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Disjoining the Left:

Cultural Contradictions of Anticapitalism

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In his foreword to the first paperback edition of *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1978), sociologist Daniel Bell announced that he was “a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture.” People “might find this statement puzzling,” Bell went on, “assuming that if a person is radical in one realm, he is radical in all others; and, conversely, if he is a conservative in one realm, that he must be conservative in the others as well. Such an assumption misreads, both sociologically and morally, the nature of these different realms.”¹

Bell’s affirmation that one can be a conservative in matters of culture without being a conservative *tout court* has not won anything like universal acceptance. As Jonathan Arac observes, his sundering of the economic, political, and cultural realms was apparently “so scandalous that [Bell’s] critics in the debate do not even comment on it.”² This scandal has not blown **[End Page 29]** over in the two decades since. Louis Althusser, whom Arac mentions as a forerunner of Bell’s case for relative autonomy, might seem representative of a newer and antitotalizing common sense. But for all our Althusser-influenced talk of split subjects and multiple subject positions, where political identities are concerned, the cultural Left has been quick to enforce a high standard of consistency. Consider, for example, the pervasive idea that the true pedagogical mission of the humanities is the production of activists. As a moral ideal, the activist embodies a transparent unity of thought and action, public self and private self, culture and politics. The activist has

nothing to hide; she or he can stand in the interpellating eye of God without turning or trembling. The heritage most visibly at work here is not Althusserian but Puritan.

The same might be said of the assumption that one's political identity can be faithfully read off from apparently apolitical signs, say from one's epistemology—an assumption that goes back much further than the particular epistemologies associated with Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida. Like trial-by-epistemology and the quietly totalizing goal of activism, various sins of which the cultural Left is regularly accused probably have less to do with French poststructuralism than with the humanistic holier-than-thou tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot. It is this tradition, assembled and put to progressive use in Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, that makes Bell's insistence on the relative autonomy of economics, politics, and culture seem so scandalous—scandalous even within Bell's own argument. For this tradition, disjunction and fragmentation name what is wrong with industrial society, and the unifying power of culture is the sole remedy adequate to this diagnosis. Thus cultural politics becomes the definitive politics. Although Bell plays off against Eliot's famous self-description as “classical in literature, royalist in politics, anglo-catholic in religion,” Eliot's notion of culture as a unified sensibility or “whole way of life” is also Bell's, as it is largely that of the New York intellectuals in general.³ Culture, Bell writes, must “provide a viable coherence to the meaning of existence. . . . For this reason, tradition becomes essential.”⁴ Bell also argues that over the past fifty years, “*the culture has taken the initiative in promoting change*, and the economy has been geared to meeting these [End Page 30] new wants.”⁵ But if culture is a coherence that transcends apparent fragmentation, and if it has come to pervade and command the supposedly distinct realm of economics, then Bell does not seem to be respecting his own disjunction of realms.

What Arac calls the “blurriness”⁶ of Bell's argument helps explain, though it does not justify, the subsequent phrase “left conservatism.” In leaving out the word *cultural*—a more precise alternative would have been “cultural conservatives on the Left”—this condensed formulation makes the absent term into the sole arbiter of political identity. The intent behind the phrase may be only to suggest an inconsistency: leftist in one domain, conservative in another. But the noun *conservatism*, having ingested the invisible modifier *cultural*, lords it over the remaining modifier *left*. The effect is to insinuate that the final or fundamental political identity of the person so described is conservative. A cultural conservative, even on the Left, thus stands accused of no longer being a leftist at all. This would be a very silly conclusion to draw about people such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Katha Pollitt, whatever one thinks of their statements about postmodernism or science studies. Pollitt, who describes the pro-impeachment crowd as “Christian crazies, antichoicers, gun lovers and racists,” is not even a conservative in matters of culture.⁷

