguson in 2014, a similar phenomenon occurred: the “official” BLM non-profits made concrete demands for body cameras on cops and money for military equipment to be funneled into anti-racism and de-escalation trainings, but these were never the popularly endorsed demands of the streets. Instead, the movement cohered around not a demand, but an assertion: that Black Lives Matter.

It is this assertion that has returned as the cohering force of today’s uprising. At the same time, this may be changing somewhat. But there is still not yet a coherent set of demands that could unite peaceful and militant protesters rising up after the murder of George Floyd. If such demands were to arise, they would probably be basic and unlikely to be achieved without “dismantling the big stage” of business as usual in the US, much like the Five Demands from Hong Kong: general amnesty, abolition of the police, or reparations for centuries of state-sanctioned murder and forced labor. Calls to “defund the police” seem to have taken prominence now after being picked up by activist groups and local progressive politicians. But such a demand falls far short of the more popular call to abolish the police, and allows local leaders to claim that they are “defunding” po-

Kong might be of use to those in the streets of other cities.¹ In particular, we offer for your consideration the evolution of the “frontline” role in the Hong Kong movement, in hopes that it might be helpful in bridging gaps between militants and peaceful participants in the streets elsewhere.

As in past movements, there have already been significant disagreements about how to engage with the forces of the state in the US. As with other movements since Ferguson and before, some (but not all) formal activist organizations have begun to engage with the “soft” wing of the local repressive apparatus, springing into action to tamp down the militancy of the initial uprising: “Community leaders” collaborate with the police, walking crowds into ambushes and kettles, and literally point out “violent” protestors in the crowd. Meanwhile, local governments nationwide claim that those initiating property destruction or fighting the police are “outside agitators,” with the mayor of Seattle tweeting that “much of the violence and destruction, both here and across the country, has been instigated and perpetuated by white men.” But it is abundantly clear that pent-up rage against the police is extremely widespread, and on the streets a broad consensus has emerged that they must be opposed.

Hong Kong may offer one path that escapes the seeming inevitability of conflicts over violence, nonviolence, and how to engage with the forces of the state. For those who are looking for a new way to bridge gaps between militant and peaceful forms of participation, we think one of the city’s most important contributions to the new era of struggles has been the development of particular roles and formations to be deployed on the streets, as well the structures behind them that helped to better link those willing to fight the cops with others in the movement. In particular, we want to highlight the concept of Hong Kong’s “frontliners,”



who not only developed many successful techniques for confronting the police, but also established a new kind of relationship between the militant and nonviolent elements of street actions through many months of experimentation.

What does it mean to be “on the front line?” The term has become incredibly popular the past few months across languages and social domains, especially in reference to medical workers and others who are particularly vulnerable to the ongoing pandemic. This has obscured the original surge in popularity of the term in mainstream media coverage last year, where it referred to protesters in various parts of the world. The official adulations for workers coming off shift in Wuhan and New York strike us strange, state-orchestrated echoes of the cheer “¡vivan los de la primera línea!”

of the people working on them increased, it became difficult to continue participating without physical and mental preparation for violence. In the face of both police violence and the “white terror” of attacks on protesters by pro-Beijing thugs, any divide between those who were willing to put their bodies on the line and those who were committed to either lower-risk or ethically nonviolent participation became harder and harder to draw. This was particularly true as increasing numbers of protesters were arrested. For some friends, the decision to join the frontline was gradual and resulted from the gradual erosion of differences between frontline activities and other ways of supporting the movement. Other friends relayed difficult conversations they had with their elderly parents who, seeing the arrests of so many youth, resolved to join the frontline themselves to fill the gap.

While we have purposely focused on material tactics rather than political identity, it should be recognized that the five demands helping to provide a basis for admirable unity for protesters in Hong Kong also papered over significant political divisions. In particular, the fact that the movement was so broad-based meant that it included (and in some cases was driven by) right-wing localist sentiment. Unlike the Yellow Vests in France, which had a similarly broad base of participation, escalation of militant tactics to include property damage did not serve to drive right-wing elements out of the movement. Rather, in Hong Kong the situation was reversed, and some (but by no means all) leftists limited their participation in the movement, unwilling to chant slogans alongside nationalists calling for a revolution to “restore” Hong Kong, or to participate in marches with those waving flags of the US or colonial British regimes.

understood as a means of supporting the movement: One friend tells the story of an anonymous older office worker on a smoke break who, having read on Telegram that a group of frontliners near his building needed to buy time before engaging with the police, walked directly up to the police line and tried to pick a fight with the cops, thinking that his identity as an older, well-dressed person might decrease his chance of getting arrested and provide more of an alibi if he did. However, this generalization of the struggle is also seen by some as one reason why the police eventually turned to the more recent strategy of kettling and mass arrest of everyone in a given area: Anyone on the streets can now be assumed to be a participant, or at least to hate the cops.

