Politics as Art of the Impossible
The Case for a Dreampolitik in the USA

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A dominant movement in leftist politics has always embraced a sense of reality as opposed to dreams and imagination. The American sociologist Stephen Duncombe argues instead for a dreampolitik, which, unlike reactionary populist fantasies, can activate the imagination with impossible dreams. They make it possible to think 'out of the box' and to wonder what an alternative world and a different attitude to life might be like.

In his day, Otto von Bismarck was known for the practice of *realpolitik*: a hard-headed and hard-hearted style of politics that eschewed ideals in favour of the advantageous assessment of real conditions. Politics, in Bismarck's words, was 'the art of the possible'. But Germany's 'Iron Chancellor' ruled at the end of a long era of open autocracy, where the desires of the populace mattered little, if at all. What was realistic then is not realistic now. Today 'the crowd is in the saddle', as the American public relations pioneer Ivy Lee warned business leaders in the first decades of the twentieth century, and politics must embrace the dreams of the people (a lesson not lost on a certain leader of a later German Reich).[1] Furthermore, *real* conditions have changed. Today's world is linked by media systems and awash in advertising images; political policies are packaged by public relations experts and celebrity gossip is considered news. More and more of the economy is devoted to marketing and entertainment and the performance of scripted roles in the service sector. The imaginary is an integral part of reality. *Realpolitik* now necessitates *dreampolitik.*

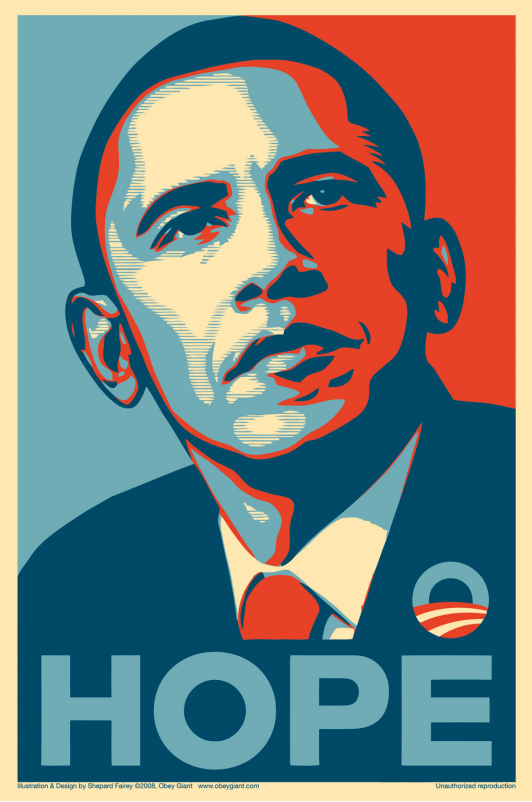
So what sort of *dreampolitik* is being practiced in the USA in the twenty-first century? Let's begin with the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. No president in recent history has so successfully channelled popular American political dreams. Ronald Reagan was the last to do so, but his dream of limited government at home and muscular intervention abroad were, after three decades, shattered by the feeble state response to the domestic disaster of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the foreign debacle of the war in Iraq. As Americans awoke from this conservative nightmare, Obama and his advisers conjured up a competing and compelling fantasy: Change and Hope. Change from what was and hope for what would be.

The brilliance of Obama's dream of was its absolute emptiness. Nearly anyone, no matter what their political beliefs, could curl up inside it and fall asleep with contentment. This technique of *dreampolitik* is not a new one. Walter Lippmann, political journalist and adviser to nearly every American president from Teddy Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, outlined this practice back in 1922 in his masterwork *Public Opinion.* He called it the 'manufacture of consent'. The procedure is simple: in order to organize the myriad and often conflicting desires and interests of voters in a popular democracy, savvy leaders learn to mobilize symbols with which people can identify. The broader and emptier the symbol the better, as it makes for a bigger tent within which to fit a greater number of people's individual dreams. The trick is, as Lippmann wrote, to 'siphon emotion out of distinct ideas' and then channel all that emotion into a unifying symbol.[2] That symbol –

and all its new followers – can then be re-linked to a party, platform or politician. By owning the symbol, you own the people's fantasies, and if you own their fantasies then you own their consent.

