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Duncombe, Stephen. *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. New York: The New Press, 2007. 230 pp. \$15.95 (paperback).

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In his 1899 work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, sociologist Thorstein Veblen condemned bourgeois conventions of taste, dress, culture, and other accoutrements of life based on the pursuit of consumerism rather than critical engagement with ideas.<sup>1</sup>

More than a century later, Stephen Duncombe takes up much the same trajectory in his new book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. Yet rather than taking on the illusory pretensions of wealth and status, Duncombe sets his sights on the bean counters, bureaucrats, and Democratic Leadership Council types who believe that liberal politics could garner support if only those professional advocates with sound, moderate arguments could find their way back into the center of U.S. public life. For Duncombe—a community organizer now living in New York City, where he teaches the politics of media at New York University—there is little wrong with reason other than the fact that it obscures desire. Thus, politics based on reason alone will be about as exciting as a seventh grade civics class.

Take, for example, welfare reform, a policy many view as a political success. In the mid-1990s, reform proposals first made their way through the 104th Congress and President Clinton vetoed one after the other. Social welfare scholars and advocates—from Harvard's David Ellwood to the Senate's own Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Clinton staffer Peter Edelman—argued that this new version of welfare would hurt the poor and that the data projecting success did not add up.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, social animosities over race fueled the debate in a manner that overwhelmed scientifically informed proposals about the most effective approaches to alleviating poverty.<sup>3</sup> While scholars and advocates did indeed have the data, it failed to match the spectacle of race, retribution, and “welfare queens” that fueled the call to “do something about welfare.” Supporters of reform had found a story-line and spectacle that resonated.

Therein lays the double-edged conundrum and the hope of Duncombe's highly complex and engaging new work. Without a spectacle, politics generally fails to move forward. Yet in the name of the spectacle, we sometimes give up our heads. This dual nature of spectacle is a reality Duncombe faces head-on with examples ranging from the ominous *Triumph of the Will*, the frivolous *The Ice Capades*—to the playful and destructive video game *Grand Theft Auto*. There is, he contends, something to be learned from each of these mainstays of our media-saturated culture. Duncombe has the courage to face head-on the lessons of both Nazi propaganda and fascism as well as the thrills of Las Vegas. For Duncombe, spectacle comes in countless shapes and sizes—some of which inspired by fear and animosity; others by hope and connection.

Spectacle exists within the terrain of paradox. Here, rationality and irrationality collide in a conflict over the very nature and meaning of modern life. The result is a spectacle of sights, sounds, bells, whistles, and images of differing

competing views of reality and political economy—all competing to help connect some notion of truth with one image or story or another. For many of us, spectacle is typically consumed within the providence of entertainment, such as movies, videos, or even the stage. Struggles over the meaning of spectacle are by no means new. Jonathan Lear, a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, suggests that moderns would do well to look to the lessons of the Greek stage, where questions about democracy were acted out within a spectacle of human tragedy and comedy:

If we go back to the birth of democracy, in fifth-century Athens, we see that the flourishing of that democracy coincides precisely with the flowering of one of the world's great literatures: Greek tragedy. This coincidence is not mere coincidence. The tragic theater gave citizens the opportunity to retreat momentarily from the responsibility of making rational decisions for themselves and their society. At the same time, tragedy confronted them emotionally with the fact that they had to make their decisions in a world that was not entirely rational, in which rationality was sometimes violently disrupted, in which rationality itself could be used for irrational ends.<sup>4</sup>

For Lear, the lesson of Sophocles—both for psychoanalysis and for democracy itself—was simple enough. Those who ignore the meanings of the irrationality engage in a form of hubris which puts them at risk of reliving Oedipus' fate.<sup>5</sup>

The hubris Duncombe addresses involves the overemphasis on rational means within progressive politics. After all, it is the irrational which produces any number of implications for modern democracy and politics. As with Greek theater, Duncombe suggests that these ideas and yearnings deserve a similar form of expression within an “ethical spectacle.” Here, hopes and dreams are allowed a place for transparent expression. However, the actors involved are not only professionals: everyone is allowed a space to create a stage of their own invention. For Duncombe, politics is all about creating space for people to imagine a better world and then to help build it.

