

# Books

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## A Funeral Pyre for America

Irving Louis Horowitz

Interpreting one's own civilization has always been a touchstone of the success or failure of a particular intellectual vantage point. For the most part such retrospective analysis either points to a benchmark that *is* (capitalism) or a heavenly choir that *might be* (socialism). Since for these three noteworthy capitalism is doomed and Bolshevism is soiled, only the socialist future remains to test the adequacies of the present moment.

These three works, each quite distinctive, illustrate this point. These elder (or at least middle) statesmen of the Left, each in his own manner, seek to summarize the American experience through the filter of socialist tradition. For Bell, it is Weber; for Rogow, Freud; and for Harrington, Marx *sans* Lenin, who filters the critical vision of America as a civilization. Each of these typically American intellectuals still resorts to European masters to provide sense and sensibility to their socialist viewpoints toward American capitalism. Their efforts seem to tower above others, in part because the generation that followed men like Bell, Harrington, and Rogow failed to make the essential leap from criticism to construction. With the notable exception of younger scholars such as Marcus G. Raskin, Ira Katznelson, and Richard Flacks, the ranks of social scientists (historians have fared better) who have made even a remote effort to comprehend the society they reject with such passion are thin in numbers and even scantier in ideas.

The usual answers are probably accurate: anti-intellectualism, activity isolated from intellect, the very displacement of generational factors that isolated the New Left even from its socialist tradition. But there is one rather elusive property that probably best explains this failure of intellectual nerve. The New Left was so centered on self-criticism, inner-oriented critique, and the cult of collectivism generally that the purification of sociology replaced the examination of society. Domination of a political science association became bigger game than restoration of the American political process. As a result, the analysis of American society suffered badly. We must take comfort in the willingness of the remnants of the Old Left, over-fifty crowd to fill the tragic void in the critical literature. In the world of scholarship youth was wasted on the young. Worse, the idea of radicalism was wasted on new radicals living out old academic conventions.

Each of these three books reiterates a familiar theme in the literature of the Left: the crisis and ultimate doom of

capitalism. The last chapter of Rogow's *The Dying of the Light* is fittingly enough termed "The Twilight of the Gods." Harrington's sermon is apparent from the title, *The Twilight of Capitalism*; and even Daniel Bell, while showing that the sources of instability are in the "triumph of Weber over Marx," nonetheless describes his penultimate chapter as "Unstable America," with the cumbersome subtitle, "Transitory and Permanent Factors in a National Crisis," restoring Bell's claim to radical credentials. As America celebrates its Bicentennial, the three writers of the Old Left find themselves building a collective funeral pyre. Upon closer inspection it turns out that only Rogow has dark premonitions for America; Harrington has negative feelings toward capitalism as an economic system for distributing wealth; and Bell's hostility is vented on capitalism as a cultural style for disseminating ideas.

*The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, by Daniel Bell (Basic Books; 301 pp.; \$12.95)  
*The Twilight of Capitalism*, by Michael Harrington (Simon and Schuster; 446 pp.; \$10.95)  
*The Dying of the Light: A Searching Look at America Today*, by Arnold A. Rogow (G.P. Putnam's Sons; 384 pp.; \$10.00)

It makes a big difference whether one dislikes America or capitalist culture. For what we have with Harrington and Bell (despite their sharp differences) is a celebration of democracy of which the United States turns out to be the foremost representative, while Rogow condemns the United States as a "phallic" nation run by "barbarians" and "one-eyed kings." In this sense perhaps Rogow is closer in spirit to the New Left than the Old Left—or at least is making an effort to bridge the gap. What cements these books is a series of dislikes: an economic system that does not provide equity (Harrington); a cultural system that is individualist in temper and bourgeois in appetite (Bell); a national system that is overfed, overclothed, and overhoused (Rogow). Each author senses that the American problem is not one of goods but of distribution. And each believes that capitalism generates wealth at the expense of equity.

When the variables are parceled out, the sting of criticism is actually offered in modest proportions. For when questions hinge on the reform of the economy, changes in the polity, or an overhaul in the cultural apparatus, America is seen as the logical place for such experimentations to occur. This is the frustration suffered by the authors of each of these volumes: their critiques are not suppressed, not condemned, not even paid much heed. Why do these substantial books with their absolute criticisms fail to shake up generations, move policy-makers, or arouse a national debate? Why are they, in fact, part of the historical dustbin to which they so ruefully assign America and its works generally?

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IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ is Professor of Sociology and Political Science at Rutgers University and Editor-in-Chief of *transaction/Society*.

