

The Revolution of Rising Entitlements: Daniel Bell and the Logic of Segregation in the Post-Industrial State

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The creation of boundaries shapes every power relationship. Without a strong boundary between those who hold power and those who do not, the political fabric of society is torn apart. In other words, boundaries play a central role in contemporary societies because they cope with the emergence of distinctions in apparently inclusive and egalitarian social spheres. These distinctions are necessary to preserve a hierarchical order in social systems that seek to abolish mechanisms of formal exclusion: “the existence of hell is denied, but then better and worse places in heaven must be distinguished” (Luhmann 269). Insofar as it allows the continuous reproduction of power structures in society, creating boundaries is a political act that singles out and ranks apparently equal individuals in a social hierarchy. Yet, this social boundary, like any other boundary, needs to be legitimated in order to discourage any attempt at subverting it. From this standpoint, sociological studies have historically provided a legitimizing discourse to the creation of these intra-social boundaries.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, until the “disruption of the sociological business as usual in the 1960s and 1970s,” most of the American sociological works shared an “overarching logic of segregation.” Within it, “everyone has one place, places have meaning only in relation to one another, and every place has its rank.” Thus, “working-class men, women and African Americans may appear to go willingly to their assigned places, especially when hegemonic ideologies

naturalize these identities” (Collins 577). In other words, the logic of segregation naturalizes social hierarchies of class, race and gender: it is a sociological device that scientifically shapes and legitimizes the boundaries of distinction in American society.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on how the logic of segregation affected the thought of the contemporary American sociologist Daniel Bell in three different phases of his intellectual journey: in the fifties when he was influenced by the structural-functionalist paradigm, then in the sixties, when he outlined the theory of post-industrial society and, finally, in the seventies, when the rise of a strong demand for social rights prompted him to deal with the paradoxes of the welfare state and the break-up of the American social order.

SYSTEMATIC SEGREGATION

“We no longer know what holds a society together” (Bell, “America’s Un-Marxist” 215). With these words, in 1949 Bell began to question the very nature of social ties and started wondering about how a social order could be established. These kinds of concerns marked Bell’s thinking for about thirty years and, at the same time, revealed two of the most important drives behind his early sociological work. In the first place, he was concerned about the inclusion of the working class, which in the past was denied access to the full benefits of citizenship, fueling a sense of alienation among blue collar workers that resulted in a fierce class struggle. Ways in which to defuse this social unrest and subordinate the specific interests of the antagonistic social groups to the universal values of an inclusive mass society was the other focus of Bell’s attention. This was a central problem for structural-functionalist sociology, which was the dominating branch of American social sciences thanks to the works of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. In the long run, wondering about what holds a society together entails reflecting on how to avoid the emergence of conflicting forces in the social sphere. To this extent, it is more than a merely traditional sociological issue. It is, rather, a political issue which questions the very nature of social ties in order to analyze the conditions in which it is possible to build a hierarchical order on the basis of a group of free and equal individuals. The structural-functionalist response highlighted a view of society as a pluralistic and balanced social system, in which roles and norms organize and govern free individuals within a peaceful social complex. This view implied a redefinition of individual freedom, that was more than just the freedom of consumerism: it was above all the freedom to follow the social norms embodied by the role. Such a freedom relied on the existence of a broadly based consensus about the ultimate values underlying the social structure.

The admittance to American society of people who had formerly been excluded, entailed, however, their acceptance of those values and their own collocation within a structure of normative roles. To put it in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms,

white male blue collar workers who crossed over from exclusion to admittance were at the same time taking on a habitus, that is a set of practical dispositions connected to the role and designed to constantly reproduce the established social order (Bourdieu 8-9). That being said, the American social system promised its existing and potential members a progressive upgrading in the social hierarchy, according to the principles of performance and achievement. The dynamics of society were geared toward integrating anyone who shared its values and accepted its modus operandi. Nonetheless it was a logic of segregation, as Bell shows in *The End of Ideology*, the most famous of his books, insofar as it was permeated by the basic tenets of the Parsonian theory of social stratification (Parsons). Analyzing the break-up of family capitalism, Bell highlighted the growing importance of technical skill over property in determining an individual's position on the social ladder.

