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# A COMMENTARY ON DANIEL BELL'S BOOK *THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM*

Gifford Phillips\*

The relationship between capitalism and the arts has received too little serious study, and much that has been written on the subject suffers from ideological bias. Cultural historians have noted that in capitalist countries an art market system emerged in the past two centuries replacing an earlier reliance of artists on the patronage of aristocracy and church; whereas in socialist countries a greater portion of artist support has been assumed by the state. Marxist writers have asserted that art in capitalist countries inevitably becomes a tool of the bourgeoisie in maintaining its social privilege. On the other hand, apologists for capitalism have claimed artistic freedom depends on a 'free market' and is absent in a state-controlled economy.

Whatever the validity of such observations, they are of limited value in advancing one's operative knowledge of how the arts have influenced capitalist institutions—and vice versa—in specific historical situations. Assertions that can be argued effectively only in ideological terms are especially useless in this regard.

Happily, Daniel Bell's new book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Basic Books, New York, 1976. 301 pp. \$12.95) helps to fill this void. He attempts to show that modernist and post-modernist (19th century and later) art have been strong forces in undermining the capitalistic ethos and that a crisis of morale may be imminent within capitalist institutions. Though his case is not entirely convincing, he does throw new light on a long overlooked area of cultural interplay.

Bell's references to what he sees as the insidious role of modernist and post-modernist art in the U.S.A. are contained in a larger analysis of the present state of culture affecting capitalist institutions in that country. According to him, these institutions have undergone significant changes in recent decades that have affected their fundamental integrity. Time was (in the 19th century and earlier) when the capitalistic ethos was all of a piece. Economic producers and consumers alike subscribed to the protestant work ethic and the puritan code of behavior. Producers worked tirelessly to improve the efficiency of the manufacturing apparatus. Consumers practiced thrift, saved their money for a time of need. People, generally, felt constrained by the puritan code of modesty, sobriety and inhibition. But today capitalist culture appears to have become schizoid. The producer's component still adheres to the ideals of efficiency and productivity. Wasteful activity is censured. The consumers component, however, has become profligate. Consumers are continually enticed to spend beyond their means, and the by-products of this promotion contribute

to waste and pollution. Puritan ideology is turned inside out.

A combination of factors, some economic and some cultural, has brought about the change in attitude. The economic factors are more easily discerned. Installment easy credit and aggressive product advertising have altered consumer psychology. Post-Keynesian economics, with its emphasis on maintaining aggregate demand, has influenced a number of federal administrations in the post-World War II years and has reinforced the new attitudes and habits.

Bell concedes that marketing stratagems fostered by capitalism itself are the factors most responsible for the conversion from Puritanism to hedonism: 'The protestant ethic was undermined not by modernism but by capitalism itself. The greatest single engine in the destruction of the protestant ethic was the invention of the installment plan, of instant credit.'

Yet he seems to contradict his own thesis by placing more stress in his ensuing argument on cultural factors, on modernism especially. Indeed the destructive influence of modernism and post modernism becomes the principal basis for his attack on the changing social character of the U.S.A. At times he seems outraged. He fulminates and becomes shrill, at other times he writes with more balance and perspective, but always he seems to exaggerate the influence of the contemporary arts in the broad stream of culture.

Nor does he offer convincing evidence for his assertion that culture in the U.S.A. has become predominantly hedonistic. Some sub-cultures have moved in this direction in the post post-World War II era, but enough remains of the old work ethic in the dominant culture to cast doubt on Bell's categorical position. If capitalistic society is moving toward an imminent crisis, which it may be, the reasons would seem to stem more from unresolved technical, economic and environmental problems than from cultural contradictions within itself. For example, how to secure full employment without a high rate of inflation; how to maintain economic growth without squandering vital natural resources and despoiling the environment. These are the basic problems for capitalism today.

Bell's concern, however, is less economic than cultural, and it contains a strong moralistic strain. What he seems to be saying is that if people continue to become more luxury-loving, more bent on self-expression and self-gratification, they will lose the will to work, and capitalism will be devoid of an ideology. But he seems to underestimate the resilience and flexibility of capitalist ideology, its capacity to assimilate alien cultural elements, including those that seem hostile to its own values. For example, the counter-culture of the 1960s produced a rash

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of protest songs, many having to do with Vietnam, the draft, equal rights for Blacks, etc. Yet in a remarkably short time, many of these same songs had been commercially recorded and had made their way to the best-seller list, returning large profits to the recording companies. Similarly, the scruffy garb of hippies was adapted to boutique wear, as faded blue jeans and tank shirts emerged as style leaders in the late 1960s.

