

The Best of All Worlds

The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, by Daniel Bell, *New York: Basic Books, 1978 (paperback edition). xxxiv + 301 pp. \$4.95 (paper).*

THE AUTHOR could have enhanced the value of this book if he had organized it better, if he did not give the impression of being out of breath trying to pack into one volume information, statistics, political commentary, sociological diagnoses, and efforts at outlining some sort of historical perspective. As a result, hardly has he secured the reader's consent in one pas-

sage, when in the next he dilutes the value of his observation with what seems irrelevant in that same context. The book is full of remarks like these: now let us see the issue closely; let us sum up; as it will be discussed later; it is time now to develop our general thesis, etc. One remains dissatisfied with the tone and style of the book, as one may be confused in a fully packed supermarket selling too many products. Nevertheless, the general thrust and numerous passages are hardly refutable.

And, after all, that is what counts in this kind of sociological study with ambitions ramified in too many directions. The question is only whether Daniel Bell himself has fully understood the import of the thesis he propounds. If he had, he could not have resisted the temptation to show its validity beyond the confines of what remains, alas, a rather pedestrian achievement.

The liberal era, Bell argues, has been (*was?*) taking it for granted that freedom concerns mostly, if not exclusively, the economic transactions in the free marketplace, *not* the moral and cultural endeavors which were understood as remaining within the salutary limits drawn by religion and traditional morality. All the while, however, the great freedom that the economic sector claimed and obtained has increasingly undermined the other areas with its hedonistic temptations: an overabundance of goods and the commercialization of even the worst that culture offered, in fact, especially of the worst. Thus capitalism has been for a long time digging its own grave, into which it is now falling, carrying all of society in its fall. The fact is, Bell notes, that morality and culture, at least their representatives on a lower level—but, precisely, they are the ones who receive the attention of the market—claim now the same freedom that used to be the privilege of the sacrosanct economic sector. Freedom in the latter was always regarded in America as a neutral thing, in-

scribed “in the nature of man”; it is now unmasked as a questionable attitude towards things and people because its mirror image in moral and cultural behavior suddenly reveals its potentially hideous features.

Thus far Bell's thesis. It is not entirely new; Schumpeter and Röpke had provided important elements to this diagnosis, although a generation and more ago they could not so richly illustrate it. Furthermore, Bell is now not alone making the same statements, analyzing the same phenomena, drawing the same conclusions. The ancestry of his thesis goes back to Karl Polanyi, and today he finds himself in the company of Robert Heilbroner, Eugene Genovese, Marshall Sahlins, and others. In other words, the critique of capitalism has become a branch of serious scholarship, by no means limited to works by social democrats or Marxists, and certainly not to an exclusively economic discourse. The angle of the new criticism is fairly original because in order to view capitalism from a detached perspective, the new critics have elaborated a non-Marxist, even non-economic, set of references. I found, for example, an unexpected meeting ground between Heilbroner and Saint Augustine. The latter argued that in the City of Satan no opinion (he wrote “dogma”) is allowed to prevail, all views are equally tolerated, not because Satan's city is virtuous but because it is indifferent to truth. Heilbroner's article in a recent issue of *Dissent* castigates liberal society the way Augustine castigated the City of the Devil: for tolerating any and all theories and practices, and, while recognizing their harm, ugliness, and threat, never calling them also “blasphemous.” The conclusion is that liberal society (like Rome at its decline) has lost its desire and ability to protect itself against self-declared enemies.

Two things are missing from Bell's book which, given the author's apparent ambition to write an all-inclusive work,

may be considered serious gaps. He does not as much as hint at a typology of the liberal mind and its epistemological presuppositions. David Hume could have been chosen as the archetype. Reality is unknowable, the best world is the com- modious one in which the David Humes, that is, the liberal and liberally thinking decent gentlemen, feel at ease. People feel at ease when there are no restrictions inhibiting their movements, in other words where they freely trade in mer- chandise and ideas . . . as long as free- dom does not include price rises by Arab sheikhs and pornographic literature by the Larry Flynts. In short, let's be free *and* decent. But, as Bell notes, "on a mass scale, economics has become geared to the demands of culture, and culture reigns supreme not as a moral meaning but as a lifestyle"—*any* lifestyle, not merely that of decent gentlemen. Where in liberalism, and its offspring, capitalism, is the moral (and cultural) compass telling it and society that there are norms higher than the freedom to trade and to publish?

This takes us to the second lacuna in Bell's volume: we find in it no outline of a theory of state and power. The author is "a socialist in economics, a liberal in poli- tics, and a conservative in culture"—in other words, an adept of the best of all worlds. The trouble is that such a world does not exist except in the mind of intel- lectual, comfort-loving people. The ques- tion concerning state and power cannot be eluded, even though it is fashionable to do so among the *nouveaux philosophes*, whether in France or in America. For the situation in which we find ourselves is one in which liberalism maintains itself at the price of suicidal compromises with *diri- gisme*, on the one hand, and with cultural decay, on the other. It flourishes only in such vaporous minds as Giscard's in France and Suarez's in Spain. The liberal veils his eyes when power is mentioned because he thinks that the status quo he enjoys is not sustained by power but by

the consensus of decent sort of chaps like "me and you." Yet, power knocks at the door: in Heilbroner's description its name is *socialism*, and he warns the liberals not to entertain the illusion that socialism is already here in the comfortable form of the welfare state. The latter, he writes, is merely the nth mask of capitalism, whereas real socialism will be, if not totalitarian, at least authoritarian, plan- ning the economy and imposing its own (illiberal) cultural values.

Heilbroner tries to be reassuring; after all, if he is right about the ubiquity of capitalism, he addresses, even in the pages of *Dissent*, a capitalist-liberal pub- lic. It would be interesting to learn what Bell thinks of the emerging state and its power; in short, what kind of book would he write under the title of "The *political* contradictions of capitalism"?

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR

Composer Under Communism

Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov; translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis, *New York: Harper and Row, 1979. xli + 289 pp. \$15.00.*

THESE ARE THE MEMOIRS of the composer "Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich, Dep- uted of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., laureate of the Lenin and State prizes of the U.S.S.R. A faithful son of the Communist Party. . . ." (so the of- ficial obituary described him); taken down during the last four years of his life by a young Russian musicologist, brought to the West with the help of some "coura-