Such a shift implied a strong social mobility that was increasingly dependent on acquired principles rather than on ones that had been ascribed. Furthermore, it entailed the decline of the class structure and the rise of a predominantly middle class society, that was open to anyone who shared the values of work ethic and achievement in the interests of society as a whole (Bell, *The End of Ideology* 39-46). Thus, by depicting the American postwar working class—and its union leaders—as a cooperative and affluent group, Bell could maintain that blue collar workers had become part of the middle-class (Bell, “Next American”), in what consequently appeared to be a political maneuver to legitimize a consensual social sphere by concealing the actual hierarchies within it (Battistini).

The theory of social stratification embodied by *The End of Ideology* revealed how the functionalist logic of segregation works, by assuming that “societies insure that the most important positions are filled by the most qualified persons” (Davis and Moore 40). Since in the postwar United States women were confined to the role of housewives (Baritono) and African Americans occupied the lowest ranks in the social hierarchy, it is easy to deduce who the targets of this systematic logic of segregation were.

POST-INDUSTRIAL SEGREGATION

Even before a new and heterodox generation of sociologists began to undermine the functionalist paradigm, the social movements of the sixties not only challenged the logic of segregation within American social institutions but also revealed how this same logic compromised sociological progress. Blacks, ethnic minorities, students and women—the so-called anti-systemic movements (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein)—realized that their own freedom lay outside the boundaries established by white male liberals belonging to the middle-upper classes, such as, in fact, Bell or Parsons, and that reestablishing their freedom would require a renewal of their struggle. Since sociological categories such as

consensus, equilibrium, pluralism were turning out to be obsolete, American society could no longer be depicted as a tranquil entity impacted by different functional groups that were different among themselves but who nevertheless shared the same set of fundamental values.

In 1982 the sociologist Michael Burawoy criticized the Parsonian structural functionalism because it ignored “the new historical forces unleashed on its own doorstep” (Burawoy S4). To be fair, in the early sixties Bell recognized that any functionalist view of contemporary society was by then untenable. In 1962 Bell outlined the hallmarks of the theory of post-industrial society: a society that represented a higher stage in the progressive evolution of social dynamics, but also reflected the deep-seated contradictions of the period. In other words, instead of a unified system, Bell felt that in a post-industrial society the mutual adjustment between the different Parsonian subsystems was being substituted for the disjunction of three different spheres: social structure, polity and culture (Bell, “Disjunction”). In other words, the anti-institutional impulses that stemmed from the social movements of the sixties were being concentrated within the cultural sphere. This uneasy configuration endangered the political unity of society and Bell kept on wondering how society could cohere without some form of internal order. Posited in a different context, this dilemma involved a new logic of segregation, that is a logic of institutional segregation, because integration could no longer be answered by the auto-normative structure of the social system, but required what Otto Kirchheimer called a “quest of sovereignty.” This quest prompted Bell to focus on the role played by the political system in developing and governing the principal trends of post-industrial society.

In the first place, instead of the production of goods, post-industrial society was organized around theoretical knowledge as to “the purpose of social control and the directing of innovation and change; and this in turn gives rise to new social relationships and new structures which have to be managed politically” (Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 20). In the second place, post-industrial society was in Bell’s terms a “communal society,” wherein public mechanisms rather than market demands became the allocator of goods which “multiplies the definition of rights—the rights of children, of students, of the poor, of minorities—and translates them into claims of the community” (Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 59).

These two considerations were interrelated insofar as the furtherance of awareness in different fields and specifically in social science studies, was necessary in order to propose a social policy capable of coping with the rising demand for social rights. Since the State was the missing factor in postwar American thought (King and Stears), the specific needs of post-industrial society demanded not only that polity would become “the true control system of society,” but would also lead to a rethinking of the specific organization of the public. Bell maintained that the chaos in the American administrative structure had to be resolved and he demanded on the part of the government stronger coordination of the various public and private agencies that revolved around the government

executive. At the same time, Bell was aware that the lax functioning of the machinery of government reflected the specific evolution of American political history. As a matter of fact, he was not advocating a Weber-type State that monopolized politics, but was calling for a more institutionalized integration between governmental structures such as independent commissions, universities, non-profit making organizations and enterprises. The actual interplay between them represented what I would call “the post-industrial state,” or, to use Bell’s terms, “a scientific-administrative complex” which represents an institutionalized interaction between political actors located between state and society (Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 246).

