

Daniel Bell: The Empire Loses a Publicist: The Epitaph of an Ideologue

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Theme: [History](#)

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The recent death of one of the United States' most prominent sociologists, Harvard Professor Daniel Bell, and the effusive eulogies that have accompanied his obituaries highlight the importance of ideological utility over scientific rigor. Typical of the mass media's hagiographic write-ups is the obituary in the Financial Times (2/12-13/1, p. 5), which claimed that "Few men are given the gift of seeing into the future, but Daniel Bell ... was one of them ... with uncanny accuracy". Further on, the 'puff' piece pronounced that, "Few thinkers in the second half of the 20th century managed to catch the social and cultural shifts of the times with such range and in such detail as he did". No doubt there are some important reasons why Bell warrants such effusive praise, but it certainly is not because of his understanding of the political, economic, ideological developments which transpired in the United States during his intellectual life.

An examination and analysis of his major writings reveals an 'uncanny' tendency to be consistently wrong in his analysis of ideological developments and of the central features of the US economy, its class structure and propensities toward permanent war and deepening economic crisis.

One of Bell's earliest and most influential books, *The End of Ideology* (1960), argued that the US was entering a period when ideology was disappearing as a motor force of political action: in his analysis pragmatism, consensus and the decline of class and social conflict characterized the future of American politics. *The End of Ideology* was published during a decade when American society was riven by anti-war and anti-imperialist movements, which saw the early exit of one US President (Johnson) and when tens of thousands of American combat troops were paralyzed and immobilized in Indo-China, leading to massive popular mobilization at home and eroding any sense of 'political consensus'.

During the same decade major Afro-American urban uprisings and social movements erupted in hundreds of cities, in many cases leading to violent confrontations and harsh repression by a National Guard and police uninterested in 'consensus' building. Ideologies flourished, including 'Black Power', Marxism in many forms, variants of the New Left's "participatory democracy", feminism and environmentalism. Instead of reflecting on the realities of the decade and rethinking his misguided prophecies, Bell, holed up at Colombia and later (1969) at Harvard Universities, merely sneered at the protagonists of the new ideologies and social movements. The rebirth of ideology as a guide and/or rationale for political action was not confined to the Left and the environmental movements by any means: The stridently ideological neo-liberal and neo-conservative Reaganite Right emerged to dominate politics in the 1980's, redefining the role of the state, leading to a full scale assault on the welfare state and corporate regulation and justifying a massive revival of

militarism.

Never has a social scientist so decisively misread the historical times, made such myopic predictions and been refuted in such a brief time frame. This monumental disconnect with reality did not prevent Bell from going forward with another bit of prophecy: The Coming of Post Industrial Society. In this book Bell argued that class struggle and manufacturing activity were being replaced by a new service economy based on information systems and “new principles of innovation, new modes of social organization and new social class”. He went on to argue that class struggle was being replaced by “meritocracy” based on education and a politics of personal self-interest.

Even a cursory reading of the period would reveal that this was a time of intensified of class struggle, this time from above (rather than below), entailing a successful political onslaught by both the Reagan Administration and the major corporations against the rights of labor, including the massive firings and jailing of the striking air controllers and the beginning of a national campaign to roll back wages, salaries and job protection in auto, steel and other key industries.


Secondly, the relative decline of manufacturing and the rise of the service industry did not lead to the growth of better paid white collar work for the children of the displaced industrial workers: the vast majority of the new service workers were poorly paid (averaging less than 60% of the unionized factory workers income) and engaged in menial manual labor.

What Bell dubbed the postindustrial ‘knowledge society’ was in fact the growing predominance of financial capitalism, which increasingly defined the primary uses and functions of the information systems: the development of new software for speculative financial instruments. Rather than “merit” as the basis of social mobility, especially at the top, it was the links to the big investment houses that served as the principle vehicle for success. This relationship undermined the domestic manufacturing economy and stable employment.

Bell’s conceptual “contributions” reflected his uncanny ability to coin euphemisms useful for obfuscating the ascendancy of a parasitic financial class and labeling its predatory behavior, “meritocratic”.

It is hard to believe that Bell, a former labor editor for Fortune, a big business publication, was not aware of the massive shift from industrial to finance capital. More likely Bell honed his skills as a publicist coming up with simple phrases and catchy concepts that entered into the narrative of a mainstream media eager to divert public debate from the profoundly negative features of the capitalist onslaught on the working class from the 1980’s onward.

Bell’s last big book, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, was at once celebration of capitalism as a great success story, which, he warned, carried within it’s breast the seeds of its own destruction where the Puritan value of hard work had been eroded and replaced by “instant gratification”, “consumerism” and the counter-culture, leading inevitably to a moral crises.



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Bell once again diverted attention from the most obvious structural contradictions by focusing on marginal behavior patterns, themselves the bi-products of an increasing global-imperial power. The most flagrant “contradictions” that Bell ignored was between the disappearing ‘republican’ tradition in the US and the dominant drive toward empire building; the contradiction between the decline of the domestic economy and the growth of overseas militarism. Bell’s post-industrial rhetoric failed to recognize that the loss of US manufacturing jobs was not due to corporate America’s conversion to an “information economy” but rather to its relocation overseas, (Asia, Caribbean, and Mexico) either via subcontracting or foreign investment. In other words, Bell attributed the decline of the American domestic economy to the morality of the middle class and lower-income American consumers instead of presenting an objective analysis of the structural features and behavior of globalized capital as they serve an expanding empire.

Even more perversely this “exceptional thinker”, “the paragon of our time”, failed to capture the essential deepening class contradictions of our time. Comparative statistical studies have demonstrated that the US now has the worst inequalities of any advanced capitalist country and the worst health system among the top fifty industrial countries. Moreover, like so many of the New York’s affluent intellectuals with their six figure salaries, Bell failed to confront the inescapable fact that the inequalities in Manhattan were as bad or even worse than Guatemala, Calcutta, and Sao Paulo: Less than 1% of the residents controlled 40% of New York City’s wealth.

Such are Bell’s “cultural” contradictions: the contrast between the pronouncements of our celebrated academic and the reality which existed just outside of the academic grove.

As an intellectual, Bell’s contribution was therefore mediocre, at best, and lacking in any meaningful insights, especially in his pretensions at prophecy. Bell’s noteworthiness and his reputation, particularly in the prestigious media and academic journals, was due to his unfailing ability to fashion catchy euphemisms designed to divert attention from the devastating socio-economic fallout of late 20th century capitalism. He provided useful concepts for business and financial publicists and scribes to embellish their narratives. His grand reputation among many academics, as a writer willing to engage the ‘great issues’ of our times, to debate with and polemicize with critics on the Left, is a minor virtue given his substantive mediocrity and mendacious defense of the indefensible.

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