

January 8, 2019, The Chit Chat Club

POLITICS FOR DUMMIES! (Actually, for this dummy!)
“Politics is the systematic organization of hatreds.” Henry Adams.

“The Country is so totally given up to the Spirit of party, that not to follow blind-fold the one or the other is an inexpressible offense — The worst of these parties has the popular torrent in its favor, and uses its triumph with all the unprincipled fury of a faction; while the other gnashes its teeth, and is waiting with all the impatience of revenge, for the time when its turn may come to oppress and punish by the people’s favor.” (quoted in the NYRB, January 17, 2019)

John Quincy Adams in his diary, 1803.

I need your help! I thought I’d begin the new year by trying to understand politics. I think the time is right given the I’ve always been confused politically – I was brought up in a very left-wing home at the end of WWII. My dad was a bricklayer and an idealistic socialist. My brother became a successful business man and a Thatcherite Tory. My grandmother — straight out of downstairs at Downton Abbey, always voted Tory because “they were born to rule.” When I was at university I joined (very briefly) the National Association of Socialists Students. But I hung out with the Young Conservatives. In fact, I only went to one meeting of the Socialists. I fled when a spotty faced woman called Pat Frydd called me “comrade”. I was further confused when, as a young priest and junior lecturer I felt the need to get alongside the

working men of the town and express my solidarity with “the workers”, only to find a bunch of racist bigots, worried about . . . well, I can’t repeat their racist convictions with regard to immigrant workers.

I was also brought up on “English Exceptionalism” which we all took for granted. Aneurin Bevan, scion of the Labor Party, told the House of Commons in 1951, “This great nation has, since 1945, assumed the moral leadership of the world . . . There is only one hope for mankind, and that hope still remains in this little island. It is from here that we tell the world where to go and how to go there.”¹

As for the United States, as long ago as 1845 John L. O’Sullivan wrote that our destiny was to occupy the whole continental territory “which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.” From this developed the view that our nation has a key role in God’s plan for humanity: a plan with mixed reviews! Love of country is a good thing. But there’s a fine line between a Patriot who loves his country and a Nationalist who hates or despises every other.

So, I thought I’d take this opportunity to make my political confession and to seek your counsel as we enter into another cycle of the world’s madness. Don’t worry, I won’t be lapsing into partisan polemics. This is a modest exploration of one man’s struggle for political coherence! The nearest I can come to a description of my political allegiance is that I’m a progressive traditionalist who tries

¹ See the TLS for November 30, 2018, p. 8

to reject ideology in favor of the messiness of passionate never-ending conversation!

I like good order and am puzzled by peoples' distrust of government since I don't trust those who distrust government! In October 1987 Ronald Reagan charmed us with an old antigovernment joke. What are the ten most frightening words in the English language? "Hello, I'm from the government and I'm here to help." A silly and destructive joke. The best way to undermine government is to make it as stupid and inept as possible. I don't trust the government entirely but, then, I don't trust you either! But I have to acknowledge that I benefited from the wartime and post war governments in the UK for both education and healthcare and, for want of a better word, "upward mobility." I am the product of the grammar school system (the founder of my school was William Rutlish, chief embroiderer to Charles I) and a redbrick university — all fully paid for by the government.

Where to begin? Consider the following exchange written up in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* a few years ago by Ron Suskind. He quotes a presidential aide as saying to him that Suskind's problem was that he was "*in what we call the reality-based community*", or, in other words, people on the east and west coasts who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality".

The aide went on to say, "that's not the way the world really works any more. We're an *empire* now, and when we act, we *create* our own reality We're history's

actors and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

As one critic writes, “These are chilling words. They represent a throwback to an imperial politics in which the emperor’s courtly culture reigns supreme and is unchallengeable. Truth is not important if truth is understood as *telling it like it is*. The important thing is how they *want* things to be. That’s why there’s the tendency to debunk the science of global warming: the truth is not “out there” but rather it is being *manufactured* by public relations blitzes, political spin, the military, and the corporations.”

So, where am I politically?

My main inspiration and guide politically over the years has been a book, published over forty years ago -- Daniel Bell’s – *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 1976. I’ve lived with this book for so long that what follows is my somewhat rambling version of my ongoing conversation with it.

Daniel Bell died in 2011 aged 91. A great political writer on such subjects as the failures of socialism in America, the exhaustion of modern culture and the transformation of capitalism from an industrial-based system to one built on consumerism.

