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The Eros Effect and the Arab Uprisings: An Interview With George Katsiaficas

Monday 30 May 2011

by: *David Zlutnick, Truthout* | *Multimedia Interview*

George Katsiaficas is a professor, sociologist, author and activist. He teaches at the Wentworth Institute of Technology and specializes in social movements, Asian politics, US foreign policy, and comparative and historical studies. He is the author or editor of 11 books, including "The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life" (AK Press, 2006); "Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party" (co-edited with Kathleen Cleaver, Routledge, 2001); "The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968" (South End Press, 1999) and the forthcoming "Asia's



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Unknown Uprisings" (PM Press, Fall 2011). His writings can be found at www.ErosEffect.com.

Katsiaficas has written extensively on popular social uprisings in various regions and historical moments. I had the opportunity to sit down with him and conduct a video interview discussing the recent wave of demonstrations and rebellions throughout the Middle East and North Africa, placing them in a greater context of social transformation. You can view a 14-minute edited selection from the interview [here](#). What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Berkeley, California, March 27, 2011

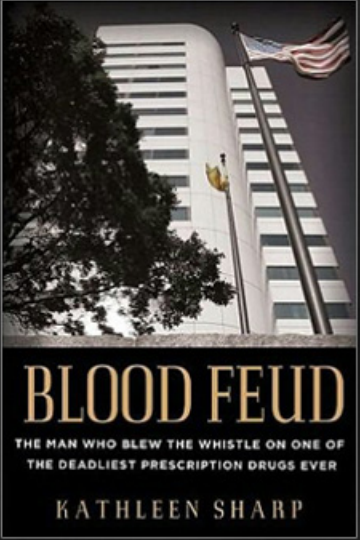
David Zlutnick: *Much of your recent work has been centered on a phenomenon you have termed the "eros effect." You have applied this concept to the recent Arab uprisings, for example. Could you explain this idea and offer some historical instances where you believe this has taken place?*

George Katsiaficas: Well, I was finishing a book on '68 that I had worked on for years and years. And I was sitting at my work table and had all of this data from all over the world, and had one of those "eureka" moments where I realized that the protests in Vietnam and the uprising - the Tet Offensive, February '68 - had affected a conference in Berlin, Germany of antiwar activists, many of whom were from France, who had helped spark the May uprising in France. The May Events - a near-revolutionary situation in 1968, which in turn led to general strikes in Italy and Spain, movements in Mexico, ... Columbia University - and the way protests had broken out was more related to each other than to domestic political conditions, economic conditions and ways that social movements are normally conceptualized.

And as I tried to grapple with a way to get a handle on what had happened, Herbert Marcuse's notion of Eros - and political Eros, which he had been developing - crystallized as the "eros effect," meaning that in certain moments in time, out of the blue, universal interests become generalized. That people, instead of going about their daily lives seeking to be happy, to maximize their own individual gain, actually are more concerned with the universal questions of peace, or of prosperity for all, not just for themselves.

I would say it's the most important natural resource on the planet, human love for each other.... The broad meaning of the term - solidarity, peoples understanding that life, and that all life, is of value. So, in moments when this can be crystallized and actualized, those moments of the eros effect have a great deal to do with how history's direction has changed.

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Besides 1968, I've seen instances of the eros effect erupt in many different situations.... We can look at the Asian uprisings of 1980-1998. There was a string of Asian uprisings which I've been trying to analyze, from Gwangju, South Korea; then in 1986 the Philippines; '87 South Korea; '88 Burma; '89 Tibet and China; 1990 Taiwan, Bangladesh and Nepal; 1992 Thailand - these were related to each other much more than they were related to any domestic political conditions. These are societies vastly different in religion, economy, language, cultural heritage - yet in all of these societies, millions of ordinary people stood up to their governments and demanded very similar kinds of changes.

Similarly then, in the Arab world today, out of the blue, all of a sudden, we have many different people suffering from many different types of political regimes rising up demanding greater liberties. I think if you try to find what variable united these various instances of revolt, it would be other instances of revolt - the subjective factor, as opposed to dry objective factors. And I think this understanding shows that, in fact, people are ready to change the direction of history. It's the economic system, the world capitalist economic system - which is inherited, which was never democratically voted upon or decided - that is one of the major obstacles that humanity faces. A hundred militarized nation-states with weapons of mass destruction are similarly something that humanity has never democratically agreed to accept.

