

DEFINING *the* AGE

DANIEL BELL,
HIS TIME AND OURS

EDITED BY

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every 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.

We are grateful to all the participants, as well as to Princeton's Department of History, School of Public and International Affairs, and Center for Human Values for the financial support

14. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
15. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions*, xii.
16. William James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), 1268. For Bell's use of "relevant distinctions," see Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, with "The Resumption of History in the New Century" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 211.
17. Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 425.
18. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions*, 118.
19. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).
20. See Keith Michael Baker, "A Script for a French Revolution: The Political Consciousness of the Abbé Mably," in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86–108.

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DANIEL BELL'S

THREE-DIMENSIONAL PUZZLE

PAUL STARR

Daniel Bell resisted being classified in any one standard way, identifying himself instead as "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture."¹ How those different commitments could fit together may seem puzzling, and indeed that was probably part of his intention. His account of himself was a sly invitation to read his work more carefully and ignore how other people characterized it. It expressed his antipathy to comprehensive ideologies, which he regarded as all-too-easy substitutes for hard thought and the drawing of relevant distinctions. And it identified him as both an heir and a contributor to three traditions of thought, none of which on its own, he maintained, satisfactorily represented his views.

Bell's threefold self-description also corresponds to a threefold distinction at the core of his sociology. Contemporary societies, he contended, were not well-integrated wholes. They could best be understood as divided into three realms—the economy, politics, and culture—each governed by a different "axial" principle: efficiency in the economy, equality in the political sphere, self-realization in the culture. He saw his own cross-cutting identifications—socialist in one respect, liberal in another,

conservative in a third—as fully compatible. But he argued that the “disjunction of realms” in contemporary society, rather than existing in a complementary equilibrium, led to contradictory and destabilizing forces.

These two sets of claims—one personal, the other theoretical—and the curious relationship between them raise a series of questions about how Bell arrived at and understood his ideas, how they cohere and relate to other intellectual currents, and whether they provide any continuing purchase for social analysis. Despite his protests, he is often categorized as a lapsed radical, a Cold War liberal, a technocrat, or a neoconservative—labels that in some cases don't do justice to the distinctiveness of his ideas and in other cases substantially misrepresent them.

Intellectual creativity often comes from spanning social groups. This between-group, bridging role—“brokerage,” as sociologists call it—“provides a vision,” Ronald L. Burt writes, “of options otherwise unseen.” People who fit snugly within a single group tend to be exposed to relatively homogenous knowledge and experience, whereas individuals with ties to two or more groups are better positioned to borrow and recombine elements from each one into new ideas.²

Bell's creativity stemmed in part from the bridging connections and experience that enabled him to recombine elements from different intellectual and political traditions. He had the advantage of developing his ideas through an intense oral community of intellectuals in New York and a transnational intellectual world. The members of his local community were themselves cosmopolitan bridge-builders. The “New York intellectuals,” as Irving Howe wrote in the 1968 article that gave them that name, served “as a liaison between American readers and Russian politics, French ideas, European writing.”³ During the postwar decades, Bell himself developed strong connections with both western and eastern

Europeans, spent a year in Paris in 1956–1957, and borrowed key terms (“the end of ideology,” “post-industrial society”) from his European connections. Later, he developed intellectual ties in Japan—yet more intellectual bridging capital.

In his passage from his immigrant Jewish upbringing to elite mainstream institutions, and from political journalism to the academy, Bell spanned other social boundaries. He grew up in so marginal a relation to American society that he was virtually an immigrant himself. “It was a kind of double consciousness,” he later recalled about his childhood. “We'd go to school and we'd sing ‘My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, land where my fathers died,’ and people would say, *Russia*. ‘Land of the pilgrim's pride’—*Jerusalem*. ‘From every mountainside’—*the Alps*.”⁴ He entered fully into America only as a young man, and his entry came through the battles on the left. From that experience, he acquired a deep knowledge of Marxism, the labor movement, and the socialist tradition, which he later synthesized with critical reading in the social sciences. As his moral and political views matured, he recombined ideas from diverse sources, notably John Dewey and Max Weber. But it was mostly in confronting theory with experience—typically European social theory with American historical experience—that Bell developed his distinctive contributions. If theories based on European conditions didn't work in the United States, he had to work out alternatives that did.

BELL'S SOCIALIST INHERITANCE

The collapse of American socialism and the failure of Marxism to explain social and political change from the 1930s to the 1950s were formative intellectual experiences for Daniel Bell. But despite being forced to confront the limitations of his early commitments,

he never left either socialism or Marxism entirely behind. Beginning in the 1970s, he would have a standard formulation to explain how he could be a socialist in economics as well as a liberal in politics and conservative in culture: "I'm a socialist in economics," he said in *Arguing the World*, a 1998 documentary about the New York intellectuals, "because I believe that every society has an obligation to give people that degree of decency to allow them to feel that they are citizens in this society. In the realm of economics, the first lien on resources should be that of the community in a redistributive way."⁵ Yet this idea of the "first lien" as belonging to the community and going to establish a floor of decency understrates the continuing imprint of both the socialist experience and Marx on his thinking.

