It is a great advantage in life to have had a god that failed. Nothing human, and certainly nothing modern, will be alien to you.

Daniel Bell’s god that failed was Marxian socialism. My god that failed was God. When I first met Dan at Harvard in 1979 I had just emerged from the haze of evangelical religious fanaticism that clouded my adolescence and early twenties. I knew and had read nothing except the Bible, which I had absorbed, not studied. There were good teachers in college but no one like Dan, who had a passion for conversation alien to an provincial gentile like myself. I spent a lot of time in his office that year, and the next, mostly listening and taking notes while he digressed from his digressions and gave me my education.

Strangely, I was the only one waiting outside his office for a meeting. I asked some of the sociology graduate students why they didn’t stop by - you learn so much from him, I said. But they avoided Dan, as did his colleagues. The narrow sociology professors felt challenged by his range, and his conviction that to understand a society you must understand more than its economic and political structures, you also needed a grasp of its religion, literature, and visual arts. Of course, no one can achieve total mastery in all these areas, but the aspiration helps to remind the sociologists that he must keep alert to changes in all the
dimensions of social life, especially cultural changes that can't be captured with statistical methods, the opium of the sociological profession. The graduate students, on the other hand, were almost all dogmatic neo-Marxists in the late 1970s. You might have thought that talking to a former Marxist with experience in left-wing politics would have excited them, but that's not how the students saw it. They wanted to invent their own imaginary Marxism and were selective about which historical events and figures they chose to remember. Dan did not flatter them, he challenged them, and they resented that. When they started talking vaguely about Marx, Dan would pull down a volume from the Marx-Engels Collected Works, which was just behind his desk, and quoted passages to them - in German. Their lack of curiosity and dialectical skill astonished us both.

What brought Dan and me together was a common experience: a youthful conversion followed by disillusionment. Dan's political conversion took place at the age of thirteen. That was when he announced to the rabbi preparing him for his bar mitzvah (the Jewish ceremony for adolescent boys) that he was a socialist and no longer believed in God. ("You think God cares?" was the reply.) This is how he described his upbringing in a wonderful autobiographical essay, called "First Love and Early Sorrows," that has never been published in book form:

In 1932, at age thirteen, I joined the Young People's Socialist League, commonly known as the Yipsels, the youth division of the Socialist party. I had grown up in the slums of New York. My mother had worked in a garment factory as long as I could remember; my father had died when I was an infant. All around me I saw the "Hoovervilles," the tin shacks near the docks of the East River where the unemployed lived in makeshift houses and rummaged through the garbage scows for food. Late at night I would go with a gang of other boys to the wholesale vegetable markets on the West Side, to swipe potatoes or to pick up bruised tomatoes in the street to bring home, or to eat around the small fires we would make in the street with the broken boxes from the markets. I wanted to know, simply, why this had to be. It was inevitable that I would become a sociologist.
Dan was never a Communist and had zero illusions about the peasant utopia being constructed on the Great Steppe. A few years after he joined the Young People's Socialist League the Moscow Show Trials began, and not long after that the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed, and not long after that Leon Trotsky lay in a pool of blood in a Mexican villa, an ice pick buried in his skull. Dan's illusions were intellectual and short lived. Growing up in thirties, he felt the need to make sense of a present that made no sense at all. And Marxism made everything connect.

Making it all connect was the grand ambition of the nineteenth-century system builders whose multivolume masterworks on Nature and History now lie unread in library basements. On or about August 1914, that ambition died in Europe - or nearly. While in the arts all that was left of history were shards, Marx, a half-forgotten man in 1914, was given a second life by the unlikely success of the Russian Revolution, and, a decade later, by the discovery of his 1844 Manuscripts, which added a patina of humanism to his unforgiving materialism. An intellectual cult grew up around this archaic nineteenth-century prophet, and for a very short time Dan belonged to it. While he was editing the socialist magazine New Leader during the Second World War he spent evenings in the New York Public Library writing his own systematic work, which would expose corporate capitalism's iron grip on modern society. After writing 150 pages, he threw it away. "Who am I kidding?" he thought, and gave his Marxism a quick, respectful burial.

