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Lessons from the Hong Kong Unrest

Authoritarian Capture and the Epistemic Fragility of Protest

PETER KAHL

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Why freedom collapses when institutions fail to dignify dependence

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Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This working paper argues that the failure of Hong Kong's 2019–20 mobilisation was epistemic before it was political. While millions sympathised with the movement, only a minority sustained dissent. The paradox is explained by integrating *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* with a reconceptualisation of cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event. Protest participation depended not simply on material costs or tactical choices, but on whether individuals could endure contradiction without collapsing into conformity, silence, or exit.

The analysis shows how fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds — universities, professional bodies, and media — failed or inverted, leaving citizens structurally and psychologically isolated. Without institutional buffers, the burdens of contradiction and fear were redistributed downward: youth and precarious actors disproportionately endured trauma and long-term mental health risks, while professionals rationalised withdrawal or exit.

Situating Hong Kong in a comparative frame — Belarus, Iran, Taiwan, South Korea, and even established democracies — reveals the same dynamics of scaffold collapse or resilience. The normative conclusion is that freedom is not independence but bounded freedom: fragile autonomy sustained only when fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds dignify dependence, enabling plurality to survive both material repression and psychological fear.

Keywords

epistemic clientelism, bounded freedom, cognitive dissonance, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, epistemic capture, epistemic injustice, Hong Kong unrest, authoritarian resilience, democratic erosion, plurality, academic freedom, media capture

Working Paper Status

This working paper is circulated to invite comment and debate. It reflects ongoing research and will be revised as the material is developed into *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*. Readers are welcome to cite it, noting its provisional status.

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Introduction

Prologue

In 2020, as the streets of Hong Kong fell silent, I asked myself a question that has not left me since: why did a movement with such overwhelming sympathy collapse so swiftly? Millions had marched, families had joined human chains, and slogans echoed from campuses to shopping malls. Yet within a year, the momentum dissolved into silence, emigration, or conformity.

At the time, I could name repression, exhaustion, and fear, but I lacked the instruments to see deeper. Only later, through the development of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* and my reinterpretation of *cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event*, did a clearer answer emerge. Protest failed not only because of coercion, but because citizens were bound into epistemic bargains — surrendering autonomy in exchange for recognition, protection, or belonging. And when the institutions that might have dignified dependence collapsed or inverted, dissent was left without scaffolds to sustain it.

This paper returns to that question with sharper tools. It treats Hong Kong not only as a political tragedy but as an epistemic case study: how dissonance is pacified into silence, how clientelist bargains entrench conformity, and how absent scaffolds make courage unsustainable. Its claim is simple: freedom cannot rest on bravery alone. It requires fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds capable of dignifying dependence, so that contradiction can be endured rather than collapsed.

1. The Scope and Puzzle

1.1 Scope of the Paper

This paper does not attempt a full chronology of Hong Kong's 2019–20 unrest. The events have been extensively documented elsewhere, from detailed timelines (Purbrick, 2019) to analyses of tactics, repression, and migration. My concern here is different. Hong Kong serves as a paradigmatic case through which to develop and illustrate two conceptual innovations: *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl, 2025e) and the reinterpretation of cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event (Kahl, 2025b).

The aim is not descriptive completeness but explanatory sharpness. Why did a movement with mass sympathy collapse so quickly into silence, conformity, or emigration? Mainstream political science approaches offer partial answers. Repression theory highlights escalating coercion (Davenport, 2007; Kobayashi, Song, & Chan, 2021). Resource mobilisation stresses the organisational and network capacities that initially enabled tactical innovation (Tarrow, 2011). Rational choice frames withdrawal as the logical outcome of rising costs (Olson, 1965). Each captures an important dimension, but none explains why individuals with similar risks and sympathies diverged so sharply — why some endured contradiction while most rationalised silence or fled.

The contribution of this paper is to show that the decisive mechanism was epistemic. Citizens confronted dissonance between their sympathies and the risks of dissent. Most resolved this dissonance through clientelist bargains — trading voice for protection, autonomy for belonging. Only a fragile minority endured contradiction, achieving what I call bounded freedom. Hong Kong's collapse was therefore not simply political but epistemic in its foundations, revealing how freedom itself depends on fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that dignify dependence and sustain plurality.

1.2 Framing the Puzzle

The 2019–20 Hong Kong unrest was one of the largest episodes of collective contention in the early twenty-first century. Triggered by the government's attempt to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and deepened by anxieties over Beijing's encroaching authority, millions participated in marches, sit-ins, and decentralised actions under the tactical banner of Be Water. On 9 June 2019, organisers estimated one million participants; a week later nearly two million joined—close to one-third of the city's population. Surveys during the peak indicated that 60–70 per cent of residents expressed sympathy with the movement (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019).

Yet by mid-2020, mobilisation had collapsed. The National Security Law (NSL) criminalised dissent; universities fell silent; independent media were shuttered; and almost 180,000 Hongkongers emigrated to the United Kingdom under the British National (Overseas) scheme between January 2021 and March 2025 (Sturge & Bolton, 2025; UK Data Service, 2025). The Professional Teachers' Union, once the territory's largest with 95,000 members, dissolved under government and media pressure (SCMP, 2021). Over a quarter of those arrested were minors or under 25, with the majority under 30 (Teen Vogue, 2019).

The paradox is stark: sympathy was broad, yet sustained mobilisation was narrow. Why did a movement that captured global attention dissolve into silence, conformity, or emigration? Existing frameworks emphasise repression, tactical adaptation, or rational withdrawal. This paper reframes the question: not only why the movement failed, but how citizens processed contradiction—and why institutions that might have buffered dissent instead reproduced conformity.

1.3 Literature and Gaps

Existing scholarship offers three main explanations for Hong Kong's 2019–20 unrest. Structuralist accounts emphasise authoritarian repression, particularly the chilling effect of the National Security Law, but often treat mobilisation collapse as automatic rather than mediated by institutions and social relations (Hung, 2020). Social movement perspectives highlight tactical innovation under the Be Water strategy, enabled by encrypted communication and Lennon Walls, yet underplay why mass sympathy did not translate into sustained participation (Holbig, 2020; Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019). Comparative democracy studies situate Hong Kong within wider patterns of authoritarian encroachment and democratic fragility (Case, 2011), but these accounts remain at the structural level and do not explain how citizens themselves processed contradiction.

Social epistemology has long recognised that knowledge is not an individual possession but socially distributed and institutionally mediated (Goldman, 1999). Yet this insight has rarely been applied to contentious politics. What is missing is a fiduciary–epistemic lens. This approach integrates:

- **Cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event**, signalling the finitude of knowledge and typically resolved through conformity or silence (Festinger, 1957; Kahl, 2025b).
- **Epistemic clientelism**, the bargains by which individuals trade autonomy for recognition or protection (Kahl, 2025e).
- **Fiduciary scaffolds**, institutions that could dignify dependence by binding authorities to candour, loyalty, and accountability, but which in Hong Kong were absent or inverted (Kahl, 2025a, 2025h).

By centring how individuals negotiated dissonance and how institutions failed to buffer it, this perspective reframes Hong Kong as not only a case of repression and tactical adaptation, but as a paradigmatic instance of how knowledge, dependence, and institutional collapse shape the endurance or failure of dissent.

1.4 Scope of Concepts

This paper develops its argument through three interlinked conceptual anchors.

