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# Pragmatism and Christian Realism in the Political Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr: An Analysis and Evolution of American Liberalism

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Université Bordeaux Montaigne

École Doctorale Montaigne Humanités (ED 480)

THÈSE DE DOCTORAT EN ÉTUDES ANGLOPHONES

**Pragmatism and Christian Realism  
in the Political Thought of Reinhold  
Niebuhr**

*An Analysis and Evolution of American Liberalism*

Présentée et soutenue publiquement le 08 décembre 2017 par

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## Introduction

Absolutist and relativist, religious and atheist, liberal and conservative; throughout the study of intellectual history, political philosophers, intellectuals, and academics in general have confronted these and other, seemingly irreconcilable contradictions, all in pursuit of a specific vision of the truth. These dichotomies are neither surprising nor new as several authors, Reinhold Niebuhr for example, have discussed many of these topics at great length. The goal was either to validate one approach over another or, as was the case of Niebuhr, to explain the roots of these dualistic visions. He did so by using classical thought as the foundations of his philosophies and bringing them into the modern world. For example, in Niebuhr's work *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, he elucidates that for the Greeks, this division was between the physical and the mental. The mental dimension of life was expressed specifically in the form of reason or *logos*. In the first chapter of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr established how classical thought favored the mental world over the physical. This dialectic approach in intellectual thought continued throughout the Middle Ages, for instance, with Augustine's *The City of God* which turned the conversation from an internal one, to one between the self and God.

Throughout the Enlightenment and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this religious conversation shifted to one less inclined toward the mysterious. It turned instead towards the "disenchantment of the world" which brought about new interpretations, and therefore new divisions in the comprehension of world events. These ruptures went from being introspective dialogues to full-scale public debates about the place of not only God, but Man in society and concerning the cosmos themselves.<sup>1</sup> These debates are, to no one's surprise, still raging on. Nevertheless, most societies in the Occident have come to, at least for now, a certain *détente* and have decided to leave the question of religion as a personal matter which remains within the realm of the *fort intérieur*.<sup>2</sup> The same cannot be said, however, when it comes to the secular debates about how

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<sup>1</sup> Debates such as secularism in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Winock) or Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (Menand) are just two examples of vibrant, and sometimes violent debates that shook the Western World over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> The website <http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/> is just one of many that is devoted to religion's place in society.



societies and, more importantly, governments, should be run, or the seemingly continuously public debates between conservatism and liberalism.<sup>3</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) discussed, often in great detail, the concepts and issues related to dialectics. Called “the supreme American theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” Niebuhr never shied away from speaking about the various and quite extraordinary “and/or” debates that were center stage throughout his very active professional and intellectual life (Schlesinger Jr. “Forgetting”, par. 4).

Son to German immigrants, Niebuhr grew up in an extremely religious household where his father was not only deeply spiritual, but an influential minister in his German-speaking community. Niebuhr knew from a young age that he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps because “[his father was] the most interesting man in town” (Lemert ch. 1, par. 18). As such, Niebuhr’s father would often ask young Niebuhr his personal advice on ministry appointments in other cities. It was clear to the Niebuhr family that the young man would follow a unique and special path (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 10-14). Niebuhr’s father preached the importance of the Bible and Jesus as a social gospel. This meant that the Bible and its teachings were not solely for the purpose of individual salvation, but for the betterment of society. His son broke away from this liberal Protestant vision of Christianity. Instead, he focused on the complexities, or more accurately, the paradoxes of modern society, and on being a Christian in a modern world.

This is not to say that Niebuhr did not attempt to apply social gospel lessons while preaching or that he did not believe the social gospel to be important. On the contrary, he had tried following the social gospel teachings throughout his formative years, and it was not until the catastrophe of the First World War and the following events that Niebuhr came to understand the fallacies in not only in this religious model, but the modern vision of the world that so many held dear. He became critical of the idea that, through reason and the benefits (both technological and social) which stemmed from that reason, a person could always improve society, and therefore the individual’s condition. The dependence upon reason culminated in the erroneous belief of surpassing the need for God.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be remembered that conservatism and liberalism are not universal concepts, and are particular to each country or area studied. Therefore, it is more appropriate to talk about conservatisms and liberalisms. Even notions of liberalism are deceiving, as depending on the language used or studied, the word carries completely different connotations. Such connotations and definitions will be explored later on in this work. Works such as Conord’s *Les Gauches européennes: Au XXème siècle* or Kopecek and Hlousek’s *Origin; Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties: East-Central and Western Europe Compared* are just two examples of the complexity when looking at political ideologies on a comparative scale.

Niebuhr considered this rejection of God to be how liberals comprehended the world, though not necessarily limited to the secular world. Niebuhr felt that there was a branch of liberal Christianity which was equally at fault through its perception of world affairs. Niebuhr's ultimate critique against this concept was that history had never justified the liberal (religious or secular) belief regarding the pure and enlightened nature of reason or of human beings. This idea is best summarized in *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* where he discussed why a critique of modernity was needed. He affirmed that:

[...] this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives. [...] They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man's collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. (Introduction xxx)

Calling into question these liberal beliefs as well as accounting for the unpredictability and egoism of human nature, and the importance of power in human affairs, all whilst maintaining normative values of approximate justice would later be associated with Niebuhr through his Christian realism. Furthermore, it is the purpose of this work, to demonstrate how Christian realism, though accurate in describing Niebuhr's philosophies and approaches, fails to consider one of the other major influences on Niebuhr: Pragmatism. That is why this research will seek to demonstrate how Christian realism should be analyzed through pragmatic lenses as well creating not just a new branch of political realism, but a new branch of Pragmatism as well: Christian Pragmatism. Niebuhr's Pragmatism managed to consider something that many of the moralists, both secular and religious of his time, failed to take into consideration: the importance of power as well as the natural egoism of the individual.

For Niebuhr, no one better epitomized this false misconception of human nature than the works and philosophies of John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey exemplified the false sense of reassurance provided by belief in human reason and human beings themselves. As the eminent philosopher of his day, specifically in the field of Pragmatism, Dewey was more or less a scapegoat for Niebuhr's attacks. His criticisms of Dewey were at times so blatant and

generalized that Niebuhr was often criticized for oversimplifying Dewey's philosophies (Rice 18).

Though by no means the orator that Niebuhr was,<sup>4</sup> Dewey was still a titan amongst secular humanist circles. His development and application of Pragmatism in a variety of fields including, but by no means limited to, psychology, child development, education, philosophy, aesthetics, and politics transformed the American intellectual landscape. While Dewey was equally critical of modernity, his beliefs on the reasons for the evils of society and the problems of humanity stemmed from different sources. A primary disparity between the two was that Dewey felt that human reason was paramount in resolving the various problems individuals encountered in society. Niebuhr's criticisms tended to focus on this nuance of Deweyan thought without considering the other key factor in Dewey's philosophies, which was making the modern individual realize that s/he was not truly alone and that individuals succeeded when society did so as well. For Dewey, everything was interconnected due to the social nature of human beings.

Where Niebuhr saw the world through the traditional spiritual/physical dichotomy, Dewey's Pragmatism enabled him to see the world differently. Dewey's unique conception of Pragmatism permitted him to realize that there was only an "and/and." Immediately, the divisions between Dewey and Niebuhr are clear as Dewey rejected any form of dichotomy as there was no physical and mental normative divisions of the world in which the physical was considered "bad" and the mental "good." Instead, both were equally important and active in a human's life. Ignoring one to the detriment of the other, caused overall damage to the subject regardless of whichever division was taken into consideration, or given priority.

Niebuhr, as well as other critics of Dewey's specific vision of Pragmatism, quickly charged that it was far too fluid, with no set boundaries, rules, or ideological foundations. Some even went so far as to argue that "pragmatism opened the door to moral nihilism of the sort that [William] James had identified with Nietzsche, to a kind of relativism, to a deeply dangerous, 'anything goes' approach to the world" (Blake sec. VI, par. 1). Dewey's holistic understanding of the world obviously clashed with Niebuhr's dualistic approach, and Niebuhr was not shy in finding what he felt were the philosophical, intellectual, and even moral flaws with Dewey's

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<sup>4</sup> Various sources including Fox, Rice, and Lemert, state that though both men were brilliant, Niebuhr was definitely the more gifted speaker. This, of course, is partly due to his training as a minister. Indeed, Niebuhr seemed to possess an incredible talent for public speaking, allegedly capable of even keeping the attention of tired town hall members: "By the end of one sentence, he had every person's full attention; by the end of one hour, he had several hundred people on their feet, clapping, stamping, shouting their approval" (Lemert ch. 2, pars. 12-13).

philosophy. Ironically, Niebuhr's constant critiquing of Dewey's humanist/pragmatic/secular approach to comprehending the world, actually proved to a certain extent that Dewey was right: all things were indeed related. Thus, as will be seen throughout this research, by constantly criticizing Dewey, Niebuhr was indeed, and a bit in spite of himself, influenced by the former.

