



*Photo courtesy of David A. Bell*

# Daniel Bell and *The End of Ideology*

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*Daniel Bell's The End of Ideology* is one of the *Times Literary Supplement's* "100 most influential non-fiction books published since the Second World War." Bell, who died in late January at the age of ninety-one, never dishonored the intellectual's motto: when you meet a problem, make a distinction. But the *TLS's* distinction is peculiarly apt. After ideology, we compile lists, observe anniversaries, and invent rankings to disguise our disagreeable confusion over how to value our inheritance. Once upon a time, ideologies told us what mattered. "A total ideology," Bell explained in his most famous book, "is an all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality, it is a set of beliefs, infused with passion, and seeks to transform the whole of a way of life. This commitment to ideology—the yearning for a 'cause,' or the satisfaction of deep moral feelings—is not necessarily the reflection of interests in the shape of ideas. Ideology, in this sense, and in the sense that we use it here, is a secular religion."

It was this large conception, and not "the particular conception of ideology" behind particular issues and groups, that Bell addressed. And it was Marxian socialism, not any other ideology, that his book eulogized.

Nobody could doubt the acuity of Bell's mind. But what can explain the long influence of a loosely organized collection of essays arguing a narrowly conceived thesis on the death of an ideology that has never been very important in the United States?

Timing, for one thing. *The End of Ideology* announced the end of a thirty-year nightmare dark with fanatics, apostles, and messiahs whom history had exposed as demagogues and monsters. The phrase "end of ideology" first entered widely into English circulation in 1955, between Stalin's death and

Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing him. That year the Congress for Cultural Freedom met in Milan, Italy, in a conference that featured Bell, Raymond Aron, Seymour Martin Lipset, and other end-of-ideologists. Edward Shils, also attending, reported a mood proud with vindication. "Have the Communists come to appear so preposterous to our Western intellectuals that it is no longer conceivable that they could be effectively subversive?" Shils wondered. "Is it now thought that there is no longer any danger of the working classes in the advanced Western countries falling for their propaganda?"

The danger lying in the past, Bell exorcised the ghost. He confirmed the generation of the 1930s in its repudiation of youthful idealism by baring "the ambiguities of theory," "the complexities of life," and "the exhaustion of utopia," as he titled his book's three sections. In the 1970s and 1980s, another generation of disenchanted radicals cottoned to the book's skepticism. By 1995, when the *TLS* memorialized it alongside Friedrich von Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*, Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, and Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, the Soviet Union had failed in fact as well as in spirit. Events seemed to have proven Bell correct.

What is the legacy of *The End of Ideology* today? I think it lies in the sober, anti-romantic, wiser-than-thou style of political analysis and leadership on display January 25, hours after Bell died, in Barack Obama's State of the Union speech. "Obama aims to realize the end-of-ideology politics that Daniel Bell and others glimpsed," David Brooks opined in 2009, as if every Democratic president since John F. Kennedy has not feared an uprising from the Left, after the Left put them in power.

Two years into Obama's administration, the ironies and fatuities of the style deserve to be clearly stated. While the president claims the

post-ideological, responsible center, he stands accused of promulgating socialism by Americans who have no memory, and little understanding, of socialist ideology; the electorate fights over party dogmas awkwardly labeled neoconservative and neoliberal; civic discourse runs thick with empty rhetoric of rebellion and revolution, interrupted by sporadic episodes of passionless violence; and political society, long lacking the New Deal consensus assumed by Bell and his cohorts, swings from apathy to protest and back again.

Such is life after ideology. Bell likened Marxian socialism to a secular religion and stressed its eschatological imperative. About non-Marxist forms of ideology, he had little to say. Of these forms, which focus disagreement and discipline action, contemporary America may need more.

*The "end of ideology"* thesis has figured in American social thought from Lewis Mumford's *The Story of Utopias* to Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven*, whose first premise was "that old political ideologies have exhausted their capacity either to explain events or to inspire men and women to constructive action." Bell, too, trained attention on the surrogates emerging in place of the declining nineteenth-century ideologies: bureaucracies that ensured social integration by administrative fiat; technologies that aborted political conflicts before they fully formed; consumer goods that satisfied and stoked appetites for personal transformation.

Unlike Mumford and Lasch, however, Bell did not greet the end of ideology as an opportunity for reconstruction, or address the fragility of popular belief in progress, or fret over the artificial limits imposed by the structure of the new society. "There is now, more than ever, some need for utopia, in the sense that men need—as they have always needed—some vision of their potential, some manner of fusing passion with intelligence," he conceded. But he maintained "that 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." In this case, it would

no longer be a utopia, if utopia still means—as it meant to the Greeks—no place. Bell's version sounded like public policy.

Which was the point. As a labor journalist for *Fortune* magazine, then professor of sociology at Columbia University, Bell moved deftly between social trends and social theory. He submitted his conclusions in a disinterested spirit, for the purpose of guiding civic discourse on such topics as the myth of crime waves; the achievements and limitations of the labor movement; the economic thought of Joseph Schumpeter, John Maynard Keynes, and John Kenneth Galbraith; and, in an essay that demonstrated his extraordinary talent for cutting through cant and dogma, on the prediction of Soviet behavior.

