Daniel Bell in Retrospect

The edited volume *Defining the Age: Daniel Bell, His Time and Ours* is a collection of essays focused on the life and writings of Daniel Bell, a sociologist, social critic, and intellectual of the twentieth century. *Defining the Age* looks to reinvigorate scholarly attention to Bell's works and attract a new generation to his ideas. Its essays do much to further that goal. Its authors demonstrate powerfully how Bell's ideas remain essential to our understanding of the present socioeconomic and political conditions in the United States.

Bell is best known for his work on postindustrial society, a concept he explored to describe the transition from an industrial to a service-based economy. Bell argued that this shift led to a greater reliance on theoretical knowledge as a source of economic and political power, replacing the traditional focus on manufacturing and goods production. He also introduced the idea of the "information society," wherein information becomes a commodity and driving force of the economy. Additionally, Bell scrutinized the separation and interplay between culture, politics, and the economy, positing that each followed its own logic and set of rules, often leading to contradictions and tensions within society. Though many of his predictions proved inaccurate, his unique ability to retain the socialistic moral and ethical views of his youth while engaging with concepts like technology and change through a fairly conservative framework marks him as unique in American intellectual history.

Bell was a significant thinker in twentieth-century America. A socialist-curious journalist and then academic, unlike many of his contemporaries and friends like Irving Kristol, he did not end up on the right of the political spectrum and remained a committed liberal, at least in economics. In his many collaborations and connections to the academy and the public, either from his perch at Columbia or Harvard University or in public contributions through journals and magazines, Bell was a sociologist who explored many topics academically and as a public social and cultural critic. His social and economic ideas were his most complex. Bell called himself “a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture” (p. 3). His academic and popular works explored cultural, political economic, and social issues from these somewhat contradictory positions over a nearly seventy-year career.
The book has four parts, with three loosely focused on Bell’s most regarded monographs. The first focuses on Bell’s life and background. It offers personal reflections from his son, David, an academic historian in his own right, and Paul Starr, one of today’s most celebrated sociologists and a student and colleague of Bell’s. It introduces Bell’s broad works, personal history, and general ideas. The second part focuses on Bell’s writings on politics and ideology, his book *The End of Ideology* (1960), and his pragmatic, though still moralistic, views on liberalism and anticommunism. Bell was a social democrat who embraced the many contradictions that labels such as socialist or conservative held during and after the Cold War but seemed hesitant of just about all other totalizing labels.

The book’s third part concentrates on the ideas expressed in Bell’s *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) and brings them into conversation with recent events. Bell’s views and prognostications concerning economics, technology, and culture are messy, and the authors each deal with them carefully. The fourth and final part looks principally at Bell’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). It attempts to bring Bell’s ideas regarding the interaction of culture and capitalism and, perhaps more importantly, the possible results of that interaction into greater focus.

The authors’ goals in this largely celebratory text are laudable. Bell’s ideas should be revisited, and his thoughts about the cultural import of the transition to a technology-driven service economy are both exciting and important. Indeed, as Starr points out, viewing his thoughts on postindustrial society’s communal potential as a normative aspiration rather than a failed prediction can allow Bell’s ideas to take on new resonance as a political objective rather than an explanatory framework. In the book’s second half, the pieces combine to provide a deep and detailed impression of some of Bell’s concerns: What would happen to society when the capitalist system matured into a consumption-driven service economy? In many ways, we are answering this question today, as the authors point out.

In this and other elements, the essays are rather timely. Though prompted by a conference held to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Bell’s birth, the themes contained in Bell’s thinking and writing are capacious. They are also ripe for rediscovery and rethinking after the three crises of the early twenty-first century: the 2008 financial crisis, the 2016 political crisis after the election of Donald Trump (a crisis that continues), and the still as yet unfinished economic reconfiguration brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bell’s ideas about culture’s intersection with capitalism and technology and his hopes for a postindustrial world are just two areas that are worthy of inclusion and discussion as academics and the public face the challenges of the 2020s.