The answers vary from the actual resilience of American society to the insensitivity of the dying system to its own near extermination. Again, I think the answer lurking within each of these quite useful volumes is the absence of alternatives. Each of these people in his own way recognizes that the existing socialist options—i.e., Russia and China—that the United States might emulate are not attractive. For Rogow socialism is simply a critical label within capitalism. He goes so far as to suggest that the resemblance between European socialism and American liberalism is so marked that both must simply be called varieties of progressivism and reform. Whether this is the twilight or the midnight hour of capitalism, Harrington can barely get around the problem of his own characterization of the Soviet Union as a bureaucratic collectivist state, and his faith in China and Cuba is barely an existential flicker. Bell, of course, is so renowned as a critic of totalitarian varieties of socialism that he can leave this point in the closet. However, in his effort to base solutions on the “public household” rather than bourgeois individualism or bureaucratic collectivism, he makes it evident that the skeleton peeks out of the closet at crucial moments.

These authors describe a crisis without offering us alternatives. Worse, the options available turn out to be even less satisfying than the American society under scrutiny. For Hegel the better is the critic of the good; here the worse is the only world picture offered as an alternative to the good. Under such a confining situation these are simply books of economic and cultural doomsday that cannot be taken seriously as models of rebellion because no alternative real-world options are presented. The idea of socialism has been irrevocably tarnished by systems of socialism. The misanthropic nature of the USSR makes the miscreant nature of the USA entirely bearable, even joyously deviant. The myopic inability of these fine scholars to take seriously the cultural contradictions of Bolshevism, the dying of the light in the Soviet orbit, or the twilight of socialism deprives each book of its natural dialectic. The field of international relations is left untapped as a fruitful way to measure contemporary American society and its failings.

A terrible sense of tentativeness haunts these critics of capitalism. Harrington has no doubt that “human life will be radically transformed” because “that future has already begun.” What is in doubt is “the most crucial of issues: Whether this collectivist society which is emerging even now will repress or liberate men and women.” Thus, at the very end, Harrington can “conclude then with an ‘if.’” The spirit of Marx is urged upon us as a comrade in struggle, despite the dual outcome of Marxism so eloquently described by Harrington.

Bell provides us with the virtues of defeat. The early Founding Fathers’ sense of destiny was replaced by a “virulent Americanism,” and colonialism and hedonism took over. “Today that manifest destiny is shattered; the Americanism has worn thin, and only the hedonism remains. It is a poor recipe for national unity and purpose.” To confront defeat Bell advises “the reaffirmation of our past” followed by “recognition of the limits of resources and the priority of needs, indi-

vidual and social, over unlimited appetite and wants, and agreement upon a conception of equity which gives all persons a sense of fairness and inclusion in the society....” Harrington’s socialist redemption is for Bell part and parcel of the “hubris of classical liberalism.” But Bell ends with the conservative plea: a recognition that the “knowledge of power must coexist with the knowledge of its limits.” The cultural contradictions of capitalism are presumably to be resolved by a neo-Aristotelian balance-wheel.

Rogow too is not about to surrender bourgeois virtues, his frontal assaults on the system notwithstanding. The right to privacy must be protected; economic opportunities extended by future totalitarian societies are unacceptable because they are not “free.” Benevolence is not liberty. Rogow ends with a conservative plea for liberties as a protection against benevolent fascisms and its “loss of equities.” We are reminded of “de Tocqueville’s wisdom” that equality can lead people to servitude or freedom, knowledge or barbarism. In the end is the beginning. It turns out that the radical critics of American society do not have the answers; worse, they may not be asking the right questions. But first let us attend to what is worthwhile in these works.

The current crop of writings on Marx and Marxism are so spongy, metaphysical, and oracular that one might well imagine that Marx was a hell-bent-for-leather theologian providing a new vision of heaven and hell. Harrington’s enormous strength is his appreciation of Marx as an economist and social scientist. Through a series of brilliant literary devices (“bourgeois socialism” paralleling Marx’s “feudal socialism”; the “spiritual materialist” paralleling Engels’s “mechanical materialist,” etc.) Harrington attempts to show the contemporary relevance of Marx, even the superiority of Marxian analysis over its revisionist critics. Arguing against ideas such as Bell’s postindustrial society, Moynihan’s policy-making for an unplanned society, and the welfare state as a fundamental change in the composition of capitalism, Harrington does very well, saying that corporate priorities remain essential to the conduct of politics and policies alike. Similarly, his analysis of the spiritual materialists, those who argue the case for Marxism as populism, is filled with rich insight. The “spiritual humanism” of a Castro ends up as a new bureaucracy carrying out the modernization of Cuba under Soviet aegis.

For someone who believes that a “Marxist ‘economics’ does not, and cannot exist,” Harrington does an incredible job resurrecting the dead. In the chapter on “The Anti-Economist,” in particular, one will find a basic lesson in Marxian economics: the nature of money and capital; the labor theory of value; the wage form of labor; capital as a relationship; labor as substance and/or measure of value. These complex issues are dealt with in felicitous prose, with full knowledge of the sources, and a sense of social science as a whole, rather than a parceled-out series of administratively defined “disciplines.” The six appendices contain a great deal of inner Marxian polemics conducted with sense and decency.