That experience turned Dan into an engaged Cold War liberal. He was part of the great generation of Western intellectuals - Isaiah Berlin, Raymond Aron, Ralf Dahrendorf, Leszek Kolakowski - who came away from the experience of the first half of the 20th-century with the conviction that political utopianism was to blame, and that a new, more realistic view of human nature and the limits of politics was needed. His opposition to Communist totalitarianism was not only political, though, it was based on the intellectual insight that the nineteenth-century aspiration to interpret society with a single set of laws was in principle misconceived. The world just isn't like that; and besides, the principles
we apply to it are only "conceptual schemes" of our own, they are not laws of Nature or History. Here he shared a great deal with Isaiah Berlin whose response to totalitarianism was to make the philosophical case for a "pluralism" that would recognize the irreducible variety of human ends, the pliability of our nature, the limits of our knowledge, and the unpredictability of history. What Berlin saw as a moral necessity, Daniel Bell saw as a sociological reality.

Yes, the Marxist were right to think that in analyzing society, everything matters. But everything doesn't connect: that was Dan's negative epiphany. In his classic works of sociology, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (1973) and The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976), he showed that modern societies are structurally plural, constituted of different realms - political, technical-economic, cultural - that operate according to different logics, change at different rates, and can conflict with each other. In the first book he marked some major shifts in advanced nations, in particular the shift from manufacturing to a service-based economy, the new role of science based technology, and the creation of a new elite based on education and technical knowledge. But he also noted a new sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction that these changes had brought about:

A technocratic society is not ennobling … . Yet one of the deepest human impulses is to sanctify their institutions and beliefs in order to find a meaningful purpose in their lives and to deny the meaninglessness of death. A post-industrial society cannot provide a transcendent ethic … . The lack of a rooted moral belief system is the cultural contradiction of the society, the deepest challenge to its survival. i

He went even further in Cultural Contradictions, arguing that the culture modern capitalism had produced was itself going to become a strong force of social change, independent of and in tension with the logic of technological change. And how right he was! Over thirty years ago he predicted that acquisitiveness would replace asceticism as the impulse behind economic activity, that law would be separated from moral questions in politics, and that a
counter-culture of modernist nihilism would triumph over bourgeois complacency in the arts. He even went a step further, predicting that aesthetic modernism would exhaust itself through institutionalization and the commodification of the avant-garde attitude. To put it in a phrase, the great contradiction in modern capitalist societies is that anti-bourgeois cultural hedonism is set against bourgeois economic hedonism, and both are at war with the ascetic Protestant ideal capitalism was originally founded on:

This is the cultural dilemma of capitalist society: we see the triumph (albeit tempered) of an adversary "ideology," the emergence of a new class which sustains this ideology, and the collapse of the older value system which was, ironically, undermined by the structural transformation of capitalism itself. The inimical ideology is not the secular socialism of the working class … but the cultural chic of "modernism" which retains its subversive thrust however much it is absorbed by the system. This new class, which dominates the media and the culture, thinks of itself less as radical than "liberal," yet its values, centered on "personal freedom," are profoundly anti-bourgeois. The value system of capitalism repeats the old pieties, but these are now hollow because they contradict the reality, the hedonistic life-styles promoted by the system itself. … The historic justifications of bourgeois society -- in the realm of religion and character -- are gone. … Yet one of the deepest human impulses it to sanctify their institutions and beliefs in order to find a meaningful purpose in their lives and to deny the meaninglessness of death. … This lack of a rooted moral belief system is the cultural contradiction of the society, the deepest challenge to its survival. ii

Dan's new, more complex vision of a pluralistic society was a major advance in modern sociological theory, and an even bigger advance beyond classical Marxism, which denies pluralism in theory. (Communism, of course, denies it in fact, with monstrous results.) But the cultural contradictions of capitalism also
helped to explain the reaction against the counter-culture of the 1960s. In rereading The Post-Industrial Society recently, I was struck by this prescient passage that foresaw exactly what happened in American politics from the 1980s on:

What the counter-culture has done is to extend the double tendencies of cultural modernism and capitalist marketing hedonism initiated sixty years ago. It seeks to take the creed of personal freedom, extreme experience, and sexual experimentation into areas where the liberal culture - which would accept such ideas in art and imagination - is not prepared to go. Yet the liberal culture finds itself at a loss to explain its reticence. It approves a basic permissiveness, but cannot with any certainty define the bounds. And it leaves the moral order in a state of confusion and disarray. For this reason liberalism may yet suffer a reaction. (p. 479)