Given the exhaustion of neoconservative ideals and the fiasco of George W. Bush's presidency, very few Americans didn't dream of change in 2008. And who isn't for hope? What I hope for and want the world to change to might be very different from a middle-American suburbanite defecting from the Republican Party, but we can both embrace the dream of hope and change. Mobilizing these abstractions, Barack Obama won in a landslide. But there's a fatal flaw to the manufacture of consent: an empty symbol can remain empty for only so long. What is widely interpreted as Obama's excessive political caution in enacting any real change might be better understood as a savvy understanding of this mechanics of the manufacture of consent once power is obtained. Obama delayed giving substance to the dream for as long as possible but sooner or later political decisions had to be made and real policies enacted. And this is when his popularity plummeted. As his administration escalated the war in Afghanistan he betrayed my dream of peace, and when he passed the health care bill he lost my limited-government-loving middle-American doppelganger.

The disjuncture between the dreams conjured up by Obama and the disappointing political realities he's delivered has had disparate effect across the political spectrum. Liberals, for the most part, have given up their dreams. They support the president, not with the initial emotion that Obama had once masterfully siphoned, but instead with a dispirited sense of necessity. The popular right, on the other hand, has found something to dream about again. No place is this phantasmagoric renaissance on display more than with the Tea Party.



Obama / Hope, poster by Shepard Fairy, 2008.

Tea Party protest, ca. 2010.

Dreams of the Past

People in the Tea Party dream of being American patriots of the past. And they love to dress the part, sporting tri-corner hats and wearing colonial garb, waving American flags and holding aloft tea bags. As their name and dominant symbol suggest, these people honestly and earnestly think of themselves as the ideological heirs to the Sons of Liberty that dumped British tea into the Boston harbour. ('Socialists are Today's Redcoats', reads a sign attached to a tri-corner hat at a Tea Party protest.) The Tea Party's politics, at their most coherent, adhere to this self stylization. Just as the American colonists rallied to fight an intrusive government, the Tea Party musters its troops to protest the expansion of government health care and interference in the free market; just as the flashpoint for the American Revolution was unfair taxation, so too, do the Tea Partiers rail against government levies, flashing their favourite sign: Taxed Enough Already.

But there's a problem in equating the political grievances of eighteenth-century American revolutionaries with today's Tea Party activists, and it is a revealing problem. The patriots of the past were not protesting government or taxation per se, they were riled up over rule by *foreign* government and taxation *without representation.* Today, however, there is a US government made up of elected representatives. Given this, there are two ways to understand the Tea Party's faulty analogy: one, they really are the ignorant hicks that liberals believe them to be and need to be educated in basic US history, or two, Tea Partiers truly believe that the Federal Government is a foreign body and their elected officials don't really represent them. Given the Tea Party's obsession with proving that President Obama was not born in the USA, it's safe to bet on interpretation number two.

Part of the Tea Party's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the current US government is just sour grapes. After 30-odd years of conservative rule, the right lost the last election and lost it badly. It's not unrepresentative rule, as they might fantasize, it's that the other side's representatives won. That's how a democracy works. But there's something more at stake. It isn't just political representation that Tea Partiers feel alienated from, it is *cultural representation*.

You can spend weeks wandering the vast mediascape and not see a sea of middle-aged, middle-American whiteness like a Tea Party rally. Over the past 50 years, partly out of political concern, partly out of some desire to accurately represent the changing face of America, but mostly in an attempt to reach as broad an audience as possible, the culture industry has largely rejected such bland homogeneity. The starring roles in most hit

dramas still go to the straight white guy and girl, but the show would seem incomplete without a couple of co-stars of a different colour. And while whites still dominate positions of factual authority in the mass media, every local newscast has their 'other' anchor. It's been a long journey from the novelty of Nat King Cole in the mid 1950s to the routinized multihued casting of a show like today's *Survivor*, but what the American audience watches, and thus how they see their world and imagine its possibilities, has been irrevocably altered. 'Difference' is no longer different, and diversity, albeit in its most banal form, is what American's have come to expect. Beneath this ethereal media rainbow there used to be places were one might reliably find jowly white guys playing prominent roles, one of them being the nation's capital. Then came the Obama not-so-White House.

