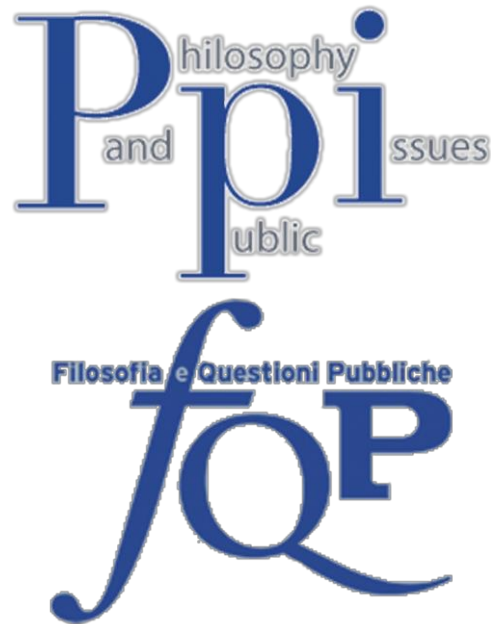# MODELLING MERITOCRACY. DEMOCRATIC TRANSFERENCES AND CONFUCIAN ASSUMPTIONS IN *THE CHINA MODEL*

BY

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Modelling Meritocracy
Democratic Transferences and
Confucian Assumptions in
The China Model

Juan Canteras and Javier Gil

In his book *The China Model*, Daniel A. Bell argues for the efficacy and the legitimacy of current Chinese meritocracy.[1] According to Bell, the way of selecting top political leaders based on merits and proven capacities has been one key to China's (and Singapore's) astonishing economic growth over the last decades, but this meritocratic tendency in the contemporary Chinese system deeply relates to the Confucian political culture. Certainly, Confucianism is the school of literates, of Ru scholars and of the Mandarins, i.e. the rulers and public servants appointed by competitive examinations. The officials' appointment system was first implemented during Emperor Wu regency in the 2nd Century B.C. Since then, the selection of ministers and officials characterized China's meritocratic structures. Nevertheless, Bell´s sympathy towards Confucianism is not limited to the institutional arrangements and procedures it can inspire nowadays. During his academic years in China, he has

turned from admiring the Confucian system´s ability to achieve 'good outcomes', to substantively assuming the Confucian notions of 'the good'. As he plainly recognizes, Bell has become a Confucian himself.[2]

In the first two sections of this article, we will discuss some philosophical assumptions that support Bell's attachment to political Confucianism. On our interpretation, the procedural innovations and institutional designs proposed in *The China Model* mobilize a whole series of substantial and comprehensive views. Indeed, Bell's arguments are intertwined with a series of ethical, aesthetic, pedagogical, anthropological and ontological notions that place the model within the Chinese Confucian tradition. The harmony-centered worldview consistently upheld by this tradition does not have room for the prevalence of election and competitive multiparty politics in Western democracies. In the third section we will defend the claim that much of Bell's suspicion of electoral democracy (just as so many Chinese thinkers, politicians and citizens) comes from the harmonist socio-political ideal and not only from the ruinous deficits of the Western regimes that he analyses in the first chapter of his book. Certainly, democracy in the history of the West cannot be understood without its agonistic and deliberative dimensions. On our view, the harmonistic core of Bell's meritocracy highlights his assimilation of the success of the participatory and direct democracy experiments undertaken by the Chinese government during the last decades, with processes of public information, consultation, deliberation and decision. Consequently, in the third section of this paper we will discuss the sophisticated integration of the notion of deliberation in Bell's China Model, and, in the

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[2] Daniel A. Bell, *China´s New Confucianism. Politics and Every Day Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapter 9.

fourth section, its onto-political incompatibies with the agonistic model of democracy defended by Chantal Mouffe. Finally, we will cast some doubts on the supposed universality and the expected transference of the Chinese 'Model'. We suspect that Bell's proposal is so strongly framed within a narrow sociopolitical context and aligned with culturally thick views that it is highly questionable whether it could also work as a standard to be implemented in a wide range of different contexts.

I

Confucian Harmonism

The China Model advocates for a political reform that aims to strengthen and expand the meritocratic features of contemporary Chinese institutions. A 'model' is offered because those features are supposed to serve as an example for other countries in the belief that 'Western democracies can be improved by incorporating more meritocratic institutions and practices' (p. 3). Bell holds that the benefits of such reforms concern matters that could easily raise wide agreements, 'some standards of good government that should not be too controversial', such as the assertion that 'the government should try to structure the economy so that the benefits do not accrue only (or mainly) to a small group of rich people, leaders should not enact policies that wreck the environment for future generations, and the political system should not poison social relations and unduly penalize those who seek harmonious ways of resolving conflict' (p. 19). Assuming that wide agreements about 'the common good' can be made, it is all about deciding which institutional devices, be they democratic or meritocratic, prove to be more able to produce the best outcomes.

However, previous works by this author show that his turn towards Confucianism does not only involve the adoption of meritocratic procedures, but also, and firstly, a series of substantive choices on ethical, aesthetical, anthropological and pedagogical issues. Let us give an example. In *China's New Confucianism*, Bell recreates a debate between Confucius as a university professor and 'an American-trained Chinese liberal thinker' that has a Socratic perspective on learning and education[3]. In the imaginary dialogue, the memoristic and hierarchical education of Confucianism is confronted with the critical and autonomous methods of the Socratic maieutic. Bell makes a considerable effort to defend the virtues of the former approach, by disconnecting it as much as possible from the authoritarian image that any liberal tends to associate with it. Previously, the whole second part of *Beyond Liberal Democracy* had vigorously and widely argued that the tradition of Confucian thinking about education may have some merit in the contemporary world[4]. In the second chapter of *The China Model*, Bell largely recommends the reintroduction of the Confucian Classics in the education and selection of good leaders because "the classics are a rich repository of cultural knowledge about how to act well in politics (and society more generally)" (p. 89). Pedagogical considerations such as the role of history and arts in the ethical and aesthetical cultivation of the wise leaders or the value of 'humility' for the formation of student's character show that Bell's political proposal has larger implications than a mere reorganization of the political institutions. Certainly, a reform aimed at promoting deep, global and long-term cultural changes

[3] *Ibid.*, chapter 7.
[4] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy. Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

needs to start by creating the conditions in the background educational context.

