

DEFINING *the* AGE

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DANIEL BELL,  
HIS TIME AND OURS

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EDITED BY

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**E**very generation of intellectuals periodically needs to revisit its predecessors to decide how much of their thought belongs to the past and how much is still alive. This book is a contribution to that work. Our subject, Daniel Bell, was a major figure in American intellectual life, who played two distinct roles from the mid-to-late twentieth century. He was a journalist and critic, centrally involved in the controversies of his time. And he was a sociologist and social theorist who sought to develop ideas that would have durable value in understanding post-industrial society and the relationship of the economy, culture, and politics.

In September 2019, on the one-hundredth anniversary of Bell's birth, we brought together a group of historians and social scientists for a conference at Princeton University to reconsider his work. Some of the participants focused on Bell in his historical moment, while others were more concerned with evaluating the merit of his ideas in light of subsequent developments. The chapters in this book are the outgrowth of that conference.

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## INTRODUCTION

PAUL STARR AND JULIAN E. ZELIZER

The sociologist Daniel Bell had a singular ability to put his finger on critical changes in the United States and other Western societies in the twentieth century. The ideas summed up in the titles of his major books—*The End of Ideology* (1960), *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973), and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976)—became some of the most hotly debated frameworks for understanding the era when they were published. As a social theorist, Bell also sought to identify the structural forces and long-term direction of the United States and other technologically advanced societies. *Defining the Age: Daniel Bell, His Time and Ours* is about Bell's legacy: how well his ideas capture their historical moment and have continued to provide insight into the contemporary world.

We would not have brought together a group of distinguished historians and social scientists to explore Bell's contributions if we did not think they had durable interest. Bell has often been cast as a representative and influential public intellectual of his time. But he was also a distinctive figure who stands out from his contemporaries as an original interpreter of American society and as a theorist of the great transformations of the modern world. His work holds interest from both of these perspectives—as a representative

intellectual of the mid-twentieth century, and as a critic and theorist with ideas of continuing interest.

As a representative intellectual, Bell exemplifies the story of a generation that rose to influence after World War II. He was an important figure among a group known as the "New York intellectuals," most of them the children of Jewish immigrants who came of age during the Great Depression, were active in left-wing circles opposed to Stalinism in the 1930s and 1940s, and played a central role in American intellectual life and literary culture over the next several decades.<sup>1</sup> He was also one of an international group of social democratic intellectuals in the 1950s who defended liberal principles, opposed the extension of the Soviet Union's influence in Europe and elsewhere, and were denounced by their critics as "Cold War liberals" and "NATO intellectuals."<sup>2</sup> From the 1970s on, he was lumped together with the neoconservatives, an identity that has trailed after him even though he rejected it.<sup>3</sup> That label has probably done more than anything else to diminish and distort the historical understanding of his thought and politics.

Bell's substantive interests have put him in other company. As a result of his pioneering history of American socialism and his studies of work and unions, he ranks among the foremost analysts of the development of the American left and labor movement.<sup>4</sup> The interpretation that he and his colleagues introduced to account for McCarthyism in the 1950s remains one of the most influential accounts of the "radical right" in the United States.<sup>5</sup> His formulation of the theory of postindustrial society puts him among the principal thinkers about the information revolution and social forecasting.<sup>6</sup> His work on capitalism's "cultural contradictions" puts him among the leading theorists of capitalism and modernity.<sup>7</sup>

The various ways of grouping or labeling Bell locate him within broader intellectual and political currents and help explain the

attention that his work has received. Bell's work opens a window into the political culture of the United States and the history of ideas in Western societies in the twentieth century. But to reduce him to any of the usual labels or categories or to confine him to the postwar American moment would be a mistake. Readers who get beyond the titles and secondhand descriptions of his books discover that his work is more complicated and far-ranging than they expect. That is partly why it also has held more continuing interest than much other writing of his era.

Bell stands out from his generation in part because of how he both maintained and revised his early left-wing commitments. Many others who began as socialists or communists in the 1930s became liberals in the postwar decades and ended up as conservatives by the 1970s. In contrast, Bell came to say that he was "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture."<sup>8</sup> He continued to adhere to the social democratic values he had stoo for in his twenties as a socialist journalist, even after he turned to liberal politics and to a more conservative understanding of literature, the arts, and religion. Today, with the revival of interest in socialism in the United States, Bell's writing on the subject should have a new audience.

Bell was also distinctive in how he combined different intellectual roles. He moved from journalism to the academy, but throughout his career, he was concerned with both contemporary social criticism and social theory. During the 1960s, he gravitated toward more practical issues as he became a leading policy intellectual, and in 1965, with Irving Kristol, he cofounded and for eight years coedited an influential policy journal, *The Public Interest*. But, as Kristol moved to the right, Bell parted ways with him, and instead of becoming immersed in policy research, Bell turned more squarely to theoretical concerns in his two books of the 1970s, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* and *The Cultural*

*Contradictions of Capitalism*. Together with *The End of Ideology*, these volumes give Bell's account of how the European tradition in social theory, originating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, needed to be revised in light of contemporary, largely American developments. Few scholars have left as formidable a body of work to be reckoned with by those who want to understand the trajectory of the modern era.

