

# stephen duncombe

SOCIAL HISTORIAN

Interview by Steven Heller

Stephen Duncombe, 41, is an associate professor of history and politics of media and culture at New York University's Gallatin School, and a fierce critic of consumption and its political consequences. Having grown up surrounded by the unremittingly consumerist trappings of late-20th-century culture, Duncombe aspires to expose the ways in which clever advertising and seductive marketing hoodwink the masses into rampant acquisition (and how much the masses enjoy every minute of it). Duncombe's current book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, explores the role of myth-making in culture through the agents of commerce, and its deleterious effect on the body politic. He is also the author of *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, one of the first analyses of the '80s radical publishing phenomenon; and the editor of the *Cultural Resistance Reader*, with classic texts by Walter Benjamin, Virginia Woolf, Abbie Hoffman, and Tom Frank. Currently, he teaches a class on 20th-century political magazines in a room at NYU's Bobst Library where the archives of the American communist party are stored. In this interview, Duncombe takes aim at various consumerist bugaboos that are leading some of us to rack and ruin.

**HELLER:** Have Americans changed their consumption habits radically in the past 20 years? **DUNCOMBE:** I think that consumption—not just as an act, but as a lifestyle—has become more and more pronounced. We define ourselves by what



we buy, or don't buy, and these definitions have become more and more particular.

**HELLER:** What is the role of advertising in consumption today? Have consumers simply substituted ads for entertainment?

**DUNCOMBE:** Advertising defines these lifestyles, or subverts already existing lifestyles, and promises us that we can embody them through the purchase of a product. Given the task of envisioning these life-worlds—including the life-world of the savvy consumer who does not buy into consumption—advertising has become more entertaining, as each ad is a symbol-laden mini-narrative. But ads have also gotten more entertaining simply to cut through the clutter of [hundreds of] channels and get around the TiVo fast-forward. **HELLER:** Viral and guerrilla campaigns are being launched in place of conventional advertising. Given that advertising is part of the American way of life, how do you feel about these new strategies? Are they indeed subversive?

**DUNCOMBE:** They're subversive strategies

insofar as they don't present themselves as being strategies at all, but instead appear as cultural and social movements, subcultural artistic expressions, or even innocent conversations. I think the prevalence of "subversive strategies" of advertising these days speaks to two things: the disgust that many consumers have with traditional advertising and the ease with which they can avoid it; and the real hunger for engagement in some sort of social movement, artistic expression, and conversation that speaks to their needs and desires. Responding to the first, advertisers capitalize on the second. **HELLER:** Is subversive a good thing? **DUNCOMBE:** Matthew Arnold, the 19th-century poet and critic, wrote, "Freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere." Similarly, one has to ask oneself: subversive to what? Subverting real dissatisfaction with the status quo, or genuine desire for community, into an advertising strategy is reprehensible. However, subverting the techniques and strategies of advertising in order to energize a politics

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that facilitates community and offers a constructive outlet for dissatisfaction is, in my opinion, quite laudable. **HELLER:** How do you feel about politics and political issues being sold by ad agencies in the same ways that they sell our goods and services? Shouldn't we be taught to see the difference?

**DUNCOMBE:** The problem with selling politics like a bar of soap is that you reproduce the same relationship we have to a bar of soap. Politics then becomes something we purchase, try for a while, and then if we don't like it, switch. I think politics demands another approach. In a democracy, people need to engage in the production of politics, not its consumption. In my book I am not suggesting that we learn to advertise politics like any other product. Instead, I think we have to look deep into advertising to understand what passions and desires advertisers speak to, and learn to offer the political equivalent in order to get people engaged in producing politics. **HELLER:** Is consumerism politics? Has it somehow replaced ideology? **DUNCOMBE:** Along with every product being sold through advertising is a dream of life as it should be—is this any different than communist or fascist ideology? What makes it different is that it does not announce itself as political. This, in my mind, is what makes it all the more powerful. **HELLER:** You focus on spectacle in your book *Dream*. Spectacle was a totalitarian tool in the 20th century. Have we entered a new age of spectacle where politics and consumption are treated the same way?

**DUNCOMBE:** Yes, and there is no going back, so we'd better figure out how to go forward. What I mean is this: The ideal of a pure, authentic, non-commodified politics—or existence—is fantasy. We can either keep being disappointed when it is never realized, or we can accept that this is the world we live in and move through and past the commodity form. We can push it and probe it and try to make it speak a language and take a direction that it was not meant to take. It's

really the only solution; all else is nostalgic nonsense. **HELLER:** You mean there is no way to return to less manipulative times?

**DUNCOMBE:** There were never times when manipulation wasn't practiced. At one time, and perhaps now once again, it was the magic and mystery of religion that was used to manipulate the masses. Now it's the awe of the product and the advertised life. But just as the civil rights movement employed religious symbols and narratives in the fight for racial justice, progressives today have to learn how to use the spectacle, transforming it from a tool of manipulation into a tool of empowerment. **HELLER:** Is there a uniquely American spectacle? **DUNCOMBE:** Las Vegas. It's the dream of a world in which you can magically transform yourself—the American dream without the work. But it's also something else—something that I think suggests one way in which spectacle can be formulated ethically. Las Vegas is transparent; it's a spectacle that reveals itself as a spectacle. No one mistakes the New York-New York casino for the real thing. There's no trickery here, no mistaking the fantasy for reality, but it's still enjoyable. Illusion may be a necessary part of an exciting world, but delusion need not be.

**HELLER:** Is it politically expedient to keep us "dreaming"? **DUNCOMBE:** One needs to dream in order to imagine a new politics, and we desperately need a new politics. But I think one needs to be careful with dreams. Dreams can, and do, become a replacement for reality. This is what typifies the dreams of fascism, or advertising, or those of our president, and this is when a dream is replaced by fantasy. A real dream is always acknowledged as just a dream—an ideal state to strive toward yet never reach.

**HELLER:** With globalism under such fire, do you believe that American consumerism has been an unhealthy force in the world?

**DUNCOMBE:** If the rest of the world consumes at the level of Americans, there will be no world left. The question is, how do you stop

Americans from consuming, and the rest of the world from emulating? Appeals to guilt and sacrifice are never going to work. What we have to offer is a substitute—something else that speaks to the desires and fantasies now tapped by advertising and consumption. **HELLER:** Come on, now, is there anything fundamentally wrong with the way we, as consumers and citizens, consume, and in how we are addressed through advertising, marketing, and promotion? **DUNCOMBE:** Is there anything wrong in how we are addressed? No. I think advertisers are very smart and creative people who have figured out, far better than most politicians I know, how to speak to our dreams. Is there anything fundamentally wrong with what is delivered? Yes. It's a product in the place of a dream. **HELLER:** Should the challenge to this come in the form of consumer advocates? **DUNCOMBE:** No, although I'm all for consumer advocacy. Consumer advocacy often takes the form of education: Here's the truth about the product being advertised. I want to move in another direction, asking, What is the dream being mobilized in the advertisement, and how can we articulate its political expression? It means leaving the product behind and concentrating on the social desire being tapped into. **HELLER:** Consumption is such a large part of our lives. How do we reconcile it with the more important concerns? **DUNCOMBE:** There's nothing wrong with consumption. We need to consume to live. It's when consumption becomes a replacement or a substitute for other activities: building community, engaging with the world, or governing one's own society—that's when it's the problem. The solution is to subvert the subverters by offering up new, and more honest, directions for the social and political passions and dreams that are now only addressed through the fantasies of advertising. **P**

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*Steven Heller is a contributing editor of PRINT.*