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ABSTRACT

In the Hong Kong government's latest effort to address land and housing shortages in the city, a task force was appointed to forge a consensus among the public as to how the city can increase its land supply. Using this case as an example and drawing on the literature of post-politics, this paper explores how the narrative of consensus has been deployed by state and non-state interests over the question of land supply to legitimise positions and to restrict the space of debate. This paper contributes to the literature by identifying post-politics' relevance and limitations when applied to non-Western contexts.

Introduction

Hong Kong has an obvious housing problem with the city's housing market being one of the least affordable in the developed world (Demographia, 2019). Many of Hong Kong's poorest residents live in extremely undesirable environments, often occupying 'subdivided flats' where an apartment is split into several rooms for different families. Housing affordability does not only affect those on low incomes. Former Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said in 2017 that even she could not afford a flat spacious and central enough for her family of four (Yiu, 2017). Yet while the issue of affordability is widely recognised, there is no agreement on the source of the problem or how it should be dealt with.

In light of that, the government appointed the Task Force on Land Supply in 2017, consisting mainly of architects, engineers and people with public policy experience. A consultation exercise of five months was launched with an aim to "narrow the differences and forge the greatest consensus in society" (Task Force on Land Supply, 2018, p. 1). As the Task Force's name suggests, the consultation takes land shortage as a key cause of the housing problem. One might argue this was too narrow a remit, given that housing shortages can be viewed more broadly as a matter of population policy and wealth distribution.

This paper explores the stated objective of forging a consensus around the issue of land supply and the Task Force's early circumscription of the scope of debate. We draw on critiques in the past two decades around the notions of consensus and participatory politics (Mouffe, 2005a,

2005b, 2018) and the emergence of such tools as elements of what has been termed post-politics (Haughton et al., 2013; Metzger et al., 2014a; Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2007). Whilst much has been written on the nature of consensus and post-politics in liberal democracies, this paper explores how the notion of consensus has been used as a tool to foreclose the political space in semi-democratic Hong Kong, and studies the displacement of politics during the consultation exercise. It also reflects on the worsening antagonism observed since June 2019 and whether this situation constitutes a reaction to the foreclosure of politics as discussed within the literature. This ties in with the emerging scholarship of caution and critique against the direct application of Western theories to other contexts by authors such as Watson (2014, 2016) and Roy (2009, 2016).

As the literature review section will show, consensus-based planning in Hong Kong comes from a different tradition, one that is not typical in the West and one that has not yet been accounted for in the spectrum of studies on the post-political shifts in planning and urban governance. Two main questions therefore arise: to what extent is post-politics relevant to such different contexts and approaches? What can the situation in Hong Kong tell us about post-politics?

Hong Kong's semi-democratic context will be introduced in the next session, leading onto a review of post-politics' critique of consensus. This paper relies mainly on in-depth interviews with key actors. Considerations and limitations of the methods will be presented, followed by reflection on the results. This paper contributes to the post-political literature in two ways. Firstly, it identifies similarities of the workings of 'consensus' between the liberal democratic West and semi-democratic Hong Kong, hence establishing the theory's relevance to other contexts. Secondly, it points to factors that future application of theory to politically constrained contexts should consider. These include the roles of tradition, culture and the balance between persuasive tactics and coercion in governance. This way, the paper represents a first step towards expanding the theory's application to wider contexts.

Semi-Democratic Hong Kong and Public Engagement

At the time of writing, Hong Kong is at a political juncture. The situation is rapidly changing following widespread protests that began in 2019. The implementation of a controversial National Security Law, which many believe would curtail the city's civil liberties, has further brought uncertainties to whether the former British colony can still be called semi-democratic. But before reflecting on the latest situation, it will make sense to first examine what we mean by semi-democratic with regards to Hong Kong.

Defining the semi-democratic status of a place is often tricky, given the large range of circumstances which could make it fall short of full democracy. Whilst no two democratic systems are the same, there are a number of characteristics of democratic societies that provide a starting point in any assessment. These include free and fair elections (for both the leader and the legislature), the rule of law, a separation of powers, protection of basic liberties, etc (Cheibub et al., 2010; Freedom House, 2021; Zakaria, 1997). In Hong Kong, a significant way in which democracy is restricted is that not all elections are free. Some seats in the legislature are returned via 'functional constituencies,' the elections of which are restricted to members of certain industry or professional bodies. The leader of Hong Kong, the Chief Executive, is chosen by an election committee without the participation of the general public. Before drastic political changes in 2019, Freedom House (2018) described the city as 'partly free.' Hong Kong was rated 5 out of 7 for political rights and 2 for civil liberties (1 being the freest). The average score of

3.5 was shared by other places such as Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. However, Hong Kong was the only territory with such a big gap between political rights and civil liberties.

Under the new National Security Law, elections face even tighter control. In the 2021 Legislative Council election, only 20 of the 90 seats were directly elected by the public. Candidates were also screened by a committee to ensure that they were 'patriotic.' Politicians who participated in a primary election of the pro-democracy camp were accused of plotting to paralyse the government by aspiring to win more than half of the seats. They were later arrested under the National Security Law. Expression of views concerning the election was also under tight control, with several people having been arrested for calling on voters to cast a blank ballot. In 2022, John Lee, the only candidate, was elected Chief Executive after receiving 99% of the votes from the 1,500-strong election committee. The near unanimous vote reflected not the popularity of Lee but the highly restricted context in which the election was conducted, particularly the strict vetting process that has prevented other candidates from running. The lack of full democracy has been a source of public grievance, as seen in the calls put forward in the 2019–2020 social unrest as well as the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

The political situation of Hong Kong is hence markedly different from the liberal democratic context where the theory of post-politics was developed. Post-politics refers to the soft suppression of dissent (Metzger, 2018; Metzger et al., 2014b). In semi- and non-democracies however, hard and soft tactics are often mixed as the state's use of coercion faces fewer obstacles. While the Western critique of neoliberalism is likely to be relevant to a large range of contexts (Sheppard, 2014; Storper & Scott, 2016), a finer study into differences in contexts will help identify areas of relevance and departure. Before proceeding to the literature review, it will be helpful to outline how planning decisions are made in Hong Kong.