'Take our country back!' is a common cry at a Tea Party protest. Back. Back to a time when white people were firmly in power and those of other races knew their place. But also back to an imaginary America that was almost entirely white as well. Tea Party rallies – the costumes, the outrage, the provocative rhetoric – are so theatrical because they *are* theatre: a way for disaffected white people to represent themselves in a mediated world that no longer recognizes them. The Tea Party folks have a nascent understanding that they are out of sync with the cultural dreams of America. This is a subtext to Sarah Palin's appeals to the 'Real America'. But the problem for the Tea Party is that a multicultural America is not a mere media fantasy, it's a demographic reality. And it has been for some time: Crispus Attucks, the first patriot killed in the Boston Massacre, was black. In a recent Captain America comic book a group of protesters is shown holding aloft signs that read 'Tea Bag The Libs Before They Tea Bag YOU!' Captain America and his – African-American – sidekick Falcon look down on the crowd in the street and dismiss them as a just a bunch of 'angry white people'. [3] When you've been dissed by Captain America you know you're on the losing side of history.

Bypassed by multicultural America, Tea Partiers are attempting to resurrect a mythic (white) past through tri-corner hats and colonial garb. They may look ridiculous, but that doesn't mean they are not dangerous. The alienation that Tea Partiers feel from the dominant fantasies and demographic realities of the USA is exactly what makes them so volatile. They have no sense of identification *with* the majority and little recognition *from* the majority, and these are the conditions that breed incivility, violence and perhaps even terror. If the majority doesn't exist in the dream world of the Tea Party, then violence against them is not quite real. And, paradoxically, when the dream world of the Tea Party is not recognized by the majority, what better than violence to make them notice? But their dream has no future. No doubt there will be electoral shocks and violent outbursts from the Tea Party over the next few years, but in the end it will disappear like Father Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, the John Birch Society, the Ku Klux Klan and the myriad other manifestations of the populist radical right in the USA that promised a dream of the past.

Dreaming the Future

So what is the alternative? Is there a practice of *dreampolitik* distinct from the reactionary, and ultimately doomed, popular fantasies of the far right and the manufactured consent of the political elite? I think so. You will not find it among the liberal-left, vacillating as they are between a support for Obama rationalized by the 'realities' of the present and reflexive criticism of his policies with no counter-inspirations offered. But on the creative fringes of the left another type of dreaming is taking place.

On 12 November 2008, New Yorkers awoke to a 'special edition' of the *New York Times*, handed out by a legion of volunteers at subway, bus and train stations across the city. 'IRAQ WAR ENDS' screamed the headline, followed by an article reporting that US troops would immediately withdraw from Iraq and that the UN would take responsibility for rebuilding the social and political institutions of *both* countries. This 'news' was

surrounded by reports declaring passage of a Maximum Wage Law, the elimination of tuition at all public universities, a ban on lobbying, and a timeline detailing how progressives gained power in Washington, DC. Even the advertisements envisioned a utopic future: a picture-perfect full page ad for Exxon, with the tagline: 'Peace. An idea the world can profit from', pledged the multinational to a pacific and environmentally sound future. The *Times*' slogan: 'All the News That's Fit to Print', was altered for one day to read: 'All the News We Hope to Print.' [4]

Over 80,000 copies of the faux *Times* (the organizers, in fabulist form, claimed over a million) were handed out across the city and forwarded to national and international newsrooms, where news of the 'news' was then spread around the world. The project, the result of the clandestine labour of hundreds of contributors facilitated by artist / activists Andy Bichlbaum of the Yes Men and Steve Lambert, a political artist with a history of utopian interventions, was meant as an imaginary act of politics, or rather, a political act of imagination. The prefigured future, however, was not meant as a magical transformation: each event reported in the paper was described as the result of everyday citizens pushing for a more progressive agenda. Yet the experience was meant to be magical. The realism of the newspaper was singularly impressive: the paper, the type, the layout, even the tone and style of the articles and ads themselves were crafted to create a believable product of an imaginary future. The organizers hoped to make people stop and, for a moment, enter a dream world. 'The challenge isn't to make people think that the war is a bad idea, since most people already do,' Bichlbaum explained at the time. 'The challenge is to make people feel it can be over now.' He continues: 'We wanted people to read this and say to themselves, What if?'

