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Notes from Underground:

Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture

Dream

Re-imagining Progressive Politics
in an Age of Fantasy

Stephen Duncombe



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For it must be noted that men must either be caressed or else annihilated.
—Niccolò Machiavelli, 1532

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.
—Walter Lippmann, 1913

All power to the imagination!
—Graffiti in Paris, May 1968

In our dreams we have seen another world. . . . And this new, true world was not a dream from the past; it was not something that came from our ancestors. It came to us from the future; it was the next step that we had to take.
—Subcomandante Marcos, 1994

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2. Learn from Las Vegas: Spectacular Vernacular with Andrew Boyd

The S-3B Viking Navy jet screams down onto the flight deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. Its extended tailhook catches the carrier's steel cable and two g's of force bear down upon the president of the United States, bringing the plane to a standstill in a mere 350 feet. In full flight suit, his crotch bulging subtly, the president steps out of the four-seat fighter-bomber to cheering throngs of servicemen returning from the Iraq war. He gives them a thrilling thumbs-up sign. The media is enraptured. "History in the making," says one cable news commentator. "Spectacular," another claims, astutely. After changing out of the flight jacket into a suit and tie, the president addresses the five thousand sailors standing in impressive, uniform-white rows on the carrier deck, announcing the "end of major combat operations in Iraq" while a huge red, white, and blue banner proclaiming "Mission Accomplished" waves above.

Progressives know all this was a lie. We eagerly point out to the few who will listen that President Bush avoided declaring a literal "victory" to circumvent legal repercussions under the Geneva

Convention. We explain that the enlistees onboard the carrier were bound by military discipline to applaud him. We describe how the podium was aligned so the TV crews would have the S-3B Viking in the background of the shot with the "Mission Accomplished" banner draped across the bridge above it. We tell people that the carrier itself, already held at sea and delaying the homecoming of servicemen returning from an unprecedented ten-month tour of duty, was angled to obscure a view of the coastline only thirty-seven miles away. We report that normally a carrier would need to be at least two hundred miles out to sea to require the use of the fighter-bomber rather than the usual Marine One helicopter. We know, in brief, that the whole affair was a manufactured spectacle.

We shake our heads in shame and disbelief at the seeming gullibility of our countrymen and countrywomen as we see the real history of the president's less-than-heroic performance in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War dissolve in a carefully stagecrafted series of associations of our president with military prowess. As we watch the facts and complexities of the Iraq war, as well as the larger and darker political machinations behind it, become subsumed by mythic imagery, scenes from *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's filmic celebration of the 1934 Nazi Party rally, haunt our imagination.

Why do we have such a virulent reaction to this political stagecraft? Certainly, we're upset by the hypocrisy and shameless triumphalism of a political adversary. And yes, progressives are creatures of the Enlightenment with an abiding faith in reason and reality. But there is something more to this, something deeper. We are afraid of the spectacle.

What is spectacle? By default most people think of throwing Christians to the lions, parading missiles through Red Square, or

maybe the Ice Capades. But spectacle is something more. It is a way of making an argument. Not through appeals to reason, rationality, and self-evident truth, but instead through story and myth, fears and desire, imagination and fantasy. It realizes what reality cannot represent. It is the animation of an abstraction, a transformation from ideal to expression. *Spectacle is a dream on display.*

Spectacle has a long history in politics, stretching back to the Circus Maximus of imperial Rome and likely long before. But it takes on new importance in the age of popular democracy. In a democracy, leaders not only need to keep the masses from running riot in the street but, more important, they need their consent to govern. Progressives are quite adept at the critique of this "manufacture of consent," but we need to learn how to construct dissent—and consent—as well. We need to acknowledge that politics—even our own politics—is about persuasion, and that one of the most effective ways to persuade people, and effect change, is to tap into their dreams. If progressives are going to take politics and power seriously, we need to learn to use spectacle not grudgingly but enthusiastically and free of guilt. We need to make spectacle our own.

But what, then, separates our spectacle from theirs? Do our recognition and embrace of the nonrational lead inexorably to a relativistic "battle of the myths"? Does the manufacture of consent, or dissent, necessitate ignorance and blind obedience? No. There is the possibility that spectacle can honor progressive ideals. Ironically, it is Las Vegas—Sin City itself—that might help us begin to formulate such an ethical spectacle. Among the whimsical, over-the-top, crassly commercial simulations of Vegas lies a model of spectacle that is more populist and more participatory—yet maybe no less effective—than Bush's landing on the USS *Lincoln*. Progressives have a lot to learn from Las Vegas.

