MICHAEL DUTTON

# The Book of Politics

## China in Theory

THE BOOK OF POLITICS

BUY

**Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society**
Editors: Rey Chow, Michael Dutton,
H. D. Harootunian, and Rosalind C. Morris

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# FORE*WORD*

Let's cut to the chase and recognize that the things being critiqued in this book—such as the market—aren't going away anytime soon. At the same time, let's recognize that neither are the problems. Let's also begin by recognizing that some of the arguments I present may prove hard to swallow. Nevertheless, every book has multiple potential readings and therefore multiple potential readerships, and while this book is no exception, its wide-ranging critique of the political and its amoral stance in relation to Mao and the Chinese revolution are likely to irritate, vex, and possibly anger some. Hopefully, however, it might also lead to rethinking across a broad range of readers from a variety of disciplines. Let me try to narrow down the most likely readership for a work such as this.

I'm hoping scholars of area studies will recognize this work as an implicit critique of their field, inspired, in no small part, by what in some circles might be thought of as a postcolonial turn. Here, however, the postcolonial turn is not designed to unveil or unearth an authentic "other" or simply to add non-Western theory and "stir." Rather, pushing theory beyond the Western frameworks in which I and every other Western scholar have been trained is to recognize that the concept of the political is global. This is painful because it involves digging into unconscious attitudes as one might pick at a scab. However, this is not to dismiss Western theory or even to suggest a "provincialism" about it but instead to try to reexamine what undergirds its assumptions and operations. For me, the binary form seems quite central to this form of thinking.

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For the China specialist, this work offers a new and novel reading of the early Maoist revolution as well as its postrevolutionary aftermath. In highlighting the connection of the former to the concept of the *jianghu* and the latter to a theory of the gift, not to mention the possibility of treating the economic reform period as a metaphor of the Crystal Palace, this work is hopefully registered as a novel way of writing "area" studies. To gain such insights, we need a change of direction in the flow of theory and a recognition that theory sometimes manifests not as a textual articulation but as a set of material practices. Adopting just such an approach enables me to channel thoughts away from the geographically solid ground of "area" and toward a recognition of practices as being, in themselves, forms of theory. Moving from solids to fluids and from texts to materiality opens a new way of understanding, contextualizing and interpolating the Maoist revolution into the conceptual realm. This is an understanding based less on a set of ideas or texts and more on the unique form of lived, untheorized, and habituated "theory" that was building up beneath the feet of Chinese Marxism-Leninism. This "theory," in catching history in its wings, helped propel Mao and the revolution to victory. Propelled by the idea of "China" less as place and more as a theoretical turn produces a very different account of, and role for, area studies; but this only makes sense if, in embarking on this journey, we set aside the version of Maoism that is encountered in the West as a moral stain on humanity and instead approach it as an inadequately developed, often untheorized, set of technologies and machinery. The advantages of this are that, back-engineered all the way to the Crystal Palace, this work might help cast new light on some of the more intractable contemporary dilemmas that have been thrown up with the growth of modernity. If such amorality does not stick in the throat of Western writers who have built their careers exposing the ills of China or lead the largely Western readership that have swallowed that approach to vomit, then it is possible that this book might produce its own kind of "affective rechanneling."



Such affective rechanneling is political. But to understand it as such involves rechanneling conventions around the gold standard of scientificity within the discipline of political science. In place of science, I have turned not just to China but also to art and the humanities for guidance and inspiration. As a result, both the content and the form of this book are arranged slightly differently to most texts concerned with things political. In this regard, while still only a small step, the novelty of this approach is that it opens new ways of thinking about the concept of the political.

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If the book begins with a context section rather than an introduction, it is because context is everything and there can be no understanding outside of it. Moreover, the context in which I am writing and in which we all currently live carries within it tasks of such political urgency as to require us all to rethink and decolonize the politics in which we live. I have attempted to trace the political as a flow of affective but vital energy, and that has not only returned me to China for inspiration but also drawn me toward politics as a field of artistic channeling. Such a simple move involved rethinking the relationship between art and politics and that meant rethinking not just the content but also the form of the book. Hence from its almost aphoristic beginnings right through to its employment of images that go beyond mere illustration at the end, this book attempts to rearticulate a theory of the political through a rearrangement of both form and content. Such grandiosity, however, has been "downscaled" by organizing the work around the flow of vital affective energy as it moved in relation to the concept of the political in the era of modernity. Yet, despite the centrality of affective energy flows within this work, I have said very little throughout this work about figures who have helped me channel my thoughts about the flow of affective energy and who have been instrumental in helping me rethink key areas of the book. The acknowledgments are but a small attempt to rectify that, but before I name names, let me also acknowledge the help of a number of institutions, for this question of institutional help bears on some of the issues that concern me in this book. Four institutions—Griffith University, Goldsmiths College, Tsinghua University, and Beijing Capital Normal University—have supported this work in a variety of ways, but collectively they are part of a problem I want to address in the book. As part of a modern global academic scene, I am effectively writing within but also against such institutions. In some ways then, I am biting the hand of those who have fed me. Thus, while my thanks to them are sincere, they are thanks tempered with the recognition that, as institutions, they are not only tied to but also productive of the system of market veridiction I am railing against. In other words, the academy is part of the problem. Collectively, such institutions are supportive of intellectual work, but that support always comes at a cost. Increasingly drawn into the world of market veridiction and indeed teaching and promoting it, they invariably impose such impossible demands and burdens on academics that the work being produced often ends up resembling versions of products coming off a Fordist assembly line. For a somewhat bespoke work like this, which has taken decades to piece together, such a demanding timeline