At the macro or system level, Bell continued to believe in the necessity of a collective, public role in economic and social choices that ought to reflect the moral ideals of socialism. Early in his career, Bell thought of these choices in terms of government planning and public ownership; later, he saw them as problems of what he called "the public household." But he consistently argued for the priority of public or communal interests and sought to set out principles for identifying what those were. At the micro level (or "lifeworld," to use the phenomenological term), Bell was concerned about the dehumanization of labor, a focus of his thought in *Work and Its Discontents* and *The End of Ideology* even after he had abandoned socialist politics.

It wasn't only socialist politics that Bell abandoned. As a young socialist, he tended to frame problems in both the system and lifeworld as arising from capitalism and the power of business. Replacing capitalism with socialism would therefore be the solution. In the years after World War II, he turned away from that understanding as he became persuaded that all industrial societies, capitalist or socialist, shared the same problems in collective

choice and the humane organization of work. But, on the basis of the New Deal in the United States and social democratic governments in postwar Europe, he thought that liberal democracy gave capitalism a potential for reform, while the tyranny in the communist world left little hope.

This was not as much a shift for him as it was for many others of his generation who were radicals in the 1930s. From his teen-age years, Bell had sided with social democrats against the revolutionary-minded left. In a 1977 article, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," Irving Kristol recalled Bell from their days at the City College of New York as "that rarity of the 30's: an honest-to-goodness social-democratic intellectual" who believed in such "liberal heresies" as a "mixed economy." Bell's "evident skepticism toward all our ideologies," Kristol wrote, would ordinarily have disqualified him from admittance to the alcove in the student lunchroom where the Trotskyists gathered. But Bell "had an immense intellectual curiosity, a kind of amused fondness for sectarian dialectics, knew his radical texts as thoroughly as the most learned among us and enjoyed 'a good theoretical discussion' the way some enjoy a Turkish bath—so we counted him in."⁶ In a study of Bell in his formative years, the historian Howard Brick writes that not only did Bell stay on good terms with those to his left in college, he also appropriated ideas from them, and "at several moments in the coming decade [the 1940s] he would turn in that direction politically, radicalizing by shades, before returning to his social democratic anchorage."⁷

Both the continuities and changes in Bell's views of collective choice emerge from a comparison of an article he wrote on planning for *The New Leader* in 1943 and the theory of the public household that he had worked out by 1976. The title of the 1943 article, "Planning by Whom for What?" raised the central question of whose goals would dominate. Bell quoted approvingly from

the report of the Natural Resources Planning Board that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had just sent to Congress, which proposed that “the government should underwrite permanent prosperity . . . and maintain reasonably full employment.” The lesson, Bell wrote, was clear: “*planning*, an idea viciously derided only a decade ago, is here to stay.” But “the nub of the problem now is shaping up as: Who shall do the planning, Government or Business?” The article’s subtitle, “Business Menaces FDR Schemes: Vested Interests Plan Own Boards for Economic Control,” expressed Bell’s fear about what would happen. This was the anxiety at the root of a book to be called *The Monopoly State*, which he began to write over the next two years but abandoned as he came to regard the argument as simplistic.⁸

By 1976, Bell had long given up the idea of business as a unified interest menacing public-minded planning, but he still saw collective choice about the economy from a perspective recognizably similar to his outlook as a young socialist. Three developments, he argued, had transformed the arena of the public budget, which he preferred to call the “public household” because of “its sociological connotations of family problems and common living.” First, since the 1930s, “the direction of the economy has become a central government task” in the sense that the government, regardless of its policies, had become accountable for economic performance. Second, government now also underwrote advances in science and technology. Third, it had become responsible since the 1960s for “normative social policy” to redress social and economic inequalities. The political scientist Charles Lindblom, Bell noted, had asked why people don’t try to achieve greater equality through the state: “My argument is that such an effort will now be made.” Bell had reservations about that effort, but he sought to provide just principles for it, not to reject it.⁹

Here we come back to Bell’s view that the community should have “first lien” on resources, expressed in part by the collective

obligation to provide every citizen a “social minimum,” which he defined as “the amount of family income required to meet basic needs.” To that requirement he also added a principle of “illegitimate convertibility”: Wealth should not be “convertible into undue privileges in realms where it is not relevant. Thus it is unjust . . . for wealth to command undue advantage in medical facilities, when these are social rights that should be available to all.”¹⁰

In his writing about work and the problem of alienation, Bell also maintained earlier socialist concerns even after his abandonment of socialist politics in the late 1940s. He argued that there had been “two roads from Marx”—one concerned with exploitation and the other with dehumanization in work—and that while socialists and communists had been preoccupied with the first, they had abandoned the second. Marx had recast Hegel’s concept of alienation, or the failure to realize one’s potential as a self, as being based in work rather than in the ontological facts of human existence and consciousness. In Marx’s view, workers become means for others’ ends and therefore suffer a double loss—loss of the *product* of their labor (exploitation) because a portion is appropriated by the employer as surplus value, and loss of control over the *labor process itself* (dehumanization)—as a result of a division of labor intensified by technological change. If Hegel had been correct, alienation had to be accepted because it was an inescapable fact of human existence. But if, as Marx argued, alienation was rooted in private property and the social relations of production, it could be overcome by changing that system.

Bell pointed out, however, that in transforming the concept of alienation, Marx ran two risks: the risks “of falsely identifying the source of alienation only in the private property system; and of introducing a note of utopianism in the idea that once the private property system was abolished man would immediately be free.”

