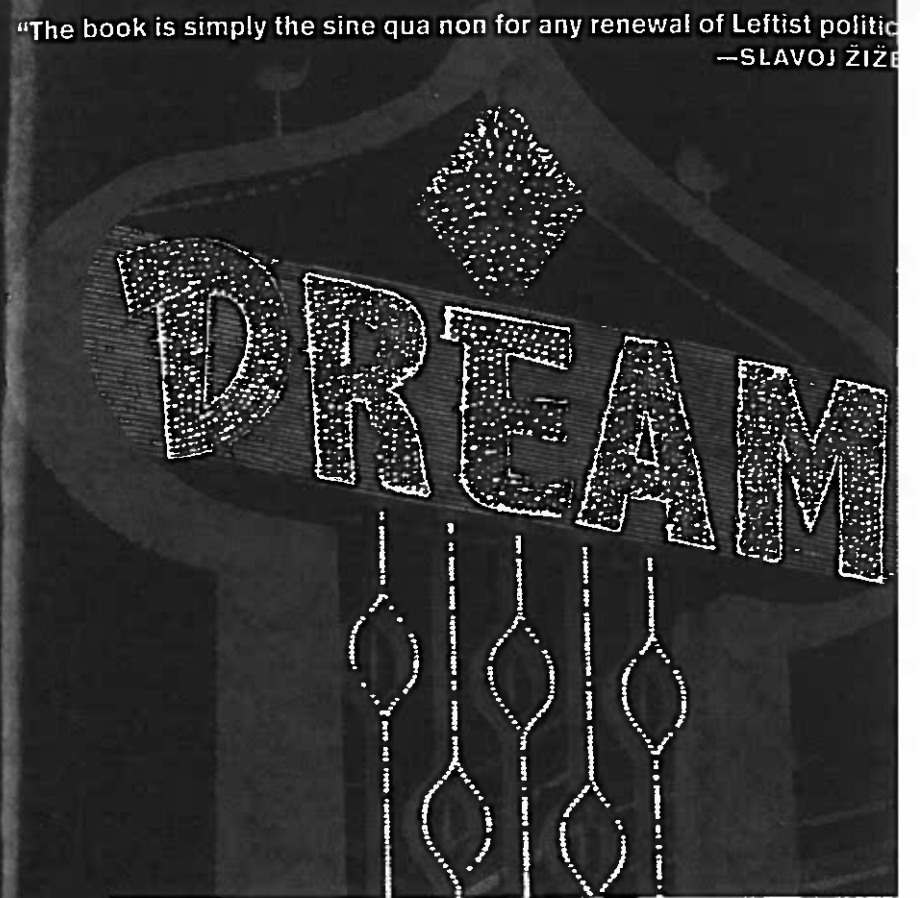


"The book is simply the sine qua non for any renewal of Leftist politics."
—SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK



DREAM

RE-IMAGINING PROGRESSIVE POLITICS
IN AN AGE OF FANTASY

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I. Politics in an Age of Fantasy

In the autumn of 2004, shortly before the U.S. presidential election and in the middle of a typically bloody month in Iraq, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a feature article on the casualty of truth in the Bush administration. Like most *Times* articles, it was well written, well researched, and thoroughly predictable. That George W. Bush is ill informed, doesn't listen to dissenting opinion, and acts upon whatever nonsense he happens to believe is hardly news. (Even the fact that he once insisted that Sweden did not have an army and none of his cabinet dared contradict him was not all that surprising.) There was, however, one valuable insight. In a soon-to-be-infamous passage, the writer, Ron Suskind, recounted a conversation between himself and an unnamed senior adviser to the president:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernable reality." I nodded and murmured something about Enlightenment principles

and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create reality. And while you are studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

It was clear how the *Times* felt about this peek into the political mind of the presidency. The editors of the *Gray Lady* pulled out the passage and floated it over the article in oversized, multi-colored type. This was ideological gold: the Bush administration openly and arrogantly admitting that they didn't care about reality. One could almost feel the palpable excitement generated among the *Times* liberal readership, an enthusiasm mirrored and amplified all down the left side of the political spectrum on computer listservs, call-in radio shows, and print editorials over the next few weeks.² This proud assertion of naked disregard for reality and unbounded faith in fantasy was the most damning evidence of Bush insanity yet. He must surely lose the election now.

What worried me then, and still worries me today, is that my reaction was radically different. My politics have long been diametrically opposed to those of the Bush administration, and I've had a long career as a left-leaning academic and a progressive political activist. Yet I read the same words that generated so much animosity among liberals and the left and felt something else: excited, inspired . . . and jealous. Whereas the commonsense view held that Bush's candid disregard for reality was evidence of the madness of his administration, I perceived it as a much more disturbing sign of its brilliance. I knew then that Bush, in spite of

making a mess of nearly everything he had undertaken in his first presidential term, would be reelected.