Two of his books, “The End of Ideology” (1960) and the “Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism” (1976), were ranked among the 100 most influential books since World War II by The Times Literary Supplement. In his view, Western capitalism had come to rely on mass

consumerism, acquisitiveness and widespread indebtedness, undermining the old Protestant ethic of thrift and modesty that writers like Max Weber and R.H. Tawney had long credited as the reasons for capitalism's success.

Daniel Bolotsky was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on May 10, 1919, to Benjamin and Anna Bolotsky, garment workers and immigrants from Eastern Europe. His father died when Daniel was eight months old, and Daniel, his mother and his older brother, Leo, moved in with relatives. The family changed the name to Bell when Daniel was 13.

He liked to tell of his political beginnings with an anecdote about his bar mitzvah, in 1932. "I said to the Rabbi: 'I've found the truth. I don't believe in God. I'm joining the Young People's Socialist League.' So the rabbi looked at me and said, 'Kid, you don't believe in God. Tell me, do you think God cares?'"

I found Bell helpful in his breaking politics down into three realms – the economy, the polity, and the culture and showing me that I came by my confusion honestly. And that politics is an endless conversation in which no one has the last word.

The problem is that these three realms do not lend themselves to a coherent political vision because they are ruled by contrary axial principles: for the economy,

efficiency; for the polity, equality; and for the culture, self-realization (or self-gratification).

What kind of politics do we embrace when we make economic activity the central feature of society? Bell points out that such activity was originally fused with a distinctive culture and character structure. Hard work – self-control, delayed gratification. We might not applaud all its manifestations but at least it had moral bite. Now, Bell asserted, we're suffering the unraveling of this relationship between hard work and character. It was sustainable when work and wealth had a "sacred" (for want of a better word) sanction but that transcendent justification has gone out of the window.

Bell writes, "So long as work and wealth had a religious sanction, they possessed a transcendental justification. But when that ethic eroded, there was a loss of legitimization, for the pursuit of wealth alone is not a calling that justifies itself . . . The stock exchange is a poor substitute for the Holy Grail."

What "legitimizes" such things now? Remember, he's writing over forty years ago. Then he saw " . . . a shift in emphasis from "character," which is the unity of moral codes and disciplined purpose, to an emphasis on "personality," "which is the enhancement of self through the compulsive search for individual differentiation." We tended to move from life to life-style. So the economy is geared to produce the life-styles paraded by the culture. We yoke together asceticism and acquisitiveness. Bell puts it this way – the Puritans meet Faust! On the one hand, we

treat people as things to maximize profit, and, on the other, we praise self-expression and self-gratification. In the tension between profit and self-expression lies the reason for our divisions and polarizations, resentment and angers. The culture cannot deliver what it promises. Who said “There are no socialists in America - only millionaires who’ve fallen on hard times?” There are a lot of them/us!

Now here’s the passage in Bell which caught my attention and helped me understand that the way I express my politics depends on the issue at hand. He’s a socialist, a liberal/libertarian and a conservative — depending on the issue.

Bell puts it this way, “I am a socialist in economics . . . that’s how I make] a judgment on economic policy. It is for that reason that I believe that in this realm, the community takes precedence over the individual . . . establishing a social minimum “which would allow individuals to lead a life of self-respect, to be members of the community. This means a set of priorities that ensures work for those who seek it, a degree of adequate security against the hazards of the market, and adequate access to medical care and protection against the ravages of disease and illness. . . . I do not believe wealth should be convertible into undue privilege in realms where is it not relevant . . . it is unjust for wealth to command undue advantage in medical facilities, when these are social rights that should be available to all.”

But he doesn’t leave it there. When he leaves economics and comes to politics, he’s a a liberal or more

of a libertarian. He writes, "Yet I am a liberal in politics within the polity the individual should be the primary actor, not the group. . . And the polity has to maintain the distinction between the public and the private, so that not all behavior is politicized, as in communist states, or left without restraint, as in the justification of laissez-faire in traditional capitalist societies." It treats peoples equally but does not attempt to make them so.

Finally he writes, "I am a conservative in culture because I respect tradition; I believe in reasoned judgments of good and bad about the qualities of a work of art; and I regard as necessary the principle of authority in the judging of the value of experience and art and education." Tradition is essential to the vitality of a culture, for it provides the continuity of memory that teaches how one's forebears met the same existential predicaments." He sums it up this way: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning."