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could not and did not work. The anxiety-inducing results of timelines or ever-increasing demands to write with relevance are replaced by demands to fulfill what are effectively work quotas. While I understand the need for accountability, I also see the systems introduced to bring it about destroying the very work they hope to create. In this respect, therefore, this really is something of a retirement book in that it could have been written only by someone near the end of an academic career who no longer cares about tenure or career advancement and therefore someone for whom the constraints of institutional assessments matter less and less. Freed from such endless anxiety creating yet transitory and superficial concerns and pressures, this book has operated as a space of critique of an academy hell-bent on global expansion, on judging the quality of work only on the basis of grants gained, assessing "usefulness" in administratively conjured-up taxonomies, and applying management techniques learned from the very university teachers who are now oppressed by them. Universities, having long taught systems of market veridiction, now find themselves being devoured by the very systems they created or propounded. And what is the discipline at the heart of that training in administration if not the modern discipline of politics? In leaving behind this Charlie Chaplin factory of modern university times, I feel increasingly drawn to the sentiment expressed by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten when they insist that "the only possible relationship [to the modern university] . . . is a criminal one."[1] The challenge for the university and teachers within it is to prove that logic wrong.



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1 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 26.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For well over a decade, indeed nigh on two, this book has been a journey that has followed the flow of ideas. Following this flow has taken me from Melbourne to London and on to Beijing and from a political science department into a theory positing an art of the political. It is a journey nourished by the gifts of others and it has left debts that seem almost impossible to repay. After all, every twist and turn of this argument, right down to image choice and placement, has been fueled by the friendship and generosity of others. These brief acknowledgments do no justice to the debts I owe, because I can include only a small fraction of those very special people who have left their mark on me and this work.

Some influences are ongoing and easily remembered, and, for me, one of the main ones would have to be the remarkable Harry Harootunian. Harry has been friend and mentor and has always offered his support alongside rigorous critique. Harry, more than many, has pushed me to get this book out because, like me, he believed it has some important things to say. I might long ago have abandoned this entire project were it not for his ongoing encouragement, patience, and occasional impatience. On the topic of patience, Judy Farquhar deserves special mention. As another source of inspiration she generously guided me through a field she is a master in and also showed enormous patience when faced with my carelessness and stupidity. Indeed, only she can answer this riddle: How many versions of the same text can a person read before they simply say, enough already?

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To Haiyan Lee, Viren Murthy, and the anonymous readers commissioned by Duke, I can only offer my sincerest and heartfelt thanks for their erudite readings, their understanding, and their willingness to embark on this journey with me. Patience was also a virtue that my editor, Ken Wissoker, has displayed. Along with Ryan Kendall, Ken has shown an appreciation of this book project as being something more than words on a page. The sympathetic understanding of the approach shown by Ken and Ryan, not to mention the rigorous reading and textual corrections of Michael Trudeau, stand in sharp contrast to that of many contemporary publishers who seem to have adopted, or been driven into, a factory model of production.

Throughout this lengthy period of writing and thinking, I've been honored by the friendship of some of China's leading intellectuals and thinkers. Wang Min'an, Xu Zhangrun, and Wang Hui, as well as the curator Huang Du, stand out in this regard. They have helped in too many ways to recount. Former students, both in China and in the West, have been simply amazing. Huang Gang, Suhail Nazir, and Elaine Jefferys are worthy of special mention, as is my former tutor, Wang Yanqiu. Thanks must also go to my current PhD student, Wang Cheng, for the last-minute help he gave. I should also mention my brilliant former research assistant, Sharon Baggio (Li Shaorong), who made my last Duke book so erudite and also started me on the road to this one. I cannot (and probably didn't) thank her enough. Indeed, this book was in many ways meant to be the theory behind the last one but ended up taking on a life of its own. As it did, interlocutors have been plentiful, but John Cash and Scott Lash stand out. Old mentors, like Stephan Feuchtwang, offered stimulating discussion on parts of this work, while friends like Francisco Carballo offered insightful commentary and support on earlier versions. My dear friend Pal Ahluwalia is deserving of a special mention as he stayed with me throughout this journey, not only offering intellectual support but also giving me the gift of unwavering friendship. Other old friends from Adelaide, like Greg McCarthy, also contributed to me thinking through problems in this book, as did friends from my Brisbane days, such as Sue Travaskas and Sang Ye, who not only offered generous support and help but also supplied some of the materials I've used here. Don Miller, Rob McQueen, Zhou Tao, and Zhao Fengshan have always been there for me, while others, Rajyashree Pandey, Sanjay Seth, David Martin, Zhu Jianfei, Borge Bakken, and Phillip Darby, have traveled at least part of this long and forked road. To all of them, whether still with me or not, I offer heartfelt thanks. This journey to completion was peppered with theological discussions on



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biblical evidence (Allen Kerkeslager), unforgettable exchanges on Maoism (Nick Knight), fabulous comments on and debates about Carl Schmitt (Peter Fenves), not to mention erudite advice on triads and printing (Berend Ter Haar), on bandits and place (Hans Steinmuller), and on the city, place, and the human (Abdou Maliq Simone). And, speaking of place and the human, fieldwork at various sites mentioned was facilitated by support, insights, or contacts from Alf Ludtke in Göttingen, Huang Du in Anren, and Don Gasper in Hong Kong, while much of the writing took place either at home in London or in a small, ancient, and beautiful little *pingfang* my generous and dear friend, the amazing Laura Trombetta Panigadi, allowed me to use as she headed off to Tibet to milk the yaks. I have indeed been blessed with some remarkable and gifted friends. Most of the artwork used in this book has been facilitated through discussions with artists Cai Guoqiang, Joe Fig, Long Taicheng, and Zhao Shudong. Like the aftereffects of moxibustion, discussions with a practice-based traditional Chinese healer, Rey Tiquia, have also left their mark just as the affective energy of my family has been harnessed and carried this work to its penultimate form. My son's wife, Amanda Khairunnisa, proved herself to be the Sherlock Holmes of the internet when she found half-remembered source materials online, while her cousin, the gifted designer, Bunga Larascaesara, helped produce a final prototype of this book that expressed, in form, something that words alone could not. Meanwhile, my son, Tavan, worked tirelessly and selflessly, tracing permissions, checking translations, and pushing me ever onward. He not only ensured that this book saw the light of day but also made sure that I survived this process by guiding me through one of the darkest periods of my life. To him and to his in-laws, I offer both love and thanks.

