

NIEBUHR'S STRATEGIES OF JUSTICE

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In the currently prevailing political climate and the present mood of academia, my predictions for an archeological expedition into layers of Niebuhrian literature would have been an excavation of "early Niebuhr" (liberal and sometime pacifist), or more likely "middle Niebuhr" (modified Marxist, socialist, revolutionary). Instead, Ronald Stone has offered us a new exhibit of "mature Niebuhr" or "standard Niebuhr"—conservative (after the manner of Burke and Churchill), pragmatic, reformatory but not revolutionary, constitutionally democratic, more attentive to continuity in history than to discontinuity. It is Niebuhr of the period of the dissipation of Marxist sentiments and the full development of Christian Realism.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, ed. by Ronald H. Stone. Braziller. 268 pp. \$6.50.

The implications of this register of contrast between expectation and product is that Dr. Stone may have edited and issued a *passé* and irrelevant Niebuhr. That, certainly, is the view of critics of Niebuhr who insist that he was on firmer ground in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) than in his later writings, or at least that his position in the early thirties speaks more directly to our present needs than do the Christian Realist writings.

On the other hand, under almost any flat rock one can discover a sun-blinded liberal realist who hungers and thirsts for justice, liberation and humanity, but who fears that revolutionary madness will produce in their stead first chaos and then tyranny of the Left or (more likely) the Right. For such persons, Niebuhr the "realist" is the most relevant and necessary man to set before the crusaders who are hell-bent to rescue us from establishment, system, power structure and suburbia. And therefore they would (and probably do) welcome *Faith and Politics* as a reminder and republication of a deposit of political and moral wisdom against which all diagnoses, strategies and tactics must be tested.

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The volume is a collection of Reinhold Niebuhr's previously published essays written, with one exception, between 1937 and 1968. Dr. Stone has arranged them in three groups representing the following concerns: (1) religious faith as a perennial element in human experience and its implications for the dynamics and the structural requirements of politics; (2) the ethical method of Christian Realism; and (3) the theory and politics of international relations, with particular attention to the nature and responsibilities of imperial power.

The title *Faith and Politics* is appropriate, not only because of Niebuhr's work in establishing a significant connection, but also because of its pertinence to the levels on which these disputes operate. On the penultimate level, it is an argument over the conclusions which ought to follow from the application of a methodology for testing and comparing strategies of justice. The disputants accept, for the most part, the same methodological framework. Their opposition pertains to questions of judgment—*Ermessensfragen*, as the Germans would put it. On the ultimate level, the disputants challenge or defend the fundamentals of the methodology, and stand over against each other in *status confessionis*.

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The methodological framework within which the penultimate arguments are conducted is one which relativizes all ideals and strategies of justice by confronting them with their anthropological limits and possibilities. No strategy can deliver man finally from evil, for the disorders and injustices of human society derive from man himself and not from the character of institutions or any other transient historical circumstances. None can safely disregard or rightly promise to liberate man from the perennial problems of egotism and interest, power and authority, law and government. No charge against the standing order can override the fact that even the most venal and tyrannical orders are mixtures of justice and injustice. No claims to truth and universality can escape the taint of particular interest.

The principal effect of relativizing all strategies is to render them subject to proportionate rather than absolute distinction. If there are no absolutely just or absolutely unjust historical orders, neither are there

any defensible schemes for total redemption in time and history. Each proposal must stand for measurement and proportionate comparison with respect to its anticipated ability to produce relatively greater justice, relatively less injustice, in the given historical situation in which it competes.

The particular strategy of justice represented and endorsed in these essays can be expressed in the following hypotheses: (1) Justice for the out-groups will be gained more by incorporating them into the competitive struggle among groups within the limits and by the legitimate means of a constitutional democratic society, than by forcibly and completely displacing the "ruling class" and socializing the productive processes. (2) The advancement of justice is more likely and more secure by way of pragmatic correction of the standing order than by way of ideologically guided abrupt and radical change.

Obviously, the proposed strategy is anti-revolutionary. In fact, it coincides with and reflects Niebuhr's abandonment of commitments to revolution and socialization which he had defended in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and even more sharply in *Reflections on the End of an Era*. His change of mind was prompted by historical evidence from Russia and the United States that revolution could not deliver on the ideological promises, whereas "incorporation" and competitive struggle could produce substantial although not complete justice. The experience of Stalinist Russia had shown that revolutionary expropriation not only did not resolve the problem of unjust power, but even tended to make it worse by concentrating both political and economic power in the hands of a managerial class equipped with a dogmatic and repressive ideology. On the other hand, the political and economic gains of labor and the passage of important social legislation during the New Deal period proved that a flexible system could allow considerable redistribution of power and wealth without the necessity of overthrowing the "ruling class."