So how do we, humanity, move beyond this? I see the combination of all of these eros effect episodes leading to a protracted global struggle uprising against neoliberalism and war in which people's energies are going to be co-opted by the system unless some kind of leadership emerges that can provide an alternative vision for how these might be resolved.

DZ: When the "eros effect" comes to life - when a revolt takes seed, it grows, it spreads - much of what you see in the streets is informal and spontaneous. But what organizational apparatus come to fruition, whether previously existent or not, to carry the rebellion or rebellions forward? And what role do these play in the idea of the "eros effect"?

GK: This is a vital question. And, unfortunately, existing progressive, left organizations often play regressive roles in these periods of time. I mean, we've seen this for some time now. For instance ... in moments like 1968, the French Communist Party totally was against the spontaneous wildcat strike movement of nine to ten million workers. And they called the student revolt, which had set off the whole thing, "petty-bourgeois," "reactionary," etcetera, etcetera.... So, in Italy in 1969 and into the 1970's, the Communist Party of Italy really was against the

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spontaneous movement. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party was really against the autonomous movement. And believe it or not, the Greens - who formed out of these extraparliamentary movements in Germany - turned against the autonomous movements when they began to use militant tactics against nuclear power, against militarism and against the burial of nuclear waste in the Gorleben site.

So, it seems to me, that what is most important in moments of the eros effect is to create meaningful public space where many diverse constituencies can air their perspectives. It's not a question of trying to impose the correct political line on these popular eruptions - it's a question of feeding the eruption and of directing it in ways that challenge and undermine the structures of the system. Now, the very powerful men and women at the top of society also understand this great power of popular movements in the streets. They are seeking to redirect it, as well.


So, how can the movement redirect it if the movement doesn't have some prior organization? This is the dilemma, because prior formed movement organizations ultimately turn against these popular eruptions. Even some of the best NGO [nongovernmental organization] activists are threatened by the eruption of popular movements, because instead of the professional voices of activists being the voice of the movement, as they have been used to being over the years, all of a sudden it's fresh faces. It's people they don't know. They have perhaps good reason, bad reason to not trust these people, but I think part of the dynamic is, they're losing their privileged position as spokespersons of the progressive impetus.

DZ: *And in the context of the uprisings in the Middle East - whether it be in Egypt, Libya, Yemen - how do you see these organizational roles being fulfilled and how do you see them interacting with the spontaneous nature of the revolts?*

GK: Clearly, in Tahrir Square, the space was wide open and ordinary citizens of all varieties, from the Muslim Brotherhood to very left-wing Egyptians, came to Tahrir Square and spoke up, aired their viewpoints. And this, to me, this diversity, is a real strength of the movement. It's also a problem when the army takes control of the square because it means there's no group that has coherence that can sort of continue the struggle. And the army very cleverly cleared the square a few days after Mubarak left office and took control of that public space.

It seems less obvious to me that claiming public space has been successful in other countries. In Bahrain, for instance, where the protest movements had seized control of the downtown square, the government quickly moved against it. And of course in Syria,

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we don't know how many people - but we know dozens, perhaps hundreds may have been killed in Syria, in Daar'a.... So, I think all of these popular movements realize what's key is to have a public meeting space where they can have the movement's focal point happen in a direct and democratic fashion. And the regimes realize that they need to deny this public meeting space to people.

DZ: During the uprising in Egypt, before Mubarak fell, you wrote:

The ultimate goal of people power is the institutionalization of popular forms of decision-making, which involves taking power from the elite and reconstituting it into grassroots forms. This radical potential of the movement is precisely why the political elite today scurries to implement the appearance of change - not system transformation but only rotation of personalities at the apex of power. **["People Power Comes to Cairo," February 8, 2011]**

Mubarak did fall, as have many of those individuals and some of those institutions that were closely associated with his regime. How do you see the present situation in Egypt following his overthrow in the context of "reconstituting [power] into grassroots forms?" And how has the Egyptian political elite reacted to the attempts to reallocate decision-making power?

GK: I wish I could say I was optimistic about the future of Egypt. And I think there could be reasons to be. But what I understand as having happened in Egypt is that the military has effectively managed a transition.... In terms of institutional power, it seems that top-down power has been maintained. Immediately after Mubarak, there was a wave of strikes - even the police were being attacked on the street.... So, all over the country in every kind of institution, people were demanding a change. And yet, that was effectively stopped because Tahrir Square was seized by the military. [The March 19, 2011 constitutional] referendum that was rushed through effectively hands power over to established groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and other parties [that] already existed, meaning that the impetus from below did not have time to crystallize organizations that could have provided real alternative visions. So, in that count, as well, I'm not optimistic about the future of Egypt....