Which it did in the form of neoconservatism, a political movement Dan had direct experience with. In 1965 Dan and his old friend Irving Kristol, later known as the "godfather of neoconservatism," started a small journal called The Public Interest, which turned out to be one of the most politically influential political publications in post-war American history. Dan and Kristol had been classmates at City College and belonged to the same group of young anti-communist intellectuals, who had daily debates with Stalinist students in the college cafeteria. In the mid-1960s they were prominent Cold War liberals on the New York scene (Dan had just published The End of Ideology) but were becoming disturbed by changes in American life - the decay of cities, crime, pornography, drug use, the rising divorce rate, violence in schools - and the inability of liberals and the Democratic Party to face up to them. Countless social welfare programs had been created by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, but it was unclear that any of them actually reduced the problems they were intended to. Liberals were dogmatically attached to these programs, had utopian expectations for them, and wouldn't listen to reason - or so Dan and Kristol thought. So they began The
Public Interest as a modest effort to publish sober and well-researched articles on domestic politics and public policy, and hopefully find better solutions. iii As they stated in the first issue, "The aim of THE PUBLIC INTEREST is at once modest and presumptuous. It is to help all of us, when we discuss issues of public policy, to know a little better what we are talking about- and preferably in time to make such knowledge effective."

Though the magazine's circulation was miniscule it had enormous influence in Washington, since it was the only journal of its kind. But as the years passed, the campus exploded, and cities deteriorated further, Kristol became more pessimistic and began to think that perhaps American liberalism itself was misconceived. He began to work with new writers - labeled "neoconservative" - who rejected the principles of the welfare state, thought regulations and taxes were stifling economic growth, and that social institutions like marriage and religion needed to be protected against liberal individualism. This change displeased Dan and he resigned as co-editor of the magazine in 1973, turning the task over to his other old friend, the sociologist Nathan Glazer. In the early 1980s, as the magazine began promoting Reagan Republicanism and became more ideological in tone, he also resigned from the magazine's governing board.

In Dan's view, The Public Interest had been founded to resist narrow, passionate ideologies - which is exactly what neoconservatism had become. Kristol had changed his mind about ideology and now considered it a necessary political tool; as he once quipped, "you can't beat a horse with no horse." But Dan always remained true to his original principles. I know this from experience, since Dan got me a job at The Public Interest in 1980 and I worked there for four years, following the neoconservative line. In those years I would occasionally write severe reviews of books by liberals and send them to Dan, who would send me long critical letters in return. He found my writing superficial, sometimes in bad taste, and haughty. "You are speaking like a king on a throne," he once wrote to me, "and you don't even have a throne!" I thought he had political objections to what I wrote, but politics was not the issue for Dan. It was intellectual comportment: how to read a book, how to address a problem, choosing the right level and tone for criticism. It took me some time to see that and realize what he
was defending in his letters. It was the same set of intellectual values he had been
defending his whole life, against the Stalinists, against the radical right, against
the student rioters, against the smug academic left. That is why people always
had trouble "placing" him politically, most recently the journalists who wrote his
obituaries. They didn't understand that Dan was not dogmatically committed to
any narrow political ideas or program, he was an intellectual who believed the
intellectual's task is to be alert and not falsify the complexity of the world. The
moment I understood that I ceased to be a neoconservative. iv

For all their variety and range, Dan's books were all inspired by a single
psychological question: why in the twentieth century did so many, for so long,
invest so much in Marx and the murderous regimes he inspired? Why did class
warfare and revolutionary violence thrill rather than disgust them? What was the
attraction of belonging to an intellectual elite that possessed a concealed truth?
This is what our conversations over thirty years always seemed to turn to. When
Dan wrote about "the end of ideology" in the sixties he only meant the failure of
the Marxist tradition to make sense of contemporary society. His real subject,
from the fifties onward, was actually the persistence of ideology, its
polymorphous perversity, and its deep affinities with the psychodynamics of
religion. Max Weber once called himself "religiously unmusical," which was a
brave thing to say because it was true. Dan had the theological equivalent of
perfect pitch, a very rare thing.

