7 Administrative Absorption of Politics in Hong Kong: Emphasis on the Grassroots Level

Hong Kong is one of the few Asian cities which have become rapidly urbanized and industrialized in recent decades. In the last twenty years, Hong Kong has been transformed from a British colonial entrepôt to a city of world significance with a population of four million.

There is a growing literature arguing that Asian urbanization has distinct characteristics and thus differs from Western urbanization. This difference is often believed to have resulted from the differing growth patterns of their seminal cities. Most students of the city use technology as the strategic variable to delineate types of cities. Indeed, the Western city differs in large measure from the Asian city in that the former resulted from technological industrial expansion while the latter did not. However, cities in both the West and the Orient have been multifunctional, and there are very few contemporary cities so heavily committed to industrial activities that a great majority of the labor force is engaged in it. Therefore, apart from technology, other variables such as value and power, especially power, should be taken into account. More often than not, the contemporary Asian cities are created and shaped primarily by power variables. As

a matter of fact, Hong Kong, along with many other major Asian cities, has been the result of foreign domination or enterprise. They were created and shaped by the colonial powers for political and economic reasons; they did not grow out of an indigenous urban process. In this sense, Hong Kong is, using Redfield and Singer's concept, a heterogenetic city, and it fits well into McGee's description of the so-called "colonial city."[1]

Hong Kong's urban characteristics cannot easily be described by the rural-urban continuum theory concepts which grow out of the grand tradition of dichotomous social change. The grand dichotomous conception of social change, despite its usefulness as a heuristic model, is primarily a useful typology, rather than a theory of social change. Moreover, it is probably time-bound and cul-ture-bound. The concept of Asian urbanization, however, it seems to us, can hardly be applied to Hong Kong. In this chapter, we are primarily concerned with the political implications of urbanization. In the West, urbanization has often been linked to democracy by political theorists. Max Weber, one of the pioneering students of the sociology of the city, held that the city, as a political community, is a peculiarly Western phenomenon and the source of the modern con-ception of "citizenship," which itself is the source of democracy.[2] Later, Harold Laski's view that "organized democracy is the prod-uct of urban life" was further elaborated by S. M. Lipset.[3]

But it would be a gross mistake to assume that what holds true of the historical relationship between urbanization and democ-racy is necessarily true in the cities of the Third World. The cities of the Third World are in a situation "that is congenial not to democ-racy but rather to political demagoguery, or to radical movement, and to the eruption of mob violence."[4] There are many things that

make the city political life of the West different from that of Third World societies. But, the basic fact is that the rapid increase of population living in urban settlements in the Third World makes the city a field where the major sociopolitical transformation process takes place in a rather short period of time. Karl Deutsch has termed the process "social mobilization" which is "the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded and broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior."[5] It is our belief that the social mobilization process is certainly not confined to the Third World city, but it is by definition more dramatically manifested in cities where people have sudden high exposure to aspects of modern life through demonstration of machinery, buildings, mass media, etc. The increased numbers of mobilized population tend to increase their demands for participation in the political system, leading to a phenomenon called "participation explosion." More often than not, social mobilization and participation explosion lead to political instability in the Third World resulting primarily from, using Huntington's concept, the political gap between the rapid social and economic changes and the slow development of political institutions which have dominated the scene throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The political gap is wider in the city than in the countryside precisely because rapid social mobilization takes place in the city and yet non-governmental institutions are weak or undeveloped. As a consequence, "the instability of the city—the instability of coups, riots, and demonstrations—is, in some measure, an inescapable characteristic of modernization."[6]

What has been said above is indeed a rather gloomy view of the political aspect of urbanization in the Third World. However,

we are not ready to accept the view that the pattern of political development in Asian cities and other cities in the developing countries is a "deviant" pattern of the Western model. In our view, the reason why Asian political urbanization does not fit the Western model can be explained in two equally valid ways: either it is the particularistic nature of the Asian political urbanization, or it is simply the parochial nature of the Western model itself. The positive political role of cities in Asia can be better understood by viewing the city as a center of change that has contributed to nation-building because urbanization serves to undermine primordial sentiments, loyalties, and identifications with sub-national entities and thus helps to make the development of new and larger political communities possible. Indeed, Asian cities' political function must be understood in terms of the relation between the part (city) and the whole (national societies). This, however, cannot apply to the Hong Kong case. Hong Kong is a city-state: it is a total entity itself. And this makes Hong Kong a special variant of the Asian city, or the colonial city. What concerns us in this chapter is the way Hong Kong's political system has coped with the problem of stability and, especially, the way it has been coping with the "crisis" of political integration resulting from rapid urbanization in recent decades.

Participation, Synarchy, and Elite Integration

In large measure, Hong Kong is an urban polity relatively free from riots and political cleavages. It has achieved a kind of equilibrium in a very intricate political situation. It certainly has not experienced violence on the same scale as many cities in the Third World. It is the argument of this chapter that the kind of equilibrium this