Epistemic clientelism refers to conditional bargains in which individuals surrender epistemic autonomy in exchange for recognition, protection, or belonging (Kahl, 2025e). Unlike ordinary trust, which is reciprocal and generative, clientelism constrains voice: the price of safety is silence or conformity.

Cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event reinterprets Festinger's classic concept (1957). Dissonance is not merely psychological discomfort but the lived signal of contradiction and finitude (Kahl, 2025b). Ordinarily, individuals resolve it by collapsing into conformity; only rarely is dissonance endured, yielding fragile but authentic bounded freedom.

Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are institutional arrangements that dignify dependence by binding epistemic authorities to duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability (Frankel, 1983, 2011; Kahl, 2025a, 2025c, 2025h). Originating in fiduciary law, these duties protect vulnerable beneficiaries against opportunism by requiring fiduciaries to act with openness, loyalty, and care (Frankel, 1983). When transposed into epistemic life, they designate the responsibilities of universities, professional associations, unions, and media to act as trustees of plurality. Properly functioning, such scaffolds shield individuals who endure contradiction and allow plurality to persist even under duress. Their absence—or inversion—renders dissent structurally undefended, collapsing dependence into clientelism.

The remainder of this paper shows how these concepts, taken together, explain why Hong Kong's 2019–20 unrest faltered despite mass sympathy: citizens were bound by clientelist bargains, most collapsed dissonance into conformity or exit, and institutions failed to scaffold plurality.

1.5 Thesis Statement

This paper advances a double thesis. First, Hong Kong's 2019–20 unrest collapsed because most citizens were bound into epistemic clientelism—conditional bargains in which epistemic autonomy was surrendered in return for recognition, protection, or belonging (Kahl, 2025e). When confronted with contradiction, many resolved their cognitive dissonance not by enduring but by retreating into conformity or silence. Only a fragile minority endured contradiction, achieving what I have elsewhere termed bounded freedom—an authentic but precarious autonomy sustained at significant personal cost (Kahl, 2025b).

Second, the absence—or inversion—of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds left dissent structurally undefended. Fiduciary scaffolds are institutional arrangements that dignify dependence by binding epistemic authorities to duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability (Kahl, 2025a; Kahl, 2025c; Kahl, 2025h). Where such scaffolds exist, as in the role of professional associations, universities, or unions in democratic transitions elsewhere (Case, 2011), plurality can be preserved even under authoritarian pressure. In Hong Kong, by contrast, universities, professions, and media capitulated or were co-opted, narrowing plurality and accelerating collapse.

The thesis thus integrates three registers. Ontologically, cognitive dissonance is understood not merely as discomfort but as an epistemic event, the lived signal of contradiction and finitude (Festinger, 1957; Kahl, 2025b). Psychologically, this dissonance is refracted through epistemic fear, which routinises retreat into silence or conformity. Institutionally, only fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can transform dependence into resilience, enabling plurality to endure contradiction.

By integrating these levels—ontology, psychology, and institution—the paper contributes to comparative scholarship on democracy and authoritarianism. It shows that freedom is not reducible to courage or autonomy alone. Rather, freedom depends on the institutional dignification of dependence: without scaffolds to protect contradiction, plurality collapses into conformity or exit (Anderson, 2006; Barnett, 2000; Fricker, 2007; Hirschman, 1970).

1.6 Structure of the Paper

The argument develops across five chapters.

Chapter 1: The Scope and Puzzle situates Hong Kong's unrest within comparative debates, defines the conceptual anchors of epistemic clientelism, cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event, and fiduciary scaffolds, and states the thesis.

Chapter 2: Tactical Innovation ('Be Water') analyses the creativity of decentralised mobilisation. It shows how solidarity networks and symbolic actions generated temporary scaffolds of plurality, but also how these repertoires collided with repression (Holbig, 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Stott et al., 2020).

Chapter 3: Repression and Counter-Mobilisation traces the escalation of coercion and the parallel rise of pro-government mobilisation. It highlights how repression reconfigured dissonance into rationalised

withdrawal, and how counter-mobilisation recast conformity as patriotic virtue (Purbrick, 2019; Kurata, 2020).

Chapter 4: Clientelist Dependencies and Asymmetries examines how employment, family, housing, and education structured participation. It demonstrates how clientelist bargains, reinforced by institutional betrayal, shifted dissent into silence or exit.

Chapter 5: Toward an Epistemic Constitution generalises the lessons comparatively. Cases from Belarus, Iran, Taiwan, and South Korea illustrate how scaffolds are dismantled, inverted, or preserved. The conclusion advances a normative argument: freedom is best conceived not as pure autonomy but as dignified dependence — a condition secured by fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds.

Together, these chapters move from Hong Kong's specific trajectory to broader philosophical stakes, offering both an explanation of collapse and a proposal for resilience.

2. Tactical Innovation

2.1 Tactical Repertoires: The 'Be Water' Strategy

The tactical hallmark of Hong Kong's 2019–20 unrest was the 'Be Water' strategy, a decentralised and adaptive mode of mobilisation that deliberately eschewed formal leadership. Borrowing Bruce Lee's dictum to "be shapeless, formless, like water," protesters embraced anonymity, fluidity, and improvisation as guiding principles. Rather than fixed occupations, the movement relied on mobility: assemble quickly, disperse before police arrived, and reappear elsewhere. This adaptability allowed a relatively small number of frontline protesters to project omnipresence across the city.

Digital tools were central to this repertoire. Encrypted Telegram channels coordinated rapid flash-mobs, provided real-time updates on police locations, and pooled logistical resources. Lennon Walls — improvised mosaics of post-it notes and artwork that appeared in neighbourhoods across Hong Kong — functioned simultaneously as tactical hubs and symbolic scaffolds of solidarity, allowing dispersed sympathisers to contribute anonymously yet visibly. Flash-mobs disrupted transport nodes, shopping centres, and border checkpoints, maximising disruption while avoiding prolonged vulnerability. Crowdfunding campaigns raised millions within hours, financing medical supplies, legal aid, and protective equipment.

Scholars have emphasised how these tactical repertoires innovated beyond earlier movements such as the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Holbig (2020) highlights how the Be Water approach transformed decentralisation into an ethos, equipping protesters with both symbolic legitimacy and tactical unpredictability. Lee, Yuen, Tang, and Cheng (2019) show how this repertoire extended protest capacity across districts, embedding dissent within everyday neighbourhood life rather than concentrating it solely in central occupations.

These innovations can be read against Charles Tilly's classic account of repertoires of contention as historically sedimented practices (Tilly, 1978) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's mechanisms-and-processes framework for contentious politics (2001). In contrast to the continuity and organisational embedding stressed in those models, Hong Kong's *Be Water* strategy depended on ephemeral trust, anonymity, and rapid symbolic enactment. Plurality was forged less through durable organisations than through contingent peer solidarities mediated by digital tools. This tactical evolution underscores the need for an epistemic lens: only by examining how solidarity was scaffolded — and why it later collapsed — can we explain both the ingenuity and the fragility of Be Water.

2.2 Solidarity as Temporary Scaffolding

The Be Water strategy was not only tactical but relational. Decentralised action generated fleeting solidarities that acted as temporary scaffolds of plurality. Encrypted Telegram groups, Lennon Walls, and spontaneous flash-mobs enabled recognition among strangers and lowered thresholds for participation (Holbig, 2020; Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019). These practices conveyed candour, loyalty, and mutual accountability — the very fiduciary-epistemic qualities otherwise absent from Hong Kong's institutions (Kahl, 2025a; Kahl, 2025c; Kahl, 2025h).