As the subsequent history of the communist world showed, these two risks proved fatal to Marx's solution. Nonetheless, this was the direction that Marxists thought had followed, down the "narrow road of economic conceptions of property and exploitation, while the other road, which might have led to new, humanistic concepts of works and labor, was left unexplored."¹¹

Bell was equally severe in his judgment of the prevailing non-Marxist approaches to work. Early-twentieth-century Taylorism, with its time-motion breakdowns of factory work as well as later studies in industrial social psychology, exemplified what Bell referred to as "the cult of efficiency" in America. Bell rejected the researchers' defense that they were merely studying what existed. "One of the functions of social science," he insisted, "is also to explore alternative (and better, that is, more human) combinations of work and not merely to make more effective those that already exist."

Workers' concerns, Bell argued, involved two separate types of problems: equity in treatment and the work process itself. Equity demanded that workers be free of arbitrary or capricious control by supervisors and that wages be fair. Unions legitimately focused on these issues. But they had failed to challenge the work process itself, which "would require a radical challenge to society as a whole" because it would call into question "the logic of a consumption economy whose prime consideration is lower costs and increasing output." Still, if one was to deal meaningfully with dehumanization in the modern world, concrete changes in the workplace, such as the rotation and enlargement of jobs and decentralization of production, were a place to begin.¹²

As his analysis of work and alienation illustrates, Bell was concerned in nearly all his writing to establish his relation to Marx. In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, he linked his account of changes in the economy and social structure to volume three of

Capital.¹³ The *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* turned Marx's understanding of capitalism's dynamics on its head. While critical of the substance of Marxism, Bell took Marx as a model. For example, in the midst of criticizing C. Wright Mills for relying on Vilfredo Pareto's "ahistorical" theory of elites, Bell remarked, "My own masters, in this respect, are Dewey and Marx." He reverted to Dewey, he wrote, for his emphasis on problems and sources of change rather than fixed structures, while he looked to Marx "for the interplay of ideology and power: for the emphasis on history, on crises as transforming moments, on politics as an activity rooted in concrete interests and played out in determinable strategies."¹⁴

But although Bell admired Marx's historical method, he abhorred the Marxist theory of history and its eschatological vision of an inevitable breakdown of capitalism, revolutionary upheaval, and communist future. That theory was not only wrong, Bell argued; it had historically misled socialists about the practical tasks of politics. And it was on this issue, the relation of ideology to politics, where Bell parted with his socialist upbringing and turned to liberalism.

FROM SOCIALIST TO LIBERAL POLITICS

Bell's first book, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, originally published in 1952, sought to reckon with the political failure of American socialism.¹⁵ The question "Why is there no socialism in the United States?"—the title of a 1906 book by the German sociologist Werner Sombart—had drawn a long series of answers focused on America's distinctive social and political conditions, including the relatively high standard of living, opportunities for mobility, deep ethnic and racial divisions, and early extension of

the franchise to white working men and their integration into the dominant political parties. Shifting from “external” to “internal” causes of failure, however, Bell turned attention to the socialist movement itself, arguing that “its inability to resolve a basic dilemma of ethics and politics”—namely, how to deal with the “here-and-now, give-and-take political world”—had prevented it from achieving influence.¹⁶

In a striking analogy, Bell wrote that the Socialist Party had operated, like Martin Luther’s church, as though it could live “in but not of the world,” and, as a result “it could only act, and then inadequately, as the moral, but not political, man in immoral society.” *Marxian Socialism in the United States* sought to show how moral posturing and ideological obsessions stymied socialism in practice. Sectarian splintering was one consequence: “the Socialist Party has never, even for a single year, been without some issue which threatened to split the party and which forced it to spend much of its time on the problem of reconciliation or rupture.” At crucial moments such as the two world wars, socialists and their leaders, like Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, chose moral purity and political irrelevance over responsible political choice. What Bell said of Debs—“he lacked the hardheadedness of the politician, the ability to take the moral absolutes and break them down to the particulars with the fewest necessary compromises”—could have been his verdict on other Socialist leaders as well.¹⁷

Critics of Bell’s argument object that it lacks a “comparative dimension”: after all, weren’t socialists elsewhere also dogmatic, yet nonetheless more politically successful?¹⁸ But Bell was not denying the relevance of America’s distinctive social and political conditions. As he wrote in a 1967 preface to *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, the questions that he had attempted to answer, and that others had previously avoided, was why “the socialist

movement, as an organized political body, fail[ed] to adapt to American conditions.”¹⁹ Socialists, Bell suggested, could have made different choices. In 1934, for example, the novelist Upton Sinclair, a longtime socialist, won the Democratic nomination for governor of California on the basis of a radical platform and, while losing, he did far better than any Socialist Party candidate ever had. “Sinclair’s quick and spectacular rise, like that of the [North Dakota] Non-Partisan League before him, showed that socialists could utilize the primary system to great political advantage”—a point that democratic socialists today have come to appreciate. But the Socialist Party at the time denounced Sinclair for obtaining the Democratic nomination and abandoning orthodoxy.²⁰

The problem, Bell argued, lay with the failure of militant socialists to appreciate the distinctiveness of “the American scene.” Their attention “was riveted on Europe, because, as Marxist theory foretold, the fate of capitalism there foreshadowed the course of capitalism here.” When Bell revisited *Marxian Socialism* in a 1996 afterword, he emphasized this point: the Marxian theory of history had been “mischievously misleading” for American socialists. “Socialism,” he wrote, “remains a moral ideal independent of a theory of history,” a moral ideal of equality and “condemnation of exploitation and domination,” but achieving those aims “necessarily involves politics.”²¹ And socialists had failed to adapt their politics to American conditions.