Bell's work commands attention for another reason as well. The United States and the world changed in fundamental ways from the 1930s through the turn of the twenty-first century. Anyone who lived as long as Bell did—ninety-one years, from 1919 to 2011, sharp until the end—was entitled to change his views, and his views did evolve. Nonetheless, his work shows a remarkable constancy of moral judgment and temperament. In an interview for a 1998 documentary on the New York intellectuals, he said, "I think I've been consistent all the way through. It's not that my politics haven't changed. Politics is basically a response to particular situations. I think my fundamental values have remained."<sup>9</sup> To understand what that moral framework was, we have to start where Bell started.

### BELL'S BEGINNINGS

Daniel Bell grew up in poverty on the Lower East Side of New York City, the son of Jewish immigrants from what is now Belarus. Like most other children of immigrant families, he had no elite pedigree or patronage. His father died when he was an infant, and as a child he was often left at what was then called a "day orphanage" while his mother worked in a garment factory. The city's public educational system, including Stuyvesant High School and the tuition-free City College of New York, made it possible for him to get an education. But he later recalled two other institutions

as framing his early years: his *shul* (synagogue) and the socialist movement, which opened up the wider world of ideas to him.<sup>10</sup> It was through the socialist movement that he had a precocious introduction to politics and a quick ascent that launched him into a key role in political journalism by his early twenties.

Bell started out at an early age as both antifascist and anti-communist. In fact, he was just thirteen years old in 1932 when he became a member of the anti-Stalinist Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) and stood on street corners campaigning for the Socialist Party's presidential candidate, Norman Thomas. During the following two years, he was attracted to the communists but turned sharply away from them after reading about an event that came to symbolize the brutalities of the Soviet regime: the Bolsheviks' savage repression of a rebellion by sailors at the Kronstadt naval base in 1921. The Moscow trials and purges that began in 1936, in which Stalin had many of his fellow revolutionaries executed, and the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 later reinforced Bell's choice. From his teenage years on, in the internecine battles in the socialist movement, he stood with the social democrats, who were committed to democratic methods.<sup>11</sup>

Bell entered City College in the fall of 1935 and became active in a circle of radicals who ferociously debated the relevance of Marx's ideas to the events of their time. As a social democrat, he was to the right of two of his contemporaries, Irving Kristol and Irving Howe, who were both Trotskyists (followers of Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary, then in exile, who advocated "permanent revolution"). In 1936, when the American Socialist Party split over the rising influence of a militant faction that called for seizing power in a revolutionary crisis, Bell supported the moderates who broke away to establish the Social Democratic Federation. The federation took control of several socialist institutions in New York, including the party's weekly paper *The New Leader*.

Leaving college after three years in 1938, Bell attended law school at Columbia University for the fall term and then transferred into the graduate program in sociology, where he was a full-time student for a year and a half. He had already been writing occasional articles for *The New Leader*, and he joined its staff in the summer of 1940 and, by his own account, was soon turning out 5,000 words a week under several invented bylines besides his own. When the managing editor left the next year, Bell assumed the position by default while the business manager looked for a replacement. But by 1942, Bell had become the managing editor in his own right, at a time when *The New Leader* was a platform for left-wing writers who opposed both the Communist Party's Popular Front and the Socialist Party's unwillingness to support the entry of the United States into World War II.<sup>12</sup>

During the war, Bell took on other editorial duties as well. When a group led by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr left the Socialist Party to support the war, Bell for a time edited the bulletin of the new organization, the Union for Democratic Action (forerunner of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action). He also delivered a weekly commentary on radio station WEVD (the initials stood for Eugene Victor Debs, the longtime Socialist leader). "In 1942," Bell later recalled, "I even wrote the state platform for the American Labor Party," a third party established by the Social Democratic Federation and limited largely to New York. When Bell left *The New Leader* in 1944, he took a better-paying job with another socialist publication, *Common Sense*.<sup>13</sup>

As the war went on, Bell's expectations about its political implications changed. At first optimistic that the war would advance socialism and the labor movement domestically, he became increasingly concerned about the power of big business. By 1944, he was arguing that the United States was on its way to a kind of "democratic corporatism" that he called the "Monopoly

State . . . a system whereby industry and labor are locked together under contractual compulsion by the State and forced along a line of ill-defined national interest."<sup>14</sup> But though he had a contract for a book on the Monopoly State, he never finished it. Describing his decision to abandon the project, he later said that after writing several hundred pages, he "suddenly realized" that he had been "very badly educated . . . in a vulgar Marxist framework." He had imagined "American business as somehow coming together in a central web with a small, controlling clique dominating society," but he became convinced that it was an oversimplification.<sup>15</sup>

The late 1940s were an intellectual and political turning point for Bell. From 1945 to 1948, he served as an instructor in the undergraduate social science program at the University of Chicago, a period he later credited as affording him an opportunity to do more reading and acquire a more thorough education than he had before. He benefited especially from his fellow instructors—David Riesman, Edward Shils, Robert Redfield, Barrington Moore, Phillip Rieff, and Morris Janowitz—who would go on to become major figures in the social sciences. It was during this period, he said, that he became "much more of a Weberian than a Marxist" (some of Max Weber's most important work had just been published in English for the first time). The war and the Holocaust had shaken his earlier optimistic and progressive view of human nature and society, and he now looked at the Marxism that he had learned as "mechanical and sterile." In Chicago, though, he still maintained his commitment to socialist politics and became involved in a failed Midwestern effort with union activists to start a new social democratic third party.<sup>16</sup>