This latter essay he delivered at St. Anthony's College, Oxford, in the aftermath of the 1956 rebellions in Hungary and Poland. As director of international seminars for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Bell organized a seminar that split between those who believed Soviet political society was evolving in a rational, legal direction in spite of its leaders and those who thought it betrayed an ancient despotism incapable of enlightened reform. His contribution, reprinted in *The End of Ideology* as "Ten Theories in Search of Reality," staked out a sensible, middling position, suggesting, in the light of the new facts from Eastern Europe, the obsolescence of the concept of totalitarianism as a guide to communism and urging intellectuals to stay open to new developments. "Hegel once said that what was reasonable was real," he wrote in the essay's preface. "Each of the theories to be discussed seems reasonable, yet not wholly real. Something may be wrong with Hegel, the theories, or both. The reader will have to be the judge."

But if ideology had ended, then how could "the reader" judge the contributions of *The End of Ideology*? Was Bell a neoconservative, his book an early signpost for the neoconservative path? He rejected the label, though not because he felt free of conservatism. In a minor paradox that gave his book its polemical energy, he claimed that his thesis exempted him from all labels, that he spoke from a nameless position beyond ideology. The neoconservative "designation is mean-

ingless," he insisted—not wrong, mind you, but "meaningless." His book represented a "new cultural criticism" that "seeks to transcend the lines of the present debates and to present the dilemmas of the society within a very different framework." In place of closed ideologies and foregone conclusions, he mated the spirit of openness with the discipline and tentativeness of new facts. In place of wild passion, he embraced "the hardness of alienation, the sense of otherness."

Ideology simplified, whereas the post-ideological intellectual afforded a clear view of complexity, ambiguity, and difficulty. Bell, accordingly, wore his learning obtrusively, his flow of argument interrupted by gratuitous references, his footnotes crowded with I-told-you-sos, his prose studded with evidence of his erudition. A look past his heroic style, though, catches him blurring the normative and descriptive modes of analysis by sleights-of-hand that, in sociology as well as in politics, are typical of those who claim to address the present from beyond.

Consider "Work and its Discontents: The Cult of Efficiency in America," the strongest, most useful essay in the book. Bell showed how the metric conception of time conceived by Jeremy Bentham and developed by utilitarian rationalists had come to regulate the experience of factory-work. Shifting between management theory and wage contracts at major U.S. corporations, he turned out a brilliant piece of writing on a necessary subject. Everything in the essay, including the "cult" in the subtitle, suggested that the reader should oppose the engineering effort to manipulate the production process, should challenge, with Bell, its narrow concept of efficiency. "The worker, like the mythical figure of Ixion, is chained forward to the endlessly revolving wheel," he wrote with a flourish. And yet he went out of his way to divest his essay of a point of view. "I seek not to be the ideologue or the moralist," he wrote lamely, the odd syntax betraying his eagerness to retreat from any commitments such that his facts might imply. ("I seek not to be" rather than "I do not seek to be.")

In other essays, Bell's point of view was concealed by the a priori judgments he smuggled into his many-sidedness. "The

Failure of American Socialism," an essay on political psychology whose central arguments he had featured in his first book, *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, joined the large literature on the absence of radical alternatives in the age of industrialism. "How did the socialist see the world, and, because of that vision, why did the movement fail to adapt to the American scene?" A very good question, very incompletely answered. Concerned with the relations of politics and ethics, Bell's essay did not satisfy the first criterion of moral argument, as he never took the necessary step of reconstructing what those irrational socialists, riddled with utopian delusion, could have expected to achieve had they adapted "to the American scene." Nor did he acknowledge—even in passing—that the U.S. government and the corporations had subjected them to a decades-long campaign of repression, fraud, and violence, a campaign that prefigured much of the Cold War security state. The essay miscarried into an excuse for blaming the losers.

*Sometimes it seemed* that Bell refused to take a clear stand on any issue other than the danger of taking a clear stand. Chapter three, a long critique of C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), he introduced as "an exercise in hermeneutics." Were the nation's elected leaders truly representative men? Was the Cold War security apparatus damaging democratic institutions? With the arms race in high gear, was the military gaining new or dangerous powers? These were a few of the large questions that Mills's "power elite" thesis raised (and raised from an anti-Marxist position, no less) and that made his book indispensable reading for an aroused citizenry. Bell's hermeneutical exercise scored many worthy points—indeed, I would rate it the most penetrating textual analysis of *The Power Elite*, ever—but about the large questions the book stimulated, about the feeling of powerlessness creeping over democratic publics, he fell silent. President Eisenhower was more eloquent.