In the early 1970s three East Coast establishment architects visited Las Vegas. Out there in the Nevada desert, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour found an antidote to the European architectural modernism of gray poured-concrete towers and sterile glass blocks. With its billboards, neon signs, garish casinos, and vast parking lots, Las Vegas was an architecture of bold communication and commercial persuasion which scorched the cool theories of respectable design. Whereas modernism whispered the structural truth of buildings with its stripped-down architecture and exposed materials, the gaudy style of the Vegas Strip screamed out unlikely but alluring promises: Golden Nugget, Stardust, Mirage, and then, as it stretched into the desert, "Quick Cash Here" and "Girls, Girls, Girls."

In 1972, Venturi, Brown, and Izenour wrote a manifesto celebrating the vernacular of the roadside called *Learning from Las Vegas*. What is remembered about *Learning from Las Vegas* today is the architects' celebration of historical pastiche and eclectic style: the way that the casinos on the Strip mixed Egyptian with Baroque, Classical with Arabesque. The book launched an anti-theory of architecture which, predictably, became the field's new reigning theory. In graduate schools, *Learning from Las Vegas* is still read as one of the founding texts of aesthetic postmodernism.

But in 1972, the lessons Venturi, Brown, and Izenour seemed most eager to impart had more to do with hubris and humility. It wasn't so much that the architects loved Las Vegas, but they loved the fact that so many people loved Las Vegas (6.8 million visited in 1970).² Since the architects' job was to build spaces for people to inhabit, they reasoned that it was important to pay attention to popular style. If people liked garish display, improbable historical juxtapositions, and convenient parking—signs and surfaces rather than boldness of pure form and integrity of the material—

who were architects to deny this? "As Experts with Ideals," they wrote, modern architects too often "build for Man rather than for people."³ The authors wanted to reverse this, paying attention to people's values and then designing buildings utilizing the popular vernacular. Their argument was not that the customer is always right; it was a rejection of the notion that people's desires are always wrong. The ideal was not to capitulate, but to learn from Las Vegas.

What does a book on architecture have to do with politics? A lot. Progressives tend to think about politics in terms of ideals. This is good—without ideals we would have nothing to fight for. The problem is that these ideals are too frequently divorced from the dreams of the rest of the population. In a dictatorship this doesn't pose a problem. As "Experts with Ideals," we could merely impose our vision on everyone else. But in a democracy this simply won't do. That everyone has a say in governance is the fundamental principle of democracy; that you cannot govern without the consent and support of the people is central to its practice. Ethically and practically, progressives need to understand popular dreams. If the masses like Las Vegas, then progressives have got to figure out what it is about Las Vegas they like.

"The deepest error of our political thinking [is] to talk of politics without reference to human beings," wrote Walter Lippmann in his first book, *A Preface to Politics*.⁴ Oddly enough, it might be the very same man who coined the term "the manufacture of consent" and ended up rejecting democracy as unworkable who can help progressives learn what Las Vegas has to teach us about a popular and passionate democracy. Lippmann was once a progressive himself. He formed the Socialist Club as an undergraduate at Harvard, worked as a researcher for the great muckraker Lincoln Steffens upon graduation, and held a job in the administration of

the socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York.⁵ In these positions Lippmann noticed something. The rational appeals of reformers often fell upon deaf ears. Successful politicians—like those of the great, and greatly corrupt, urban political machines—spoke to the heart as much as to the head. Progressives spoke to abstract Man while organizations like New York City's infamous Tammany Hall appealed to real people.

Lippmann's evolving theories about what motivated human beings and what that meant for the practice of politics were influenced by ideas swirling around him. He had struck up a relationship with William James while at college and was inspired by his ideas about the "moral equivalent of war." Lippmann also developed a friendship with Graham Wallas, a British socialist who stressed the political importance of understanding the irrational. And finally, he, like most intellectuals of his time, was just beginning to comprehend the radical new theories of Sigmund Freud. Indeed, during the summer Lippmann spent writing *A Preface to Politics* in the backwoods of Maine, his cabin mate was working on translating Freud into English.