The breaking point for Bell was the Socialist Party's crushing electoral defeat in 1948. Years later, the socialist Michael Harrington would describe 1948 as "the last year of the thirties" because it marked the end of radical hopes.<sup>17</sup> Returning from Chicago to New York that year, Bell initially edited a new social

democratic review, where he argued that socialists could wield their greatest influence by working through the Democratic Party. But that venture soon folded, and he instead took a job writing on labor for *Fortune*, the nation's leading business magazine, where he remained for most of the next decade.

So began the most intellectually productive period of Bell's career, from the end of the 1940s to the mid-1970s. It was at the end of the 1940s that he wrote his first book, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (1952), in which he sought to come to terms with the failure of American socialism. Between 1951 and 1959, he wrote the essays that went into *The End of Ideology*. In 1955, he published an edited volume, *The New American Right*, an inquiry into McCarthyism that grew out of a faculty seminar at Columbia (and was expanded and reissued as *The Radical Right* in 1962). In 1956, he came out with *Work and Its Discontents*, a concise, probing examination of how work, and thinking about work, had changed in the industrial era. By the early 1960s, he was circulating the first of his papers on postindustrial society; he also took a year to study and reflect on the state of liberal arts education at Columbia, and the resulting report, *The Reforming of General Education*, was published as a book for a wider audience. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* came out in relatively quick succession between 1973 and 1976, the fruit of the work that he had been doing during the 1960s and, in some respects, a response to the changes of that decade.

These were also the years when Bell switched careers from journalism to academia. Even while at *Fortune*, he had kept a foot in sociology, serving from 1952 to 1956 as an adjunct lecturer at Columbia. He then spent the 1956–57 year in Paris as the director of seminars for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international organization of liberal intellectuals formed in opposition to Soviet influence. (A decade later, in 1966, disclosures revealed

that the group had received funds from the Central Intelligence Agency—an enormous embarrassment to Bell and others who had been associated with the organization.<sup>18</sup>) Returning from Paris, Bell resumed writing for *Fortune* for a year before becoming a full-time professor at Columbia. At that point, he still did not have a doctorate. “After everything had gone through and I was already appointed with tenure,” he later recalled, “[the university provost Jacques Barzun] asked, ‘Does Dan have a PhD?’” But Bell had never handed in a dissertation. Following a precedent that the university had set in another case, it awarded him a doctorate for a published book. *The End of Ideology* became his dissertation.<sup>19</sup>

Bell became deeply engaged in national policy during the 1960s as postwar liberalism was reaching its peak. From 1962 to 1964, he served on a presidential commission investigating technology, automation, and the economy, and then on a second federal panel that sought to develop social indicators parallel to the indicators of economic performance that the government routinely produces. When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences organized the Commission on the Year 2000 in 1964, it asked Bell to chair the group; the founding of *The Public Interest* came a year later. Bell's 1966 report on general education at Columbia involved him in debates about the future of the university, and in 1968, he was closely involved in a failed effort by Columbia's faculty to settle a student rebellion on campus.<sup>20</sup> The conflicts of the late 1960s created rising tensions not only on campus, but also among the circles in New York that had been so important to Bell personally and intellectually. Bitterly divided over the Vietnam War, the youth revolt, and other issues, the old community of New York intellectuals broke up and began dispersing. Bell himself was one of those to leave the city. In 1970, he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, taking up a professorship in Harvard's sociology department, where he continued to teach until his retirement.



## BELL IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in the early 1960s, Bell occupied a position of unusual influence. A survey of writers for leading publications in the early 1970s identified him as one of the ten most influential American intellectuals, along with such figures as Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, and John Kenneth Galbraith.<sup>21</sup> (The term “public intellectual” came later; “intellectual” used to imply an orientation to the public and didn’t need a modifier.) A much-discussed 1987 book even called Bell one of the “last intellectuals,” as though the species was dying out.<sup>22</sup> In 1995, when Britain’s leading review, the *Times Literary Supplement*, chose the 100 most influential books since World War II, two of Bell’s works—*The End of Ideology* and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*—made the list.<sup>23</sup>

The intellectual and political world where Bell had begun his career was altogether different from the one where he achieved international influence. Professional opportunities for an aspiring left-wing Jewish intellectual were limited in the late 1930s; anti-Semitism in the universities and other elite institutions blocked careers for Jews at the higher reaches of the world of ideas. Bell was lucky to get a job in journalism in 1940, when few of his contemporaries with intellectual ambitions had jobs that paid them to write.<sup>24</sup> Besides *The New Leader*, the publications where he got his start during the war were “little magazines” of the left, all edited by radicals who had turned against the Communist Party: *Partisan Review* (Phillip Rahv and William Phillips), *Common Sense* (Lewis Corey), and *Politics* (Dwight MacDonald). Bell also wrote for *Commentary* after it was established by the American Jewish Committee in 1945 (a decade later, he was offered the opportunity to edit the magazine, a job that went to Norman Podhoretz after Bell turned it down).