Unfortunately, the same “everything-is-culture” equation underlies the widespread confidence that if one is progressive in matters of culture, one is a progressive, period. The asymmetrical arrangement of noun and adjective in the phrase “cultural Left,” which need

not be a piece of sarcasm (I use it straight, for instance, in the paragraph above), encourages us to assume that leftist political identity can be firm and substantial even though it is restricted to culture, in other words, unsupported by any taking of sides in matters of economics or politics in the strict sense. If that phrase does not suggest a leftism *only* in the domain of culture, a possible and more humbling interpretation, then it could certainly be seen as a form of self-flattery. Surely it makes no more sense to allow one's position on culture to dictate political identity than it made, once upon a time, to allow that identity to be read off exclusively from a position on the falling rate of profit or the utility of electoral politics. **[End Page 31]**

Or does it? A more moderate or disguised version of “everything is culture” might hold simply that culture can never be properly sealed off from economics or politics. Anyone inclined to argue against Bell's disjunction of realms could suggest that this is why Bell himself did not manage to sustain the disjunction. When Jürgen Habermas labels Bell a neoconservative, for example, it's on the grounds that, after all, these realms are strategically connected. “Neoconservatism,” Habermas writes, “shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization.”⁸ In other words, Bell and other neoconservatives attempt to blame culture for effects that originate not in culture but in capitalism.⁹ It is the scapegoating of culture, made possible by the *apparent* disjuncture of realms, that allows them to protect capitalism itself from radical critique. Thus their cultural politics is not merely cultural. It is a move in a larger political game—a game that encompasses all of these realms but depends on getting as many players as possible to accept the illusion that these realms are separated.

Whether or not the term *neoconservative* properly applies to Bell, this model has been a useful strategy of the Republican Party at least since the Reagan-Bush era, for it permits the Right to gather together in a single party two very divergent constituencies: on the one hand, the Christian, or “family-values,” Right, and, on the other, the interests of big capital. From the point of view of either culture or economics, taken separately, this political union seems self-contradictory. From the perspective of economics, it means that the victims of capitalism are enlisted in support of capitalism. From the perspective of culture, it means that the Republicans can support family values while encouraging social conditions under which family values will be unlivable—conditions under which, as Marx put it, everything solid **[End Page 32]** melts into air. This self-contradiction is veiled from sight by the disjunction of culture and economics, which thus serves as the glue fastening together the victim/victimizer coalition. The success of this strategy, not just in uniting the constituencies of Republican big capital and family values but in winning votes away from the Democrats, is, of course, one of the biggest stories of the so-called culture wars.

This is a reason, that is, for the real, if badly named, phenomenon of “left conservatism.” Provoked by the success of the Right's cultural campaign, many progressives have been tempted to reply in kind; they have sought to win back cultural territory occupied by the

family-values platform by appropriating carefully selected planks. Some were already “embarrassed by or actively hostile to the cultural radical legacy of the sixties,” to quote Ellen Willis, and hence were ready to defend values such as patriotism and the work ethic against critical irreverence and too much attention to foreigners, women, and minorities, in particular.¹⁰ Others have simply found it advantageous to claim a more centrist position by pinning unpopular aspects of the sixties legacy on a bunch of easily denigrated academics, conveniently forgetting all the other constituencies whose hearts and minds have been engaged by “merely cultural” matters. And all progressives are, of course, under some pressure to jettison minority aspirations, including their own, for this is the dark, though perhaps unavoidable, underside of the project the *Nation* calls “building a progressive majority.”

It is also worth speculating that the imitation of neoconservatism by progressives extends even further: that it might be a specific unwillingness or inability to make a socially acceptable case *for socialist economics* that leads would-be builders of a progressive majority to displace their energy into the less-discouraging domain of culture. You don’t see Richard Rorty arguing for radical redistributive policies *in Washington*; he argues it only against the cultural Left, which hardly needs to be converted. (This is rather like Dinesh D’Souza arguing for exclusively need-based affirmative action. **[End Page 33]** If poverty weighs so heavily on him, let him tell his right-wing sponsors about it, not supporters of existing affirmative action; supporters of affirmative action know that it has always aimed at redressing economic injustice.) Perhaps the wannabe left majority, like the Republican leadership, has had its less-laudable reasons for diverting attention from economic inequality to a nostalgic cultural majoritarianism.