One of the central concepts of *The China Model* is that of 'harmony', which was also central in his earlier works. In the aforementioned dialogue on education, Bell's critique of critical thinking responds to the evidence that liberal and maieutic approaches undermine the value of harmony, since they provoke discordance and favour egocentric quarrels among the students. According to him, the exacerbation of criticism makes students adopt belligerent attitudes even before they had the opportunity to achieve a real understanding of the issues in question. The urgency in expressing criticism prevents students from developing sound beliefs and mature opinions and gives cause for pedantic disputations instead of contributing to strengthen a disciplined and robust thinking. Against the insistence of the maieutic approaches on the students' self-esteem, Bell emphasizes on the contrary the cultivation of 'humility'. Humility is presented here both as a sort of harmonistic counterpart and as a correction of a dialectical pedagogical approach.

Drawing on a Confucian sensibility, Bell also locates the value of art, and particularly music, in its enabling of an aesthetic experience of harmony. The moral and political implications of this are obvious and directly inspired by the Confucian classics: 'Confucians have long emphasized the moral benefits of music… Precisely because of its effect in breaking down class barriers and generating feelings of emotional bonding, the right sort of music is essential for harmony and social stability'.[5]

[5] Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 63-64. Bell does not hesitate to apply these ideas to

In *The China Model*, the concept of harmony is presented in its more strictly political dimension. The importance attached to it comes to the foreground in the assertion that the 'Confucian-inspired view is that people have a fundamental interest in leading harmonious lives, and hence the government ought to prioritize social harmony' (p. 234, note 145). Likewise, it can be gauged by examining the Harmony Index (in the first appendix published on line) 'that ranks countries according to how well they do at promoting four different types of social relations characterized by peaceful order and respect for diversity [and that] can be used to judge social progress (and regress) in China and elsewhere' (p. 10). In contrast to other indexes that highlight human development or democratic indicators,[6] such an interpretation of social progress translated into levels of harmony again makes it clear that Bell's model does not only take from Confucianism the 'instruments' or 'consequentialist tools' for achieving 'good results', but, beforehand, the comprehension of 'the good' itself. The question underlying the quantitative measurements of this exclusive index is whether the election of harmony as a unilateral or overriding indicator of social progress belong to these matters 'that should not be too controversial' (p. 19). Obviously, a series of highly controversial issues and values that involve cultural backgrounds and historical heritages are involved in such a choice.

Maybe the transversal character of the notion of harmony in all these (pedagogical, aesthetical, anthropological, ethical and

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contemporary sociological matters like contemporary karaoke-style prostitution; see *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

[6] See for instance the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy index, where China ranks 3.14 over 10 and is qualified as an 'authoritarian regime': https://infographics.economist.com/2017/DemocracyIndex/.

political) areas reveals Bell's complete assimilation to Confucianism. In fact, he does not only admire the historical effectiveness of Confucian institutions but also embraces the very values and presuppositions of the Confucian worldview. Moreover, the priority of social harmony over freedom or equality highlights that the case by Bell and other Neo-Confucians against democracy cannot be understood just as the outcome of indexings for measuring and comparing 'social progress' among different countries. It is above all the coherentist and comprehensive conception of harmony as the greater good that raises their disagreement and discomfort with the political life of Western-style democracies.

II

Harmonism and Hierarchy

From the Confucian-inspired ideal of harmony, 'electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict' (p. 54). Confrontations may be unavoidable to some extent, but they are not something that the system has to encourage. On the contrary, election campaigns, candidates' struggles and militant opposition between members and groups inside and outside the parliament are viewed as highly undesirable and alien encroachments, because competitive elections 'instead of allowing for the flourishing of human goodness that underpins social harmony, almost counteract human nature by allowing for, if not encouraging, the demonization of political opponents' (p. 58).

The inherent agonistic nature of democracy is not welcomed by the Confucian harmonistic sensibility. However, it has not been widely considered as undesirable in itself in the Western tradition, but very often as a major virtue of democracy. Unlike

Bell[7], many authors before him have positively valued the strong connections that the Athenian political culture held with sports competition and war. Amongst modern political philosophers, Hannah Arendt famously understood Greek democratic culture as agonistic and this political agonism as a way of differentiating genuine democratic equality from the disturbing 'homogeneity' of modern mass societies:

> This modern equality, based on conformism, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity. To belong to the few 'equals' (*homonoi*) meant to be permitted to live among one's peers; but the public realm itself, the *polis*, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*).[8]

Agonism is constitutively present in Greek political thought and action, and it also pervades Ancient Greek culture. Many authors have noted that it shapes philosophy as a whole. For instance, in the geophilosophical view of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the socio-conceptual order of the polis, unlike the 'Eastern empires', was not vertical in accordance with theo-political hierarchies. Democracy was rather the political system of the 'friends-rivals' and the relation of equality and competition between free citizens laid in turn the horizontal conditions of the philosophical argumentation. In their words, 'if we really want to say that philosophy originated with the Greeks, it is because the city, unlike the empire or the state, invents the agon as the rule of

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[7] See the fifth chapter of *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, where Bells claims that "a comparison with physical education in ancient China may cast doubt upon the virtues of democratic-inspired physical education as well as the ideal of active citizenship more generally" (p. 121).

