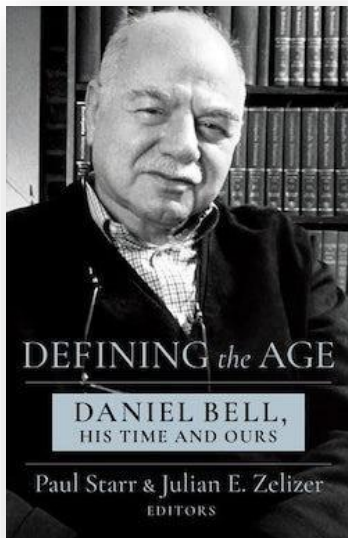


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Defining the Age:

Daniel Bell, His Time and Ours

Paul Starr and Julian E. Zelizer (eds.)

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Review by Shelby Shapiro.

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Defining the Age contains twelve essays on the life, times, and contributions of the sociologist and public intellectual, Daniel Bell (1919-2011). He wrote three influential works: *The End of Ideology* (1960), *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1970), and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). A product of New York's City College and its cadre of "New York intellectuals," from immigrant Jewish backgrounds, its numbers included Bell, Irving Howe, and later neoconservative intellectuals such as Irving Kristol. Bell defined himself as "a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture" (p. 59). One of Bell's major accomplishments was to move discussions of American history and society away from the economically reductionist viewpoint championed by historian Charles Beard to a much more nuanced view.

The essays include one by son David A. Bell ("Remembering Daniel Bell: Two Perspectives") and another by son-in-law Michael Kazin ("Of But Not in the Left: Daniel Bell and Radical Politics").

A minor correction is in order for Kazin's "Of But Not in the Left: Daniel Bell and Radical Politics." He writes about "such sympathizers with communism as Paul Robeson, Woody Guthrie, and Jacob Lawrence" (p. 99). Robeson was much more than a mere "sympathizer" – he was a member of the Communist Party who followed the twists and turns, the zigs and zags of the Party line faithfully, which included this giant of civil liberties defending the Smith Act prosecutions of members of the Trotskyist Socialist Worker Party, then condemning it when used against members of the Communist Party. Communist Party leader Gus Hall

boasted that he had personally accepted Robeson's dues. As for Guthrie, he wrote a daily column for the Party newspaper, *People's World*, and praised the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Guthrie particularly admired Stalin. Unlike folk singer Pete Seeger, Guthrie never criticized or repudiated Stalin.

One of the most interesting essays is by Julian Zelizer, "Daniel Bell and the Radical Right," which fits in nicely with the theories of Richard Hofstadter, seeing "status anxiety" and resentment as the key to its rise. Zelizer ties this to the attractions of Donald Trump to his followers.

As noted in several of the papers, Bell's book *The End of Ideology*, written in the 1950s, did not argue that magically all ideology had disappeared. Rather, it spoke of World War Two as having spelled the end of mass beliefs in particular ideologies, in particular fascism/Nazism on the Right and Communism/Marxist-Leninism on the Left. In their "Introduction," the editors (Starr and Zelizer), note that "[t]hroughout Bell's career, he was suspicious of fanaticism.... No distinction may have been more important to him than one that [Max] Weber made between 'an ethic of ultimate ends' and an 'ethic of responsibility.' An ethic of ultimate ends requires total devotion to those ends, to the disregard of the human cost, whereas an ethic of responsibility requires a weighing of consequences. Bell's choice was the ethics of responsibility, and how he interpreted that ethic critically affected how he responded to the major intellectual and political issues of the postwar decades." (9, 13). For Daniel Bell, that realization came with his reaction "at age thirteen, to the diary of Alexander Berkman, which recounted [Leon] Trotsky's brutal repression of the sailors' mutiny in 1921 at the Kronstadt naval base.... One passage of the essay has become deservedly famous: 'Every radical generation, it is said, has its Kronstadt. For some it was the Moscow Trials, for others the Nazi-Soviet Pact, for still others Hungary (the Rajk Trial; or 1956), Czechoslovakia (the defenestration of [Jan] Masaryk in 1948 or the Prague Spring of 1968), the Gulag, Cambodia, Poland (and there will be more to come). My Kronstadt was Kronstadt.'" (p. 35). Bell (1919-2011) learned from reading the diary of the Anarchist Berkman; the political philosopher and historian Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) came to much the same conclusion – opposing the total panacea-seekers, based on personal experience as he witnessed street killings during the Russian Revolution as a child. Berlin was

fond of quoting Immanuel Kant's 1784 line that "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." To similar effect, see Starr's "Daniel Bell's Three-Dimensional Puzzle" (pp. 61-73).

