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IV. Commentaries on Daniel Bell and Max Weber

The Cultural Contradictions of Daniel Bell*

Joseph Bensman and Arthur J. Vidich

In “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,” Daniel Bell has done an excellent job of defining and summarizing the attributes of the new sensibility, the postmodernist and antirationalist “psychedelic” culture that is actionist, anti-establishment, experimental, and obsessed with continuous change. Even better, he has elucidated the cultural and intellectual trends and movements which over the past two hundred years have led to the apparent dominance of the new culture. In fact he has done such an excellent job of proving the cumulative power of the trend that we fail to see, on the basis of his evidence, why the new culture did not predominate in the 1950s instead of in the late sixties, and why its impact was so sudden, shocking, and discontinuous. On the basis of the overwhelming evidence Bell cites, the growth in salience of the new culture ought to have been continuous and should have appeared in a slowly evolving way. Moreover, if all these factors have been operating for so long, the new culture should not have come as such a surprise to so many people.

To come directly to the point, we suspect that Bell is guilty of providing an overdetermination of causation, of providing enough causes to explain half a dozen cultural revolutions but no specific causes for the one that did occur. Moreover, we will argue that his central theme, the freeing of culture from its socioeconomic base, is not a cause for the current cultural revolution, which in fact did not occur as Bell describes it. To state it differently, Bell’s central argument that culture is now free from its socioeconomic base is, at best, only partially true. Indeed the major ways that culture still

*This review was first published in response to Daniel Bell’s article “Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism” which originally appeared in *The Public Interest*. Both articles later appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* Vol. 6, No. 1–2 (January–April 1972): 52–65. We reprint it here in response to the publication of the twentieth anniversary edition of Daniel Bell’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (with a new afterword by the author, New York: Basic Books, 1996).

reflects the underlying social and economic reality have been wholly ignored in his essay.

It is true that an avant-garde that is critical of the bourgeoisie, “the establishment,” and Western society in general has emerged. However, this avant-garde is virtually as old as the bourgeoisie itself and certainly much older than the term avant-garde. Cervantes, Simplicismus, Rabelais, Moliere, Rousseau, Beaumarchais, de Sade, Stendahl, Balzac and, in fact, virtually all Western intellectuals were anti-establishment and antibourgeoisie, regardless of their social origins and regardless of the label. Granted, it is only with the symbolist movement and with impressionism that the experimental aspects of the new sensibility emerged while the antirationalist tendencies had already emerged with Rousseau and romanticism. Only in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century did such tendencies become programmatic, arising with the *Salon des Refusés*, and with expressionism, surrealism, and dada. Nonetheless, all of the revolutionary tendencies in art were present long before such self-conscious programs.

The rationalistic and scientific tendencies in culture and intellectual trends were only expressed (apart from the scientific theories of impressionism) in the technological optimism of the ideologies of Saint-Simon, Marx, Comte and their successors.

The freeing of culture from its economic and social base was itself a function of the growth of the bourgeoisie and of a market for culture occurring with the rise of printing, the subscription concert, and bourgeois mass markets for printing and sculpture. In this development the artist was liberated from the patron, the guild, and the church and was free to seek his audience either in the mass market of bourgeois culture consumers or in the approval of other artists. Thus mass-art and “art for art’s sake,” either antibourgeoisie or purely aesthetic, experimental, technical, and obscure, emerged. This development began in the seventeenth century and has continued into the twentieth. Over this period of time a freeing of the artist from some socioeconomic structures has thus occurred, but since this occurred so early, it does not explain the phenomenon of the 1960s.

Bell does not define the socioeconomic institutions from which culture has apparently liberated itself. By referring negatively to Marx and Marxist ideas, he apparently means economic and productive institutions. Bell’s rejection of Marx means that he chooses not to treat class as an operative part of the socioeconomic institution from which culture has achieved “autonomy.” By thus treating culture as an autonomous flowing of ideas, techniques, and aesthetic systems and programs, Bell frees himself from referring to the classes that constitute the artists and audiences for art and culture.