Symbolic actions amplified this scaffolding effect. The August 2019 human chain, stretching across the city, dramatised horizontal recognition, while mothers' marches reframed participation as protection rather than provocation (SCMP, 2019). For a brief moment, dependence was dignified: family, peers, and anonymous publics offered recognition without demanding conformity.

Yet these scaffolds were fragile. Lennon Walls were repeatedly torn down, Telegram groups infiltrated, and symbolic marches policed. Amnesty International (2019) documented how such spaces of trust were dismantled as soon as they appeared, leaving participants exposed once the protective canopy dissolved. The lesson is conceptual: solidarity can act as a proto–fiduciary-epistemic scaffold, dignifying dissent for a time, but without institutional anchoring it remains contingent, reversible, and easily inverted.

2.3 Collision and Entrapment

The tactical fluidity of Be Water reached its limit in November 2019. The sieges of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and later the Polytechnic University (PolyU) transformed a repertoire premised on dispersal into enforced entrapment. Protesters who had thrived on anonymity and mobility found themselves contained, surrounded, and starved of exit routes. Tactical ingenuity — quick regrouping, improvised barricades, and even homemade devices — could not overcome the asymmetry of firepower and endurance (Reuters, 2019).

These confrontations exposed the dilemmas of solidarity. Many students stayed not out of tactical calculation but because leaving felt like abandoning peers. As Stott et al. (2020) show, social identity dynamics intensified in moments of siege: loyalty to the group overrode individual risk assessment. Yuan

(2019) reported how medics faced similar conflicts, torn between professional duty to treat the wounded and fear of police retaliation. Solidarity, which had functioned as a temporary scaffold of plurality, here became a trap — binding individuals into danger when exit might have preserved survival.

The aftermath underscored the fragility of these scaffolds. Hundreds were arrested at PolyU, with students describing their experience in terms of trauma and betrayal. The very networks that had enabled trust and courage now transmitted despair as participants witnessed peers detained en masse. Amnesty International (2020) and subsequent studies documented widespread psychological effects: depression, post-traumatic stress, and enduring fear of surveillance. Epidemiological research confirms this burden: a prospective cohort study found elevated risks of depression and post-traumatic stress among Hongkongers exposed to the unrest (Ni et al., 2020), while Wong et al. (2021) show how repeated exposure to multiple stressors compounded risk through rumination. What had appeared as proto–fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds dissolved under pressure, leaving participants not only defeated but demobilised.

Conceptually, the sieges show the limits of tactical solidarity absent durable institutional anchoring. Trust networks dignified dependence for a time, but once compressed by authoritarian force they collapsed, turning scaffolds of courage into conduits of trauma.

2.4 Vignettes of Fragility

The scaffolds of solidarity were not abstractions but lived in fragile moments of choice. Short testimonies from students, professionals, and medics illustrate how dignity was temporarily sustained — and how quickly it could collapse.

- **Students**. One CUHK student explained: “We knew the risks. I was terrified, but leaving felt like betraying myself. Fear meant I was alive, and being alive meant resisting” (Reuters, 2019). Yet days later, after watching friends arrested, others recalled that staying felt like “walking into a cage.” Courage and despair were separated by only hours of shifting conditions.

- **Professionals**. A financial analyst described the chilling effect of institutional entanglement: “We were told in internal meetings that social media was monitored. Even ‘likes’ on the wrong post could cost us our job. I deleted everything” (Amnesty International, 2020). Here, the scaffold of professional association offered no buffer; the epistemic bargain collapsed into silence.

- **Medics**. Medical staff faced dilemmas between duty and fear. Yuan (2019) documented how doctors treating protesters reported being questioned or monitored by police, producing hesitation about even routine care. Solidarity with patients was real, but fragile under threat of professional ruin.

These testimonies resonate with broader epidemiological evidence. Ni et al. (2020) found that exposure to unrest heightened risks of depression and post-traumatic stress, while Wong et al. (2021) identified rumination as a mechanism that prolonged vulnerability. Together, they confirm that the collapse of scaffolds was not merely symbolic but inscribed in the psychological burdens of those who endured contradiction.

2.5 Competing Theories, Epistemic Depth

Political science offers several powerful frameworks for explaining the rise and fall of protest movements. Each illuminates part of Hong Kong's trajectory, yet none accounts for the central puzzle: why broad sympathy never translated into enduring mobilisation.

- **Repression theory**. Repression deters participation by raising costs (Davenport, 2007). In Hong Kong, mass arrests, police violence, and the National Security Law illustrate this mechanism (Kobayashi, Song, & Chan, 2021). But repression alone cannot explain why some persisted despite escalating risks, often the youngest and least secure.

- **Resource mobilisation**. Movements endure when they harness networks, funds, and organisational capacity (Tarrow, 2011). The Be Water movement excelled here: encrypted Telegram groups, Lennon Walls, crowdfunding, and flexible leadership created unprecedented mobilisation infrastructure (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019). Yet despite these resources, mobilisation collapsed.

- **Rational choice**. Participation is explained as a cost–benefit calculus. As repression grew, withdrawal became rational for many. Yet this model cannot account for apparently "irrational" endurance — students returning to barricades after arrest, or medics persisting despite intimidation (Yuan, 2019).

- **Civil resistance theory**. Nonviolent campaigns succeed by broad, diverse participation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Hong Kong initially achieved this breadth, but participation narrowed dramatically. Civil resistance theory struggles to explain why sympathy (60–70%) remained high even as active involvement dwindled.

These frameworks converge on repression, resources, and rationality—but they miss the processing of contradiction. Cognitive dissonance has evolutionary roots, observable in both children and non-human primates (Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007). This universality shows that dissonance is not a parochial bias but a structural feature of human cognition. Reinterpreted as an epistemic event (Kahl, 2025b), dissonance marks the lived signal of contradiction and finitude: some endured it, achieving fragile bounded freedom, while most collapsed it into conformity or exit.

Tactical ingenuity and momentary solidarity made contradiction briefly bearable. But without durable scaffolds to protect plurality, the collapse of dissent was not accidental — it was structurally inevitable.

2.6 Synthesis: From Innovation to Collapse

The *Be Water* movement showcased extraordinary tactical ingenuity. Decentralisation, encrypted coordination, and symbolic action generated temporary scaffolds of solidarity, allowing citizens to act collectively without central leadership. For a moment, plurality was dignified: students trusted peers, mothers reframed protest as protection, and Lennon Walls transformed anonymous sympathy into visible connection.

Yet tactical brilliance was not structural resilience. The very fluidity that enabled adaptability also magnified fragility. Once repression escalated, temporary scaffolds collapsed into entrapment — as at CUHK and PolyU, where solidarity transformed into collective vulnerability. The dilemmas of solidarity revealed the limits of improvisation: peer trust that had once buffered fear now amplified exposure, producing trauma and demobilisation.

The epistemic lens clarifies this trajectory. Tactical repertoires could momentarily make contradiction bearable, but without durable fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds — universities, unions, professional associations, or media bound by duties of candour and loyalty to truth — endurance was fleeting. Plurality narrowed not because ingenuity failed, but because it lacked institutional anchoring.

Thus, the passage from innovation to collapse was structurally overdetermined. Hong Kong's unrest demonstrates that tactical brilliance cannot substitute for institutional protection. This sets the stage for Chapter 3, which examines how state repression and pro-government counter-mobilisation reconfigured dissonance into conformity and silence, accelerating the collapse of dissent.