And of course, one of the real factors in the Egyptian uprising that surprised many people was the participation of women in

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leadership positions, as well as in the square, in a society that is often regarded as patriarchal, Islamic. Women stepped forward and played a very progressive role. And I think that signals a wider social transformation in Egypt. We'll have to see the extent to which social relations can be changed from the bottom up, but it seems like institutional power remains intact in Egypt at this moment.

DZ: That's an excellent segue into my next question. Often overlooked in the discussion of outcomes for the recent events in the Middle East are the potential effects on social relations in the affected states - much of the discussion is around who's going to take power. Even in countries where the rebellions have so far been unsuccessful in achieving their systemic goals, how do you see this time period transforming the way Arab citizens relate to their respective societies?

GK: That's a very important question. Because for decades, if not centuries - for millennia in Egypt, power has resided at the top, from the pharaohs through the various conquerors, whether they're Macedonians, Romans, Assyrians, you know, the Hyksos - whoever came to power, the Egyptian people have more or less ceded to control from the top. If they have been able to overthrow Mubarak, then the power and energy of that action will remain with them as a lasting historical legacy. They know they can overthrow Mubarak - they did it. This means they can overthrow the next ruler, as well. If they will be able to mobilize against rulers is another question.

But an even deeper change for Arab society is not only on the reliance on power at the top, but its reliance on weapons as opposed to the power of the people. The effect of all this on the Arab world has been enormous, because it shows that opinion matters.... All of a sudden, we're seeing the entry of ordinary people onto the stage of history in the Arab world. This is a very exciting moment.

DZ: The United States has at times embraced the notion of people power during the most recent events in the Middle East, and at other times, hoped it would blow over, depending on the regime in question. What is your opinion on the variant nature of US support - whether it is rhetorical, as in Egypt, military, as in Libya, or nonexistent, as in Bahrain?

GK: One thing is very clear to me, and that is the United States is very insistent upon maintaining its interests. So, whether or not people think the United States is acting altruistically or for greater democracy, I believe the United States is acting in its own interests. In this context, the experience of the Asian uprisings in

the 1980's is very instructive. If we take, for instance, the Gwangju uprising, 1980, in the middle of the uprising, the USS Coral Sea, an aircraft carrier, steamed into Busan harbor, and many South Koreans who heard of this in Gwangju believed the United States had come to support democracy. They were bitterly disappointed, because of course, the United States supported Chun Doo-hwan [and] the Korean military dictatorship for its own interests. The needs [of] human rights, the needs of democracy, political reform for Korean people, was a far low consideration, if any, for the United States. Of course, President Carter, the champion of human rights, was president of the United States at this time. He publicly stated that security interests of the United States had to override human rights concerns.

In the Philippines in 1986, longtime US friend Ferdinand Marcos was ousted by the People Power movement. But what's really not known is that the United States made a prior political decision that Marcos had to be gotten rid of.... So, the United States has no friends that it will not throw overboard. We've seen this - I think we all know [former Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio] Noriega was a paid CIA man. When he outlived his usefulness, the United States invaded Panama, killed several thousand people to get rid of him. Saddam Hussein, of course, had been given chemical warfare weapons that he used against the Kurds. When he outlived his usefulness, the United States launched war after war against him. So US interests are not to maintain regimes that are not in the interests of the United States.

That means Mubarak, longtime friend of the United States and of Israel, was suddenly a threat to American and Israeli strategic interests because the growing movement against him would have been much more radical if it came to power. Instead, the United States rode the wave of popular uprising to ease Mubarak out of power with his billions of dollars probably intact, and then establish a military control of Egypt in a transitional period. Now, the United States will look very good if the military does in fact cede power to a newly elected civilian government, but you can be sure that that civilian government will maintain the very same interests of the United States, of Israel and of the Egyptian elite. It will not be in the interests of the vast majority of Egyptian people who are living at standards of living you and I would find unacceptable.