His conservative bias when it comes to culture is based simply on the conviction that judgment is necessary "to fend off that indiscriminateness which regards all "meaningful" experience as good, and which insists that each group's "culture" is as valid as any other." J.S. Bach or Mick Jagger? All opinions aren't equally valuable! But some people are authorities in certain subjects — elitism has its place! Just look at the mess we get ourselves into when our acting "on impulse, rather than the reflective discipline of the imagination becomes the touchstone of not only of satisfaction but of truth. To have significance, a

culture must transcend the present, because it is the recurrent confrontation with those root questions whose answers, through a set of symbols, provide a viable coherence to the meaning of existence. The continuity with the past shapes the future. The present is what the past is doing now.

Bell writes, "And since the appreciation of tradition in culture, and judgment in art (and a coherent curriculum in education) has to be *learned*, authority – in the form of scholarship, teaching and skilled exegesis – is a necessary guide for the perplexed." That's why The Academy seems such a messy and hazardous place! Students seem to think that their opinions are as valid as their teachers!

[I have a particular gripe when it comes to theology and religion. You can be an expert in a particular field and be acknowledged as such but when it come to religion, everyone's an authority!]

How did we get to where we are? Bell notes the surge of creativity from about 1850 -1930 -- but at a price: the loss of coherence in the valuing more highly the new and experimental -- the self becomes the touchstone of cultural judgment. Nothing is sacred. One great price was the loss or blurring of the distinction between art and life – what was once permitted in the imagination is now "acted out" – the enhancement of the self. No wonder people are angry and resentful. The culture doesn't deliver the goodies promised. We are entitled to received fulfillment spiritually and intellectually. It is our right!

My conservative self resists the rhetoric of entitlement in the area of artistic and intellectual judgments — our thinking that equality involves the elimination of difference. We fear difference and imagine that stability requires our stamping it out (or worse, stamping *them* out). We make the mistake in thinking that difference means inequality, and we work for an absurd world in which no-one is better at anything than anyone else. The conservative mind rightly fears that the liberal mind wants to do away with difference to ensure not equality but equality of outcome.

Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron" illustrates the absurdity.

The year is 2081 and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. Ballet dancers had to wear weights on their legs — to be handicapped to stay level with the rest of us!

The flattening everything out in a downward direction helps no one and feeds into our collective paranoia. We are made mad by the cult of sameness which we mistake for fairness. Those who are different from us are probably plotting against us. It is not accidental that conspiracy theories run riot in our culture. Life becomes a constant struggle against "the enemy." There are many

groups checking the terrain for the sight of an Armageddon -- a "final" conflict so that all the filth and slime can be purged away and the human race can have a fresh start.

I think of "The Declaration of the Rights of Toiling and Exploited People" promulgated in January 1918 – Lenin – the text identified "former people" – not quite human who could be slaughtered. People of the old regime. An excuse for terror. "By their own account, Lenin and his followers acted on the basis of the belief that some human groups had to be destroyed in order to realize the potential of humanity." Many found themselves bearing the stigma of being a former person! Imagine being looked at as someone who represented a humanity that had had its day. You could be disposed of, killed!

Yet there are dangers on the other side too. We feed on "the ideas of liberty and liberation, whose embodiments are "rugged individualism" in economic affairs and the "unrestrained self" in culture . . . Freedom, we mistakenly think, lies in the repudiation of tradition and the authority of the past.

Bell helped me understand why I hated the 60s. Moving into the Haight in the 80s and seeing people who'd fried their brains in the 60s. Bell writes, "The so-called counter-culture was a children's crusade that sought to eliminate the line between fantasy and reality and act out in life its impulses under the banner of liberation. It claimed to mock bourgeois prudishness, when it was only flaunting the closet behavior of its liberal parents It

was less a counter-culture than a counterfeit culture." (xxvi-xxvii)