[8] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 41.

the society of 'friends', of the community of free men as rivals (citizens)'.[9]

While horizontality is the condition of the agonistic relations that ruled the ancient Greek polis, Confucianism erects vertically hierarchical relations. In contrast to the egalitarian relations of the polis and the foundation of democratic agonism, hierarchical organization is the precondition of the harmonious relations throughout Confucian society. The idea of harmony is as attached to hierarchy as the democratic idea of equality is attached to rivalry.

In this regard, the Ancient Confucian doctrine of virtues is revealing. For Confucius and his followers, society is interwoven and stable thanks to the action of five human relations: those between ministers and officials, those between husbands and wives, those between parents and descendants, those between older and younger siblings and those between friends. A single virtue is needed to interpret and judge the degree of correction achieved by any given relation: *ren*, frequently translated as 'humanity' and, sometimes, just as simple 'kindness'. This virtue oscillates between two senses, depending on the direction of the relationship that is being considered: ren means benevolence and protection (if descending) and respect and loyalty (if ascending). Thus, the father should protect the son and be benevolent with him, while the son should obey his father and be loyal to him. The husband must protect the wife and be benevolent to her, while the wife must respect her husband and be loyal to him, etc. But it becomes apparent that something is underdetermined in this scheme of virtues. Unlike the other pairs (husband/wife, minister/official, etc.), the pair friend/friend seems to reflect or

[9] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 9.

to establish (at least in principle) a relation between equals. Many differences are obviously possible, but none of them can be deduced from the mere relation of friendship. As a result, friendship arranges itself according to a horizontal disposition that keeps *ren* in a virtual and undecided state. How to tell and judge the top-down and bottom-up aspects of a friendship relationship? How to decide about its correct distribution? How to allocate protection and obedience, benevolence and loyalty? Even though Confucius himself believed that this kind of relation is a fundamental one, it introduces a decisive change of direction in the system of virtues that threatens to undermine it. Being the horizontal relation par excellence between the citizens of the Athenian polis, friendship withdraws from the Confucian scheme and introduces an anomaly into it. Confucianism can offer nuanced descriptions of certain social relations around the axis of benevolence and obedience, but its harmonistic approach faces a limit when it comes to the political interpretation of friendship. As a consequence of its harmonism, Confucian virtues can only be completely practised and unfolded from within unequal and hierarchical relations.

III

Democracy, Meritocracy, and Deliberation

The hierarchical organization of society can be implemented in many ways, and the Western world has tested some of them. In European Middle Age societies, hierarchy reached an ontopolitical status that would probably beat the strictest of the Confucian materializations. At the level of the theory, the Christian ontotheology projected it onto the orders of reality, including of course the 'angelical hierarchies'. The specificity of the Chinese system rests on the fact that Confucian hierarchy has

been organized, since an early stage of the empire, as a long-standing and (at least partially) as a meritocratic one. Confucian verticalism exhibits, therefore, singular features from the point of view of normativity and legitimation. Meritocracy preserves the hierarchical principle and at the same time structures the access to power according to rational, transparent and arguably fair principles. To some degree, the Chinese Mandarinate established a hierarchy that was not grounded on irrational bases, violent impositions, descent or blood relations, or pecuniary criteria. Since then, a lasting meritocratic justification remains, independently of theocratic, timocratic, aristocratic or oligarchic principles. Despite the singularity of this meritocratic ideal, Bell suggests that it resembles that of the American Founders (p. 66): as Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Adams of October 28, 1813, a 'natural aristocracy' based not on 'wealth and birth', but on 'virtue and talents.'[10]

Needless to say, Bell's astonishingly brief account of the meritocratic ideas of Western political thought is excessively selective and reductive. By way of example, we may cite Pierre Rosanvallon's trilogy on modern French democracy because it clearly shows that liberal rationalism -and especially the postrevolutionary figure of François Guizot as representative of doctrinaire liberalism- offered a view on representation and sovereignty that was an alternative to the voluntarism and collectivism of revolutionary predecessors and that emphasized the empowerment of elites as a sort of rational aristocracy founded in merit and virtue, as well as the acceptance of hierarchy as constitutive element of the social order.

[10] For the original letter, see
http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s61.html.

But, in any case, why would a Neo-Confucian scholar and a founding father of American democracy be supposed to subscribe in some degree to a similar set of ideas about the legitimate government? In fact, the unexpected affinities go even further. In a previous work that anticipated many of the ideas of *The China Model*,[11] Bell outlined a proposal for a contemporary institutionalization of Confucianism by establishing a bicameral system: an upper house of public servants selected through competitive examinations, and a lower house whose members would be elected by universal suffrage. While the meritocratic camera –called Xianshiyuan (賢士院), the House of Virtue and Talent- would be a high-quality deliberative body composed by the wise and public-spirited elite and assume most of the governmental responsibilities, the democratically elected camera would serve as an advisory and censorial body. This bicameralism bears some similarities with that promoted by John Stuart Mill in *Considerations on Representative Government*.[12] This may not seem entirely surprising if one takes into account that Mill understood the competence principle as complementary to the egalitarian principle and in an enriching and productive tension relationship with it. But, again, how could a major advocacy of liberal democracy that encompasses the meritocratic demand in a wider democratic view have an echo in a Neo-Confucian reconciliation of minimal democracy with elite politics?

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[11] See the sixth chapter ("Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics") of Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy. Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 152-179.
[12] See *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, gen. ed. John M. Robson (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press & Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), vol. 19.