Despite his marginal beginnings, Bell built up an extraordinary network of contacts through his role in a series of editorial positions and his time at the University of Chicago. By the time he was thirty years old, he already knew many of the people who would go on to become leading figures in postwar intellectual life.

The postwar decades brought about a change in the relationship of intellectuals and academics, who until then had largely been two separate groups. University appointments had been a rarity among intellectuals before the late 1940s. But when universities expanded as a result of the GI Bill and increased state spending on higher education, new opportunities developed for intellectuals to teach, write, and earn a good living as well. Social barriers that Jews had long confronted in American society were also falling, a change that particularly affected the New York intellectuals and their relation to universities. And so, like many other Americans, they began enjoying middle-class affluence for the first time.

In this new context, Bell’s generation became more approving of American society, though not without some ambivalence. As Bell wrote in 1959, “The American intellectuals found new virtues in the United States because of its pluralism, the acceptance of the Welfare State, the spread of education, and the expanding opportunities for intellectual employment. And in the growing Cold War, they accepted the fact that Soviet Russia was the principal threat to freedom.”<sup>25</sup> But tensions and divisions emerged among them over “selling out,” settling into middle-class comforts, and especially over anticommunism and the Cold War. Jewish intellectuals experienced a particular form of ambivalence, which Bell described in an article in 1946:

In Jewish life the cradle of love is the family. . . . It is also, in our time, the most painful. For the heritage of each Jew is the loss of

home and the destiny of footsore wandering. The story of the Prodigal Son, thus, is ever alive. But it is more meaningful and real today, for the Prodigal Son's return can rarely be realized. The Jew values the quality of sacrifice which characterized that home, yet he knows that two languages, not one, are spoken, and the sons cannot speak to the elders. . . .

The young Jew is left helpless, and aware. He is aware of a distance both from the Jewish culture from which he came and the Gentile culture into which he cannot or will not enter. He is helpless, for he cannot find his roots in either. Yet out of this tension of understanding and inhibition has been bred a new kind of Jew, the Jew of alienation, a Jew who consciously accepts this situation and utilizes his alienation to see, as if through a double set of glasses, each blending their perspective into one, the nature of the tragedy of our times.<sup>26</sup>

This sense of loss and sadness permeated much of Bell's work. His book on Marxian socialism, he said, addressed the "melancholy" question as to why there was no socialism in the United States. But he also claimed that alienation was a strength. "Alienation over the years," he said in a 1971 interview, "became such a cant word that anyone who had a bellyache suddenly became alienated. For us alienation had the sense of double consciousness, the sense of distancing oneself from events to allow a degree of detachment and involvement, yet never a complete involvement. Now if there is an intellectual and emotional source to the theme of the end-of-ideology, it would be in this very particular conception of alienation."<sup>27</sup>

The idea of double consciousness, of being one step removed from full involvement, affected Bell's conception of his own vocation as a critic. "Alienation," he wrote in *The End of Ideology*, "is not nihilism but a positive role, a detachment, which guards one

against being submerged in any cause." Ideology was surrender. "The claims of doubt are prior to the claims of faith. One's commitment is to one's vocation"—in other words, not to an ideology or a movement. But this commitment to the vocation of social criticism did not require a denial of "one's roots or country," for it was possible to be "a critic of one's country without being an enemy of its promise."<sup>28</sup>

Throughout Bell's career, he was suspicious of fanaticism. "An intellectual," Bell liked to say, "is a person who knows how to make relevant distinctions."<sup>29</sup> No distinction may have been more important to him than one that Weber made between "an ethic of ultimate ends" and an "ethic of responsibility."<sup>30</sup> An ethic of ultimate ends requires total devotion to those ends, to the disregard of the human cost, whereas an ethic of responsibility requires a weighing of consequences. Bell's choice was the ethic of responsibility, and how he interpreted that ethic critically affected how he responded to the major intellectual and political issues of the postwar decades.

The 1950s are remembered as the decade of the "quiet generation," the 1960s as a decade of renewed political activism. During the 1950s, Bell wrote, the terms that dominated intellectual discourse were "irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity," whereas the 1960s saw a return of passionate commitments drawn in sharp contrast.<sup>31</sup> But both decades were roiled by bitter conflicts on the left—in the 1950s, about communism and McCarthyism, and in the 1960s, about liberalism and the New Left.

