

New York University scholar Stephen Duncombe: Utopia puts a heavy responsibility upon our shoulders



EXCLUSIVE



Stephen Duncombe is an associate professor at New York University's Gallatin School in the department of Media, Culture and Communications, and author of 'Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy', published by New Press in 2007.

In retrospect, your book, 'Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy', which was published in 2007, feels like a prescient piece, given what happened afterwards in the US politics. I'd like to know how you feel about progressive politics in the US ten years after publishing that work? What is your general analysis (or diagnosis) of Barack Obama's presidency in terms of pushing progressive politics forward?

As is tragically often the case, the wrong side seems to have learned the lessons from my book. It was Trump who understood the potential of learning from popular culture – in his case: Reality Television; in adopting and adapting the language of contemporary media expression: Trump's infamous daily Twitter habit; and the power of a Utopian dream: "Make America Great Again!" Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, played out the script that "progressives" have been doing for decades: Asking people to consider the facts, rely upon expertise, and not offering up any common dream that might

animate a progressive vision of politics – other than having her, a woman, in the White House.

The legacy of Barack Obama is more complex. As a campaigner he knew how to speak in a popular vernacular and conjure up a dream: Hope! Change! Once in power, however, he ruled by expertise. He succeeded in passing a number of progressive policies on the environment, on immigration, and on foreign policy (the nuclear deal with Iran, for instance) – and all of this in the face of virulent conservative opposition. But Obama seemed to forget that policies, in order to be embraced, need a vision of the world into which they must fit. Ultimately, he was unable, unwilling, or simply uninterested in conjuring up that greater dream. These policies were subsequently being dismantled and, because they were understood as merely policies, and not as integral components of a coherent larger picture, the popular outcry was scattered and thus muted.

Would you agree that dystopian imagination is more popular in

our current culture? If so, why?

Dystopia does seem far more popular than Utopia. Think of popular movies and books, like The Hunger Games series for instance. The picture these movies and books paint of our future is stark – and wildly popular. Why is this so? One could argue it is because we live in Dystopic times where the rich and powerful seem to get more powerful, and the destruction of the earth is immanent. We also live at a time when the great upsurge of Utopian movements around the world in the 60s and 70s have either failed or transformed into their opposite. I think all of this is true. But I also think that Dystopia is popular because it asks very little from us. While Utopia asks us to imagine what is possible (and impossible) and work to bring it into being, Dystopias ask us to merely stop what we are doing, stop those people that are doing it, and retreat back to a mythic past. (In this way Trump's 'Make America Great Again' was profoundly Dystopian.) Dystopias are always the fault of a clear and present enemy: *Them*. Utopias, on the other hand, make demands on

us. And that puts a heavy responsibility directly upon our own shoulders.

Then, one might argue that our time is ripe for pessimism. How could we be optimistic in imagining utopias. And why should we?

The most powerful tool of the powerful is their capacity to limit our imaginations: To convince us that there are no alternatives. We may be unhappy, we may see injustice all around us, but if this is "natural" or "just the way things are" then how, or even why, should we try and change it? This is why religious movements seeking to change the world frequently employ prophecy. The power of Moses, Jesus, and The Prophet Mohammad was not just their ability to critique the world they saw around themselves, but their ability to articulate and communicate what another world might be like. How to do this is much more difficult. But I think it starts with imagining what is *impossible*. Things that can *not* be done because of time, money, politics or even the laws of physics. This is what lies

behind much of the tradition of the artistic avant-garde. (I'm thinking here of Vladimir Tatlin's 'Monument to the Third International' here.) When we've imagined that far-out, obviously absurd, possibility, our minds start doing something interesting. In the vacuum between what is now and what can never be, we start to imagine what *might* be. It frees our mind from the prison house of the possible. This, of course, is the function of Utopia.

One might argue that a post-truth society is a mixed blessing for progressive dreaming and utopian thinking: On the one hand it allows fantasies to be taken for reality, and on the other hand it undermines any serious program of change. What's your take on that?

I think both Utopian thinking and post-truth are part of the same impulse: To create reality as we desire it to be. But there is a big, and important, difference. Fake news, the ideological manifestation of a post-truth society, relies upon making truth claims. That is to say: