

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 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.