Many of the essays that Bell wrote in the 1950s and went into *The End of Ideology* had a similar theme. The Marxist schema was only one example of a theory derived from European conditions that did not fit the United States well. Summing up the six essays that make up the first third of that book, Bell attributed “the

inadequacy of many social theories about America" largely to "the uncritical application of ambient ideas from European sociology to the vastly different experiences of American life."²²

The first essay in the book is a withering critique of the theory of "mass society," which had been developed by a wide variety of European critics—aristocratic, Catholic, existentialist, and left-wing—and picked up in the United States. The general idea was that modernity had broken up traditional communities and faiths and left people rudderless, alienated, and therefore susceptible to manipulation through the mass media by charismatic leaders like Hitler and Mussolini. As mass production in industry turned out standardized goods, so the mass media produced uniform, lowest-common-denominator entertainment. To be part of a mass was to lose one's individuality. But these accounts, Bell wrote, had little to do with "the complex, richly striated social relations of the real world." Americans were joiners; there were some 200,000 voluntary associations in the country. Churches, unions, and civic groups had more members than ever. Civil society was alive and well in the United States despite the tragic stories that the mass-society theorists told about modernity.²³

Bell was similarly critical of Mills's *The Power Elite* because it was both too dependent on European theory (Pareto's theory of elites) and too little grounded in analysis of American politics. Bell and Mills had been close both personally and intellectually in the 1940s, and *The Power Elite* was in some ways the book that Bell had started to write under the title *The Monopoly State*. But Bell now considered that vision of a cohesive elite controlling American politics out of touch with the realities of a diverse, pluralistic society with multiple centers of power. Like the Marxists and the mass-society theorists, radicals like Mills needed to come to terms with America's liberal complexities.²⁴

BELL'S LIBERALISM

Bell's understanding of what had gone wrong with American socialism—its excessive dogmatism and failure to grasp American realities—influenced how he conceived of liberalism. At times, he defined liberalism entirely as an anti-ideological temper. "I'm a liberal in politics," Bell said in an interview for *Arguing the World*, "but liberalism has no fixed dogmas. . . . It's a skepticism. It's a pluralism, it's agnostic."²⁵ In other contexts, though, he did identify liberalism with a set of principles, which supported representative democracy and qualified his socialism. Individual achievement, for example, should be the basis for allocating social positions; the public and private spheres needed to be kept distinct to avoid politicizing all behavior: "Once a social minimum is created, then what people do with the remainder of their money (subject to the principle of illegitimate convertibility), is their own business, just as what people do in the realm of morals is equally their own business, so long as it is done privately."²⁶

Yet these efforts at self-clarification did not get at the heart of Bell's politics. In the last line of *Marxian Socialism*, he quoted a sentence from Weber's lecture "Politics as a Vocation": "He who seeks the salvation of souls, his own as well as others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics." Bell continually returned to Weber's distinction between an ethics of ultimate ends, which demanded an unstinting dedication regardless of costs, and an ethics of responsibility, which required a weighing of consequences and acceptance of limits. To Weber, dangers existed on both sides. But politics required a choice, and Bell made his. Looking back in his 1981 essay "First Love and Early Sorrows," he wrote, "The ethics of responsibility, the politics of civility, the fear of the zealot and the fanatic, and of the moral man willing to sacrifice his morality in

the egoistic delusion of total despair—are the maxims that have ruled my intellectual life.”²⁷

Bell's concern about damage control reflected the experience of a generation that had lived through the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the Holocaust, and World War II, and it had much in common with Judith Shklar's “liberalism of fear,” the liberalism that puts the prevention of cruelty above all else.²⁸ But Bell was particularly concerned with preventing another danger: being sucked into an all-consuming cause that blinds its true believers to the realities of the world and the consequences of their actions. This was a central motivation behind *The End of Ideology*.

Some books, Bell later lamented, are “better known for their titles than their contents,” and *The End of Ideology* was one of them.²⁹ But in choosing the title, he had invited confusion about his intentions. In one of the chapters in the book, an essay on unions, he does the same thing. The essay begins with a line from George Bernard Shaw: “Trade-unionism is the capitalism of the proletariat,” which Bell calls “a half-truth, calculated to irritate the people who believe in the other half.” The other half was that unions were still a social movement, and indeed Bell saw that movement tradition, rather than “market-unionism,” as the half that unions needed to build upon and expand.³⁰ Nonetheless, Bell appropriated Shaw's disparaging phrase, “the capitalism of the proletariat,” for the title of his essay. Likewise, “the end of ideology” was also “a half-truth calculated to irritate the people who believe in the other half,” and Bell nonetheless used it for the title of his book, surely knowing whom it would irritate and why their attacks would focus controversy on what he wrote. As marketing, the title was brilliant, but it has left a cloud over the book that it can never escape.

