
The Participation of Women in Times of Revolution

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She/Her/Hers

"My name is Elizabeth Mallonee, and I am a senior at CSUDH majoring in anthropology with a concentration in archaeology. My main research interests are the sacred spaces and landscapes of Prehistoric Northwest Europe, particularly megalithic structures. I chose to write about the role of women in revolutions because I found it interesting that at different points in history and in different countries, women were facing the same issues."

When one thinks of a social or political revolution, the picture that is commonly brought to mind is one of a physical display of aggression – fists in the air and the strength of the people against their oppressors. For those with access to any source of media during 2019 and the first half of 2020, these descriptions of revolutionary iconography have become commonplace. Since the start of the protests in Hong Kong in March 2019 opposing a bill proposal to extradite Hong Kongers to China for trial – a move that seemingly accelerates the 2047 Deal to absorb democratic Hong Kong into authoritarian mainland China in the year 2047 – and the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States that began in May 2020 over the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, these images seem to appear everywhere. Women have always played a significant role in political movements, many at the forefront of the fight, but their work in these movements can often become trivialized by history. The following paper will discuss how the arrival of the hierarchical separation of the sexes occurred and discuss the implications of that separation on the work of women in

revolutionary activity. This paper will also examine how women have found authority in movements within these constraints.

A look back on the many political movements and uprisings from the past two hundred years, will definitely reveal the stories of great men, but information about the great women that worked in these movements is very seldomly found. From the French Revolution, the 1916 Easter Uprising and 1923 Civil War in Ireland, the occupation of Wounded Knee and Alcatraz by the American Indian Movement in the 1960s and 70s, women have always been major parts of the story. It is easy to wonder why, if women play an integral role in such movements, are their participation not recognized in the same way as their male counterparts. One possible answer to that question might be found in the work by American anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock. In her article, “Women’s Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution,” Leacock states that with the introduction of capitalism, the previously equal and valued role of women in egalitarian societies are diminished and “. . . transformed women’s work from public production to private household services” (Leacock 1978, 247-75). In egalitarianism, men and women have equally autonomous roles where the individual is responsible for the dispersal of the goods that they produce, but as capitalism emerged and those goods became a product of commerce rather than for subsistence, hierarchical gender roles begin to emerge

(Moore 2019, 228). During the 1950s, Leacock conducts ethnographic and historical research with the Montagnais-Naskapi in Labrador in North America. The Montagnais-Naskapi transitioned into the fur-trading economy from an egalitarian society, and she observes that the women have less control over the trapping and distribution of furs, and thus their role in society diminishes and centers more towards unpaid domestic duties, while becoming dependent on men as the heads of the household (Moore 2019, 208). Leacock goes on to describe the eventual separation of the sexes into the spheres of public and private life, which she refers to as “the dichotomization of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres” (Leacock 1978, 247-75). This paradigm is still reflected in many cultures today and has seeped into the participation of women in political movements.

There are many instances throughout history where women participated in public demonstrations and acts of violence that are typically performed by men in the public sphere, but by and large, the work done by women is conducted in the private realm. Jobs like espionage, organizing, documenting, and taking care of elders and children are often designated to women. Because these positions are vital to the effectiveness of any grassroots political movement, the men of the organization would appreciate the women’s efforts, but the outside world that might have a difficult time respecting these jobs and would subsequently undervalue the authority of

women's roles. In the case of the occupation of Alcatraz in San Francisco, California in 1969-1971, it is the media that overlooks the significance of these essential jobs (Hightower-Langston 2003, 118). In her paper, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," anthropologist Dr. Donna Hightower-Langston points out this exact issue by arguing that, "The work of women was essential in the daily running of the island, including running the community kitchen, school, and health care center. Yet male figures such as Richard Oakes (Mohawk), head of San Francisco Native American Student group and . . . John Trudell (Santee Lakota), who ran the radio broadcast from Alcatraz, received more media attention and remain better known to this day" (Hightower-Langston 2003, 118). Although the women are responsible for keeping the camp running for the 56,000 individuals who occupied the island with no electricity or running water, it is the men who are made the faces of the movement, thus maintaining the model of men in the public sphere and women in the private sphere (Hightower-Langston 2003, 118). Some may point out that one of the men, Richard Oakes, was in a leadership position and would naturally be designated as a representative to the media. Although this is true, Oakes left a few months into the occupation while LaNada Boyer/Means, the first Native person admitted into the University of California, Berkeley, and head of the Native American Student

Organization at Berkeley, stayed the entire nineteen months of the occupation but was not given the same distinction in the press as her male colleagues as an authoritative public figure in the movement (Hightower-Langston 2003, 120).

The downplaying of women's roles from outside of the revolutionary's own movement did not only happen at Alcatraz. It has occurred many times throughout history and can be a detrimental mistake to the opposition. In the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland against British rule of the country, members of the radical paramilitary women's group Inghinidhe na hÉireann were arrested during the Rising on Easter week in 1916. While imprisoned, the British army miscalculated the female prisoners they had in their organization (Collins 2020). The British eventually let most of the women go, believing that they were "silly little girls" who "had been misled into taking part in the Rising, or 'had joined in out of a desire for 'excitement' or sense that it was 'something to be in' rather than a political conviction'" (Conaway 2019, 99). Due to the undervaluing of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann members, the women went out into the streets angrier and ready to continue their part in the war. To gain more support for their movement, the women partook in the vital tasks of propaganda, fundraising, and intelligence (Collins 2020). Because these tasks were done in the private sphere, particularly intelligence and espionage, women could enter parties,

institutions, etc. and be inconspicuous (Collins 2020). By playing into the traditional division of the sexes, the women gained supporters, funds, and information that men otherwise could not have accomplished, aiding the movement to eventual success.