Policies for urban development in Hong Kong are largely decided by the Development Bureau, the Housing Bureau and the Transport and Logistics Bureau,[1] and implemented by various departments under them. The city's Town Planning Board is responsible for statutory planning and oversees applications for planning permissions. Committees set up to address town planning issues exist outside of this hierarchy, including the Task Force that we are looking at in this paper. The Task Force members were appointed by the Chief Executive but their recommendations were non-binding. The government is free to reject them and as this paper will show further on, this has caused controversies and grievances. Other similar committees appointed that were tasked with public engagement in urban issues included the Urban Renewal Strategy Review from 2008 to 2010 and the Urban Design Study for New Central Harbourfront from 2008 to 2011. More recently, the Task Force for the Study on Tenancy Control of Subdivided Units held several public forums and visited subdivided flats tenants before submitting their suggestions to the government in March 2021.

The consultation that this paper focuses on was preceded by a similar exercise that spanned between 2012 and 2013. It was suggested that Hong Kong should build a 'land reserve' to meet future demand, a theme that was carried forward in the more recent consultation (Town Planning Board, 2013). A brief news search indicates that the former consultation had received less attention and most discussion surrounded the issues of reclamation.

Consensus: A Post-Political Critique

The notion of consensus in planning is one that has received significant recent attention through the frame of post-political theory. Post-politics is the broad term for how a state displaces

fundamentally political issues and forces them to be played out in other spheres of society, such as protests or the courts. At the heart of post-politics is a distinction between the political (understood as the fundamental differences in society) and politics (understood as the ways in which such differences are unified into a policy or decision). According to Mouffe:

> By 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 9)

The broad argument of post-political analyses is that following the fall of Eastern European State Socialism in the late 1980s there was a hubristic claim that liberal-democracy had triumphed, conflict had evaporated and that the future would be all about managing or fine tuning society and the economy. Whilst those on the political right had always been suspicious of democracy this view was given credibility to those on the left through the work of leading thinkers such as Anthony Giddens. In *Beyond Left and Right* (1994) Giddens explored the impact of globalization and technological change on politics and came to the conclusion that class-based politics has been replaced by identity politics based around lifestyle choices. Consumerism and the market were now firmly embedded in society and the left had to accept that there was no realistic alternative to neoliberalism. The so called Third Way gave this view political manifestation as centre-left politicians were elected espousing the need for 'big tent' politics.

Yet conflict and difference had not simply disappeared but were displaced and managed, hiding behind meaningless phrases that meant something different to everyone. The political was, instead, now the realm of those such as planners who decided what the issues were, the options to address them and the resources that were necessary to deliver them. This is the essence of post-politics:

> In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists …) and liberal multiculturalists: via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of more or less universal consensus. Post-politics … emphasizes the need to leave old ideological divisions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account. (Žižek, 1999, p. 198)

There are a range of nuances in the various approaches to post-politics that we cannot adequately cover here (for an overview of post foundational philosophy see Marchart, 2007. For an overview of post-political planning see Metzger et al., 2014a). In planning, consensus based politics came under the broad umbrella of collaborative planning (see Allmendinger, 2017), a movement that sought to replace the search for a plan with the search for *consensus on* the plan, a subtle but important distinction. According to critics this is a shift towards the foreclosure of politics and an attempt to force agreement (see Metzger et al., 2014b).

However, one should not forget that planning has a technocratic history that prefigured many of the elements and concerns of post-politics. This technocratic theme of planning did not disappear when challenged by more open and democratic processes from the late 1960s. Instead, there is still a strong technocratic theme that runs through contemporary planning practice in the guise of various impact assessments, forecasting and options evaluations. What post-politics adds to the critique of technocracy in planning is the way it problematises the concept of 'consensus.'

In Mouffe's (1999, 2005a) view, consensus always entails exclusion as "every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony as a stabilisation of power" (1999, p. 756).

She saw the pursuit of consensus not only as impossible but also undesirable as it put "democratic thinking on the wrong track" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 2). For her, while much has been said about 'dialogue' or 'deliberation,' participants have no real choice under the neoliberal hegemony (ibid.). This view of consensus as anti-democratic is shared by Rancière. For him, consensus requires the identification of groups with specific interests and aspirations and leaves no room for those who are unaccounted for to stand up for themselves (Rancière, 2003; Rancière & Panagia, 2000). He stated:

> Consensus refers to that which is censored […] Consensus means that whatever your personal commitments, interests, and values may be, you perceive the same things, you give them the same name. But there is no contest on what appears, on what is given in a situation and as a situation. Consensus means that the only point of contest lies on what has to be done as a response to the given situation. (Rancière, 2003, Paragraph 4)

One of the dangers the pursuit of consensus can lead to, according to Swyngedouw (2009), is populism, "one that annuls democracy and must, of necessity, lead to an ultra-politics of violent disavowal, radical closure and, ultimately, to the tyrannies of violence and of foreclosure of any real spaces of engagement" (pp. 604–605). For him, populism is a symptom of post-politics, as conflict of interests and ideological differences are papered over by the articulation of a 'common threat.' By invoking notions such as 'the people,' populism disregards the heterogeneity and antagonisms that cut through the population (Swyngedouw, 2010). It involves a designation of an external threat, the extermination of which is the only way for normal life to be resumed. Hence, instead of a transformation of existing power relations, populism sustains the status quo (2010).