The irony of being significantly influenced by that which one criticizes is the basis for this dissertation. By comparing Niebuhr and Dewey's political thought over the course of their careers (the first half of the twentieth century), it will be shown that though Niebuhr was critical, at times extremely and unjustly so, of Dewey's political thought, Niebuhr was nevertheless heavily influenced by Dewey and his pragmatic philosophies. It will be argued that due to these clashes of ideologies, Niebuhr was in fact a product of Dewey's thought. Through Niebuhr's negative assessments of Dewey's thought, Niebuhr created something new, taking a part of Dewey's own Pragmatism to improve it, thereby mixing it with his own Christian Realism to create a new branch of Pragmatism: Christian Pragmatism. This new pragmatic vision, as will be argued, acted as a bridge between classic and future pragmatists, allowing them to adapt Niebuhr's pragmatic thought to their own vision of the world.

In order to achieve such a lofty goal, this research will be divided into three major sections. Though multiple approaches were indeed possible for accomplishing such a task, it is best to tackle the questions brought up in a thematic way rather than say, chronological or author-centered way. Therefore, rather than beginning at a specific date and working chronologically through each author's biography, this work will instead focus on themes that both thinkers wrote about. However, due to the scope of work available on Dewey, this research will focus primarily on Niebuhr and how Liberalism,<sup>5</sup> in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word and embodied by Dewey, affected him.

The first section of this dissertation will be devoted to discovering the philosophical and political roots of both authors. To do so, this work will look back at the European roots which influenced each thinker and how those European ideas eventually evolved into the "American philosophy" known as Pragmatism. Of course, such a lofty goal could be a research subject all on its own, which is why this work will focus on highlights of classic Liberalism and its "evolution." Throughout this historic and intellectual extrapolation, similarities between classic Liberalism (either European or American) and Niebuhr will be highlighted in order to demonstrate that though considered a political "realist," Niebuhr nevertheless falls into Liberalism's philosophical camp. The reason for the sections on intellectual history is simply

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<sup>5</sup> Here, "Liberalism" is capitalized to demonstrate and signify the general philosophical movement that found some of its roots, as will be demonstrated later on in this work, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

that philosophies and, to a greater extent the thinkers that developed them, do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, discussing Dewey or Niebuhr without developing the intellectual background which inspired both men would ignore an important part of their intellectual development as both Dewey and Niebuhr were simply 20<sup>th</sup>-century expressions of Liberalism. Thus, in order to understand the latter figures, discovery of the former is required. However, due to the complex and varied nature of Liberalism, specific choices were made in terms of studying certain authors over others, which will be explained in later sections of this research.

The second section will be consecrated primarily to the development of Niebuhr's thought alone. Specifically, it will demonstrate how his Christian realism evolved in response to the historic events and philosophical movements surrounding him thereby transforming his Christian realism into Christian Pragmatism. In order to do so, a brief analysis of traditional realism will be explored as Christian realism is a "version of political realism" (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 4). Furthermore, this section will briefly analyze Dewey's particular vision of Pragmatism. As Dewey was a prolific writer, specializing in and discussing several different fields which most people saw as unrelated, studying Dewey the philosopher is a subject in and of itself. Therefore, for clarity's sake, this work will focus on a selection of Dewey's political writings in order to concentrate on his political Pragmatism and not his general pragmatic philosophy. In regard to the choice of Dewey, the choice was clear. Niebuhr and Dewey held many opposing viewpoints, but still shared multiple similarities. The primary, and most evident reason for choosing Dewey and Niebuhr was the proximity in age and ideology between the two. Though Niebuhr often objected to being labeled a liberal or being compared to Dewey, Niebuhr's objections masked an ironic reality: he shared more in common with Dewey than he cared to confess. Admittedly a generation apart, they nevertheless reacted and wrote on similar world events, demonstrating how both were indeed, products of their environments. For example, both thinkers were defined by two World Wars which had an undeniable impact on their writings and, more importantly, their philosophies. These impacts and shared influences strengthened the case to select both authors during this time period.

Additionally, the second section will analyze how Pragmatism and Christian realism viewed values such as freedom and equality in society, as well as discussing the appropriate role of religion. It will also explore how, even though both authors approached human nature from radically different points of view, still managed to come to similar conclusions. This holds especially true when it came to the role of the individual in society and the converse position of society's responsibility toward the individual.

Keeping on the topic of the individual and society, the second section examines the impact of World War I on both thinkers, for both authors were at pivotal moments in their

intellectual careers during the Great War. Though Dewey did not necessarily have any profound changes in his vision of the world, he did find himself on the defensive when it came to his political ideologies as well as his convictions towards the social and human sciences. This was contrary to Niebuhr who, because of the events that not only led to the war but the effects thereafter, experienced a profound change within his political philosophy. Although he did not outright abandon his upbringing, he fundamentally challenged it by developing a new philosophy.

The third and final section will be devoted to two major world conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: World War II and the Cold War. These conflicts changed both thinkers, but in ways different to World War I. This was especially true for Niebuhr, who towards the end of his life demonstrated, perhaps the most clearly, how his original Christian realism, had indeed evolved into Christian Pragmatism. His development was due, in part, to how both thinkers discovered similar approaches to the rise of totalitarian regimes, be it fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, or Stalinist Russia. However, it was the Cold War that distinguished the two, primarily because Dewey died at the beginning of it. Still, Dewey's reflections on Communism<sup>6</sup> and individual liberties went on to help Niebuhr become a latent "Cold War Warrior". Finally, the last subsections will discuss the overall influence and pertinence of Christian Pragmatism and political Pragmatism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to demonstrate that though Niebuhr was indeed very critical of Dewey's political philosophies, his philosophies helped bridge Dewey's liberalism with contemporary liberalism. Niebuhr was, to quote Daniel F. Rice, a sort of "liberal realist," who believed in the influence and importance of power, without necessarily falling into moral ambiguity or the cynicism of traditional realists (*Odyssey* 265).

Firstly, a word and its variants, have appeared a few times already need to be clarified and defined for the purpose of this work: "liberal" and "Liberalism." The problem with both words is that they can have different meanings depending potentially on cultural or historic context. In fact, their vernacular use can give the impression that the terms mean nothing at all. What is specifically dubious about both is that meaning and signification that go along with them are not only heavily dependent on the words' contextual usage, but also on the language in which they are being expressed.

For example, the word *libéral* or *libéralisme* in the French context and usage, carry very different meanings when compared to American-English interpretations. In the French, and often in the continental European context, the first-level meanings of liberal/liberalism

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<sup>6</sup> Communism will be used as a proper noun for the sake of this research as it was a philosophical and political movement that arguably had as equal a contribution to Western culture as Pragmatism, or Liberalism.

primarily focus on economic policies, revolving around a *laissez-faire* attitude of minimalist State intervention. When speaking about such “liberal” policies for example, populist mentality limits them strictly to the economy rather than having any political notions.<sup>7</sup>

In French, the difficulties with translating liberal/liberalism are avoided through the use of two different words which are at the same time linked but separate: *libéral* and *progressiste*. The former is associated with the economic philosophy of *laissez-faire* where state intervention is viewed negatively. The translation for the latter is associated with a sort of political leftist ideology: egalitarianism, rights between the sexes, minority rights or other progressive issues. The problem with such an approach or understanding is it fails to take into consideration that liberalism is both an *economic* and *political* philosophy. It is simultaneously the freedom to pursue one’s economic interests, but also includes the belief that a person has the right as a rational human being to be as he or she is without prosecution from any governing body, and that for the individual there are no inherent or innate differences between the him/herself and another which might result in arbitrary inequalities from society.

Similarly, what the European understanding of liberal/liberalism fails to capture is the complexity and evolution of the word and its use from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today. In American intellectual contexts, there are constant debates and analyses of the origins of the word “liberal” or “liberalism.” Furthermore, there are debates on the roots of these words regarding their original historical context and to their current usage. The topic of liberalism in an American context is so widespread that there are even academic works such as Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*, devoted not only to the subject, but also with proving how liberalism, in the American understanding, is actually behind the creation of American political ideology and the American State.

