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Wendell Bell: The futurist who would put my grandmother in prison

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ABSTRACT

Wendell Bell made major contributions to futures studies, and to my own understanding of the field, by helping establish the knowledge base of the field; developing the foundational concept “images of the future”; focusing on the ethical dimensions of futures studies; insisting there is a futures field that should be nurtured; and proposing an interesting use for “equal opportunity” and “affirmative action” laws in the US criminal justice system.

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Wendell had a profound influence on my futures thinking very early on when I read his essay, “Images of the future: theory and research strategies” [1]. I was of course familiar with Fred Polak’s seminal book on the subject, *The image of the future*, in its original cumbersome translation from the Dutch in 1961, before Elise Boulding’s much more accessible translation in 1973 [2]. And I had also read Kenneth Boulding’s provocative statement, *The Image*, in the early 1960s [3]. But it was Bell and Mau that really enabled me to see the centrality of “images of the future” to the entire futures enterprise. That understanding has been the basis of my teaching, research and consulting ever since, and I thank him for it [4].

There are several other aspects of Bell’s life and work that stand out for me.

One was Bell’s public debates with Michael Marien over whether there was a futures field or not [5]. Bell insisted there was and is, and Marien insisted there was not—even though for almost all of his life, Marien earned his living by publishing one of the most important resources for any futurist—*Future Survey*. Every year I told my futures graduate students that if they could only afford one futures publication that it should be *Future Survey*. It served as the starting point of much of my own futures research. I am forever in Marien’s debt for that.

Nonetheless, Marien could justify his argument that the futures field did not exist in part by showing how little of the work of people who Wendell and I thought were exemplars of the futures field ever had their publications summarized in *Future Survey*. This had to be a self-fulfilling prophecy since it was Michael who determined what was included in *Future Survey*, and he chose very few of the items published in the journals of the futures field, such as *Futures*, *Foresight*, *Futures Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Futures Studies*, *On the Horizon*, and *Technology Assessment and Social Change*. And he absolutely refused to include articles in the many futures journals not published in English, even though much excellent futures work is done not only in Australia, New Zealand, The UK, Canada and the US, but also all around the world. Moreover, he ignored material published by the many futures consulting firms, such as the Institute for Alternative Futures or The Institute for the Future. I felt that only by surveying mainstream and popular publications, and ignoring where much futures material actually is reported, could he conclude that the field did not exist.

By the same criterion—by refusing to survey most of what is in scholarly journals and reports, and only relying on what appears in the popular press—he could have concluded that no other academic field exists either—from anthropology to zoology.

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OK. I have gone too far here, and suspect that Marien will want to rebut again, and so we will be back to where Wendell and Michael often were, to no avail. But I salute Bell for patiently stating his arguments over and over again that the futures field is alive and well, though of course not nearly as lively and widespread as it should be [6].

One of the main features of Bell's work has been to focus on the ethical aspects of futures. He has been tireless in trying to call the attention of the futures community to the ethical implications of their work and the necessity for their assuming responsibility for it. I very much agree that futurists need, if not a "code of ethical conduct", at least seriously and continuously to engage in discussion and reflection on the ethical implications of their work [7].

Where Wendell and I differ is about the basis of that discussion. Without in any way being intolerant or dogmatic, Bell nonetheless seems to believe there is Truth with a capital T and Evil with a capital E. He does not favor the postmodern ethical relativity that has dominated much of academia recently. He especially feels this is important for the futures community whose views and statements may influence the lives of others [8].

One of Bell's most important contributions to the futures field is his two volume work *Foundations of Futures Studies* [9]. Along with Richard Slaughter and Sohail Inayatullah, Bell has done more than anyone else to establish the "knowledge base" of the futures field and to give it academic and intellectual respectability. However, Bell was not content to establish the knowledge base alone. He also wanted to make it very clear that—unlike typical academic or applied fields—futures studies must have an ethical, values basis as well. It was his insistence on this, as I understand it, that explains why his important contribution was rejected by mainstream presses that would have advertised and sold it more widely. I believe there was acceptance of his description of the rise and current status of futures studies in volume one, but great concern over the length and substance of the ethical/values content of volume two. Bell insisted he would not publish the former without the latter—that, indeed, the values discussion was more important than the mere facts of the futures field. While I am far from being a postmodernist in many aspects of the position, I too felt the second volume went where it need not have gone, but of course I fully supported—and admired—Bell's insistence on it.

But what will always stand foremost in my memory is the first time I met Wendell Bell in person, and heard him speak.

