

POWER & INEQUALITY

Power is an inevitable feature of human life. Yet it is also profoundly problematic. On the one hand, societies require centers of power in order to maintain order and efficiency. Without a police force or a mayor, for instance, our major cities would devolve into chaos. On the other hand, the same power that ensures the smooth function of human relations can also become a means of manipulating and controlling others. Hence why human societies are perpetually vulnerable to tyranny.

For Niebuhr, one simple way to gauge the health of a society is to look at how power is distributed. When economic and political power is distributed widely—when there is a large middle class, free and fair elections, and a robust system of checks and balances in government—societies are relatively healthy. Conversely, when there is stark inequality—when a small elite controls the economy, elections are unreliable, and one branch of government becomes inordinately powerful—societies become oppressive.

In Niebuhr's view, the only consistently effective way to fix imbalances of power was through coercion. As a general rule, once an individual or social group gets a taste of power, they do not give that power up voluntarily. As Niebuhr observed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, "There is no ethical force strong enough to place inner checks on the use of power if its quantity is inordinate" (MW 269). Once people hold inordinate power, they must be forced to give it up.

Coercion need not be violent. Niebuhr points to Gandhi as a shining example of how to use coercive tactics in nonviolent ways. Martin Luther King, Jr. would later draw on the example of Gandhi and the insights of Niebuhr to force American society to confront the flagrant injustices of the Jim Crow era. But from Niebuhr's perspective, both Gandhi and King were successful because they identified and deployed effective levers of coercion. And those who seek to confront power and inequality must make their peace with the fact that they will have to wield coercion in the name of justice.

Questions to consider:

What are some examples of a stark imbalance of power between two social groups?

Are these situations also marked by injustice?

Do you think that stark differences in power always result in injustice? Why or why not?

-- Henry Ford --

Niebuhr lived in Detroit during the boom years of the auto industry. As demand for the city's cheap, reliable automobiles soared, laborers flocked to the city in search of employment. The industry's upper management grew wealthy, while overworked, underpaid laborers struggled to keep up with the grueling pace of the assembly line. At the center of it all was Henry Ford, the legendary inventor and founder of Ford Motor Company. In addition to revolutionizing the auto industry, Ford had cultivated a reputation as a philanthropist. Yet he also instituted a series of exploitative labor practices, including cutting his workers' hours and shutting down his factories for months at a time. In a series of articles in the mid-1920s, Niebuhr called Ford out for his shoddy practices and drew attention to oppressive factory floor conditions. Despite his best efforts, however, he failed to puncture Ford's mystique. Niebuhr's showdown with Ford laid the foundations for his scathing critiques of American life in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

Niebuhr on Ford:

Henry Ford is America. If we may judge men not so much by their achievements as by their hopes, not so much by what they are as by what they want to be, Henry Ford reveals the true nature of the average American... To be feared and loved at the same time, to satisfy natural greed without sacrificing the instincts of love—that were to solve the problem of life to the complete satisfaction of the man on the street. That is why Henry Ford is the hero of not only America, but of many a European. –“How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?” LJ 98

Mr. Ford is celebrated throughout the nation as the most benevolent of employers, while human material is used with a ruthlessness and disregard for ultimate effects which may be matched, but is not surpassed, by any industry. –LJ 101

In our day of enlightenment it is possible for a man to amass billions and be praised at the same time for the astuteness of his business impulses, even though the groans of his workers may be heard above the din of his machines.

–“Ford’s Five Day Workweek Shrinks,” CS June 9, 1927 (LJ 108)

Look at the industrial enterprise anywhere and you find criminal indifference on the part of the strong to the fate of the weak. The lust for power and the greed for gain are the dominant note in business. An industrial overlord will not share his power with his workers unless he is forced to do so by tremendous pressure. The middle classes, with the exception of a small minority of intelligentsia, do not aid the worker in exerting this pressure. He must fight alone. –LNTC (MW 67)

The man of power, though humane impulses may awaken in him, remains something of the beast of prey... His philanthropy is a perfect illustration of the curious compound of the brutal and the moral which we find in all human behavior; for his generosity is at once a display of his power and an expression of his pity. His generous impulses freeze within him if his power is challenged or his generousities are accepted without grateful humility.

