

Dialogue between Daniel Bell & Wolf Lepenies

On society & sociology past & present

Translated by Howard Eiland

“That’s no way to start a newspaper article!”* How many times have I heard

Daniel Bell, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1964, is Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences Emeritus at Harvard University. Bell’s publications include “The End of Ideology” (1960), “The Reforming of General Education” (1965), which won the gold medal of The American Council of Education, and “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism” (1976). He has written or edited eighteen books, a number of these in Japanese. He was for twenty years a councillor of the Suntory Foundation in Japan and for ten years Scholar-in-Residence at the American Academy.

Wolf Lepenies, a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy since 1992, was Rector of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (1986 – 2001) and is now a Permanent Fellow there and professor of sociology at Freie Universität Berlin. Among other prizes, he received the Alexander von Humboldt Prize for French-German Scientific Cooperation, the Karl Vossler Prize, and the Joseph Breitbach Prize. His publications include “Die drei Kulturen” (1985), “Benimm und Erkenntnis” (1997), and “Sainte-Beuve: au seuil de la modernité” (2002). His latest book, “The Seduction of Culture in German History,” will be published by Princeton University Press in the spring of 2006.

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Daniel Bell say that? For several years he and I worked together with a Japanese colleague – the literary critic and author of *No plays*, Masakazu Yamazaki – to edit *Correspondence*, a magazine funded by the Japanese Suntory Foundation and first published by the American Academy, and then by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Although there were no official positions on the staff, Masakazu and I gladly followed Daniel Bell’s lead on a host of matters, ranging from choice of themes for particular issues, to the makeup of pages, and the selection of vignettes to illustrate articles. There was no question who was in fact the primary editor.

I was not the only one who thought that Daniel Bell was a great journalist. Bell’s retirement in 1958, after ten years with the magazine *Fortune* (with the exception of a year and a half in Paris), astounded the newspaper magnate Henry Luce.

“But why?” he wanted to know. “You’re body and soul a journalist! What reason could you possibly have to return to academic life?”

* Wolf Lepenies met with Daniel Bell on December 4, 2004, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The German version of the interview was published in the newspaper *Die Welt* on January 12, 2005.

“Three reasons,” answered Bell. “June, July, and August.”

Of course, the lure of summer vacations was not the only thing that led Bell, who during his time at *Fortune* was already teaching at Columbia University, to return to an academic career. Born in 1919 in New York, Daniel Bell early on developed a sociological eye for things, an intuitive grasp of the fundamental changes taking place in the structure of society. Today the titles of his books – *The End of Ideology*, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, and *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* – have become bywords in discussions of modernity.

Bell taught at Columbia as a professor of sociology until 1969. He then switched to Harvard, where he remained until his retirement in 1990. He’d come a long way from ‘the poor man’s Harvard’ – that is, City College in New York, where he studied from 1935 to 1938. As the son of poor Eastern European Jewish immigrants, he was able to enroll at City College tuition-free. Soon he was actively involved with the ‘New York Jewish intellectuals,’ not all of whom were religious, but who all shared a certain ethos. They saw themselves as deracinated cosmopolitans, but at the same time as part of a widely dispersed intellectual family.

Bell describes himself as “decidedly religious.” “My upbringing was very Jewish,” he recalls, “and my native tongue was Yiddish. I attended a Jewish school (*kheder*), where neither teachers nor students spoke English. We translated from Hebrew into Yiddish.” Still, religion for Bell is “not so much about God, as about the sacred. It’s not a matter of ritual or orthodoxy. Religion for me is the holy and the tradition, something that sets limits and that you can’t go beyond. I was particularly impressed by the fact that rabbis are not priests but teachers. What remains after

the destruction of the temple? The sacred writings.”

Our conversation took place in Cambridge, where Bell lives with his wife Pearl (younger sister of literary critic Alfred Kazin) near Harvard Yard. I hadn’t seen him in over a year. His house now has a small addition, so that Pearl, who had a serious accident a few years ago, could move back in and receive round-the-clock treatment from two nurses.

The house is not only, as one would expect, full of books. Bell is also an art connoisseur and has collected Japanese and German Expressionist prints. He once described himself as a liberal in politics, a socialist in economics, and a conservative in culture. Does this self-characterization still hold? “Yes, certainly. I had recourse to this tripartite division because I don’t regard society as a holistic system. You can be a radical in one area and conservative in another. I’m a liberal in politics because I believe in individual achievement and reward, in the idea of a just meritocracy. In economics, I’m a socialist, because community participation is important to me; everyone is entitled to a decent share of the available resources. And in art and culture I’m conservative, because I uphold values and traditions.”

Bell’s description of himself as a socialist makes him smile. He remembers a time when there were socialists everywhere at City College; many Stalinists were so argumentative that New York at the time was known as the most interesting city in the Soviet Union. The socialists at City College were abundantly self-conscious, returning manuscripts with the comment: “Tolstoy did it better.” And in the midst of a political debate, one might hear someone say, entirely in earnest: “I know what Trotsky should do, and so do you. But does *Trot-*

sky know?” Daniel Bell was a socialist like the others, but, unlike most, he was never doctrinaire. How does he explain that?