Bell used the phrase “the end of ideology” in both a descriptive and a normative sense. First, it described the political mood of a moment. The subtitle—*On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in*

the Fifties—signaled this descriptive meaning, which was simply that the grand systems of ideas that dominated politics earlier had been drained of vitality and, in particular, no longer captured the imagination of intellectuals. In the introduction, Bell wrote that he was using “ideology” not to denote any “belief system,” but to refer to “a special complex of ideas and passions that arose in the nineteenth century,” applying the term “largely to left-wing thought.” In the epilogue—the only essay in the book directly about the end of ideology—he emphasized that he was referring to “total ideologies,” “all-inclusive” systems of “comprehensive reality . . . infused with passion” that sought “to transform the whole of a way of life.”³¹ This had a definite historical reference in Marxism, but it was a small part of what most people understood then, or understand now, as “ideology.”

Bell wrote that the phrase “end of ideology” applied to more than Marxism. Utopian visions of social engineering were not alone in being exhausted: “At the same time, the older ‘counter-beliefs’ have lost their intellectual force as well. Few ‘classic’ liberals insist that the State should play no role in the economy.” Western intellectuals had arrived at a “rough consensus” in favor of a welfare state and political pluralism. This was the view of Bell's colleagues in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, who included many of the leaders of Britain's Labour Party—though it was by no means an idiosyncratic opinion of Cold War social democrats. The “end of ideology” referenced a narrowing of major-party differences in Western democracies and the collapse of ideological extremes. In the United States, Eisenhower Republicans had accepted the main achievements of the New Deal; in Britain, Conservatives had accepted the reforms of the postwar Labour government, such as the National Health Service. This was the chief basis of the half-truth of “the end of ideology”: it described a political reality of the 1950s.³²

Bell made it clear that he wasn't predicting that ideology would disappear forever, but he also left no doubt that he welcomed "the end of ideology" in the 1950s, and that the phrase had a second, positive, normative meaning for him. Ideology oversimplifies reality, and it was this oversimplification that he opposed. His perspective, he insisted, was "anti-ideological, but not conservative." He did not intend the end of ideology to be an endorsement of the status quo: "A repudiation of ideology, to be meaningful, must mean not only a criticism of the utopian order but of *existing society as well*." In the book's final pages, he said that people still need the idea of utopia, a "vision of their potential, some manner of fusing passion with intelligence." But now, rather than being a "faith ladder," the ladder to "the City of Heaven" had to be an "empirical" one: "a utopia has to specify where one wants to go, how to get there, the costs of the enterprise, and some realization of, and justification for the determination of *who* is to pay."³³

Bell's work as a policy intellectual in the 1960s followed from that understanding of the need for an empirical basis for public remedy. He criticized the "patristic writings" in the Marxist tradition for saying nothing of substance about how a socialist planned economy would work in practice.³⁴ When he served on a federal commission on automation between 1962 and 1964, he was struck that much writing on the subject lacked grounding in research. In the inaugural issue of *The Public Interest*, Bell and his coeditor, Irving Kristol, wrote that "it is the essential peculiarities of ideologies that they do not simply prescribe ends but also insistently propose prefabricated interpretations of existing realities—interpretations that bitterly resist all sensible revision." The aim of the new journal, they said, was "to help all of us, when we discuss issues of public policy, to know a little better what we are talking about—and preferably in time to make such knowledge

effective."³⁵ This emphasis on the need for empirical knowledge hardly made Bell a technocrat.

During the mid-1960s, Bell cast himself as a practical-minded liberal. In a 1964 speech to the annual dinner of the Sidney Hillman Foundation—Hillman had been the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and one of the founders of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—Bell suggested that the leaders of the Black protest movement should learn from the CIO. The late 1930s, like the mid-1960s, saw "spreading violence, the seizure of property, sit-downs and sit-ins, complaints from employers about 'outside agitators,' the quick emergence of new, natural leaders from the rank and file." The industrial unions had turned successfully to collective bargaining, and now too, Bell argued, "responsible" Black leaders should organize themselves for "political collective bargaining" (though exactly whom they could have bargained with wasn't entirely clear). With little appreciation for the obstacles to wealth formation among Blacks in the United States, Bell also reprimanded the Black middle class for failing to build "communal" organizations to deal with problems in family life, as the Jewish immigrant community had done. His basic message to Black leaders was that European immigrants had advanced through collective bargaining strategies and communal self-help, so they should do likewise. But he ended by saying that progress also depended on white liberals and "can only start when the Negro has begun to achieve his legitimate political demands."³⁶

Bell's speech about Black advance at the Sidney Hillman dinner—still an important annual event on the labor left—illustrates a more general failing among his generation of sociologists in their understanding of racial politics. Like many other white social scientists of the time, Bell saw the Black struggle through the prism of the "immigrant analogy," assuming that Blacks could follow the same path that white immigrant groups had traveled

since arriving in the United States.³⁷ Although he criticized others for failing to take into account America's distinctive history and social conditions, he failed to do so himself on the crucial issue of race.

Bell's insistence in *The End of Ideology* that he was not ruling out utopian ideas—they just needed to be empirically grounded—did not impress his critics on the left. After all, the phrase “end of ideology” suggested that big, radical political ideas were finished everywhere and forever. It suggested a narrowing of criticism of the status quo, even though Bell denied it. Few of Bell's critics disagreed with what he was saying about the political mood of the 1950s. But by the mid-1960s, “the end of ideology” looked outdated as a description of politics, and inadequate as a guide to moral responsibility.