How could my reaction be so different from that of so many of my colleagues and comrades? Maybe I was becoming a neocon, another addition to the long list of defectors whose progressive God had failed. Would I follow the path of Christopher Hitchens? A truly depressing thought. But what if, just maybe, the problem was not with me but with the main currents of progressive thinking in this country? More precisely, maybe there was something about progressive politics that had become increasingly problematic.

The problem, as I see it, comes down to reality. Progressives believe in it, Bush's people believe in creating it. The left and right have switched roles—the right taking on the mantle of radicalism and progressives waving the flag of conservatism. The political progeny of the protestors who proclaimed, "Take your desires for reality" in May of 1968, were now counseling the reversal: take reality for your desires.³ Republicans were the ones proclaiming, "I have a dream."

Dreams often make those who are left-of-center nervous. Fantasy and spectacle have been the property of Fascism, totalitarian Communism, and, more recently, the unspeakable horror known as *Entertainment Tonight*. Traditionally we are more comfortable with those things mumbled by the *Times* reporter underneath his breath: "Enlightenment principles and empiricism." But what are these things in which liberals put so much faith? Empiricism, put simply, is the theory that things exist and can be measured independently of those doing the measuring. There are facts to be discovered and truth to be discerned, if only we can separate out the desires of people. In the early 1600s the pioneering scientist Galileo Galilei wrote of the necessity of distinguishing qualities that "exist in external bodies" and can be measured—size, shape,

quantity, and motion—from qualities like color, smell, and taste, which are subjective judgments. The former have an autonomous and verifiable reality, while the latter “exist only in the sensitive body, for when the living creature is removed all these qualities are carried off and annihilated.” These latter, all-too-human impressions are, in Galileo’s wonderful phrase, “nothing more than mere names.”⁴ The job of science, then, is to hold human subjectivity in check in order to reveal the objective reality that precedes it. Reality, once freed from tradition and superstition and no longer clouded by imagination and emotion, is self-evident.

Self-evident reality was critical to the Enlightenment as well. Philosophers of the Enlightenment—the name bestowed upon a loose school of thought centered in Europe around the 1700s—believed that politics should strive to model itself upon the “real” of the world, including the real nature of man. For Thomas Hobbes, man was brutish and cruel; for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he was noble and good; yet both held that any system of just and lasting governance must base itself upon this revealed “real.” That is, politics must be based in fact, not mere tradition or superstition. Another key tenet of Enlightenment thought followed from this. Man, in order to reveal this “real” and act upon it accordingly, must be able to reason and act rationally. Just as an empiricist astronomer could examine the trajectory of a planet without reference to heavenly bodies, the citizen imagined by the Enlightenment had the ability to discern the forces governing his or her life and make thoughtful decisions based upon the (judicious) study of such observations. Through reason a citizenry could intelligently choose one leader, policy, or system of government over the other. As a rational actor, *homo economicus* guided the invisible hand of the market. Reason and rationality, so the theory goes, were and are the cornerstones of democracy and capitalism.

It is not surprising that progressives feel an affinity for the Enlightenment and empiricism. It was empiricism that broke the Church’s grip on the interpretation of the world. By challenging the Church on its explanations of the physical world, the empiricists opened up an assault on its political and spiritual power as well. Likewise, the Enlightenment ideal of man as a rational, reasoning creature undermined the hierarchies of feudalism and the foundations of divine right. Traditional “common sense” held that common people could not govern themselves nor act orderly in the marketplace. Contesting these assumptions cleared the way for new forms of politics and economics.⁵ The religious festivals and entertaining spectacles mobilized by Church and crown to excite or divert the masses and cement religious or royal power could now be replaced by town meetings and coffeehouses where enlightened citizens debated the issues of the day. These reasonable citizens, understanding reality as it is and not as it is imagined, would guide democracy and rationalize the market, breaking forever with a reactionary past cloaked in magic, mystery, and manipulation. In other words, and more to the point, progressives throughout history embraced the Enlightenment and empiricism because historically these ideas were progressive.⁶

But all this is history. Appeals to truth and reality, and faith in rational thought and action, are based in a fantasy of the past, or rather, past fantasy.⁷ 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 or the performance of scripted roles in the service sector.⁸ We live in a “society of the spectacle,” as the French theorist-provocateur Guy Debord declared back in 1967. Yet, faced with this new world, progressives are still acting out a script inherited

from the past. This is a mistake, for those who put their trust in Enlightenment principles and empiricism today are doomed to political insignificance.⁹

This is largely where liberals and the left reside now. Consider the recent ghoully spectacle of Terri Schiavo, the brain-dead woman kept alive by forced medical feeding against the wishes of her husband and the decisions of a court. In a roundabout effort to inch toward outlawing abortion, conservative politicians dramatized the tragedy as an epic struggle of the right to life, of the lofty primacy of the spirit over the body. Politician stood shoulder to shoulder with priest in an appeal for state intervention to prevent a helpless innocent from court-mandated death. It was grand theater, played to the hilt—despite opinion polls recording anywhere from 60 to 70 percent of Americans believing that government has no place in end-of-life decisions.¹⁰ How did the Democrats capitalize on their opponents' popular weakness? With meek statements about proper judicial process and respect for expert medical opinion—all the inspiration of a Sergeant Friday: “Just the facts, ma’am. No need to get excited.” This was not merely a case of political ineptitude; it was the manifestation of an Enlightenment-era faith that facts are more powerful than fantasies.