Finally, there are three people who stand out as having both helped and inspired me and who ended up being woven into the very fabric of this book. They are Stacy Lo, John Reardon, and Deborah Kessler. Without the brilliance of Stacy Lo, who accompanied me on large parts of this journey, I might never have joined the dots between my own past work and the flowing rivers and pooling lakes of the Chinese *jianghu*; nor could I have interpreted, much less used, some rather complex and ancient Chinese works on vital energy. She has been, and continues to be, a wonderful friend, supporter, and interlocutor. It is because of her that the *jianghu* spirit became more than merely a bookish and abstract concept. With her, it gained embodiment. The artist John Reardon is a force of nature with whom I have been through every imaginable season and from whom I have learned much. In some crucial





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ways, he has "rewired" my thinking. Without his hectoring, I would never have learned to think beyond the bookish textualism the academy encourages, paid attention to the way images themselves "speak," or learned how to weave images into and through textual argument to enhance both. Lastly, and more than ever lately, I realize that without Deborah Kessler, to whom this book is dedicated, none of this would have even been possible. I simply could and would not have continued this work without her. She not only carried out detailed research into the Crystal Palace, spending weeks in the British Library on my behalf, but she also read and approved every sentence and corrected every error. She was the one who helped me bring all these thoughts, images, and experiences together into a form that, hopefully, will excite the reader as much as it has excited me. If you, the reader, decide to go beyond these few words of thanks, my hope is that this book might help you as it has helped me to rethink our world, by rethinking the concept of the political.



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## Context

*Some of the greatest achievements in philosophy could only be compared with taking up some books which seemed to belong together and putting them in different shelves.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

We are entering dangerous times politically and doing so at a moment when the intellectual discipline charged with the task of thinking through the question of politics has little "out of the box" to offer, having become so intellectually embedded in the very system it purports to "objectively" analyze. The system that has imposed these limits is called *market veridiction*.[2] The

1 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 44–45.

2 As Wendy Brown writes, "Market principles frame every sphere and activity, from mothering to mating, from learning to criminality, from planning one's family to planning one's death." Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 67.

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framework through which it developed was the nation-state and the impetus for it comes out of modernity's encounter with the telluric. With the environmental crisis, however, our very existence is now threatened because of our inattentiveness to the soil, the nation-state, and, most of all, the modern market. If market veridiction continues to lead to unsustainable growth, the nation-state that has led us into competitive monads will continue to produce conditions that fuel feverish growth. Growth might be killing us, but it is also keeping our dreams alive.

Growth has long been regarded as a key precondition for dreams of democracy, freedom, justice, and the material good life. With such dreams, political science all too often thinks through the same sorts of frameworks and uses the same kinds of analytics as those that guide market calculations and growth predictions.[3] It is a benchmarked, fantasy-inducing world, underpinning a system of market veridiction that, as an a priori, thinks "good" and "growth" are synonymous.



To rethink the question of the political, therefore, involves breaking with the limitation imposed by a field such as political science, which is mired in the rationality of market veridiction. It means moving toward something more akin to an art, rather than a science, of the political. Briefly stated, an art of the political works with fluids rather than solids, focuses on affect and energy rather than on the pragmatic and purely rational and, rather than centering on an understanding of humans as "individual rational utility maximizers," is concerned with the agglutination and dissipation of affective energy flows.[4] It is concerned with the agglutination and dissipation of such flows as they take on a particular "political" form, even when that form may appear to be nonpolitical.

3 The contemporary market has been important to (principally) the US discipline of political science in two ways. First, in terms of an underlying theory, market growth was often central to ethical claims, as was the case with, say, modernization theory. Second, in terms of political calculation, rational choice theory would draw heavily on the methods of econometricians, thereby ensuring that the logic of market-based forms of calculation became the principal method of political calculation. For the former approach, see Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*. For the latter approach, which grew into rational choice theory, see Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy*.

4 "Individual rational utility maximizers" is an expression used in a short review and critique of rational choice theory. See Brogan, "A Mirror of Enlightenment," 795.

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This approach, therefore, draws away from the conventional view of politics centering on concrete institutions, regulations, laws, and policy. It shies away from such an approach, not because these things are unimportant but because their overt functions—be they institutional, legal, or policy based—tend to overshadow and even mask their collective and essentially collaborative role in guiding and harnessing affective energy flows. Recognition of this energy-channeling function of institutions, laws, and policies is not to deny the importance of their manifest functions. Parliaments do make laws and bureaucracies do codify regulations, just as markets will distribute resources, and stadiums will house sporting and entertainment events. At the same time, parliamentarism also arguably reduces the cycles of political violence by de-intensifying debate, stadium sports do focus the emotional intensity of the roar of the crowd onto the game, and, most important, markets do transform affective energy into material desire. Collectively, then, these institutions are essential for any understanding of the political because they all play key roles in directing and channeling the flow of affective energy away from or toward moments of political intensity.[5] Irrespective of whether such machines drive this energy away from or toward political intensity, however, this economy of flows and its relationship to the formation of the modern political is of interest in this book. This art of the political focuses on "machinery," big and small, that is used to channel this vital energy. This book examines how this process develops or is augmented, how manifest functions work with latent channeling functions, and how, why, and where such machinery "leaks." As politics enters more dangerous and unpredictable times, we need to follow this channeling of currents and undercurrents more carefully, despite their unpredictability, instability, and incalculability. How we collectively channel these energy flows, after all, might well determine our collective fate.