One stinging attack on Bell came in 1967 from Noam Chomsky in a long essay, “The Responsibility of the Intellectuals,” published in the *New York Review of Books*. “Intellectuals,” Chomsky wrote, “are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.” His main thrust was to lay responsibility for the Vietnam War at the feet of prominent intellectuals who had misled the public about the war, justified it, or provided technical advice in support of it. Bell, however, had never done any of these things, and Chomsky did not say that he had. His indictment of Bell was that *The End of Ideology* provided a general justification for dismissing radical ideas and confining change “within the framework of a Welfare State in which, presumably, experts in the conduct of public affairs will have a prominent role.” Like conservatives who would later attack liberals as part of a “new class” that had a self-interest in expanding government bureaucracies, Chomsky saw self-interest at work in Bell's defense of a liberal welfare state: “Having found his position of power, having achieved security and

affluence, he has no further need for ideologies that look to radical change.”³⁸

Although Bell regarded Chomsky's criticism as illogical and unfair—“I have never defended American policy in Vietnam,” he protested, “on the contrary, as far back as 1965 I began to oppose the war”³⁹—it was representative of a wave of attacks from the New Left in the late 1960s. Bell had interpreted Weber's ethics of responsibility as an obligation to weigh moral consequences, which meant, among other things, shedding ideological blinders and assessing empirical effects. But to a new generation who saw the responsibility of intellectuals differently, he had become too close to power and too circumspect when outright opposition was necessary. And in the 1970s, the rise of a movement with which he was initially identified—neoconservatism—seemed to confirm suspicions that he had shifted to the right with other members of his generation.

A CONSERVATIVE ONLY IN CULTURE?

Although Bell had earlier insisted that he was not a conservative, by the 1970s he was saying he was a conservative in one respect—culture. But what was a conservatism specific to the realm of culture?

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Bell used the term “culture” in a restricted sense. He equated it with “the realm of symbolic forms,” and more particularly in the context of his book's argument, with “the arena of *expressive symbolism*: those efforts in painting, poetry, and fiction, or within the religious forms of litany, liturgy, and ritual, which seek to explore and express the meaning of human existence in some imaginative form.” Or as he restated it: “Culture, for me, is the effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the existential predicaments

that confront all human beings in the passage of their lives." By those universal existential predicaments, he meant "how one meets death, the nature of tragedy and the character of heroism, the definition of loyalty and obligation, the redemption of the soul, the meaning of love and of sacrifice, the understanding of compassion, the tension between an animal and a human nature, the claims of instinct and restraint." Bell identified himself as a conservative in culture, he wrote, because he respected tradition, which "provides the continuity of memory that teaches how one's forebears met the same existential predicaments," and because he believed in "reasoned judgments of good and bad about the qualities of a work of art," and regarded "the principle of authority" to be necessary for "the judging of the value of experience and art and education." He saw religion as having historically embodied "the quest for the unity of culture."⁴⁰

Over the previous century, however, modernism in culture and capitalism itself broke down the respect for tradition and standards of judgment that had prevailed in "bourgeois society." Modernism disrupted the earlier unity established through religion "by insisting on the autonomy of the aesthetic from moral norms; by valuing more highly the new and experimental; and by taking the self . . . as the touchstone of cultural judgment." In its drive for autonomy, modernist culture took over "the relation with the demonic. But instead of taming it, as religion tried to do, the secular culture (art and literature) began to accept it, explore it, and revel in it, coming to see it as a source of creativity." Instead of cultivating the restraint of impulses, modernism celebrated their release. The same shift took place in everyday economic life: "Puritan restraint and the Protestant ethic" dissolved under the influence of a consumption-oriented capitalism: "The greatest single engine in the destruction of the Protestant ethic was the invention of the installment plan, or instant credit."⁴¹ In effect, capitalism

had been destabilized from above and below—not, as Marx had taught, through a contradiction between the forces and relations of production, but through the contradictory cultural tendencies that capitalism unleashed.

The result of these tendencies, Bell argued, was to undermine the traditional moral justifications of authority, leaving self-realization, or self-gratification, as the dominant principle of contemporary culture. Nothing so epitomized this tendency for him as the counterculture of the 1960s, with its rejection of authority, traditional standards of judgment, and reason itself in favor of "pre-rational spontaneity."⁴² By the 1970s, the slowdown in economic growth and rise in inflation were accentuating the crisis brought about by the collapse of traditional moral principles. Democratic governments found themselves in a "double bind" as they faced the two imperatives of capital accumulation (to keep the economy growing) and legitimation (which now depended on meeting popular demands for spending on public services). It was in response to this situation—the mid-1970s economic and political crisis coming on top of the collapse of earlier moral justifications—that Bell offered his conception of the public household as a way of grounding the role of government and mediating the conflicting demands it faced.⁴³ Bell recognized the potential use of the market as a way of diverting responsibility from government, but he neither predicted the crisis would be resolved that way nor favored it.⁴⁴

Cultural Contradictions was important as both a theoretical and a personal statement. As a work of social theory, it challenged both Marxism and the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons, which shared the premise that societies were interdependent totalities. Marxism saw the material base of a society determining its superstructure, while structural-functional theory saw societies as being integrated through general value orientations. Bell's outlook was anthropological; societies were not necessarily unified

wholes. This skepticism about societies as unified totalities was consistent with other tendencies in social theory at the time that rejected grand, comprehensive narratives of historical change. But it was in opposition to what would be a growing vogue in the next several decades, exemplified by the work of Michel Foucault, who saw the same structures of thought as pervading an entire social order. Bell's antiholism did not imply a retreat to small-scale analysis or deny the possibility of understanding long-term patterns of development. After all, his theory of post-industrial society was also a grand narrative, although Bell described the post-industrial shift as limited to the technoeconomic realm rather than determining how culture and politics would change as well.