3. Repression and Counter-Mobilisation

3.1 The Escalation of Repression

Repression in Hong Kong unfolded in escalating waves, progressively narrowing the space for dissent and reconfiguring the meaning of risk. The most decisive rupture came with the National Security Law (NSL) of June 2020, which criminalised slogans such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" as secessionist, mandated censorship of politically sensitive content, and triggered the rapid dismantling of unions and civil society groups (Kobayashi, Song, & Chan, 2021).

This formal legal architecture was preceded and reinforced by police violence and mass arrests. Amnesty International (2019, 2020) documented systematic use of excessive force, including indiscriminate tear gas, arbitrary detentions, and assaults on medics and journalists. By early 2020, more than 10,000 people had been arrested, with minors and university students disproportionately represented. The legal process itself became an instrument of repression: bail was routinely denied, trials were delayed, and defendants faced charges carrying life sentences.

Journalists were particular targets. Newsrooms such as Apple Daily were raided, their editors arrested, and assets frozen, while independent outlets like Stand News were shuttered under charges of "seditious publications." Professional associations also succumbed: the Professional Teachers' Union, Hong Kong's largest with 95,000 members, dissolved itself in 2021 under sustained state pressure and denunciation by Mainland media. These moves exemplify what Kahl (2025h) terms scaffold inversion within the epistemic architecture of power: institutions that might have buffered plurality instead became conduits of compliance.

From an epistemic perspective, repression did more than raise the costs of protest. It triggered new forms of epistemic clientelism (Kahl, 2025e): employers and institutions demanded silence or displays of loyalty in exchange for professional survival or protection. The contradiction between sympathy and participation was increasingly resolved by retreat, as silence and conformity became reframed as responsible, even patriotic, choices. For many, participation no longer appeared as a courageous act of dissent but as reckless exposure to ruin. This logic aligns with Schedler's (2002) insight that authoritarian regimes survive not only through coercion but by structuring citizens' calculations of risk, and with Slater's (2010) analysis of "provisioning" authoritarianism, where regimes endure by binding institutions into protective bargains. In Hong Kong, these mechanisms converged with epistemic capture: repression recalibrated dissonance, engineering retreat as the rational, even loyal, response.

3.2 Counter-Mobilisation

Repression was not only coercive but also complemented by counter-mobilisation, designed to saturate public space with symbols of loyalty. From June 2019 onwards, pro-government rallies emerged in Tamar Park and other central locations, explicitly framed as demonstrations of solidarity with the police and the government (Purbrick, 2019). Participants waved Chinese national flags, sang patriotic songs, and carried banners denouncing protesters as extremists. Organisers often claimed numbers in the hundreds of thousands, presenting a rival narrative of unity and stability, even when independent counts suggested much smaller turnouts.

Beyond street rallies, pro-Beijing civil society campaigns proliferated. Local loyalist demonstrations featured coordinated logistics—flag distribution, stage management, and on-site provisioning—documented in contemporaneous coverage of "support the police" events (SCMP, 2019b; SCMP, 2019c). These gatherings complemented earlier pro-government mobilisations described by Purbrick (2019), presenting a visible counternarrative of order and stability.

Propaganda amplified these messages. Mainland state outlets reframed campus dissent as "politicization" harmful to education and portrayed the unrest as the work of "rioters" and "foreign forces," while the National Security Law was cast as restoring stability (Kurata, 2020; Xinhua, 2019; China Daily, 2020). In the local pro-government press, commentary warned that "Western plots" sought to destabilise Hong Kong (Ta Kung Pao, 2019). This framing aligns with Feldman's (2003) analysis of authoritarianism as the enforcement of conformity through moralised binaries, where dissent is equated with disorder and loyalty with virtue. It also echoes Levitsky and Way's (2010) account of competitive authoritarian regimes, where formal pluralism persists but opposition is structurally delegitimised through orchestrated loyalty performances.

From the perspective of Epistemic Clientelism Theory, these loyalty campaigns operated as institutionalised clientelist bargains (Kahl, 2025e). Citizens were presented with a binary: support the state and be recognised as a responsible member of the community, or risk being branded a traitor. Acts such as waving flags, reposting slogans, or joining rallies became transactional gestures—small but visible tokens of loyalty that secured protection and belonging. Silence, too, could be recast as prudence within this framework,

while open dissent was stigmatised as betrayal. Counter-mobilisation thus complemented coercion: where repression raised the costs of protest, loyalty campaigns lowered the costs of compliance, making conformity the more attractive epistemic bargain.

3.3 Institutional Inversion

The collapse of dissent in Hong Kong was accelerated not only by repression and counter-mobilisation but by the inversion of institutions that had once provided scaffolds for plurality. Universities, unions, and media — traditionally sites where citizens could contest authority — were progressively reconfigured into conduits of compliance.

The Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) illustrates this dynamic. With 95,000 members, the PTU had long defended academic and labour rights. Yet in August 2021, under sustained political pressure and denunciations by state media as a "malignant tumour," the union dissolved itself (SCMP, 2021). Its dissolution removed a critical buffer that might have defended teachers against arbitrary sanction. What had been a fiduciary–epistemic scaffold capable of dignifying dissent was recast as a liability, leaving educators individually exposed. This is a paradigmatic case of scaffold inversion: an institution once structured to bind authority through duties of candour and accountability was folded into the epistemic architecture of power, amplifying conformity rather than plurality (Kahl, 2025a; Kahl, 2025h). It also exemplifies what Levitsky and Way (2010) describe in competitive authoritarian contexts: institutions formally retained but substantively hollowed out, functioning less as arenas of contestation than as instruments of regime control.

Universities, long associated with academic freedom, underwent a similar transformation. Following the enactment of the National Security Law, students and faculty were required to sign loyalty pledges, politically sensitive courses were censored, and curricula were revised to embed "national education" and cultural nationalism (SCMP, 2021; BBC News, 2021; Lin, 2025; Global Voices, 2022). Once spaces for contestation and critical voice, universities became sites where silence and patriotic conformity were policed. As Kahl (2025h) notes, the epistemic architecture of power operates most decisively when institutions that should safeguard plurality instead administer obedience. What should have been fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, enabling scholars and students to inhabit contradiction, were reconfigured into instruments of domestication.

The closure of Apple Daily offers a parallel in the media sphere. Once a leading pro-democracy newspaper, its newsroom was raided in June 2021, assets frozen, and founder Jimmy Lai arrested under the National Security Law. Days later, the paper ceased publication. Amnesty International (2021) described the closure as a "dark day for press freedom," while Reuters (2021a) reported on staff being escorted out of the building as the final edition went to print. Here again, fiduciary obligations of candour and loyalty to the public were supplanted by loyalty to the state. As with the PTU, a fiduciary–epistemic scaffold was not merely dismantled but inverted, repurposed to transmit state-sanctioned silence (Kahl, 2025h).

From an epistemic perspective, these reversals are decisive. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds function only when they protect members' autonomy from coercion. Once inverted, they not only fail to buffer dissent but actively enforce conformity. Institutions that might have enabled plurality instead amplified the epistemic bargain of silence: compliance became the condition for continued belonging.

3.4 Epistemic Consequences

The combined effect of repression, counter-mobilisation, and institutional inversion was epistemic as much as political. Repression intensified dissonance: citizens were forced to confront the contradiction between their sympathies and the escalating risks of expression. Arrests, prosecutions, and loyalty oaths amplified the sense that dissent was not merely costly but existentially dangerous (Amnesty International, 2020; Kobayashi, Song, & Chan, 2021).