Bell, as we have already mentioned, opposed communism from an early age, and as a social democrat, he regarded the communists and their methods as inimical to democracy. The Communist Party, in Bell's view, was more of a conspiracy than a legitimate political party because it acted at the behest of a foreign power (a point on which no doubt can possibly remain since the opening

of the Soviet archives), and because it operated through “front groups,” in which its members concealed their party connections, beliefs, and motives. But while Bell viewed the Soviet Union internationally as a threat to freedom, he had no sympathy with Senator Joseph McCarthy and others on the right who were conjuring up a vast communist menace in the United States. Bell argued that when the “communist issue” became central to American politics in the early 1950s, McCarthy was grotesquely exaggerating the influence of the Communist Party and recklessly damaging American democracy with unfounded accusations and suspicions.<sup>32</sup>

But how had McCarthy been able to gain so much power and wreak so much damage? Unlike earlier Marxist and Progressive historians, who typically saw the political right as the creature of reactionary elites, Bell and the other authors he assembled in *The New American Right* granted that McCarthyism had genuine popular support. They interpreted that support as originating not from economic suffering, but from the “status anxieties” of groups who saw themselves as being victimized by social change and denied their rightful place of honor by disloyal elites. By the time the book appeared in 1955, the fever of McCarthyism had already broken, but Bell argued that the forces that he and the other contributors identified were deep rooted.<sup>33</sup> Today, when analysts explain right-wing populism as originating from the anxieties of white conservatives about demographic and cultural change, they are basically invoking the same theory of frustrated privilege that Bell and his colleagues developed for the radical right of the mid-twentieth century.

During the second half of the 1950s, with both the radical left and the radical right marginalized, ideological politics was at a low ebb, and Bell’s book *The End of Ideology* captured that mood—what he referred to in the subtitle as “The Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties.” He was using “ideology” in a restricted sense, only

to refer to “all-inclusive” systems of thought that were “infused with passion” and sought “to transform the whole of a way of life.”<sup>34</sup> At least in the United States and Western Europe, the old arguments between Marxism and free-market liberalism appeared to have given way to consensus on a compromise—a modified form of capitalism with a strong role for government in managing the economy and protecting workers and consumers. This was the main sense in which the French sociologist Raymond Aron and others had discussed an end to the “age of ideologies” at a meeting of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Milan in 1955.<sup>35</sup> Although some critics interpreted the “end of ideology” to imply support for the status quo, Bell was an advocate of further liberal reforms. For example, the presidential commission on which he served under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson recommended that the government guarantee a job to anyone who exhausted unemployment benefits, assure a minimum income to every family, and provide free public education for fourteen years (through the second year of college). Although President Johnson shelved the report, Bell believed that its proposals would eventually be adopted.<sup>36</sup>

But Bell was skeptical about the demand for quick solutions in Johnson’s War on Poverty. In 1967, he wrote that he had been “appalled by the fact that the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations had ‘discovered’ the problems of poverty, education, urban renewal, and air pollution as if they were completely new.” What was needed was long-range and rational planning. The purpose of the Commission on the Year 2000, as Bell saw it, was to lay out “the future consequences of present public policy decisions, to anticipate future problems, and to begin the design of alternative solutions so that our society has more options and can make a moral choice, rather than be constrained, as is so often the case when problems descend upon us unnoticed and demand an immediate response.”<sup>37</sup>

By 1967, Bell was laying out the main lines of his own thinking in a series of articles about the future of “post-industrial society.” At the core of his argument were a number of interconnected trends. The economy was shifting from the production of goods to the production of services, particularly more complex services such as education, research, and health care; innovation was becoming more dependent on advances in science and theoretical knowledge. Consequently, the professional-technical class was on its way to becoming the most important occupational group, and universities were becoming the key institution for economic development. Certain new technologies, particularly computers, would play an important role (in later versions of the argument, Bell emphasized the convergence of computers and telecommunications). The postindustrial society, Bell believed, raised problems that would have to be addressed collectively: “In the ‘Great Society’ more and more goods necessarily have to be purchased communally. The planning of cities and the rationalization of transit, the maintenance of open spaces and the extension of recreational areas, the elimination of air pollution and the cleaning up of the rivers, the underwriting of education and the organization of adequate medical care, all of these are now necessarily the concern of ‘public institutions.’”<sup>38</sup>

Although he was criticized as “technocratic,” Bell always emphasized that policies reflect moral values and that political leaders would continue to be the pivotal decision-makers. In fact, because decisions were shifting from the market to the political arena, postindustrial society would aggravate political conflicts: “The political arena is an open cockpit where decision points are more visible than they are in the impersonal market; different groups will clash more directly as they contend for advantage or seek to resist change in society.” To be sure, Bell insisted that good decisions required more exact knowledge and that technical experts

would play a larger role, but he never saw technical expertise as superseding moral and political judgment. The more telling criticism is that despite Bell’s liberal political sympathies, he was overly optimistic about the consequences of the postindustrial shift for industrial workers, and he paid relatively little attention to the implications for racial minorities and women. The Commission on the Year 2000 illustrated in an extreme form the elite biases typical of the period—its membership consisted entirely of white men.<sup>39</sup>

In a speech to a social democratic labor group in 1964, Bell called upon Black leaders to follow the example of the industrial unions, which in the 1930s turned from sit-ins and other protests to bargaining over concrete gains. He also cited as a model the communal, self-help institutions that white immigrant groups had created, while recognizing that the “legitimate political demands” of the civil rights movement had to be met.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, though, race was a blind spot in Bell’s work; he tended to subsume race under the general heading of “ethnicity” and to see the challenges facing Blacks from the standpoint of an analogy with white immigrants that made sense to many in his generation of social scientists because of their own heritage and experience. That analogy, however, had great limitations as a way of understanding the racism that Blacks confronted.<sup>41</sup>

Bell was only one of a number of social scientists and popular writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s trying to anticipate how the technologically advanced societies would evolve. But even with his blind spots and other limitations, he offered a clearer analysis of how change in the “techno-economic” realm was likely to alter social structure, reorder institutions, and create new political challenges. One advantage of his approach, paradoxically, was that it was cautious and open-ended. Rather than try to forecast how the political decisions would come out, Bell argued that postindustrial change would create a “new agenda” for politics.

