

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?

-- 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.