While Duncombe comes at this work as a professional theorist, his perspective is informed by years of writing about culture and using it to inform his own organizing. For him, the two concepts overlap in countless ways. Duncombe decries the “rational turn” in U.S. politics in which culture is separated from democratic politics; indeed, much of the first chapter of *Dream* bemoans this turn of events. In much the same way that a golden era of theater history ended with the demise of the popular Elizabethan stage and the rise of Oliver Cromwell and the puritanical thought in England,<sup>6</sup> Duncombe rails against the limitations of a democratic politics based solely on rational, even puritanical, ends. Thus, the second chapter of *Dream* suggests the left has more to learn from Las Vegas than from Cambridge. After all, as Duncombe quotes Walter Lippman, “So long as you rely on the efficacy of ‘scientific’ demonstrations and logical proof, you can hold your [political] convention in anybody's back parlor and have room to spare.”

The third chapter, “Play the Game,” borrows from Johan Huizinga’s anthropology of play to consider the ways that social actors play in a democracy. Duncombe notes that while “regular” people play video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, liberal elites—such as Hillary Clinton—scold them for taking part in such harmful, frivolous activities. The analogy between a popular video game and progressive politics is simple enough. “Fashioning a politics that learns from and draws upon the popular attraction of video games means considering more than just end goals,” Duncombe explains:

Universal health care, free education or a more equitable economy are worthy objectives. But we also have to give serious consideration to how we reach these targets—that is: how we do politics. We need to rethink progressive politics in terms of our game play. Perhaps one of the reasons progressives are not winning much these days is that lately our game isn’t much fun to play (p. 65).

One reason for this lack of fun and relevance is the systematic process of professional advocates, policy analysts, lawyers, and others involved in a demobilization of American politics. Within such a framework, the rank-and-file organizers who generate the heat that gives fire to social movements are left on the sidelines. Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg describe this process as the “downsizing of democracy.”<sup>7</sup> For Duncombe, the process demarcates the ends—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all citizens—from the means: an insider’s game of reports, briefs, and bills. “It has taken the game away from the very people for whom it is ostensibly being played,” he says (p. 65). Thus, Duncombe points out, when politics emphasize “privileged efficient ends over participatory means, the ends become totally unattainable” (p. 76).

After all, Duncombe notes, democracy needs actors for the performance to resonate with the public. Moreover—to borrow from the lessons of the Elizabethan stage one more time—when such performances were engaged with popular culture and discourse as was the custom in Elizabeth’s day, and when the price of a ticket to the Globe Theater was equivalent to that of a contemporary movie matinee, such performances resonated in ways that shifted the terms of public debate.<sup>8</sup> “The great strength of democracy is that it depends on its players,” Duncombe explains (p. 76). Within contemporary democracy, people can be treated as spectators—but for only so long. Eventually, inevitably, they will want to play. However, where can they do so? Duncombe ponders. If the only democratic arena is sterile and sleepy, the necessary participants will go play elsewhere. Hence, Duncombe’s gaze on the increasingly popular arena of video games, celebrity culture, and popular culture where lessons about fantasy, agency, and entertainment are unending.

Yet for many progressives, learning from such lessons is hindered by the lingering legacy of the hair-shirt left. While activist movement from gay liberation to global justice have sought to render the pleasure-less left a thing of the past, old habits die hard. Moreover, they obfuscate the lessons of popular entertainment and culture, especially for those fixated on guilt and political correctness. “It is not the job of progressives to condemn popular fantasy and

desire,” Duncombe explains. “It is our job to pay careful attention to them, learn from them, and perhaps—God forbid!—even enjoy them, ourselves. Then carjack these fantasies and drive them some place else” (p. 77).

Part of what makes *Dream* an effective text is the intersection between Duncombe’s readings of culture and political economy and his reflections on more than a decade of effective organizing with groups ranging from ACT UP to the Absurd Response to an Absurd War. Duncombe was a key organizer with both New York’s Lower East Side Collective (LESC), which he cofounded, and the city’s chapter of Reclaim the Streets. As part of his involvement in such groups, Duncombe took part in successful campaigns to save community gardens, defend the rights of immigrant workers, and create a different type of activist engagement in New York City.