Lippmann borrows two ideas from Freud, altering them to meet his needs. The first was the concept of *taboo*. Taboos are restrictions, prohibitive laws laid down by society to ensure stability. For Freud, the root taboo was on incest, revealing itself in ancient Greek stories like that of Oedipus, a young man fated to kill his father and bed his mother. Lippmann uses taboo more liberally, defining it politically as the impulse to "abolish human instincts" in the effort to bring about social change.⁶ Reformers often ruled by taboo, legislating against popular desires such as drinking, gambling, and promiscuous sex. The primary taboo of progressives, however, is on allowing the irrational to play a positive role in politics. Then, as now, the progressive MO was to be practical,

consider all the ramifications, and then create a committee to make recommendations. Judicious study is always what's called for. Lippmann was all for study but believed that the myopic search for the rational solution to social problems often missed the point. "For human nature seems to have wants that must be filled," he argued. "The demand for pleasure, adventure, romance has been left to the devil's catering for so long a time that most people think that he inspires demand. He doesn't."⁷

We do. We are the ones who demand pleasure, adventure, and romance. Understanding this, Lippmann's theory of politics represents a radical—or, at first glance, conservative—acceptance of who humans are and what they desire.⁸ Like the modernist architects that Venturi and his colleagues criticized, progressives are all too fond of fashioning solutions that depend upon an idealized model of humanity to work. They imagine Man as he could be: sober, reasoning, and upstanding—not men and women as they are: emotional, passionate, and prone to fits of fantasy. And if people don't play the part progressives have written for them, then it is the progressive's job to step in and keep them from their evil ways.

Taboo.

Those of us left-of-center today like to think that taboo is now the property of conservatives. It was Nancy Reagan, after all, who made "Just Say No" the Republican Party's response to drug use. We, on the other hand, are neither Nancy Reagan Republicans nor the Prohibitionist Progressives of Lippmann's era, but the libertine children of the freewheeling sixties.⁹ Certainly this is how conservatives now think of us. But taboo is still very much in operation in liberal politics; it is just no longer focused on loose women, games of chance, and devil water. Think of how progressives often frame their demands for ending dependence on fossil fuels: don't buy a sport utility vehicle, don't drive over 55 miles per hour,

don't waste gas. Don't, don't, don't. We witnessed the epitome of this politics of liberal taboo when President Jimmy Carter appeared on national television in 1977 to talk about the energy crisis. Wearing a cardigan sweater, he told Americans to turn down their thermostats and stop being so selfish. Carter may have been correct, but he was also widely ridiculed and resented, and his one term in office was followed by eight years of gas-guzzling policies implemented by his successor, Ronald Reagan.

It's fun to drive fast, one feels invincible in an SUV, and bare skin is sexy. This doesn't mean that wasting energy should be celebrated, only that it is worth figuring out why people do it before simply condemning, regulating, and repressing. Acknowledging the present passions of people is not the same thing as accepting things as they are. Instead, current desire is the fulcrum on which to leverage future change. As Lippmann argues, "Instead of tabooing our impulses, we must redirect them."¹⁰

This is where he borrows another concept from Freud: *sublimation*. Sublimation is as necessary for civilization as taboo—but much more effective. Whereas the taboo is the restriction of a harmful impulse, sublimation is its redirection. For Freud the primary impulse was the sex drive, *eros*, to which he later added *thanatos*, or destruction. Left to our libidinal impulses we humans would destroy one another, screwing and killing like an apocalyptic episode of Marlin Perkins's *Wild Kingdom*. We don't do this (or at least most of us don't) because we've learned to channel these nihilistic impulses into safer ends: insatiable sex becomes loving relationships, ceaseless destruction is expressed through shoot-'em-up video games like *Grand Theft Auto*.

