

# 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?

## -- 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...