Still, this is a strange moment for cultural conservatism. To judge from the congressional elections of November 1998, from the backlash against the now-departed Newt Gingrich and his now-buried Contract with America, and from the stubborn lack of mass support for the Christian Right’s attack on Clinton for lying about consensual sex, a previously invisible majority of American public opinion seems to have turned against the cultural conservatives. If only in relatively good times, economically speaking, it seems to have judged that it does not want private morals to be decisive in public life. It can no longer be relied on to fall for every sex panic that the Right can foment. In other words, the Right’s great cultural offensive seems to have stalled and even to have been pushed back. Rorty argues (in the *Nation*’s “First Principles” series) that the only way for the Left to be successful is “to retrieve the votes of the Reagan Democrats, the bubbas and the high school graduates and dropouts who resent and despise the colleges and universities as much as they resent and despise the politicians.”¹¹ But both high school dropouts and high school graduates voted solidly Democratic in the 1998 elections. They are not the real problem, and we should probably look somewhere closer to home for the sources of the resentment against “the colleges and universities” that Rorty vents (echoed lamely, in the *Nation*’s report on the Left Conservatism workshop, by Patrick Sand’s denunciation of “institutionally credentialed professionals” and their specialized jargon).¹² In November

1998, 59 percent of white men voted Republican to 41 percent Democrat; white Protestants voted Republican 65 percent to 35 percent Democrat; women overall voted 53 percent Democrat to 47 percent Republican, while blacks and Hispanics were overwhelmingly pro-Democratic.¹³ Okay, these groups do not come together in support of exactly the projects we might want. Still, it's clear that an effective majority can be put together with much less than 50 percent of the white male Protestant **[End Page 34]** vote. And it's *not* clear that cultural crowd pleasing directed at the white male Protestant vote, which seems to be what Rorty and company are proposing, would be likely to produce a more progressive majority.

At this historical juncture, indeed, it seems at least as reasonable to try out the opposite argument. To the extent that culture is essential to building a progressive majority, the way to go is perhaps not with the antimodernism of Bell, Christopher Lasch, Jackson Lears, and (for the stodgier members of the younger generation) Thomas Frank but with the ambivalent excitement about capitalism's transformative possibilities expressed by Marx himself. The denial of any natural, biological grounding for identity, which gives concrete form to that excitement and which has been an increasingly influential tenet of the cultural Left from the Progressive Era through the antiracist, antisexist alliances of more recent years, can of course be seen as complicit with capitalism, as certain cultural conservatives would see it. But so is the work ethic. If the latter can be salvaged, there is no doubt other ethical common ground on which both capitalism and the resistance to capitalism can (and must) struggle for supremacy. For example, the same popular acceptance of limited liability that allowed for the invention of the corporation and that has helped corporations escape the grievous consequences of their policies has also helped make the case for the social welfare state, which would have been impossible without a consensus that poverty should no longer be seen as a mark of the individual's moral deficiency. This ethical tendency toward the dispersal or socializing of individual accountability is part of what Bell would call modernism, but it cannot simply be labeled as capitalist. It is also part of the potential for self-critique, self-regulation, and perhaps even self-transcendence that capitalism has let loose. Culturally speaking, socialism will not come from Mars or from an idealized and irretrievable past. As Marx predicted, it will have to come from within capitalism itself, or it will not come at all.