This conservative strategy of justice has two principal lines of defense. *First*, rightly understood it is "conservative" in its respect for the achievements of history and its suspicion of the capacity of human reason and will to master historical destiny. It is not conservative as an ideological defense of established power, interest and privilege. On the contrary, it maintains the tension of ideal and reality from which issue the unrelieved demands against every historical arrangement, and it is concerned particularly to challenge imbalances of power and restore competitive equilibria. *Second*, it produces. Visionaries and romantics will remain unimpressed and unconvinced by its relative gains, but those who struggle seriously

for earthly justice will see this route as the way of real achievement and will resist the temptation to design Utopia and gird themselves for Armageddon.

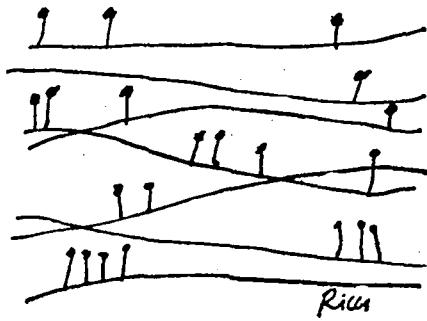
However, the strategy is vulnerable precisely in its historicity. The evidence supporting the claim that it is preferable to other approaches may not carry beyond the conditions under which the preferential judgment originally was made. And if it is carried over despite contrary evidence, it will, in fact, provide an ideological defense for inordinate and oppressive power. It is not surprising, therefore, that among the complaints raised against the relevance of Niebuhr's position one finds, first, a general reassessment of procedural and revolutionary approaches to justice based on a more inclusive usage of historical evidence; and second, denials of its applicability to "underdeveloped" and traditionally non-democratic societies and even to the prevailing conditions in American society.

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We can get a line on some of the criticisms by seeing them in terms of the two major provisions of the strategy: pragmatic correction, and incorporation. The "pragmatic-corrective" approach explicitly rejects holistic interpretations and solutions derived from ideological frameworks. It deals with the problems of the society one at a time—as they arise—and it assumes the basic health of the system. The critics insist that the assumptions are fallacious and that the resulting approach therefore cannot cope with the difficulties. Problems of the society cannot be individuated and isolated for treatment. They are systematically interrelated—to deal with one is to deal with them all. Moreover, they are not random challenges to a basically healthy system but problems generated by the system itself—by reason of its constitutional unsuitability to the meeting of human needs in a given set of historical conditions.

The objections produce corresponding requirements. To move towards a just society it is necessary to work from a general conceptual understanding which diagnoses the systemic difficulties, defines the outlines and identifies the qualities of a truly just society, brings unrepresented needs to the fore, and indicates the programmatic tasks and responsibilities. That, of course, is a work of ideological construction and orientation. Moreover, it is necessary to make fundamental changes—"radical structural changes," as the saying goes—in the system, or perhaps to create a wholly new system which gives expression to the ideological discernments. That, to one degree or another and in one form or another, is a work of revolution.

The strategy of justice-by-incorporation, it is claimed, may have proved relatively effective in the thirties in the United States, but it is not adapted or adaptable to the most grievous of contemporary problems of social injustice. In the United States it is not adequate to cope with problems of institutionalized racism, of dislocations produced by the progressive automation of an industrialized society, and of the flow of power to the so-called "military-industrial complex." Niebuhr acknowledges the powerlessness and increasing desperation of black urban dwellers and the preoccupation with military expenditures in the concluding essay on "A Question of Priorities." In "underdeveloped" countries or in countries ruled by a racial and racist minority, the strategy is simply irrelevant. There the "out-group" is the majority, *not* the minority. To incorporate a substantial numerical majority would be tantamount to giving it effective power to rule. The ruling minority knows this, and therefore it will not yield. In both types of situations, therefore, the course of justice requires changes in systemic structure and in the distribution of power and wealth that are more radical, thoroughgoing and disruptive than the "incorporation" strategy can allow or produce.



It would not be possible for me to sift through these arguments briefly. What I propose to do, rather, is to make some distinctions between the penultimate and the ultimate level of argument, and in doing so to indicate the lines along which the discussion should proceed.

1) Christian Realism as a methodology for testing and comparing strategies of justice can and must be distinguished from the particular strategy which the Niebuhr of this volume believes meets the tests better than any other. That is why there can be penultimate disagreement over particular conclusions without challenging the ultimate foundations of the methodology. And that is why there is no absolute barrier to reconsidering revolution within a Christian Realist framework. There is no doubt that Niebuhr expresses a *general* preference for constitutional democracy shorn of its liberal illusions, and that he believes every existing political system must move

towards democracy in order to gain more authority for its exercise of power. But he always has insisted that democracy is not universally viable. It presupposes the long historical development of supporting traditions and of a politically competent citizenry. Moreover, any particular expression of it stands under the same functional test as any other arrangement: can it produce and does it produce "tolerable" justice? If the answer is "no," we are back in the business of taking a hard look at strategies of revolution—but with a decided bias for pragmatic over romantic revolution.