As he did with taboo, Lippmann broadened Freud's concept of sublimation and expanded its application. The solution to social problems like "vice" was not repression but a political response

that recognized the impulses that feed vice and then channeled such desires into more socially desirable outlets like dance halls and social recreation.¹¹ But more important, Lippmann recognized that sublimation needn't merely apply to the redirection of problematic human drives; it could be used to think more widely about creating a politics that was responsive to human beings in all their desires. "No genuine politician ever treats his constituents as reasoning animals," Lippmann writes in a passage worth quoting at length:

This is as true of the high politics of Isaiah as it is of the ward boss. Only the pathetic amateur deludes himself into thinking that, if he presents the major and minor premises, the voter will automatically draw the conclusion on election day. The successful politician—good and bad—deals with the dynamics—with the will, the hopes, the needs and the visions of men.¹²

This last line is important, for with it Lippmann opens up the idea of sublimation. The traditional psychoanalytic definition of sublimation assumes that human desires are destructive: rapacious sexuality and a violence unto death. But Lippmann, in arguing for the political direction of human desires, includes "dynamics" far more noble: people's hopes and visions. The irrational and the emotional are not intrinsically negative aspects of politics. They are not something that must be prohibited, nor even necessarily something that must be civilized; they can be noble and good.¹³ They are, however, something that needs to be addressed if one hopes to attain, and hold, political power.

So what sort of deal does a savvy politician strike with the often irrational dynamics of his or her constituents? The first is to recognize that current manifestations are not indicative of future

possibilities. "It is probably true that the impulses of man have changed very little within recorded history," Lippmann writes. "What has changed enormously from epoch to epoch is the character in which these impulses appear."¹⁴ Men and women, for example, have likely felt what we now call romantic love since the beginning of time, but the idea that one would consummate that love with the person one marries, or even with someone of the opposite sex, is merely its present character. Arranged marriages and same-sex romantic relationships among the classical Greeks were another such manifestation. What remains constant is the emotionally charged dynamic.

Americans' current desires for security often manifest themselves in fantasies of safety within gated communities and SUVs, and their fears are answered by the continuing spectacle of the War on Terror. The theory Lippmann presents to us suggests that we acknowledge the enduring desire to be safe but also ask ourselves whether there are other ways in which this dynamic can be expressed and addressed. Could security come from more stable communities? Could more stable communities come from feeling more secure in our health, work, education, and housing? Progressives can come up with better solutions to address people's desire for security than gated communities, SUVs, and eroding civil liberties, but only if we start from the right place: acknowledging these root desires.

Recognizing and working with popular desire makes sense from a pragmatic point of view, but taking dreams seriously opens up possibility on a more theoretical level as well, for it reverses the relationship between political reason and desire as it has been commonly theorized since Aristotle. Reason has traditionally been used as a club with which to beat desire into submission. Political theorists excise it, reformers prohibit it. Instead, I would argue,

the function of rationality is to give form, shape, and concrete expression to irrational dreams. To be effective in the world, to change the world, progressives ought, in the heady words of the young Walter Lippmann, "make reason serve the irrational."¹⁵

A recent progressive attempt to understand popular hopes and visions and give political substance to some of these ephemeral dynamics is the Apollo Project. Organized in the spring of 2003 by two progressive think tanks, the Institute for America's Future and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Apollo is an alliance of heavy hitters from U.S. environmental and union movements. Apollo promotes fairly traditional progressive environmental policies: public investment in sustainable energy sources and energy conservation through infrastructural development. What's novel is how the project packages and sells these policies. Their choice of name tips off their strategy. By bundling their policies under the name Apollo, and through conscious—and constant—comparisons with President Kennedy's 1961 space initiative, they hope to harness some of the optimism and patriotism (and funding) attached to the moon landing. Acting executive director Jeff Rickert explains that Apollo is more than a name. It's "a metaphor" which "sparks imagination."¹⁶ Rickert's hope is that evoking the moon shot of 1961 will remind Americans that they once found common cause in a peaceful national project, and can do so again.

Apollo addresses multiple desires simultaneously: the environmentalist's dream of smog-free air, the patriot's longing for national autonomy and independence, and the blue-collar worker's hope for U.S.-based jobs. "Clean energy. A safer world. Jobs with a future" is the sound bite repeated by Apollo advocate and former Clinton administration chief of staff John Podesta.¹⁷ As Rickert explains, the project is about "changing the frame of the debate in order to broaden the coalition" by "removing the wedges" of jobs

vs. environment and global warming vs. national interest that have been used to divide constituencies. Apollo, then, provides a new—and inclusive—symbol that redirects these potentially divisive desires toward a common material goal: national sustainable energy.¹⁸