We know by and large that the class origins of artists have been

primarily in the bourgeoisie and the lower middle classes. It is also clear that the customers and audiences of artists have been drawn from the upper classes and the bourgeoisie reaching as far down as the lower middle classes. In Europe these customers have not necessarily been exponents of middle-class values even when they have been part of the middle classes. In highly developed societies it has always been the case, at least since the classical period of Greece, that anti-establishment ideologies have been produced in the upper classes, in segments of the middle classes, and in the intelligentsia.

In virtually all class systems the achievement of upper-class status frees that class from the work and the discipline necessary for economic mobility. Quite frequently, enforced idleness and leisure deprive the upper and middle classes from social functions other than those of consumption and of political and military activity. The total number of people needed from the upper classes for the internal mastery and control of a society is actually quite limited in relation to the total size of the class. Frequently, economic and military expansion has provided the middle and upper classes outlets for the utilization of the stores of energy unexpended because of their social and economic privileges and predominance. Seen in this light, the pursuit of art, knowledge, and science is simply another avenue available to the upper classes by which they are able to expend the excesses of energy provided by their favored class position. But the very affluence of the privileged classes frees all but a few from both the necessity of mastering the arts in order to live off them and the discipline required to achieve professional and craft standards. In fact, members of the upper classes usually became declassed if they pursued the arts professionally because professionalization implies a necessity for work. As a result, the upper classes if at all interested in the arts have been forced to become art consumers in order to pursue leisure conspicuously.

But art consumption alone has never been enough to absorb the time and energy of the idle upper classes. Alternatives include participation in sports, gambling, racing, and hunting. Other alternatives have included wenching, carousing, gluttony and experimentation with alcohol and drugs. Historically, these leisure-time pursuits have also included revolutionary, anti-establishment, and antibourgeoisie politics. Thus the phenomena typical of the current cultural revolutions have been going on for more than two thousand years.

Certainly during the latter half of the nineteenth century in Russia the intelligentsia displayed the full range of political, cultural, and aesthetic libertarianism in almost the same forms as can be found in the present. Berlin, during the Weimar Republic, had its own versions of activist political alternatives, apathetic expressionism, and cultural and personal libertarianism, libertinism, and romanticism. The libertinism of the ancien régime in

Paris and Versailles, despite the Enlightenment, included elements of a “sexual revolution,” romanticism, political revolution, activism, and an emphasis on freeing oneself from all restraints. Most of this experimentation was confined to the upper classes, but after the Restoration the same liberation movements were carried on in the salons of the upper bourgeoisie at which artists, writers and intellectuals danced attendance. In both Restoration England, during the reign of George IV, and in Edwardian England the same upper class phenomena were prevalent. The coxcomb, the dandy, and Beau Brummel remind us of the class. Thus, middle and upper classes that were art consumers even when art was anti-establishment, that indulged in all varieties of pleasure seeking and participated in reform and revolutionary political movements of all sorts, were characteristic throughout European history.

However, equivalent classes have been much less common in American history. At various times America has had small, somewhat isolated, upper-class enclaves. Included among these have been Gramercy Park and Washington Square in New York, Beacon Hill in Boston, and Charleston and New Orleans in the South, which produced life-styles and cultures similar to their European class counterparts. But these enclaves in America were small and were not part of the mainstream American civilization. The overwhelming mainstream consisted of commercial expansion, westernization, industrialization, and, for millions of immigrants, Americanization. The expansion and development of the United States served the same functions in using up the energy released by economic development as did the arts, self-indulgence, leisure, warfare and politics in Europe. Moreover, in the United States economic mobility, materialism, and political movements were not ideological in the sense that ideology characterized European political movements, not excluding Marxism. During America’s expansionist frontier phase what dominated politics and public debate was rather the advance and defense of economic interests—in which the major political issues were interest rates, tariff rates, credit policies and governmental subsidies and protection to farmers, railroads, and other major economic interests such as the protection of free labor or the extension of slavery. Ideology in the sense that Bell defines the term was never an important American phenomenon, except among fringe groups in New York who related themselves to European issues. Thus the “end of ideology,” if it ever ended, would have ended in Europe. It never really began in America.

