

'Consciousness in action of millions of people' determines social direction

Interview with George Katsiaficas

There have been various social uprisings and movements around the world, which have garnered enormous solidarity and support, but have not amounted to significant change or reform (despite change in government in some instances)— the candlelight vigils in Seoul and the Jeju protests in South Korea, Burma's saffron revolution, the uprisings in Syria and Egypt. How can we understand this?

I think we must be careful to define what we mean by significant changes and reforms. For example, most observers would agree that the French Revolution and the American Revolution had significant impact. Individual liberties were greatly increased, and monarchies were temporarily abolished or expelled. Yet, at the same time, the French Revolution led to acceleration of French imperialism in Africa and Asia, and after the American Revolution, we saw extermination of the buffalo and increased genocide against Native Americans.

What is most important is the residue of social movements in the consciousness and unconsciousness of people, for people's liberties and freedoms are ultimately a product of their own willingness to take them, no matter the cost. Uprisings and social movements sometimes change governments, but almost always build new friendships and connections between people, one dimension of a phenomenon I call the eros effect. In the long run, the consciousness in action of millions of people is the key determinant of the direction societies take.

Do social protests have different roles and impacts in democratic and nondemocratic regimes? What are the factors that influence their success?

The specific character of the political regime is one factor among many. High on my list of what influences the outcome of uprisings are cultural factors, the capacity of people to live freely, to think and imagine a better society, and to insist upon it no matter what the consequences. Having said that, repressive force applied by dictatorial or democratic regimes plays a role. To give two examples, massive force was applied in Burma in 1988 to end popular councils mainly composed of students and monks that were effectively governing the country. In United States in May 1970, six college students were shot dead and the National Guard was called out in more than a dozen states to end a student strike called against the Vietnam War and police repression of the Black Panther Party. In both cases the movements subsided before morphing into other forms that continued struggles.

How is this age of 'social media revolutions' different from earlier movements? Where do movements such as 'One Billion Rising' fit in?

The connections between people today are often immediate and massive because of the "social media revolutions", as you put it. This means that movements can arise suddenly and subside quickly, as we have seen with the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Arab Spring (when in 14 months 14 countries experienced protests). Yet long before social media existed, movements erupted in waves, as for instance in Europe in 1848 or in Asia from 1986 to 1992 (when in six years nine dictatorships were overthrown in eight places, as I discuss in my book *Asia's Unknown Uprisings*).

We see greater participation in social movements by women, particularly in societies where they traditionally had little political or social voice (Syria, Egypt). How has this come about and will it translate into anything positive for their future role in society?

The increasing involvement of women and social movements is part of what I mean by the residue of freedom in people's consciousness and unconsciousness. In South Korea, commonly thought of and rightfully so as one of the world's most patriarchal Confucian societies, young teenage girls used music websites to spark nationwide protests against the import of American beef in 2008. As you point out, in Arab countries women are increasingly active in public events, despite the high cost they sometimes pay. In my opinion, the activation of women is one of the most significant developments in the 20th century, and in the 21st century I believe we will see great social transformations led by women. The One Billion Rising Revolution, which seeks to end violence against women, is one contemporary example.

At the same time, there seems to be an increasing trend for societies to turn towards violence, extremism and economic/capitalist chaos, as seen in Europe. Why is this, and what does it imply for the future?

Austerity programs implemented by many European governments today have resulted in declining standards of living for many people, creating the conditions for the emergence of right-wing social movements. Yet social movements are not only caused by economic factors. Psychological insecurity has been intensified by increasing immigration, economic decline, and a more general destabilization of family and social life caused by the culture of consumerism required by the necessity of increasing corporate profits. The existing world system lies at the root of many of the problems facing humanity today. The good news is that there are more activists at the grassroots seeking to transform the global capitalist system than ever before in history.

We are also seeing an increase in the use of religion...

As global capitalism undermines people's daily lives and compels them to work longer years and more hours every week for less money, religion becomes a substitute for satisfactory lives in this world. Ultimately the culture of consumerism empties people's lives of meaning. Shiny cars, jewelry and the latest gadgets and gimmicks have short shelf lives, and their temporary charm creates a kind of addiction—a greediness that keeps people running faster to make it in the rat race of corporate culture. As Herbert Marcuse pointed out, such "comforts" can be debilitating, both physically and psychologically. Is change really possible given the suicidal and imploding system we live in?

Change is not only possible, it is absolutely necessary. As Naomi Klein points out in her new book, capitalism is destroying the planet.

Please share with us about your work on Greece

Although I've given many talks, interviews and written articles for Greek publication, my time there has mainly been a learning experience. I have never before lived in Greece, and recently I have connected with it and people there in ways that have expanded my mind. The country is going through a desperate time. German bankers and arms manufacturers have impoverished the country and continue to extract from it billions of Euros every year. Unemployment is 30 percent officially, 60 percent among youth—and the reality is probably much higher than that. Nonetheless, Greeks voted for progressive change and SYRIZA in the recent European Union elections, and the anarchist movement there is probably the strongest in the entire world today. I am hopeful that Greeks will help lead Europe and the world forward into a brighter future.

George Katsiaficas has been active in social movements since 1969, and is the author of many books that have been well received internationally. His web site is www.erosseffect.com.