The organizing ethos of the LESG is instructive. While other activist groups of the mid-1990s seemed to ask participants to play the time-worn role of the selfless activist, LESG sought a lighter path. It did so “by allowing people to personalize how they participated in our campaigns,” Duncombe explains. “Participation didn’t just mean more people to make more phone calls; it meant opening up our organization to new voices and tailoring our tactics to make use of individual personalities and proclivities” (p. 86). Moreover, because people felt good about having an influence on the organization, they ended up wanting to make more phone calls. This allowed participants to connect with the group at the point of their own insights and passions, which infused the group with an abundance of energy and creativity. A key element in this strategy was allowing engagement to feel good:

In the Lower East Side Collective, we did not fund raise by applying for grants, sending our direct emails or badgering people on the street. Instead we raised money for our organization by throwing huge, raucous dance parties. We goofed around and socialized while tabling for causes, we prided ourselves on our cleverly worded signs, and working with groups like Reclaim the Streets and More Gardens! we turned our demonstrations into festive carnivals. In brief we enjoyed ourselves. This wasn’t hard to do, but it wasn’t an accident. As the last line of LESG’s introductory flyer read, “We believe politics can be fun!” (p. 71).

In so doing, LESG helped transform the way politics was conceptualized on the Lower East Side. This model would lay the groundwork for the upsurge of protest with the advent of the North American global justice movement in the late 1990s.

None of this is to suggest that the activism Duncombe describes did not include the difficult work of grassroots organizing. Moreover, this included making a convincing case for change through the use of research to support a cause or claim. Thus, while some of the campaigns Duncombe worked on involved the use of empirical data, such data was deployed within a broader holistic framework which recognized that different individuals and groups bring different skills to the table. For example, take the community gardens campaign. Some organizers engaged in research about the state of public space in New York City; others conducted research about the land use process in the city; still others

such as More Gardens!, took part in outreach and community building; still others, such as Reclaim the Streets, were involved in creating a spectacle which drew attention to the issue. Yet, many within the LESC worked together in campaigns based on an organizing model which recognized the importance of data and research, legal advocacy, fundraising, communications, outreach, direct action, and street mobilization. Therein policy and planning overlapped with direct action within a framework for organizing and community building.<sup>9</sup> While rationality may be part of such a framework, there was no means–ends inversion wherein rational ends overwhelmed human needs and humanistic means. In order for the campaigns Duncombe describes to work, a lighter touch was needed. This spirit—or social Eros—helped create a transformative context for organizing.

“LESC had a standing working group whose function was fun,” Duncombe explains. “We called it, with tongue firmly in cheek, the ‘Ministry of Love’” (p. 91). The Ministry helped draw new members into the group. Each new member received orientation materials and a follow-up phone call asking how they experienced their first LESC meeting, as well as an introduction to the work of specific project groups. This spirit of engagement, play, and social Eros was quite a draw. “Within a year of our founding we had more than fifty activists working with us and were engaged in six simultaneous campaigns,” Duncombe recalls (p. 91). The group won an award from the Abbie Hoffman Activist Foundation for its innovative organizing, as well as criticism for being too frivolous. That is when Duncombe and his fellow organizers knew they had succeeded in shifting the terms of community organizing from “sacrifice to pleasure” (p. 92).

Shifting away from his own experience, Duncombe notes that LESC was not alone in taking such an approach. “In the midst of a bloody civil war in El Salvador, a group of women organized three committees per refugee camp: one for education, another for construction/sanitation, and a third for joy—the *comité de alegría*,” he explains (p. 92). Play finds itself in the most unexpected places. This, of course, is Duncombe’s point: It is a joy to work with a group of people to build a better world.

Chapters four and five of *Dream* address the themes of advertising and celebrity culture. Duncombe’s point, of course, is that activists have as much to learn from Madison Avenue and Hollywood as they do from lefty enclaves, such as the Lower East Side, Ann Arbor, or Berkeley. This is especially the case if the goal of a given campaign is to organize the unorganized—those who are not already part of the movement.

