

Women’s fight against misogynist violence and the search for a new humanism

by Terry Moon

Talk for the March 29, 2021, Chicago Local meeting

This talk won’t be repeating what was in the Lead “[Women from India to the USA fight against misogynist violence](#),” or in the article wrote the day of the massacre of the seven women—six of them Asian—and one man at the massage parlor in Georgia, titled “[Massage parlor killings were a racist femicide](#),” but they are background to this talk and you can find them on our website.

I. THE REALITY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND THE MEANING OF THEIR RESISTANCE

The reality of violence against women tells you a lot about just exactly what it means to be a woman in the world today. Mostly it tells you that women are not seen as actually human, that is, they are not viewed as being as human as white men, especially when it comes to thinking. Women are not seen as human in much the same way that Black people in the U.S. and much of the West are not seen as human and how Black women and men and women and men of color are seen as less than white women who are already seen as less than human. This is important, but not so much because of what it means in terms of how women are oppressed. The importance is seen in how women are fighting that oppression. Because the attacks against women are attacks on our humanness, the fights against them are often expressions of the desire and demand for a humanism that is a partial pathway to a new and different kind of world.

The incredibly cruel treatment that women experience reveals why having a vision of a different world is a requirement for survival. One recent example of that cruelty is that just this month (March 2021) Afghanistan’s Ministry of Education imposed [a ban on schoolgirls singing](#). They banned girls 12 and older from singing at public events if men were present, nor could they have a male singing instructor. The lie given as a reason for this outrage was so that the girls could focus on school, but then why not also ban boys from singing so they too could focus? Women fought back on social media posting themselves singing with the hashtag: #IAmMySong.

That great hashtag reveals at least two things: it expresses how people often feel when they sing; and it shows how important music is to being a human being. The outcry against the ban was so great, including charges that the government was no different than the Taliban, that it has forced the government to rethink it—which doesn’t mean they won’t impose it anyway. One has to ask: what is the real reason to deprive girls of such joy that singing and performing music gives?

Women’s resistance spans the myriad repressions we encounter, nor is that resistance confined to injustices that only women experience. Today and throughout history women were and are involved in every revolution, not only to further the general cause of the revolution, but to make sure that the revolution speaks to women’s needs too. What is going on in Myanmar/Burma right now shows us this truth.

II. RESISTANCE DURING REVOLT: BURMA

A protester made clear to [Aljazeera](#) that “One of the first groups to protest were women’s labor unions and garment workers along with young women activists.” Women, including

teenagers, are on the front lines, which means they are targeted by the military, shot down in the streets or among the thousands arrested, where they stand a large chance of being raped by their captors. Many youths on the front lines declare that they have no fear of death or arrest. Striking is how widespread this fearlessness is. A woman member of the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions spoke for many saying: “I do not have any fear of being arrested. I am fighting for justice. I am fighting for democracy. I am fighting for our generation.”

Fighting for freedom along with men is itself revolutionary as it shatters sexist stereotypes. Burmese culture is so misogynist that the military demands “modest dress for proper ladies”; a tradition is to separate the clothes that cover women from the waist down and wash them separately from men’s, because you know... contamination. Using this idiocy against the military, “people have strung up clotheslines of women’s sarongs...to protect protest zones, knowing that some men are loath to walk under them.” As one 28-year-old woman medical doctor “who has dodged bullets in Mandalay” told [The New York Times](#): “Young women are now leading the protests because we have a maternal nature and we can’t let the next generation be destroyed. We don’t care about our lives. We care about our future generations.” Also widespread—along with an absence of fear, or more likely a determination to persist in spite of it—was a critical concern for the next generation. This reflects the fact that the young people fighting now are the generation that experienced the worst that the Burmese military has to offer and the beginnings of a very weak democracy that only lasted a few years. They know the suffering the next generation can expect if they don’t transform it.

Over one third of Burma’s population are ethnic minorities, several already fighting the government. One of the important things to come from the revolt is that those fighting the government who are part of the Buddhist majority, or Bamar ethnic majority, are reaching out to the Karen, Kachin, Shan, Rakhine, and other ethnic groups and of course the Rohingya and vice versa. A woman Kachin saw the relationship between the suffering of ethnic minorities and women: “Minorities know what it feels like, where discrimination leads. And as a woman, we are still considered as a second sex. That must be one of the reasons why women activists seem more committed to rights issues.”

In the first days after the government coup, young women demonstrated in Yangon dressed in gowns, calling it a [“princess protest”](#). But now the military has gunned down demonstrators, shooting many in the head and heart, including children, randomly shooting into homes, disappearing hundreds and murdering well over 1,000 by the time of this meeting. In response, many students and young women and men have taken the struggle to another level including mass strikes, bringing the economy in some areas to a halt, and taking to the jungle to train as revolutionary soldiers. They deserve our solidarity.