This tendency of commercial operations to appropriate counter-culture activities is amusingly satirized in the motion picture 'Network'. A television network news commentary, low in audience ratings, is converted into a huge commercial success by allowing a commentator, morally outraged by the drivel of commercial television, to vent his anger without constraint. To make extra-sure the program would attract a new, young audience, the programmers added filmed interviews with the members of a radical Black 'liberation' group.

Is not Bell mistaken in assuming that the dominant commercial culture will disintegrate because of the ideological inconsistencies that he sees? The evidence so far is that it can live comfortably with such inconsistencies. Bell's moralism seems to have clouded his observation. People in the U.S.A. appear simply to have exchanged one set of motivations for another. They no longer work hard to secure a preferred place in Heaven. Now they work hard to buy a new car, a new washing machine, a deep freeze, a weekend camper, an Elizabeth Arden coiffure and French wines. One sees little evidence of slackening work habits and little reason to believe that capitalism has not been able to construct a new rationale based on consumer motivation to replace the old one based on the protestant ethic. To be sure, individuals of moral sensibility, those who cling to puritan values or who are offended by the blatant materialism of the consumer culture are confronted today with a moral dilemma.

How can they reconcile qualities now sanctioned by capitalist culture as contradictory as self-restraint and self-gratification, as asceticism and hedonism? But the moral dilemma of some individuals does not yet constitute an ideological crisis for the society as a whole, nor is it likely to. As long as the society can produce and market products at a profit, capitalism historically has shown a remarkable flexibility in its cultural attitudes.

Bell's most controversial thesis, however, is his implication of modernism as an important factor in weakening, perhaps fatally, the ethos that has supported capitalism in the past. He commences his argument by noting that modernism historically has conflicted with the bourgeois world-view.

Modernism from its outset in the mid-19th century despised the bourgeois values of utility, materialism and rationalism. For its part, as Bell notes, the bourgeois class 'feared the radical experimental individualism of modernism in the culture'. Virtually from the beginning modernism has been an 'adversary culture,' as Lionel Trilling called it. By this term Trilling meant that the purpose of modernism was to promote detachment from the 'larger culture' in order to gain needed perspective. Bell quotes both Trilling and Irving Howe, critics he evidently admires, who defend modernism's adversary stance, but Bell is obviously not convinced. According to Bell, such a view 'does not explain modernism's need to negate every prevalent style, including, in the end, its own'. This and other passages confirm his view of modernism as a form of nihilism, an essentially destructive force with few compensating virtues.

Though Bell in his historical analysis of modernism starts with a tolerant, even detached view of his subject, he grows more vehement in his condemnation the closer he gets to the contemporary era. He sees the origin of modernism as 'a response to two social changes in the nineteenth century, one on the level of sense perception of the social environment, the other of consciousness about the self'. He sees these two dominant strains becoming ever more emphatic as modernism starts to turn into post-modernism, commencing in the 1920s but only reaching its apogee in the 1960s.

In post-modernism there is an almost total eclipse of aesthetic distance between viewers and artworks; and the 'consciousness about the self' has become self-revelation, a laying bare of the instinctual side of a human's personality, an exposure of the demonic. Fantasies are no longer acted out in the imagination nor constrained by aesthetic form. In post-modernism, art and life merge.

Bell sees post-modernism as an almost wholly destructive social force. A chapter entitled *The Sensibility of the Sixties* contains the following observation: '... the sensibility of the 1960s added something distinctly its own: A concern with violence and cruelty; a pre-occupation with the sexually perverse; a desire to make noise; an anti-cognitive and anti-intellectual mood; an effort once and for all to erase the boundary between "art and life"; and a fusion of art and policies.'

In support of this description, he offers a grab-bag of examples selected from a wide range of fine arts and popular arts, and a wide mix of art media. For example: movies like 'Bonnie and Clyde', 'M\*A\*S\*H', Andy Warhol's 'The Chelsea Girls'; the action painting of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline (who incidentally painted most of their major works in the 1950s); the minimal sculpture of the 1960s (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin); the criticism of Susan Sontag (*Against Interpretation*); the 'confessional' poetry of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Platt; The Living Theatre of Julian Beck and Judith Malina.