The post-industrial state rejected any view of sovereignty as a specific hallmark of the state, but envisaged power as extending over a wider social sphere. In Bell’s opinion, a coordinated and broader based political structure, with ramifications at the core of society, helped to keep in check the problem of societal order, constantly threatened by the anti-systemic movements. In other words, Bell was keen to highlight the fact that the new role assigned to commissions, research centers, and other social actors was essential to convey to the government that the expertise of the social sciences was capable of transmitting the impressive changes of a future-oriented society, as, indeed, post-industrial society was. Furthermore, by its very nature, this loose and polycentric institutional arrangement would be useful in diffusing social unrest. Bell feared that the “politicization” of society would fuel social turmoil. He remarked that “market disperses responsibility” whereas the political center is visible, the question of who gains and who loses is clear, and the state budget becomes a battlefield (Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 118). These unintentional consequences depended on the increase in social demands (health, education, welfare, social services) that became entitlements for the population. Yet, faced with this “Revolution of Rising Entitlements,” Bell wondered: “since there may not be enough money to satisfy all or even most of the claims, how do we decide what to do first?” (Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 159). Because of the disintegration of ultimate values, the lack of a coordinated political norm to manage the public budget constituted the source of social strains in the post-industrial age. In order to mitigate such social strains, it was necessary to disperse the anger and the demands of the “poor people’s movements” (Fox-Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s*) by deploying the public, private and hybrid political structures collocated at different levels of government. In short, the post-industrial State was betraying its comprehensive promises and was moving toward a path of privatization of the social services that reactivated the logic of segregation within the American welfare system itself. This path became obvious in the seventies and necessitated efforts to reestablish social harmony.

In the early seventies, Bell discovered the sources of the antinomic cultural impulses in the structural transformations of the capitalist ethos. They were the “cultural contradictions of capitalism.” This latter stemmed from the decline of the Puritan ethic which revolved around a work ethic that considered achievement and reward as inextricably linked. It embodied the old Malthusian injunctions for “prudence,” abstinence and the need for hard work in a world of scarcity. When scarcity was substituted for a new material abundance in Gilded Age capitalism, a hedonistic ethic emerged that celebrated endless accumulation, unleashed acquisitive impulses and, subsequently, severed the link between work and rewards. Unbridled appetites were the characteristic feature of Hobbesian man in the state of nature. The specter of a deadly conflict reemerged in American society, insofar as the cultural contradictions of capitalism had instilled in the American people the conviction that they were entitled to material luxury, prompting blacks, minorities and poor people to cast their private desires into the public budget (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 23-25).

According to Bell, in order to resolve the contradictions between the public and private spheres it was necessary to elaborate fiscal sociology, a discipline that studied the management of state revenues and expenditures, emphasizing the impacts of economic and social policies on social groups. In 1918 Joseph Schumpeter laid the foundation of fiscal sociology, warning that “the fiscal capacity of the state has its limits and if the people demands higher and higher public expenditures the fiscal state can collapse” (Schumpeter 199). Bell maintained that this limit was reached in the seventies, when the mounting pressures coming from several sections of society overburdened the administration (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 235). This situation produced a political stalemate and the upsurge of new tensions. In Bell’s opinion, reducing the administrative overload and restoring the normal operation of the political machinery required a rethinking of the “philosophy” of public expenditure. This was “the arena for the register of political forces in the society,” but, according to Bell, it was also a political maneuver to coordinate and legitimate social power relationships (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 221). In order to achieve this end, the public budget was to be thought of in terms of a public household, as German and Austrian sociological economists in the twenties called it. Bell admitted to preferring the term ‘public household’ to other more neutral terms because it emphasized the sociological connotations of communal living. Drawing on Aristotle’s politics, the household was depicted by Bell as the equivalent of the *oikos*, the basic unit of ancient Greek society which catered for the residential and economic needs of an extended family. Such a household depended on a hierarchical order that had to be preserved in order to meet the needs of each member and foster a shared image of the common good. By projecting this image on to contemporary society, Bell was assuming that the public household was expected to sat-

isfy the basic needs of individuals but not their private aspirations (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 221).