Though the definition of liberalism is still relatively fluid, even in an American context in which Hartz for example, focused on a Lockean definition, most academics agree on one thing: the term has evolved over the course of the centuries (4). Other authors such as Serge Audier even argued on how liberalism and socialism were not as contradictory as one would imagine. He writes: “*Pourtant, le clivage radical entre « libéraux » et « socialistes » n’a pas*

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<sup>7</sup> These usages are primarily coming from direct experiences in a French context, where, when brought up, *libéral* or *libéralisme* deal strictly with economic policy and are often criticized as being “*américain*.” When looking up the terms for example from a French context, the definitions given focus on the individual and his/her right to pursue his/her own economic interest and it is often compared with capitalism. The French understanding of the words seems to overly focus on the *economic* aspect to the detriment of the *political* aspect (*libéralisme*, *capitalisme*, [http://www.lemondepolitique.fr/culture/liberalisme\\_capitalisme.html](http://www.lemondepolitique.fr/culture/liberalisme_capitalisme.html)).

*toujours été si simple*” (Audier 5). Dewey himself wrote on the problems of liberalism, even devoting an entire work, *Liberalism and Social Action* to the difficulties that modern liberalism encountered. According to Dewey, the very roots and origins of the term had been corrupted which was the reason for such complications.

The confusion in the European understanding of the term is reasonable because historically, “*libéral*” and “*libéralisme*” included not only the political, but the economic definitions. Guillaume Garrita, in his introduction to the French translation of Dewey’s *Liberalism and Social Action* states:

*Tout était simple lorsqu’il n’y avait (apparemment) pas lieu de distinguer entre libéralisme politique et économique, ce qui, pour faire très vite, était le cas majoritairement jusqu’au XIXe ; les revendications des libertés de pensée, de conscience, d’expression et des libertés d’être propriétaire, de commercer, de contracter, d’entreprendre étaient solidaires dans le combat contre l’ordre ancien et hiérarchisé des oligarchies et des coutumes. La situation se complexifie lorsque le libéralisme est retourné en idéologie de la classe dominante, justifiant le laisser-faire le plus débridé de l’économie capitaliste à partir de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, en s’opposant à toute intervention et régulation de l’État, toujours au nom des « mêmes » droits et libertés individuelles. (23)*

What must be taken from this citation is how the original goal of liberalism was not necessarily economic profit, but individual liberty. Adam Smith, and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who valued personal freedom, including the right to follow one’s own interests for economic gain, felt that the pursuit of self-interest was not inherently selfish or greedy, but rather a way to overthrow the oppressive and restrictive forces of their day. As highlighted in his introduction to Dewey’s work, Garrita summarized how in the context of 18<sup>th</sup>-century society, these repressing powers were the aristocracies and monarchs who were suppressing the merchant classes to maintain political control. Enlightenment thinkers understood that obtaining economic liberty (the ability to freely participate in an economy) would bring about political liberty, something that the dominant classes feared greatly.

The problem, according to Dewey and other modern liberals, was that Enlightenment liberalism was too successful. Not only did the 19<sup>th</sup> century see a rise in *laissez-faire* capitalism, with unprecedented advancements in both technology and political freedoms, it turned liberalism itself into a sort of religious dogma. It became an ideology, and as Garrita correctly



pointed out, any type of State intervention was immediately discarded in the name of “freedom” or “liberty,” often at the expense of social or economic justice. Garrita summarized Dewey’s thought on these so-called defenders of liberty as “pseudo-liberals” stating:

*Le libéralisme qui fait des individus des « atomes » newtoniens dotés d’une liberté inhérente et n’entretenant entre eux que des relations externes, dont l’harmonie ne saurait être perturbée par un troisième terme englobant, même s’il décrit correctement le premier libéralisme émancipateur, n’est plus désormais qu’un « pseudo-libéralisme », du fait du changement radical des fronts et des luttes à mener. (“Introduction” 24)*

These pseudo-liberals, according to Dewey, were liberal in name only as they used the original authentic struggles against dominating classes to justify their own economic control of lower classes. As Dewey stated in a 1934 address to the American Philosophical Association:

Even when words remain the same, they mean something very different when they are uttered by a minority struggling against repressive measures, and when expressed by a group that has attained power and then uses ideas that were once weapons of emancipation as instruments for keeping the power and wealth they have obtained. (“Future” par. 5)

Political scientist Serge Audier echoes this sentiment, adding that “pseudo-liberals” have also corrupted other philosophies associated with liberalism, including “liberal socialism” (“*libéralisme social*”). He argues instead that though “liberal socialism” would have seemed to be the natural evolution of the liberal doctrine, it instead was viewed as an opposing force to traditional *laissez-faire* economic liberalism. Exceptions existed to this animosity against “liberal socialism,” such as with the “English new liberalism” of John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hill Green, and Leonard T. Hobhouse. These thinkers influenced a young and idealistic Dewey to one extent or another. However, it was Thomas Hill Green who probably had the largest impact on Dewey’s younger years by helping him realize how the traditional liberal doctrine, which was meant to emancipate the disenfranchised, ended up becoming a force of economic oppression. Dewey had to use the lessons that “English new liberalism” provided, primarily how liberalism needed to grow in order to resolve social and economic injustices as well as reevaluate the role of the State (Audier 5-6).

Therefore, taking the complexity of the definition, the history, and evolution of its use, and the overly specific European sense of the word all into consideration, the terms liberal/Liberalism will be kept in an American context for the sake of this research. This means that Liberalism is at the same time an economic and political doctrine. If, for any reason or purpose, the purely economic factor of Liberalism needs to be highlighted or discussed the adjective “economic” will be used before it to highlight this distinction.

Though the decision to employ certain words such as liberal/Liberalism is a conscious choice for this work, other employed terms are based either upon historical context or a philosopher’s/author’s specific understanding or usage. For example, with Reinhold Niebuhr the terms likely to cause confusion, are idealism/idealist, and with John Dewey, it is his use of experience which is often complex and confusing. Rather than giving the definitions of both terms, it is preferable to concentrate on Niebuhr’s use of idealist/idealism as there will be a future chapter explaining Dewey’s use of experience.

The impetus behind defining these terms is to clarify the difference between the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century conception of the terms. Currently, an idealist is synonymous with “utopian,” “wishful thinker,” “pipe-dreamer” or “romantic.” These synonyms are extreme exaggerations of what was meant by an idealist or idealism in an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century context. Its most common use was for international relations, specifically in connection between an individual and an organization. There is still no universal or true definition of idealism as it changes depending on context, author, and period. In the framework of international relations, however, Peter Wilson sees idealism defined in two ways:

[...] one broad, one narrow. The broad understanding sees idealism as a perennial doctrine or disposition toward world affairs which can be witnessed in all historical periods where independent political communities exist in a condition of anarchy i.e. in the absence of central government. Idealism is an optimistic doctrine which seeks to transcend the international anarchy, and create a more cosmopolitan and harmonious world order. The narrow understanding sees idealism as intimately tied to the inter-war period (1919-1939). It is a doctrine that dominated the first phase of IR theorizing, emphasizing the growing interdependence and unity of mankind, and bound-up with the experiment in internationalism that was the League of Nations. (*Idealism 2*)

It is this second concept, this narrow approach of idealism, which will be further developed and defined in order to give the historical context of Niebuhr's first and later encounters with the term.

Idealism was not born from a "peace and love" attitude, it was a direct response to the *realpolitik* which, according to many leading post-World War I academics and intellectuals, was the actual cause for the war in the first place (Battistella 81). The devastating consequences of the Great War led several universities to create academic departments devoted to the understanding and study of International Relations in order to avoid future conflicts. There is perhaps no better example of the importance of International Relations and its role in the modern world than Woodrow Wilson.

For Wilson and his contemporaries, the reason for the Great War and its horrific consequences, was the removal of the individual from the equation. Wilson summed up the problem by stating: "[ce qu'ils ont vu par rapport à la guerre n'était pas] *une forme d'instinct, mais une forme d'action étatique. Elle ne fait pas partie de la nature humaine, mais d'un programme politique. Elle n'est pas davantage un instinct ou un élément de la nature humaine que ne l'est l'adoption de l'impôt sur les revenus*" (qtd. in Battistella 81-82). Thus, wars were not caused by the acts of individuals gifted with the moral understanding of right or wrong, but were the results of State actions whereby the State acts as an independent entity within the international scene.