For Mouffe (2005a, 2018b), the rise of right-wing populism is a result of a lack of real political alternatives as parties increasingly move towards 'consensus at the centre.' That has created an opportunity for right-wing populists to "articulate the desire for an alternative to the stifling consensus" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 66). By disregarding the nature of society as inherently antagonistic, the pursuit of consensus can lead to worse forms of conflicts (Mouffe, 2005a, 2018a). Mouffe (2005a) distinguished between 'antagonism' and 'agonism.' While antagonism involves a 'we/they' relation that entails annihilation, agonism refers to conflicts between adversaries, where the legitimacy of the other actors is respected despite disagreements. In her view, the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism.

Superficially, the post-political understanding of consensus offers an ideal framework for the case of Hong Kong, given the explicit consensus-seeking purpose of the land supply consultation, contrasted with the growing antagonism in planning issues in the city. However, consultations in Hong Kong happen in a very different context from the West. The meaning of consensus politics also diverges from what is understood in post-political critiques providing new insights into this area of theory.

Consensus Politics in Hong Kong

While in the West, the emphasis on consensus is described as a conscious political turn, in Hong Kong, consensus politics can be regarded more as a tradition. It is underlined by a general pursuit of social harmony common in East Asian polities (Tao et al., 2010), and bolstered by a politically apathetic public and a general attitude of not wanting to 'rock the boat' in colonial times (Lau, 1984). This non-confrontational nature of politics was further supported by the government's tactics to absorb elites and dissent into an array of advisory committees and the

legislature (Ma, 2018; Lee & Chan, 2018; Kuan, 1998; King, 1975). Disputes were resolved behind closed doors to ensure a "public show of harmony and consensus" (Miners, 1994, p. 225). Consensus in this sense took the form of synarchy as it generally referred to the agreement reached in these committees rather than the general public (King, 1975). Public consultation was performed via advisory bodies, dominated by pro-establishment professional and business figures (Lee et al., 2013).

A change in the government's approach can be observed in the 1980s, when political reforms were launched in preparation for the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997. Directly elected seats in the legislature were introduced for the first time in 1991. The general political atmosphere shifted too, fuelled by uncertainties over the city's future as well as concerns over Beijing's crackdown on student protests in 1989. It was observed that both the public and the politicians had become more assertive (Miners, 1994). "Consensus is now dead and the era of adversial [sic] politics […] has now taken over," Miners (1994, p. 236) asserted.

However, this was only half of the story. Despite a more politically aware public and a more argumentative legislature, the practice of appointing advisory committees and the aspiration to reach a consensus within them continued. As of December 2019, 500 such committees were operating (Home Affairs Bureau 2019). According to the Home Affairs Bureau, these committees serve the function of engaging with stakeholders and to some extent, the general public. Influence of professional sectors on Hong Kong politics is also maintained by functional constituencies in the Legislative Council.

Within the literature, the existence of a paradox between the restrictive political space, where decisions continue to be based on consensus among the elites, and an increasingly assertive public is widely acknowledged (see e.g., Lee et al., 2013; Ma, 2018). In planning, an activist and independent researcher observed that the government often framed consensus as something that could be achieved through technical means (K. C. Chan, 2018b). According to him, when a consensus failed to arise, with people raising more fundamental questions, the government would blame the discussion for being 'too political.'

Hong Kong's tradition of consensus politics can be further contextualised against the literature on consultative authoritarianism (Rodan, 2012; Teets, 2013; Truex, 2017). Under such rule, individuals and groups are involved in public policy discussion or feedback as long as the legitimacy of the ruling party remains unchallenged (Rodan, 2012). It can be taken as an attempt to resolve the dilemma between the state's wish to improve relationship with citizens and its reluctance to go down the Western democratic path (He & Thøgersen, 2010). In general, under a consultative authoritarian regime, the introduction of public participation is to stem off pressure for more drastic changes (Truex, 2017). Elite groups are often given privilege in these consultative mechanisms (He & Thøgersen, 2010). While consensus-seeking deliberation is encouraged, it is "*not* democratization but rather a sophisticated authoritarianism" (Teets, 2013, p. 36). While research on consultative authoritarianism has mostly been conducted in the contexts of mainland China and Singapore, a more general point about the danger of the appropriation of seemingly inclusive devices to tighten state control can be inferred.

While there appears to be significant differences between the political background of Hong Kong and the context under which the theory was developed, post-politics remains a potentially valuable lens in the analysis of conflict in Hong Kong planning. In the last section, we noted some superficial similarities between the case of Hong Kong and descriptions in the literature: despite explicit efforts to achieve consensus, conflict has continued to grow. On top of that, post-politics' critique of neoliberalism is likely to be relevant to a wide range of contexts, given

that the effect of capitalism is not limited to the West (Storper & Scott, 2016). Sheppard (2014) further pointed out that many Asian cities were simultaneously shaped by globalising capitalism, neoliberalism, strong states and multiple modernisms – factors that can work together to limit the space of debate. Hong Kong hence offers an interesting and relevant case study as a capitalist society under a semi-democratic regime, where some forms of consultative authoritarianism can be observed.

The Consultation and Research Methods

The task force's public engagement exercise, in the form of public forums, exhibitions, workshops and surveys, lasted from April 2018 to September 2018. The consultation revolved around 18 options pre-defined by task force members to increase land supply. In the survey, people were asked to choose a combination of short, medium and long-term options to meet the land shortage of 1,200 hectares, a number disputed by critics (Liber Research Community, 2018). The survey method has also been criticised as being akin to a 'dim sum menu,' where options were confined by what was provided by the 'chef' (see e.g., Au, 2018; *Ming Pao,* 2019; 林, 2018).