To be fair, there are some things that progressives do reasonably well. We reveal the lies of institutionalized power through investigative reporting and media exposure (Watergate, torture at Abu Ghraib prison). We demonstrate to those in power that “the whole world is watching” by marshalling hundreds of thousands of people for mass protests (the ritual “March on Washington”). And we influence privileged youth through our relative dominance in the universities (even though this victory is never acknowledged since doing so would mean admitting that what we

teach is not simply the Truth). But these strengths are based upon a fundamental weakness: an Enlightenment faith that somehow, if reasoning people have access to the Truth, the scales will fall from their eyes and they will see reality as it truly is and, of course, agree with us.

To retain this faith, progressives have, ironically, closed their eyes to the reality of today's politico-cultural landscape. Despite repeated assertions that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on 9/11 by nearly every respected news outlet in the United States (and even the not-so-respected governmental intelligence services), a majority of Americans believe there was a link. This is not some mass of illiterates living in a world where information is controlled by priests intoning in Latin. These are citizens of a highly literate nation awash in 24/7 information. Is there any better evidence that the problem is not one of access to the truth? The archaic concern with formal censorship has little validity in our age of informational overload.

Certainly U.S. propaganda gave the public's flight from facts a helping hand, but it was effective because the Pentagon understood that people often prefer a simple, dramatic story to the complicated truth. Weaned on endless advertisements, sitcoms, and Hollywood movies, we've learned to find comfort in compelling narratives and change the channel when confronted with messy facts. If Osama bin Laden is elusive and al-Qaeda ephemeral, Saddam Hussein and the easily recognized nation of Iraq seemed made for prime-time trouncing. When the Iraqis didn't welcome us as liberators, and catching Saddam proved anticlimactic, no matter: there was always *Saving Private Lynch*.

A climate of fear can fuel fantasy, as the Bush administration so effectively demonstrated in the days after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. When threatened and insecure, people will find a way to

go with the story—no matter how irrational—that makes them feel safer. And it may be that the pull toward the dramatic is basic human modus operandi. Jesus, after all, used parables instead of rational arguments to get his points across in the Gospels. But today spectacle is center stage, driven by a mass media and a consumer economy that panders to and profits off of emotional narrative and the overhyped story. Once there were a few hold-outs: news, education, and so on. Now "fair and balanced" Fox is in the living room and commercially sponsored Channel One is in the classroom. Spectacle is our way of making sense of the world. Truth and power belong to those who tell the better story.

Walter Lippmann, the influential writer, popular newspaper editor, and informal political adviser to nearly every president from Teddy Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, argued that democratic theory has little to do with democratic practice. Democratic theory resides in the coffeehouses and government buildings where enlightened men examine evidence, hold reasoned conversations, and arrive at rational decisions. Theoretical democracy is a heady process. Its practice aims a bit lower. To win elections among a large and diverse population and get the majority to agree upon policy or go along with decisions, politicians, like their commercial counterparts in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue, speak to people's fantasies and desires through a language of images and associations. By manipulating symbols, exploiting memories, and spinning stories, the political elite are able to guide the direction of public opinion. "The practice of democracy has turned a corner," Lippmann argued in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, "A revolution is taking place, infinitely more significant than any shifting of economic power." He called this revolution the Manufacture of Consent.¹¹

Those of us opposed to rule by a political elite learned an im-

portant lesson from Lippmann. If democracy is to be sustained, and citizens are to truly govern their lives, then the manufacture of consent must be continuously revealed and deconstructed. Political stagecraft must be relentlessly attacked with our arsenal of facts and reason.

We learned the wrong lesson.

Progressives should have learned to build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashions spectacles which give these fantasies form—a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories. In brief, we should have learned to manufacture dissent.

We need to do this for strategic reasons. Whether one approves of it or not, fantasy and spectacle have become the lingua franca of our time. Progressives can talk all they want about the Bush administration's disregard for the truth and its dangerous flights of fancy, but no one other than the converted is listening. And when no one listens in a democracy, the alignment of power stays the same. If we want our ideas to lead and not trail the politics of this country, then we need to learn how to think and communicate in today's spectacular vernacular.