The fake-edition of The New York Times, 12 November 2008, a project by Andy Bichlbaum (Yes Men) and Steve Lambert. – Times Special Edition: Photo Bureau

Verfremdungseffekt, or What If?

What if? – to state the obvious – is a question. It is a question that disrupts the fantasy; it asks the person reading the *Times* to realize that what they hold in their hands represents a dream. The striking verisimilitude of the newspaper was intended to convey a sense of

felt possibility. 'None of this is currently true,' co-organizer Steve Lambert explained, 'but it's all possible.' [5] But the sense of possibility that the paper hoped to evoke is complicated, for at the same time the reader was meant to feel the possibility of peace and justice, she was expected to know that this was just a dream. Bertolt Brecht, the great German communist playwright, experimented with this tension between illusion and awareness in his quest for a radical theatre. Brecht was horrified about the ability of most theatre to suck the spectator into an illusion and have them vicariously dream someone else's dream. Traditional theatre made spectators into passive receptacles: a dumb, obedient mass, well suited for fascist mythologies or the 'democratic' manufacture of consent, but not the radical transformation of society. Brecht wanted his theatre to create active subjects who would think critically and act politically. His dramaturgical solution to this problem was *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect. Alienation, in Marxist as well as common parlance, has traditionally had a negative connotation: the proletariat was alienated from their labour just as the Tea Partier is alienated from the contemporary culture of their country; the struggle for both is to overcome alienation and regain power and control over the foreign object. Brecht, however, theorized that alienation might be used as a positive force: a means to shake people out of their comfortable integration. Through a battery of techniques like giving away the ending of a play at the beginning, disrupting dramatic scenes with song and dance, having stage hands appear on stage, and collapsing the fourth wall to have actors address the audience, Brecht worked to alienate his audience. Instead of drawing people into a seamless illusion, the playwright strove to push them way and remind them that they were only watching a play. If the audience wanted real action, if they wanted the world to change, they could not rely upon art to do it for them – they would have to do it themselves. An end to wars and a just economy are not impossible, no matter how far we seem from these goals today, but the *Times* reporting this as factual news in 2008 is an impossibility. I saw firsthand the cognitive dissonance in people's faces when they were handed a copy of the newspaper: first surprise, then interest, then realization that what they held in their hands was not genuine – all in the matter of seconds. This rapid realization on the part of the audience that what they had been reading was a fake was not a political failure on the part of the project; it is the secret of its success. By holding out a dream and refusing entry simultaneously, the 'special edition' of the *Times* created the conditions for popular political dreaming.

Utopia is No-Place

This technique was pioneered nearly 500 years ago in *Utopia,* Thomas More's story of a far-off land that was, well, utopic. On this fantasy island living and labour is rationally planned for the good of all. There is a democratically elected government and priesthood, and freedom of speech and religion. There is no money and no private property or privately held wealth, and perhaps most utopian of all, there are no lawyers. More's Utopia was everything his sixteenth-century European home was not: peaceful, prosperous and just. For, as More writes in his tale: 'When no one owns anything, all are rich.' [6]