Certainly, Bell's defence of meritocracy against competitive electoral democracy has abandoned the proposal of the bicameral legislature in the meantime because it would favour a slippery slope from meritocratic deliberation towards popular election (pp. 167-168). Nevertheless, such a defence should not overlook the meritocratic character of the democratic tradition itself. Electoral processes and deliberative sites were raised in the 18th and 19th representative democracies as a meritocratic restriction to the egalitarian radicalism based on the random designation of public servants in the ancient Greek democracy[13]. 'Pure democracy' was then identified with the regime in which the decisions on public issues were made by randomly appointed citizens. In ancient democracy, the practice of voting was an aristocratic procedure with respect to the genuinely democratic procedure selection by sortition, which was expected to guaranteed the radical equality of the interchange between rulers and ruled.[14] Thus, the modern transformation of democracy as an electoral and representative regime reactivated the aristocratic element of the old democracy. Elections were made fully consistent with the new regime (eventually called democracy) thanks to a meritocratic reform of the representative principle that definitively abandoned the drawing by lot for the balloting and channeled participation of people into the authorization of the representants elected by popular consent. Sortition, whilst still

[13] Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambrige University Press, 1986).

[14] As Nicole Loraux said, sortition and *misthophoria* (a small salary that allowed not-so-wealthy citizens to invest time in their political obligations) were a sort of cardinal institutions of the Greek democracy and "the most vulnerable and… the most widely attacked" features. See Nicole Loraux, *The invention of Athens, The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 175.

effective in small pre-industrial city states during the early modernity, was precluded not only because of the unfeasibility of institutions equivalent to those of the *Ekklesia* and the *Boulé* in the new large-scale societies, but primarily because it was undisputably assumed that drawing lot would have placed the power in incompetent hands. By transforming the representative principle, the electoral-based government retained the aspiration of selecting 'the best' by adjusting it to the standard of political equality demanded by democracy.

Of course, Bell claims that contemporary electoral democracies seem unable to preserve this meritocratic legacy and that it helps to explain why they are being increasingly put into question from within. Democracy, i.e. the form of government that grants ultimate controlling power to elected representatives, has been the hegemonic term in global political discourse since 1945. But, in a time in which the 'one person one vote' principle has become the key of the common understanding of the very meaning of the word 'democracy', it finds a growing number of detractors nowadays. Some question the democratic value of voting; others criticize its meritocratic value. Among the former, some denounce the narrowing of political participation in electoral systems, its reduction to a bare minimum. The act of voting is a punctual and infrequent action and so predetermined in its possibilities and insignificant in its effects that, on its own, it leaves citizens' political participation in a position of irrelevance. Among the latter, some cast doubts on the ability of polls to find the most excellent outcomes or even to promote the formation of capable governments. The evidence of widespread citizen incompetence and, particularly, the irresponsible exercise of the right to vote (for instance, in the absence of an informed reasoning) would undermine any guarantee against the empowerment of incompetent or even corrupt legislators and governments.

There are authors on both sides that share the view that democracy deserves citizens' efforts beyond voting by default and demand, in a way or another, the relevance of deliberation. But it is not necessarily so. Those who judge voting to be insufficiently democratic can urge more participative forms of organization and also the implementation of deliberative venues, the subjection of the political decision-making process to an open exchange of views based on information, contestation and publicity, and so on. However, authors like Chantal Mouffe see no potential in deliberation, but rather emphasise its limitations and counterproductive effects. Those who, on the other hand, hold that voting is insufficiently meritocratic can aspire to counteract the widespread condoning of citizens' political ignorance and misuse of voting and also to implement political reforms intended to improve the deliberative quality in the political system, such as plural voting, citizens exams, experts vetoes, and so on. However, the meritocratic defences behind the critiques of electoral democracy by authors like Bryan Caplan and Jason Brennan openly repudiate citizens' deliberations for the sake of epistocratic solutions. Brennan even holds that, since a majority of citizens inevitably lack time, motivation, and cognitive skills to acquire political knowledge and, what is worse, they are systemically biased and even complacently irrational, any attempt to lead error-prone voters to better functionings will go even worse under real-world circumstances: 'real-life political deliberation could easily corrupt and stultify rather than ennoble and enlighten us'.[15].

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[15] Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 62 and 242. For a discussion of this issue, see Javier Gil, 'Abstaining citizenship', in Claudia Wiesner, Anna Björk, Hanna-Mari Kivistö and Katja Mäkinen (eds.), *Shaping Citizenship: A Political Concept in Theory, Debate and Practice*

Bell has much in common with Brennan's approach and his own meritocratic model is, to a large extent, an epistocratic one. He also thinks that 'voting booth—where individuals express their political preferences without any obligation to inform themselves beforehand (i.e., no effort required) and without any feedback from other people or organizations that might be able to check cognitive biases—seems almost designed to maximize irrational decision making' (p. 24). However, while Brennan hardly trusts in deselecting the incompetent and unreasonable voters, Bell has confidence in the amelioration of the intellectual level of rulers. Brennan argues for restricted suffrage by means of a properly administered voting examination system as a way of filtering the intellectual level of voters (and, failing that, for voting lotteries, prescribed as a sort of palliative less expensive and less time-demanding than standard elections). In contrast, Bell argues rather for epistocracy in the sense (accepted in East Asian societies) of rule by the 'knowers' and aims at establishing (and eventually exporting) measures and public policies for selecting and recruiting the competent and public-spirited leaders.

Unlike Brennan, Bell frequently appeals to the potentialities of deliberation. In fact, some determinant aspects of his political proposal rest on a sophisticated adaptation of the idea of deliberation. Moreover, Bell does take into account both kinds of criticism against electoral democracy, and also embraces both solutions, those from the epistocratic and the deliberative

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(New York: Routledge, 2018), chapter 4. By epistocracy we can understand not only the rule of those who know, the wise or the experts (Plato), but also the implementation of institutional designs that give 'more power' (and not 'the power') to an instructed minority (Mill) or that disempower a significant portion of citizens because of their alleged incompetence (Brennan).

reforms. To a certain degree, he has found the way paved for these reforms.