Early in the movement, however, prior to the scaling-up of police repression and arrests in the late summer and fall of 2019, the role of the frontliner was relatively clear-cut, with options for supporters to remain separate from direct police confrontation by constructing barricades, providing supplies to frontliners as they extinguished tear gas, or hiding frontliners from police while they changed out of gear. This divide was still somewhat problematic, however, as the acceptance of the frontline as a core segment of the movement gave those actually fighting the police a position of “higher merit” in some ways, with some peaceful protesters being accused of not being militant enough. But as acceptance of militant action grew alongside ever-more extreme police violence, these divisions began to break down. On the one hand, actions that were formerly understood as peaceful became associated with ever greater risk of detection and arrest.

For example, the creation and protection of “Lennon walls” of protest art and self-expression was originally understood as a completely “peaceful” mode of participation, but as the number of violent attacks on Lennon walls and arrests

that had greeted protesters returning from battles with the police in Chile last fall. What allowed for the versatile, and seemingly opposed, mobilizations of this term was precisely its ability to integrate otherwise divided activities in an effective way, proposing a unity defined not by homogeneity but by support for the overall struggle, symbolized by those at the “frontline.” Now, with the return of riots to the US, it seems possible that the use of the term may again turn to those facing off against the police: In Connecticut, a line of black-clad protesters faces the police wearing masks that must have first been intended to prevent the spread of the virus, and in a blurry screenshot of the moment, a woman holds a sign that reads, “the only allies are the ones on the frontlines.”

The basic idea allowing the concept of the frontline to integrate the movement beyond the old divides between violence and non-violence, or “diversity of tactics,” is that those on the frontlines take personal risks to protect those around them, ideally with (but often without) distinctive protective gear, and that these risks help to push forward the entire movement. This is also why the concept extended so easily to pandemic response, because the basic logic of personal risk in support of the struggle is more or less identical. But in those cases, the state had a clear interest in mobilizing the term to co-opt popular responses or disguise its own incompetence, all with the ultimate goal still being to suppress the pandemic. Now, however, the state has no such interest, since it does not share the same goal as the protestors invoking the concept of the frontline. Instead, it will pose “community leaders,” and maybe even portray them as having been “on the frontlines” of the movement in some fashion, but there is no necessity to even pretend to support those actually in conflict with the police. This means that the term has the ability to return to the meaning it gained in Hong Kong, defined through risks taken in

defense of everyone or the act of putting one's life on the line to keep everyone else safe and simultaneously push the struggle forward.

In the course of escalating street clashes throughout 2019, Hong Kong protesters produced rapid-fire innovations, including the invention of new gear and distinct formations with specific tactical positions to be filled within the body of the protest. The frontliner emerged in this context as a recognizable role for those who, with armor and tear-gas mitigation strategies, positioned themselves directly against the police, backed up by comrades in second and third lines.

This tactical innovation spread rapidly, first to Chile and then to other Latin American contexts. The first jump from Hong Kong to Chile was likely translated through riot porn uploaded to YouTube or simply transmitted through the heady air of the 2019 cycle of revolt. One participant in a Chilean frontline “clan” makes it clear that the tactics his group uses were adopted from Hong Kong. Soon enough, other local rioters were gearing up remarkably similar tactics, including shields, slogans, inventive construction of barricades, and the widespread adaptation of high-powered laser pointers as tools for disrupting police cameras and vision (as well as, in one memorable case, the destruction of a police drone). Beyond these specific adaptations, the structure of the Chilean movement was also organized along recognizable lines: Following a period of demonstrations against an increase in public transportation prices, including widespread organized fare evasions and large marches, a police crackdown then sparked massive demonstrations and riots that are widely referred to in Chile as a “social explosion.” In video of a protest in Plaza Italia, Santiago, Chile, one man on a building overlooking the square remarks excitedly that the demonstration “is only possible





Top: Image of protest roles from Hong Kong, translated anonymously and circulated during recent struggles

Right: Chilean protest graffiti

because of a group of kids”, who have organized “to stop the repressive forces.”