Recently, progressive political writers such as Thomas Frank have argued that if the Democratic Party is to have a political future, it needs to adopt platforms and embrace policies that materially benefit the majority of Americans. Frank is absolutely correct.¹² But unless the Democrats develop programs to sell these real material gains and employ strategies that acknowledge the more immaterial nature of citizens' hopes and dreams, they will continue to fail. With apologies to Galileo (who merely makes the mistake common to many modern Western thinkers), reality and fantasy don't inhabit separate spheres, they coexist and

to enter into social contracts, political debates, and democratic self-governance. Their conservative opponents, such as French Revolution critic Edmund Burke and the reluctant American revolutionary Alexander Hamilton, argued that it was exactly because the people were not capable of reason that politics should be kept out of their hands. (Burke was particularly haunted by the specter of the French hairdresser making political decisions.)²⁰ Radicals in the Marxist tradition ingeniously incorporated both sides of the argument. They acknowledged the seemingly irrational behaviors of the majority of people who act against their own political interests by supporting the ruling class, but held out the promise of the masses' eventual awakening to "class consciousness" when, in the words of the Communist Manifesto, "man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."²¹ For all their ideological differences, these thinkers agreed on one thing: reason should rule.

Outside of politics, other realms of human life acknowledge and exalt the fantastic. Consider the texts of the great world religions: the Red Sea parting for Moses as the Jews flee to the promised land; the terrible beauty of Krishna as he advises Arjuna to kill his friends and kinsman in battle; the dissonant symbol of Jesus, the son of God, crucified on a cross like a common criminal; the lyrical cadences of the words of the Prophet Muhammad. The Hebrew Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the New Testament, and the Koran are all quasipolitical models for right behavior and community relations, yet stripped of their narratives and symbols they would have no power to move their audience, and thus no power at all. How many stirring sermons use the endless genealogies, the begets and begottens, of the book of Numbers as source material?

Fantasy inspires the bulk of our entertainment as well: movies, television, popular music, video games, theme parks, casinos, strip clubs, and so on. No matter what their differences, each form of entertainment constitutes a sort of spectacle that promises to transport the spectator outside their present reality. Complaints about the unreal fantasies of Hollywood and the "lack of representation" in television sitcoms miss the function of entertainment: to escape the here and now, to imagine something different, something better.

While there are fundamentalists who insist on the literal truth of religious stories, and media activists who would like to make entertainment into a bleak mirror of our everyday lives, most of us are drawn toward religion and entertainment for very different reasons: because both address our desires and articulate our dreams. So why is politics exempt? One might think that particularly in politics, whose purpose is the organization and arrangement of people's lives, one might find the irrational front and center. But looking out over the wide expanse of Western political theory, the irrational is hard to spot. When it is noticed, it is treated as a contagion to quarantine or a disruption to manage, a stain on the otherwise clean landscape of reason.

But again, this is theory, and practice is something else entirely. Take national political conventions in the United States. In theory these conventions are meetings held "to discuss and decide important matters," according to the *Dictionary of Government and Politics*.²² More specifically, the *American Political Dictionary* tells us a convention is "a meeting of party delegates . . . to decide on party policy and strategy and nominate candidates for elective office."²³ It is a reasoned process of discussion and decision and, finally, democratic action. But this, of course, is hokey. In

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conventions past, backroom deals were cut by political bosses in private smoke-filled suites and physical fights broke out among inebriated delegates on the convention floor.²⁴ This was bare-knuckles democracy. Today even that semblance of debate and discussion is gone. All decisions have already been made by the time the campaign button-bejeweled conventioners invade their host cities. Illuminated by the bright lights of television, political conventions are floodlit stages on which to play out competing fantasies of the future of the country and its leader. The Republican candidate is presented as firm, resolute, and patriotic, awash in flags and martial symbols. The Democratic challenger conjures up the ideals of inclusion and opportunity, surrounded by faces of many races and stations. Or, as with the 2004 conventions, the parties swap fantasies; John Kerry played the war hero flanked by his Vietnam War Swift Boat comrades, a soldier-statesman leading a "Stronger America," while George W. Bush acted the down-home everyman surrounded by the Republican rainbow. The candidate's biopic, with its soft-focus images of candidate and country, packaged and produced months in advance, is the real star of the convention. The time when political parties decide instead to save money by staying at home and buying an hour's worth of prime-time TV space may not be too far off. It would be a much more efficient means to fulfill the real function of the modern political convention: a spectacle.

If progressives are to engage, rather than ignore, the phantasmagoric terrain of politics, we need to learn from those who do spectacle best: the architects of Las Vegas, video game designers, advertising's creative directors, and the producers and editors of celebrity media. This does not mean adopting flashy techniques to help us make sexier advertisements for progressive causes (though this wouldn't hurt). It means looking deep into the core of

these and other examples of popular spectacle to divine exactly what makes them so popular.

