In her improbable and yet pioneering ethnographic study of human rights activism among Myanmar’s LGBT community, *The Politics of Love in Myanmar: LGBT Mobilization and Human Rights as a Way of Life* (2019), the Singaporean sociolegal scholar Lynette Chua introduces us to two activists whose intertwined lives and experiences constitute the central thread of her work. Tun Tun is a former English literature student at Rangoon University, the son of a prominent family with deep connections to the country’s authoritarian regime. During the prodemocracy movement, which began in 1988, Tun Tun joined the mobilizations against the ruling junta along with thousands of other protestors.

When the Orwellian State Law and Order Restoration Council—known as the dreaded SLORC—decided to “pacify” the prodemocracy movement, which was led by the future Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, the regime turned to mass roundups and the widespread use of torture against activists. Tun Tun fled Yangon for the dense jungles along the Myanmar-Thailand border, where he took up arms as a rebel fighter within a wider guerrilla struggle against the military government.

Tun Tun spent years engaging in dangerous and ultimately fruitless attacks on government installations, strikes in which many comrades were killed or captured. By the mid-1990s, the military regime in Myanmar had destroyed most of the rebel camps and suppressed the prodemocracy movement. Tun Tun formed a close relationship with another man in the camps, and the intimate attachment had to be kept secret, even if other rebel soldiers in his unit sensed the nature of the relationship.
For almost twenty more years, Tun Tun lived in exile in Thailand, where he eventually became a leading human rights activist and one of the first openly gay Burmese. Although he had begun his human rights work as a pro-democracy activist, he eventually made the decision to create the first Burmese LGBT movement. Stirred by human rights as a new language of empowerment, Tun Tun worked with others to build a fragile transnational LGBT network against a background of homophobia and political violence.

Fifteen years younger than Tun Tun, Tin Hla grew up at the very center of Burmese military life. Raised in a strict military family, his grandfather was an army major whose unit played a central role in maintaining law and order in the one-party state. As a boy and then as a teenager, Tin Hla grew up in constant fear of his grandfather and other children in the military compound, who subjected him to years of physical and emotional abuse. Although he tried to hide his true sexual identity from others, he was still bullied and ridiculed by others on the military base, who called him *achauk*, a derogatory Burmese word for gay men.

Ten years after the brutal military crackdown of 1988, deep in the midst of internal political and cultural repression, Tin Hla’s grandfather retired from the military, something that released Tin Hla, in a very real sense, from twenty years of bondage spent in isolation from his true self. He passed much of his twenties wandering the country, doing odd jobs, and exploring his sexuality through a number of furtive same-sex relationships. By his early thirties, Tin Hla had returned to Yangon, where he eked out a living working in a mattress shop.

Yet with each passing year, Tin Hla had become more confident in his queer identity, despite the pervasive social discrimination. Volunteer work with an international NGO implementing HIV/AIDS programs in Yangon brought him, for the first time, into contact with gay Burmese activists, some of whom maintained connections with the exiled Burmese LGBT community in Thailand, led by Tun Tun. Finally, in 2013, the lives of Tun Tun and Tin Hla were brought together when the exiled LGBT activists came home. Tin Hla soon joined the transnational organization and went on to become one of the founding members of Myanmar’s LGBT activist network.

The stories of Tun Tun and Tin Hla, and those of many others far from the centers of dominant human rights theory and policy making, were an ever-present source of inspiration and guidance as the proposal to reinvent human rights coalesced over the years. This is because the interconnected narratives of Tun Tun and Tin Hla offer a glimpse into the forms a reinvented human rights might take in the future based on an account of how human rights is already being
transformed beyond the boundaries of political and legal institutions, without regard for international treaties and monitoring bodies, and without any commitment to a flattened conception of the abstract "human." Under the most implausible and onerous of circumstances, queer Burmese have built a new social community in which “human rights” functions as a metaphor for translocal action and moral renewal amid the realities of social suffering, a metaphor through which they manage to find joy and meaning in their lives.

But if the unlikely transformation of human rights in authoritarian Myanmar into a “way of life” reveals the possible future of a reinvented human rights in the present, it also offers a critical lens through which to better view more troubling developments in the centers of global power, particularly those closely associated with the invention of existing human rights. If Reinventing Human Rights was written with one eye on the ways in which human rights can and must be radically reconceived in the face of manifold long-term crises, both those we must confront now, and those looming just over the horizon, it was also written with another eye on a crisis with more immediacy: the intellectual and moral crisis of the—largely Euro-American—political left.

With the failure of international human rights—its tribunals, its international bodies, its ethics of naming-and-shaming—to fulfill its apparent destiny as the grand replacement framework for a traditional left-wing politics anchored in redistributational socialism and a vision of conflict shaped by historical materialism, what remained was an increasingly fragmented series of oppositional movements, many fighting among one another to reclaim the mantle of revolutionary change. The problem, however, was that the remnants of the old political left, betrayed by the well-intentioned but ultimately false promises of international human rights, turned inward and toward categories of exclusionary difference—ideological, social, racial—as the grounds on which the struggle for emancipation would be waged.

Despite the fact that categories of inclusionary difference can form an important initial basis for collective mobilization, as the case of Myanmar’s LGBT activists reminds us, the tragedy of the erstwhile left shows what happens when categories of exclusionary difference become both the means and the ends of political life. Leaving aside the inability or unwillingness of many well-meaning progressives to respond meaningfully and coherently to the foundational problem of global capitalism, the more pragmatic concern is that a politics based on categories of exclusionary difference is fundamentally incapable of producing the translocal alliances that will be absolutely necessary for meeting the most
serious global challenges: economic and social inequality, conflict over natural resources, ethno- and religious nationalism, and the rapidly escalating consequences of climate change.

A reinvented human rights, by contrast, can never be circumscribed by categories of exclusionary difference. Even though the idea of the universalizing “human” turned out to be a completely misbegotten grounds on which to try and build the postwar moral—if not political—world order, it at least had the virtue of projecting beyond the kinds of ideologies of difference that had fed the catastrophe of world war, militarism, and genocide. For that is the great lesson from history: categories of exclusionary difference can never, in the end, form the basis for true emancipation, which requires solidarity, empathy, and understanding across the many lines that divide us. It is this spirit of translocal belonging and action that animates the proposal for a reinvented human rights, a proposal that is made with a keen sense that it is getting very late in the day, that the intellectual and moral crisis besetting what replaced the traditional political left shows no signs of abating, and that the window of opportunity for forging a radically different future is fast closing.

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REINVENTING HUMAN RIGHTS
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