Through the following period, as a state of emergency was declared in cities across the country, space for peaceful demonstration was defended by a frontline of protesters willing to fight the police. As in Hong Kong, these frontliners were organized primarily by role: shield-bearers, rock throwers, medics, “miners” (producing projectiles), protesters in the back line with lasers to disrupt police vision or cameras, and barricaders to block advances. Unlike later developments in the Hong Kong “be water” strategy that emphasized wearing police out through constant movement, the Chilean movement started with frontliners setting up and defending specific lines around the “zero zone” or “red zone” to keep the cops from entering areas where other protesters were gathered. As repression increased, however, the daily clashes became essentially street by street battles between organized frontliners and the police. Still, however, the importance of the frontline as a tool to make protest possible was widely recognized by those inside the movement and out, with “representatives of the frontlines” being cheered wildly when invited to participate on talk shows. As in Hong Kong, frontliners who formed autonomous groups to defend the movement were supported by outside participants, both anonymously and as groups, as some right-wing media complained.

Similar tactics were also adopted in Colombia via Chile and Hong Kong, as groups organizing on Facebook recognized that there was a need to protect demonstrators in the student-driven movement there from police violence. However, the early members of the most prominent frontline groups declared that they would act in purely “defensive” ways rather than attacking the police directly. However, as the broader popular movement died down, opinions on



**Translation of slogans between
Hong Kong and Chilean protests:**

Beyond reporting functions, Telegram channels created for specific actions also allowed participants to relay information about needs (medics needed at this intersection, tear gas mitigation tools needed soon) and make collective decisions about responses in real time through voting functions. The latter allowed for quick choices such as which escape route to take to avoid a police attack. Importantly, these organizational methods drew in both militants and those who were unwilling, uninterested or (because of immigration status, disability, or other potential vulnerability to police violence) unable to participate on the frontlines: While frontliners faced off with police and their escalating violence, nonviolent supporters involved themselves in marches, as medics or by providing logistical support (moving barricade supplies, tools for dealing with tear gas, or clothes for black-clad frontliners to change into), as cop-watch with video cameras, or as scouts feeding information to other supporters working as data aggregators.

Many of the ways that those “outside” the frontlines provided direct material support to frontliners on the streets: In some actions, protesters without gear would form human walls, sometimes using umbrellas, to protect frontliners while they took off the gear that would mark them for arrest on their way home. Others, while not directly participating as frontliners themselves, would facilitate property damage by using their umbrellas to shield those breaking windows from the view of cameras. Later in the movement, protesters outside the front lines would bring the individual components for molotov cocktails to actions, and formed human chains supplying frontliners with materials to rapidly resupply with bottles, gasoline, sugar and rags.

Beyond these specific support actions, simply remaining on the streets during bans on public gatherings was eventually

In Hong Kong, the decentralized nature of the movement, combined with the growing sense of a unified purpose shared between peaceful and militant protesters allowed for the formation and reproduction of recognizable roles in which participants could support each other in autonomously organized groups, coordinated anonymously through online tools like Telegram and forums like LIHK.org. These tools and organizational structures are worthy of a separate investigation or open-sourced protest guide in themselves: Telegram allows for the creation of extremely flexible structures while preserving anonymity, which allowed protesters and supporters to develop an entire digital ecosystem that was crucial to outmaneuvering and outwitting the police in real time. Telegram's "Channels" feature allowed for the creation of both massive large-scale chatrooms similar to the comment feature on livestream software that protesters in the US are using. However, while these "public seas" (公海) were capable of providing some useful information, they were understood to be under police surveillance due to their public nature, and sensitive organizing was done in breakout channels with trusted friends.

Protesters also created other channels specifically for sharing police locations and escape routes, which eventually reached tens of thousands of protest participants. In these channels, posting is restricted to admins or specially designated bots, who relay verified information about the location and disposition of police forces, helping to undercut the phenomenon of runaway rumor common in any protest. This information is itself crowdsourced from individuals working as spotters on the fringes of protest marches, who send updates in designated channels according to a specific format, so that it can be easily standardized and passed on to data aggregators who monitor both scout channels and livestreams, publishing updates to announcement channels and real-time maps of police locations.