Consequently, for the idealists of Wilson's time, the problem was not the individual but the corruption of the institutions imposed upon individuals. To correct such errors, the idealists' solution was to try to infuse institutions, both on a domestic and international scale, with the traits and the *ideals* of an individual. These principles were, of course, liberal in nature because they believed that human reason, as well as economic and political self-interest were the driving factors behind human actions. Therefore, war, due to its innate antipathy to the self-interest of the individual was harmful to him/her in the very real sense of possibly resulting in death. Battistella continued, not only discussing idealists' critiques against war as harmful to an individual, but also how States could be organized and thus controlled individuals through the rule of law and by appealing to their "better nature." Battistella affirmed that:

[Les idéalistes] *en déduisent que l'on peut y mettre un terme, à la simple condition de prendre conscience de ce que dans un monde interdépendant, le recours à la force est futile parce que [sic] contre-productif, vu que le bien-être et même la puissance d'une nation résident non pas dans sa force militaire mais dans sa richesse elle-même fonction de sa productivité et de ses échanges.*

*Persuadés que le règne de la loi est applicable aussi bien entre les États qu'au sein de ceux-ci que la diffusion de la démocratie va de pair avec la pacification des relations interétatiques, et convaincus de l'existence d'une harmonie réelle des intérêts entre sociétés qui ne demande qu'à être constatée par des esprits éduquées [...] (82)*

It was this conception and understanding of the world that Niebuhr was most critical of, especially in his earlier writings. What complicated the matter was that Niebuhr used other terms or synonyms to talk about the same overall ideology. Thus, when Niebuhr referred to rationalists or optimists, he still meant these early 20<sup>th</sup>-century idealists. Add into the mixture the idea of “liberal Christianity” and the terminology can become convoluted rather quickly. Nevertheless, optimist, rationalist, liberal, liberal Christianity all fell under, in one form or another, Niebuhr’s understanding, and thus, critique of idealism.

The reason for such a grouping of terms was due to Niebuhr’s interpretation of both human and intellectual history. For Niebuhr, these terms were linked by common roots: The Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. Though branching off into several different sub-categories, Niebuhr stated that “[t]his faith of the Enlightenment [was] still the creed of the educators [...] and [was] shared more or less by philosophers, psychologists and social scientists” (*Moral Man* 23). Thus, it was no surprise that Wilson and his fellow idealists so adamantly held their beliefs in the improvement of social institutions and a globalized “world order” in which States would act as rational actors and always seek peaceful, economic, and political self-interest, thereby avoiding any type of direct open warfare.

Initially, when Niebuhr used any term to signify idealist, he was referring to the overall thematic concept of a world vision where the individual can directly affect larger institutions, and criticized it as being *almost* synonymous with naïve. Though he never outright stated that idealists were naïve, his earlier texts, especially those prior to the 1950s, were extremely critical of their understanding of the world, almost to the point of being dismissive. It was as if he were chastising an adult for believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. He, of course, justified his critiques by giving various historical, as well as philosophical reasons for lambasting such a world vision. Nevertheless, similar to those who criticized Niebuhr for generalizing his analyses of Dewey, a similar argument could be made for Niebuhr’s insight on idealism and its descendants.

What makes understanding idealism in a Niebuhrian context problematic is not the lack of definition, but how it changed over the course of his career. As he did with Dewey, Niebuhr softened his language and analyses over time, specifically by returning to some of his earlier

works. For example, in *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, he “would regret the term *immoral* as too strong” (Lemert ch.3, par. 4). Thus, due to the evolution of his terminologies and understanding of concepts which he himself had panned, it becomes somewhat difficult when analyzing Niebuhr to understand exactly how a term he was criticizing or developing was being used. Therefore, for the purpose of this work, Niebuhr’s use of the words rationalist, liberal Christian, or modernist, all stem from the same basic concepts rooted in idealism, though with different contextual variations. However, if this work mentions or highlights a tangent from the original meaning the word will be either redefined or given the appropriate historical and linguistic context in which Niebuhr was using it.

With the difficulty of defining some key terms out of the way, it is necessary to discuss the pertinence of such a subject. Why Niebuhr and Dewey together? Why them and not others? These are fair questions, and ones often asked, especially when dealing either with intellectual history or political philosophy. Usually, there is a certain expectation that the research or answers provided will provide some form of pragmatic utility.

The general or “simple” answer to “why” would be because any research in the social and human sciences continues to develop and enrich the discourse of the eternally elusive and indefinable subject within these fields: a human being. Where the natural sciences allegedly have the benefits of definitive results, correct or incorrect answers, or being “more neutral,” the social/human sciences have to constantly be on guard against personal prejudices from the researcher. This was demonstrated best with the distinction between “facts and values,” made famous by Max Weber’s *Le Savant et le Politique*. It is this neutrality which is often the alleged difference between the hard and so-called, “soft” sciences, because it is believed that in the natural sciences a researcher simply studies the facts. As a result, the researcher does not have to confront the problem of allowing personal prejudices to affect his/her results, and is actually unable to do so.<sup>8</sup> The topic of neutrality in all sciences, natural or social/human, is one that persists to this day. The fact that the subject in the social/human sciences, a person,<sup>9</sup> is not a concrete or universal subject adds not to the weakness of the social sciences, but on the contrary, contributes to its complexity and richness.

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<sup>8</sup> The fundamental references for how to properly conduct study in the social sciences are, of course, Max Weber, most notably his work *Wissenschaft als Beruf et Politik als Beruf* and any work by Emile Durkheim.

<sup>9</sup> The reason or the use of “person” rather than “human being” or “man” is that human beings as subjects can indeed be studied in an objective manner (autopsies, biology, etc.) and “man” is an outdated term highlighting, whether consciously or not, one sex over the other. The term “person” fits well as the subject in social/human sciences due to the fact that a person is often defined in relation to another person or thing and is not universal.

In *Le Savant et le Politique*, sometimes known as the *Vocation Lectures*, Weber provided the groundwork for understanding certain sociological phenomena as well as for explaining the difference between a calling and a profession. He focused on how Science and Politics, here capitalized to demonstrate the notion of a “calling,” can be particular vocations, but cannot intersect. Weber made a strong argument as to why someone who never felt “the lived ‘experience’ of science” (“*‘expérience’ vécue de la science*”) is thus unable to follow the true calling of the scientist (81). This is because for Weber, a scientist was only interested in the “pure” aspect of research. He was driven not by desires for wealth or for power, but for the purpose of discovery. He even declared that: “*Sans cette singulière ivresse dont se moquent tous ceux qui restent étrangers à la science, sans cette passion, sans cette certitude [...]. De savoir si tu es capable de faire cette conjecture-là tu ne posséderas jamais la vocation du savant et tu ferais mieux de t’engager dans une autre voie* (81-82).”

Aside from following one’s passion, Weber gave another reason why it was important not to mix practicing the vocation of science with the vocation of politics. The reason related to the idea of value-neutrality. For Weber, the problems in society and thus for its people, were directly related to what he called the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 90). The concept behind this statement was that with the rationalization of society and the development of the natural sciences, human beings, especially in the West, were no longer driven by unknown forces or the powers of nature. Instead, they were ruled by law, order, and reason.

As the West became dependent on using analysis and reason to solve problems, value neutrality (*neutralité axiologique*) became a direct result of the disenchantment of the world. This can best be expressed through knowing the boundaries between the subject and the scientist, which Weber discussed in the lectures. Additionally, he explained why one cannot mix the scientist with the politician. In this hypothetical situation, the politician and scientist were combined which ultimately led to the “corruption” of the student body. Weber argued that:

[D]ans un amphithéâtre au contraire on fait face à son auditoire une toute autre manière : le professeur y a la parole, mais les étudiants sont condamnés au silence. Les circonstances veulent que les étudiants soient obligés de suivre les cours d’un professeur en vue de leur future carrière et qu’aucune personne présente dans la salle de cours ne puisse critiquer le maître. Aussi un professeur est-il inexcusable de profiter de cette situation pour essayer de marquer ses élèves de ses propres conceptions politiques au lieu de leur être utile, comme il en a le devoir, par l’apport de ses connaissances et de son expérience scientifique. (103)

It may appear that Weber was quite critical of the person practicing politics as a vocation, but he simply believed that the vocations served two different, though equally important, purposes.

It may seem contradictory how a career which “corrupted” society could not only be a vocation, but also necessary to society. The reason for this contradiction was simple, and explained through Weber’s definition of politics and his analysis of how the modern, primarily Western, state came into being. Firstly, the study of politics was nothing more than “political grouping management that we today call the ‘State,’ or the influence that [was] exercised on this management” (124).<sup>10</sup> The State ran everything because it had the “monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force” to the State (125). The people accepted this monopoly because according to Weber, it was all a question of legitimacy.

Weber highlighted three “ideal-types” in which societies functioned, including the modern Nation-State model. The first type of society was one with traditional authority where rulers were selected because of ancient customs, traditions or supernatural beliefs (monarchies, theocracies, or tribal rule). The second societal type was charismatic authority in which one particular person was able to lead a mass of people through sheer force of will or charisma (prophets, demagogues). The final type was the legal-rational authority where power was entrusted to institutions of legal “virtue.” These institutions had practicing professionals trained in the various intricacies of the latter, usually in the form of civil-servant exams, professional training, or higher education such as within the modern Nation-State (Weber 126-127).