With an environmental crisis threatening our very existence, the spread of a pandemic showing the limitations of the nation-state to solve global problems, and intermittent financial crises exposing not just corruption and greed but also the myopic underpinnings of the "science" informing the intellectual discipline guiding decision-making, is it time to face the real possibility that at least some of the intellectual forces unleashed under the modernist code of positivist rationality, the nation-state, and market veridiction have

5 For a study that shares a similar concern with this form of fluid affectivity but takes it in a different direction, see Ahmed, "Affective Economies."

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begun to show their age and their limitations? In one way or another, these problems are all symptoms flagging the possibility of global catastrophe. The problem, however, is that the modernist regime of market veridiction has so corrupted critical thought, that any capacity to think beyond its horizon has narrowed in the extreme.

The stranglehold the modern market has achieved is not just over our consumer and working lives, but also over our critical thinking. It has resulted not only in the instrumentalization of reason and bureaucratic stultification but also in the emergence of a particular style of modern thought that is little other than a mimetic reformulation of the commodity process itself. Just as the commodity economy requires an endless material production and reproduction of difference to mask the perpetuation of an always-the-same form (i.e., the commodity), so, too, the cognitive mode of veridiction that accompanied the commodity form does much the same to knowledge but via a somewhat different route.



Underpinning the logic of the "knowledge economy" is the rationality of market veridiction, for to call "knowledge" an "economy" necessarily draws it into marketlike understandings and calculations. Take the modern university and its disciplines. The global university ranking systems employ the techniques of market veridiction to establish status and fee rates, just as the grant system, coupled with the internal operation of managerialism, directs academic agenda-setting. The net result is that the disciplines are made market ready as they are parceled into "use-values." In a field like political studies, this means that critical reflection invariably gives way to policy training, for this is where the discipline's market value increasingly lies. Moreover, there seems to be little ability or encouragement to think outside this style of thought because every potential break is either dismissed or immediately interpellated back into market assessments as a new intellectual trend or fashion, which, in terms of the knowledge economy, leads to more book sales, more grants, more web "hits," more scholarly citations, and, institutionally, a higher university ranking. Market veridiction thereby becomes this key nodal point in a never-ending cycle of potential growth. In this process of endless expansion, the markets might send affective energy flows and potential intensities spiraling in all directions but they are always guided by the profit motive.

Channeled by this money economy into tributaries and eddies, momentary material and immaterial desires can all be seen as symptoms of this larger process of energy redirection or dissipation. The channeling of this energy is,

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therefore, profoundly political even when it appears to be otherwise. The politicalness of systems of market veridiction, therefore, operates less through the manifest intensification of antagonisms than through the latent but profitable "dissipation" and transformation of energy, and it is in this process that the culture industry comes to play a pivotal role. More than any other domain, the culture industry can channel potential political intensities into energy forms that fuel the roar of the crowd in the stadium or that become romantic songs and gifts that "stand in" for feelings of love in the shopping mall.

In other words, the modern market is a crucial technology of political domestication that transforms affective energy flows into monetizable desires that simultaneously direct them away from thoughts or intentions that might otherwise (and sometimes do) agglutinate into political intensities. This ability of market circuits to pull in virtually all forms of affective energy flows therefore creates the conditions for their (political) dissipation, dispersal, and transformation into desire. In this land of market veridiction, even the manifesto-like arguments of oppositional flows—whether Marxist, post-Marxist, or postmodern—end up as versions strengthening the underlying rational presuppositions of the modern market economy. Yet, just at the very moment when the market regime appears all conquering, just when it reveals no outside, leakages from within begin to pool into signs of potential reenergization.



Past political reenergizations have challenged the process of market-energy dissipation with a politics of "agglutination." Centered on manifestos, party platforms, or even personality cults, agglutinations rely on the imposition of both a unified understanding and a method of action, and these, in turn, rely upon a revivification of political intensity. Such processes, while still in evidence in some quarters, are challenged by other forms today. Today, we face the specter of a new challenge brought on by a dispersed form of subjectivity that is political but not political in the "unified" ways created by past political movements. Far from being unified, the newly emerging social subject is not tied to any program, platform, or manifesto but, instead, takes on a form that Giorgio Agamben once called the "whatever singularities" of the coming community.

"The coming being is whatever being," writes Agamben, and this whatever being, he adds, is whatever entity is one, true, good, and perfect (*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum*).[6] If this Latin phrase catches

6 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1.

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Agamben's imagination, the events in Beijing's Tian'anmen Square in 1989 make him shudder and turn his imagination into something more concrete and political. Under banners proclaiming the desire for freedom and democracy, Agamben suggests that there was, paradoxically, a "relative absence of determinate content in [the Chinese protesters'] demands."[7] Instead of creating specific, pragmatic agglutinating demands, the Chinese student protesters of 1989 offered abstractions ("freedom and democracy") that enabled the movement of the one, the true, the good, and the perfect, to develop a sense of righteous intensity in the absence of any concrete, unifying manifesto, program, or organization.[8]

A Latin phrase, a Chinese street scene, a dead European language bursting with life, and a set of Chinese characters spelling out the words "democracy and freedom" that were alive to the political but dead to any deductive or concrete meaning. Here was a Chinese protest in which two words—democracy and freedom—flag nothing: nothing that is, other than the fact that "everything" was up for grabs. The Party, the system, their own lives: everything . . . except, perhaps, the nation-state form itself. Here was a movement in which demands were held together and intensified, not by detailed positive affirmations of who or what they were or what they stood for (a manifesto-based politics) or by a tightly disciplined organizational form (a party-based politics) but by a scattered mass of heterogeneous thoughts, fractured into fears,



7 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 84–85.