Several arguments in the collection offer insights into today’s historical and political debates. Four jump out most as relevant to present-day discussions. First is Paul Starr’s examination of Bell’s cross-cutting commitments as a self-described socialist in economics, liberal in politics, and conservative in culture. In chapter 2, Starr examines these apparent contradictions in the context of Bell’s times and Bell’s threefold distinctions of politics, economics, and culture as “efficiency in the economy, equality in the political sphere, [and] self-realization in culture” through which he saw contemporary Western social interactions (p. 59). In short, for Starr, Bell mitigated the extremes of left and right through a “moral vision ... rooted primarily in the ethic of responsibility and a tragic sense of the twentieth century's horrors and the failure of socialism's great expectations” (p. 83). Starr powerfully demonstrates that Bell’s ideological grounding grew from his moral beliefs before any ideological commitment. Wishing for more Bells in today’s political and academic environments is easy.
Another interesting and topical reflection is the chapter by Margaret O’Mara on Bell’s ideas in the era of Big Tech. O’Mara points out that Bell was fundamentally correct in his conclusion that “technology could not transcend politics” (p. 212). Numerous practical and policy mistakes that contributed to the current populist moment might have been avoided had more attention been paid to Bell’s conclusion. This is another place where his ideas seem important and somewhat underutilized in present-day discourse. Though he died before the recent backlash against Big Tech and its encouragement of cultural excesses and political absolutism, Bell’s ideas are worthy of a revisit. His concerns over tech triumphalism and bad incentives remain important. O’Mara’s recommendation that Bell’s ideas should be used to interrogate the role of Big Tech is likely worthy of book-length treatment in its own right.

Fred Turner’s chapter on *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* also seeks to bring Bell’s ideas into conversation with our present. Turner looks at one of Bell’s mistakes: “when he asserted that each sphere [techno-economic, political, and cultural] moved to its own music, he blinded himself to the ways that much of the culture he decried in fact embraced and even grew out of the techno-economic changes he described” (p. 269). Bell’s thoughts on the connections between culture, technology, economics, and capitalism are likely the most fruitful and profound parts of his thinking. Turner does essential work in assessing them and identifying the problems in Bell’s formulations.

The fourth chapter, perhaps the most consequential for present and future readers, is Stefan Eich’s discussion of the “double bind” facing today’s Western democracies. Eich revisits Bell’s predictions and his reflections on life in the postindustrial future. The double bind is, simply put, the challenge that postindustrial states face in balancing contradictory demands placed upon them by the citizenry. Increasing expectations are placed on the state by an already affluent society seeking to protect and expand its wealth. At the same time, state delivery of the services demanded makes it more and more complex and opaque and, as a result, democratically less legitimate. Politically, society demands more state support, but the cost of that support is a continued reduction in the legitimacy in the eyes of the people who place those demands on it. Now that it seems policymakers are reaching the end of the machinations they can utilize to insulate society and the state from the perils of Bell’s double bind, it is worthy of a much deeper discussion in public and academic realms. This is likely also a powerful lens through which to discuss our current populist moment.

Levying criticism of this text is challenging. It connects Bell’s ideas to today’s issues well and argues for their importance, even when flawed. Perhaps most glaring is the omission of chapters diving deeply into Bell’s social and cultural conservatism. Though Starr and historian Michael Kazin both touch on this in chapters 2 and 3, respectively, Bell’s place as a cultural conservative and economic liberal is not explored sufficiently. A significant reason he is often mislabeled a neoconservative was Bell’s alignment with a social and sexual conservatism that is worthy of study in isolation. A discussion centered on his engagement with right-wing intellectuals like Christopher Lasch and others would have enabled a more profound and fuller picture of Bell’s cultural positions and ideas.[1]

Though Kazin, David Bell, and others all mention Bell’s failures to confront race and gender in his work, a chapter dedicated to that critique should have been included in this volume. Such a critique and perhaps a more focused discussion of Bell’s ideas and their application to today’s questions of identity and anti-discrimination would have been a worthy addition. Indeed, Bell’s ideas on liberal democracy and the morally centered positions that he favored over totalizing ideologies...
could and should be used to interrogate theoretical explanations of these issues. Pity they were not.

Overall, *Defining the Age* does an excellent job of introducing new audiences to Bell's thinking and writing. It paints a picture of a versatile, thoughtful, and often contradictory thinker who contributed a good deal to the social and cultural reflections of the generation of academics that came of age in the 1950s through the 1990s. One hundred years after his birth, the authors make a strong case for re-engagement with Bell's ideas on political pragmatism with a moral focus, interrogating how technology impacts culture and vice versa and the challenges inherent to our postindustrial world. Perhaps now more than ever, we need his ideas. I know that I will certainly be reading more Daniel Bell in the future.

Note

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**Citation:** Andrew Varsanyi. Review of Starr, Paul; Zelizer, Julian E., eds, *Defining the Age: Daniel Bell, His Time and Ours*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. December, 2023.

**URL:** [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58432](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58432)

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