Although participation in the consultation was lively – with 29,000 questionnaires received, 3,000 telephone surveys conducted and 70,000 pieces of views submitted – the results and suggestions were not binding. In fact, soon after the Task Force submitted the consultation report, then Chief Executive Carrie Lam said it would be 'irresponsible' for her to fully accept its recommendations (N. Ng & Cheung, 2019). A month later, after much public outcry, the government announced that they would fully accept the report.

The consultation has been labelled by critics as 'fake' from the beginning and many have chosen to express their views outside of the formal consultation framework. In this sense, politics can be said to have been displaced to other arenas. Particularly, several notable frames of the housing crisis, for example shortage as a justice problem and as a population control issue, were excluded from the consultation exercise. The starting point of the research was to probe the displacement of politics in the consultation exercise. As the consultation exercise had an explicit consensus-seeking aim, the question was whether this had led to worsened antagonism, as post-political authors suggested. Five frames popular in civil community reports and newspaper articles were identified following an initial, broad coding process of documentary materials. They are presented in Table 1. In the process, I also studied how the word 'consensus' was used in official narratives.

These frames reflect the variety of assumptions in the debate. While the consultation exercise was the result of the land supply frame, others have framed housing affordability issues in Hong Kong as a matter of population policy, land use efficiency and market failure. In particular, the land justice/wealth distribution frame saw unaffordability not a result of land shortage, but uneven distribution of land resources. There were also views that land resources in Hong Kong

Table 1. Frames of housing problem identified in desktop research and examples of their implied solutions.

Frames	Examples of implied solutions
Land Supply/ physical constraints	Sea reclamation
Land justice/ wealth distribution	Develop brownfields before considering environmentally sensitive options, turn a golf course into housing
Population policy	Take back control of approval of immigrants from mainland China
Land use efficiency	Public-private partnerships to spur development of empty sites
Market failure	Stamp duty to control speculation

would never be enough for everyone if the city had no control over its own population policy. In this sense, by design the consultative exercise was exclusive: only arguments within the frame of land supply would be admitted.

Three themes have been chosen for the discussion here. They are (a) the emergence of community research (b) the case of Fanling Golf Course and (c) the advocacy to reduce the number of immigrants from mainland China. Themes (a) and (b) cut across all five frames identified in Table 1, while (c) relates primarily to the city's population policy. The themes were chosen because of the apparent 'us' and 'them' division that had emerged within the debate as time went on, a central theme in post-political research of antagonism and populism. In relation to theme (a), the division was between those believing that research should be for 'the people' versus research for academic goals; for (b), it was regular residents versus the rich; for (c) it was existing Hong Kong residents versus newcomers. Discussion around these themes during the consultation period was vibrant, so documentary materials were readily available and interviewees were easily identifiable. They warrant a deeper study also because they involve arguments alternative to the dominant technocratic, growth-based discourse in Hong Kong planning.

Particularly relevant to theme (a) was the work of Liber Research Community, a crowd-funded group consisting of independent researchers. Parallel to the official consultation, they launched the 'Honest Consultation on Land Supply,' aiming to rebuke the official discourse of land shortage by identifying un(der)-used land and suitable brownfields for development. Their document has a strong 'land justice' theme, calling for a rethink of who actually benefits from development. The group also worked closely with the Citizens Task Force on Land Resources which was established in response to the circumscribed nature of the official debate.

Theme (b) concerns Fanling Golf Course, operated by the exclusive Hong Kong Golf Club on a site they rented from the government for a rate well under market value for its private recreational purposes. Turning sites under the same lease as the golf course into housing was listed as one of the options in the consultation. However, calls for the golf course to be developed began much earlier and were connected to the plan to develop nearby villages into a new town. Protesters and villagers felt it was unfair that their homes would be razed while the golf course was allowed to stay put. When the government announced that they would accept the Task Force's recommendation to develop 32 hectares of the 172-hectare golf club, members called the decision 'populist' (Interview with Golfer; Chung, 2019; Hui, 2019). The comment was related to the long-standing scepticism of broad-based democratic politics within the business sector and the upper class, who feared that the electoral success of pro-welfare parties would turn Hong Kong into a welfare state (Patten, 2022; So, 2000).

Theme (c) surrounds the advocacy by an environmentalist and district councillor to 'reduce population at source' – a slogan borrowed from the environmental campaign to 'reduce waste at source.' He called for a reduction of the number of immigrants from mainland China who moved to Hong Kong to re-unite with their families. At the time of writing, there was a daily quota of 150 arrivals and the vetting power rested in mainland authorities. His advocacy sought to reduce that quota, take back control of the application approval process and prioritise entirely local families in the allocation of public housing resources. His campaign began in 2013 and was connected to the rise of localism in the city at the time, where calls were made to prioritise local needs over those of tourists and newcomers (Chen & Szeto, 2015; Veg, 2017).

These themes were explored further via 11 in-depth interviews with 12 key actors, and supplemented by reports published by the Task Force, government and civil communities.

Newspaper articles and commentaries about land supply and housing affordability around the consultation period were also studied. The interviews were semi-structured and questions surrounded their personal views and feelings on the consultation exercise and different housing frames. The interviewees and their backgrounds are listed in Table 2.