8 There were quite pragmatic grounds for the "hollowness" of slogans in Tian'anmen Square in 1989. Over the course of this three-month occupation, the crowd (which was, by definition, always self-selecting) constantly changed. As Beijing students retreated in exhaustion, new energy came to the protests through provincial students coming to Beijing to join what was perceived at the time to be a new revolution. The crowd was made up of an ever-changing, ever-flowing supply of itinerant student protesters. Consequently, the critiques being offered, and values being espoused, while always critical of the regime, were, within that broad framework, also always changing. The leadership of the students could never speak for the student body any more than they could weave the thoughts of any particular moment of the crowd into a manifesto that could bind them all. Instead, unity was maintained because very few words were used to unify them, and those words were open to various possible meanings. In other words, the degree of abstraction enabled unity.

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hopes, loves, hates, rumors, desires, and aspirations that gained a unity of sorts in what they stood against rather than what they stood for.[9]

Could this movement not flag the beginnings of a form that other contemporary social movements, be they Occupy, Anonymous, or Extinction Rebellion, then develop? At the level of the subject, did this movement not reinforce an existentially felt sense of righteousness and abjection that would, at the very least, flow into the formation of contemporary Western identity politics? Yet here, too, when this coin is flipped, and these calls for democracy and freedom spill into that other 1989 Tian'anmen mantra of "saving China," did they now also reflect a commitment to a telluric-based patriotism that, in a very different way, inspired Breitbart, Brexit, the alt-right, and an antiestablishment xenophobia? These movements of the populist right might be tied back to a telluric-based ethnonationalism and have antithetical notions of the collective good or individual liberty, but they were still anchored to slogans and ideals that proclaimed their struggle was for democracy, freedom, and justice. With the alt-right, however, this struggle is based on conspiracy narratives, "fake news," and "alternative facts."



No matter whether it manifests as progressive or otherwise, flows will always flow, just as leakages and contradictions, inequalities and injustices will always potentially devolve into challenges to this cognitive regime of market veridiction. What is now being witnessed is the global spread of this "non-form" as it emerges as, or in, a series of movements and disturbances. These movements and disturbances each develop their own forms and their own points of intensity, and these are so culturally, socially, and politically embedded that the very idea of any unifying political manifesto is either an absurdity or a total abstraction. Democracy and freedom might still be their rallying cry, but in the bifurcated world of "alternative facts" and "fake news," these words mean very different things.

The spectacular rise of Donald Trump with his simple slogan "Make America Great Again" or, across the pond, the call to "Get Brexit Done" both demonstrate the "relative absence of determinate content," while still

9 This opposition is not unified into a single "enemy" figure for, as Gloria Davies notes, the students' rather theatrical reenactment of petitioning the emperor suggests a very different form to that of state and civil society, much less a friend/enemy divide. On the petition and its role in 1989, see Davies, "Homo Dissensum Significans."

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producing a clustering and intensification around telluric patriotism.[10] This is not, however, the only political form this telluric element can take—think, for instance, of past left-wing national liberation movements—nor is patriotism the only way intensity can be generated. The success of this form of contemporary telluric populism, however, has tended to eclipse those smaller, more fragile progressive movements that are channeling energy and lighting "prairie fires" across continents in seemingly unconnected and quite random, often localized, ways.

Less a "movement" than a trend, less a trend than a telltale sign of a potential future political taking shape, these sparks sometimes appear as quickly as they disappear; sometimes they appear only as minor triggers, while at other times they become fully formed social movements. They range from overt political waves of destabilization like the Arab Spring, through to the trigger mechanisms generating new cultural norms such as the #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter. They also include those forms dismissed as "purely criminal," like the 2011 London "riots" as well as those political "platforms" increasingly criminalized, such as Anonymous, WikiLeaks, and LulzSec. Herein lie certain facets of whatever subjectivity, revealing themselves as part of a new "glocal," political refusenik culture.



Enough is enough, but what is not enough has not yet been decided. Even the formation and rise and fall of some recent European political parties and coalitions, be they on the left, the right, or simply the edge of confusion (for example, Greece's SYRIZA, Spain's Podemos, Britain's UK Independence Party, France's National Front, and Italy's Five Star Movement), speak to this informal refusenik culture. Manifesting as antiestablishment and antiglobalization, both the left and right are responding to the alienation that the market-based dissipation of energy has produced. In these movements, the whistleblower is the newfound hero, while new technology (whether made up of tweets, Instagram memes, or TikTok videos) is the newfound

10 The telluric is an important concept in this work. The word itself comes from the Latin *tellus*, meaning "earth," or *terra*, but it is (strangely) tied to flow. Most often referred to in relation to a "telluric current," it signals the natural electric current flowing near the earth's surface. Here, however, I want to add to this fluidity something of the spirit of Carl Schmitt's usage by referring to practices that relate to the earth itself or to those culturally and spatially grounded and embedded practices that are tied to the earth. For Schmitt's usage, see Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan*.