***“We cannot return to normal,
because normality was the problem.”***

these groups (characterized by their media-friendly blue shields) started to shift. Frontliners consciously adopted Hong Kong's "be water" strategy, but this was perceived by many in the student movements as a physical abandonment of the student movement, which had not made the same tactical choices. More broadly, frontliners in the Colombian student protests were perceived as opportunistic, attempting to make media-friendly spectacle, and trying to lead marches away from agreed-upon routes. Ultimately, this type of highly inorganic "frontline" became alienated from the support they first received from the rest of the movement.

Across these different contexts, the development of the role of the frontliner has marked a significant advancement in tactics for street confrontation with the police. Such tactics must, of course, change to suit particular situations, but we can learn from the continually growing global knowledge of struggle. In the decade or so following the decline of the alter-globalization movement, discussion over tactics for fighting the police largely congealed into debates over the "black bloc." Originating in 1980s Germany, black bloc refers to the tactic of wearing matching, all-black protest gear, which prevents police from picking any individual out from a crowd. Partly because of its practical success, black-bloc actions in the US and much of Europe have been subject to endless debates that ultimately come down to the role militant action should play in street protests. In the US, the ultimate result was a *détente* in which protestors who supported militancy and those who could only support non-confrontational action went so far as to divide up areas of cities to prevent interaction between groups. Assertions that the black bloc protects nonviolent demonstrators (either directly or by drawing police repression and resources elsewhere) have been common points of contention, but never reached a consensus. At best, there is advocacy for a

tralization" as a slogan and organizational principle rendered in Cantonese as "without a big stage" (无大台).³

At the same time, experiences of the violence of police repression created an atmosphere of solidarity among protesters. Based on unified demands—first for the retraction of the extradition bill, and then for an inquiry into police brutality, an end to classifications of protesters as rioters, amnesty for arrestees, and universal suffrage—participants achieved a broad consensus that success would require a level of unity between militants and peaceful protesters: "no divisions, no renunciations, no betrayals" (不分化、不割席、不督灰) or, more positively, "each fighting in our own way, we climb the mountain together" (兄弟爬山, 各自努力) and "the peaceful and the brave are indivisible, we rise and fall together" (和勇不分、齐上齐落). Polls of movement participants taken on the ground in early June showed that 38% of respondents believed that "radical tactics" were useful in making the state listen to protesters' demands, but by September, 62% agreed. When asked if radical tactics were understandable in the face of state intransigence, nearly 70% already agreed in June, and by July, this percentage had risen to 90%. By September, only 2.5% of poll respondents stated that the use of radical tactics by protesters was not understandable. From the same polling, by September, over 90% of participants agreed with the statement that "Bringing peaceful and militant actions together is the most effective way to get results."⁴ A similar tipping point may be emerging in the US, as nearly 80% of respondents to a nationwide poll asking whether the anger leading to the current wave of protests is "justified" respond affirmatively, and 54% state that the response to the death of George Floyd, including burning a police precinct building, is justified.

camp and a slew of established NGO activists. While these occupations could never have begun—much less sustained themselves—without huge amounts of autonomous work and action, formal organizations attempted to maintain some control over the shape the movement, and in some cases attempted to call off specific actions, some of which went on anyway without their support. Still, those in leadership positions were the groups that eventually entered into negotiations with the government. As in many western contexts, these organizations were largely oriented towards so-called “rational nonviolence.” However, tensions between radicals and those who controlled the stage rose throughout the course of the movement, reaching a peak following an attack by protesters on the LegCo building, after which nonviolent protesters and organizers labelled all militants as secret agents of Beijing or “wreckers.” On the other side, some protesters began circulating slogans calling for the main stage (and the power center it represented) to be dismantled (拆大台), and for pickets that had attempted to halt attacks on LegCo to be disbanded (散纠察).

In the wake of the failure of the Umbrella Movement and the clearance of occupations, the first period of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement—roughly from the proposal of the law in March 2019 to the two million person march on June 16—still saw rational nonviolence as the dominant tactic. However, following the government’s unwillingness to retract the law in the face of the mass nonviolent movement, and following increasingly violent police repression, a rough consensus emerged around a few basic principles: Learning from the failures of the Umbrella Movement, the new protests should not be organized around a central body and would not attempt to take and hold space. This organizational form was specifically understood in reference to the main stages of the Umbrella Movement, with “decen-

“diversity of tactics,” maybe the single best phrase to describe this fragile *détente*.