Wendell Bell is a tall, patrician, distinguished-looking person—exactly what a Yale University professor should look like in the mind of a scruffy-looking guy like myself perched on the most remote academic twig in the cosmos at the University of Hawaii. If anyone should have succeeded the stately Eleonora Masini as president of the World Futures Studies Federation it was Wendell Bell. Not only does he have impeccable, pioneering academic credentials in the futures field, but he also is a giant in his original academic base, sociology. Bell not only looks like a president, he also acts like one. His is a commanding and yet utterly humane and compassionate presence. You have to like and trust him on first sight, and after hearing him talk with a great combination of rolling phrases, scholarly rigor, ethical passion, and mildly sardonic humor, you love him on first sound as well.

So I was very impressed as soon as Bell stood up to speak to a group composed largely of police, prison, and parole officers, along with several academics concerned with law enforcement and incarceration, and a few futurists at a meeting on "The Future of Corrections", sponsored by the US National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, at a motel near Dulles airport in Chantilly, Virginia, on October 23, 1978 [10].

Bell started out by reminding everyone in the room of something that they all knew very well—that young, poor, black (the politically correct term of the day) males were far more likely to be in prison than their percentage in the American population would predict. He read off the numbers at the time and observed that the "probabilities of getting these differences by chance are so small as to be inconceivable" (p. 18).

How small? "[I]ncomprehensibly smaller than one out of a million. They are smaller than 10 to the minus 200,000" (*loc. cit.*).

It is likely that few in the room indeed could comprehend that magnitude of injustice. Some were perhaps outraged by the difference while others perhaps felt that even more young black males should be in prison than already were.

Bell went on to remind us that the criminal "justice" system can also be understood as a criminal "processing" system involving some or all the following steps: alleged "commission of a crime, report to the police, investigation, arrest, booking, initial appearance, preliminary hearing, arraignment, trial, sentencing, fine, probation, jail or penitentiary, parole, revocation of parole and...some way out of the system" (p. 20). At every step in the process, if you were a young, black, male, you were far—far—more likely to be sent to the next stage than if you were not.

Indeed, the statistics worked in reverse as well: if you were old, white and/or female you almost certainly were a stranger to the criminal processing system. Women were vastly under-represented at each step, most dramatically in prison. So were upper class, professional white men.

How could that be?

Quoting material from the President's Commission on Law, Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, Bell stated that there is "no evidence that disproportionate amounts of criminal behavior occur at one status level or another" (*loc. cit.*). Rich and poor, young and old, black and white, men and women—they all commit crimes in about equal degrees. And yet those who are questioned, arrested, brought to trial, convicted, sentenced, and imprisoned overwhelming represent only a fraction of the number of Americans who actually commit crimes.

Why?

While everyone in the room knew that racism was most likely the underlying case for these differences, Bell cleverly did not mention that at all. Rather, he observed that people at "all socio-economic status levels commit crimes. The difference is in the type of crime committed" not the act of crime itself (*loc. cit.*). The "nation has deployed its law enforcement officials

differentially to deal with certain types of...crimes, rather than the crimes of corporations and other criminal acts of the middle and upper classes. Who goes to prison depends primarily on the types of crimes at which we aim our efforts of crime control" (*loc. cit.*).

That clearly is not fair. A crime is a crime. It is not fair to be harsh on some and not on others, especially when, as a consequence, certain categories of people are overwhelmingly in prison while other categories of people who break the law are scarcely even arrested or convicted, much less imprisoned, at all. America is a nation founded on equality—at least equality of opportunity. So let's be fair. Let us correct this injustice!

So far, Wendell Bell was being a good sociologist. It is at this point that he revealed his genius as a futurist.

He noted that in recent decades (the 1960s and 1970s), categories of people who had been historically and currently discriminated against in opportunities for education and employment had been successful in getting legislation passed—and enforced—under the labels of “equal opportunity” and “affirmative action” that gave them a better chance of being admitted/hired than they might have had otherwise. Women, blacks and other minorities used the new rules to move into arenas to which they had long aspired but had long been denied. The laws required that women and minorities be given an “equal opportunity” and, when candidates are equal, the boost of an “affirmative action”.

This change had been a very long time coming—since the Civil War and the end of slavery in the US in the 1860s for minorities, and at least since the Suffragette Movement in the late 19th century for women. The change in the laws in the 1960s was the result of patient and careful organizing and education on the one hand, and long and often bloody confrontations on the other. Since race and gender discrimination had been legally and brutally enforced throughout the United States for so long in the past, it seemed fair to help qualified women and people of color gain entrance to schools and jobs without thereby being unfair to white men who themselves might think they are personally innocent of racial or gender bias.

Bell reasoned that if equal opportunity and affirmative action worked with education and employment, then why not apply that same principle to the criminal processing system? In that case, at each step of the criminal processing system, the administering officer should strive to see that the pool of persons moving to the next step fairly represents their numbers in the overall population.