Of course, these ideal-types do not really exist within a pure context, meaning no political regime or government functions on only one form of legitimacy. Most States use a combination of two, if not all three models at a given time depending on the State in question, the time in history, or the events of the moment. For example, the British government demonstrates how traditional and legal-rational models work together. The Queen rules based on tradition and custom, but the government functions on legal principles and institutions. Both are legitimate forms of control over the British people. Additionally, it could be argued that the Queen also fulfills the charismatic model given her unique role in not only the United Kingdom, but as a world figurehead as well.

Weber spent a considerable amount of time speaking on the development of the State and its role, demonstrating why neutrality was important between the scientist and politician. However, he also illustrated how difficult it was to achieve neutrality for the latter. Following politics as a vocation implied an immediate conflict of many interests. The first conflict

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<sup>10</sup> “ [...] *la direction du groupement politique que nous appelons aujourd’hui « Etat », ou l’influence que l’on exerce sur cette direction.*”

stemmed from whether or not the person in question was “living *for* politics or *from* politics” (Weber 137).<sup>11</sup> The difference implied here, was that someone following the former does what s/he does because of a calling, a passion that brings him/her to lead, to help or to guide the people. The latter implies that the person in question only had his/her financial or political (in the pejorative sense of the word) future in mind (i.e., how to make the most money as fast as possible and remain in power for the sake of power).

The other major conflict, according to Weber, was the conflict between the “ethic of responsibility [*verantwortungsethisch*] and ethic of conviction [*gesinnungsethisch*]” (206).<sup>12</sup> This conflict exists for most leaders, but is probably easiest to understand within the western democratic model. In this model, an official or leader represents people who did not necessarily elect him/her, yet, s/he still has a responsibility toward those individuals. However, surrounding the leader are special interest groups with varying, often contradicting goals, vying for attention in order to obtain their desires. Sometimes, the official or leader will agree with these lobbies, and therefore, the action is influenced by his/her convictions. Herein lies the problem: though these two ethics are not at all mutually exclusive, it is possible, and probable, that a leader’s feelings of responsibility toward society will contradict his/her own personal convictions or opinions. For a Head of State, remaining neutral is impossible due to the nature of the duties involved. At some point, a decision must be made which will favor one ethic or the other, and thereby eliminate neutrality.

It is because of these conflicts and the elimination of neutrality that Weber insisted on separating the two vocations. Not because one was better or worse than the other, but because they served completely different purposes. The scientist must endeavor to remain neutral in relation to the subject and remove any value judgment, so that s/he could achieve that “pure” goal of the scientist: understanding. A politician could never truly “understand,” in the Weberian sense of the word, because the vocation did not allow for it. The scientist, however, is under the obligation to remain neutral when studying his/her subject, especially when dealing with the social or human sciences. Weber stated that : “*La science est de nos jours une « vocation » fondée sur la spécialisation au service de la prise de conscience de nous-mêmes et de la connaissance des rapports objectifs*” (115). Consequently, the sciences developed into numerous specializations and disciplines, comprehension could only be accomplished through objectivity, and by distinguishing between the scientist’s values and the culture or subject s/he studied.

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<sup>11</sup> “*vit “pour” la politique, ou bien “de” la politique.*”

<sup>12</sup> “[...] *l’éthique de la responsabilité et l’éthique de la conviction.*”



With all sciences, methodologies and popular ideas change or evolve over time. This was true for Weber and his value-neutral approach. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 21<sup>st</sup> the idea of “value-neutrality” has been called into question. Some authors, such as Dartiguenave, have even suggested that the opposite approach may be required, one in which subjectivity is actually a *good* thing, and that a methodology based on this should be developed. Even Weber’s own neutrality has been scrutinized, with authors such as George Biztray criticizing Weber’s value-laden vocabulary. According to Biztray, terms Weber uses such as “the cultivated man” or the “ideal type” are “hardly value-free” (42).

The idea of a subjective methodological approach is by no means the only critique to Weber’s value-neutrality. Following a very Deweyan line of thinking and attempting to find common ground, many social scientists, especially within the past few decades, have focused on the intersubjective relationship between the subject and researcher, rather than focusing on either the “objective” or “subjective” approach. For example, Claude Javeau focuses on how value-neutral methodologies need to be adjusted for three significant reasons. The first is that the relationship between the scientist and subject is by its very nature, intersubjective, due to exchanges between the two. Regardless of how a social scientist may try to remain neutral, his/her position of power over the subject will have some influence “directly or indirectly” (*directement ou indirectement*) on the subjects (Javeau 34). Secondly, the field of study does not exist within a vacuum and is therefore open to external influences, especially when dealing with any form of evaluations and the power struggle that may play out within a given hierarchy. This struggle can be either open and explicit (how financing is managed for example) or indirect (management decisions between different levels of bureaucracy/hierarchy) (Javeau 34-35).

It is perhaps Javeau’s third reasoning which is the most promising as to why intersubjectivity may be a better approach to the social sciences than value-neutrality. It can be best summarized as follows: because the object of study within the social sciences is a person, the observed object and observing subject are “of the same substance” (“*d’une même substance*”), or as Javeau says himself: “*L’objectivité réclamée de celui-ci est contaminée par sa subjectivité interne, participant de l’intersubjectivité inscrite dans des pratiques de champ, mais aussi par la subjectivité externe de celui-là, de cet objet qui subit diverses tentatives de ‘neutralisation’*” (34-35).

Henri Janne adds that there is a way to fight against any natural “corruption” that happens as a result of the relationship between scientist and subject. He argues that:

*Le chercheur en sociologie sait donc qu’en principe il affecte toutes ses observations d’un certain coefficient de déformation à cause du social intériorisé en son esprit. Il*

*sait aussi que la publicité des résultats de son observation tend à modifier les faits. Ainsi se pose le problème de l'« équitation personnelle » du chercheur. [...] Bien entendu il ne suffit pas de vouloir se connaître soi-même, il y faut une véritable ascèse consistant en une autoanalyse persévérante du milieu, des origines, de la formation, des opinions et des intérêts relatifs à sa propre personne. L'autocritique, toujours nécessaire dans le travail scientifique, doit être particulièrement en éveil dans le travail sociologique.* (qtd. in Javeau 39)

Thus for Janne, even though neutrality may not be able to be reached, the researcher can at least understand, through self-criticism and self-analysis, potential biases and make his/her enquiries focused more on discovering the “truth.”

With all of these seemingly different approaches to neutrality and subjectivity, it can be difficult to decide which one to follow. One way to handle the seemingly contradictory or at least confusing statements may be to add the point of view of Fred Blum. For Blum, “[a] social science free from value judgments does not eliminate the problem of values; it merely makes them a part of scientific consideration” (47). Here we see another intersubjective method, stating that because a researcher cannot remove all bias from his/her work, it is best to try to incorporate these values systematically into the research. For according to Blum, who actually personified the subject perhaps in order to demonstrate a contradictory “divine” aspect to it, “Science always performs a social function” (52).

This evolution of the practices within the social sciences is important to this research because it sets the groundwork for how Dewey and to a certain degree, Niebuhr viewed and studied the world. Both individuals, for different motivations, discussed how to properly conduct research within the social sciences, sometimes echoing the aforementioned arguments, critiques and analyses. Providing this outline of a selection of the debates in the social sciences also serves the purpose of explaining and justifying the methodological framework for this dissertation. As this work deals with the history and evolution of ideas, subjectivity is prone to be ever present. Therefore, this research will be conducted according to an intersubjective approach. It will always keep in mind any innate values which may affect analyses and conclusions, not for the purpose of justifying any normative values, but for the sake of trying to acknowledge those value-judgments in order to handle them properly and arrive at some form of truthful analysis and comprehension.

In addition to the intersubjective nature of this work, this research also takes an interdisciplinary approach to both philosophers. Combining historical analysis and political philosophy, the unique aspect of this dissertation is how it analyzes historical events from

ideological and philosophical perspectives, specifically that of Christian Pragmatism. This means that rather than simply providing a historical recounting of events or demonstrating an evolution of intellectual history, this research will use a combination of both methodological and epistemological backgrounds to provide a distinctive perspective of both Dewey and Niebuhr's view of historical events in relation to how these events shaped the authors' very beliefs. To provide a proper context, these incidents will indeed be described. However, the focus will be less on the events themselves, and more on how both philosophers perceived these events, and conversely how these events shaped them, through their specific pragmatic analysis.