I hated the musical *Hair!* And I sided with the parents. I found *Zorba the Greek* odious and the prophet Theodore Roszak, way off the mark. In *The Making of the Counterculture* – 1969) he wrote, "The bourgeoisie is obsessed by greed; its sex life is insipid and prudish; its family patterns are debased; its slavish conformities of dress and grooming are degrading; its mercenary routinization of life is intolerable . . . " Bell comments: "What is funny about such pronouncements is their polemical and ideological caricature of a set of codes that had been trampled long ago, beginning 60 years earlier, with the Young Intellectuals. Yet such a caricature was necessary to make the new counter-culture seem more daring and revolutionary than it was. . . . For while the new movement was extreme, it was neither daring nor revolutionary. In fact, it was simply an extension of the hedonism of the 1950s, and a democratization of the libertinism that had already been achieved by sections of the advanced upper classes long before. Just as the political radicalism of the 1960s followed the failure of political liberalism the decade before, so the psychedelic extremes – in sexuality, nudity, perversions, pot, and rock – and the counter-culture followed on the forced hedonism of the 1950s." (74)

Now, we can turn religion and spirituality into commodities that can be bought and sold. "Religions grow out of the deepest needs of individuals sharing a common

awakening, and are not created by “engineers of the soul.”
We now have “The Mindfulness Industry.”

Let’s conclude (as messy my confession of being a Progressive Traditionalist. is) by returning to Bell’s three axial principles – the economic, the political - the arena of social justice and power, and the cultural - the realm of symbolic forms – how one meets death, the meaning of love and of sacrifice, the understanding of compassion.

Bell writes, “Modern culture is defined by this extraordinary freedom to ransack the world storehouse and to engorge any and every style it comes upon.” (13) How so? Because the axial principle of modern culture is the expression and remaking of the “self” in order to achieve self-realization and self-fulfillment.” (13) This is breaking down! Anger, resentment and depression – the denial of limits or boundaries – the view of experience where nothing is forbidden -- all lead to disappointment, frustration and violence.

Bell insists that “Western society lacks both *civitas*, the spontaneous willingness to make sacrifices for some public good, and a political philosophy that justifies the normative rules of priorities and allocations in the society.” (25)

We live in the illusion that *Everything is fixable?* -- we’re morally and intellectually unprepared for calamity. We are seduced by the liberal temper that redefines all existential questions into “problems” which have “solutions.” The strange rationalist idea that to any single question there is

a single answer. The utopian assumption of limitless ends achievable through economics and technology.

The question for our time is, perhaps, the question of Culture? Bell writes, "Culture . . . is a continual process of sustaining an identity through the coherence gained by a consistent aesthetic point of view, a moral conception of the self, and a style of life which exhibits those conceptions in the objects that adorn one's home and oneself and in the taste which expresses those points of view." But what happens when culture itself becomes a commodity? The *adversary* culture is the norm. "I'm more marginal than thou!" One reason for the dominance of the adversarial is that "the majority has no intellectually respectable culture of its own." Is this true? How far are we truly divided between the illiberal left and the extreme right? Bell quotes Irving Howe: there is a "frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present . . . the line of history has been bent, perhaps broken."

Take, for example, the issue of the tension between the "normal" and the idiosyncratic, between conformity and diversity. Human beings cannot help but appeal to norms but norms are intolerant of what appears to be aberrant. In Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* (1973). Martin Dysart, a psychiatrist, has one of his patients (who literally blinds horses) under hypnosis, and says this to the audience:

"The Normal is a good smile on a child's face – all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains

and kills – like a God. It is the Ordinary made beautiful; it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health and I am his Priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away terrors and relieved many agonies. But also -- beyond question – I have from them parts of individuality repugnant to this God, in both his aspects. Parts sacred to rarer and more wonderful Gods.”

Are we suffering from the embrace of the “normal” — the average made lethal — of the culture being overtaken by the economic? “For thousands of years, the function of economics was to provide for daily necessities – the subsistence of life. For various upper-class groups, economics has been the basis of status and sumptuary style. But now, on a mass scale, economics had become geared to the demands of culture.”

In the 1920s Bruce Barton asserted that Jesus was the greatest salesman of all time. “The ‘real’ Jesus whom Mr. Barton purported to have uncovered from the biblical text had proved his skill as a business organizer by having brought twelve obscure men from their inefficient pasts and ‘welded them’ into the greatest organization of all time. Jesus had known and followed ‘every one of the principles of modern salesmanship,’ Barton averred.” “Wish ye not that I must be about my Father’s business.”