2) Christian Realism both as methodology and as strategy of justice is weak in its constructive phase. It does not conceptualize "alternatives to the present" with sufficient distinctiveness to precipitate and guide efforts towards qualitative renewal or reconstruction. On this point the critics are correct in principle, whatever might be said for their particular recommendations. The reason for this fault is that Christian Realism was hammered out in conflict with ambitious and optimistic schemes of social redemption. Its "realistic" contribution was to point out the obstacles to the implementation of ideal programs. It majored in defining the anthropological and historical limits and requirements with which every serious strategy of justice must contend. Historically, its function has been to check out constructive proposals rather than to propound them.

There is, nonetheless, a constructive phase. It is located in the sustained movement towards optimum equilibrium of liberty and equality, the regulative principles of justice. But it does not predominate in the employment of the methodology, and it sees the constructive alternatives in terms of the issues and forces in the struggle over power and interest. It does not, as a rule, attempt to impose a new shape and orientation on the struggle itself.

One corrective suggestion, frequently encountered, is that Niebuhr should shift his theory of democratic politics from an "interest group" theory, which sees public policy as the outcome of the struggle of groups pursuing their own interests in a condition of scarcity, to a "party" theory which gives more attention to the formulation of "propositions in the public interest" and to the housing together of interests with at least a minimum of ideological compatibility. A second suggestion is that the methodology should be developed more fully from its constructive theological resources—from a reassessment, that is, of the positive political implications of love, reconciliation, and eschatological hope.

We must emphasize, however, that these suggestions pertain to the further development of "under-

developed' aspects of the politics," a bit more relevant. There do we require a wholly new idealism, and in particular they do not challenge the insistence of the independence of the family... It is quite out of all categories of justice. For that reason they will be incapable of rejoicing when they hear the anthropological re-examinations of the methodology.

3. The ultimate level of discussion is concerned with anthropological pre-suppositions. However, the important question is not the pre-supposition, but that often too few consider it. Let us, then, that is, whether Neubauer has eliminated once and for all the notion of *man's capacity for justice*? Over against those who maintained too uncritically that man's capacity for justice had been eliminated, he says: "The fundamental question has to do with the nature and premises of the most fundamental limiting factors. Does human nature limit historical possibility, or do historical circumstances limit human possibility?" If the former is true, then political theory, ethics, strategy and programming must reflect the potential elements which correspond to them as the boundaries of thought and action. If the latter, then the future may indeed be radically open (although not necessarily hopeful).

Neubauer... does not answer such questions affirmatively; however his realism requires attention to historical as well as to anthropological limits. He argues that particular evils exist in historical form precisely because their realization and credibility is a strategy of justice, but the view of human nature ultimately determines whether aspiration to morality (e.g., leadership and authority) are properly designated "evil," and whether their bankruptcy is intrinsic or merely a different expression of a permanent condition. Overcoming the old order partly takes over history in the traditional way and the strategy of justice, but always as an expression of the ambiguity of filthiness and freedom. Morality of a more radical sort would require much more than modest systemic changes in historical existence. It would require a structural change in human nature to eliminate other features of freedom.

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Professor Neubauer has been making the point against "total and soft utopians" and "soft children of light" for at least four decades, i.e., if we did not consider previous his earlier opponents he may have been a successful mesh their pretenses, the moment based of historical optimism can turn cyclical. A by product of Christian history is the notion of human worth and therefore is the measure of human im-

perfection. But he does not believe that there is anything "beyond history"—he cannot accept his ancestors' hope of heaven—and therefore he feels compelled to work out secular and temporal forms of salvation. His hope for the salvation of the human condition is an old theme with a new element. The new element is the addition of science and technology have created the full capability of meeting those evils which have been the primary sources of conflict and aggression. To do so, one into the new age of humanity and abundance it is necessary only to eliminate filthiness. It is necessary—these conditions when artificially and unjustly imposed... are justifiably.