Counter-mobilisation recast conformity as virtue. State-backed rallies, amplified by pro-Beijing media, presented loyalty as patriotic duty. Citizens who withdrew from protest could rationalise their silence as responsible citizenship, while dissenters were framed as reckless or traitorous (Kurata, 2020; Purbrick, 2019). This narrative converted withdrawal into a moralised form of compliance: to remain silent was no longer shameful but commendable.

At the same time, clientelist bargains escalated across everyday life. Employers warned staff about their social media activity; teachers faced deregistration for politically sensitive lessons; students risked expulsion for protest slogans; families urged children to remain at home to avoid arrest (SCMP, 2019, 2020, 2021). Each sector became a site of control where epistemic autonomy was conditionally traded for security, employment, or familial belonging.

This dynamic resonates with Milgram's (1974) classic experiments on obedience to authority, which demonstrated how individuals resolve dissonance between conviction and command by collapsing into compliance. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, cognitive dissonance should be understood not merely as psychological discomfort but as an epistemic event — a lived signal of finitude and contradiction that demands resolution (Kahl, 2025b). In Hong Kong, repression and institutional inversion transformed this dissonance into epistemic fear: individuals came to see contradiction itself as dangerous, resolving it through silence or conformity rather than endurance.

The epistemic consequence was clear: plurality narrowed as dissonance collapsed into conformity or exit. With fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds dismantled or inverted, only a minority could endure contradiction, achieving bounded freedom at immense cost. For the majority, silence was reframed as loyalty, dissent as deviance — a shift that structurally redefined the possibilities of truth in public life.

3.5 Synthesis

The analysis of repression and counter-mobilisation reveals complementary dynamics. Repression explains deterrence: coercive escalation — from police violence to the National Security Law — raised the personal costs of dissent, making silence the rational response for many citizens (Amnesty International, 2020; Kobayashi, Song, & Chan, 2021). Counter-mobilisation explains reframing: state-backed rallies, media campaigns, and the dissolution of independent institutions recast conformity as patriotic virtue, turning withdrawal into a moralised act of loyalty (Kurata, 2020; Purbrick, 2019).

Together, these dynamics produced what I term epistemic capture. By this I mean the process through which repression and counter-mobilisation converge to restructure the knowledge environment so thoroughly that plurality becomes unsustainable. As elaborated in my Epistemic Architecture of Power (Kahl, 2025h), epistemic capture is not only silencing but the reconstitution of the very conditions of knowing: dissent is delegitimised, loyalty naturalised, and institutions inverted into channels of compliance. Epistemic capture occurs when:

- **Plurality narrows** — dissenting voices are criminalised, marginalised, or stigmatised.
- **Scaffolds invert** — universities, unions, and media once capable of dignifying dependence instead become conduits of compliance.
- **Clientelist bargains escalate** — individuals are compelled to exchange candour for survival in employment, education, or family life.

This convergence can only be fully explained by linking the micro- and meso-level dynamics: cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event (Kahl, 2025b) shows how contradiction is borne and pacified by individuals, while epistemic clientelism (Kahl, 2025e) shows how bargains of recognition and protection routinise silence. At scale, these mechanisms crystallise into epistemic capture — a systemic narrowing of plurality.

Authoritarian resilience research offers a comparative frame. As Gandhi (2008) demonstrates, regimes stabilise power not only through coercion but by embedding bargains within institutions. Schedler (2002, 2006) complements this by showing how manipulation and electoral authoritarian practices routinise compliance while preserving a façade of pluralism. Hong Kong exemplifies a sharper variant: dissent was not co-opted into regime institutions but inverted, with fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds transformed into mechanisms of obedience.

This synthesis clarifies why Hong Kong's plurality collapsed: repression and counter-mobilisation did not simply deter protest but reconstituted the epistemic conditions of public life. It also sets the stage for Chapter 4, which maps the specific clientelist dependencies and asymmetries — across employment, family, housing, and education — that embedded epistemic capture into daily life.

4. Clientelist Dependencies and Asymmetries

4.1 Employment and Professional Risks

Employment relations in Hong Kong during the unrest exemplify how epistemic clientelism constrained participation. Clientelist bargains are sharpest where livelihoods, licenses, and careers are dependent on institutional gatekeepers. In these domains, dissent was not only politically dangerous but professionally suicidal.

The corporate sector illustrates this logic vividly. In August 2019, Cathay Pacific issued warnings to employees after the Chinese aviation authority demanded staff be barred from flights if they supported the protests (SCMP, 2019). Employees reported scrubbing social media profiles of likes, reposts, or slogans, lest they jeopardise their jobs. Here, recognition and belonging in the workplace became contingent on silence: conformity was exchanged for employment continuity.

The education sector faced equally explicit sanctions. In October 2020, the Education Bureau deregistered a primary school teacher accused of disseminating "pro-independence" messages, effectively ending his career and barring him from all campuses (Hong Kong Free Press, 2020). The case sent a chilling signal: professional identity and income were hostage to political compliance. For teachers, dissonance between civic sympathy and professional risk was typically resolved by retreat into neutrality.

Medical workers, traditionally buffered by fiduciary codes of care, were also exposed. Amnesty International (2020) documented cases in which hospital staff treating injured protesters were questioned or monitored, creating a chilling effect that reframed professional duties as acts of political risk. Medics confronted an impossible double bind: loyalty to patients could be read as disloyalty to the state.

Together, these cases reveal how epistemic capture (Kahl, 2025i) operates through professional hierarchies. Occupations bound by licenses, corporate hierarchies, or state regulation were structurally vulnerable to clientelist bargains. Dissonance was pacified not by violence alone but by the routinised reminder that dissent imperilled careers, families, and futures. In this way, professional compliance amplified the asymmetries of the unrest: while young students endured contradiction at barricades, professionals rationalised silence as prudence.

4.2 Family and Generational Divides

If professional hierarchies tethered dissent to employment risk, families bound it to moral responsibility. In collectivist contexts, political action is not merely individual but relational: choices reverberate through kinship ties. Parents thus often discouraged children from joining marches, not only out of fear of repression but in the name of duty. A BBC 中文 report (2019) recorded one mother pleading with her son to avoid protests, explaining that she dreaded each march for fear he would be the next arrested. Here,

parental care was reframed into epistemic constraint: silence became the price of familial protection (Kahl, 2025d).

These injunctions drew on cultural scripts that long predate the unrest. Chinese proverbs such as 槍打出頭鳥 ("the bird that sticks out gets shot") or 木秀於林，風必摧之 ("the tree that rises above the forest is sure to be destroyed by the wind") normalise conformity by equating visibility with danger. Kwang-Kuo Hwang (2012) identifies how Confucian social relations embed such expectations, while Chan and Fu (2017) examine how online dynamics reinforced polarisation. Experimental evidence corroborates these mechanisms: Asch's (1951) classic findings demonstrate how even trivial group pressure can distort individual judgment, while Feldman (2003) shows how authoritarian orientations channel fear into conformity. Cross-cultural psychology confirms that conformity, relatedness, and autonomy are contextually adaptive rather than fixed. In Turkey and Japan, for example, conformity and relatedness often function as protective strategies, while autonomy emerges only in bounded contexts (Güngör, Besamusca, van de Vijver, & Kağıtçıbaşı, 2014). These findings resonate with Hong Kong, where familial injunctions rationalised conformity as responsibility, even as peer solidarities offered bounded autonomy.