Early on in such movements, diversity of tactics allows for a tenuous coexistence of both militant and peaceful protest, since there are many participants and multiple marches, allowing people to distribute themselves into those locales where their preferred brand prevails. The term effectively imagines entirely different spheres in which “diverse tactics” can take place. But this is often not the case. As state repression increases and the early momentum slows, the two spheres are forced to merge. It is precisely at this point that more aggressive tactics are needed to defend the movement as a whole against the police, and to continue pushing things forward as participants’ energy wanes. On the one hand, this is when the state’s repressive function is activated, as local police are resupplied and receive backup from higher levels of government. Yet on the other, this is also the moment when the state mobilizes its apparatus of soft control in the form of community leaders, non-profits and “progressive” politicians, all of whom play an essential role in severing the tenuous tactical alliance that existed in the early days. These are, after all, the people most successful in pushing the myth of the “outside agitator,” deriding the “white anarchist” destruction of property and often literally stepping in to prevent attacks on police or even de-arrests of other protestors, after the fact encouraging people to turn over snitch videos showing who threw bottles at the police line, and flooding social media with posts claiming that cops or even white nationalists were the ones who broke the first windows.

In the 2019 protests in Hong Kong and Chile, however, in different ways and at different speeds, the assertion that the bloc protects others was turned into a clear and undeniable piece of common knowledge. This was possible part-

ly through an erasure of any previous meanings attached to black bloc protesting and its replacement with the role of the frontliner: that protester who, by subjecting herself to grave danger and ever-present tear gas, was acting in no other capacity than the defense of everyone else in the protest from the police. This represents a shift: there is no longer a large geographic separation into two bodies of protesters (one zone for peaceful protest and another for confrontation), but instead a single body coalesced, protected at the frontline by those who have made it their role to be there. In an even broader sense, and perhaps even more importantly, the Hong Kong and Chilean protests totally reconfigured the role of black-clad, masked, and militant protesters willing to fight the police. Unlike the situation in the US, where it is often possible for media and police to collaborate in isolating militants, portraying them as separate from the main body of “good protesters” and even further distanced from the body politic at large, frontliners also came to be widely (if not completely) understood as acting in defense of everyone else, protesters and non-protesters alike, by making it possible to resist an untenable status quo.

The construction of effective solidarity between “brave militants” (勇武) and adherents to “peaceful, rational nonviolence” (和理非) was not the automatic result of the rising movement in 2019 Hong Kong, nor did it happen overnight. As is the case in the US, previous movements in Hong Kong were divided along ideological lines of militancy and non-violence, as well as between those on the street and the “controlled opposition” of Pan-Democratic parties in the Legislative Council (LegCo).² We must recall that the 2019 protests came after years of experimentation, including the emergence and failure of the 2014 Umbrella Movement: an equally massive and largely “peaceful” protest that checked all the boxes advocated by liberal proponents of non-violence.

When that movement was so decisively defeated, the youth of Hong Kong began to agitate in new ways—at first in much smaller scale street actions, such as the odd and still controversial “Fishball Riots” of 2016. In these actions, we saw something like the frontline severed from its basis in a mass demonstration. Young people still reeling from the abject failure of 2014’s “peace, love and nonviolence” instead jumped into direct confrontation, declaring war on the cops, stacking and throwing bricks, and then piloting the “be water” strategy of refusing to hold space. At the same time, they didn’t wait to be joined by other protestors, and they made no effort to recruit. The result was that the frontlines in the Fishball Riots, such as they were, had none of the connotations of defending others that they hold now. This instance of rioting is still controversial among Hong Kongers within the protest movement because its isolated character made it into a kind of risky adventurism (not to mention the role played by far-right localists in the riots). Now, however, we see very similar tactics re-deployed and polished, but in a strikingly different context. It is as if the tactics piloted in both the (relatively) peaceful actions of 2014 and the (relatively) violent confrontations with police of 2016 were finally forced to combine in an effective synthesis.

The roots of this synthesis might be best seen near the end of the Umbrella Movement, which took shape through sometimes conflictual interactions between formal organizations and tens of thousands of autonomous participants. During the occupations of Central and, later, Mong Kok, some elements of the movement were organized centrally, with occupations focused around a “big stage” (大台) that was essentially controlled by large political organizations, particularly the two student groups: the HK Federation of Student Unions and Scholarism (a group founded by high school students), as well as the main electoral parties of the Pan-Democratic