We must acknowledge somewhat in the claims of the critics, human beings are... an evil for now and ought to do many things for the welfare of society and injustice which hitherto were deemed impossible. Moreover one by that there is more definite meaning to the cause of revolution than can be expressed in the formula "the possibility of good goes together with the possibility of evil." But one could accept both of these claims in polemics without denying the truth of Niebuhr's moral theory. The fundamental argument is one type of historical pessimism which regard man as a love spirit adapted to our three kinds of repression and fulfilling historical mission—when religious attitudes, personal economic and political interests, biological instincts and social progress in historical line by destroying the present and purging the human condition of all vestiges of the old order. But if the proponents of the views are as certain about original theory as they claim to be, they should not look away from the historical evidence that revolutionary movements in the new world are founded first and last, part and whole, views and below by existing conditions outside the in the old order, based on the law of life, mainly as the initial propagation of error (not of sin only), the will-to-power and the will-to-freedom as the ultimate limit of efforts to deal with the inherent self-destructive nature.

4. If we stay with the Neubauer anthropology, we must stay even with its implications for ends and means in the struggle for justice. We should recognize more amplitude and room for more cooperation in the setting of goals but... during, so we should account for what we know to be the inevitable moral elements in any political society. Also, we should dare to take the level of our expectations, but not so high, as to falsify the human reality. For example, we could strive to make our society more truly democratic but we should not expect that a large,

complex, industrial society can be governed by participatory democracy without authoritative leadership and institutional controls on leadership, without combinations of interests, without balances of power. Nor should we suppose that the depressing of leadership and the activating of a wider participating constituency automatically improves the quality of social decisions. Also, we must come mightily to grips with the fact that patterns of racial advantage and disadvantage are imposed institutionally and not simply by individual prejudice and will, but we should not suppose that the institutions are the primal source of racism. If we fail to recognize, as Niebuhr would put it, that racism is a function of the will-to-power of identifiable groups in juxtaposition with other and racially different groups, we shall be about as successful in coping with racism in American society as the socialized societies of Russia and Poland have been in coping with anti-semitism.

The means of justice must continue to be judged primarily by their promise of productivity, and not primarily by the quality of the hope which they serve. Revolution may qualify—but on the basis of pragmatic proportionate testing, and in comparison with other means. The strategy of justice for black America surely must be decided on these terms. Revolutionary seizure of power by blacks is not a credible possibility, nor could it, as minority rule, be defended in terms of its justice. But black power as black awareness and identity, and as the organization of that power which ironically has become a possibility to blacks as a result of their segregation by a racist white society, provides the muscle with which blacks in America can make the incorporation strategy—and therefore the political and economic system—work on their behalf. Of course, that means coalition with other groups and struggle within the system rather than simply against it. And that suggestion will offend the purists. But a black power incorporationist approach meets the realities of the historical moment with regard to the possibilities of justice far more effectively than either integration or black separatism alone.

5) We have contended that the ultimate level of dispute is confessional, and that clearly is true, because the arguments terminate in decisions about the nature and the worth of human and political reality. That was evident in the contention over the primacy of anthropology or history, and the evidence is confirmed when one moves from the conceptualization to action. The quality and commitment of action depends in large part on whether one is able to live with ambiguity and partial results in hope of fulfillment beyond history, or whether one must force earth

and time to become heaven and eternity, or whether one can find meaning and purpose neither within history nor beyond.

There is evidence also in the fact that some of the participants in contemporary struggles want more than justice—they want salvation. That surely is the meaning of the widespread eschatological language in “new left” literature: the hope for a wholly new future, the conflict between the old order and the new, the germinal presence in the “movement” of the order that is to come, the joy of the common meal with its remembrance of past confrontations and its hope for the promised deliverance. That also is a major source of peril to the struggle for justice, as for example when revolutionary confrontation becomes a way of life and the battle over particular issues serves the self-affirmation of the revolutionary more than the victims of injustice.

The confessional and religious character of the intellectual disputes and the actional encounters confirms the point which Niebuhr made against some of the “death of God” theologians in the opening essay, and which is either explicit or implicit throughout the volume as a whole: that man is incurably a religious being who pursues the meaning of existence in social contexts as well as individual endeavors, and that his religiousness is the source both of his acceptance of transnational authority and of his tendency towards the demonic use of power in his possession. The confessional and religious character of the conflicts confirms yet another point: that questions of politics and ethics ultimately are theological.

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. 6) One other important criticism of Christian Realism is out of the line of argument which has been developed in this review, but it is important and therefore should be mentioned. I refer to Paul Ramsey's complaint that Niebuhr puts all ethical judgment under the criterion of proportion and does not consider that some acts ought never to be done because they are intrinsically immoral. I would support the reconsideration of this point in any efforts to reformulate a Christian political ethic, but I believe that in practice it would pose a more serious problem for Niebuhr's revolutionary critics than for Christian Realism.

Niebuhr's political theology and ethics I conclude, require substantially more development in their constructive aspects—particularly out of the theological resources, but also from a more open estimate of historical possibilities. However, the Christian Realist anthropology is the necessary foundation for an *ethica politica perennis*.