His notes on Althusser, Habermas, Popper, Ollman, Godelier, Colletti, Poulantzas, etc. indicate a writer who takes seriously the entire range of present-day literature on Marx, and embody the sort of discussion that should be particularly appealing to those already versed in the arguments presented in the main portion of the text. In short, the analysis is cogent; the clinical uses of Marxism convincing, even if the master thesis of the book, summarized by its title, remains strangely obscure and even profoundly dubious.

The methodological base of Rogow's work is the use of personal anecdote in the narrative. In this he is far removed from the austere economism of Harrington's dialectics. He can move within one paragraph from a description of Maya Angelou in a film she made several years ago to a discussion of black/white sex mores. Personal statements, newspaper items, and policy reports vie with each other for attention. Each chapter contains Rogow's own proximate solutions: city blues can be alleviated by pedestrian malls, pocket parks, decorating subway stations on a neighborhood basis, moving merchandise at night to avoid auto congestion, and so forth.

The chapter on political economy is spiced by many illustrations of competing drives toward opulence and equality, but it ends on the inconclusive note that, while a democratic society always moves toward equality, those who dislike equity will always find ways to establish social distance. This central chapter is more concerned with how social distance is established through snobbery than with mechanisms for reducing social inequality or injustice. The foibles of the rich, whether they are servants of the state or of God, are amply illustrated by newspaper accounts of the way the Rockefellers, Billy Graham, and Norman Vincent Peale live. But whether newspaper accounts of wealth and poverty are an adequate basis on which to decide about the qualifications or lack thereof of political leaders is moot. After all, it might be argued that political corruption is easier to institutionalize among those of impoverished background than those coming from bastions of economic privilege. It takes a very poor boy indeed to risk a Vice Presidency for a \$10,000 bribe. In short, Rogow's recitation of anecdotal materials, far from adding up to a self-evident condemnation of American society, serves rather to illustrate the fables and foibles of a "vertical mosaic" of facts and figures of societal imperfection that can be mustered for any and every society (except, of course, when the gathering of data is politically impermissible).

What evidence is there for Rogow's vision of the dying light of American society? The anecdotal style has a basic shortcoming: He has the unfortunate habit of confusing levels of discourse. His intuitive critique of suburbia, apart from being in direct contradiction to the best evidence we have on the subject (that suburban residents are very much like urban Americans, and then some), includes all sorts of data that characterize American society as a whole. Aggregate data on divorce rates

and suicide rates are not broken out by suburban versus urban or rural America; hence we are left with a large-scale non sequitur. Many of his observations, such as "Keep Off the Grass" signs, or the character of shopping centers, are at least as true of big-city life as suburban living. Likewise, the mind of the moralist that lurks behind many Freudians is expressed in Rogow's critique of America as a "phallic culture." Despite the egalitarian nature of the American sexual revolution, the phallic culture is said to give rise to "pornographic imperialism." But if, "in the end, happiness, which includes sexual satisfaction, remains a personal problem and perhaps will be forever elusive," how does the search for sexual happiness come to be characterized in such harsh, even American, terms, since the same tendencies are prevalent worldwide, in the Soviet Union no less than the United States?

The cement that holds this book together is Rogow's vision of America as a dying society, one drawn to thanatos more than eros. It is a society capable of practicing genocide without knowing it, cultural self-destruction, again without knowing it, and even colonialist economic practices without knowing it. Rogow is no more willing than the other authors to accept totalitarian solutions for America. Hence the sorts of dictatorial regimes that dot the earth in the name of socialism cannot be honestly considered in his book. Even where he expresses his harshest criticisms in relation to the treatment of blacks as a "final solution," he must also acknowledge that "one can discern in America, if not the faint tracings of an interracial society, at the least, the outlines of a society in which there is more tolerance and mutual respect." So much for genocide in America.

The problems with this sort of analysis are multiple: First, he presents or suggests no real options to the death of America; second, he allows no real counterinformation to filter into the analysis to forestall this sense of waiting for the end; and finally, he submits no evidence that we are witnessing a national malaise unique to this country rather than general processes characteristic of industrial societies in flux. For all of that the book stands as a useful reminder that the combined power of psychoanalytic and historical criticisms can serve as worthy guides in national analysis. We have so many books combining the insights of Freud and Marx at metaphysical levels that it is good to have one employing the insights of both traditions in a clinical evaluation of American society.