“I was lucky. I became a socialist in reaction to the Depression. I saw people living in hovels and starving. Capitalism seemed to be on its last legs – so you became a socialist. Then I met Rudolf Rocker, who though born a Christian had learned Yiddish in order to edit the *Free Workers’ Voice* (*Fraye Arbeter Shtime*), a Yiddish-language newspaper printed in Hebrew letters. Rocker gave me anarchist writings, and I read about the sailors in Kronstadt who, in 1921, went to Trotsky and demanded food supplies and the free elections they’d been promised. And Trotsky, the organizer of the Red Army, cried ‘Insurrection!’ and had the sailors shot. ‘Kronstadt’ then became a code word for withdrawal from the Communist Party. Some people had their ‘Kronstadt’ during the mass purges in the 1930s, others during the Hungarian uprising, and still others during the Prague spring. My Kronstadt was Kronstadt.”

Like many of his college friends, Daniel Bell grew up on the Lower East Side of New York – in a milieu marked by persistent poverty if not by overwhelming misery. His generation did not come to socialism through dramatic conversion experiences but rather grew into it, as youngsters grow into the clothes of older siblings. Schoolchildren were already trade unionists and agitated from soapboxes for a more just society. In this spirit, the young Bell, speaking on soapboxes, memorized passages from Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*. His reward – the astonished exclamations of passersby on the New York sidewalk, “How eloquent he is!”

At eighty-six, Daniel Bell has lost none of his youthful eloquence. According to

the definition once devised in a City College cafeteria, a New York intellectual is someone who, after two minutes’ preparation, can talk uninterruptedly on any subject whatsoever for at least a quarter hour. Bell needs no two-minute preparation, and one can listen to him for hours. He personifies a kind of American intellectual who, unlike his European colleagues, has never had any illusions about belonging to a ‘socially free-floating intelligentsia.’ Nor has he ever taken refuge in a concept of ‘the inner life.’ “With Roosevelt and the New Deal, there came into being a type known as the ‘policy intellectual.’ That was what I wanted to be: someone who understands something of the details of politics, and is interested in its everyday working. Friends of mine would say: the intellectual has to be critical. That was not enough for me. For me, the most important function of the intellectual was to take responsibility.”

It was because of this ‘ethic of responsibility’ that Bell became a member of four government commissions and, in 1965, cofounded the journal *The Public Interest*, with his old friend Irving Kristol. Bell resigned in 1972, and was replaced by Nathan Glazer. Kristol became the intellectual forerunner of the neoconservatism that brought Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to the White House.

Bell likes to quote Irving Kristol’s definition of the neoconservative as “a liberal mugged by reality.” But he does not by any means number himself among the neoconservatives. “In 1972, the *New York Times* invited Kristol and me to contribute guest columns. They wanted us to explain why he supported Nixon and I supported McGovern. We wrote our commentaries, but at the last minute the *Times* could not print them. We still have the articles. Unlike Kristol, I didn’t trust Nixon for a minute. But my

friendship with Irving Kristol was never compromised by our differing political views. Friendship has always been more important to me than ideology.”

Bell’s political differences with the neoconservatives – those who provide the ideological lining to U.S. policy at present – became clear in the course of our conversation: “I don’t trust a politics geared to securing American hegemony. Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the rest – I don’t trust them. They’re obsessed with geopolitics.” Still, Bell refuses to describe American hegemony as ‘imperialism.’ “There’s a big difference between hegemonic and imperial. Hegemony, and, above all, military hegemony, the role of superpower – this role has fallen to the Americans. I once cited André Malraux, who had it right: An imperial style is something denied to Americans. Nixon aimed for it – without success. And Bush, too, with his ‘Mission accomplished!’ – his advisors came up with that. Our society is much too bourgeois to be able to cultivate an imperial style.”

In speaking of members of the Bush administration, Bell frequently uses one adjective: “smart.” Unlike most intellectuals, he has not believed that those who hold the reins in Washington today are blockheads. As a sociologist, he is careful not to underestimate the reelected president. “What drives George W. Bush is his faith. He’s a born-again Christian and must be taken seriously as such. Compared to, say, Ronald Reagan, who in these things was very clever, Bush is no operator. I sometimes wish he *were* – then there might be some chance of changing him. But, no, he really believes in what he says. It’s on this score that so many people misjudge him.”

For over forty years, Daniel Bell has bemoaned the lack of *civitas* in the life of the modern democracies, the unwilling-

ness of most citizens to make sacrifices for the community. He also predicted thirty years ago a resurgence of religious conviction in the world; he believes European society is only superficially secularized. And he has cited the observation of his friend Irving Kristol, that societies in the West are unprepared for major catastrophes. 9/11 was proof of that.

Asked if he was worried about anything in particular these days, Bell had this to say: “Optimism is a philosophy, pessimism a character trait. My character trait is pessimism. Jews continually have had cause for anxiety; that’s part of our history. I’m a pessimist – there’s always something that’s got me worried. At the moment, it’s the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to which the American government is paying insufficient attention.”

With this, our conversation came to an end – though not our evening together. We went to dinner at the Kebab Factory, a popular Indian restaurant in Cambridge. The table was small but the noise level high. Bell requested that the music be turned down a little. He wanted to sing me a song he’d written in his youth at City College. The song was called “The Old Bolshevik.” He started up: “When I was a lad in Nineteen Six, / I joined a group of Bolsheviks.” There were at least six choruses, and before long nearly everyone in the Kebab Factory had stopped eating. I thought of the passersby in New York who had once listened in amazement to the little soapbox orator; like them, one wanted to exclaim: “How eloquent he is!”