–*Moral Man Immoral Society* [MW 159-60]

Transcript for clip -- “Power & Inequality: Henry Ford” :

Healan Gaston:

Well I think in terms of Niebuhr’s experience in Detroit, he was there for a period from 1915 to 1928, so 13 years. And it’s really in the final 3 years of his time in Detroit, between about ‘25 and ‘28 when he’s beginning to sort of find his center of gravity and becoming more politically engaged that he starts to look at Henry Ford and see in Henry Ford a perfect example of the kind of self congratulatory welfare capitalism that he thinks is responsible for concealing the true dynamics of power that are at work in this situation. So he tries to expose Ford and he says, “Look, this assembly line production. Is it actually helping the industrialists, not the workers, despite his claims?” Right, he actually accuses Ford of engaging in practices that are designed to keep the workers believing that he’s got their interests in mind, when in fact what he’s doing is criminal from that standpoint, right? And so that kind of exploitation, Niebuhr had not patience for it. And he had no patience for the kind of self-congratulatory way of making capitalism work that he was seeing on display there. He was concerned about the questions of justice that lay beneath that process, and he wanted to expose them. And he became more and more adamant in his desire to do that.

Part of what really concerned Niebuhr was the disjuncture between the middle class culture that he was part of presiding over at Bethel and what was happening for workers as a result of

industrialization. The '20s were a time when there were huge anxieties on the part of people like Niebuhr about this burgeoning culture of consumption, and the kinds of complacencies that it made possible, the sorts of abuses that it would potentially conceal. And so part of what's happening for him that there is this tension between the job he's doing at Bethel and the class issues that surround that, right, and the activism that he's engaging in as he goes off to write for *The Christian Century*, or do work with Sherwood Eddy, or even go work with the higher ranks of the Evangelical synod. His issue there is that capitalism has the capacity to conceal its own power structures. And so he comes after Ford in the '20s and the latter part of his time at Bethel and tries to say, hey, you know, here we have this person who's essentially using welfare capitalism as a way to conceal the incredible injustices that are a part of this system. The concentrations of power that are really subjugating the workers, and yet they don't know it, and then he's patting himself on the back about it. So Niebuhr definitely wanted to get in there and say we need to expose the situation and the power dynamics at work in it. Right, in fact power turns out to be the major preoccupation of his thought and his primary legacy, and you could see it cueing up right there with Henry Ford.

-- In Groups & Out Groups --

EXERCISE:

Niebuhr's 1932 work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* transformed the field of social ethics. The book's central claim is that groups of people are prone to selfish and aggressive behavior in ways that individuals are not. **By way of illustration, imagine two scenarios.**

In scenario #1, two people strike up a casual conversation at a dinner party. They discover that they have a lot in common, save for one thing: they are fans of rival sports teams. They joke about this good-naturedly, but continue to enjoy their conversation and become friends.

In scenario #2, those same two people meet for the first time at a rivalry game, when they are each decked out in their respective team's colors. They start taunting each other, yelling at each other, and eventually come to blows.

What has changed from one scenario to the next?

In scenario #1, the two people are meeting as individuals. Consequently, they are willing to treat one another with courtesy and attentiveness. In scenario #2, they are meeting as representatives of opposing groups. They don't see one another as individuals, but rather, as members of a group that they dislike. Thus, they behave aggressively toward one another from the onset.

For Niebuhr, this dynamic is true of society at large. We are capable of being kind and generous when we relate to each other as individuals. But when we relate as members of opposing groups, we tend to react with aggression and suspicion. This is especially visible in politics, as various groups compete for power and influence. But it is also evident in our schools, churches, workplaces, sports fields, and any other arena where our group identities are at play.

Questions to consider:

Individuals are capable of being moral; groups by and large are selfish and even brutal.
Does your personal experience confirm this insight?

When have you observed the “brutal character of human collectives” in your own social groups?
In your school? On social media?

Do you agree with Niebuhr’s pessimistic read of groups? Why or why not?

Niebuhr Quotes:

As individuals, men believe they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command. –MM (MW 156)

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational is an understanding of the brutal character of human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations. Failure to recognize the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought... They do not see that the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end. –*Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 145-6)

Our contemporary culture fails to realize the power, extent and persistence of group egoism in human relations. It may be possible, though it is never easy, to establish just relations between individuals within a group purely by moral or rational suasion and accommodation. In inter-group relations this is practically an impossibility. –*Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 147)

Most rational and social justifications of unequal privilege are clearly afterthoughts. The facts are created by the disproportion of power which exists in a given social system. The justifications are usually dictated by the desire of the men of power to hide the nakedness of their greed, and by the inclination of society to veil the brutal facts of human life from itself. – *Moral Man Immoral Society* [MW 156]

The disproportion of power in a complex society... has perpetuated social injustice in every form through all the ages. Types of power have changed, and gradations of social inequality have varied, but the essential facts have remained unchanged. – *Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 157)