Bell also argued that the changes in technology, the economy, and social structure did not determine cultural life. Quite the opposite: there was an emerging disjuncture of culture and social structure. As he put it in 1967, "Society becomes more functionally organized, geared to knowledge and the mastery of complex bodies of learning. The culture becomes more hedonistic, permissive, expressive, distrustful of authority and of the purposive, delayed-gratification of a bourgeois, achievement-oriented technological world."<sup>42</sup> This argument would become central to the book that he published nearly a decade later, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.

*Cultural Contradictions* had an immediate relevance in a period when Western societies seemed to be coming apart. The idea that Bell proposed of a disjuncture between culture, on the one hand, and the economy and social structure, on the other, suggested a more deep-seated explanation for contemporary conflict than the proximate events of the mid-1970s. And if the book still has power, this is where it lies: not in Bell's reaction to the New Left and the 1960s counterculture, but rather in his general theoretical framework. Bell was arguing against the traditions that sought holistically to account for the long-term evolution of societies. The two major contending traditions in sociology, Marxism and structural functionalism, both sought to give a unified account of society. Marxism saw that unity as rooted in material conditions, whereas structural functionalism saw it as stemming from dominant values.

Against both of those views (and other variants of holism such as Michel Foucault's conception of epistemic ordering), Bell argued that culture and politics were decoupled from the economy and social structure. That was not to say that they were entirely separate, nor was it to deny long-term patterns of development. Rather, the different realms of society were not reducible to one

overriding force, however that might be conceived. Much thinking about American history and society in the mid-twentieth century had assumed consensus or harmony; Bell's approach rejected those assumptions but conceptualized the sources of conflict and contradiction in a distinctive way.

Although Bell was sometimes described as a "futurist," that was not how he saw himself. The whole purpose of trying to anticipate the future implications of developments in the making or on the horizon was to get a better grasp of the deeper forces at work in society and the moral and political choices that needed to be made. No one could try to peer into the future without making mistakes. In a 2011 book about financialization that begins and ends with quotations from Bell, the sociologist Greta Krippner remarks, "Bell's special brilliance was that he was prescient even when his predictions missed their mark."<sup>43</sup>

A mistake that Bell made himself in one of his papers in 1967 for the Commission on the Year 2000 is revealing. He recalled a 1924 book about science and the future by the biologist J. B. S. Haldane, which had many remarkable and accurate predictions. But Haldane, Bell said, had made one mistake: lacking "foreknowledge of nuclear energy," he had predicted that future sources of energy would come from "wind or sun."<sup>44</sup> Sometimes what seems like an error—in this case, Haldane's energy forecast—remains worth taking seriously regardless of history's apparent verdict, and sometimes it turns out to be right.

## ORGANIZATION AND THEMES OF THE BOOK

The essays in *Defining the Age* attempt to provide a fresh perspective on Daniel Bell's work. Most of the scholarship on Bell dates from the 1980s and was concerned with his early career and ideas,

particularly in the context of the “end of ideology” debate and the history of the New York intellectuals.<sup>45</sup> It is now roughly a half-century since Bell’s major work, and a decade since his death, and it is time for a broad reconsideration of his thought. This is what the contributors to this volume have sought to do: some as historians, others as social scientists, variously concerned with Bell’s historical significance and the continuing merits and limitations of his ideas.

Two general interpretative essays follow this introduction. The historian David A. Bell approaches his father’s career and ideas from two perspectives. The first concerns the tension in his father’s temperament and thought between Yiddish radicalism and Hebrew conservatism—the first born of the Jewish history of humiliation and expressed in his father’s socialism; and the second born of the fear of the collapse of order and expressed in his father’s understanding of culture. Drawing on work in his own field on the social history of ideas, Bell then turns to the intellectual circles where his father flourished, particularly the circles outside the university where intense conversation inspired him to write.

In “Daniel Bell’s Three-Dimensional Puzzle,” the sociologist Paul Starr, cofounder and coeditor of the *American Prospect*, who was first a student of Bell and then a colleague of his, examines Bell’s account of himself and his theory of society. Bell claimed that the three parts of his self-description fit together; he could be a “socialist in economics” while also a “liberal in politics” and a “conservative in culture.” But in contemporary society, Bell argued, the economy, politics, and culture were driven by conflicting principles—efficiency in the economy, equality in politics, self-realization in culture. Starr explores how, from his early to his mature work, Bell arrived at his cross-cutting normative views and anthropological social theory.