The separation between needs and aspirations implied the necessity of reducing State commitment to social welfare. Needs were defined on the basis of biological necessities, aspirations were defined as claims based not on meritocratic principles but on ascribed features such as color or gender. This was the logic of the quota act, fiercely criticized by Bell, because it didn't promote the equality of opportunities but the equality of results, thus undermining the already slackened tie between achievement and reward (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 265). This reduction of the impact of welfare on the public household was designed not only to obviate the fiscal crisis of the state, described by James O'Connor in 1973, but also to address the cultural contradictions of capitalism and reinstate a "public philosophy" that would lead the administration to pinpoint the legitimate demands of social provisions and, at the same time, to re-dimension the demands themselves. The restoring of the public household required a shared public interest in order to legitimately classify and justify social claims on the state budget. It is no wonder that Bell and the neoconservative social scientists conglomerated at an early stage round a journal named the *Public Interest* that aimed to assess conscientiously the "public policy" of the Johnson administration (Bell and Kristol). From 1967 the journal, edited by Bell and Irving Kristol, launched an attack on the misleading idea of inclusion conveyed by those Great Society programs based on "the ascriptive nature of sex and color" (Vaïsse 50-80; Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial* 466). These programs were molding an "unfair" inclusion, which was seeking to make people equal rather than treat them equally (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 259). Setting a "limit to social policies" became one of the main goals of *The Public Interest* (Glazer), insofar as a fair inclusion depended on the principle that blacks or women should be "treated as individuals (and to achieve equality on that basis) rather than as a category" (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 197).

The new arrangement of post-industrial governance and the new vision of inclusion came together as a way to rethink the basic assumptions of the American welfare state. Bell called for the enactment of what he called a "market for the social purposes," that implied a reconfiguration of traditionally private institutions for public ends (Bell, *Winding Passage* 226). It was a recipe designed to ease the administrative overload by privatizing the welfare state and, also, to "regulate" the dependent poor (Fox-Piven and Cloward, *Regulating*) by throwing them back into the market. In this way, subjects that were once entitled to social aid as members of a specifically disadvantaged group would be treated as abstract individuals who received public funding in order to buy services in the market (Cento). As Bell put it, "if there is a new emphasis today, it is a retreat from the older visions of a centralized public ownership . . . The government's primary role, in the older conception, was to provide public goods . . . Now [it] is to set standards and provide resources, and the recipients can buy their own housing and pay for their own health care" (Bell, *Cultural Contradictions* 276). The translation of

group claims into individual/consumer demands involved the deactivation of the subversive threat posed by the anti-systemic movements. It deprived them of the subversive connotations embodied in being part of the “other America.” Furthermore, it incorporated disadvantaged people not by giving them full citizenship, as Thomas Marshall pointed out, but by undermining it. Thus, it forced recipients of welfare aid to merit it, as a meritocratic/individualistic philosophy required. We can see in Bell’s arguments a reversal of the movement from contract to status envisioned by Marshall. In the fifties an inclusive society and the status of full citizenship were promised to white male blue collar workers and, to some extent, to blacks—but not to women who were bound to follow their peculiar “mystique” (Friedan). In the seventies, the reorganization of welfare and a more restrictive and meritocratic view of citizenship aimed at drawing up new racial, gender and class boundaries in order to classify and discipline individuals by qualifying some of them as “undeserving subjects.” Summing up the transformations that occurred after the seventies, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon observe that the welfare state had been trapped by a contract vs. charity dichotomy. In other words there are some who get back what they put in and others who get something back without putting anything in. This latter category, therefore, became the target of social stigma, while the language of social rights and social citizenship disappeared. By naturalizing historical and socially created differences and reinstating a new work ethic, Bell re-imposed the logic of segregation that was at the very core of the American welfare state. “Social justice—Michael Katz remarked—[was] subordinated to the market price” (Katz 1).

CONCLUSIONS: THE CREDENTIALS OF SEGREGATION

The attempt to restore a meritocratic ethic didn’t foster social mobility and equity, but, in the famous words of Bell, the establishment of a “credentials society” (Bell, *On Meritocracy* 34). In a society built around knowledge and science, universities and high schools were responsible for proving the merits of an individual by issuing credentials under the guise of diplomas, thereby perpetuating the pre-existing boundaries within society. As Bourdieu put it, “the act of scholastic classification is always an act of ordination.” Thus, a credentials society resembled the “court society” depicted by Norbert Elias, insofar as it separated “a clearly limited set of people . . . from the common run of mortals by a difference of essence” (Bourdieu 21). In the fifties, Bell maintained that the primacy of knowledge over property as the basis of social power meant the rise of an open mass society. Yet, certified knowledge introduced new hierarchical principles between those who were socially able to undertake an educational path and who were not. Identifying knowledge as the main resource of social power, Bell’s sociological discourse legitimized a measure of distinction that created intra-social boundaries within a formally egalitarian and inclusive society. Thus, formal exclusion disappeared,

but different degrees of inclusion were applied to a society that no longer had an “outside.” Since knowledge was an acquisitive resource, it appeared to be an unquestionable hierarchical device to organize a society that aspired to be “beyond barbarism” (Luhmann).

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