The interviewees were identified via desktop research. In the process, we were looking for people on different sides of the three themes. For theme (a), we spoke to an activist and researcher for Liber Research Community. For theme (b), we spoke to members of the golf club, the legislator who represented the sport sector and residents in nearby villages who faced eviction. For theme (c), we spoke to social workers who worked closely with new immigrants and advocated for their rights, as well as the politician who campaigned for a reduction in the number of immigrants. In addition, we also spoke to the Chairman of the Task Force for an overview of their work, as well as the former Secretary for Transport and Housing for his perspective on land-related consultations in general. The interviews were conducted during a three-week visit to Hong Kong in December 2019. At that time, Hong Kong was recovering from one of the worst confrontations between police and protesters at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The general mood in the city was, perhaps somewhat eerily, calm. It was a short break from intense confrontation and many in society were reflecting on the city's politics and future. Most interviews were face-to-face, except for the Lawmaker, whom we talked to over the phone. They lasted from 25 minutes to 1.5 hours. All interviewees appeared candid. No one had expressed worries about potential legal and political consequences of what they said. At the same time, the National Security Law was not yet in sight, so there was no general fear that those reflections could lead to trouble.

Since the interviews probe personal views and feelings, they cannot be taken as representative of the general public. Nonetheless, the chosen interviewees were all opinion leaders either within their own community (e.g., the villagers) or the entire territory (e.g., the former minister and Task Force Chairman). They also interacted closely with their own groups. Their views reflected certain lines of thinking that were subsequently popularised by the media and social media. Desktop research of newspaper articles also partly remedied this issue as a larger range of people and sentiment had been cited in them. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and the cited quotes here are our own translation.

Because of the limited research period, we were not able to speak to more general members of the public who participated in the consultation. That could have yielded a more comprehensive

Table 2. Interviewees and their backgrounds.

	Background	Theme(s)
Chairman	Chairman of Land Supply Task Force	All
Liber	An active researcher and campaigner for Liber Research Community – a group critical of the government's planning approach and has published their own research against the government's discourse	a
Secretary	Former Secretary for Housing and Transport	All
Golfer	Golfer and campaigner against the turning a historical golf course into housing, member of a pro-business and pro-government political party	b
Lawmaker	A lawmaker representing the sport sector who is against razing the golf course for housing	b
Villagers 1–3	Residents in a village near the golf course whose homes are categorised as squatter huts and will be demolished for the development of a new town	b
Anti-Immigrant	An advocate of 'reducing population from source,' i.e., limiting immigration from mainland China	c
Social Workers 1–3	Social workers who work closely with new immigrants. P11 and P12 were spoken to in a group interview	c

picture and detected any discrepancy between the views of the opinion leaders and general participants. There are also other intensely debated themes, such as reclamation and the development of country parks, that we could have explored. Upon desktop research, we found the arguments revolved mostly around well-established environmentalism versus developmentalism debates. Those arguments are also partly covered by theme (a), as members of Liber Research Community argued for more efficient use of brown field land before pursuing any development that could damage the natural environment.

Foreclosure, Scepticism and 'Consensus'

Participation and 'Fake Consultation'

The interviews revealed an interesting paradox: most interviewees saw the consultation as a legitimising tool for the government to pursue its reclamation agenda rather than a genuine consensus-building exercise, but at the same time their participation was active. Over the years, the government has proposed various reclamation plans to increase land supply and it has been a heated topic in public debate. Therefore, from the beginning, there was a suspicion that the consultation was only a tool to lead to the conclusion that reclamation was the most feasible option (Liber Research Community, 2018). Further fuelling the suspicion, over the course of the consultation, government officials had explicitly voiced support towards reclamation. For instance, two months into the consultation, then Chief Executive Carrie Lam said she 'personally' thought reclamation was the best option (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2018a). This was followed by a comment by the then Secretary for Transport and Housing Frank Chan who said the government should press on with its reclamation plan as long as it was technically feasible, even if no consensus could be reached (Ming Pao, 2018b). Within the Task Force, Stephen Wong Yuenshan, who researched for pro-establishment think tank Our Hong Kong Foundation, also repeatedly called for support for reclamation over the consultation period (e.g., as reported in *Wen Wei Po* 2018).

Critics doubted the purpose of the consultation. Edward Yiu, a former legislator and geography academic, said a conclusion had been set even before the consultation took place (E. Yiu, 2018). For him, the consultation was only a legitimising tool. In an opinion piece published two days after the engagement exercise had concluded, Liber reflected that the government would not accept uncertainty of the outcome, and hence by design the consultation was 'fake' (K. C. Chan, 2018). For critics such as Yiu and Chan, a significant moment of confirmation came when the government revealed that they expected reclamation in an artificial island plan to begin in 2025 (余 and 周 2018). The announcement was made in October 2018, before the consultation results were submitted to the government. Later in November 2018, Lam said 'reclamation cannot be avoided' and that the government would press ahead with the plan regardless of public opinion (Zhao & Sum, 2018). Liber remarked:

> The government might be able to hide their agenda if they hadn't bent their own rules. However, the moment they announced the artificial island plan, their political aim became apparent.

In fact, the Chairman conceded that the major aim of the consultation was to allow the government to take a stronger stance in increasing land supply. In this sense, it empowered the government rather than the public. He said:

> Apart from providing a comprehensive picture and outline the land supply options that have received the most support, we hope to help the government reclaim its leading role in land supply. A range of

methods was used to gauge the public view and the report was well recognised by the public. The government should then reclaim its leading role in land supply. If there's any issue, they can blame it on us.

Even so, participation in the consultation, and the surrounding discussion it sparked, continued to be lively, as reflected in the number of submissions the Task Force received and the number of newspaper articles reporting on the debate. However, for many, rather than taking the consultation exercise as an effective way to achieve their goals, they saw it as a platform for publicity and awareness. For example, the Villagers regarded the consultation a tiny battlefield among others, having been protesting and negotiating with the government for decades. They still participated in some of the meeting sessions but did not place any hope in them. Rather, they took it as a chance to raise awareness, to remind people that their plight was not over. For the Anti-Immigrant, the consultation served as another opportunity to once again bring his campaign to the fore, even though he saw it as a 'public relations show' for the government's reclamation agenda.