Since almost two decades, the Chinese Government has made visible efforts in order to implement deliberative procedures and processes by different experimental ways. A large literature has followed in its wake. Cases like the 2005 deliberative opinion poll in the Zeguo Township of Wenling City, Zhejiang Province are well known.[16] That deliberative poll was organized to decide on the budget allocation. Several political events and changed economic circumstances made it so that the total expendable funds were unexpectedly and significantly reduced, leaving the authorities in the need of having to choose only some of the already-planned projects. It was novel in this case that 'officials in Wenling altered the device by elevating the outcomes of the deliberative polling from its typical advisory function to an empowered status, committing in advance of the process to abide by the outcomes'.[17] Both normative and strategic reasons might be offered for putting the deliberation and eventually the decision as well in the hands of local citizens. Authorities arguably endorsed the deliberative poll in order to make the decision-making process more participative and 'democratic' and, at the same time, to improve their public image and guard against possible future protests. This political experiment has been widely influential and replicated in other places. The conductors of the

[16] Consult, for instance, James S. Fishkin, Baogang He and Alice Siu, 'Public Consultation through Deliberation in China: The First Chinese Deliberative Poll', in Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 229-244. See also http://participedia.net/en/cases/wenling-city-deliberative-poll .
[17] Baogang He, Mark E. Warren, Mark E., 'Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development'. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2011, p. 277.

deliberative poll, James S. Fishkin and Baogang He, highlight its singularity, which is also a reason for its success, as follows:

> We believe it is the first case in modern times of fully representative and deliberative participatory budgeting. It harkens back to a form of democracy quite different from modern Western-style party competition... Hence we think that the experiment described here is notable in the context of the long history of democratic reforms in that it shows how governments, without party competition or the conventional institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West, can nevertheless realize, to a high degree, two fundamental democratic values at the same time: political equality and deliberation.[18]

At the same time that these authors underline the relevant fact that the deliberative polls achieve political equality and deliberation 'without any need for Western style party competition', they trust that these deliberative experiments mark the beginning of a trend of democratization: 'If the process spreads, it may have further effects on the political culture, effects that could facilitate additional democratic reforms over the long term'.[19] In another article, Baogang He and Mark E. Warren stress the ambiguity of what they call 'authoritarian deliberation', insofar it 'frames two possible trajectories of political development in China: the increasing use of deliberative practices stabilizes and streghthens authoritarian rule, or they serve as a leading edge of democratization'.[20] Again, it is this trajectory of democratization that is made possible thanks to the

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[18] James S. Fishkin, Baogang He and Alice Siu, 'Public Consultation through Deliberation in China', in Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 230-31.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
[20] Baogang He, Mark E. Warren, Mark E., 'Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development'. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2011, p. 269-89.

transformative practice being what is ranked as normatively significant.

Daniel A. Bell thinks otherwise and integrates the already existing deliberative experiments into a different project. In contrast with He and Warren's approach about the 'authoritarian deliberation', Bell's 'meritocratic deliberation' is inspired by Confucian institutions, not in liberal parliaments, and intervenes in the three levels of the China Model (meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, democracy at the bottom). Bell reiterates in the book that, due to the meritocratization of the Chinese political system over the past couple of decades, the political top level should work as a 'public-spirited deliberation among elites' (p. 60). On the other hand, the experimentation in the middle is aimed to design and develop new ways of inclusion and participation and hence to result in higher levels of social harmonisation. It is especially in the basis where Bell finds room for the application of deliberative innovations. In *The China Model*, 'democracy at the bottom' means democracy by consensus at a local level, with small communities directly involved in the matters at issue (such as land distribution, investment priorities, selection of local leaders…). The widespread support in China for the idea of democracy at the local level has been enriched with the new practices of deliberation and consultation among citizens who can be considered as capable of being well-informed: 'the government has backed experiments with deliberative democracy at the local level. Such experiments hold the promise of aiding the democratic education process and securing more fair representation' (p. 169). Deliberative and consultive practices seem to be the best participatory procedures for local-level democracy.

The agonistic and deliberative dimensions are consubstantial to democracy in the history of the West. In Western

contemporary political theory, influential models of democracy have reappraised both dimensions. Consider briefly Chantal Mouffe's view of antagonism as the essence of democracy and of politics in general. According to her, the friend/enemy relation is so constitutive of social life that any attempt of blurring or silencing the real conflicts is suspected of neglecting the specificity of the political. Against rationalistic and universalistic approaches that confuse and dissolve political conflicts by means of ethical and juridical criteria, she points to 'the dimension of the political that is linked to the existence of an element of hostility among human beings'[21] Deliberative democracy theories involve such a neutralization of the genuinely political. Interestingly, the reasons why an advocate of 'radical democracy' like Mouffe repudiates the theory and the practice of deliberative democracy are not so far removed from the reasons why a neo-Confucian theorist like Bell appeals to it: deliberation is able to lessen and tame antagonisms, to dissolve or even disguise them. Chinese deliberative experiments would confirm it by assimilating the notion of deliberation into a radically harmonist approach to the political.

According to Mouffe, those who think that deliberation leads to rational consensus, at least under ideal conditions, and that individuals involved eventually coincide in 'reasonable' common views tend to relegate antagonism as a byproduct or as a distortion due to failures in the communication processes. In this sense, Habermasian and Rawlsian deliberativists would share a harmonist bias that neglects the 'constitutive difference' where the political is originated and threatens the recognition of political conflict. Something similar could be said of the Chinese

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[21] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 2.