The concentration in the United States on economic interests rather than on ideological issues was in part a reflection of the absence of a relatively stable, traditionalized class system in the United States. In Europe the class system became the focal point of all internal social conflict. In

the United States classes emerged and were prominent, but their privileges after the Revolutionary War were never legalized. Equally and perhaps more important the continuous expansion and growth of the American economy and the continuous emergence of new class groups and class interests prevented the stabilization of classes and class interests. Moreover continuous change in the composition and characteristics of the leading classes prevented the formation, despite Veblen's theories, of *stable* leisure classes that resembled the European upper classes in the characteristics described above. In the United States the energies of the upper classes were, in general, absorbed by economic expansion or as described by Veblen in vulgar conspicuous consumption after fortunes had been accumulated.

Of course, as Bell notes, the Protestant ethic and Puritanism were involved, but this was especially in the nineteenth century. The Protestant ethic was given impetus by the opportunities inherent in the American frontier and in the absence of aristocratic restraints on vulgar materialism in a new and rapidly expanding country. In England, for example, the presence of a court and a legal aristocracy served to deflect the interests of successful Scotch-Irish Puritans away from vulgar economic expansion and into elegant cultural styles, political service, and prestigious consumption.

Overall the Protestant ethic had a highly limited territorial focus, though without doubt it has been important in its consequences. Certainly it was extremely important in the early development of English commercial capitalism, primarily Scotch in origin, and in early industrial capitalism, as it was important much later in America. It was also important in Switzerland, Holland, and among French Huguenots, who early scattered to America and to Prussia. But it must be remembered that the Protestant ethic, a concept created by Weber, was already proclaimed dead in its religious sense by Weber by 1904.

With the passage of time in the United States the Protestant ethic was absorbed into its service clubs by organizations such as the Rotary, the Better Business Bureau, and other booster clubs. Later, it was incorporated in somewhat more distorted form into the organizational structures of giant corporations that began to dominate the organizational life of America. But the decline and distortion of the Protestant ethic does not explain the new cultural revolutions of the 1960s and '70s which occurred long afterwards.

Moreover, even apart from the Protestant ethic, the new culture is a world-wide phenomenon that has risen in every society where cultural freedom exists, whether such a society has or has not been influenced by the Protestant ethic.

By the same logic, the failure of corporate capitalism to develop an ideology that would have given it legitimacy cannot be viewed as a cause

of phenomena of the sixties and the seventies. The failure of corporate managerial capitalism to develop a legitimizing ideology was a central theme of the intellectual history of the thirties. Veblen, Peter Drucker, Robert Brady, Berle and Means, and James Burnham were only a few of the authors who pointed this out. And while some of these authors and others (including Bell himself) since the thirties attempted to create new ideologies that would replace the defunct ideologies of laissez-faire, no one or combination of the new theories (all primarily based on managerial or technological trusteeship) received enough acceptance by even the managerial classes to provide ideological legitimacy for the corporate system. Yet American society has survived without an ideology. Without an overall ideology the New Deal prevented a deeper American crisis by promising a reform in American institutional arrangements, and the Republican party during the Eisenhower administrations accepted the fundamental premises of the New Deal. Moreover, World War II and the cold war forced a moratorium on the ideological self-probing and doubts of the thirties, since it appeared that American survival was at stake, and that American ideologies of political freedom and conventional capitalism, regardless of imperfections and inconsistencies, were superior to defeat in both World War II and in the cold war.

Theodore Draper has advanced an intriguing theory that the cold war forced American political leaders and the public to avoid the self-probing, "self-doubts" of the thirties, since it caused each group to turn their attention and energy outward. Only with the apparent relaxing of the cold war, according to Draper, has America been forced to face the fact that it has no ideological system that can withstand its own self-doubts. The end of a cold war psychology has thus caused a collapse of the psychological defenses of the American public and a failure of conviction and nerve on the part of its leaders. Thus President Nixon can appear to be simultaneously a conservative, a liberal, and a revolutionary, but in each of these aspects, he appears to be rhetorically indistinguishable from what are often thought to be his more liberal political opponents.