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means of communication and "organization." As new technologies reduce the complexity and size of the message being communicated, the dominant mode of understanding also begins to shift. A simplification and reduction of "variables" is one effect, but more positively, there has been a change in the very mode of political thought. A "this, this, and this, but not that" definitional logic is gradually being replaced with a new, and growing, politico-knowledge sensibility that says "not this, not even this, and definitely not that." Here, then, is a negative politics that, paradoxically, still displays a vibrant political positivity. A politics of "whatever" that was first spotted by Agamben on the streets of Beijing during the events of Tian'anmen Square back in 1989[11] has now gone "viral" and turned "glocal." If market veridiction helped produce this particular "whatever" sensibility, it was through new social media that it went viral. New social media could do this because it was a market that both government and business could exploit. In China, "supply-side" disciplinary technology proved highly effective in preventing the spread of COVID in its early stages but, in the West, it was read as simply another sign of China's rising authoritarianism. This system, which requires the mass scraping and extraction of personal online information, had already been "stress tested" in China with earlier attempts to turn credit-card systems into a disciplinary mechanism,[12] by using a series of techniques that were first developed in the West. In the United States, data extraction would be combined with psychological profiling and machine-driven algorithms to tap into, target, and influence consumer desire. The results might have been mixed but they nevertheless proved highly profitable when employed in relation to the sale of product. Drawn from the world of push-marketing, such techniques would also enter the political realm as technologies that could help influence voter behavior. The election of Donald Trump highlighted the power of business techniques in politics and, more than ever before, opened onto the virtual world. In the United States, the clustering of left-leaning elements around groups, like Extinction Rebellion, might still be attacking the "establishment," but Trump's assault on the "establishment" was from the right. Business, not politics, should rule, and competition and growth as well as draining the swamp combined in his ethnonationalistic "America First" campaign.



11 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 85.

12 It is important to note that, at the time of writing, this system was still not unified nor is it clear that it ever will be. See Matsakis, "How the West Got China's Social Credit System Wrong."

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Trump's inflammatory tweeting, his hyperbole, not to mention his claims about "the establishment" and "fake news" all played to an alt-right songbook but did so through an update of techniques familiar to any Barnum and Bailey circus act. Most important, the techniques were suited to a digital age of consumption—the constant and quick surfing of the net, picking up on viral iconoclastic trends while simultaneously turning away from those that were regarded as passé or uninteresting. Sensationalism dominated as this mode of knowledge consumption increasingly turned anything and everything into bite-sized commentaries. Meanwhile, viral trends emerged like fashion fads alongside "alternative facts." In this way, the unified, disciplined organizational forms of more "grounded" politics were being forced to adapt to this new, often unpredictable, rhizomic form that mimicked and resembled the virtual and viral world and gave these new forms of organization protean life.

One does not have to be wedded to the vitalist tektology of Alexander Bogdanov[13] to realize that the question of organization is also a question of cognition. Modes of production leading to forms of organization producing different styles of thought are increasingly changing the way we interact with the world around us. Cyberspace leads from ground to air, from static to mobile, and from the mechanical, linear, and hierarchical to the rhizomic and virtual. Cyberspace induces a mode of cognition that is not only transforming traditional organizational forms and practices, such as mainstream political parties, but, more importantly, also changing the way in which the political manifests as a crowd and, once again, it is in Beijing that the first signs of things to come would be witnessed.



Ten years after the crushing of the "whatever" politics of Tian'anmen Square, one of the world's most successful mass-based grassroots political organizations, the Chinese Communist Party, once again faced a political threat from the streets. This time, however, there would be no warning signs, only the shock of a crowd's appearance. As if by some magical conjuring trick, followers of the heterodox spiritualist cult known as Falungong suddenly appeared before the leadership compound in Beijing in numbers too big to ignore.[14] What was significant about this crowd, however, was not just their

13 For details on Bogdanov's vitalism, see Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology*, chap. 4.

14 For details and conspiracy stories surrounding this, see Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 270–71.

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numbers, but their stealth. Here was a mass protest that totally blindsided the so-called omnipotent Mao-era mass-line surveillance system.[15] Suddenly, one morning, in front of the Beijing leadership compound, Zhongnanhai, an estimated ten thousand silent protesters gathered in prayer. One text message, and the crowds appeared, avoiding every one of state security's "eyes and ears."[16] Pioneering the use of text messaging as a means of discreetly organizing mass gatherings, Falungong opened a new and parallel political frontier outside the purview of the then "grounded" and mass-based street-level surveillance system. In so doing, Falungong began to "morph" the telluric guerrilla-style tactics of the Mao-era partisan into something it could use to outfox the Maoist mass-line security system. Falungong pioneered the use of the text message as a protest weapon in 1999 but, by the time of the Arab Spring of 2011, the use of text messaging had become part of a myriad of web-based tactics that would interweave the new social movements into the new social media and feed into claims that this technology signaled the dawning of a new era of democracy.[17]



The 1999 Falungong protests shocked the Chinese Communist Party establishment just as the 2011 Blackberry-texting rioters in London and other British cities frightened the British establishment, and just as internet-savvy protest groups, whistleblowers, and hackers have unnerved the US establishment. If Falungong offered a small glimpse of the new, virtual mass-line guerrilla technology of future mass movements, the Chinese government's

15 While one cannot say that the Chinese government changed tack as a result of this blindsiding, it is clear that they have indeed changed. By 2014, James A. Lewis, a computer security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, even went so far as to claim that "China does more in terms of cyberespionage than all other countries put together." See Sanger and Perlroth, "NSA Breached Chinese Servers Seen as Security Threat."

16 In effect, the eyes and ears (*zhi'an ermu*) that the Chinese police had used for years failed them. "Eyes and ears" is an expression used by the Chinese public security forces to describe their street-level informants. Falungong's protest totally outflanked this system that had ensured "stability" even in the most difficult of times under Mao and into the reform years. Indeed, even when protests erupted in 1976, and again in 1989, they were both well flagged. What was surprising about the Falungong protest in front of Zhongnanhai on April 25, 1999, was that it took the Chinese state totally by surprise. For a leadership so used to mass control, this must have come as both a shock and a threat.