I am suggesting that we take Bell's disjunction of realms seriously at least in the following sense: that we cease to think we can take our political bearings in cultural matters from an unambiguous one-to-one correspondence between culture and capitalism. This means not that culture, politics, and economics are autonomous (Bell himself does not assert such a thing) but that the causal relations among them can run in more than one direction, and that even cultural phenomena that result in large part from extremely undesirable developments in economics—as cosmopolitanism, say, results from globalization—may be politically desirable in any number of ways. It is in this spirit that Arjun Appadurai's classic essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" reprises Bell: "The complexity of the **[End Page 35]** current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics that

we have only begun to theorize.”¹⁴

The Left’s most pressing reason for not wanting to accept this disjuncture of realms is its threat to the very concept of a “Left.” Socialist in economics, liberal in politics, conservative in culture—Bell implies that there are no terms that transcend these divisions, no final or fundamental political identities. Are we ready to accept as normal the sort of inconsistency that is marked by the oxymoron *left conservatism*? Perhaps we have no choice. Consider the issue of immigration, which threatens the budding alliance between intellectuals and the labor movement. Who is to say that a left position domestically will also be a left position internationally? Or the issue of part-time labor, which is very much on the agenda these days for the academic Left. There is no guarantee that a stinging critique of Eurocentrism, say, will mean support for graduate student unionization, or vice versa for that matter. The Yale graduate student strike redrew the lines of Left and Right, and other strikes will probably be doing so again and again as graduate students continue to organize. Many of them are by no means leftists in their intellectual work. Many putatively leftist professors will not be supporting them.

Norberto Bobbio has attempted to save the endangered opposition between Left and Right by realigning it around the criterion of equality.¹⁵ Paraphrasing Bobbio, Perry Anderson writes: “Given that human beings are manifestly at once—that is, in different respects—equal and unequal, ‘on the one side are those who think men are more unequal than equal, while on the other side are those who think them more equal than unequal.’ This is the permanent, underlying contrast between Left and Right. It is accompanied by another. The Left believes that most inequalities are social and eliminable; the Right that most are natural and unalterable. For the first, equality is an ideal; for the second, it is not.” But Anderson shows that this attractive opposition will not stand up to analysis. “The opposition between Left and Right,” he concludes, “has no axiomatic guarantee.”¹⁶ Without any [End Page 36] desire to say so, Anderson seems to agree with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that the Left is a construct. In other words, it has no purely theoretical identity outside of the particular history of conjunctures and disjunctures in which it finds itself.

This is much the same argument that Nancy Fraser makes in her recent debate with Judith Butler. Like Bobbio’s centering of equality in *Left and Right*, Fraser’s recent writings on recognition and redistribution have sought to re-ground and re-center the Left by separating economic from cultural injustice.¹⁷ In a critique entitled “Merely Cultural,” Butler insists, correctly, that cultural wrongs against gays and lesbians also translate into material wrongs.¹⁸ Fraser replies that the harm suffered by homosexuals because of misrecognition is indeed material, but it is not “hardwired in the relations of production.”¹⁹ All that is material is not economic. Economics has its own relative autonomy. To remedy the harm against homosexuals, which is both cultural and material, would not require transforming the economic domain of capitalism. Once it is agreed that culture is material, then harm against homosexuals can safely be called “merely cultural.” Hence the urgency

of a specifically cultural politics: “Change the relations of recognition and the maldistribution would disappear” (283).

In defending “a quasi-Weberian dualism of class and status” (281), Fraser is also, like Bell, defending the differentiation of realms. Fraser accuses Butler, in turn, of “illegitimately generalizing to capitalist societies a feature specific to precapitalist societies: namely, the absence of a social-structural economic/cultural differentiation” (287). Differentiation, a source of inescapable “gaps” (284) between economics and kinship (gaps that are **[End Page 37]** indeed absent from precapitalist society), is, of course, a product of capitalist society. But having been produced by capitalism does not render it a mistake that can and must be rectified. “To historicize” such distinctions, Fraser concludes, is not to make them “nugatory and useless” (287). The urge to totalize the struggles and constituencies of the day into a single opposition of Left and Right is perhaps irresistible, given the stakes, the antagonisms, and the tantalizing economies of scale and effort such simplification holds out. But on the evidence offered by Fraser and Anderson, two of the Left’s staunchest defenders, the only Left we can join seems to be one that recognizes inevitable disjuncture, a Left that is historically contingent down to its very joints.