For the golf community, their participation was a reaction against calls to develop to golf course into housing. They said the sport had been 'demonised' by those who portrayed it as an activity solely for the rich (*Ta Kung Pao,* 2018). The community suffered an "inaccurate stigma," said the Golfer. He believed that the consultation started with a reclamation agenda. However, as frames that put unfair resource distribution as the cause of housing unaffordability started to emerge, the golf course became a target. He said:

> At one point, the Task Force became populist. They were looking for scapegoats such as rich people and developers and the Fanling Golf course became a convenient victim. It spans a large area of 172 hectares. Once that is done, it would be much easier for them to pursue other options. It was first advocated by some politicians because it made great political slogans.

The golfers' participation in the debate was hence not so much about housing but the sporting, historical, and environmental value of the site. They also tried to reshape the discourse of exclusivity by emphasising the socio-economic diversity of golfers and the number of hours the public were allowed to use the facilities.

The liveliness of participation hence indicated only deep divisions in the matter of land supply, instead of a shared will to reach a consensus. The consultation could be said to be doomed from the onset. As the Secretary reflected, consultations in the Hong Kong context often became a stage for different interests to reinstate their claims. He attributed such a limitation to the paradox between the government's claim of democratic mandate and the reality that the democratic mechanism in Hong Kong was imperfect. He said:

> Carrie Lam said in her manifesto that she would pursue large-scale reclamation to increase land supply, then why was she consulting the public again?
>
> […]
>
> In Hong Kong, we claim that [our leaders] have [democratic] mandate. But if that's the case, there should be no need for consultation. Or are we saying that the mandate is fake?

The Secretary's remarks pointed to consultations as an important mechanism for the Hong Kong government to gain legitimacy. While the risk of tokenistic consultations has long been recognised in the literature, what sets Hong Kong apart from the West is that consultations in the city are conducted in lieu of, rather than alongside, democracy. The implication is that in the case of Hong Kong, consultations, even if tokenistic, could be the closest substitute for democracy. They on the one hand allow the government to gauge public opinion; on the other

hand provide channels for the public to express their views – even if there is no guarantee that they would be taken into account in the final decision.

The Secretary observed a general unwillingness in society to debate, hear other people out and adjust positions accordingly. As the next section will show, over the consultation period, not only was there little movement in positions within the civil society, but also even the government and the Task Force themselves did not seem to have a clear idea of what constitute consensus and what it was for either.

'Consensus': A Fuzzy Notion

An examination of people's quotes in newspapers and reports that include the word 'consensus' revealed the fuzziness of the understanding of the word. The exact content (consensus on what) was often not specified. When it was spelt out, it appeared to refer to society's determination to make trade-offs and agreement on the source and priority of development (see HKSAR Government, 2017; Lam, 2017; Task Force on Land Supply, 2018). But even so, what constitutes a consensus remained unclear. Very often, the term was conflated with majority. For example, the Chairman described the Task Force report as "carrying the consensus of the majority" (Hong Kong Economic Journal, 2019, *own translation*), even though only one of the 18 land supply options presented in the quantitative part of the consultation reached an overwhelming majority.[2] While the Chairman reflected in the interview that most people would see the report as a fair account of public opinion, there seemed to be very limited, if any, agreement on trade-offs by different interest groups post-consultation. If the consultation's aim was to narrow differences, then evidence collected in this paper points to its failure.

There were also many instances when the government and the Task Force acknowledged the impossibility of total consensus and the reliance on public opinion in making decision. This is apparent in the policy addresses of Carrie Lam and her predecessor Leung Chun-ying. According to Lam (2018, Paragraph 4):

> [T]here is no perfect solution in this world and it would be difficult to forge an absolute consensus in the community, yet divergence of views should not become an obstacle to the Government's leading Hong Kong to make progress and more importantly, it should never bring Hong Kong to a standstill.

On Land Supply, Leung (2013, Paragraph 70) stated:

> The Government will strive to balance different interests when making choices. But the fact is that the community will never reach a full consensus over such issues. In fact, we cannot afford to, and should not, wait for a full consensus.

At one point, even the Chairman was quoted as saying that the purpose of the consultation was 'not to reach a consensus' when asked about the assumption of land demand and economic growth of the consultation, explaining that it would be too late if we were still debating about the existence of land shortage (*Ming Pao*, 2018a, my own translation). The purpose of the consultation became even more unclear as government officials asserted that they would carry on with reclamation regardless of the existence of a consensus, as reported in the last section.

'Consensus' in this case, rather than an objective, measurable goal, was a vague and malleable concept, leaving room for adjustments whenever it suited the government's agenda. When or whether a consensus was needed, as well as the subject of agreement, was decided by the government. While debates in the consultation were lively, discussion on these questions by the public was out of bound.

Post-Political Consensus?

Taking a wider perspective, we can see some alignment with the literature, where 'consensus' has been used as a tool to foreclose the political space. This is manifested in two ways. Firstly, the consultation was carried out with the assumption that a consensus already existed on the cause of the housing crisis, which according to the Task Force was the shortage of land. It framed the housing crisis as a technocratic issue and confined disagreements to technocratic solutions. Secondly, the goal of the consultation was to portray the existence of a popular consensus which would then legitimise the government's decision and approaches to urban development. Further debate would then be seen as repetitive and unproductive.