17 Hempel, "Social Media Made the Arab Spring."

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post-Falungong response revealed the state's growing realization that these tactics opened a new frontier of politics. From facial-recognition technology to the social credit system, the Chinese government has, since this time, invested heavily in high-tech experimentation. The Falungong protest didn't just force the Communist Party to become internet savvy, it also led them to address this issue in a way that helps shine a light on the process of (re)channeling (potential) political intensity. This, at least, could be one conclusion drawn from the findings of Gary King and his research team, who examined the post-Falungong but pre–Xi Jinping internet censorship strategies of the Chinese government.[18]

Censorship in China, the King studies show, was not so much designed to silence all dissent but "to muzzle those outside government who attempt to spur the creation of crowds for any purpose—in opposition to, in support of, or unrelated to the government."[19] In other words, Chinese government internet censors were less concerned with dissent than with rechanneling any signs of potential political intensity into forms of political quietism.[20] So-called internet spikes—that is, sites that went viral, attracting large numbers of clicks—were the sites focused on, not because of any political position they held or principles they espoused but based on their potential to generate intensities that could lead from the virtual world back to the streets. If a spike could potentially turn into street-level action, then the goal became to flatten it. That was attempted in many ways, but one may well have involved the use of the so-called 50 Cent Army, which was said to rechannel traffic away from potentially dangerous spikes with the allure of clickbait.[21] Harmonious



18 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts demonstrate the way Chinese government censors employed a three-pronged approach, involving (1) building a virtual wall, (2) key-blocking banned words or phrases, and (3) manually reading and removing text. King's quantitative big-data studies focused on the latter and covered over 11 million social media posts from almost 1,400 Chinese websites. See King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism," 326.

19 King, Pan, and Roberts, "Reverse-Engineering Censorship in China," 891.

20 This approach excludes the Chinese government's total ban on internet pornography. See King et al., "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism," 326.

21 In his 2012 Distinguished Lecture to the UC Davis Institute of Social Science, King also points out that the infamous pro-government 50 Cent Army, *Wumaodang*,

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society (*hexie shehui*), it seems, involved ensuring that the virtual crowd did not turn into a street crowd. This kind of manipulation, channeling, and redirection of internet flows, in order to redirect affect away from political intensity, is not confined to China but where China's concerns are to ensure a politically "harmonious society," in the West, it is (once again) used to enshrine profit as the principal goal.

Shoshana Zuboff describes how a financial crisis that engulfed the search engine company Google started a process that rather quickly developed into what she has called "surveillance capitalism."[22] In the late 1990s, Google had technologically sophisticated software, a user-friendly interface, and the biggest index of any of the search engines.[23] What it didn't have was any idea about how to monetize these factors. Then, notes Zuboff, they discovered advertising. In particular, they discovered how data being scraped from their search engine—the extraneous material that had, up until that point, been treated as "data exhaust"—could actually be gold dust to advertisers. The data that was being scraped enabled mass consumer profiling that could more accurately, timely, and cost-effectively produce targeted advertising. As Zuboff notes, "Google had discovered a way to translate its nonmarket interactions with users into surplus raw material for the fabrication of products aimed at genuine market transactions with real customers: advertisers."[24] While Google was first, others quickly followed. Aided by the surveillance-friendly regulatory regime of post-9/11 America,[25] Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook, along with many other companies, explored different routes and



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if it is dispatched at all, is used not to bombard sites with pro-government propaganda and thereby raise the degree of political intensity, but to lure internet traffic away from such sites and concerns, by producing bursts on other sites that are likely to distract. In other words, Chinese censorship is built around halting the eruption of political intensities, not stamping out all criticism. See G. King, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," Fung Institute for Engineering Leadership, accessed July 17, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hybtm4Fp1jc.

22 See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance*.

23 In 1999, Google had the biggest index, having indexed fifty million pages. See J. Mitchell, "How Google Search Really Works."

24 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance*, 93.

25 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance*, 9.

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different methods of scraping data for profit, creating what Zuboff has called "a behavioral futures market."[26] In this context, she says, goods and services became mere supply routes for data. "It's not the car; it's the behavioral data from the car. It's not the map; it's the behavioral data from interacting with the map," she concludes.[27]

"Big data" was now big business, and that business was knowing consumer moods, ideally in real time and ahead of the consumers themselves. From the analysis of the spikes of collective internet activity through to the individual likes and dislikes from emoticons, data would be extracted and "crunched" in order to produce the appearance of a predictive ability that advertisers could exploit. From cookies that tracked millions of virtual links and Google maps that tracked millions of terrestrial journeys, people's documented habits, interests, temptations, and tastes became the raw material that, through predictive analytic modeling, channeled affective energy into material desire, thereby helping reinforce political quietism. In this respect, the behavioral futures market of which Zuboff writes is, like any contemporary market, a political machine that dissipates and transforms affective energy. While this makes it intrinsically political, it was, surprisingly, never really treated as such until the Facebook scandal of 2018. That was when this technology and methodology was directly applied to politics.



The ensuing scandal revolved around the company Cambridge Analytica (CA), which used megadata scraped from Facebook accounts to find "trigger emotions." From the data analysis, CA was able to produce targeted political advertisements that were specifically designed to tap into a person's unconscious fears and hopes.[28] While such overtly dark political arts, designed to push voter sentiment through unconscious triggers, was thought scandalous, as a business model, it had gone virtually unnoticed. Hence, once the scandal passed, so, too, did much of the public anxiety and anger about the data-scraping industry. Aided by "free product" and a mass media that both sensationalizes but quickly forgets, data scraping once again became a simple "business model," albeit one that exponentially expanded the market by extending it into cyberspace. Paradoxically, perhaps, the sensationalism en-

26 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance*, 96.

27 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance*, 131.

28 See Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, "How Cambridge Analytica Turned Facebook 'Likes' into a Lucrative Political Tool."

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couraged by this system can also lead to small and seemingly inconsequential things upsetting the apple cart and triggering re-intensifications. The protests that took place in Hong Kong in 2019 exemplified this.