Generational divides sharpened the dynamic. Surveys during the unrest revealed that younger Hongkongers were far more likely to sympathise with and participate in protests, while older generations tended toward caution or outright opposition (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019). For youth, solidarity with peers in Telegram groups and Lennon Walls dignified participation; for parents, responsibility for household stability rationalised silence. The result was intergenerational dissonance: young people framed resistance as authenticity, while parents cast withdrawal as duty.

These tensions did not remain abstract but manifested in measurable mental health burdens. Ni et al. (2020) demonstrated that repeated exposure to unrest significantly increased risks of depression and post-traumatic stress across cohorts, with younger participants disproportionately affected. Wong et al. (2021) extended this by showing how rumination — the tendency to dwell on potential harm to self and family — amplified the persistence of distress. Intergenerational conflict often served as a vector for such rumination: youths carried the double weight of state repression and familial reproach, while parents internalised fear as a moral argument against resistance.

From an epistemic clientelism perspective, families became micro-scaffolds of conformity. Protection was offered in exchange for obedience; dissonance was collapsed into filial loyalty (Kahl, 2025d). Yet intergenerational divides also opened space for resistance. As surveys confirmed, youth were consistently more willing to embrace protest than their elders (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019), and psychological studies show that rumination and intergenerational strain magnified this burden among younger cohorts (Ni et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021). For many, parental warnings reinforced rather than dissolved their sense of authenticity: fear was reinterpreted not as a reason to withdraw but as evidence that their struggle mattered. In this way, the household itself became a contested site of epistemic bargains — a terrain where freedom was negotiated at the dinner table as much as in the streets.

4.3 Housing and Precautionary Dependence

Housing, already one of Hong Kong's most acute social pressures, became a powerful mechanism of compliance during the unrest. For many citizens, participation in marches risked not only arrest but also the security of their homes. Tenants in public housing estates feared that visible dissent — from slogans on walls to damaged national flags — could result in surveillance or even jeopardise tenancy. The SCMP (2022) reported cases where residents discovered national and Hong Kong flags festooned across estates, only to worry that any damage or defacement might be blamed on them personally. Here, the private sphere of housing was reframed into a site of loyalty display, binding conformity to continued shelter.

Mortgage holders faced a parallel bind. With decades-long debt obligations, many middle-class professionals concluded that risking arrest could imperil not only their liberty but also the financial stability of their households. In a city where property is the primary marker of security and status, silence often became a rationalised bargain: dissent was traded away for the preservation of hard-won mortgages.

From the perspective of epistemic clientelism, housing created a form of precautionary dependence. The promise of stability — tenancy, mortgage protection, community reputation — was implicitly conditioned on visible loyalty or at least political discretion. Citizens did not need explicit threats; the structural precarity of Hong Kong's housing market made the risks self-evident. Silence was internalised as a form of insurance.

In this way, housing functioned as a clientelist scaffold inverted: rather than dignifying dependence by protecting plurality, it bound dependence to compliance. Dissonance between sympathy for protest and fear of dispossession was resolved by retreat into conformity. Housing thus exemplified how everyday material conditions — not just overt repression — narrowed the horizons of dissent.

4.4 Education and Institutional Betrayal

Education, once imagined as a space for critical thought and civic engagement, became a key site of institutional betrayal during the unrest. Universities and schools, under pressure from both the Hong Kong government and Beijing, imposed new loyalty requirements on students and staff. Teachers were deregistered for lesson plans that broached sensitive topics such as freedom of speech (Hong Kong Free Press, 2020), while students faced disciplinary warnings for participating in demonstrations or even forming human chains in support of the protests (SCMP, 2020). What might once have been defended as academic freedom was reframed as subversion.

The university sieges at CUHK and PolyU in November 2019 left a lasting stigma on student protest. While many young people defended campuses as symbolic strongholds of autonomy, the subsequent criminalisation of those actions meant that thousands carried the burden of arrest records, expulsions, or disrupted careers. These institutions, which should have provided fiduciary-epistemic scaffolds to dignify student dissent, instead amplified vulnerability. To enrol in a university was to risk becoming marked as disloyal.

From the lens of epistemic clientelism, this marked a profound inversion. Students had entrusted their institutions with the duty to safeguard intellectual openness. Instead, universities collapsed under political pressure, offering recognition only in exchange for silence. For many young people, this betrayal compounded the psychological toll: not only were they endangered by police violence, but they were also abandoned by the very institutions that ought to have defended their autonomy.

Education thus became a dual site of fear and conformity. Loyalty oaths, curriculum shifts, and punitive measures transformed schools and universities into instruments of epistemic capture. Rather than scaffolding plurality, they reinforced clientelist bargains: safety and professional futures were offered, but only to those willing to suppress dissent.

4.5 Asymmetries of Risk

The distribution of risk during the Hong Kong unrest was far from even. Youth, precarious workers, and students bore the brunt of frontline exposure. Over a quarter of those arrested were minors or under twenty-five, and the majority were under thirty (Teen Vogue, 2019). For this cohort, lacking mortgages, professional licenses, or established careers, participation was both more feasible and more existential: they had less to lose in conventional terms, yet faced disproportionate personal danger through arrests, imprisonment, and long-term stigma. Psychological research confirms that repeated exposure to repression and instability heightened rumination and mental health risks among youth, magnifying their vulnerability (Ni et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021). Their endurance exemplified bounded freedom, but at extraordinary psychological and social cost.

By contrast, many professionals and middle-class citizens rationalised silence or opted for exit. Employees in law, finance, and education weighed the risks of dismissal, deregistration, or blacklisting against the uncertain rewards of protest. As clientelist bargains tightened under the National Security Law, silence became a rationalised form of self-preservation, and emigration under the BN(O) scheme or other "lifeboat" policies became a common outlet (Sturge & Bolton, 2025; UK Data Service, 2025).

These asymmetries were not unique to Hong Kong. In Belarus after the 2020 presidential election, university students expelled for dissent carried the burden of resistance while professionals disengaged or sought safety abroad (Wilson, 2021). In Iran during the 2022–23 women-led protests, young women became visible symbols of defiance while many middle-class professionals, constrained by family and institutional obligations, withdrew (Amnesty International, 2023). In each case, the absence of robust fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds meant that dissent was borne by the most vulnerable — youth, women, and precarious workers — while the more secure rationalised their retreat.

The result in Hong Kong was a deepening generational cleavage. Surveys confirmed that younger Hongkongers were far more likely to sympathise with and join protests, while older generations tended toward caution or opposition (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019). While youth endured contradiction and took to the streets, elders often framed restraint as responsibility. This intergenerational division underscored the structural fragility of the movement: without institutional buffers to distribute both

physical and psychological risk more equitably, dissent remained uneven, unsustainable, and traumatic in its asymmetry.

4.6 Synthesis

Across employment, family, housing, and education, the collapse of fiduciary-epistemic scaffolds left citizens exposed to coercion and dependent on bargains of conformity. Professionals silenced themselves to protect careers, families reframed obedience as responsibility, tenants feared blacklisting, and universities shifted from incubators of plurality to enforcers of loyalty. Each domain redistributed risk downwards: the young, precarious, and unprotected were disproportionately left to endure contradiction on the front lines.

This systematic redistribution of risk explains why broad sympathy for the movement did not translate into sustained mobilisation. Clientelist bargains refracted dissonance into conformity, silence, or exit, leaving only a fragile minority willing — or able — to endure contradiction at extraordinary personal cost. The movement's fragility, therefore, was not simply the result of repression but of the absence of institutional buffers capable of dignifying dependence and sharing risk equitably.