It should be reminded nevertheless that even with a general interest in interdisciplinary studies, these same methodologies can often be the source of other problems. The primary issue that should be addressed before further delving into this work revolves around physical and epistemological limitations. This work looks at four major themes: Liberalism, Pragmatism, John Dewey, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Consequently, it was impossible, both physically and epistemologically, to become an expert in each sub-domain. No researcher can become an "expert" in numerous subjects at the same time because there are not enough hours in the day. Furthermore, believing that one can actually become an "expert" implies a very un-pragmatic understanding of the subject for it implies that there is nothing left to learn. As a result, given the abundance of available information regarding the various subjects, the sources used are by no means exhaustive.

On a similar note, and to add just a few final words on methodology, it will be noticed that no American dissertations on Niebuhr were cited in this research. This was because the dissertations on Niebuhr in other countries focused on his theology, either through in-depth analysis of Niebuhr's religious beliefs, or comparative studies between Niebuhr and other theologians. Any time Dewey was mentioned in relation to Niebuhr in other works not cited in this research, it was to discuss pedagogy or educational policy, and therefore, not in line with the goal or line of thought of this work.

Finally, because this work is a combination of historical and philosophical analysis from a pragmatic perspective, the various sections can rely heavily on certain authors or texts. That is because for that given section, the cited works were either a direct link with the event or question being examined, or provided accurate and in-depth analysis that other sources were lacking. Thus, any seemingly repetitiveness of sources was a deliberate decision to reinforce the specific sub-topic being studied.

Returning to the purpose of studying Niebuhr and Dewey, the answer is related to an interview with then-Senator Barack Obama's in 2007. Obama cited Reinhold Niebuhr as one of his favorite philosophers who helped shape his own understanding of politics and his vision

of the world (Brooks, “Obama”). At the time, it caused little stir, but in 2008 when Obama won the presidential election, more people focused on the president’s philosophical and ideological influences in an attempt to understand his potential governing style, thus sparking a sudden re-interest in Niebuhr’s political and theological thought. It was not necessarily a renaissance, as there was a respectable selection of works devoted to Niebuhr, either in the form of case studies, or through republications of previous work during the 1980s and 1990s. This suggests that though never out of fashion, Niebuhr was definitely put on the back burner of American political thought until recently. Whether Obama’s election and Niebuhr’s resurgence in popularity are connected, is unknown, but the two events make for interesting reflection.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, it is currently evident as to why studying Niebuhr is pertinent in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world: his dedication to concepts of liberty and equality. These two notions are constantly in struggle with one another, and will never cease being debated, regardless of whatever side of the political divide. Niebuhr understood that both were needed in society as one principle overshadowing the other would lead to injustice. Thus, “[t]he principle of ‘equality’ is a relevant criterion of criticism for the social hierarchy, and the principle of ‘liberty’ serves the same purpose for the community’s unity. But neither principle could be wholly nor absolutely applied without destroying the community” (Niebuhr, *Pious* 62). Therefore, in order to comprehend some of President Obama’s decisions or at least his ideological background, understanding Niebuhr is just one step in doing so. However, analyzing Niebuhr is not just limited to the practical benefits, there are indeed many philosophical, moral, and political questions Niebuhr raised throughout his life, that are still relevant today. Questions specifically regarding social justice as well as the nature and use of power in democratic societies are just two examples. Although these issues are unresolved, analysis of Niebuhr’s works can still offer valid insights into improving democracies and their understanding of social justice and power.

Furthermore, the idea that Dewey influenced Niebuhr is neither new nor groundbreaking,<sup>14</sup> individuals cannot help but be influenced, in one way or another, by what they claim to be completely against. What this research will do is demonstrate not only how Dewey influenced Niebuhr, but actually made Niebuhr a sort of bridge between political pragmatic philosophies.

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<sup>13</sup> To back up this statement, the author went to Amazon.com (21 May 2015) to see publication dates of either works on Niebuhr or republications of his work and found the following on the first results page using the search guidelines “Reinhold Niebuhr” where out of 15 shown works, 9 were published post-Obama’s interview, suggesting at least a slight increase in his popularity.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Rice is just one example of authors who have written on the subject of Dewey and Niebuhr. As a matter of fact, one of his works, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey*, will be used throughout this work as reference material.

This transition was assisted by the seemingly natural pragmatic nature of Christian realism as “[t]his school of thoughts never had a doctrinaire set of positions, but was associated with principles of political responsibility, international security, and justice” (Patterson, “Christian” 167). Also, Daniel Rice explained in his book *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American odyssey*, how Dewey and Niebuhr belonged to a “first wave” of Pragmatism. He demonstrated how they could be grouped together as a result of their similar attitudes and visions of the world, as well as, of course, being contemporaries.

Regardless of having been contemporaries, and having shared similar visions on how democracies should function in terms of social justice, this dissertation will attempt to prove that the two do not belong to the same “wave” or branch of Pragmatism. This is a direct result of their original world visions, and the means by which they came to their respective conclusions. These conclusions differed too greatly for them to belong to the same philosophical branch. As a matter of fact, it will be demonstrated how Niebuhr’s Christian realism, the political philosophy with which he is most famously associated, is actually the result of Niebuhr’s open criticisms of Dewey’s Pragmatism and Liberalism. Niebuhr would eventually take the best of both, and force his Christian realism to evolve into the creation of a new pragmatic philosophy: Christian Pragmatism.

Of course, Dewey’s political Pragmatism did not stop with Niebuhr’s Christian realism. Other authors, including Richard Rorty, understood the critiques leveled against Dewey and his branch of philosophy. They modified it to create a new branch of metaphysical and political Pragmatism, that is not necessarily the “second wave” as Rice would say, but was instead a third one. Therefore, it is pertinent to study Dewey and Niebuhr in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world and context because their influence and philosophies are still being used in very real and practical purposes in contemporary society.

Political Pragmatism and Christian Pragmatism are indeed more than simple philosophical approaches to the world: they are used in actual discussions regarding American domestic and foreign policy. This is especially true following the ideological world view which seemed to dominate during George W. Bush’s time in office. During his presidency, religious or political ideology was followed sometimes contrary to, or in spite of empirical, pragmatic, or analytic studies of problems, again both domestic and foreign. Any type of threat was often viewed in Manichean terms, something very anti-pragmatic as well as anti-Niebuhrian since both traditional political Pragmatism and Christian realism acknowledge that complex problems often require complex solutions; if any are indeed possible. George W. Bush’s administration aligned more with religious conviction and certainty than historical experience or objective analysis of the problem, with Bush even stating, “I could not be governor if I did not believe in

a divine plan that supersedes all human plans” (Bush 6). He was therefore guided not by facts, nor by the realities of a difficult world, but by inner faith and a sense of Divine selection.

Following the end of the Bush 43 presidency,<sup>15</sup> there was a growing desire amongst Americans and political leaders to take a different approach, one that was not based on any religious fundamentalism, but on comprehension and understanding; one where a leader would be skeptical to start any type of foreign conflict for fear not of defeat, but of prolonged and costly conflicts, both economically and in terms of human lives. Thus, a sort of return of pragmatic philosophy emerged with the election of President Obama in 2008. This was a noticeable change in policies, both on the domestic and international level.

Consequently, whether it is President Obama accepting the Nobel Peace Prize using Niebuhrian terminology and arguments,<sup>16</sup> or even the basic understanding that mandatory health insurance for all citizens would reduce the cost for all even if this belief had to be defended in spite of the numerous criticisms that such a law would lead to a totalitarian State, Pragmatism has returned to the forefront of America political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> These examples demonstrate how pragmatic political thought has come to the forefront of the American psyche once more. Herein lies the importance of this research: Pragmatism is actively being discussed, used, and implemented in American domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, in order to understand these policy decisions, one must understand the philosophies behind them.

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<sup>15</sup> When discussing the Bush family and their presidencies, it has become commonplace for many commentators and writers to differentiate between George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush by their sequential order as president. Meaning, George H.W. Bush is often referred to as Bush 41 and his son as Bush 43.

<sup>16</sup> Several intellectuals and Niebuhr scholars, including but not limited to, William F. Felice, immediately recognized Obama’s tone and choice of words during his Oslo speech. See: Felice, William F. “President Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize Speech: Embracing the Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr” *Social Justice*. Vol. 37, Nos. 2-3, 2010-2011.

<sup>17</sup> Though this may seem like hyperbole, Obama’s healthcare law, the Affordable Care Act brought about the fury and wrath of many on the American right. Due to Americans’ innate mistrust of the State, several people on the right felt that the federal government forcing any type of program, even one that is beneficial to its citizens, is a step toward a totalitarian and fascist regime. Among the many examples of said citizens’ outrage are:

Beck, Glenn. “America Becoming Worse than Nazi Germany” *Youtube*. RWW Blog, 7 June 2013.