Thus, for example, a judge on sentencing day would have before him information about all the people convicted of crimes. He also would have information about the people currently in prison. His task, therefore, was to try to see that the population of prisoners fairly represented the population of non-prisoners. Thus, a judge might skip over young, black males since they were grossly over-represented in prison, and look for older, white females—perhaps my grandmother—to sentence to prison, there being so few white grandmothers in prison.

Wendell Bell, in good futures form, presented a scenario of how that change might come to pass, and what the consequences of that change might be.

He was speaking in 1978, but his speech was not published until 1983 (with what changes, I do not know). So his scenario in the published essay began with the US Supreme Court in 1985 requiring the criminal justice system to come up with “affirmative action plans to eliminate the racial and social class biases presently existing within the population of incarcerated persons...” The Court required that the guidelines give “specific targets of proportional representation for population distributions of race, education, employment status, occupation and income” (*loc. cit.*).

In Bell's scenario, the Supreme Court also said that white collar crimes should be prosecuted as vigorously as other crimes, beginning a long list of such crimes with “credit card fraud, credit purchases without intention to pay, bankruptcy fraud, home improvement loan fraud, violation of Federal Reserve Board regulations regarding margin requirements in stock purchases, commercial bribery or kickbacks, income tax evasion, fee splitting by doctors or lawyers, embezzlement, putting unqualified relatives on government payrolls, ‘sweetheart contracts’ entered into by union officials, false travel expenses or per diem claims, anti-trust violations” (p. 21)... and on and on at considerable length (note the stock margin provision. In the 1970s, this requirement regulated one of the many fiscal actions that were decriminalized by the US government during the Greed Is Good days from the 1980s onward, leading, as many of us warned, to the recent economic collapse. Ah the good old days, indeed).

Bell lists in his scenario the many advantages that accrued as a result of the Supreme Court's requirements in 1985. One of the most dramatic is that the criminal justice system began making money because of what it recovered from white collar criminals. Another is that theft and violent crimes decreased as members of the lower classes began to feel the justice system was now fair, and no longer weighted entirely against them.

Bell extended his scenario to 1990/2000 showing that crime of all kinds declined sharply along with the number of persons in prisons and the length of sentences, so that fewer prisons were built and many older ones demolished. Most startlingly, prison life itself now became much more humane, tolerable, and indeed ameliorative as the quality of prisoners themselves improved and their numbers decreased. Indeed, for the most part, hard time was reserved for that tiny number of men and women who “must remain in prison a long time—perhaps their entire lives—because they have proven their dangerousness to others and an unwillingness—or inability—to change” (p. 22).

However, as a good futurist, Bell also made it clear that there are alternative futures, and he admitted that his preferred future “may not be highly probable, since it involves some contradictions with current penal practices and appears to run against present public fears about street crimes”. One alternative future he feared was a “repressive reaction that would embark us on a wave of costly prison construction and a civil war of law enforcement against crimes committed by lower-class whites and minorities...” (p. 23). This is of course what actually happened, and so America stands Number One in the

world in the percentage of its population in prison. “The United States has less than 5 percent of the world’s population. But it has almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners. Indeed, the United States leads the world in producing prisoners, a reflection of a relatively recent and now entirely distinctive American approach to crime and punishment. Americans are locked up for crimes—from writing bad checks to using drugs—that would rarely produce prison sentences in other countries. And in particular they are kept incarcerated far longer than prisoners in other nations” [11]. Moreover, the absence of the “affirmative action” policies that Bell proposed meant that the biased nature of the American criminal processing system only got worse: now, “one in 11 African-Americans, or 9.2 percent, are under correctional control, compared with one in 27 Latinos (3.7 percent) and one in 45 whites (2.2 percent). Only one out of 89 women is behind bars or monitored, compared with one out of 18 men” [12].

Unfortunately, none of this is surprising, either in prospect at the time or in retrospect now. Bell reports that after he finished his presentation in 1978, “a corrections official turned to me and said, “I really liked your paper. It shows how ridiculous the whole idea of affirmative action is anyway” (p. 23). And so the tragedy that is this aspect of American society continues to unfold.

The longer I have been in the futures business, the more I have felt like a member of the chorus in a Greek play: many of us have been able to see rather clearly what was happening, and why, and to warn folks well in advance about the impending consequences of their actions. But for the most part, we have been helpless to influence the flow of events. We could see that a train wreck was immanent, but could only stand and wail at what was inevitable.

This is the very definition of a tragedy.

T. S. Eliot wrote that “only the fool, fixed in his folly, may think he can turn the wheel on which he turns.”

Nonetheless, I—and I think Wendell Bell—have been and still are such fools. We keep pointing and wailing and hoping folks will act ethically and prudently, all the while trying to improve the ability of the futures community to see, point, wail, and hope.

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