Draper's thesis appears to be highly plausible as a political explanation, but in its present form it does not explain the new psychedelic culture, unless the latter is viewed as a means of filling the gap created by the destruction of the cultural defenses caused by the end of the cold war.

In summary, our objection to Bell's thesis is that while his theories do explain a consistent antibourgeoisie attitude in the arts that has persisted in European society since the seventeenth century, it explains *nothing* that is particular to the cultural revolutions of the late sixties and the seventies. His theory not only ignores the phenomenon of class but especially ignores those classes in America and Europe that are the bearers of the "new"

culture and consciousness. He posits the decline of the Protestant ethic to explain phenomena which occur in places where the Protestant ethic was no longer dominant. He argues that the end of political ideology results in a cultural but not in a political revolution, but does not account for the fact that the “end of political ideologies” occurred some thirty years before the appearance of the cultural revolution. Most seriously, in our opinion, he has failed to prove his thesis of the independence of culture from the socioeconomic system.

In our recent book, *The New American Society*,¹ we addressed ourselves to the same problems posed by Bell in “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism.” In that study we arrived at a solution to the question of the relationship between culture and socioeconomic institutions that is exactly the opposite of Bell’s.

In that book and in our article in this *Journal*² we have described and analyzed the rise of the new middle class since World War II. This new middle class is composed of people who are college educated, American born, and the children either of immigrants to the United States or of migrants from rural to urban areas within the United States. This middle class is employed in the professions and in the middle and upper levels of the giant economic bureaucracies that dominate American life. The emergence of the class position of this group can only be understood in terms of socio-institutional developments such as the rise of giant corporations, the acceptance of Keynesian economics by the federal government, the end of immigration in the twenties, the rise of mass college education (particularly during and immediately after World War II) and of a highly technological society.

The life-styles of this new middle class have not stabilized but have been in a continuous process of creation and re-creation since World War II. A significant feature of these life-styles involves a repudiation of the cultural vulgarity that has traditionally been a dominant feature of American society. In this effort to create new life-styles the first (parental) generation of these new middle classes strove to emulate American and European models of an older upper class, endeavored to adopt styles embedded in high and elite culture, and became protagonists of ideologies of technological and managerial elitism. If they had been radical ideologists or political activists in their youth, they rejected both the ideologies and the activism and frequently replaced them with an emphasis on sophisticated cultural consumption or on managerial elitism.

The first generation of the new middle classes (now between approximately 45 and 60 years of age) enjoyed success far beyond their expectations simply because the technological drift of their society rewarded the skills and training they possessed. In addition, that drift was so strong and the

economic expansion in their skill sectors was so great that numerically they became the largest segment of the middle class as a whole, while all other classes declined relative to the increase of the new middle classes.

But this group was not the bearer of the new cultural and “political” revolutions. It was their children, the second generation of the new middle classes, who created and became the audience for these revolutions. The parental generation, many of whom were veterans whose careers were delayed by World War II, were caught up in making up for lost time in the quest for mobility and economic and professional success. In part, they were the silent generation silenced by their dedication to nonpolitical goals. It was their children and their children’s children, along with a small number of the older generation who “flipped out” of the old culture and into the new, who were the protagonists of new cultural revolutions.

The children, unlike their parents, were middle class by birth rather than by achievement. They, unlike their parents, could take for granted the affluence into which they had been born. The culture they acquired in the frequently suburban home was often acquired under the pressure and coercion of their striving parents who had themselves only imperfectly acquired that culture as a result of their own efforts. The children found it easy to accept the ideals and the culture of their parents, but did not have to temper either the ideals or the opportunities for cultural consumption with the struggle necessary to achieve economic mobility. Having already comfortably arrived, they found it easy to be critical. They saw their parents as bureaucrats, technicians and technologists, and sell-outs to a corrupt society. If they acquiesced to this society they saw themselves doomed to both military service in a senseless war and to menial bureaucratic service in organizations that, at best, had no other purpose than mechanical survival. If the new society was rational, it was rational only in a formal, institutional sense. If it was technological, the technology served materialistic and corrupt ends. If it required discipline, the discipline was to external, alien goals. If the established arts exhibited any of these characteristics, then the arts were irrelevant, as was a politics wedded to a corrupt establishment.