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Footnotes

- 1.** Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Twentieth Anniversary ed. (1976; reprint, New York: Basic, 1996), xi–xii.
- 2.** Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiii.
- 3.** See Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 2.
- 4.** Bell, *Cultural Contradictions*, xv.
- 5.** Bell, *Cultural Contradictions*, xxv.
- 6.** Arac, *Postmodernism and Politics*, xvi.
- 7.** Katha Pollitt, “Make Love, Not War,” *Nation*, 11/18 January 1999, 11.
- 8.** Quoted in Arac, *Postmodernism and Politics*, xv.
- 9.** According to Arac, Bell does not deserve the charge of neoconservatism. The Right may have borrowed from his 1976 analysis (which never mentions the Republican Party), but unlike the Republicans, Bell announces openly that capitalism itself is responsible for the modernist culture he condemns. Bell abhors the replacement of a disciplined, ascetic ethic of production

—characteristic of one stage of capitalism—by a hedonistic, irreverent ethic of consumption that is characteristic of a later stage. “No limits,” as Bell puts it in his 1978 foreword to *Cultural Contradictions*, “nothing was sacred” (xviii). Though he makes clear that his cultural goal is something like a religious revival, he stops short of blaming culture for an epochal shift whose sources clearly lie in capitalism itself. If he looks to “the effort to recover the sacred,” this is only in the sphere of culture, as an expression of his conservatism in that sphere, and not as a solution to what is happening in the others (Arac, *Postmodernism and Politics*, xxix, xvii).

10. Ellen Willis, letter to *Nation*, 11 May 1998, 2. Another letter on the same page (by Nicholas Sammond) describes as “sloppy” and “intellectually dishonest” the identification of poststructuralism with fundamentalist Christianity in Barbara Ehrenreich and Janet McIntosh’s article “The New Creationists” (*Nation*, 9 June 1997, 11–16). This is not the same as cultural conservatism, but it is well worth saying. Jeffrey Kittay informs me that “The New Creationists” was commissioned and paid for by *Lingua Franca* but was dropped (without any refund of the money) when the authors refused to provide any concrete evidence to back up their rather startling claims—for example, that cultural critics of science “don’t believe in DNA.”

11. Richard Rorty, “First Projects, Then Principles,” *Nation*, 22 December 1997, 19.

12. Patrick Sand, “Left Conservatism?” *Nation*, 9 March 1998, 7.

13. Marjorie Connelly, “A Look at Voting Patterns of 115 Demographic Groups in House Races,” *New York Times*, 9 November 1998, A20.

14. Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

15. Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, trans. Allan Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

16. Perry Anderson, “A Sense of the Left,” *New Left Review* 231 (September/October 1998): 74–75, 81. Anderson breaks down Bobbio’s argument into four different propositions about equality: its factuality (how much of it there is); its alterability; its functionality (whether it helps or hinders the aim of people living together in society); and its directionality (or whether history is tending to increase or decrease it). Anderson objects that there is no necessary connection between how much equality one believes to exist and how much one desires to eliminate it. While the question of how functional one believes inequality to be offers the best way of dividing Left and Right, even that is not foolproof, Anderson notes, in that the existing Left does not deny all functionality to inequality. And the existing Right may well believe (as, for example, Francis Fukuyama does) that history is tending toward ever greater capitalist-induced equality.

17. Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age,” in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11–39.

18. Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *Social Text* 52–53 (fall/winter 1997): 265–77.

19. Nancy Fraser, “Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler,” *Social Text* 52–53 (fall/winter 1997): 283. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically by page number only.

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