Utopia, however, is a curious book; two books really. Book I is essentially an argument – made through Raphael, the traveller and describer of Utopia – of why Book II – the actual description of the Isle of Utopia – is politically useless. Raphael explains that rulers don't listen to imaginings other than their own, and Europeans are resistant to new ideas. Indeed, Raphael insists that his own story will soon be forgotten (which, of course, is a clever rhetorical strategy to make sure it is not). The book is full of such seeming contradictions, riddles and paradoxes. The grandest one being the title itself. Utopia, composed of the Greek *ou* (no) and *topos* (place), is a place that is, literally, *no-place*. In addition, the story teller of this magic land is called Raphael Hythloday (or Hythlodaeus), from the Greek *Huthlos*, meaning nonsense. So the reader is told a story of a place which is named out of existence, by a narrator who is named as unreliable. And so begins the debate: Is the entirety of More's *Utopia* a satire, an exercise demonstrating the absurdity of

such political fantasies? Or is it an earnest effort to suggest and promote these dreams?

There's evidence for both sides. First the case for the satirical interpretation: in addition to the problematic names given the place and the narrator, More, in his description of the island of Utopia, mixes 'possible' political proposals like publicly held property and the freedom of speech and religion with such absurdities as gold and jewel encrusted chamber pots. As such, one might argue that More effectively dismisses as ridiculous*all* political dreams. 'Freedom of speech? Well that is about as absurd as taking a shit in a gold chamber pot!' On the other hand, Raphael – our narrator – is named after the Archangel Raphael who gives site to the blind and guides the lost. Arguing for More's political sincerity, one might propose that he uses the absurd to seriously suggest, yet at the same time politically distance himself from, political, economic and religious dreams that he favours but that would, in his time, be considered political and religious heresy. 'Freedom of religion?' More might plausibly plea: 'Can't you see I was kidding?'

But I think this orthodox debate about whether More was satirical or sincere obfuscates rather than clarifies, and actually misses the point entirely. The genius of More's*Utopia* is that is it both absurd ***and*** earnest, simultaneously. And it is through the combination of these seemingly opposite ways of presenting political ideals that a more fruitful way of thinking about ***dreampolitik*** can start to take shape. For it is the presentation of Utopia as ***no-place***, and its narrator as ***nonsense***, that opens up a space for the reader's imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace and a radically different sensibility might be like.

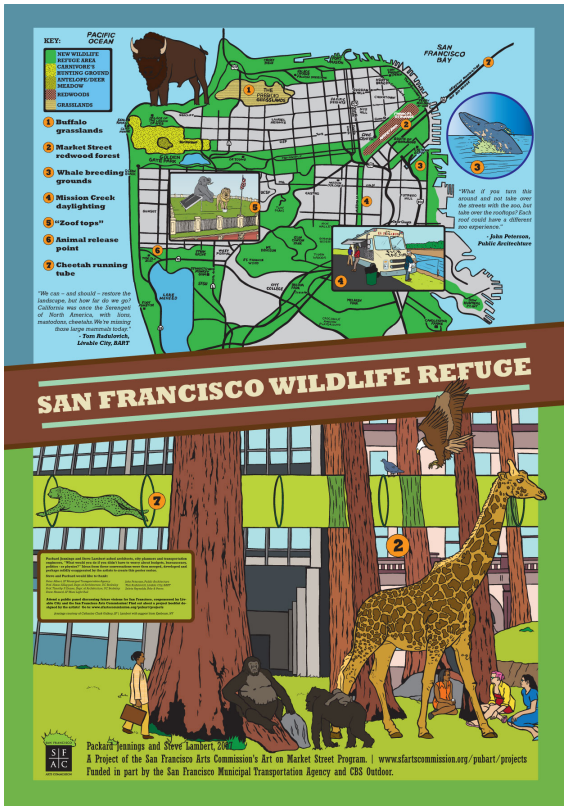
By positing his fantasy someplace as a no-place, More escapes the problems that typically haunt political dreamscapes. Most political imaginaries insist upon their possibility: positing an imagined future or alternative as ***the*** future or ***the*** alternative. This assurance guarantees at least one of several results:

– A brutalization of the present to bring it into line with the imagined future. (Stalinization, Year Zero of the Khmer Rouge)
– A political disenchantment as the future never arrives and the alternative is never realized. (Post 1968 left, the current implosion of the US Republican Party.)
– A vain search for a new dream when the promised one isn't realized. (Endless consumption of products or lifestyles.)
– Living in a lie. ('Actually existing Socialism', 'The American Dream'.)