The most important contribution of Bell's social theory was not his specific claims about the three institutional realms. The axial principles that he said governed the contemporary economy, culture, and politics were debatable: Why, for example, did efficiency rather than capital accumulation dominate the capitalist economy? Why was it necessary to pick only one principle for each realm? Few theorists have followed Bell down that path. His combination of two seemingly opposed elements has been of greater value: long-term structural analysis of technology and the economy on the one hand, and antiholism on the other, which decoupled those structural patterns from culture and politics (or at least loosened the connections between them). The net result is to open up possibilities for multiple institutional misalignments and contradictions and diverse but constrained paths for societal development. This, at least, is how I see his theoretical contribution.

Bell's own preferences did not line up with the principles that he identified as dominating the economy and culture. Just as he had written that one function of social science was "to explore alternative (and better, that is, more human) combinations of work and not merely to make more effective those that already

exist," so he thought that it was the responsibility of social scientists to propose more humane alternatives to a society's principles. And this is what he did in identifying himself as a socialist in economics and a conservative in culture.

Published in 1976, when neoconservatism was emerging as an influential force, *Cultural Contradictions* seemed to confirm Bell as one of the movement's intellectual leaders. In a 1979 book *The Neoconservatives*, with the portentous subtitle *The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics*, the journalist Peter Steinfels devoted chapters to three figures: Irving Kristol (who had embraced and championed the label "neoconservative"), the political scientist and later Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Bell. "Despite Bell's welfare sympathies and political liberalism," Steinfels wrote, "his perception of the economy and polity caught in the tow of a wildly unrestrained culture elevates his self-proclaimed cultural conservatism to a position of dominance."⁴⁵ Contrary to Steinfels, however, Bell's views of economics and politics remained fundamentally those of a social democrat, and as neoconservatism evolved over the next decade, Bell explicitly dissociated himself from it.

Originally, the neoconservatives were concerned mainly with domestic affairs and were critical of the radicalized liberalism of the 1960s, but not of the New Deal. Even with respect to the social policies of the Sixties, their stance was repair rather than outright repudiation. By the 1980s, however, neoconservatism stood for a hawkish foreign policy and grew hostile to liberal government in its entirety as part of the Reagan-era right. "From the 1960s to the 2000s, neoconservatism transformed itself so thoroughly as to become unrecognizable," Justin Vaïsse writes in a history of the movement.⁴⁶ It had already undergone that change long before the 2000s. In a 1984 article, Bell took note of the "approchement" between neoconservatives and the right and said neoconservatism

had lost intellectual coherence. When he and Kristol founded *The Public Interest*, Bell wrote, they had hoped “to transcend ideology through reasoned public debate,” but “for Kristol today all politics is ideology.” Bell still held to his liberalism: “We need a new public philosophy, rooted in liberalism, a liberalism which has the ‘negative capability’ of not reaching closure on all issues.”⁴⁷

Kristol, who so self-identified with neoconservatism that he subtitled a book on the subject “The Autobiography of an Idea,” ultimately moved so far to the right that there was nothing “neo” left in his neoconservatism.⁴⁸ In 1993, claiming that the “liberal ethos” had “ruthlessly corrupted” American life, he wrote, “Now that the other ‘Cold War’ is over, the real cold war has begun.”⁴⁹ Bell regarded these views with contempt and returned in his later years to his social democratic roots. When Robert Kuttner, Robert Reich, and I started *The American Prospect* in 1990 as an alternative to *The Public Interest* and other publications that no longer upheld liberal principles, Bell gladly agreed to become one of the magazine’s founding sponsors and helped raise money for it.



But if Bell remained a conservative only in culture, while a socialist in economics and a liberal in politics, this still leaves us with our original puzzle: How did his own cross-cutting commitments and beliefs cohere?

Bell differed from many in his generation by staying close to his early beliefs, his “social democratic anchorage,” throughout his life. Others who had been socialists or communists in the 1930s, like Kristol, first repudiated those ideas and became liberals in the 1950s and 1960s, and then changed direction again in the 1970s, repudiating liberalism and becoming conservatives. In contrast, Bell recombined his more slowly evolving commitments,

assigning them to different dimensions of his thought: socialism to economics, liberalism to politics, conservatism to culture. That differentiated, multidimensional worldview could not settle every issue. Many questions overlap—some, for example, are inherently both political and cultural—and first principles are insufficient to answer them. Bell’s own philosophy of the public household overlapped the political and economic spheres. Every political philosophy requires secondary or derivative rules to resolve conflicts of principle and ambiguities of interpretation.