These findings set the stage for Chapter 5, which moves beyond Hong Kong to comparative and normative lessons. Examining Belarus, Iran, Taiwan, and South Korea, it asks under what conditions scaffolds are dismantled, inverted, or preserved — and what this reveals about the institutional preconditions for sustaining plurality under authoritarian pressure.

5. Toward an Epistemic Constitution

5.1 Comparative Lessons: Collapse

The dismantling of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds in Hong Kong is not unique but exemplifies a broader pattern in authoritarian contexts. Comparative cases illustrate how repression systematically targets the very institutions that could buffer plurality, leaving dissent structurally undefended.

In Belarus, the aftermath of the disputed 2020 presidential election saw universities expel student leaders, professional associations silenced, and independent media such as *Tut.by* shuttered. Wilson (2021) shows how these measures severed the scaffolds of civil society, isolating dissenters and forcing many into exile. As in Hong Kong, repression was not limited to street protest but extended into the institutional domains that might have dignified contradiction, ensuring that plurality could not survive domestically.

In Iran, the women-led protests of 2022–23 revealed similar vulnerabilities. Amnesty International (2023) documents how students were expelled, professors dismissed, and doctors arrested or disciplined for treating injured demonstrators. These actions illustrate the epistemic logic of authoritarianism: to prevent solidarity from crystallising, regimes dismantle the very professions and associations that might provide

moral and organisational scaffolding. Young women became powerful symbols of defiance, but without institutional buffers their resistance was met with overwhelming violence and repression.

Both cases underscore the comparative lesson: movements collapse when fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are destroyed or inverted. Sympathy and courage alone cannot sustain plurality. Without institutions capable of dignifying dependence, dissonance collapses into conformity, silence, or exile.

5.2 Comparative Lessons: Resilience

If authoritarian collapse illustrates the vulnerability of dissent, East Asian cases of democratisation highlight the converse: how fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can preserve plurality even under authoritarian pressure.

In Taiwan, the late twentieth century saw gradual reforms that strengthened university autonomy and expanded civil society. Wakabayashi (1997) traces how universities, once instruments of authoritarian control, were incrementally granted protections that insulated them from direct state interference. These institutional reforms allowed campuses to function as partial sanctuaries for debate and activism, buffering pluralist practices during a time of political closure. Civil society organisations — including professional associations and opposition networks — further reinforced these scaffolds, enabling democratic practices to survive and later expand.

In South Korea, democratic transition was catalysed not only by mass protest but also by the scaffolding role of professional associations and independent media. Bravell (2023) shows how legal and medical associations, alongside oppositional newspapers such as *The Hankyoreh*, created institutional platforms where dissenting voices could persist. These bodies did more than report or criticise; they defended members against arbitrary authority, dignifying dependence by embedding duties of loyalty and candour into professional practice. Their presence meant that when mass mobilisation crested in the 1980s, it did not collapse into silence but gained the institutional anchoring needed for endurance.

These trajectories echo Levitsky and Way's (2010) account of competitive authoritarianism: while many regimes retain formal pluralist institutions, their function is inverted to legitimise authority rather than constrain it. Taiwan and South Korea represent the inverse path — institutions that once enforced compliance were gradually reconstituted into genuine scaffolds of plurality. They also resonate with Slater's (2010) analysis of authoritarian leviathans: where strong states often entrench domination by co-opting institutions, Taiwan and South Korea illustrate how the same organisational density can, under pressure, be redirected to protect plurality rather than suppress it.

Together, these cases demonstrate that resilience does not arise from bravery alone. What preserved plurality was the existence of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds: universities, associations, and media that functioned as trustees of dissent. These institutions transformed necessary reliance into resilience, illustrating how democracy consolidates when dependence is dignified rather than exploited.

5.3 Democratic Erosion in Established Contexts

The vulnerabilities identified in Hong Kong are not unique to authoritarian settings. In established democracies, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are also under strain.

In the United States, the second Trump administration (2024–) has escalated direct attacks on universities. Elite institutions such as Harvard, Columbia, and Brown were threatened with the loss of federal research grants unless they restructured programmes on race, gender, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In April 2025, officials announced plans to freeze more than $500 million in federal funding to Brown University (Reuters, 2025a). In May, Harvard faced a freeze on billions of dollars in National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, destabilising laboratories and international consortia (Reuters, 2025b). These measures embedded institutions in protracted legal battles and forced them into clientelist bargains: comply to survive, or resist at the risk of collapse. New state-level laws targeting DEI, tenure, and academic programmes signalled a structural chilling effect on universities (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025). Faculty unions and professional associations have pushed back, framing academic freedom as integral to democratic resilience (American Association of University Professors, 2025). Commentators have underscored the broader implications: free inquiry and academic autonomy are under siege not only in the United States but globally (Delaney & Hughes, 2025). Parallel restrictions have also extended into schools, where civil liberties groups warn that free expression is increasingly at risk (Strum, 2025). Commentators further cautioned that museums and cultural institutions could be the next targets of this campaign (Financial Times, 2025).

In the United Kingdom, erosion has taken a subtler form. Higher-education journalism increasingly operates under clientelist capture, where commercial and political dependencies shape coverage of universities. Investigative reporting into governance failures is rare, while favourable narratives secure advertising, partnerships, or access. This dynamic exemplifies epistemic clientelism within democratic settings: media trade candour for survival, narrowing plurality (Kahl, 2025g).

The comparative lesson is clear. Democratic erosion does not require overt authoritarian repression. As Bermeo (2016) argues, backsliding often proceeds through incremental institutional decay rather than sudden breakdowns, hollowing out the capacity of citizens to contest authority. Levitsky and Way's (2010) account of competitive authoritarianism highlights how even formally democratic systems can be bent into conditional pluralism. Feldman's (2003) theory of authoritarianism as the enforcement of social conformity through moralised binaries clarifies the mechanism: dissent is reframed as irresponsible or dangerous, while compliance is valorised as civic duty. Under such conditions, fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds—universities, professions, and media—internalise clientelist bargains, sacrificing candour and accountability for protection or advantage.

5.4 Philosophical Stakes

The collapse of scaffolds in Hong Kong underscores a deeper philosophical point: freedom cannot be reduced to independence or heroic autonomy. Human life is inevitably entangled in relations of dependence

—on families, professions, universities, and media. The question is whether these dependencies are structured to domesticate or to dignify. Joseph Raz (1986) argued that freedom is valuable not as mere non-interference but as the ability to act within a structure of authority that secures meaningful options. This perspective complements the fiduciary–epistemic account: dependence is unavoidable, but its value depends on how institutions structure and sustain it.

As C. A. J. Coady (1992) demonstrated in his classic study of testimony, human knowledge is irreducibly dependent: most of what we know rests on the word of others. Alvin Goldman (1999) extended this insight, showing that knowledge is not merely interpersonally dependent but socially distributed and institutionally mediated. James Hardwig (1985) went further, arguing that epistemic dependence is not an occasional weakness but the normal condition of modern inquiry, where trust in others' expertise is indispensable. These accounts converge on a core truth: epistemic dependence is structural. The challenge is institutional—to ensure that such dependence is scaffolded by duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability, so that testimony and expertise enable plurality rather than silence it. From this perspective, freedom is best understood as dignified dependence: the condition in which reliance on others is safeguarded by fiduciary–epistemic duties.