And when history threw Bell a curveball, he whiffed. "There is not a single page devoted to any phase of the Negro movement,

past or present," Harold Cruse, a former Marxist, complained in 1967. "It seems almost incredible that in the face of a social movement of such dimensions that some people even call it a revolution, a sociologist could write such a book and not even mention the existence of this movement or its impact. What does one conclude from this? Evidently, Bell does not consider Negroes as an integral sociological quantity within Western society. Hence, being outside the Western pale, Negroes could not possibly have anything to do with the 'exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties'—which just happened to be the very decade when Negroes became most insistent on being integrated within Western society."

*Did these examples add up to something greater than the sum of their parts? "Never have I read a sociologist whose mind grasped so much data but whose eyes could look past so much objective reality," Cruse wrote bitterly. "One is forced to suspect that there is a method to Bell's blindness." Was there? Was the "end of ideology" thesis itself an ideology?*

Mills thought so. In his "Letter to the New Left," he argued that the pose of standing beyond depended on Bell's failure to drive his thesis to its logical conclusion, and analyze liberalism in the same critical terms. Mills did not challenge his conclusion that socialism had lost political significance in the United States. On the contrary, Mills's own books warranted the end of ideology—"the big fact about our intellectual community as a whole, both East and West," as he wrote in 1959—and he himself was worrying about the "post-modern era" years before Bell turned attention to the "post-industrial society." Bell had not offered a panegyric to capitalism, but neither had he presented an independent defense of the immanent values and ideals that informed his stance. "Ultimately, the end-of-ideology is based upon a disillusionment with any real commitment to socialism in any recognizable form," Mills wrote. "That is the only 'ideology' that has really ended for these writers."

Mills and Bell, the representative men of the "end-of-ideology" debates of the 1960s, had been close friends and roommates, came

to teach in the same academic department, shared major conclusions about postwar social structure, and in Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, traced their conception of ideology to the same source. But now the one was prospective, leading the party of hope, while the other was retrospective, standing with the party of memory. "If there is any lesson which emerges from the experiences of the last forty years," Bell wrote in his reply, "it is the realization of the recklessness of social movements which sought to change the social 'structure' without specifying the 'costs' involved other than claiming that History would erase the bill."

Mills died in 1962, but the tumult of the decade ahead warranted both his criticism of complacent liberalism and his suggestion that the end-of-ideology school would be unprepared to meet the consequences of its partiality. The upheavals surrounding free speech, poverty, civil rights, and foreign policy collected toward a new consensus on the need to replace "the system" with a new vision of the future. Christopher Lasch, heir to the problems and aspirations that Mills had identified and embodied, resurrected his argument that Bell had mistaken the obsolescence of particular issues for the more general obsolescence of political ideas. "Postindustrial society generates new tensions peculiar to itself," Lasch wrote in 1969. "It contains certain sources of conflict which cannot be divorced from the nature of the system; and these in turn give rise to a revival of ideology—that is, to political arguments in which both sides do not agree on the same premises."

Mills might have felt disappointed by the failure of his epigones to develop out of the revival a new ideology to redeem the rational humanism of the Enlightenment. But he would have sympathized with their struggle. By contrast, when the student movement came to occupy Columbia University in 1968, the event not only put the lie to Bell's expectation of moderation in action, orderliness in society, reconciliation in politics, and civil discourse in public language, but it betrayed the ambiguities of his conception of the post-ideological intellectual. He had promised to "transcend the lines of the present debates and to

present the dilemmas of the society within a very different framework." Now, with his efforts to mediate the dispute between students and administrators falling to pieces, he could not transcend the debate at his own university. As with his essay on socialism, he delivered his verdict on the students as if the tendencies he derided had nothing to do with the pathologies of liberalism in power. On this occasion, though, his uncertainty was unmistakable. "As I have studied this history, and reflected on my own participation in it, I find the 'outbreak,' 'uprising,' 'revolution'—none of these words is adequate—extremely puzzling," he wrote soon after the Columbia administration, also puzzled, called in the police. Eight years earlier, his response to the "Letter to the New Left" had stumbled on the same note. "A first reading of the article, and a second, leaves one a bit bewildered."

I raised many of these criticisms with Bell during a series of interviews conducted at his Cambridge home. He rejected my contentions, one and all, and he did so at considerable length. I listened attentively and admiringly, and waited for the moments when he paused for breath, for at those moments I tried to interject a bold thought, with the hope of

regaining a little of the lost ground or, even better, earning a riposte. He relished disputation, and, although he was then well into his eighties, he had stamina.

Every time I returned, I found new reasons to appreciate his capacity for stating general ideas that cut through the symbols and myths manufactured by the organs of serious thought in the country. He was a stout defender of science against superstition, and of politics from the mythic shapes it takes in mass democracies. Even the utopia he envisioned, meager though it seemed to his critics in 1960, would be heaven on earth today.

"Optimism of the will, and pessimism of the heart, are the unresolved tensions in my temperament," he wrote in *The End of Ideology*. For leaving us so many instructive tensions he should be praised and criticized for as long as we have the heart to honor public intellectuals and the will to face up to the uncertainties of the future. May he rest in peace.

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