What can we learn from the opposition in Burma regarding humanism? One thing is that Hegel was right when he said “the Idea [of freedom] is not so feeble as merely to have a right or an obligation to exist without actually existing.”¹ If that Idea of freedom exists nowhere else in Burma, it exists in the minds and actions of the new generation of revolutionaries arising there. Another aspect of humanism is the *expansion* of the idea of freedom—that in Burma it now has to include women and ethnic minorities. We see it in the determination that a new generation

¹ *Hegel’s Logic*, by G.W.F. Hegel, forward by J.M Findlay (Oxford at the Clarendon Press), 1975, p. 10.

will not have to suffer what they have, and that they are willing to die so that those who are children now can live in freedom.

III. THE DOMINATION OF RAPE CULTURE AND THE FLAWED FIGHT AGAINST IT: AUSTRALIA AND BRITAIN

In our limited time, I want to take up briefly what happened in Australia. and Britain. In Australia the critique of rape culture was of the highest levels of government. On March 14 tens of thousands of mostly women participated in a [March4Justice in 47 locations across Australia](#). What set it off was the rape of Brittany Higgins by a center-right Liberal Party minister. After she spoke up, four other women came forward who were also raped by the same man. Significantly, march leaders refused to meet with Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the Parliament House, instead demanding that he meet them at the rally—which he did not do.

That the old-boys-club that is Morrison’s government persists was seen on March 25—that’s just Thursday of last week—when Morrison refused to “[confirm or deny whether his staff spread negative information](#) about Higgins’s partner to the media after” she complained. On March 23 the news came out that staffers at the Parliament were bringing prostitutes to the Parliament building for Parliament members. Morrison said he was “[shocked and disgusted.](#)” I find that hard to believe because also, on the 23, it was revealed that a [Parliament staffer masturbated](#) on the desk of a woman MP, and he wasn’t the only one! Morrison has steadfastly refused to take any responsibility for the misogynist culture that flourished under his leadership.

In her remarks to the marchers, [Brittany Higgins said](#): “We are here because it is unfathomable that we are still having to fight this same stale, tired fight.” Women the world over know the feeling, but the problem with the March4Justice was that it appears that it was a very white affair. That is unfortunate because Aborigine women certainly have first-hand experience with rape and with racism. There are Black feminist groups there but as far as I could see, they were not represented in this march and were not speakers. I could be wrong and I hope I am because without that dimension of women who experience the worst of what society dishes out and have been fighting for their freedom for decades, whatever change does take place will not be a total change.

That fatal flaw also seemed, at least from a U.S. vantage point, to plague the recent events in Britain as well.

What sent thousands of women into the streets in Britain was the murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard. Everard was kidnapped on March 3 when she was walking home from a friend’s house and then killed by police officer Wayne Couzen. A planned rally, first okayed and then cancelled by police, still drew thousands to London’s Clapham Common who wanted to show their grief and anger. But at the rally the Metropolitan Police tried to break it up and manhandled many in the crowd, including at least one reporter, throwing some women to the ground. Four protesters were arrested.

There has been much written about the fact that Everard was what is called “the perfect victim.” She was white, she hadn’t been drinking, and she was abducted and killed by a stranger. What many talked about on Twitter and Facebook, at the rallies and memorials, was how this could happen to any woman. [As one 28-year-old woman](#) who lives near where Everard was taken said, it is wrong to blame women: “We’re already doing all the right things. We walk

in sensible shoes, have our keys out, don't listen to music with both earphones, we're already doing all those things."

It is true that it could happen to any woman, and also true is that violence against women, be it in the U.S. or the UK, happens to women of color at a greater rate than to white women. Again, it appears from here that the groups working on the rally in Clapham Common did not reach out to the many Black women's organizations in London. But what they *did* do is to challenge the idea that more police were the answer.

IV. THE POWER OF BLACK LIVES MATTER: BLACK MASSES AS VANGUARD

Amanda Taub, in a remarkable piece in *The New York Times* titled "[After Sarah Everard's Killing, Women's Groups Want Change, Not More Policing](#)," wrote of how women galvanized around Everard's death are not only rejecting the common proposal that more police are the solution to violence against women, but see police as a dangerous part of the problem. And it is not alone that Everard was killed by a cop, or even that the police savaged women at her memorial rally. What these women in the UK are concluding now, Taub writes, is that "the police are an active threat. Women's safety and freedom, they argue, can come only from deeper social changes..." The truth is that "[the second-most-reported complaint against police officers in the United States is for sexual misconduct](#). They are also [disproportionately likely to commit intimate-partner violence](#)." The same is true in Britain, India, Pakistan, and most likely the world over.

All of this is happening at the same time as Britain is trying to pass a police and crime bill "which would create sweeping new restrictions on protests and grant broad new powers to the police..." What happened around Sarah Everard's murder has created a huge backlash against passage of this bill and some think that it may have dealt it a fatal blow. We can only hope it has.

What we've learned from the struggles in Australia against sexual harassment, rape and abuse; and from Britain about rape and femicide is that women want to live in a world that sees them as human beings and that the problem they face is systemic to the entire society.