Collins, Kevin. “Obamacare Copies Socialist Germany” *Western Journalism*. 6 July 2012.

Limbaugh, Rush. “Obamacare: Gateway to Totalitarianism” *RushLimbaugh*. 26 March 2012.

“Obamacare at the Supreme Court: Totalitarian Democracy” *RedState*. 28 June 2012.

Thorton, Bruce. “Obamacare Architect Exposes Progressive Totalitarianism,” *Frontpage Mag*. 12 November 2014

With the fluid terms defined, as well as the reasons for delving into such a subject, the actual corpus of this research can be explored. However, before probing directly and deeply into Dewey or Niebuhr's political philosophies, or even the contexts of their lives, a general analysis of Dewey's and Niebuhr's intellectual foundations, specifically found within Liberalism needs to be explored. At one point or another, both thinkers embodied liberal values in the American context of Liberalism. To obtain a better grasp of what made American Liberalism different from its European predecessors, it is best to start at its roots, specifically, European liberalism from the 16th to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

# **Liberalism: Its Origins and Evolutions**

## **1.0.0 Liberal Theory: From Europe to the American Colonies**

The difficulty when studying intellectual history, or a philosophical approach to historical events, is finding a particular philosophy's "origins." This is because, as the old adage states: there is nothing new under the sun. Most ideas, however novel or revolutionary as they may appear, are often just repetitions or modifications of previously existing philosophies. Liberalism, whether classic or contemporary, is no exception. Further complicating matters is that philosophy, and intellectual history in general, all exist in the real, and very human, world. That is to say, "new" philosophical ideas are more or less either direct products of their environment, contradictions of the dominating philosophy at the time, or adaptations of older philosophies to contemporary situations. To be reductive and in speaking of Western philosophy, all philosophy is simply an extension or modification of Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle or other classical thinkers. Niebuhr for example, was simply a modern reflection of Augustine, who himself was a Medieval parallel of Plato.

There is a certain degree of truth with this generalization. But what it lacks, is the detail, subtlety, and importance of history on philosophy. Indeed, Niebuhr was heavily influenced by Augustine, but keeping in mind that the two were centuries apart, it would be unrealistic, and borderline absurd, to believe that Niebuhr merely rehashed Augustine's thought. Instead, and as will be seen throughout this work, Niebuhr took classical thinkers approaches, adapted them with his own vision, and give them meaning and context for a 20<sup>th</sup>-century audience. This is because times, values, and even the meanings of words change. Additionally, philosophers and thus, their philosophies, are arguably as equally influenced by world events as inspirational thinkers. Hence the importance of studying the origins of both Dewey and Niebuhr's intellectual metaphysics. For only by returning to the past and analyzing the origins of Liberalism, and how it evolved when coming to American soil, can a more global comprehension of Dewey's political Pragmatism and Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism be achieved.

## **1.1.0 European Liberalism: Roots of American Thought**

To say that the Enlightenment had a profound effect on Western philosophy is an overused truism and does little credit to the complexities of the various nations and their unique approaches to Enlightenment thought. This is particularly true in an American context where in



most high schools and universities by the Enlightenment “[people] usually mean the French Enlightenment—thinkers like Descartes, Rousseau, Voltaire and Condorcet” (Brooks, “Two Theories” par. 1). Niebuhr shared a similar view on the historical importance of the Enlightenment to America’s development arguing how “American thought and practice can be understood only as the unique experience of a democracy created on virgin soil and without an aristocratic background. But it also helpful to realize that we have drawn our theories mostly from France and practice from Britain” (*Pious* 75). Nevertheless, making any narrow assumptions about the rich and deep philosophies of European 18<sup>th</sup>-century thought is to ignore the subtleties between the varying world views. This does not mean that there was not a general “attitude” or Western movement. Indeed, the Enlightenment simply meant the questioning of the established values and norms; to reevaluate a person’s, usually a man’s, place in society and the world. However, the methodology of these questions, and types of questions, varied, and often maintained drastically different visions and approaches, especially when looking at the French, Scots, and United Kingdom.

The source of these differences was primarily the analysis of human nature. For example, within Anglo-Saxon philosophical understanding, the division was related to the unique historic evolution of Scotland:

Scotland developed in the eighteenth century culturally and intellectually, as well as economically, with a vigour that nurtured a distinctive, local Enlightenment movement destined to exert a wide impact on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. [...] The Scots Enlightenment as a whole constituted a dramatic but complex intellectual response to two wider challenges — the strains of Scotland’s own transition to its new status within the post-1688 British empire and, intellectually, to Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau and the *Encyclopédie*. (Israel 233-234)

This sudden presence on the global stage meant that the Scots had to figure out their place in this new enlightened world. Where continental Europe focused on radical changes, Scottish thinking was more inclined toward the “reconciliation (even in Hume) of philosophy and theology and nature with divine providence via a shrewd attuning of moral and legal thought to existing social norms” (Israel 235). This reconciliation would continue throughout the centuries and appear in one form through Niebuhr’s Christian approach to politics and international relations. Niebuhr carried on and continued Scottish Enlightenment thought by remaining critical of human nature, taking it for what it was, rather than any idealized perfectionism.

Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising then, that theories such as the “Invisible Hand” or “Spontaneous Order” arose out of such lines of thought.

Though the influence and breadth of the Enlightenment’s impact is constantly debated, it nevertheless helped establish, and ultimately develop, one of the primary philosophies of this research project: Liberalism. Though, the term may have undergone several transformations over the course of the centuries, the underlying principles of it, not just in its American definition, but also in the strictly European economic sense of the term, find their roots in multiple Enlightenment thinkers from different countries. Each added their own perspective in helping to develop the philosophy as it is known today. As R.G. Collingwood for example underlined in his preface of Guido de Ruggiero’s work *The History of European Liberalism*:

[t]hese principles [of assisting the individual to discipline himself and achieve his own moral progress] lead in practice to a policy that may be called, in the sense above defined, Liberal; a policy that regards the State, not as the vehicle of a superhuman wisdom or a superhuman power, but as the organ by which a people expresses whatever form of political ability it can find and breed and train within itself. (vii.)

Brooks rightly summarized earlier how the immediate temptation in Western thought is to remain in the *Hexigone* when it comes to philosophy, and to a certain extent, the temptation is justifiable given the great number of names that came out of France from the end of the 1600s and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They include but are not limited to, Descartes, Voltaire and Montesquieu,<sup>18</sup> who amongst others to quote Collingwood, “focused on the power of reason” (qtd. in de Ruggiero vii.). Not all questions in French philosophical thought were of a metaphysical or ephemeral origin, the French Enlightenment was also at the forefront of the natural sciences with thinkers, such as René Louiche Desfontaines in botany, Joseph-Louis Lagrange in mathematics and Antoine Lavoisier in chemistry making significant headway and adding to the growing reputation of Paris as a scientific city.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The reason why Rousseau is not included in that trilogy is due to a technicality, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau was from Geneva, Switzerland, and not originally from France. Though, it should be acknowledged that his thought was one of the most highly regarded in French philosophical circles.

<sup>19</sup> The reputation would flourish and grow throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well with several prominent American thinkers going to Paris to either further their studies or to learn from the best, specifically in medicine and architecture. For further information, see David McCullough’s *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

While French thinkers focused on the unbridled possibilities of human reason to break free from superstition and question authority; a tradition arguably carried on by through Dewey's philosophies and analyses, it was often regardless of how well such thoughts were accepted in court or society. Across the channel however, English and Scottish Enlightenment thought spoke more of the limits of this same reason. They would discuss a person, not as the total possibility to do good, but as a more complex being. People, thus,

[...] are born with natural desires to be admired and to be worthy of admiration. They are born with moral emotions, a sense of fair play and benevolence. They were also born with darker passions, like self-love and tribalism, which mar rationalist enterprises. We are emotional creatures first and foremost, and politics should not forget that. (Brooks, "Two Theories" par. 6)

This analysis was more tempered and ready to acknowledge the innate pursuit of self-interest in a person's choice. The English and Scottish Enlightenment also had their heroes such as John Locke, Edmund Burke and Adam Smith.

Understanding the French, English and Scottish Enlightenments were equally important for Niebuhr as well. According to the philosopher, comprehending the roots of the various philosophical movements in the different countries was the best way to grasp the divide between liberal and conservative attitudes in the US. He maintained: "[...] in order to analyze these forms of liberalism and conservatism more exactly we must consider the history of liberal and conservative thought in the three great nations-France, Britain, and America-which have given us the most characteristic embodiments of democratic society" (*Pious* 71).