The immense popularity of commercial culture needs to be acknowledged and respected. To get us to open our wallets, le-gions of very smart and very creative people make sure that what they produce resonates with our most powerful and intimate desires. There is a lot to learn here. Too often these sources of potential knowledge and inspiration are, at best, criticized and, at worst, ignored by progressives. This makes us feel better about our cultural sophistication, our "specialness," but it also keeps us powerless. The entertainment state should be ruthlessly criticized, but the techniques used to create and maintain it need to be enthusiastically explored and exploited for their progressive potential.

This entails looking deeper than the current vogue of celebrating commercial culture as a "site of resistance." Sure, people enjoy culture in unpredictable ways: some of us may read romance novels as feminist texts, others modify video games to create unauthorized versions or customize imported autos into street racers. In resisting the sanctioned rules for "right" consumption we experience the thrill of making mass culture our own. But the political efficacy of a resistance tied to the everyday use (or abuse) of a commercial product is debatable. There is a big difference between rereading reality and acting to make it anew. To not recognize this distinction is to confuse the everyday action of making meaning with the much rarer tasks of creation and transformation.²⁵ Furthermore, this sort of "resistance" is often cultivated by marketers who understand it—correctly—as another way to get consumers engaged with their product. Toyota's new Scion division, for example, makes consumer customization of their cars—or the "remix," as they call it—part of their marketing

strategy, promoting this practice with the slogan "We relinquish all power to you."²⁶ Consumer culture always serves the needs of consumer capitalism, including making space for resistance when expedient or profitable.

Between arrogant rejection and populist acceptance of commercial culture lies a third approach: appropriating, co-opting, and, most important, *transforming* the techniques of spectacular capitalism into tools for social change. This is the fine art of transmutation, once practiced with great effect by the Church, which cleverly adopted components of pagan religions and forms of pagan ritual (the Christmas tree, for example) to do the work of Christianity.

To do this means recognizing that consumer culture—its crafted fantasies and stimulated desires—speaks to something deep and real within us. The American psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James articulated this political strategy back in 1906 in a speech he gave to students at Stanford University on "The Moral Equivalent of War." The problem with pacifism, the pacifist James argued, was that it was presented in such a way as to seem weak and boring, a safe utopia where the lion lay down with the lamb. At their peril, pacifists ignored all the legitimate emotional needs that war fulfills: romance, valor, honor, and sacrifice. By not speaking to "the higher aspects of militaristic sentiment" in their appeals for peace, pacifists ignored the real passions that motivate people. The result was a contest between the vigor of Teddy Roosevelt and the pieties of a Sunday school teacher. The wars of the twentieth century loudly declared the winner. "Pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetic and ethical point of view of their opponents," James counseled, "then move the point, and your opponent will follow."²⁷ Progressives, long comfortable with disdaining and distancing themselves from

impure desire, need to learn to speak to it, through it, with it . . . and then move the point.

This won't be easy. Spectacular culture is most often designed to manipulate people and take their money, not set the stage for liberty, equality, and fraternity. It often appeals to our worst traits, while reaching progressive goals depends upon our more generous instincts. It is understandable to worry that by recasting progressive politics within the terms of spectacle we will sacrifice our ethical strength. But the point is not to denude the progressive movement of its essential characteristics but to expand its possibilities, addressing a larger sector of the public by acknowledging, and working with, all the desires we possess. The challenge for progressives is to create ethical spectacles.

Progressive dreams, and the spectacles that give them tangible form, will look different than those conjured up by the Bush administration or the commercial directors of what critic Neil Gabler calls *Life, the Movie*.²⁸ Different not only in content—this should be obvious—but in form. Given the progressive ideals of egalitarianism and a politics that values the input of everyone, our dreamscapes will not be created by media-savvy experts of the left and then handed down to the rest of us to watch, consume, and believe. Instead, our spectacles will be participatory: dreams the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be active: spectacles that work only if people help create them. They will be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be transparent: dreams that one knows are dreams but which still have power to attract and inspire. And, finally, the spectacles we create will not cover over or replace reality and truth but perform and amplify it.

Illusion may be a necessary part of political life, but delusion need not be. Progressives cannot sell the dream of a world with

no medical bills without backing it up with promises and policies that guarantee universal health care for every American. We should not conjure up a utopia of pure skies and clean water unless we are serious about massive investment in alternative energy sources. To be certain, other sides don't have these qualms. Bush gutted the Clean Air Act with his "Clear Skies Initiative," and the oil companies fall over one another to tell us how green they are, but such hypocrisy is unethical. It is also not effective. Sooner or later myth and reality meet; witness the collapse of President Bush's triumphal declaration of "Mission Accomplished" in the face of daily casualties in Iraq.