Similarly in Bahrain, the United States has consistently backed the monarchy against the interests of the vast majority of Bahrainis for obvious reasons - that's the home port of the US [Navy's] Fifth Fleet. Or, if we look at some of the other countries in the region, the way to understand what the United States is doing is to understand US interests.

DZ: In prior discussions on this topic, you've mentioned some similarities between the Egyptian uprising and that of the rebellion in South Korea in 1987, which is one focus of your forthcoming book. You note parallels including the US backing of unpopular and illegitimate regimes, protesters' demands of democratization, and the character of the revolts, among others. Can you further outline in what ways these two revolutionary moments are analogous, and at what point they diverge?

GK: First, you know, the Egyptian eighteen-day people power uprising and the South Korean 1987 June Uprising for nineteen days involved people illegally going into the streets and risking their lives, their safety, for the sake of a regime change, of democracy of some kind. The diffuse character of the movements means that no one can be certain of what everyone wanted. In fact, people wanted very different things.... The same can be true in South Korea. There were people who were motivated by many different reasons. But what makes the movements' outcomes so similar is that, in both cases, the democratic transition occurred, but it was managed by the military.

In both cases the military was able somehow to take the opinions of a majority of its people and say, "Well, we'll take care of you. After all, we're benevolent. We're your military." And this, in both cases, is an astonishing outcome of these uprisings. It shows how the real lack of peoples' leadership - of genuine leadership that could have provided an alternative, was lacking. The eros effect is an effective way of transferring power to new governments from dictators. But it is not effective as a means to institute new systems of popular power. And I think we need to understand the limitations of the eros effect. It's not an all-in-all solution. It's a tactic in the final analysis, like any other tactic.... [In Egypt] it's the military that's deciding who's imprisoned. It's the military that is arresting and even torturing young activists who are responsible for bringing people together in Tahrir Square. So, as long as Egyptians tolerate that situation, it's a very desperate one.

DZ: And from your understanding of the Korean June Uprising and other East Asian rebellions you've studied, what are some additional lessons that you see as applicable to the current situation facing revolutionary movements in the Middle East?

GL: That's a difficult question because lessons are not universal in the context of what has occurred.... [One] lesson from the past uprisings is that those uprisings need to be supported by everyone. If, for instance, workers insist somehow that minorities' rights are not as important as workers' rights - or that

women's rights are not as important as workers' rights - the movement will have been divided between its various constituencies. So, some mechanisms have to be found to unite these various constituencies. This is a very clear lesson from these past uprisings - that the system is quite adept at divide-and-conquer strategies. And we need to find unite-and-conquer strategies in terms of dealing with the capitalist class and the generals at the top of the government apparatus.

DZ: As you previously mentioned, you say the eros effect is at play right now in the Middle East through the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and the list goes on. But you've also voiced the opinion that you could envision this spreading beyond its present geography. Do you currently see this as a strictly regional phenomenon? Do you see a broader and more sustained impact in the long-term?

GK: Now, the ongoing struggles that we are seeing in the Arab world are the latest episode. The disarmament movement in the late 1970's and early 1980's - I mentioned the Asian uprisings in the 80's, the Eastern European uprisings in the 80's and early 90's, the alter-globalization movement, the Zapatista movement. What we are seeing globally are relationships between movements that spark each other, that lead each other forward.

You know, we tend to forget that today - that in 1999, from Seattle until the September 11 attacks, every major elite summit had major protests against it by thousands, if not tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people. We forget that even on February 15, 2003, millions of people all over the world went into the streets to oppose the US war [against Iraq] even before it started. When you look at the alter-globalization movement against the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, no one directed people to protest world capitalism. Millions of people all over the planet made their own choice.... Ordinary peoples' consciousness was at a much higher level than the elite of any nation-state, and certainly at a much higher level than the capitalist class.

So, it seems to me that that realization by millions of ordinary people might have been negated by al-Qaeda's attacks on the World Trade Center and by the war on terror, but only in a temporary fashion. It will re-emerge at a higher level as history moves, and we will see, as I say, a global protracted uprising against capitalism and warfare.



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DAVID ZLUTNICK

David Zlutnick is a documentary filmmaker living and working in San Francisco. His latest film is "[Occupation Has No Future: Militarism + Resistance in Israel/Palestine](#)" (2010), a feature documentary that studies Israeli militarism, examines the occupation of the Palestinian West Bank, and explores the work of Israelis and Palestinians organizing against militarism and occupation. You can view his work at www.UpheavalProductions.com.

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