The use of 'consensus' to demarcate what is acceptable echoes Rancière's description of consensus and censorship. However, censorship alone does not explain the government's oscillation in position and obscurity in the use of the term 'consensus.' Mouffe's view of consensus as an assertion of hegemony can be of help here. Hegemony in a Gramscian sense – the definition that Mouffe's theory relies on – refers to the maintenance of order without always resorting to force (Anderson, 2020; Gramsci, 1971). It denotes ruling by consent and requires the participation of the civil society, as opposed to pure domination by the state. Even when force is deemed necessary to bring people in line, "successfully maintaining hegemony generally requires its use be identified as being with the consent of the majority, at least in the media" (Williams, 2020). While the Task Force in this case purported to build consensus, it began with an assumption that a consensus on the source of the housing crisis already existed. However, this 'consensus' was imposed as it was heavily contested by the civil society in the media from the onset. In other words, while it sought to assert hegemony, in reality, it was a show of dominance.

Despite the Task Force's claim to forge consensus, as the consultation went on, it became clear that the government did not need a consensus to make a decision. This points to the contradiction that, while on the one hand, the government saw a need to obtain legitimacy through consent; on the other, force always remained an option for when consensus failed to arise naturally. In this sense, despite the Task Force's claim to depart from the consultative tradition of Hong Kong, the barrier for the public to influence the outcomes remained high. The consultation's goal to legitimise government's decisions also shares similarities with the techniques used by consultative authoritarian regimes, where the purpose of consultations is to demarcate the scope of dissent and oriented towards problem-solving rather than public empowerment.

This paradox between the apparent goal to 'seek consensus' and the thinly veiled threat of force points to the fragility of hegemony in semi-democratic/semi-authoritarian territories such as Hong Kong. In Guha's (1998; cited in Anderson, 2017) analysis of colonial India, he defined hegemony as the condition of dominance where persuasion outweighs coercion. When coercion was relied upon instead of persuasion, the situation would be one of *'Dominance without Hegemony.'* The case of the land supply consultation demonstrates the intricate relationship between persuasion and coercion in the semi-democratic environment of Hong Kong. Rather than appearing to be downright suppressive, coercion was hidden under the surface of 'public engagement' and was reserved as a last resort. While in theory, the government does not need consensus to act, it continues to seek legitimacy. The result was a precarious situation where the relationship between the government and the public oscillates between hegemony and coercive dominance. Post-political tools to create order (as per Mouffe, 2005a) hence operate on

the edge of hegemony, with the government switching over to coercive dominance as it loses confidence in its persuasive power.

Displacement and Antagonism

Dissatisfied with the narrow remit of the consultation exercise, many took to the media to express their views. Protests were also staged at some consultation sessions. The discussion in the media, participated by mainly professionals and academics, often went beyond the scope of the consultation but touched upon more fundamental questions of how we envisioned the future of the city and how the idea of land shortage had always been ingrained in our minds but was not necessarily true. This spill over of dissent points to the inability of the consultation exercise, as politics, to completely suture the political.

For example, M. K. Ng (2018), planning professor and a member of the Citizens Task Force on Land Supply, pointed out that even after excluding country parks and conservation areas, there should be 378 square kilometres of land for development, 40% more than the existing built up land. The problem, according to Ng, was a lack of long-term vision in planning and a willingness to put brownfield sites to use. Liber Research Community members further contributed by repeating in media interviews and opinion pieces that the housing crisis was a resource distribution problem, rather than land supply. These views countered the official narratives on the lack of land supply that would have otherwise dominated the public discourse.

Displacement of conflicts in post-politics is often seen in a negative light. By displacing conflicts to the private sector, democracy can be undermined; the displacement to arenas such as law courts also limit the expression of dissent to those with resources (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012). In this case however, the displacement to the media might have helped promote mutual understanding among actors. Despite the antagonistic sounding frames identified in the initial stage of the research, interview data revealed that actors showed sympathy for each other's views and did not treat each other as illegitimate. The Golfer – affiliated with a pro-business political party – recognised that people were taking on the rich because capitalism had left many suffering. The Social Workers acknowledged that behaviour of some mainland tourists and cultural clashes may have contributed to generalisation that led to xenophobic advocacy. They did not see each other as enemies to be destroyed and silenced, as described by Mouffe (2005a, 2005b, 2018). Rather, they treated each other as opponents whose supporters were to be convinced and converted to their sides. In other words, their relationship is agonistic rather than antagonistic. As the Golfer reflected:

> There will always be conflicts. It is not only about the stances people take but also their backgrounds. We should respect that as a society.

This finding ties in well with Chan and Clement's (2005) argument that the media in Hong Kong serves a 'surrogate democracy' function by providing a channel for people to express their opinion and promoting communication between officials and citizens, filling in a gap in the semi-democratic political system (2005). It is however also important to note that while the media offer a platform for the general public to exert pressure on the government, and hence achieve a degree of power rebalance (A. H. Y. Lee & Silva, 2017), their actual influence on policies is limited (Chan & Clement, 2005). This can be seen in the government's retention of force as a last resort – as seen in the previous section – despite the lively participation in the media.

For Mouffe (2005a, 2005b), antagonism is not merely about disagreement on an issue but goes deeper into different interpretations of the liberal and democratic principles in liberal democracies. For Rancière et al. (2001, Thesis 6), "dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions," but the object and existence of the dispute itself. Seen in this light, the real antagonism lies not in disagreements between different options presented in the consultation, or the actors involved, but more fundamentally in the tension between people's aspiration for democracy and the system's inability to accommodate such aspirations (Cheung, 2011; Ku, 2009; Ma, 2018). What the consultation exercise has achieved is the reinforcement of the perception that the consultation is fake and that democracy is deficient in Hong Kong.