Since the artists cited above are practicing in widely different fields, it is hardly surprising that the work of many does not show any or all of the characteristics that Bell associates with 'the sensibility of the sixties'.

What for example do the nonfigurative paintings of Jackson Pollock have to do with 'a preoccupation with the sexually perverse'; or the severely minimal boxes of Donald Judd with 'a concern with violence and cruelty'; who could say of the silent electric light sculptures of Dan Flavin that he was manifesting 'a desire to make noise'.

Undoubtedly Bell did not intend that his examples should correspond in every particular with the various aspects of the composite 'sensibility' he has synthesized. But the discrepancies I have cited indicate a shortcoming in Bell's approach, notably his tendency of supporting a general assertion by lumping together examples drawn from artworks of widely assorted character. There is inadequate recognition of the noteworthy difference in import among various kinds of media and various levels of seriousness. His approach is especially fallible in regard to painting and sculpture of the 1960s. The dominant modes were cool, detached and cerebral, as in minimal painting (Stella, Kelly), primary objects (Judd, Morris, Andre), kinetic sculpture (Rickey, Mattox). This kind of work would seem to be devoid of the raucous, mindless, totally uninhibited qualities that Bell so often associates with the sensibility of the 1960s.

Such discrepancies detract from the credibility of Bell's thesis about the insidious role of modernist art in undermining the capitalistic ethos. It reveals the

unfairness of the blanket indictment. Those New York artists of the 1950s and 1960s who were preoccupied with new art-making forms and modes, with purely aesthetic matters, simply do not correspond to the models of cultural nihilism that he describes.

But what about those post-modernist examples chosen by Bell, especially those from literature and theater that *do* seem to be tinged with nihilism—have they contributed significantly to the cultural contradictions of capitalism? Bell contends that they have, of course, and rests his argument essentially on three points:

(1) Culture, in Bell's view, consists essentially of the realm of symbolic forms, 'more narrowly the arena of symbolic forms of *expression 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.'

Thus, what are conventionally known as 'the arts' constitute the crux of 'culture' in Bell's scheme.

(2) The arts are a kind of barometer of social change. As Bell puts it: 'What is played out in the imagination of the artist foreshadows, however dimly, the social reality of tomorrow.' This is because 'culture has become the most dynamic component of our civilization, outreaching the dynamism of technology itself.'

(3) Society increasingly accepts this new role of culture as the harbinger of social change.

Bell notes: 'Indeed, society has done more than passively accept innovation; it has provided a market which eagerly gobbles up the new, because it believes it to be superior in value to all older forms.' Important to this market is what Bell calls the 'cultural mass', persons connected with what has been termed the *culture industry*—electronic communication, publishing, recording, museums, etc. The cultural mass, according to Bell,

frequently bases its life style on the 'avant-garde' arts, though it may have only the most superficial understanding of real avant-garde meanings.

Bell has marshalled his arguments persuasively, and he almost convinces one of his case. Yet, it seems to me, the salient evidence contradicts his conclusions.

In the first place, the U.S.A. does not seem to be becoming ever more hedonistic. The 1960s marked a high point in this trend, and the 1970s show a definite reversal, a counter-trend towards sobriety, moderation and even the work ethic.

In the second place, it is difficult to find solid evidence—Bell offers very little—that the high arts are making serious inroads on the dominant culture of the U.S.A., which I would judge to be the commercial culture, the culture that places production and consumption of commodities above everything else in importance. I see no indication that modernism has displaced commercial values in any large area of this society. Commercial values govern the large majority of social transactions (even penetrating the church and the learning institutions), and are constantly reinforced by the mass communications media. Not that the arts should be judged socially insignificant for that reason. The arts *do* offer an alternative set of values to the commercial culture, an aesthetic alternative based on the wonder and mystery of changing art forms. This, I think, is the ongoing meaning of the modernist tradition, however much the tradition may be misinterpreted or its works misappropriated for ulterior social purposes. Modernist art may not be the total substitute for the declining religious values that Bell would like to see replaced. Still, art values, when they are able to resist commercial encroachment, do seem to be the only values left in a culture that offer a viable alternative to the dominant commercial culture. As such they should be cherished.