By drawing from and then speaking to a wide range of citizens' fantasies (or at least political, labor, and environmental leaders' fantasies of their constituents' fantasies) Apollo has assembled a notable list of supporters, including twenty-three labor unions, twenty-five state and local labor councils, most major environmental groups, and an impressive number of community organizations, liberal politicians, and progressive business leaders. More important, Apollo has been able to translate this ideal into local success on the ground. Through the work of more than a hundred community groups, and backed by the muscle of organized labor, Apollo pressured the state of Washington to pass a green building code that sets environmental standards for all new public buildings. Pennsylvania—a coal state, no less—has adopted an alternative energy bill that mandates clean energy standards. And California has committed to investing more than \$400 million from the public employee and public teachers' retirement fund in the clean-energy sector. Still far from their goal of a national funding initiative on the level of the space program, it is an impressive start for an organization only a few years old.¹⁹

The Apollo Project is a smart, savvy, strategic effort to listen to, respect, and address "the will, the hopes, the needs and the visions of men," as Lippmann put it, and then frame progressive policies in such a way as to speak back to these "dynamics." Apollo rather blandly calls this "a positive strategy" on its official Web site.²⁰ A more accurate description of the project comes

from Michael Shellenberger, a founder of the organization. Apollo, he says approvingly, is "a dream."²¹

Progressives could benefit by studying dreams more diligently. Fortunately, we have a ready-made laboratory at our disposal. Unfortunately, it takes the form of something progressives traditionally disdain: commercial culture. To be sure, there are disadvantages to living in a consumer society like that in the United States, where the success of culture is measured in how well it sells. Mass appeal does not necessarily result in the "the best which has been thought and said in the world," to quote Matthew Arnold's classic definition of culture. And defining the "public interest" as what interests the mass public has serious ramifications in terms of providing the quality information necessary for an informed citizenry.²² But for our purposes here, there are real advantages to a market-driven culture.

When the British Broadcasting Corporation funds the television dramatization of a nineteenth-century novel, the popularity of the program is only one of their concerns. What matters as much, if not more, is whether the programming appeals to their own elite Oxbridge sensibility and their ideal of an educated public. This is not the case in the United States (and increasingly less so in Britain, too). Here one can be sure that if a program is on TV for more than a season, if a play is staged and runs for more than a week, or if an album climbs the charts, it is appealing to a paying population. In the long run, no amount of studio promotion, disc jockey payola, or ideological interest overrides the logic of the market. If culture stays, and sells, it means that it somehow resonates with the popular will. And anyone interested in democratic politics ignores such enthusiasm at his or her peril.

This does not necessitate some sort of pseudopopulist embrace of the entirety of popular culture (we needn't contort ourselves to

reclaim Cats). But it does mean that we need to recognize that in these expressions some popular will is being expressed. How that will is being manifested in popular culture may be something to condemn—or applaud—but the will itself has to be dealt with. If it isn't, if it's ignored in our political platforms and policies, then all that energy of the people applauding on Broadway, watching *Survivor*, or listening to hit radio will remain static and then dissipate quietly (or be captured by others).

Lippmann didn't think much of popular culture. On the public's fascination with baseball scores, he had this to say: "Watch the crowds in front of a bulletin board, finding a vicarious excitement and an abstract relief from the monotony of their lives. What a second-hand civilization it is that grows passionate over a scorecard with little electric lights!"²³ But he understood that in order to understand the population, he needed to know what people saw while gazing up at those little lights. As he concludes, "Being lofty about the 'passing fad' and the ephemeral outcry is all very well in the biographies of dead men, but rank nonsense in the rulers of real ones."²⁴ Politicos don't need to think much of popular culture, but they do need to think a lot about it.

This is why it is worth thinking about Las Vegas. The city has transformed itself in the thirty years since Venturi, Brown, and Izenour visited. Casino ownership has moved from mobsters to the (aptly named) MGM-Mirage group, and the sleazy swinger style of the Rat Pack has given way to whole (if not entirely wholesome) family vacation packages. Its hotels and restaurants receive top ratings worldwide, and it is the center of some of the most dynamic union organizing in the nation. As of this writing Las Vegas is the fastest growing city in the United States. But perhaps the most noticeable transformation has been that of the architecture, or "archtainment" as Nation writer Marc Cooper calls

it.²⁵ Cheap billboards, garish neon, and blocky casinos have been usurped by an elaborate faux New York skyline, or immediately recognizable, if oddly positioned, landmarks of Paris. Down the street are Egyptian pyramids made of glass, and up the Strip lie the grand palaces of a virtual Venice.²⁶ The fantasy and fakery that was always a part of Vegas in places like Caesar's Palace and Circus, Circus has been taking steroids since 1972.