I hope it is clear by now that my argument here is not some postmodern provocation that the real does not exist.²⁹ Semantics aside, there is an all-too-real "real" at hand: war in Iraq, growing national and world inequality, global warming and species extinction—the list goes on. Make no mistake, there is an empirical real. But no matter how real this reality may be, it only means something when we give it meaning.³⁰ As such we are forever constructing fictions from the truth. Not lies, but fictions. The world surrounding us may be full of eternal truths and constitute an everlasting real, but the world that we live within is an assemblage of data ordered by ourselves according to theories, stories, habits, customs, and prejudices. We make sense. In making sense of our environment we necessarily create a simulation of whatever it is that we are seeing, hearing, or reading (which can very well be others' simulations).³¹ It is not that reality doesn't exist—it is more that by itself it doesn't really matter. Reality is always refracted through the imagination, and it is through our imagination that we live our lives.

This does not mean that there is no such thing as truth. Truth with a capital T may be an Enlightenment fantasy (one ironically

shared by religious fundamentalists), but there are standards of evidence upon which we can judge small "t" truths, accepting some as valid and rejecting others as invalid. But the important thing, as any scientist will tell you, is making a convincing case. Take the recent debate about evolution as an example. The creationists are correct in one thing at least: evolution is not the Truth; it is a theory.³² But it is a good theory with a preponderance of evidence supporting it. "Intelligent design," the latest stalking horse of the creationists, which holds that a supreme being has guided evolution, is a lousy theory with no evidence behind it. What intelligent design does have, however, is a good publicity campaign. A public opinion poll in 2005 reported that 60 percent of Americans put their faith in theories of creationism or intelligent design, while only 26 percent believe in the evolution of life through natural selection, with the remainder not knowing or caring.³³ One side has the evidence, the other the compelling narrative.³⁴

Politics is also not science. There are no immutable laws of gravity determining the outcome of an election, nor empirically verifiable tests of what constitutes a good society. Political systems are human creations that are then evaluated subjectively. As such, it is largely the power of public opinion that determines their form and value. This is something conservatives seem to understand better than progressives. The Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank, spends 3 percent of its budget on communications. The conservative Heritage Foundation, on the other hand, devotes 20 percent to what former vice president of communications Herb Berkowitz describes as "the selling of ideas." Berkowitz elaborates: "Our belief is that when the research product has been printed, then the job is only half done. That is when we start marketing it to the media. . . . We are actively out there selling these things, day after day. It's our mission."³⁵

For years progressives have comforted themselves with age-old biblical adages that the "truth will out" or "the truth shall make you free," but waiting around for the truth to set you free is lazy politics.³⁶ The truth does not reveal itself by virtue of being the truth; it must be told, and we need to learn how to tell the truth more effectively. It must have stories woven around it, works of art made about it; it must be communicated in new ways and marketed so that it sells. It must be embedded in an experience that connects with people's dreams and desires, that resonates with the symbols and myths they find meaningful. The argument here is not for a progressive movement that lies outright, but rather for a propaganda of the truth. As William James once wrote: "Truth happens to an idea."³⁷

Embracing dreams and making peace with spectacle does not necessarily mean abandoning a faith in the Enlightenment and empiricism, only acknowledging it is only that: a faith. Perhaps people can study—"judiciously, as you will"—the reality of the world and then make reasoned judgments that lead to political decisions and actions, but this is a way of seeing and being in the world that cannot have any taken-for-granted epistemological foundation. It is, to use postmodern cant, a system of discourse that must be (re)created, imagined, operationalized, and dramatized to appeal to the public's imagination.

While progressives are historically wedded to reason and reality, empiricism and the Enlightenment, there is a counterhistory of the left that has long embraced the dreamscape of the imaginary, using symbolism and narrative in an attempt to create new realities. One can cycle back through time to find examples: the story of Exodus symbolically transforming the Jews from slavery and servitude to the chosen people of God, or the miracles of Jesus giving hope to the poorest of the poor. In more modern times, one

could consider the French Revolution, idealized in the name of reason and rationality but fought out on the streets in a swirl of competing fantasies. Examples closer to home might include the imagery of the Farm Security and Work Projects Administrations during the New Deal that gave form to a new vision of "the people," and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's intimate yet informative fireside chats that suggested a new understanding of citizens' relationship to political knowledge. Two decades later the ideal of reaching the promised land was transported from ancient Palestine to the black churches of the American South, animating the struggles for civil rights.

Consider the story of Rosa Parks. She is an ordinary woman who acts spontaneously from her own heart and changes the world. She is the Everywoman who hits that very American "I'm not going to take it anymore" breaking point. It is a moment of magical transformation, the "No!" that also becomes a "Yes!" affirming her dignity and humanity—and ours. It is also, as any serious student of the civil rights movement knows, a fiction, a deliberately perpetuated mythology. Rosa Parks may have been tired and wanting a seat, but she was not acting impulsively. She was a professional organizer, a secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP trained at the progressive Highlander Institute, who acted with a full understanding of the political ramifications of what she was doing. But what's more important, the history lesson or the myth?