Communist Party's reasons for implementing the instruments of deliberative democracy:

> The Chinese national and local governments have encouraged and supported deliberative institutions to maintain local order, as an instrument to maintain local security, as a solution to local community-related problems, as a 'valve' to release the pressure upon China's fast-moving economic machine, and as a form of moderate democracy which avoids radical and substantial political reform.[22]

Bell's selective response to agonism does not only consist in applying a view of political realism on actually existing electoral democracies. Certainly, Bell contrasts China's successes to those of democratic countries with economic, geographic, and population comparable conditions and extent, such as USA and India. But to explain the facts that make China appear as a state and a society that have responded to the challenges raised in the last 40 years and definitively undermine the presumed superiority of electoral democracy, Bell reviews and argues for China's progressive implementation of meritocratic deliberative mechanisms. To be a 'stabilizer' to maintain local order and a 'valve' for turning antagonism into harmony is precisely what Mouffe criticizes in the idea of deliberation and, at the same time, what makes Confucianism attracted to it. Deliberation allows avoiding the agonism of party competition, the rhetorical struggles for the vote and the polarization of ideologies. The Confucian appropriation that Bell makes of it, i.e. the elitist

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[22] Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 7. See also p. 177, where the deliberative institutions are characterized, in addition, as 'a solution to problems arising from the tension between the expanding market and the community and an effective means to develop what President Hu Jintao calls 'a harmonious society' '.

ordering at the top level and the fit of deliberative institutional designs at the bottom, steps further into the harmonistic slope that meritocratic deliberation leads to.

The projection of a rational (or reasonable) consensus by means of deliberation is a way of evicting political agonism, but it also introduces a demand of information and ethics that can easily turned into a meritocratic criterion, suggesting a sort of intellectualistic hierarchization of political participation. The ancient imperial government of the Chinese literati could be reformulated as a deliberative elite, as a Mandarinate that is legitimized by the moral and epistemic merits to preside over political deliberation. Bell refers to this contemporary surrogate by names such as the 'House of Virtue and Talent' and the 'Union of Chinese Meritocrats'[23], while a Neo-Confucian author as Jiang Qing has proposed names like the 'House of *Ru* [as] an indication of the traditional Chinese spirit of rule by scholarship' and the 'House of Exemplary Persons'.[24] Neo-Confucianism seems to have drawn some conclusions from the Western deliberative theory. First of all, political reason should be driven by the path of deliberation as the paramount way of interchanging and consensuating political positions. But, at the

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[23] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 167, and *The China Model*, pp. 197-98. However, it is symptomatic that Bell goes to far as to say at the end of his book that the CCP's re-naming (because 'the CCP is neither Communist nor a party anymore') should rather be the 'Union of Democratic Meritocrats'. He suggests that the word 'democracy' should be introduced for normative and strategic reasons, but also for propagandistic reasons (p. 198).

[24] Jiang Quing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order. How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 65; and *The China Model*, pp. 162-68. See also Bell's introduction to the aforementioned book by Quing, pp. 7-8.

same time, such a process should take place under refined epistemic and ethical conditions. Otherwise, deliberation can be counter-productive from the democratic point of view, more corrupting and stultifying than ennobling and enlightening, as Brennan's maximalist criticism states. Certainly, the epistemic and ethical standards of virtuous deliberation are not easy to meet. Very likely public spiritedness and the necessary knowledge to understand, elaborate and make safe political decisions, including their consequences and costs, are often far beyond the scope of most citizens. That is why minipublics are said to be an imperfect, but reasonable procedure to get the best outcomes while guaranteeing both political equality and representativeness without mass participation[25]. Hence, to obtain all those things that deliberation would be in a position to achieve, it should be less egalitarian and democratic than what most citizens in Western countries (or presumably many of those not randomly selected) are willing to accept. Bell does not negate the postdemocratic point. In his own terms, he argues for an 'elitist deliberation'. In our view, he also practices a sort of 'redescription' that, by paraphrasing Vittorio Bufacchi and Xiao Ouyang, 'abandons the Western original sense and appeal instead to aspects of Chinese philosophy and political culture that can perform a similar role.'[26]

Because of its appeal to consensus and its moral and intellectual requirements, deliberation can be made consistent with the two aforementioned Confucian assumptions: harmonism and hierarchy. Hence, Confucian deliberation renounces the

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[25] James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[26] Vittorio Bufacchi and Xiao Ouyang, 'Hens, Ducks & Human Rights in China', *Philosophy Now*, Issue 118, February/March 2017, pp. 9-11.

democratic idea of political equality, in the sense we have inherited from Greek *homonoia*, the principle by which every citizen has equal rights to participate in the assembly. However, Bell's political model does not disregard all the democratic principles and, particularly, takes quite seriously the idea of 'political participation' and the requirement of accountability. Of course, participation is transformed under the prevalence of the meritocratic component. But we must not forget that representative government initially put into effect a similar restriction. While apparently regretting the loss of this meritocratic turn of modern democracies,[27] Bell believes that his meritocracy model does not minimize democratic participation much more than contemporary representative systems if they only demand 'visiting the voting booth every few years'.[28] On the other hand, the China Model leaves space for another feature of democracy that modern liberal system pushed aside long ago: direct participation. Deliberative polls and other institutional designs implemented by the Chinese government have been gaining an increasing presence in local (rural and district-level) policies during the last two decades. Bell completely incorporates these kinds of decision-making procedures in his political meritocratic model and even regrets that they are not being more quickly applied so as to strengthen the infrastructure of the 'democracy at the bottom'. Unlike other theorists, Bell disregards the expansion of deliberative democracy at a larger scale,

[27] See, for instance, the following comment: 'Had Madison been witness to today's United States, he would likely have been disappointed by the quality of political leaders as well as the relative ease with which well-funded factions ensure that the political system systematically works in their interest' (p. 265, note 39).