But Bell’s synthesis is worthy of being taken seriously because of the intellectual and moral depth with which he developed it. He was a twentieth-century American heir to Marx and other European theorists, testing their ideas against American experience and the changing social world. Similarly, he combined learning and alertness in his efforts to understand the implications of cultural change, even as he overreacted against the sensibility of the 1960s and shifts in sexuality and popular taste. The moral vision that held his worldview together was rooted primarily in the ethic of responsibility and a tragic sense from the twentieth century’s horrors and the failure of socialism’s great expectations. He was one of those whom he called the “twice born.” The “once born,” he wrote, drawing on the psychologist William James, were “sky-blue healthy-minded” moralists, to whom “sin and evil” were transient. “To the twice born, the world is ‘a double-storied mystery’ which shrouds the evil and renders false the good, and in order to find truth, one must lift the veil and look Medusa in the face.”⁵⁰ Although those words appear in his first book about socialism, written when he was barely thirty, his later work was in the same spirit. He never gave up hope of social democratic improvement, but he looked to tradition and memory for wisdom, and in that respect, his cultural conservatism was consistent with his other views.

Whether Bell's configuration of values has any future is hard to say. Some young people on the left today identify both as liberals in politics and as socialists in economics and mean approximately what Bell meant. They're unlikely, however, to identify as culturally conservative (the exceptions may be people of color, especially those from recent immigrant groups). But the culture wars of recent decades have so influenced our understanding of the meaning of cultural conservatism that it may throw off judgment about the relevance of Bell's position, which preeminently reflected a respect for memory and tradition in answering the existential problems of human life. We stand at a dangerous moment—environmentally, epidemiologically, politically—that has disturbing echoes of the dark times that haunted Bell. The rise of fascism today resembles the 1930s. Although we hope never to live through anything like the twentieth-century tragedies and disappointments that shaped Bell's worldview, we ought to be attentive to the wisdom of someone who learned from those horrors and still maintained the commitments to equality and a free society that he adopted when he was young.

NOTES

1. Daniel Bell, "Foreword: 1978," in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996 [1976]), xi.
2. Ronald L. Burt, "Structural Holes and Good Ideas," *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 2 (2004): 349–399.
3. Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique," *Commentary* 46, no. 4 (October 1968): 29–51.
4. Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 25 (italics in original).
5. Dorman, *Arguing the World*, 174.
6. Irving Kristol, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," *New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 1977.

7. Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 61.
8. Daniel Bell, "Planning by Whom for What? Business Menaces FDR Schemes: Vested Interests Plan Own Boards for Economic Control," *The New Leader*, March 20, 1943, 5, 7.
9. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 221, 224–226.
10. Bell, "Foreword: 1978," xiii–xiv; see also Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
11. For the full theoretical exposition, see Daniel Bell, "The 'Rediscovery' of Alienation: Some Notes along the Quest for the Historical Marx," *Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1959): 933–952. Bell condensed this essay and combined it with sections of other papers in "Two Roads from Marx," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 355–392.
12. Daniel Bell, "Work and Its Discontents: The Cult of Efficiency in America," *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 227–272; Bell, "Two Roads from Marx."
13. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 54–63.
14. Daniel Bell, "Is There a Ruling Class in America?" in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 48n.
15. The original publication was a nearly-200-page chapter, "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," in *Socialism and American Life*, volume 1, ed. Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 213–406.
16. Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996 [1952]), 5.
17. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 5, 9–10, 87 (italics in original).
18. John H. M. Laslett, "Comment" [responding to Bell], in *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, ed. John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 30–45. See also Michael Kazin's essay, "Of But Not in the Left: Daniel Bell on Radical Politics," in this volume.

19. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, xxxix.
20. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 162.
21. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 162, 199, 203.
22. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 13.
23. Bell, "America as a Mass Society: A Critique," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 21–38.
24. Bell, "Is There a Ruling Class in America?"; Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, 80–82, 94–100.
25. Dorman, *Arguing the World*, 174.
26. Bell, "Foreword," 1978, xiv–xv.
27. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 193; Daniel Bell, "First Love and Early Sorrows," *Parrisian Review* 48, no. 4 (1981): 550–551; Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1946]), 77–128.
28. Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21–38.
29. Bell, "Afterword, 1988," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 409.
30. Bell, "The Capitalism of the Proletariat," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 211–226.
31. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1960]), 17, 400.
32. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 402. For a survey of the debate over "the end of ideology," see Howard Brick, "The End of Ideology Thesis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freedson and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
33. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 16, 405 (italics in original).
34. Bell, "Two Roads from Marx," 368.
35. Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, "What Is the Public Interest?" *The Public Interest* 1 (Fall 1965): 3–5.
36. 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.
37. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1994), 10 (citing Robert Blauner).
38. Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of the Intellectuals," *New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967, accessed at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>.
39. Letter from Bell to Lionel Abel, quoted by Abel in an exchange with Chomsky in "Vietnam, the Cold War & Other Matters," *Commentary* (October 1969), 26.
40. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 12, xv.
41. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, xv, 19, 21.
42. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 120–145.
43. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 220–282.
44. See Stefan Eich's essay, "The Double Bind: Daniel Bell and Financialization," in this volume; and Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 138–150.
45. Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 172.
46. Justin Vaissie, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4.
47. Daniel Bell, "Our Country—1984," *Parrisian Review*, 50th anniversary issue, 54 (4) and 55 (1) 1985, 620–637.
48. Paul Starr, "Nothing Neo," *The New Republic*, December 3, 1995, 35–38.
49. Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
50. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 182–183.