Abbie Hoffman—the Yippie activist who dropped dollar bills on the stock exchange floor to create a miniriot of avarice and led 30,000 hippies in a mock-serious attempt to encircle and levitate the Pentagon—pursued an explicit strategy of mythmaking. Here he is explaining the logistics of organizing the protests that rocked the 1968 Democratic Party convention:

We are faced with this task of getting huge numbers of people to come to Chicago along with hundreds of performers, artists, theater groups, engineers. Essentially, people involved in trying to work out a new society. How do you do this starting from scratch, with no organization, no money, nothing? Well, the answer is that you create a myth. Something that people can play a role in, relate to.³⁸

Hoffman understood how the game is played and made no apologies in his advice to fellow activists.

Look at Michael Moore. In his film *Bowling for Columbine*, does he really lay out a rational, reasoned argument explaining the culture of violence in the United States? No. Does seeing Charlton Heston squirm under Moore's questioning bring us closer to the truth? No. But was that scene an emotionally powerful argument for gun control? Did the film put the issue on the table? Did it provoke millions of Americans to give serious thought to the culture of violence in America? Yes. Yes. And yes. Moore followed up on this successful narrative formula in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Contrary to what conservative—and some liberal—critics have claimed, Moore isn't simply telling tall tales.³⁹ But through clever editing, heartfelt interviews, humorous stunts, and the insertion of himself into the film, he is telling a tale. Folding facts into an enraging, touching, funny, and personal narrative, Moore produced the most profitable "documentary" ever made.

Over the past few decades it has been activist groups to the far left who have taken on the mantle of imagination. Anticorporate globalization protesters in North America and Europe have eschewed the traditional model of mass protests in favor of a more spectacular form. The old model of protest was simple and staid: march, chant, and listen (to the truth from the leaders). The new protests look nothing like this. With environmental protesters

in sea turtle costumes in Seattle, theatrical skits involving the militant jesters of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in London and New York, or Ya Basta! in their padded tutti bianchi (white jumpsuits) in Prague and Genoa, these protests are infected with a general spirit of spirited anarchy. Declaring that means are as important as ends (if not sometimes troublingly more so), these mass protests create temporary autonomous zones: a living, breathing, dancing imaginary form of a world turned upside down. It's more than telling that the organizers of the demonstration that shut down the City of London in 1998 called their protest a "Carnival Against Capitalism."

Further south, a man known only as Subcomandante Marcos, whose poetic speeches and whimsical, fable-laced communiqués weave a web of fantasy around the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico, recognizes that his comrades' black ski masks and automatic weapons, far more than providing actual security or a means of attack, are most effective as elements in a spectacle of resistance.⁴⁰ While to the east, in the Naramada Valley of India, antidam activists hold educational puppet shows, symbolically drown a dam demon, and pledge civil disobedience, drawing upon their local culture and traditions to create dramatic protests against the state's plans to flood their land.⁴¹

Ironically, progressives once had a near monopoly on political fantasy. Again, it was conservatives who wanted to defend the real and retain the status quo, while radicals wanted to move toward an imaginary future. After all, who is remembered for "I have a dream"? But now, plagued by their Enlightenment guilt complex, progressives regularly disown their own, often effective, history of mobilizing fantasy, declaring that spectacle is silly, and that their sense of superior seriousness will win debates, convince the public, and lead them back into the halls of power. Worse, spectacle

is what the other side does; a recent *New York Times* article listed one of the core qualities of Fascism as an "appeal to emotion and myth instead of reason."⁴²

Examples of spectacular dissent are not hard to find. But when not rejected outright they are too often marginalized, understood as merely a tactic and not an integral way of thinking about and acting out politics. Then it's back to the "real" work of politics: acting soberly in the name of self-evident reality. March, chant, and listen . . . or study, lobby, and regulate. "Everything is theatrical," says David Solnit, who, as a founder of the activist group Art and Revolution, had a key role in giving the protest that shut down the city of Seattle in 1999 its particular spectacular flair. But the problem, as Solnit explains, is that "traditional protest—the march, the rally, the chants—is just bad theater."⁴³

To be sure, many of the examples of spectacular dissent I have cited, and will describe in the pages to come, are marginal. Ironically, however, it may be political groups on the fringes that best appreciate and understand the mainstreams of culture in this country. Outsiders often have a clearer vision of the center than those deep within it, and for years these activists have been using their vantage point to observe how fantasy and spectacle are used by spinmeisters and marketers before trying such tactics themselves. For the most part the campaigns these activists wage and the demonstrations they stage engage hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of people, rather than millions or billions. But the potential for a spectacular politics is far greater, for everyday fantasy is employed effectively by the mass entertainment industry, and everyday spectacles are enthusiastically embraced by a majority of the world's population. The task at hand is to tap into this wide appeal and use it to build a truly popular progressive politics.