The next three sections of the book look specifically at the various phases of Bell’s intellectual development. Part II, on ideology and politics, focuses on three books that Bell published between 1952 and 1960: *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, *The New American Right*, and *The End of Ideology*. In an essay that is both personal and analytical, the historian and *Dissent* editor Michael Kazin—Bell’s nephew—continues a lifelong argument he had with his uncle. He writes that Bell’s book on socialism marked the beginning of historical scholarship about the American left, and that much of Bell’s acerbic criticism of radicals from the 1930s to the 1960s was justified. But, in Kazin’s view, he also failed to see what was of lasting value in both the Old and the New Left.

Julian E. Zelizer takes up the ideas about McCarthyism and right-wing groups that Bell and his circle offered in *The New American Right* (retitled *The Radical Right* in later editions). Like Kazin, Zelizer finds continuing relevance in Bell’s ideas—in this case, about the sources of support for right-wing extremism. But the far right has proved far more significant than Bell and others in the postwar era imagined.

The third essay in part II, by the political theorist and intellectual historian Jan-Werner Müller, concerns the connection between Bell’s ideas about the “end of ideology” and political thought since the 1990s. During the decade after Bell’s book was published in 1960, the resurgence of protest movements on the left seemed to contradict the “end of ideology” thesis. But in the 1990s, the collapse of Soviet communism gave rise to a debate that paralleled the earlier discussion about the “end of ideology.” In a 1989 article and 1992 book on “the end of history,” Francis Fukuyama claimed that the grand alternatives to liberalism were finished. Although Bell used the term “ideology” in more than one sense, Müller suggests that in at least one respect, the 1990s recapitulated Bell’s diagnosis of the 1950s: “there were no new comprehensive

belief systems comparable to what had emerged in the nineteenth century." Comprehensive belief systems, Müller argues, have also played little role in the rise of populism and authoritarianism. Identity has certainly mattered a great deal, but that is fundamentally different from a politics framed around ideologies of universal and comprehensive ambitions.

Part III focuses on Bell's 1973 book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* and related writings of his on social forecasting and higher education in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since that time, the concept of a postindustrial or information society has framed much of the thinking about social change, but now many people argue that we are living in a "neoliberal" era. Starr's essay in this part contrasts postindustrialism and neoliberalism as rival definitions of our age. Starr argues that partly because Bell took for granted an expansive government role, he failed to anticipate the brutal aspects of the postindustrial transformation that the neoliberal turn has exacerbated. But much of the core of Bell's argument holds up and has been fruitfully extended.

In parallel fashion, the historian Margaret O'Mara also finds renewed relevance in Bell's ideas about postindustrialism. She pits Bell against Alvin Toffler, exploring why Silicon Valley entrepreneurs were attracted to Toffler. But O'Mara argues that Bell's work provides a better account of how Silicon Valley actually developed. The sociologist Steven Brint explores the critical role that universities have come to play in postindustrial societies, although he argues that they have fallen short of the dominant position that Bell anticipated. He also lays out the institutional reasons why colleges have not followed the approach that Bell called for in *The Reforming of General Education*. The historian Jenny Anderson puts Bell's work in a more international context, examining his role and influence in trans-Atlantic efforts to develop new means of social forecasting.

Part IV addresses the themes that were the focus of Bell's last major book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), and some of his later social commentary. Fred Turner, a historian of culture and technology, argues that there was no contradiction; on the contrary, the cultural tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s—expressed among a group he calls the "New Communalists"—led directly to the practices of the leading Silicon Valley firms and to other changes in the corporate economy. Taking up another theme from *Cultural Contradictions*, the political theorist Stefan Eich suggests that Bell was right that the "double bind" of contemporary capitalism would express itself in growing conflict over the "public household." Eich points out that although Bell himself did not call for or favor a shift in policy toward markets and financialization, his analysis identified the reasons that turn was about to occur: "Market-based interventions could serve as a convenient tool for hiding the all-too-visible hand of the state."

The contributors to *Defining the Age* reach varying judgments about the merits of Daniel Bell's work. But taken together, these essays reveal a substantial thinker who crystallized key ideas in the mid-twentieth century that are still relevant to today's world. To inquire into the defining ideas of that era is implicitly to ask what ideas define ours. We hope, therefore, that this volume sheds light and provokes reflection on both past and present—Bell's time, and our own.

## NOTES

1. Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique," *Commentary* 46, no. 4 (October 1968): 29–51; Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Neil J. Munro, *Critical Crossings:*

- The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000). For Bell's own discussion of these issues (including a genealogical chart), see "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," in *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys, 1960–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Books, 1980), 119–37.
2. The major attack was in Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 63–114. For historical analyses, see Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 259–73; Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989); and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000). For a sensible verdict on the controversy over the funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 223–24.
  3. Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). In later books on the subject, which reflect the turn of neoconservatism to a hawkish foreign policy and Reaganite economic views, Bell drops out of the story. See, e.g., John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1994* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). But the mistaken identification of Bell as a neoconservative lingers; see, e.g., Douglas Martin, "Gertrude Himmelfarb, Historian of Ideas, Dies at 98," *New York Times*, December 31, 2019.
  4. Michael Kazin, "The Agony and Romance of the American Left," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1488–1512. He writes that nearly every historian writing on the history of socialism has found it necessary to take a position on Bell's interpretation. See also his essay in this volume.
  5. Cas Mudde describes the book as "the classic study of the postwar radical right," which laid "the groundwork for much of the European scholarship of the late twentieth century (even if this is rarely acknowledged explicitly)." Cas Mudde, *The Far Right in America* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 88, 123. For a strong, detailed defense of Bell's volume against its critics, see David Plotke, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition (2007): The