It is the nature of this fantasy and fakery that is so interesting. It's so obvious. Yes, Las Vegas is fake. This is decried by sober American thinkers (the evisceration of reality by its simulation) and celebrated by enthusiastic French intellectuals (the evisceration of reality by its simulation!) but both seem to miss the point. A fake is only fake if people believe that it references a "real." It's doubtful that anyone mistakes New York, New York for the real thing or, having visited the Great Pyramid of Luxor, feels they've gone to Egypt. The crowds that love Las Vegas know that it is fake, and that's part of the reason they love it.

Contemporary Las Vegas symbolizes a different type of spectacle than those manufactured by Leni Riefenstahl or the directors of *George W. Bush: The Movie*. The latter hope to pass themselves off as real; the former's very appeal lies in its patent falsity. People enjoy Las Vegas because they know it is just a spectacle. The sights of Paris, across the street from Venice, and down the block from the Brooklyn Bridge. How exciting! The appeal of Las Vegas is not based in trickery (other than the odds at the gambling tables); the Strip is a transparent spectacle. *What is being sold, and what is being enjoyed, is illusion—but not delusion.*

Las Vegas is not the first, nor only, cultural form to parade its artificiality. The nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, in a dig at the Enlightenment celebration of the nobility of nature, praised the use of cosmetics by women. His admiration was not

for makeup that accentuated a woman's natural beauty, but for the garish display of artificiality that allowed her to transcend nature and become a self-conscious work of art.²⁷ A century later, the critic Susan Sontag argued that the signature characteristic of the cultural sensibility known as "camp" is "its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." The over-the-top performances of Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* or Bette Davis in *All About Eve* work as camp because they are recognized and appreciated as over the top: "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," as Sontag describes it.²⁸ Set against a modern cultural tradition which celebrates the authentic expression of the true self, camp revels in the obviously inauthentic. In our new century the popularity of the staged spectacle of professional wrestling perhaps best exhibits the perseverance of the desire to enjoy a fantasy that one knows is just a fantasy.

What would a self-conscious, transparent spectacle translated into progressive politics look like? It's hard to say, but there's a recent campaign that gives a hint.

"Yes, I'm a Billionaire. And, yes, I'm for Bush," says the earnest young man to the Fox News reporter. Enjoying the crisp New Hampshire autumn at a protest "against" presidential candidate Howard Dean, the young man—impeccably dressed in a double-breasted suit, bowler hat, walking stick, and monocle—certainly looks like a billionaire, or at least like someone trying to look like someone trying to look like a billionaire. Protesting against the Democratic candidates and popping champagne corks at Bush campaign stops, such characters were commonplace during the 2004 election. It's was all part of a satirical media campaign called "Billionaires for Bush."

The "Billionaires" campaign began its life as Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) during the 2000 election when anticorporate direct action activists banded together with more mainstream campaign

finance advocates to challenge what they perceived to be the corruption of both political parties by big money. In 2004, after four years in which the Democrats were relegated to a weak minority party and the Bush administration became exhibit A of crony capitalism and corporate pandering, the campaign was reborn as simply Billionaires for Bush.

Within the conservative common sense of contemporary politics, straight-on arguments for greater economic fairness are regularly framed and then dismissed as "class warfare." The Billionaires for Bush, by camping it up as the super-wealthy and cheering on George Bush and his economic policies, used humor to sidestep this frame while still painting the president as a friend of the corporate elite. It was a backdoor strategy allowing activists to show—in surprisingly sharp terms—who were the economic winners and losers of the Bush administration's policies. Marxism, Groucho-style.