Sparked by a proposed bill that would have allowed the extradition of suspected criminals from Hong Kong to Mainland China, the 2019 protests saw unprecedented numbers of Hong Kong residents taking to the streets in a series of protests that quickly intensified into a mass movement.[29] The Chinese Communist Party regarded this as yet another challenge to its sovereignty over the territory, and it forced the bill through the Hong Kong legislature, leading to more demonstrations that became larger and more violent. Yet the violence and this challenge to Chinese sovereignty over the territory are not what is of interest here. Rather, just like the 1989 Tian'anmen and 1999 Falungong protests examined earlier, it is the tactics and technologies employed by these 2019 Hong Kong protesters and the forms of subjectivity they reveal that are of interest here, for these shed light on key facets of a new political. Where the Tian'anmen Square protests of 1989 announced the arrival of a new form of subjectivity—the "whatever singularities" of the Tian'anmen Square protesters—and the Falungong protests of 1999 highlighted the creative, disruptive potential of new social media, what the Hong Kong protests of 2019 shed light on was the "fluidity" lying at the heart of questions of the political.



Drawing on techniques from the 2011 Occupy movement in New York, and from their own 2014 Central Occupy movement, the 2019 protesters in Hong Kong showed a penchant for sign language; employed a dispersed, leaderless "non-structure"; and used the iconicity of popular culture to promote their cause.[30] Hong Kong's Sino-hybridic "mash-up" culture provided the resources drawn on by protesters that enabled them to "fit in" as they stood up and stood out. They would "fit in" by wearing the oft-used face mask to hamper state-run facial-recognition technology. This led the authorities at the time of COVID to ban the wearing of face masks. Protesters would stand

29 The reason for the proposed bill appears to be driven by the Mainland's desire to further assert Chinese sovereignty over the territory. The issue of extradition arose after a nineteen-year-old Hong Kong man was alleged to have murdered his twenty-year-old pregnant girlfriend while holidaying in Taiwan. Taiwan wanted him extradited but had no treaty. It was then that the Chinese government realized neither did they. For details, see Li, "Hong Kong-China Extradition Plans Explained."

30 Li and Ives, "Fueling the Hong Kong Protests."

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out by putting East Asian cool to work, creating propaganda videos that used Japanese anime techniques to get their message across. Hollywood iconicity was also enlisted, with one poster of a Quentin Tarantino film showing the face of the then chief minister of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, in place of the actor Uma Thurman's, but still carrying the poster's original message: "Kill Bill." The biggest icon of all for this movement, however, was their own homegrown martial arts hero, Bruce Lee. It was from Bruce Lee that they would draw their orientation, inspiration, and form.

"Be water, my friend," Lee once said and, in the hothouse atmosphere of Hong Kong in 2019, these words sent shock waves across the territory and led millions to the streets. A sensibility drawn straight from Taoist scriptures[31] yet proving so powerful it even influenced the Legalism of Guanzi,[32] now became a statement of defiance, protest, and action.

"Be water" meant being anonymous, spontaneous, flexible, and evasive;[33] it meant flash mobs, guerrilla protests, spontaneous roadblocks, and the circling of buildings.[34] Where Occupy occupied, the Hong Kong movement moved. Moreover, new technology enabled the protesters to move with stealth and agility while the new social media gave them their platform. This was activism working in tandem with new social media formats that were themselves fluid and expanding. At the same time, it also pointed to a tradition, culture, and language through which to "speak" of the fluidity within the political.



The return to a classical Taoist understanding of flow furnished the Hong Kong protests with a language of political fluidity, and this same source furnishes this book with the resources it needs to think the political in a more fluid way, albeit in a radically different way from the Hong Kong protesters.

31 This quotation was drawn from a short video clip of an interview with Bruce Lee that had already attracted 2.5 million views since it was posted in 2013. The clip captures that part of the interview where Lee says, "Empty your mind, be formless; shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend." See Lee, "Bruce Lee Be as Water My Friend."

32 For Guanzi's unique take on this question of water and life, see Guanzi, "Water and Earth."

33 Zhou and Wong, "Be Water," 1.

34 Atkin, "Hong Kong Protests Embrace Bruce Lee."

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Like the Hong Kong protesters, the references back to Taoism are made here only in order to shed light, not on the past, but on our present political predicament. The importance of fluidity in this book is marked not just by content, but also by "form." The chapters offer a series of ever-extending, ever-developing vignettes. An initial glance might suggest that these vignettes are random and unconnected, yet these seemingly inconsequential stories trickle toward ideas that pool into illustrations, exemplifications, and arguments about various facets of the political. The appearance of the political in the everyday, its binary quality, and its formation across cultures, not to mention its visibility as it intensifies, form some of the conceptual issues that travel through the pages of this work and lead us toward two modes of being political in the modern era.

One leads us into examples drawn from Mao-era China, where the state itself became the vehicle carrying a series of experimental technologies through which affective energy would be channeled, harnessed, and transformed into political intensities. The other mode, developed in the West, but also very much a part of China's economic reform, channels energy in a very different way. The Crystal Palace was an early progenitor of this new type of technology, designed to dissipate, diffuse, and transform affective energy and turn it into material desire. It was a prototype that would transform affective energy into a form that proved productive both of profit and of political quietism. It flagged the early signs of a division of labor that would ultimately carve divisions into life itself as it attempted to make the human subject ever more calculable and knowable, even when human eruptions, abnormalities, contradictions, and paradoxes pointed to incalculability. It is at this point that we come to recognize that the modern technologies designed to effect moods, feelings, and emotions have a longer history than the internet era. With this new era, however, the sheer magnitude of change has produced a qualitative change. The tectonic plates of the political are, therefore, shifting and as they move, they require a more fluid understanding of this history. To begin to develop this understanding, let us start with the seemingly least political of material objects, the domestic home appliance.



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