Duncombe is one of the few critical theorists who can comb through page after page of cultural studies, intermingle it with auto-ethnographic data, contextualize it with references to Karl Marx and John Dewey, and expand on these points with lessons from the tabloids—sometimes even within the same paragraph (as is the case on page 103). In a nod to Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” he borrows generously from both high theory and popular culture to create a distinct narrative of critical engagement. The point about celebrity culture is that we all love to fantasize. Most of us have been drawn into a soap opera in our day; we have argued with the TV, turned it off, never to turn it on again, only to

tune in again the following week. However, few of us have participated in changing the script. Few of us have experienced a sense of agency within celebrity culture or soap operas, yet we remain fixated.

Expanding on this theme, Duncombe refers to the magic realist genre of Latin American fiction, multiple realities find their expression. Here, the alteration of once fixed scripts and realities is often part of the plot line. One of the canonical novels of the genre, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, by Mario Vargas Llosa—a tale about a soap opera writer and a newscaster—speaks to the dilemma that Duncombe addresses. Tired and bored with the news, the newscaster borrows some of the plot lines from the soap opera which broadcasts on the same station. The point is that there is agency; culture stories can and do change.<sup>10</sup> To a certain degree, the reason activists write the press releases they write and do the actions they do is to create a sense of agency in which activists alter conventional views of reality. This theory of narrative provides the underpinnings for *Dream*. As an example, Duncombe looks no further than the magical tales of Subcommandante Marcos and his beetle Durito, whose aim is to cast doubt on the progress of capitalism and the virtues of free trade through the South as well as outline a different more playful view or movement action. Perhaps the best explication of the theory and reason for the global justice movement is captured within Marcos' *Conversations with Durito*, a collection of short stories and encounters capturing both the story of Durito and the defeat of neo-liberalism.<sup>11</sup>

Two pieces of graffiti from the city streets of Paris in 1968 capture many of the themes put forth in *Dream*: “Be realistic, dream the impossible” and “All Power to the Imagination.” The point is that every social movement must allow room for whimsy, for the imagination, the space to dream of altered social arrangements. Once imagined, such dreams can become the creative inspiration to draw up architectural plans for a new city.

To generate support for such a project, Duncombe argues, activists can create ethical spectacles that borrow from the lessons of Madison Avenue, Hollywood, and Las Vegas—and also from the Zapatistas, LESG, Reclaim the Streets, and the Church of Stop Shopping. Unlike a Nazi spectacle, an ethical spectacle is fluid, flexible, and highly participatory. In other words, it does not tell participants what to do as much as it asks them to join in the creation. Unlike the Joseph Goebbels or Karl Rove style of propaganda in which a lie is told long enough to become “the truth,” the ethical spectacle is transparent. It does not pretend to be real. Such a spectacle is based on illusion, not delusion. Within such a production, alternate views of truth emerge to influence and occasionally replace the official version of reality.

What *Dream* offers is a telling case series of examples of the use of culture, media, technology, social organizing, and celebrity to inspire social actors to participate in creating a better world. Duncombe makes the case that ethical spectacle can be an element of any effective organizing campaign. Part cultural studies, part auto-ethnographic experience, and part critical theory, *Dream* offers an outline of useful best-practice approaches to community building. The reader does not have to agree with everything Duncombe presents; the implications

resonate nonetheless. One part cultural studies, another autoethnographic narratives, and a third part critical theory, *Dream* outlines the pieces of what best practices in community organization and theory could really look like.

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### Notes

1. Thorstein Veblen, *The theory of the leisure class* (New York: Dover, 1899/1994).
2. See, for example, Peter Edelman, "The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done," *Atlantic Monthly*, 279, 3 (March 1997): 43–58.
3. For a close examination of the way race has informed debates about welfare reform, see Sanford Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
4. Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 29.
5. *Ibid.*, 30.
6. William Bridges-Adams, *The Irresistible Theatre* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957).
7. Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
8. *Ibid.*
9. For an overview of such competing organizing frameworks, see Jack Rothman, "Approaches to community intervention" *Strategies of community intervention*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. J. Rothman, J. Erlich, and J. Tropman (Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock, 1995) 26–64.
10. Mario Vargas Llosa, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, trans. Helen R. Lane. (New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982).
11. Subcommandante Marcos, *Conversations with Durito: The Story of Durito and the Defeat of Neo-liberalism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2002).

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