[28] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 151.

considering it simply unfeasible beyond the limits of local politics. In this case, it is noteworthy to remember why Ancient Greeks decided not to surpass the administrative level of the polis. They believed that quality depended on quantity and what they called 'freedom' was something only achievable within the boundaries of a small society. Greek democracy, the participative and egalitarian one, was 'local' as a matter of principle.

III

A Note on Agonistic Onto-Politics

The considerations of the former section leave the question still open: what is wrong with harmonism? Are the suspicions it arouses well justified? According to Mouffe, contemporary onto-politics should embrace the prevalence and the irreducibility of difference, the negative plurality taking precedence over positive identities. These identities are defined one against another, created through their shifting relationship to the 'constitutive outside', so it is their difference that exhibits genuine productivity. Consequently, any attempt to make the difference disappear while conceiving of the social whole in terms of harmony, consensus, objectivity or unity is necessarily founded on exclusion. The construction of an identity can claim to be comprehensive and all-embracing and to reach the 'full realization of a good constituted by a harmony' only at the price of excluding otherness. On the contrary, 'the project of radical and plural democracy is able to acknowledge that difference is the condition of the possibility of constituting unity and totality at the same time that it provides their essential limits. In such a view, plurality cannot be eliminated; it becomes irreducible. We have therefore to abandon the very idea of a complete reabsorption of

alterity into oneness and harmony. It is an alterity that cannot be domesticated.'[29]

Political Confucianism may be seen as an apparent target of this criticism from the agonistic model as a radical democratic politics. Nevertheless, this conclusion may be based on an insufficient understanding of Confucianism and even depend on deficiencies in the agonistic approach itself.

Mouffe assumes the postmodern critique of essentialism and she seems to believe that any harmonistic view is built on an essentialism by which everything can fall as a product of social objectification under the sign of the identical. However, Sinologists and interpreters of Chinese thought like François Jullien and Jacques Gernet have widely shown how far Confucian thought is from any philosophy of the essence.[30] Indeed, Chinese society has not been a fertile soil for the 'metaphysics of presence'. If there is such a thing as a 'Confucian ontology', it is that of immanence and transformation, that of a reality that is never 'present' but made of ever potential tendencies. Only the traces are completely 'presented', whereas reality as such exhibits the distended and un-re-presented nature of duration. Confucian thought, be it applied to politics, military strategy or the arts, relies on the harmonious unfolding of events because it just confers a punctual status to any state of things. Identities, including the political identities, are indeed formed and sustained in a field of multiple intensities, but they also return to this constitutive field and dissolve into it again. In a sense, Mouffe's constant reliance on 'political identities' reveals in turn signs of a

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[29] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 33.
[30] See, for example, François Jullien, *Les Transformations Silencieuses* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), and Jacques Gernet, *La Raison des Choses: Essai sur la Philosophie de Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

certain kind of essentialism. The appeal to identities and identifications and the hardening of the conflictive momentum of their opposition arguably disclose the very essence of the political. In this way, far from refusing an essentialist philosophical attitude, the agonistic model of democracy would only change its sign by transferring it from identity and consensus to difference and conflict.

Anyway, Mouffe's overemphasis on agonism seems to disregard the very possibility of a non-essentialist harmonistic approach. Projected over an immanent background, Confucian harmonism is strategic and relational rather than identitarian and its political realizations are built in a continuous revision of the changing, involved forces. From this point of view, agonistic onto-politics somehow reifies pure 'difference' and confuses it with a positive 'antagonism', and only deeply rooted prejudices of Western thought make plausible that mistake. Such prejudices are linked to a particular anthropology that is foregrounded in quotes like the following one from Elias Canetti:

> The actual vote is decisive, as the moment in which the one [contending party] is really measured against the other. It is all that is left of the original lethal clash and it is played out in many forms, with threats, abuse and physical provocation which may lead to blows or missiles. But the counting of the vote ends the battle.[31]

Nonetheless, it can be argued again that an anthropological antagonism is not less essentialist than an identitarian harmonism. From the point of view of Confucianism, difference is rather the 'zero degree' of identity, and hence that the usual and productive dualisms have a constitutive character: ying / yang, active /

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[31] Quoted by Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 5.

receptive, function / form, and so on. But that this field of plural intensities finally be arranged and ruled according to agonistic relations is just a possibility, and not the very nature or the template of social relations. Consequently, antagonism is just a particular anthropological and political possibility. In the realm of the political, it would only be an ontic condition, not the ontological dimension, if we prefer to express it in the Heideggerian and Schmittian registers Mouffe used to employ. Far from being constitutive of the practices and institutions through which a social order is instituted, antagonism is susceptible of being generalized only under wrong arrangements and inappropriate policies that are unable to offer better outcomes and deal competently with circumstances.

Bell's communitarian viewpoint considers the individual as the product of certain kind of community, as the result of certain social associations[32]. Certainly, he approves an anthropological thick conception, similar to that once delivered by Charles Taylor, something that curiously Chantal Mouffe said to accept:

> The basic error of atomism in all its forms is that it fails to take account of the degree to which the free individual with his own goals and aspirations … is himself only possible within a certain kind of civilization; that it took a long development of certain institutions and practices, of the rule of law, of rules of equal respect, of habits of common deliberation, of common

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[32] Daniel Bell, "Communitarianism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/communitarianism/>.

association, of cultural development, and so on, to produce the modern individual.[33]

What is true of the 'modern', 'free' individual of liberal democracy becomes even more appropriate for the harmonious members of the Confucian-style meritocracy. According to this view, as we have seen, 'people have a fundamental interest in leading harmonious lives, and hence the government ought to prioritize social harmony' (p. 234, note 145).