What is strange about Daniel Bell's book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, is the assumption that, of all ongoing societies, America uniquely has the capacity to resolve these contradictions within the framework of present-day economic, social, and political relations. In an odd way, labeling the book "The Cultural Contradictions" permits discussion of the American problem in terms of Protestant ethics, middle-class life-styles, hedonism, and the like. The word "style" dominates the key

chapter of the book on the cultural contradictions, and hence discussions of substance are minimized. We are told that the characteristic style of industrialism is efficiency in costs, maximization, optimization, and functional rationality. This style is contrasted to the anticognitive and antirational modes that lead to apocalyptic moods and anti-intellectual behavior.

Bell sees this disjunction as the historical-cultural crisis of all Western societies. Curiously we are not told what aspects of either the economy or the polity account for this disjunction, or would permit their removal. One wonders whether societies such as the Soviet Union cannot also be characterized as emphasizing functional rationality, technocratic decisions, and meritocratic awards, on the one hand, and apocalyptic moods and antirational modes of behavior on the other. Bell does put his finger on the absence of a central ideological spine in American culture; but he does not appreciate that this fragmentation is characteristic of industrialism as a whole.

The volume itself is overloaded with the very gadgets American society presumably is overloaded with: issues. While Bell promises a discussion of deeper and more difficult questions of social legitimation, we are in fact given a huge number of issues translated from the economic to the cultural realm. On any given page one may have a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard, Charles Reich, Theodore Roszak, Philip Rahv, and a host of others. As a result, we are given a remarkable feeling of the range of American culture, but these tend to be presented in an issue-oriented and individuated way that does not permit resolution of the contradictions Bell raises. The remarkable concluding essay on the "Public Household" derives, intellectually at least, from Schumpeter's work on fiscal sociology. It goes a long way to discuss the basic issues of economics, but leaves culture far behind. Curiously, this final essay, which in my opinion makes a genuine contribution to political economy, is largely out of kilter with a great deal of the book. The key issues are stated in a forthright manner: the rise of an issue-oriented society without any overriding sense of purpose; the emergence of political dominance, characteristic of capitalist and socialist societies alike, that places the state rather than the economy at the center of system maintenance; and the utilization of economic growth as a secular religion of all industrial societies as an organizing principle and premise.

The central dilemma that emerges in the Bell volume is that crises and alarms do not really add up to much relief from the contradictions set forth. The volume ends with a crisis of belief that perhaps reflects more realistically the crisis of Bell's belief system than that of American society as a whole. To conclude with a reaffirmation of liberalism after having argued for the calamitous outcomes of liberalism, and after having portrayed the tensions between the public and the private, the altruistic and hedonistic, does not provide the kind of conclusion that is either intellectually appropriate or emotionally satisfying. The double theme of "self-conscious maturity" and the "restoration of the idea of purpose" reduces itself to a teleological, even theological, framework. It argues the need for greatness

apart from enunciating the empirical properties of greatness.

The volume ends on a far more indecisive and confused note than might have been the case were Bell to deal more directly with the economic contradictions of capitalism. He could rightly argue in response that this has been dealt with in his earlier volume on *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973). In his preface he sees this new volume as having a dialectical relationship to that earlier work. The problem is that using the language of contradiction, rather than the language of conflict or consensus, obliges one to indicate how such contradictions may be resolved. Since, in the case of Bell, such contradictions are capable of resolution within the framework of the present social order (whatever that is), one is left with a study of cultural conflict rather than social contradiction. In this sense the rhetoric of socialism overwhelms Bell's better sense of the requirements of sociology. A less strident rhetoric to match what is, in the end, a series of modest proposals for a new liberalism would have been more appropriate.

In their own way each of these books exemplifies the emergence of a new and critical vision of American society that moves beyond the celebrations of the fifties and the condemnations of the sixties. They are better books for having done so. Underlining that new intellectual mood is the American revolution of falling expectations: a much deeper and more profound sense that the world not only has shrunk but that the United States role in that world has also been diminished. What prevents frenetic celebration of this fact by these socialist writers is the absence of real alternatives. Neither Harrington, Rogow, or Bell would seriously consider the Soviet option as superior or viable. They might consider West European welfare systems as better in some respects; but even so, that would be more in the nature of personal preference.

These volumes are sober, without the characteristic euphoria of earlier socialist writings. For if the American Century has been defeated as an ideological system, so has the Soviet International. As a result, each of these writers is telling us what was, rather than what is to become. The Old Left provides a kind of new pessimism in articulating the *Götterdämmerung* of American society, but it is already obsolete in failing to provide a sense of growth and birth.

One has the terrible feeling that these writers are so locked into categories of capitalism and socialism that they have not properly understood that American society has not stood still, that its problems, much less its practices, can no longer be described solely within the framework of Marxism. As a result, while these three august and distinguished representatives of the Old Left far outshadow and outweigh their colleagues on the New Left, the problem of what constitutes the Left remains unexamined. Those who set out to change the world might well start by changing the categories with which they perceive that world.