While checking its facts carefully and closely collaborating with more serious economic justice groups like United for a Fair Economy, the campaign borrowed heavily from the mythmakers of Madison Avenue. With high production values, a branding campaign built around its name and logo (a red, white, and blue piggy bank), and a viral promotion strategy that invited in-character participation, the campaign grew from one to one hundred chapters in a few months, built a 10,000-member e-mail list, put on six nationwide days of action and countless local ones, and garnered attention from more than 250 mainstream media outlets.²⁹

One of the early actions that put the Billionaires on the media map occurred during a 2004 fund-raiser for "Bush's Brain," Karl Rove. As Billionaire founder Andrew Boyd describes it:

In February we got wind that Rove was coming to New York for a fund-raising dinner. Twenty of us assembled in a nearby park, dressed in tuxedos, top hats, gowns, and tiaras, and marched toward the club, chanting "Karl Rove is innocent! Karl Rove is innocent!"

People stopped to look, and behind their curious faces, you could almost hear the mental gears clicking: "Innocent? . . . hmmm . . . so, wait . . . what's he not guilty of?" We had a long list of all that he was "not guilty of" (push-polling, misinformation, political dirty tricks, etc.) laid out in a leaflet, which we handed them.

When we reached the club where the fund-raiser was being held some protesters from the Sierra Club were already there. You could tell they were protesters because, unlike us, they didn't have matching outfits, and their signs were hand-scrawled, unlike our perfectly lettered placards. You could also tell they were protesters because the NYPD had stuck them in a protest pen on the other side of the street.

Where did they put us? Right in front of the club, right next to all these buttoned-down Wall Street execs lined up waiting to get inside. We turned to them and chanted, "Write big checks!" Then we turned to face the Sierra Club protesters and chanted, "Buy your own president!"

Eventually the police figured out who we really were and stuck us in the pens along with the poorly dressed Sierra Club protesters. But immediately after they'd done that, a black town car arrived. "It's Karl Rove," someone said. We began shouting "Karl Rove is innocent!" as he exited the car and strode up the steps of the club. He must have heard us, because he turned around and looked over at us. He saw our banner, "Billionaires for Bush—Government Of, By, and For the Corporations," and came over to shake hands with us.

The TV media crushed in to capture the scene. He turned to the

cameras: "These are my supporters." The cops and the club's security were all freaking out. The Sierra Club folks even got into the act, shouting, "Shame! Shame!" right in the guy's face. In spite of this, he popped under the barricades and joined hands with us. Finally, with a big wink, he revealed himself to be Tony Torn, professional actor, stealth Billionaire, and, with the help of a little talcum powder, a pretty damn good Karl Rove impersonator.

Luckily, the *Times* was writing all this down, and their article the following day was picked up on the blogs and news portals. It became a word-of-mouth favorite, helping to insinuate the "Billionaires for Bush" virus into the hearts, minds, and funny bones of voters across the nation.³⁰

During the 2004 presidential campaign the Billionaires rented a stretch limo, went on several "limo tours" through swing-state regions, and then held a "Million Billionaire March" during the Republican National Convention in which 400 Billionaires from over thirty states paraded down Fifth Avenue sporting banners and placards reading "Corporations Are People Too," "Free the Enron 7!" "Widen the Income Gap," "Privatize Everything," and "We Paid for 8 Years." After their candidate had won the election, the Billionaires initiated a preemptive Cheney Legal Defense Fund—just in case. On Labor Day they staged a "Cheap Labor Day," and on April 15, tax day, Billionaires accosted taxpayers on the steps of post offices in cities across the country with lines like "Thank you for paying more than your fair share" and "We couldn't have done it without you."

What is noteworthy about the whole spectacle of Billionaires for Bush, given its popularity with both participants and press, is that nobody was fooled, at least not for long. Everyone, maybe

after some initial uncertainty, realized that these were not real billionaires but people playing at being billionaires: "Being-as-Playing-a-Role." This didn't stop people from enjoying themselves at campaign stops or fancy-dress fund-raising balls. Like the faux buildings of Las Vegas, the artificiality of the Billionaires didn't seem to detract from its enjoyment. And, as I argue in a later chapter, this patent artificiality made their message more effective in that it drew attention to the corresponding charade of a politics in the service of "people of wealth" which passes itself off as a democracy—that is: the Billionaires' charade highlights the falsity of our supposed reality.

