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American Dreamers: What Dreams Tell Us about the Political Psychology of Conservatives, Liberals, and Everyone Else – By Kelly Bulkeley

(Beacon Press, 2008; 217 pp.)

Reviewed by John R. Hibbing, *University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

People want to think they hold particular political views because those views constitute sensible, rational, conscious responses to politically relevant life experiences. But evidence is rapidly growing that these political orientations sometimes can be traced to broader life orientations that are not always based on *political* experiences and that may exist outside of conscious awareness. The convincing story we construct about our political beliefs is often more rationalized than rational, the product of what Stephen Pinker refers to as a post hoc but deeply convincing “baloney generator.” In reality, sociopolitical beliefs have been shown to be affected by nonconscious factors such as levels of oxytocin in the system, allelic variations in dopamine receptor genes, brain activation patterns in response to unexpected events, the flashing of subliminal images, and involuntary physiological reactions to threatening or disgusting stimuli. The message of this research stream is that politics is interconnected with broader, autonomic, subconscious features of an individual.

Given the foregoing, it is reasonable to speculate that the content of dreams—long thought to be a window into the subconscious—might be revealing of political orientations. The author of the first book-length treatment on dreams and political beliefs is Kelly Bulkeley, a long-time student of dream patterns. The empirical evidence marshaled in the book comes from two main sources: the first is 10 individuals who agreed to keep journals of their dreams during the course of a year (apparently around the 2003–4 time period) and then to make those journals available to the author. These dream accounts, and Bulkeley’s interpretation of them, constitute the bulk of the book. The second source of evidence is a brief survey conducted in August 2007 of seven hundred “demographically representative” adults in the United States. This survey makes it possible for Bulkeley to break down categories of dreams according to religion, income, and, of course, political ideology.

So what about it? Is it possible to predict whether someone is a liberal or a conservative on the basis of their dreams? Unfortunately, the research design and analysis on display in this book make it impossible to render a clear verdict. A major problem is that the 10 journal keepers profess a hodge-podge

of issue positions (for example, most of them strongly supported George W. Bush and the Iraq War but hold decidedly "liberal" positions on other issues). Since prototypical liberals and conservatives are nowhere to be found in the group of journal keepers, Bulkeley is unable to test his core hypothesis that liberals and conservatives have different dream styles. Oddly, this was intentional on his part, a product of his stated desire to demonstrate that everyone's politics is unique and that, therefore, ideological categories are useless. Obviously, if we look closely enough, no two people will have identical beliefs; but this does not mean that categories are meaningless. In fact, it is a little befuddling that a book with the subtitle "What Dreams Tell Us about the Political Psychology of Conservatives, Liberals, and Everyone Else" would not base the analysis on individuals somewhat representative of conservatives and liberals, respectively.

The survey results are marginally more helpful. They reveal that conservatives sleep better but liberals dream better. Liberals are more likely to report insomnia but they are also more likely to dream of sex and to be aware that they are dreaming. In fact, in Bulkeley's survey, liberals report more of every kind of dream, from magically flying through the air to seeing a person who is dead. The problem is that most of these differences are substantively modest and tests of statistical significance are not supplied. Therefore not much stock can be placed in the results.

Other research on the differences in the content of liberals' and conservatives' dreams reveals clearer results. Kroth et al. in the 2006 volume of *Psychological Reports* find that, compared to conservatives, liberals are more likely to have uninhibited dreams, sexual dreams, and dreams of openness while, compared to liberals, conservatives are more likely to have dreams of falling, dreams of disconnectedness, and dreams of being chased. On the positive side, conservatives are more likely to dream of being famous and are less likely to be awakened suddenly by their dreams. Taken together, these patterns fit with research finding that conservatives tend to have greater fear of death as well as heightened sensitivity to threat and loss while liberals are more permissive, promiscuous, and open to new and possibly dangerous experiences. The differences across political ideologies found in this previous research may be modest, but they are statistically significant. Still, for whatever reason, neither data base employed by Bulkeley reveals similar patterns.

American Dreamers is intended for a popular audience. Therefore it is unfair to criticize it for not being something it was never meant to be. Still, readers of *Political Psychology* should know that it is written in a breezy style. It presents pleasant, rambling, impressionistic accounts of selected individual dreams rather than crisp, systematic analyses of broadly meaningful patterns. Thankfully, we are spared the discredited Freudian interpretations that easily could suffice such a book. Unfortunately, in their place we find a set of cloying, new-age interpretations that frequently seem forced. For example, one journalist's dream of being a drop of water is seen as indicative of the fact "that each of us is composed of matter that was once part of a lake, a star, everything" (p. 96). Maybe; maybe not.

The procedures employed for selecting the journal keepers is never made clear. Four of the 10 are married couples and six of the 10 come from the same town in Western New York. The major connecting thread seems to be nontraditional and even avant-garde spiritual orientations. This makes for an intriguingly eclectic group but not necessarily an analytically appropriate one. The book's focus on the difference between liberal and conservative dreams is frequently lost as the author strives to make all possible links between dreams and politics. One lengthy passage lists the speeches in which famous politicians have mentioned dreams; several other passages discuss "the American dream"; and one chapter is devoted to dreams stimulated by workplace politics. Though interesting, these are all separate topics that do not come together well in a short book and do not speak directly to the differences between the dreams of liberals and conservatives.

The author should be given full credit for identifying a fascinating topic. Interest is growing rapidly in the subconscious components of political and social thought. Jonathan Haidt has used hypnosis in some of his research on moral judgments and several research teams are using IATs and subliminal stimuli (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). *American Dreamers*, however, mostly misses the opportunity to build on these efforts. With greater care in selecting journal keepers and with more effort in collecting and analyzing dream-relevant survey results, it would have been possible to elaborate on earlier empirical indications that liberals and conservatives do in fact dream differently.

References

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