The rejection of instrumentalism, technological society, rationality, self-discipline, and self-control was thus a rejection of the framework of middle-class life, as they perceived it. The cultural revolution has taken place in the arts and politics. And it also has taken place in the conception of ideal models of personality. But if the political behavior of the New Left can be considered political (and older ideologists like ourselves are not likely to so consider it), then politics and culture are not exclusive categories. Both are forms of rejection, and both can coexist without contradicting each other. But the new culture, especially in its emphasis on pot, drugs,

freaking-out, and sexual, narcotic, and communal retreatism, do not constitute a basis for a disciplined, continuous political program. Apart from the Y.S.A. [Young Socialist Alliance] the new politics is neither disciplined nor a political movement.

We thus stress as a central issue the emergence of a new class that has arisen in response to fundamental economic and institutional changes in American society. This new class has many of the characteristics of the older, upper classes in European history and, though it has selected antecedents in the American past, it has emerged in large numbers for the first time as a result of structural changes in American society. Thus American society for the first time will experience the problem of having in its midst a large alienated "upper class." In fact, the problem engendered by the emergence of this new class in the United States will be greater than in European societies, since the class from which the new culture draws its ranks is larger than comparable classes in the past. European societies are only now beginning to undergo industrial and bureaucratic transitions similar to those in the United States and hence also have begun to experience the growth of current forms of the new middle classes and the new culture, though this appears to be to a lesser degree than in the United States. Large sections of European society are still in the developmental phase, emphasizing technology, the new managerial elitism, and a new enthusiasm for social and economic mobility and for consumer durables that are taken for granted in the United States. However, in Europe, too, segments of both the old and new middle classes have already flipped into the new forms of avant-garde culture.

What implication all of this has for the future and for social policy is not easy to assess. To the extent that the indicated trends represent fundamental structural changes in society and in the composition of class structures and cultures, social policy can only come to terms with the changes. We cannot abolish or "legislate away" the changes simply because the groups that are the representatives and bearers of the change constitute a significant segment of those who will be making or approving social policy. To imagine that the policy-maker can abstract himself from the social structure and thus manipulate it is the highest form of elitism, worthy of Saint-Simon or Karl Marx himself. We can project some possibilities concerning the extent of the forthcoming changes and their consequences for society, as we now know it.

We would expect a sizeable number of the new middle classes, especially the children of this class, to freak out permanently to narcotics and narcotics culture. Others will drop out in rural and urban communes, "villages," and slums, and will live as "lumpen proletariats" on remittances, panhandling, scavenging, and relief. They will rationalize their dropping out in terms of art, culture, utopianism and a professed commitment to a

higher sensitivity and morality. Included in this group will be the politically alienated, the heirs of the New Left and the S.D.S. (Students for a Democratic Society) whose righteousness will remain unabated and productive of scattered violence, bombings, and "confrontations." But while the numbers of these groups will be large and the damage they will suffer (and cause) as a result of drugs, disease, malnutrition, neglect, and violence will be great, the percentage of population of the new middle classes so involved will not be large, certainly far less than 20 percent. Apart from the frightful human cost to individuals, a functioning capital intensive, technological society can withstand this amount of human wastage, since from a purely economic point of view labor shortages are not a problem for such a society.