Perhaps nothing has changed! Wordsworth writing in 1800 (“Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”) deplored “the craving for extraordinary incident” and the thirst for

“outrageous stimulation” “the works of Shakspeare [sic] and Milton are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. . . .” (85)

There’s always someone to blame! Thucydides in Athens after the Persian wars, “posed the dilemma of a democracy which chooses empire rather than retreating to a provincial role. The temptation to risk (our neo-Cons). “An imperial role is difficult for any nation, since it means the commitment of large-scale resources, of men and wealth, which, if not returned with profit, cause deep strain within.” Thucydides wrote: “In the confusion into which life was now thrown in the cities, human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, gladly showed itself ungoverned in passion, above respect for justice, and the enemy of all superiority; since revenge would not have been set above religion, and gain above justice, had it not been for the fatal power of envy.” *The Peloponnesian War*. The United States has always been guided by a “myth of omnipotence” (Denis Brogan in 1952).

Let Bell have the last word (almost!). “Today [1976] that manifest destiny is shattered, the Americanism has worn thin, and only hedonism remains. It is a poor recipe for national unity and purpose.” A basis for the future “must be created by conjoining three actions: the reaffirmation of our past, for only if we know the inheritance from the past can we become aware of the obligation to our posterity; recognition of the limits of resources and the priority of *needs*, individual and social,

over unlimited appetite and wants; and an agreement upon a conception of equity which gives all persons a sense of fairness and inclusion in the society “ We cannot ignore the past. “It was the hubris of classical liberalism, and of socialist utopianism as well, to believe that in each new generation, in a new social contract, men could start afresh, discard the past, and redesign institutions anew. Within limits, men can remake themselves and society, but the knowledge of power must coexist with the knowledge of its limits. This is, after all, the oldest and most enduring truth about the human condition – if it is to remain all too human.”

I came across a horrible by apt phrase for our condition: The “fragilization of worldviews”.

The main narrative goes something like this — What do we have now? “ . . . a “spiritual supernova” of conflicting accounts of how to attain human fulfillment, a “galloping pluralism”, where nothing is certain, except the illegitimacy of being certain.”

I leave you with Pope Benedict and Jurgen Habermas in conversation: “the Pope believes in God. Furthermore, he believes that God is the source and end of all law. Jürgen Habermas does not believe this, but follows Kant in holding that the law arises from our ability to give ourselves rational and universal laws by which we bind ourselves to live in peace and cooperation with other citizens. . . . [So] one believes x , the other doesn’t, but believes y instead. They both have their reasons, but the failure of these reasons to generate uniformity of beliefs

does not lead them to worry that something has happened to the very possibility of belief and truth in themselves. . . . The Pope and Habermas can find some agreement, not in the realm of narrativebut in terms of future common projects common objects of love: in this case, the goods of a peaceful society, where power is subordinate to and in the service of law, where law is oriented to the common good." Our hope? Differing beliefs do not make friendship impossible. This gives me hope.

So, my friends, this is best I can do — a Progressive Traditionalist salutes you in friendship and looks forward to your correction and asks pardon for the confusion of terms! I learned this week that a conservative has two passions — freedom and the virtuous life. I thought they were the characteristics of liberals? Lionel Trilling, a liberal very critical of liberals wrote that conservatives don't think so much as have "irritable mental gestures which resemble ideas." I thought that was a characteristic of the far left! The problem, of course, is our commitment to ideology which, in my book, should be rendered idolatry.

Or as retired Senator Al Simpson puts it, "In politics there are no right answers, only a continuing series of compromises between groups resulting in a changing, cloudy and ambiguous series of public decisions, where appetite and ambition compete openly with knowledge and wisdom. That's politics."

Endless friendly combat is what I hope for. How about you?

P.S. Dave Eggers in the TLS (December 21, 28, 2018 — on digital human rights:

“Our addiction to data our willingness to accept numbers to explain every problem and define every person, will lead humanity to an existential crisis. When we accept the assigning of numerical valuations to humans, then we teeter on the abyss. When we cede most or all our decisions and destinies to algorithms, human will lose their sense of purpose and power, and this loss of purpose and power will result in a numbing malaise that will overtake the human world and send us into that abyss.

Mystery and nuance is essential to our sense of balance, and the more we replace the unknowable parts of life with rankings and scores, nuance with the false god of data, the more we willingly evolve from mammals to robots, the more our ancient psyches will lose their will to live. It’s already happening all over the industrialized world, with suicide rates rising at an alarming speed, corresponding directly with the mass supplanting of the physical with the digital.”