Both the Billionaires and Las Vegas point to a novel way of creating and understanding spectacle. Spectacle in the employ of the Bush administration is about pretending to be real: the president is a real war hero, the war in Iraq has really been won. It is about distraction and substitution. The spectacle in the Nevada desert works according to different principles: spectacle that is understood as spectacle, one that still has symbolic power but lets the audience in on the production. And where the engineered fantasy of George Bush landing on the USS *Lincoln* has collapsed under the weight of its own falsity, and the president's popularity with the public seems to slip daily, the attractions of Las Vegas are going strong. In spite of gambling being legalized in other locales across the United States, the number of visitors to Vegas has increased 450 percent over the past thirty years. More than 37 million people visited Las Vegas in 2004, spending nearly \$34 billion.³¹ One can't discount the draw of old-fashioned, unsublimated desires (gambling and prostitution) in accounting for the success of Sin City. As the refreshingly frank advertising slogan of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority promises: "What happens here,

stays here." But one also shouldn't overlook the appeal of a spectacle that doesn't treat its audience like suckers. This is a lesson that progressives might learn.

Admiration of Las Vegas has its limits. Las Vegas is a spectacle, no matter how transparent and self-conscious, whose function is to rejuvenate and replenish, not challenge, the current system. Gambling is the myth of post-Calvinist capitalism at its most extreme: with one lucky roll of the dice you can eradicate inequality—your own, that is. And for the rest of the family the spectacle is a respite, a vacation from a world increasingly complex and hostile. Scared to take an international flight because of terrorists? Stay at the Italianate Bellagio instead, and while you're there, cross the street to the Eiffel Tower, and then on to Egypt. Don't worry about the state of the world—escape it.

In the shadows of Las Vegas's neon glow hides a regressive tax structure and a shabby social service system. Nevada has the second highest potential tax revenue of all the states, yet the taxes it collects are the third lowest in the country. With no general business or income tax, sales and consumer taxes, which hit the poorest hardest, make up the gap—but not adequately. When it comes to public education, the state spends \$1,100 less per student than Mississippi. Nevada is thirty-eighth in the nation in health services, and it is fifty-first in Medicaid spending (after Washington, D.C.).³² In the end, Las Vegas is a spectacle that hides its own tawdry reality. But on those garish, neon-saturated streets lies the specter of another spectacle, one that could question, disintegrate, and reimagine the world in which we live. And, critically, it is a spectacle which is popular with the public.

"We pin our hopes to the sporting public," Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1926 in an essay directed to his fellow playwrights and directors who were bemoaning the fact that the masses preferred soc-

cer matches to serious theater. Instead of whining about the lack of taste of the masses, the radical dramaturge, like Lippmann before him, believed that you could learn something useful from sporting events, the primary lesson being that people participate in what they enjoy, and unless theater was made enjoyable, the people wouldn't come.

Many of Brecht's radical contemporaries were content to make theater, or derive theory, based upon the assumption that their good intentions and well-reasoned analysis were all that was required, and that the people, once suitably awakened, would find their truths self-evident. Brecht rejected this. He believed that to be effective as a playwright or a politico, one must embrace the present. He took the position of a (strategic) weathervane, testing the popular wind and fashioning a political theater that sailed with it. Like the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Brecht was not suggesting a public-opinion-poll politics of giving the people whatever they want and then slavishly following in their wake. He understood that catching the wind did not dictate the direction that one traveled, because, in his words, "Once one has a wind one can naturally sail against it; the only impossibility is to sail with no wind at all or with tomorrow's wind."³³ Tragically, in Brecht's Germany, it was the Nazi Party that ended up being his best students.

Today it is the right in the United States which seems to be learning from Las Vegas. The stagecraft of the Bush administration has obfuscated an unprecedented redistribution of wealth and the launching of a new American empire with stories of Dubya's folksy Texas ranch and images of toppling statues in Iraq. Many progressives shake their heads at these sorry spectacles, consolidating their impotence with a sense of moral superiority—"We would never fall for such a thing"—and hoping that some day the wind

will blow back in the direction of the mythic republic of letters and reason of the eighteenth century. Today's wind is one of spectacle. It may not be of our making. Its origins may not be the pure lands of the Enlightenment but instead the commercial barrens of entertainment and the swamps of Fascism. But use it we must, for without the wind, we are becalmed, stuck, going nowhere.