Since those who hold special privileges in society are naturally inclined to regard their privileges as rights and to be unmindful of the effects of inequality upon the underprivileged, they will have a natural complacency toward injustice. Every effort to disturb the peace, which incorporates the injustice, will therefore seem to them to spring from unjustified malcontent. They will furthermore be only partly conscious of the violence and coercion by which their privileges are preserved and will therefore be particularly censorious of the use of force or the threat of violence by those who oppose them... They are thus able to in perfect good faith to express abhorrence of the violence of a strike by workers and to call upon the state in the same breath to use violence to put down the strike.
– *Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 244)

Special privileges make all men dishonest. The purest conscience and the clearest mind is prostituted by the desire to prove them morally justified.
– *Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 268)

Transcript for clip -- “Power & Inequality: In Groups & Out Groups” :

Healan Gaston:

Niebuhr’s emphasis on sinfulness and on the sin of pride in particular is really troubling to feminists, because it raises questions about who his intended audience is. This is a wonderful corrective for the powerful, but what about for the powerless? What about for people who have trouble even taking a strong stand or are hiding their gifts instead of trying to exercise them. I mean, is this a hyper masculinist theology? That’s really the question that feminist scholars have raised, and they’re definitely on to something. But, one thing that is fascinating to me, is that black scholars have been quick to understand that the Niebuhrian position is not only about the self and where the self is positioned and how the self has an internal dialogue, it’s also about this issue of how power is working around a person, right. So how is power out there in the world working? Black scholars have been quicker to see that Niebuhr gives the oppressed a very, very compelling line about power in the world. One that might have profound implications for how the individual self would then move forward.

Robin Lovin:

It isn't so much that you're not supposed to do that. The American social gospel had a kind of optimistic idea that we could change the power relationships in society just by helping people. That if everybody would just be more loving in the local community, the employers would stop exploiting the workers and the workers would start devoting themselves to their companies and we'd have social harmony and prosperity and progress, and I think what Niebuhr understood, maybe what people were beginning to understand in America as a whole at that point, was it wasn't going to be that easy. The interests that divided people and the identities of race and culture and religion that divided people were too strong for that easy reconciliation that Americans like to hope for. The basic point that he's working on when he writes *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is certainly the fruit of that Detroit experience. The basic point that he's working on is power relationships only change when people are able to use power to force those changes.

Andrew Young:

Niebuhr kept us from being naive – about the evil structures of society... That is what I would always argue with Martin (Luther King, Jr) about. He would accuse me of being naively optimistic...and he would say “you don’t want to confront the depths of evil that we are confronting. You do alright with a few educated white folks that know what we are talking about. He said, what we are talking about is 400 years of a society that is based on slavery, and the exploitation of a people. There could not be a United States of America if it were not for four million slaves. At the time of the Civil War the value of slaves to the society was about 4 million dollars and the value of the railroad was about half the values of slavery... Economic issues...north and south... Even railroads could not have been laid without slaves...

-- America's Role in the World --

Niebuhr Quotes:

“Great disproportions of power are as certainly moral hazards to justice and community as they are foundations of minimal order. They are hazards to community both because they arouse resentments and fears among those who have less power; and because they tempt the strong to wield their power without too much consideration of the interest and views of those among whom it impinges. – *Irony of American History* (MW, 561)

The American situation is such a vivid symbol of the spiritual perplexities of modern man, because the degree of American power tends to generate illusions to which a technocratic culture is already too prone. This technocratic approach to problems of history, which erroneously equates the mastery of nature with the mastery of historical destiny, in turn accentuates a very old failing in human nature: the inclination of the wise, or the powerful, or the virtuous, to obscure and deny the human limitations in all human achievements and pretensions. – *Irony of American History* [MW 570]

That we should be less innocent than our fathers had hoped; that we should be covered in guilt by the assumption of the very responsibilities which express virtue; that we should become less powerful in relation to the total historical pattern as we become more powerful in given historical issues; that the happiness which our fathers regarded as the true end of life should have eluded us, all this fits very well into the pattern of ironic failure. In all of them human limitations catch up with human pretensions.” – *Irony of American History* [MW 581]

If we're going to be the Rome of the modern era we ought at least to apply ourselves more assiduously to the art of dominion, and learn that grand strategy without tactical skill is worth nothing.” – *New Leader* Feb. 4, 1957

Transcript for clip -- “Power & Inequality: America's Role in the World” :

Mark Massa:

I think what Niebuhr bequeaths to American theology, politics, and social theory is the importance of coercion. Now coercion a negative word. Most people think of coercion as a very bad thing. And as Niebuhr said, recognized, very profoundly about, coercion is a neutral thing. Coercion can be used for good, and coercion can be used for bad things. And part of what he saw was because we are embodied creatures, coercion is not necessarily a negative thing. It's just the way we get things done. If you tell a six year old they have to stand, they have to stay in their seat and read, when they want to get up and run, that is a form of coercion whether we like it or not. So there's all kinds of coercion. And what Reinhold Niebuhr wanted to do was to remind people in his own trade, that is, people training Protestant ministers, as well as everyone in the United States, that given our role as the leader of the free world after World War II, coercion was the name of the game whether they wanted to believe it or not. Therefore, his question was, “How are you going to use this coercion? And what ends do you want the coercion to lead to?” How are you going to do it, and what are the ends toward which you want the coercion to be. He recognized, and this is one of the ways in which he was so very attractive to the advisors to Kennedy, and to Johnson, and others, he recognized that during the Cold War rhetoric was not going to be enough. Good will's not going to be enough. You had to strategize and use coercion for righteousness' sake. And he uses that a couple times, and I love that phrase: “coercion for righteousness' sake.” Because that's the way you meet aggression with a counter power, and that's the way you have to do it. And he legitimated that. He said not only might religious people consider doing that, religious people had to do that to be responsible.

Because in a real world, where really bad things happen, coercion was just part of the game you played. When Barack Obama was asked why Niebuhr was important, or why Barack Obama thought Niebuhr himself was important, he said, "Because he reminded people that to change the world is a very difficult task and you can only change it a little bit and it's usually at great cost." And part of that cost is the coercion you have to use to affect social and political change. But it gives meaning, he anchors the meaning to that cost in profound religious and philosophical sort of duties that we have in a way that hearkened back to the earliest Christian tradition.

Andrew Bacevich:

I had read *Irony of American History* twenty, thirty years ago. I don't think I understood it. I certainly didn't appreciate it the first time I read it. And I came back to *Irony of American History*, it was certainly after the Cold War had ended. And as...a new version of American imperialism was beginning to become manifest, an imperialism that was utterly bi-partisan. I wasn't like this was something that Republicans had concocted, and the Democrats objected to. And therefore, the references in *Irony of American History*, to wanting to manage history, Americans believing they could manage history, to me that was happening in spades. I've become a student of US policy in the Islamic world or the greater Middle East, in particular I've been interested in the use of American military power in that part of the world. And members of the National Security Elite will frequently make reference to the need to "shape" the region. That's their term. Shape the region. And their use of the term "shape" in that regard certainly recalls what Niebuhr was warning Americans against. To imagine that American military power can determine the destiny of nations in the greater Middle East. And it was that expectation, of course, that was behind the Bush administrations, the George W. Bush administration, decision to invade Iraq in 2003, a decision that created a catastrophe. Had Niebuhr been with us in 2002 and 2003, Niebuhr would certainly have been warning the George W. Bush administration against imagining that it could manage history. Of course the administration would have ignored the warning anyway, but that's another matter.

Jimmy Carter:

I was idealistic, and I knew that my time as a submarine officer was dedicated to combat and defending our country with my life if necessary. And how to combine that willingness to take a practical approach to any threat to our country on the one hand, and to fulfill the teachings of Jesus Christ who is the Prince of Peace on the other hand was difficult for me to assimilate. And then I began to hear about Reinhold Niebuhr, and I had a friend named Bill Gunter who was a lawyer supporting me for public office, who later became chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, but at that time he was just a lawyer. And he sent me a book by Reinhold Niebuhr, and then later I bought a book by a student of his named June Bingham, *Courage to Change*, and when I had difficulty understanding what Niebuhr was saying in some of his writings, I would go back and get Ms. Bingham's book and read some you know, layman's, a peanut farmer's, explanation of what he was saying. But he was faced I think with that dilemma all his life too. He started out I understand as quite idealistic and wanted to have a purity of application of Christian principles in his, in his life and in his teaching and to put the Sermon on the Mount into practical application but he found that he couldn't do that completely, that it had to be a practical application of Christianity, and he in some of his writings he defined what a just war was. I know he was against the Vietnam war, but he was in favor of us going to war against Germany when the Germans were implementing the Holocaust, which we didn't know about then, but taking over Europe. So I found a compatibility between his writings and my own personal dilemma as an entry, an entrée into the political world, and it was helpful to me later when I was governor, and particularly when I became President and was facing the constant threat of a nuclear war which would have destroyed the world but had to contend with the competition that we had from the Soviet Union. So Niebuhr was always present in my mind in a very practical way and not, that is to say, not as a theologian, but as a Christian who was deeply involved in politics.