The Chairman stressed that the Task Force was trying to do something different from the past. Compared to the last similar consultation from 2012 to 2013, the new exercise was boasted to be more open, more willing to engage with the broader public and less bureaucratic. However, the pre-emptive reclamation remarks by the government coupled with the general distrust in society meant that every trace of scoping would be taken as an example of dishonesty. While much has been said about the public's distrust towards the government, less spoken about is that the distrust goes both ways: not only do the public not trust the government in its consultation effort but the government is also sceptical about the intention of some members of the public. As the Secretary wrote:

> Sometimes I cannot help but think some groups and power are guided by the agenda to sabotage the government led by Leung Chun-ying, who placed a strong emphasis on housing policies. They repeatedly doubted and tried to stop the government's planning and development proposals. (A. Cheung, 2018, p. 67, my own translation)

The distrust observed during the consultation exercise and the interviews was only a symptom of deeper antagonism. A few months after the engagement exercise concluded, protests against the extradition bill broke out. The protests later morphed into a city-wide democracy movement, where intense hate and antagonism could be observed between government supporters and those who opposed it. The new National Security Law, together with the government's heavy-handed approach towards dissent, has led to new worries that antagonism might worsen.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to extend the post-political understanding of consensus to the context of Hong Kong by examining the 2018 land supply consultation. It began with a discussion of Hong Kong's political context and how that differed from the liberal democratic West, where the theory of post-politics was developed. It was followed by a review of post-politics' critique of consensus and how Hong Kong's tradition of consensus politics departed from the theory's understanding.

This paper documented the paradox between wide scepticism towards the consultation exercise and the lively participation. It further pointed to the obscurity around the term 'consensus' over the consultation period. Despite the emphasis on consensus in the consultation, it became evident that the government did not require consensus among the public to act. As such, the consultation exercise could be said to be a legitimising tool for the government rather than a genuine attempt to engage with the public. Although this result is broadly in line with the literature where consensus-seeking approaches are said to foreclose the political space, a closer look at Mouffe's understanding of consensus as an assertion of hegemony reveals the

dominating nature of the use of the consultation exercise. On several occasions, the government hinted that if a consensus failed to arise naturally, it would resort to coercion. Consultation exercises in Hong Kong have long been criticised as tokenistic (see e.g., Cheung, 2011; Tang et al., 2011). For as long as this potential use of force remains on the horizon, consultations will continue to be seen in a sceptical light, no matter how open they purport to be.

Another finding concerns post-politics' description of displacement as a result of consensus-seeking approaches. While displacement of conflicts is generally regarded as a negative outcome, in the case of Hong Kong, the displacement of dissent to the media has helped promote mutual understanding and tame antagonism. This points to the importance of the expression of views outside the official consultation framework. In Hong Kong, while popular sovereignty is non-existent, the free press and freedom of expression have played an important role as 'surrogate democracy' (Chan & So, 2005). In recent years, there have been worries about declining press freedom (Lee & Chan, 2018). Since the implementation of the National Security Law, outspoken news outlets *Apple Daily, Stand News and Citizen News* have been forced to shutter. Although many had criticised the land supply consultation as circumscribed, the sort of liveliness observed in the press during the consultation period could become a thing of the past.

This paper set out to answer to two research questions: (i) To what extent is post-politics relevant to contexts and approaches different from the West? (ii) What can the situation in Hong Kong tell us about post-politics? For (i), this paper's findings point to similarities in the governing technique of using consensus-seeking approaches to limit the scope of debate. Over the consultation period, it was evident that only views aligned with the government's definition of 'consensus' would be accepted. Hence, in line with the literature of post-politics, the consultation exercise represented an example of 'choreographed processes for participation,' where conflicting views were not given a meaningful hearing (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012, p. 90). This paper has hence established the relevance of post-politics to contexts outside of the liberal democratic West. It confirms the potential of post-politics as a tool of analysis in such contexts, particularly in helping us critically evaluate seemingly open and inclusive processes that can sometimes be taken at face value as improvement to democracy.

For (ii), this paper has identified factors other than neoliberalism that were at play in the foreclosure of the political space. These include the tradition of elitist consensus politics, the government's reliance on consultations (rather than democratic elections) for legitimacy and the threat of state violence shall an 'acceptable' consensus not arise naturally. The implication of these findings is that post-politics operates in a precarious hegemony in Hong Kong, where persuasion and coercion are divided only by a thin line. While the government can in theory ignore public sentiment on land supply, it has also shown appreciation to the need for consensus and legitimacy. This understanding of post-politics as operating between hegemony and coercive dominance paves the way for future research in other politically restricted contexts. The theory has previously been criticised for failing to address structural constraints people in these contexts face (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Matijasevich (2020). This new understanding offers an avenue for such constraints to be incorporated into theory.

In conclusion, the contribution of this paper is two-fold: firstly it has established the relevance and potential of the use of post-politics in contexts outside of the liberal democratic West; secondly, it has enriched theory by pointing to examples of other factors that future post-political research should take into account. These include tradition, culture and the balance between persuasion and coercion in a place's governance. It is our hope that this represents a first step for the theory's application to broader contexts outside of the liberal democratic West.

Notes

1. Before 1 July 2022, transport and housing were overseen by the single bureau of Transport and Housing.
2. Among the paper and online questionnaire respondents, 87% support brownfield development. The figure for telephone survey respondents is 79%. The next most popular option is tapping into the private agricultural land reserve in rural Hong Kong, which yields support from 68% of the questionnaire respondents and 61% of telephone survey respondents.

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Disclosure Statement

Notes on Contributors

Ada H. Y. Lee holds a PhD in Land Economy and an MPhil in Environmental Policy, both from the University of Cambridge. Her research and teaching experience spans the areas of public engagement, planning theory and environmental policy. Ada was a journalist at the start of her career. She now works in planning policy, focusing on the topics of infrastructure and climate change.

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