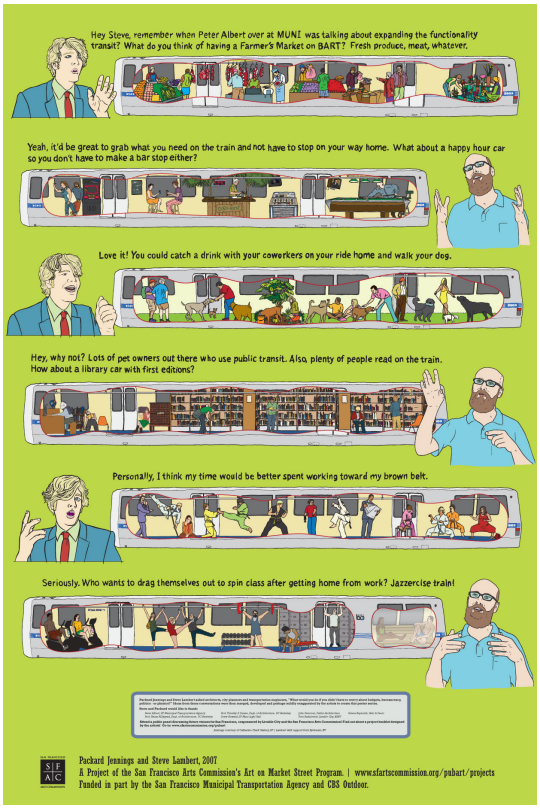
What More proposes is something entirely different: he imagines an alternative to his sixteenth-century Europe that is ***openly proclaimed to be a work of imagination***. It can not be realized simply because it is unrealistic. It is, after all, no place. But the reader has been infected; another option has been shown. As such, they can't safely return to the surety of their own present as the naturalness of their world has been disrupted. Once an alternative has been imagined, to stay where one is or to try something else becomes a question that ***demands*** attention and a choice. Yet More resists the short-circuiting of this imaginative moment by refusing to provide a 'realistic' alternative. As such, this technique of ***dreampolitik*** resists the simple swapping of one truth for another, a left dream for a right dream, communism for capitalism. As no-place Utopia denies the easy, and politically problematic, option of such a simple choice. Instead, the question of alternatives is left open, and space is opened to imagine: Why not? How come? What if?

Art of the Impossible

I was drawn into working on the faux *Times* (I wrote the copy for some of the advertisements) by one of the organizers, Steve Lambert. A few months earlier Lambert and his collaborator, Packard Jennings, had asked me to write the catalogue essay for a set of street posters that were commissioned and displayed by the city of San Francisco. These large-format posters, illustrated in the style of airplane emergency instructions and displayed on illuminated kiosks on one of San Francisco's main thoroughfares, offered passers-by images of the city's future. But not just any future: an absurd future. Skyscrapers are movable so citizens can rearrange their city. A commuter train is turned into a green market, lending library and martial arts studio. A football stadium is made into an organic farm (and linebackers into human ploughs). The entire city is transformed into a wildlife refuge. For inspiration Packard and Lambert asked experts in the fields of architecture, city planning and transportation for ideas on how to make a better city. These plans were then, in their own words, 'perhaps mildly exaggerated'. It is exactly this exaggeration that makes these artists' images so politically powerful.[7]



Green Space and Multipurpose Train, posters for a future San Francisco, according to a concept by Packard Jennings and Steve Lambert, 2007.



Jennings and Lambert's plans are unrealizable. A city could become more 'green' with additional public parks and community gardens, but transforming San Francisco into a nature preserve where office workers take their lunch break next to a mountain gorilla family? This isn't going to happen. And that's the point. Because it is a patent impossibility their fantasies fool no one. There is no duplicity, no selling the people a false bill of goods. Yet at the same time these impossible dreams open up spaces to imagine new possibilities. The problem with asking professionals to 'think outside the box' and imagine new solutions is that without intervention, they usually won't. Like most of us, their imaginations are constrained by the tyranny of the possible. By visualizing impossibilities, Jennings and Lambert create an opening to ask: 'What if?' without closing down this free space by seriously answering: 'This is what.'