Democratic freedom is not merely aggregative but epistemic: it requires institutions that enable inclusive inquiry, uptake of diverse perspectives, and correction of error—the core of Anderson's 'epistemology of democracy' (2006). These are precisely the functions fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds secure. When they collapse, plurality is no longer protected as a fiduciary good, and contradiction is left to be borne by isolated individuals. The psychological consequences in Hong Kong were stark. Longitudinal and cohort studies revealed elevated rates of depression, post-traumatic stress, and rumination among those repeatedly exposed to repression and instability (Ni et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021). The absence of scaffolds meant that the burden of contradiction was displaced onto vulnerable individuals, compounding trauma and accelerating retreat.

Here the ontological register of dissonance becomes decisive. As Kahl (2025b) argues, cognitive dissonance should not be read merely as psychological discomfort but as an epistemic event—the lived signal of finitude at the edge of knowledge. To endure dissonance is to face the solitude of contradiction; to collapse it is to retreat into conformity. Epistemic fear accelerates collapse, transforming dissonance into silence or obedience. Without scaffolds to dignify dependence, individuals are abandoned to bear contradiction alone, and most rationally—or despairingly—choose retreat.

Ron Barnett (2000) has argued that universities fulfil their highest vocation when they embrace supercomplexity: cultivating the capacity to inhabit ambiguity and contradiction rather than collapsing them into simplicity or dogma. Hong Kong's failure illustrates what happens when scaffolds refuse this vocation: contradiction is not held in common but displaced onto vulnerable individuals.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice illuminates the normative harm of such collapse. When institutions deny recognition to dissenters as knowers, or silence their testimonies, they not only suppress truth but erode the very conditions of shared freedom. Hong Kong's protesters encountered this

injustice directly: their voices dismissed as illegitimate, their experiences criminalised, their knowledge subordinated to state narratives.

This failure can also be read through Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy. As Antonia Darder (2017) argues in her reworking of Freire, a pedagogy of love requires institutions that nurture critical voice and solidarity rather than domesticate them. Hong Kong's collapse reveals the inverse: education, media, and professions transmitted conformity rather than cultivating emancipatory capacities.

Albert Hirschman's (1970) triad of exit, voice, and loyalty captures the resulting asymmetries. Youth disproportionately embraced voice, enduring dissonance at immense cost. Professionals rationalised exit through emigration. Many others settled into coerced loyalty, reframing conformity as responsibility or patriotism. These pathways were not mere rational choices under repression but responses to the absence of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that might have dignified dissent and made endurance sustainable.

The philosophical stakes are therefore clear. Freedom requires neither the denial of dependence nor the idolisation of autonomy, but the institutional embedding of plurality within dependence. By integrating the ontological (dissonance as existential event), the psychological (clientelist bargains and the routinisation of epistemic fear), and the institutional (fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as durable protectors), we see freedom not as given but as constructed. Without such scaffolds, contradiction collapses into conformity, and freedom is hollowed into obedience. With them, dependence is dignified, contradiction sustained, and plurality preserved.

5.5 Toward an Epistemic Constitution

If Hong Kong illustrates the collapse of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, the comparative lesson is normative: freedom requires their deliberate construction. Just as liberal democracies are underpinned by written constitutions that bind political power, pluralist societies require an epistemic constitution—institutional arrangements that bind epistemic power to duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability.

In such a framework, universities, professional associations, and media outlets are not neutral service providers but trustees of plurality. Their legitimacy derives not only from technical expertise or market performance but from fiduciary commitments to preserve the conditions of dissent. A university that silences contradiction, a union that capitulates to pressure, or a newsroom that echoes propaganda fails in its epistemic office no less than a corrupted court fails in its judicial one.

At the heart of this proposal lies the claim that plurality is a fiduciary good. It is not an optional flourish of democratic life but the very condition of freedom as dignified dependence. By embedding duties of epistemic candour (to disclose truth), loyalty (to constituencies rather than regimes or markets), and accountability (to wider publics), scaffolds dignify dependence and make contradiction sustainable.

The epistemic constitution thus names both a principle and a programme. As principle, it insists that all institutions exercising epistemic authority are bound by fiduciary duties. As programme, it calls for legal, professional, and cultural reforms to institutionalise these duties: peer review and editorial independence

secured against capture, professional self-governance insulated from coercion, and universities reconstituted as trustees of plurality rather than as instruments of market or state.

Without such scaffolds, dependence degenerates into clientelism, and plurality collapses into obedience. With them, citizens can endure contradiction without ruin, and freedom acquires institutional form.

5.6 Conclusion

Hong Kong demonstrates with stark clarity how the absence — or inversion — of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds collapses plurality into silence. Mass sympathy could not sustain mobilisation once universities, unions, and media ceased to buffer dissent. In their absence, citizens resolved contradiction through conformity, exit, or fragile endurance, leaving only fragments of resistance to face an overwhelming state.

The comparative evidence shows this trajectory is not unique. Belarus, Iran, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom all reveal the same lesson in different registers: freedom does not endure by courage alone but depends on institutions that dignify dependence and sustain plurality. As Bermeo (2016) notes, democratic backsliding often unfolds gradually, through subtle institutional erosion rather than overt rupture. Levitsky and Way (2010) emphasise how even formally democratic systems can erode into competitive authoritarianism when institutions are hollowed out and opposition is delegitimised. Feldman (2003) helps clarify the mechanism: conformity is enforced not only through coercion but through moralised binaries that equate dissent with irresponsibility and loyalty with virtue. Hong Kong's collapse, and parallel pressures in the US and UK, exemplify these dynamics across regime types.

The philosophical stakes can now be summarised across three registers:

- **Ontology**. Cognitive dissonance is not simply discomfort but an epistemic event — a signal of finitude and contradiction at the core of human knowing (Kahl, 2025b). When institutions collapse, individuals face contradiction alone, and most retreat.

- **Psychology**. Epistemic fear reframes contradiction as unbearable risk. Clientelist bargains routinise retreat by tying survival to silence, refracting fear into conformity or exit. Crucially, the collapse of scaffolds redistributed not only material dangers but psychological burdens: youth and precarious actors disproportionately endured trauma, rumination, and long-term mental health risks (Wong et al., 2021), while professionals rationalised withdrawal or emigration.

- **Institution**. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds transform necessary dependence into dignified resilience. By embedding duties of candour, loyalty, and accountability, they enable citizens to inhabit contradiction without collapse.

Taken together, these registers explain why Hong Kong's plurality dissolved, but also why resilience is possible elsewhere. Freedom is not reducible to heroic autonomy. It is an institutional achievement — an

epistemic constitution through which dependence is dignified, contradiction sustained, and plurality preserved.

This returns us to the question posed in the prologue: why did a movement with such overwhelming sympathy collapse so swiftly? What I could once name only as repression, exhaustion, and fear can now be seen more clearly. Protest failed because citizens were bound into epistemic bargains without scaffolds to dignify dependence. The lesson, therefore, is not only diagnostic but prescriptive: freedom cannot rest on bravery alone. It requires fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds capable of sustaining plurality — materially and psychologically — against collapse, and of resisting the incremental backsliding and authoritarian logic of conformity that threaten democracies no less than autocracies.

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Author Contact

Email: peter.kahl@juris.vc

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/

Research Gate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Kahl

PhilPapers: https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl

GitHub: https://github.com/Peter-Kahl

Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ

Blog: https://pkahl.substack.com/

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