

An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Terror of Tear Gas in Hong Kong 2019-2020: disciplinary diffusion and the construction of a novel area studies research framework.

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Aims & Approach

- **A new analysis of the Hong Kong Protest Movement 2019-2020**– Mass protests emerge in opposition to a law that would enable extradition to mainland China, a protester-police adversarial dynamic emerges after clashes in June 2019, running through to June 2020 and the introduction of a sweeping National Security Law that criminalises ‘succession, subversion, terrorism and collusion’ in Hong Kong.
- **An area studies approach**–Emphasis on building a deep, holistic understanding (Bromberg and Clowes, 2016) of the Hong Kong protests 2019-2020, recognising the specificity of Hong Kong’s history, geography, politics and culture, working across numerous disciplinary literatures to develop an informed, specific conceptual framework to explore the role of tear gas in the entrenchment of the protests.
- **Addressing the literature gap**– Existing scholarship has compared the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protest movement with similar regional and historical protest movements and focused on specific elements of the protests. However, there has been little scholarly engagement exploring the role of tear gas as a police tactic and its influence on the development of the 2019-2020 protest movement nor any sustained theoretical applications exploring the impact of its use.

An interdisciplinarity area studies literature review, integrating and harnessing insights across disciplines.

Sociology

- **Social Movement Theory** – ‘Grievances’ and the mobilisation of protest movements (Opp, 1988). Tear gas use framed as police brutality, a key mobilising grievance.
- **Media representations and the entrenchment of the protest movement**, the trauma of seeing televised coverage of young protesters subjected to tear gas sees greater involvement and public anger in protest movements (Tang, 2015).
- **Hong Kong’s cultural identity under threat**, beset by a “Culture and Politics of Disappearance” (Abbas, 1997) under Chinese sovereignty. Young Hongkongers rally to defend perceived suppression of Hong Kong’s unique way of life.
- **Critical Terrorism Studies** – Recognises state terrorism, violence deployed to instill terror by a state actor to achieve political objectives (Blakeley, 2007). Provides a theoretical framework.
- **International Political Economy** – Tear gas as a form of neo-colonial repression frequently deployed by resource extracting private companies from the Global North against resistant communities in the Global South (Blakeley, 2009). Its use raises questions of neo-colonialism in Hong Kong.
- **Rising China and geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific** – US criticism of China’s approach to Hong Kong raises Sino-US tensions in the region. Broadens the scope of the Hong Kong protest, and the dangers for China.

History

- The genealogy of tear gas, a psychological weapon of war first deployed in WW1 to erode soldiers’ sanity and to force a retreat from the trenches (Feigenbaum, 2017).
- A colonial weapon deployed by the British Empire in Ireland, India, Palestine and Hong Kong, 1967, to repress self-determination protests.
- Colonial policing practices, including the indiscriminate use of tear gas, essential in the paramilitary policing approach of the Hong Kong Police Force deployed in 2019, a colonial legacy of the British Royal Hong Kong Police Force approach (Purbrick, 2019).
- ‘Atmoterrorism’ (Sloterdijk, 2009) - Terror from the air, tear gas weaponises the air, rendering spaces as unlivable through the toxicity of the atmosphere and the breath. Hong Kong sites of protest made toxic by a poisoning of the air.
- ‘Elastic Geography’ (Weizman, 2007) – Tear gas dissolves spatial constraints on governance, allowing the deployer to discipline the protester and the bystander indiscriminately as tear gas seeps into public and private spaces. 88% of Hong Kong citizens subjected directly and indirectly to tear gas (Prasso 2019). Hong Kong’s government’s diffused disciplinarity a form of ‘atmospheric governance’ (Nieuwenhuis, 2018).

Depth and Specificity

Integrated Approach

A Holistic Understanding

International Relations

Political Geography

An Interdisciplinary Area Studies Research Framework:

State terrorism in Hong Kong : The use of tear gas inflates and entrenches the 2019-2020 protests.

The Hong Kong Police Force’s deployment of tear gas as a weapon with specific colonial connotations in Hong Kong (**genealogy of tear gas in colonial policing**), which weaponises the air and suppresses protest in public spaces (**‘Atmoterrorism’**), served as an immediate grievance for protesters (**Social Movement Theory**) mobilising further public contention against police-brutality by state actors perceived as deploying terror-inducing violence (**Critical Terrorism Studies and state terrorism**) in pursuit of political objectives on behalf of the Chinese government.

Impact

- Interdisciplinary engagement of literatures enables a novel research approach utilising a unique interdisciplinary, holistic conceptual framework that encourages the use of collaborative research methods, including historical and contemporary government document analysis, unstructured interviews and protest literature discourse analysis.
- Working across disciplines inspires creativity in the research design process, emboldening the academic pursuit of the depth, and breadth of understanding necessary in recognising Hong Kong’s unique colonial history and geography and its influence on a contemporary protest movement.
- An interdisciplinary approach avoids narrow interpretations. Tear gas not just a ‘tool’ of modern policing in Hong Kong, but a psychological weapon with direct, emotive colonial connection. 2019 deployment evokes further accusations of a ‘colonial’ Chinese government approach. Therefore, crucial context is lost in a non-interdisciplinary approach.

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