His perspective on modern ideology was distinctly Jewish. It's striking that
Christian writers who have explored it - Dostoevsky, Conrad, Milosz - have
written stories about lone individuals grappling with a secular faith. Dan was a
New York Jew who saw religion as primarily a social experience. And he took
from Jewish experience the conviction that a society can give individuals a secure
sense of meaning only if it gives them a secure sense of belonging to a
community rooted in time. Religion does that explicitly, but it can also be
accomplished through a secular sense of "the sacred," a shared understanding of
what is of ultimate value, of obligations that must be met and lines that must
never be crossed. Every healthy society, in Dan's view, needs some sort of
orthodoxy.
But orthodoxies are inherently unstable. Something in the soul resists limits and the tyranny of time, and seeks release in transgression or transcendence. Every orthodoxy brings in its train heterodoxies and heresies that would destroy it; the more rigid the orthodoxy, the more they are likely to prevail. "It is a profound truth that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing." That was how Gershom Scholem, whose books left a deep mark on Dan's thinking, and my own, explained the persistence of the messianic urge in Jewish history. And it is how Dan came to see the occult power of political messianism in the modern West, and the attraction of Marxism in particular, an ideology that gave its adepts both the thrill of transgression against bourgeois propriety, and blessed assurance of eschatological redemption through revolution.

Dan once made a case study of the Marxist writer George Lukacs, one of the best essays he ever wrote. For him, Lukacs was an exemplary twentieth-century figure: a well-off Budapest Jew and Nietzschean aesthete who joined the Communist party in 1918, he then served as a commissar in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, touting the gospel that "terror and bloodshed are a moral duty." He loathed the bourgeois beyond all measure and loved the Party even more. Despite years of abject exile in Stalin's Moscow avoiding purges (it's estimated that 80 percent of the Hungarian exiles in the Soviet Union were murdered), and despite the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, he never lost his faith in Communism, telling an interviewer just before his death that "the Russian Revolution was the world historical solution to my dilemma" and that "even the worst socialism is better than the best capitalism." This was in 1971, when the New Left in English and American universities was just discovering his works and elevating him to the office of prophet. Dan found nothing surprising in that turn. "The secret of Lukac's appeal to the Western intelligentsia," he wrote, "is the concealed history of heresy, the repudiation of common sense and conventional morality, and the creation of an esoteric doctrine and a Gnostic faith for an inner elite." Besides, "what mystagogue is not also a military commander in his dreams?"

Dan's anti-Marxism did not, however, turn him into a reactionary. Reading the obituaries published after his death, it's striking how hard the writers found it to
put a political label on him. They simply should have called him a liberal pluralist. This is how he defined himself in "First Love and Early Sorrow":

Having Lived through - as an observer with God's grace, rather than as a victim - the Nazi frenzies and the Stalinist purges, the Holocaust and the Gulag, the calculated decimation of an educated class in Cambodia and the gleeful butchery of different tribes in Uganda, all of which has made this the most dreadful century in human history, I long ago came to fear the masses in politics and those who would whip up the passions of the mob "in the name of the people," as was once done in the name of God. I have always thought myself a Socialist in economics, in that I have argued the principle that the resources of the community, as a first lien, need to be used to satisfy the "basic needs" of all (and the concept of "basic needs" is not that ambiguous; it is that which is below the "discretionary income" of the middle-class purse). And because I cherish deeply the cords of continuity that a tradition can provide, as against the syncretism which indiscriminately jumbles all cultures, I am a conservative in culture. And as for politics: if there is any lesson to be learned from this dreadful century, it is that ideological politicis, politics à outrance - the politics should in the name of the people which, as Groucho Marx once observed, seeks power for those who shout "power to the people" - destroys the people and often those who shout as well. The ethic of responsibility, the politics of civility, the fear of the zealot and the fanatic - and of the moral man willing to sacrifice his morality in the egoistic delusion of total despair - are the maxims that have ruled my intellectual life.

It's impossible for me to calculate how much I owe Dan, but these particular lessons stand out. I learned that what converts seek in faith is warmth, not light, and that when scales fall from eyes, harder, more opaque ones grow back in. I learned that an epiphany is not an argument, it is a license, usually to destroy. And I learned that when belief in a divinity gives way, a reserve army of idols stands ready to take its place - ideas, dogmas, leaders, movements. Aren't these
lessons a preparation for modern history? Aren't they a preparation for the present? The end of ideology will not take place; that's why Daniel Bell's writings will always be contemporary.

i Coming of post-industrial society, p. 480.


iii The magazine never published articles on foreign policy, which is what people today associate with the term "neoconservatism." In the mid-80s Kristol started a separate magazine called The National Interest, which became the major foreign policy journal for the neoconservative movement.

iv Later I was privileged to join Dan in a different publishing venture, Correspondence magazine, which he founded in the mid-90s with Mazakazu Yamazaki and German sociologist Wolf Lepenies, then director of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. The magazine's mission was to foster exchange between Asian, American, and European intellectuals and keep them informed of social and cultural developments outside of their geographical region.