- Success and Anger of the Modern American Right," in *The Radical Right*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel Bell (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002 [1955, 1963]), xi–lxxvi.
6. Krishan Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress: The Sociology of Industrial and Post-Industrial Society* (London: Allen Lane, 1978); Jenny Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
  7. In his "Key Sociologists" volume on Bell, Malcolm Waters writes that "Bell's work is a central element in the sociological canon." Malcolm Waters, *Daniel Bell* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9; also see Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
  8. Daniel Bell, "Foreword: 1978," in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996 [1976]), xi.
  9. Dorman, *Arguing the World*, 174.
  10. Dorman, *Arguing the World*, 33.
  11. Daniel Bell, "First Love and Early Sorrows," *Parrisan Review* 48, no. 4 (1981): 532–551.
  12. "Interview with Daniel Bell, May 1972," in Job Leonard Dittberner, *The End of Ideology and American Social Thought: 1930–1960* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1979), 309–36. Hereafter referred to as "Dittberner interview."
  13. Dittberner interview, 313.
  14. Daniel Bell, "Word Surrealism," *Parrisan Review* 11, no. 4 (1944): 486–88.
  15. Dittberner interview, 319.
  16. Dittberner interview, 319; Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 101–19.
  17. Cited in Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, 102.
  18. In response to an interviewer's question, Bell insisted, "One has to distinguish between being CIA funded, which it was, and being a CIA front, which it was not. . . . You couldn't tell [the intellectuals associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom] what to do. . . . There was never any direction of the Congress, never any effort to control it." Dittberner interview, 325.
  19. Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 430, n. 112.



20. On Bell's role, see Jerry L. Avorn et al., *Up Against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 76–79; for Bell's own account, see Daniel Bell, "Columbia and the New Left," in *Confrontation: The Student Rebellion and the Universities*, ed. Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 67–107.
21. Charles Kadushin, *The American Intellectual Elite* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).
22. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
23. "The Hundred Most Influential Books Since the War," *TLS*, the *Times Literary Supplement* (October 6, 1995), 39.
24. Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*, 134.
25. Daniel Bell, "The Mood of Three Generations," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 311.
26. Daniel Bell, "A Parable of Alienation," *The Jewish Frontier*, November 1946, as cited in "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," 133–34.
27. Dittberner interview, 315.
28. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 17.
29. David A. Bell, "Daniel Bell's Relevant Distinctions," in *For Daniel Bell*, ed. Mark Lilla and Leon Wieseltier (privately published, 2005), pp. 9–16.
30. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, tr. and ed. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1946]), 77–128.
31. Bell, "The Mood of Three Generations," 300.
32. Daniel Bell, "Interpretations of American Politics" (1955), in Bell, *The Radical Right*, 47–73.
33. Daniel Bell, "The Dispossessed" (1962), in Bell, *The Radical Right*, 1–45.
34. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 400.
35. Howard Brick, "The End of Ideology Thesis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freedren and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90–114.
36. Daniel Bell, "Government by Commission," *The Public Interest*, no. 3 (Spring 1966): 3–9.
37. Daniel Bell, "The Year 2000: The Trajectory of an Idea," in "Toward the Year 2000: Work in Progress," *Daedalus* 96 (Summer 1967): 699–51.
38. Daniel Bell, "Notes on Post-Industrial Society (II)," *The Public Interest* (Spring 1967), 102–18. For a later version framed around the concept of the information society, see Daniel Bell, "The Social Framework of the Information Society," in *The Microelectronics Revolution*, ed. Tom Forrester (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 500–549.
39. "Members of the Commission on the Year 2000," *Daedalus* 96 (Summer 1967): 978.
40. Daniel Bell, "Plea for a 'New Phase in Negro Leadership': The civil rights movement has reached a point of crisis, says an observer. Here are his suggestions for what should be done beyond protest," *New York Times*, May 31, 1964. For more discussion of this speech, see Paul Starr, "Daniel Bell's Three-Dimensional Puzzle," in this volume.
41. Daniel Bell, "Ethnicity and Social Change" (1975), in Bell, *The Winding Passage*, 184–209; on the general tendencies of Bell's generation to marginalize race and subsume it under the categories of ethnicity and class, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1994).
42. Daniel Bell, "The Year 2000: The Trajectory of an Idea," 645.
43. Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 138.
44. Daniel Bell, "Coda: Work in Further Progress," *Daedalus* 96 (Summer 1967): 985–988; J. B. S. Haldane, *Daedalus or Science and the Future* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924).
45. The books include Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*; Waters, *Daniel Bell*; Dittberner, *The End of Ideology and American Social Thought*; Nathan Liebowitz, *Daniel Bell and the Agony of Modern Liberalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985); and the books on the New York intellectuals cited in note 1.