Even though the women of Inghinidhe na hÉireann used the trivialization of their work to their benefit, that is not always an option. Today, the opposition of grassroots movements attempt to disparage and discredit the presence of women during protests, marches, and other demonstrations by using verbal and sexual harassment, – particularly by militarized police in Hong Kong and Los Angeles. According to authors Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, in their chapter, “Women and Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris,” “. . . public man was a self-sacrificing hero, while women who assumed roles in the public arenas were ‘public women,’ courtesans and prostitutes” (Gay Levy 1992, 80). Essentially, if a woman is participating in the public sphere rather than the private, she is still something that belongs to men and the male domain. It can be surmised that because women are stepping ‘out of their place’ and into this male designated space, they are more suitable for ridicule and harassment. These violations against women in protest are conducted to display power, control, and shame over the victim and to make them question their place in the movement. Although this might have been an effective tactic in years past, women

are speaking more openly about sexual assault. Sexual harassment by both male and female officers have become so rampant that the hashtag *#ProtestToo* was created for victims to communicate and discuss their assaults from the Hong Kong police, which, garnered a response of 30,000 people to come together and protest these offenses (Carvalho 2019, 3). The protests in Hong Kong and the United States are unrelated, but the same tactics of unnecessary strip searches, groping, and not allowing women to cover their exposed bodies while in police custody are also being used by the Los Angeles Police Department (Rector 2020, 3). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the LAPD conducted unnecessary strip searches on female detainees in violation of the LA curfew that went into effect at the end of May and early April during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (Rector 2020, 1). These violations include aggressively patting down of female detainee’s breasts and vaginas, and verbal harassment, which included the singling out of a woman they recognized from social media, “talking openly about her body, [and] openly ogling her body” in front of the other officers and detainees while in a police bus (Rector 2020, 3).

Regardless of any bedevilment that they might face for entering the public realm of revolutions, women still show up. Some are just learning the value of participating, and others are armed and ready to move forward by any means necessary, even violence. Protests in Hong Kong and the French

revolution in the eighteenth-century employed violence to make headway in their respective movements. In Hong Kong, protesters use makeshift weapons like bricks, bamboo poles, and petrol bombs against the militarized police (Carvalho 2019, 7). As the protests continue, women are seeing their value and validity when participating at the frontlines in the battles against the militarized police. A female protester in Hong Kong named Stephy describes her experience, “After two or three protests, I started seeing many more girls coming in front, instead of hiding in the back” (Carvalho 2019, 7). While the female Hong Kongers are at the beginning stages of discovering their power within their movement, women in the French Revolution had a strong sense of their power, especially their power in numbers. On October 5th, 1789, also known as The October Days, seven thousand women marched on Versailles and the National Assembly (Gay Levy 1992, 83). It was at this time that women forcefully made the legislators listen to their demands for bread (Gay Levy 1992, 84). The women of the French Revolution understood that threats and acts of violence were the most effective ways to see their demands met. October Day put women at the forefront of the demonstration, and women started it by beating a drum and recruiting as many women off the streets of Paris as they could (Gay Levy 1992, 83). They were so forceful, one spectator later wrote that “Men didn’t have enough strength to avenge themselves and that [the women] would

demonstrate that they were better than men” (Gay Levy 1992, 83). The demonstration culminated in the women making the 14-kilometer trek to Versailles in the rain to have their demands heard by the king while carrying “pikes, clubs, knives, swords, muskets, and other weapons. . .” including a cannon (Gay Levy 1992, 83).

After looking back at how women have navigated the public and private realms during past and present revolutions, the question remains, what does the future hold for the role of women in protest? Recently, there have been many female-lead movements, specifically in the United States, including the Women’s March starting in 2017, *#MeToo*, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. By women not only participating but creating movements and holding leadership positions, they are not just stepping out into public life but finding a way to be fully integrated. Although society has made some progress towards equality, many cannot fully accept this and continue to discredit or belittle these movements. Often, they do so in the same fashion that the British soldiers attempted to discredit the women of Inghinidhe na hÉireann, by stating that they are “silly little girls” or that these women do not actually know what they have gotten themselves into. This occurred with the Women’s March in 2017. Although the organization has been widely criticized for promoting a non-inclusive brand of feminism, it created the momentum needed for the progressive and

effective *#MeToo* movement (Lang 2019, 1). Black Lives Matter was created by three Black women from the United States: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, and they have not only facilitated what could possibly be the largest civil rights movement in American history but also inspired protests around the world to fight racial injustice and police brutality against Black, Indigenous and People of Color (Buchanan 2020, 1). With women fully and shamelessly stepping into the traditionally male world of public life, they are disrupting the status quo. In a lecture examining the relationship between anthropology and perceptions of power, anthropologist Eric R. Wolf states, “[t]he enactment of power always creates friction – disgruntlement, foot-dragging, escapism, sabotage, protest, or outright resistance. . .” (Moore, 2019,362) In other words, by women enacting their power against an age-old system of the division of the sexes, they are in effect, creating a revolution within a revolution.

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