British women's critique of the police brings us back to the U.S. and why it is that Marxist-Humanism made a category of "Black masses as vanguard."

It's important to remember when talking of women's struggles how key was the Black movement in the U.S. to the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement. Many of the WLM founders were activists in the Civil Rights Movement and along with the understanding that the Idea of freedom was what sustained and drove that movement came the realization that freedom also must mean freedom for women—women of color and white—free not only from the scourge of racism but also from sexism. That was another example of the expansion of the Idea of freedom. In the U.S. the Black movement has been a carrier of the Idea of freedom, always keeping it front and center.

V. REVOLUTION MUST BE CONTINUOUS AND TOTAL FROM THE START: THE NECESSITY OF PHILOSOPHY

When George Floyd was killed, millions the world over, people of color and white, *especially the youth*, saw—some in a flash—how racism was entrenched throughout their societies and how it was lethal, how it was wrong. The demonstrations that followed and the brutal police

response to peaceful passionate demonstrations drove the point home. And, like the Women's Marches, they spread across the globe. Black Lives Matter, like racism, is now a global phenomenon.

Black Lives Matter [has never been separate](#) from women's struggles for freedom. It was begun by women, Queers, disabled and Transgender people, who brought something new to the freedom movements in the U.S. Black Lives Matter founders have refused to be erased as leaders of a movement, to succumb to the appeal of "leaderlessness." Insisting on being who and what they are, they continue to break new ground in the long struggle for freedom in the U.S.

That masses of women who are *not* leftists are now arguing for the need for "deeper social changes," represents something new. Now sexism, like racism, is comprehended on a massive scale as a systemic part of our cultures and of how countries run their economies and do business, that is, capitalism. That comprehension cannot be satisfied with more police or laws telling women what to wear or how much to drink, or building more battered women shelters, or funding more rape crisis hotlines.

A question that each of these struggles raise is what is the nature of these deeper social changes and what does it take to realize them?

News and Letters Committees talks a lot about the need for the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism. How does that help us? Marxist-Humanism insists that the movement from practice—which is what we've been discussing—is itself a form of theory. Thus, it behooves us to try to see what flows from the movement that is new and gives a forward direction. We've tried to do that somewhat tonight.

But philosophy also has something to offer because it is a synthesis of the history of revolutionary thought and action. All those expansions of freedom are brought into the world in a permanent way by making categories of them, they are saved so they can be built on in the future. One of the things we've learned from women's struggles is that revolution must be total from the start because it must include us. This sounds simple but is not because "total" means different things and expands as history unfolds. "Total" for those who made the Russian Revolution did not mean the same thing as it would mean in our day. It did include women, but not in the way we're talking about today. It certainly did not include LGBTQI+ people in 1917, or for that matter a total revolution wouldn't have included LGBTQI+ people in the mid-1960s when the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement began, although it clearly does today. We do not know today what a total revolution would mean 10, 20, or 30 years from now, what new forces would arise.

[One young Burmese woman](#), who is about to start military training in the jungle, was reaching for this kind of totality when she said, "The security forces are following orders and lack a greater purpose. We have our political faith, we have our dreams. This is the fight in which we have to use our brains and our bodies."

The movements from practice and Marxist-Humanist philosophy tell us that revolution must be total from the start. It also tells us that revolution must be permanent. It cannot stop at the overthrow of a tyrant, or a bloodthirsty army like Burma's Tatmadaw, although that would be a great start. It also cannot stop at changing some economic relations. We live in an age where we can see that no revolution has actually freed women. Women have shown us through their struggles and demands that to satisfy us, revolution must be so deep as to transform human

relationships so they, in fact, actually *become human*. What we're talking about here is Marx's concept of revolution in permanence.

Lastly, what philosophy brings to the struggle is a glorious idea of what it means to be a human being, which is what revolution needs to be about, how to *realize* that humanity. [Marx talked about it](#) as "the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces....The absolute working-out of humanity's creative potentialities...the development of all human powers as such [as] the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where one does not reproduce one's self in one specificity, but produces one's totality? Strives not to remain something one has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?"

Marx was talking about what a free human being could be. Creating the environment where that could take place is what the goal of a revolution should be, I think, if it is to free not only women but all of us. Raya Dunayevskaya put it this way in the last two paragraphs of her book, *Philosophy and Revolution*:

"The reality is stifling. The transformation of reality has a dialectic all its own. It demands a unity of the struggles for freedom with a philosophy of liberation. Only then does the elemental revolt release new sensibilities, new passions, and new forces—a whole new human dimension.

"Ours is the age that can meet the challenge of the times when we work out so new a relationship of theory to practice that the proof of the unity is in the Subject's own self-development. Philosophy and revolution will first then liberate the innate talents of men and women who will become whole. Whether or not we recognize that this is the task history has 'assigned' to our epoch, it is a task that remains to be done."