Certainly, the concrete proposals for institutionalizing the principle of political meritocrat offered by Bell in his book imply important democratic abdications, but they also dispose arrangements intended to be highly consistent to some democratic ideals. That is particularly so in the case of the direct participation, the deliberative polling and the citizens involvement in the local-level decision-making procedures and outcomes. Insofar as they prioritize the advancement of community and benefits of cooperation in terms of social stability, all these institutional reforms do not renounce to implant some features of modern liberal democracy under the framework of political meritocracy.

IV

Civilizatory Context

The China Model proposes a meritocratic regime that deliberately redefines democratic views and implants democratic arrangements under the harmonistic assumptions of

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[33] Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 309. See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 46.

Confucianism. As such, it especially fits the Chinese context and Bell argues that it is already implemented in China, if not completely and with important deficiencies. But Bell also claims that this meritocratic system can be exemplary and transferable (if only selectively) to other contexts, even offering an alternative to the dubious course of the Western-style democracies. However, the fusion of the main words of the book's title cannot hide the essential tension, utterly difficult to surpass, between the ideal and the reality: the Chinese Model is inextricably tied with the history, system of thought and cultural values of the Chinese society and, at the same time, it is supposed to work as a model, i.e. applicable in a wide range of contexts.

On the one hand, it is a proposal projected over the future of China as 'a large, modernizing and peaceful society' (p. 112). While electoral democracy is not a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, Bell′s political meritocracy seeks to serve as a realistic standard for guiding political reforms in a society that is likely to undergo important changes in the midterm. It hopes to face possible scenarios of contemporary China just because it is directly inspired by Chinese thought and culture, and specifically designed 'for an East Asian context', as the title of one of Bell's books reads. The ambition of 'shaping the future', by paraphrasing another title he edited, has to draw on already existing Chinese institutions, on cultural features of the Chinese society and on political formulas largely proved in the history of Asian nations. The meritocratic reappropiation of 'deliberation' runs precisely on these lines. It has often been pointed out that deliberative polls and other deliberative and consultative designs are easily put into practice and work well in Chinese local contexts due to the cultural and social background of the population involved. In this point, Bell aligns with most theorists who analyze the Chinese deliberative polls. By way of example, Chang Shenyong (quoting Li Shangli) claims that 'traditional

Chinese political culture, which features the concept of harmony, can be thought to provide some (albeit shaky) intellectual foundation and cultural context for deliberative democracy', and James S. Fishkin, Baogang He, and Alice Siu attach part of the success of the first Chinese deliberative poll at Zeguo to the 'local Chinese indigenous deliberative methods'.[34]

On the other hand, the Confucian-inspired meritocratic proposal should reach a sufficient level of abstraction as to be applicable to a variety of national contexts, but only if the appropriate nuances and particularities would be taking into account. However, the strong Chinese dependence of Bell's proposal casts some doubts concerning the presumed ability to become a true 'model'. In consonance with his commitment to communitarian views, Bell appeals to widespread appreciations and values amongst the Chinese population that go beyond the scope of the instituitional designs. For instance, he mentions the organic and 'familiar' understanding of the social whole, the wide predisposition to legitimize the empowerment of meritorious individuals and the rejection of the direct exhibition of conflict and competition, the culturally inherited appreciation for rites and, of course, the high esteem in which Chinese citizens hold the value or harmony, and so on. Of course, Bell is fully aware that the main problems his model faces in order to be exported (even selectively and piecemeal) are not the lack of democracy or other normative deficiencies, but the implicit demand that a very specific cultural background in both official and informal settings should go to meet a robust meritocratic implantation. Such a claim is counterintuitive because that cultural background is disappearing even in China. If what Bell proposes involves an all-

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[34] Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 165 and 237-38.

embracing assimilation of Confucian values and not only the recognition of the advantages of meritocracy, he undermines his claim of universality.

The harmonious members of the Confucian-style meritocracy belong to a very specific civilizing context. All the habits, practices, patterns of behavior, rules of conduct and cultural attitudes that align with Bell's model are absent out of the East Asian contexts and, as he often acknowledges, it will not be directly exportable without the improbable transformation of the democratic framework of experience as a whole.[35] The epistocratic appointments, the hierarchized political participation, the ritualistic political aesthetics, all these features that should be institutionalized are context-dependent features of the Chinese culture and society. Perhaps the really worrisome concern for Bell's model is whether this 'kind of civilization' is destined to mutate and to be superseded even in the Sinosphere. Although it is true that communism did not delete every trail of Confucian 'reactionism', the hyper-capitalistic culture of the current and future generations may do it.

The program offered in *The China Model* deserves skepticism regarding not so much the normative consistency as its viability both inside and outside. Bell´s proposal relies on a virtuous Confucian background, the cultural product of the most enduring civilization in history. But it should not be forgotten that Chinese

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[35] See, for instance: 'it would be hard to persuade people that they should be totally excluded from political power… It is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy. We are all democrats today' (p. 151); and 'the sad fact is that citizens in electoral democracies won't even question their right to choose their political rulers, no matter how intellectually incompetent or morally insensitive their political judgment may be' (p. 166).

intellectuals and governments failed in similar attempts even when Confucianism was culturally dominant, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, and again after the Republican era. It is completely uncertain whether Confucian culture still has enough inertia for leading or even for taking part of the next Chinese revolution. As for its possible impact outwards, the unlikely acceptance of the Chinese model would not only imply the massive recognition of the efficacy of a certain political organisation and its institutional designs. Moreover, it would demand a deeper level of adaptation and even conversion—including ethic, aesthetic, pedagogic and political aspects—to Confucianism, as the one that Daniel A. Bell himself has undergone.

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