Perhaps the most important reason for progressives to make their peace with the politics of dreaming has little to do with the immediate task of winning consent or creating dissent, but has instead to do with long-term vision. Without dreams we will never be able to imagine the new world we want to build. From the 1930s until the 1980s political conservatives in this country were lost: out of power and out of touch. Recalling those days, Karl Rove, George W. Bush's senior political adviser, says: "We were relegated to the desert."⁴⁴ While many a pragmatic Republican moved to the center, a critical core kept wandering in that desert, hallucinating a political world considered fantastic by postwar standards: a preemptive military, radical tax cuts, eroding the line between church and state, ending welfare, and privatizing Social Security. Look where their dreams are today.

As I write these words, the right's phantasmagoria seems to be crumbling. Forced into a courtroom in Dover, Pennsylvania, the proponents of "intelligent design" acted out the part of mendacious fools on a public stage.⁴⁵ The story of stories that Christianity should be equated with the Republican Party is being rewritten as evangelicals in recent months have taken on "liberal" issues like the environment, poverty, and AIDS.⁴⁶ Revelations of manufactured evidence of weapons of mass destruction continue to reveal the cynical machinations of fantasy construction, and the bungling of the war in Iraq and the response to Hurricane Katrina have eroded the myth of the competency of Bush's CEO presidency. When centrist politicians like ex-Marine-now-Democratic representative John Murtha publicly declare the war they once supported "a flawed policy wrapped in an illusion," it is tempting to believe that progressives were right all along.⁴⁷ Truth will out after all; stay the course and all will be fine. But this would be a miscalculation. The terrain of politics has irrevocably shifted.

False fantasies may have been revealed, but the dreams that animate them live on.

Progressives are at a crossroads. To continue straight on, confident of the inalienability of "Enlightenment principles and empiricism," is to cloak ourselves in the irrelevancies of the past. It is a safe journey, for even nightmares, as long as they are familiar, offer the solace of the known. But this journey leads nowhere. The rationality and reason that once freed us from authority now make us equivocating cowards, judiciously studying reality instead of changing it. The other way—to create reality using unfamiliar tools—is to take a leap into the unknown. This way is not secure: the leap can lead to the exuberance of the French Terror, the mass ecstasy of Nazi rallies, the apocalyptic dreams of jihad, or even the monstrous banality of Andrew Lloyd Weber's latest hit musical.

Theories (and theorists) of the politics of spectacle and fantasy have steered people to some pretty unsavory places. Gustav LeBon's observations on the irrational behavior of crowds was appreciated and applied by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, as well as public relations pioneer Edward Bernays. Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of will was appropriated by the Nazis. Georges Sorel's mobilizing "myth of the general strike" led him toward Fascism. And Walter Lippmann came to reject popular democracy as unworkable, characterizing the citizenry as a "bewildered herd" who, blinded by symbols and stereotypes, were best relegated to being merely "spectators of action."⁴⁸ I, however, do not think that recognizing the power of a politics past reason means a sure slide toward Fascism (or a career as a creative director on Madison Avenue). To clear another path we need to separate what has happened from what could happen.

First, we need to survey the terrain of today's imagination. We

need to take apart the current manifestations of dreams, study contemporary spectacles, and understand how the modern manufacturers of consent channel these dynamics. Then we can begin to imagine how popular desires might be expressed in other ways and via different vehicles.

Progressives like to study and to know. We like to be right (and then complain that others are not). But being right is not enough—we need to win. And to win we need to act. What follows are observations and suggestions that might guide our actions. I'm inviting readers, wherever they might fall on the progressive political spectrum, from pragmatic liberals to utopian anarchists, street activists to pissed-off voters, to join me in imagining a way of moving our dreams into reality. In these pages I do not lay out an ideological line to follow, nor will I prescribe policies to enact. Instead, this book offers up an alternative political aesthetic for progressives to consider; a theory of *dreampolitik* they might practice. Some of the political examples I use in the following pages may seem particular, and perhaps a bit peculiar. They are largely drawn from my activist experience on the far left, and the particular—and perhaps a bit peculiar—political scene of lower Manhattan. But there is no reason why this way of thinking and doing cannot be adopted and adapted by progressives who live in different places, come from different traditions, and have different personalities. Their practice of *dreampolitik* will look different—it should. This endeavor involves taking risks. There is also no guarantee that this strategy will work, no Enlightenment assurance that this is the one true way. To embrace dreams as part of a winning strategy for progressive politics may be just a dream itself, but really, at this point, what do we have to lose?