A more serious problem would arise if the new consciousness would cause a sizeable proportion of the new middle classes who, after all, are the managerial and technological underpinning of a technological society, to neglect technical education, abandon efforts at mobility, reject self-discipline, and subvert the technological and bureaucratic values on which our society is based. We do not expect this to happen to the extent necessary to cripple seriously the technical and organizational operations of the society. Our opinion is based on a number of reasons. First, the social and psychological dropping out that has already occurred has been among only a small percentage of the new middle classes. It has primarily occurred, as in other comparable historical periods, among those segments of the middle classes that were not initially oriented to disciplined, scientific, and technological work. Thus the technological loss has been minimal because of self-regulated selection and recruitment processes. Second, a large but as yet undetermined number of those who have freaked out have already freaked back in. These numbers have discovered that the freaked-out life is not as glamorous when lived as it appears to be when viewed from the outside. Daily existence involves not only poverty and deprivation, but also idleness, boredom, and the absence of routines, which provide the means of externalizing one's life and of escaping the feelings of emptiness that impelled one to freak out in the first place.

A major reason for not expecting the freaked-out way of life to penetrate extensively is that enjoying and consuming the new culture is expensive. The enjoyment of music, new styles of clothing and adornment, restaurants, and even pot, when done with elegance, grace, and a sense of chic, all cost money which can be acquired only by handsome remittances, inheritances or from work. Finally, the vast majority of the new middle classes, regardless of their idealism, appear not to want to sacrifice the affluence to which they have become habituated for the ideals which cause them to reject in principle the society that provides the affluence.

As a result, we can expect a peculiar split in psychology of the new

middle classes. The overwhelming majority of the new middle classes, and members of the ascending lower and lower middle classes will continue to serve as the technological and administrative cadres for the technological society. Once in the ambience of the industrial, governmental, and professional bureaucracies, a sufficient number will find that the aesthetics and inducements of leadership are attractive enough to provide the basis for a continuing administrative and technological elite. But even while this is true, the majority of the new middle class will find the pleasures and blandishments of the new culture sufficiently attractive to make this culture the dominant one in Western society. The new culture need neither weaken seriously nor destroy the administrative and technological structures that support it.

The new avant-garde music, art, theater, cinema, and literature will become dominant in both mass and high culture, but will not eradicate classical high culture. Great works in art and literature manage to retain their appeal regardless of current styles and fads. But avant-garde culture already has reached the stage where it predominates as a mid-cult, in many of the arts and in the mass media.

Thus, we think that basic problems of social policy involve issues dealing with the wreckage and the waste caused by those who freak out seriously. However, one problem could affect our "optimistic" predictions. A deep depression could convert mild cultural disaffection into large-scale potentially dangerous political disaffection and into a violent and mindless radicalism. That radicalism could produce equally violent and mindless political movements from a burgeoning radical right. The new middle classes and the new culture have already provoked the hostility of the old, vulgar middle classes and of a new lower and lower middle class that, on the basis of twenty-five years of relative prosperity, are just beginning to enjoy a stake in an American society which many of the new middle class have already enjoyed and rejected.

Thus the central issue in contemporary social policy is that of avoiding a serious depression and of avoiding further political polarization of the society. For underlying the seemingly nonpolitical issues of art and culture lie the most divisive and explosive political and ideological issues of our time.

Such dangers could be averted if, emerging from out of the blue, would come a new religion, a new idealism, an enthusiasm that would capture the imagination of youth, provide the basis of self-discipline and constructive work, and overcome the sense of self-alienation that gives rise to self- and socially destructive activity. But such a movement would have to emerge indigenously, and could not be imposed from the outside by the "establishment" as were the Peace Corps and VISTA programs, and such movements

would have to be sufficiently organized and enduring to convert initial enthusiasm into sustained activity. Yet it is not the role of adult policy-makers to create "autonomous" programs for youth, to prevent youth from interfering with a society created by and for adults. Whatever else may be said, youth are now too sophisticated to be taken in.

The best we can hope for is that such programs may emerge indigenously; but if they do emerge at all, they will emerge at their own time and place and with little help from the "establishment."

If they do not emerge, the most that one can expect is that the new consciousness and the new culture will remain an after-hours, leisure-time pursuit that will sustain and fill the gaps created by the operation of an affluent technological society which otherwise lacks the means of absorbing its own effluence.

ENDNOTES

1. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.
2. JAE, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1970), p. 23.