Most political spectacles are constructed with the intent of passing off fantasy for reality. The function of the Nazi rallies in Nuremberg, so spectacularly captured in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, were to substitute an image of power, unity and order for the reality of the depression, chaos and infighting that plagued interwar Germany; US president George W. Bush's landing on an aircraft carrier in a flight suit to declare 'mission accomplished' in Iraq was the attempt to trade the actuality of a disastrous and soon to be protracted war launched by a combat-shirking president for the fantasy of easy victory declared by a noble warrior-chief. These are fascist spectacles: the future is imagined by elites and then presented as already in existence. Ethical spectacle operates differently by presenting dreams that people are aware are just dreams. These are acts of imagination that provide visions of what could be without ever pretending they are anything other than what they are. Presenting itself as what it actually is, this form of fantasy is, ironically, truthful and real. It is also unfinished. Because it is presented as only an act of human imagination, not a representation of concrete reality, ethical spectacle remains open to revision or rejection and, most important, popular intervention. Jennings and Lambert's posters are exemplars of ethical spectacle.

Standing in front of one of their posters on a street corner you smile at the absurd idea of practicing Tae Kwon Do on your train ride home. But you may also begin to question why public transportation is so uni-functional, and then ask yourself why shouldn't a ***public***

transport system cater to other public desires. This could set your mind to wondering why the government is so often in the business of controlling, instead of facilitating, our desires, and then you might start to envision what a truly desirable state might look like. And so on, ad infinitum. Jennings and Lambert's impossible solutions – like More's *Utopia* and the 'special edition' of the *New York Times* – are means to dream of new ones.

There's a dominant strain of the left that has always argued for a politics without dreams. In this vision, the masses (led by the left) will wake up and see the truth … and it shall make them free. In the famous words of Marx and Engels: 'Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' It's a nice fantasy, but that's all it is and ever has been. Even Marx and Engels implicitly recognized this by beginning their *Manifesto* with the chimera of communist inevitability: 'A spectre is haunting Europe …' [8] In the fantasy-fuelled world we inhabit today the dream of a politics without dreams is a prescription for political impotence. The question is not whether dreams should, or should not, be a part of politics, but what sort of *dreampolitik* ought to be practiced. What is not needed is a left equivalent of the center's cynical manufacture of consent, or a replica of the reactionary phantasmagorias of the right. Nor is it desirable to wait for and follow the next progressive saviour who pronounces: 'I Have a Dream.' What is needed, if we are serious about the potential of populist (un)reason, are tools and techniques to help people dream on their own. Bismarck might have insisted that 'politics is the art of the possible', but a much more powerful case can be made today that politics is the art of the impossible. [9]

Stephen Duncombe is an associate professor at the Gallatin School of New York University, where he teaches the history and politics of media and culture. He is the author of, most recently, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (2007) and the cofounder and codirector of the College of Tactical Culture and the School for Creative Activism in New York City.

Footnotes

1. Ivy L. Lee, address before the American Electric Railway Association, 10 October 1916, cited in Stuart Ewen, *PR!* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 75.
2. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 158, 151.
3. *Captain America*, #602 (New York: Marvel Universe, 2010). Pressured by conservatives, Marvel later apologized for their portrayal of the Tea Party.
4. For the complete 'special edition' of the *New York Times* see www.nytimes-se.com.
5. Andy Bichlbaum and Steve Lambert, personal interview, 20 November 2008; CNN interview, 14 November 2008.
6. Thomas More, *Utopia*, edited and translated by V.S. Ogden (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1949), 80.
7. All posters can be viewed and downloaded from www.visitsteve.com .
8. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 476, 473.
9. Fragments of this essay have appeared, in altered form, in *Playboy* magazine, *The Nation*, the exhibition catalogue for 'Wish You Were Here: Postcards from Our Awesome Future', and 'Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy'.

Tags

Activism, Democracy

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