Where Bell was most prescient was in his predictions of postindustrial America, one in which heavy industry would decline, while a new industry based on information and information systems would rise, going from the Rust Belt to Silicon Valley (Jenny Anderson, "Daniel Bell, Social Forecaster," 253). The rise of an information industry did occur, although not a completely as imagined. Those displaced from the pre-Silicon Valley economy did not fill the new information industry working slots. (Starr, "'Post-Industrial' versus 'Neoliberal,'" 187). Similarly, when America switched from coal to petroleum as a source of energy, coalminers did not become oil drillers, just as whalers did not become coal miners. In this new economy, there would be a new working class of technocrats and knowledge workers. Universities, Bell predicted, would become the spawning ground for this new class, as well as the new intellectual center. Talk about a "New Class," of course, were hardly novel: consider the writings of Milovan Djilas (1911-1995). While there has been a large growth of workers in this new industry, universities have not been transformed into the kinds of central force envisaged by Bell.

In Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, we see someone in the throes of a moral panic observing that which he neither understood nor approved, the so-called "counterculture." Claiming, à la Max Weber, that capitalism was a product of the so-called "Protestant ethic" of present denial for future pleasure – a questionable assumption. The hedonism exhibited by the so-called counterculture shocked the prudish Bell. He wrote that instead of capitalism being undermined by class contradictions, as per Marx and Engels, late capitalism's "contradiction" lay in consumerism and consumption – the results of capitalist production. This kind of moralistic view of consumerism and consumption can be traced all the way back to Thorstein Veblen, and forward to Stewart Ewen. For an effective counter argument see Daniel Horowitz's *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Ivan R. Dee, 1992). Of course, what is the good of production if nobody consumes what is produced? The outcome of such a scenario is an economic depression, overproduction vs. underconsumption.

There are two kinds of sociology: the descriptive and the prescriptive, the latter attaching value judgments to that which is being described. Bell's former friend, the sociologist C. Wright Mills, fell into the prescriptive camp, as demonstrated in Mills' paean to the Cuban Communist dictatorship, *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1960). Another sociologist, much less propagandistic, was Thorstein Veblen. He exhibited the same moral panic in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which gave birth to the phrase "conspicuous consumption." Veblen and those following in his wake looked down upon the necessary byproduct of production, namely consumption. In their binary view, production was good, consumption bad; labor virtuous, leisure (defined as not-labor) frivolous. The social critic Vance Packard (1914-1996) attacked consumerism head-on with his popular books *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), *The Status Seekers* (1959) and *The Waste Makers* (1960). The basic argument of Veblen, Packard and to a certain extent, Bell was that consumerism and consumption had turned people into "cultural dopes," to use the term devised by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel. Bell's discomfort with the seeming hedonism of the so-called "counter-culture," as discussed by Fred Turner in his paper, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, Then and Now" (pp. 267-290) led him to see capitalism's main contradiction as not being based on variations in class power or control over the means of production – the Marxist view, but rather that the economic fruits of capitalism had led to a dedication by people to those fruits in and of themselves. This threatened, he preached, the destruction of the "Protestant ethic" which animated capitalism, as set forth by Max Weber. (Stefan Eich, "The Double Bind: Daniel Bell, the Public Household, and Financialization," 291, 294-295, 300). But did it or has it? Or is the present state of the economy, society and consumption new forms of the old? This viewpoint grew out of concerns with the rise of "mass society," and what that might imply (Anderson, "Daniel Bell, Social Forecaster," 251-253).

Throughout this book, the authors note Bell's blind spots. He interpreted issues of race and racism through the prism of the European immigrant experience – people who came to this country voluntarily – rather

than being brought here, and then socialized in a manner designed to keep them subservient (Starr and Zelizer, "Introduction," 17; Starr, "Daniel Bell's Three-Dimensional Puzzle," 75-76; Kazin, "Of But Not in the Left: Daniel Bell and Radical Politics," 99-100; Zelizer, "Daniel Bell and the Radical Right," 127). He thus ignored what was happening right in front of him. The authors note that he likewise ignored issues of gender and the women's movement (Margaret O'Mara, "Assessing Daniel Bell in the Age of Tech," 211, 224) was this the case, or was Bell a prisoner of his own generation and its attitudes? In "'Post-Industrial' Versus 'Neoliberal,'" Paul Starr notes that "[l]ike ordinary mortals, social theorists are subject to recency bias: the latest developments weigh more heavily on their minds than earlier ones." (p. 163) "Recency bias" notes that often those newer views make one blind to issues of an earlier variety. Starr pointed out that Bell's "recency bias" lay in his assumption that the federal government and its social policies would continue to grow in the same way. "*The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* may productively be reread today not only as an analytical, but also as a normative work... His book reminds us of a lost agenda of social democratic liberalism of the 1970s – lost because of the subsequent turn to the right." (p. 165).

Defining the Age is a fitting testament to a dedicated public intellectual. Daniel Bell wrote about many of the defining features of our time. Some things he got right, others wrong. This book does not seek to glorify, but present a fitting, accurate assessment.

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