As previously stated, the primary difference between the French and Anglo-Saxon view of human nature during the Enlightenment was this limit on human reason and the calling into question of the innate "goodness" of a person. Similar to their Francophone counterparts, English and Scottish thinkers did question authority, and the role of organized religion in modern society. Though not often believed to have been the case, the beginnings of the English and Scottish Enlightenment were violently opposed to Enlightenment thought as well. An example of the hostility provoked by questioning the orthodoxy of the Church was the fate of Thomas Aikenhead, who, after stating that the "doctrines of Christian theology were 'a rapsodie of feigned and ill-invented nonsense'" was hanged in 1697 (Denby par. 1). Ultimately this harsh punishment for embracing Enlightenment principles was relaxed, such as in Edinburgh and Glasgow. This was primarily thanks, in part, to Francis Hutcheson, who was dean in moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Due to his relaxed approach, Hutcheson allowed

larger-known figures such as Hume and Smith to openly speak, and criticize societal values and traditions. Of course, it should be noted that prominence for the Scottish Enlightenment is something relatively new, as Denby highlights:

For those who keep track of such things, the Scots, in current accounts of intellectual history, have caught up with the French as leading exponents of Enlightenment thought. Yet the learned Scots were remarkably unlike the French *philosophes*; indeed, they were unlike any other group of philosophers that ever existed. (par. 5)

This drastic, and remarkably different, philosophical approach had an equally profound effect on American political thought as the French Enlightenment. However, no matter how important the Enlightenment may have been in the development of Western political and intellectual thought, the origins of such philosophies date well before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Tied up within the various debates of the different Enlightenments was a notion dear to many a liberal's heart: liberty. However, liberty was, and still is, a vague concept that is dependent on multiple factors. Most philosophers, and especially "almost every moralist" have at some point, "praised" or exalted the values of freedom (Berlin 121). The perennial problem is finding an accurate and minimally accepted definition for this freedom.

These meanings ultimately centered around one's perception. Isaiah Berlin is most famous for dividing these definitions into what he called "positive" and "negative" liberty. Negative liberty can best be summed up as the freedom *from* something or someone, whereas positive liberty is the freedom *to* do something, or to become something. This is quite a reductive definition but it highlights the conflicting conceptions of political reality and responsibility, notably for and of the State. In the former, external forces intervene as little as possible (State, local government, laws, regulations, etc.) so that the individual to achieve his/her conception of his/her individual sense of liberty to the best of that person's ability. The latter on the other hand, is the freedom to be able to achieve one's goals or desires with assistance from outside forces if needed. Clearly, both conceptions of liberty hold a certain level of risk and abuse. Negative liberty fails to account for the inequalities of circumstance, whereas positive liberty can quickly lead to tyranny or paternalism. Positive liberty, when looking at history, proves to be the easier path to corruption:

And, as is the case of the 'positively' free self, this entity may be inflated into some super-personal entity—a state, a class, a nation, or the march of history itself,

regarded as a more ‘real’ subject of attributes than the empirical self. But the ‘positive’ conception of freedom as self-mastery, with its suggestion of man divided against himself, has, in fact, and as a matter of history, of doctrine, and of practice, lent itself more easily to this splitting of personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be discipline and brought to heel. (Berlin 134)

History has shown that when groups, people, or leaders dictate what is “best” for another, tyranny, oppression, or authoritarianism are not far behind. Berlin himself was aware of this conflict and instead focused on a more balanced approach to both forms of liberty, stating that the two were needed to achieve any semblance of relative freedom.

Most political moralists, and especially political liberals, stretching back to antiquity, would have argued more for negative, rather than positive liberty. This is especially true of many Enlightenment thinkers who were under the thumb of various monarchical regimes. Yet, modern liberals such as Dewey and Niebuhr, embraced the cause for some degree of positive liberty in public life which was derived from the State. This applied more so to Dewey than to Niebuhr, but both did share a common belief that governments had certain responsibilities to their citizens beyond the traditional roles of defense and security.

Dewey, as will be seen later, felt that positive liberty had to be on par with negative liberty in modern democracies as having political “freedom” meant little without economic or social mobility to act upon those freedoms. Niebuhr though, would have agreed with Berlin’s realist analysis of these liberties, as the two men were a part of the “non-Communist left” and “Cold War liberals” (Cherniss 68-69). However, it was Berlin’s attitude towards the evolution and development of history in general that Niebuhr would have most appreciated:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals—justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission, or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. (Berlin 167)

Yet, this criticism of past errors did not leave Berlin completely cynical to the potential of positive liberty. He concluded that “the belief that some single formula” can bring about peace is inherently “false,” a sentiment which Niebuhr would have equally shared. (Berlin 167).

These ideas are not new and the debate highlighted by Berlin existed during the actual founding of the United States, as many of the Founding Fathers took up the cause for one form of liberty or the other. Thus, by now elucidating the debate over liberty itself, the arguments of the different Enlightenment thinkers can be better understood.

### **1.2.0 Thinkers of the Enlightenments: Building Blocks of American Liberalism**

For reasons, similar to those stated before, it would be impractical, as well as imprudent, to launch into a full intellectual history of the various Enlightenment thinkers. Tackling such a project would be an immense mission and would require its own dedicated dissertation topic. Nevertheless, the roots and general concepts of the different Enlightenments are still present today, and were during Dewey and Niebuhr’s era. One could argue that Dewey and Niebuhr were simply 20<sup>th</sup>-century reflections of the old Enlightenment debates between England/Scotland and Continental (French) thought. Representing the Anglo-Saxon tradition was Niebuhr, critical and skeptical of human nature, and more specifically the limits of human reason. Dewey on the other hand, embodied continental European thought, primarily the French branch, in which human reason was something to celebrated and improved upon in order to break free from the shackles of superstition all whilst striving towards progress. Still, what should be kept in mind for this work, nonetheless, is the emphasis on Enlightenments in the plural sense. Or as Cassier stated:

[T]he Enlightenment is not simply the sum total of what its leading thinkers – Voltaire and Montesquieu, Hume or Condillac, d’Alembert or Diderot, Wolff or Lambert- thought and taught. It cannot be presented in a summation of the views of these men, nor in the temporal sequence of their views; for it consists less in certain individual doctrines than in the form and manner of intellectual activity in general. (ix)

As explained previously, different countries produced different thinkers, each with unique perspectives, as well as varying degrees of influence on Western philosophy and politics. To carry this point even further, it has even been suggested that within the same country, Enlightenment philosophers who shared the same nationality may not have belonged to the

same Enlightenment. As Donald Lutz put forward in his article “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought,” there were three Enlightenments, with the 1<sup>st</sup> belonging to Montesquieu, Locke and Pufendorf, the second to Voltaire, Diderot and Helvetius and the third to Beccaria, Rousseau, Mably and Raynal (186-190). The existential crisis and epistemological debates regarding the meaning(s) of the Enlightenment(s) are by no means recent ones and have been carried out by authors such as Zollner, Pagden, Pocock, Israel and Lutz to name but a few.

As there are as many authors as variants on the Enlightenment, this research will focus on those authors with whom Dewey and/or Niebuhr shared the most intellectually and philosophically in common. Thus far, the author divisions have been as follows: Niebuhr reflecting a 20<sup>th</sup>-century vision of Scottish thought and Dewey the French vision. However, as will be seen in the next section, this division, though accurate when generalizing, does not always work when applied to specific authors belonging to each movement. Therefore, to demonstrate these links this work will delve further into Scottish and French thought as Niebuhr and Dewey embody these complimentary, yet different philosophical approaches.

### **1.2.1 A Sense to the Universe: The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order**

Much like Niebuhr, Scottish philosophers believed that there was a limit to human reason. Or as Nemo summarized: “*le point de départ de la tradition de l’ordre spontané aux Temps modernes est la réaction contre l’idée que le droit et les institutions peuvent être le produit de la seule volonté humaine*” (339).

Bernard Mandeville, who adhered to the theory of Spontaneous Order, and is most well-known for his *Fable of the Bees*, illustrated this point by demonstrating that a society which functioned solely on reason and virtue, could not actually function; that vice and the pursuit of individual interests were actually necessary within society. He used contemporary civilization as an example, explaining how an individual acted in his or her own interest to a certain degree (again, provided that this person’s interests did not infringe upon another’s) and that society still worked. He proved that social order was actually subject to some sort of external force which helped guide and keep things in order, and that paradoxically, for any society to function, including its economy, certain “wastes” needed to be maintained (Nemo 339-341). This idea and approach would be taken up by Adam Smith and his philosophy of the invisible hand which will be discussed in more detail later in this work.

If Locke helped establish the political basis for the rights of the individual, then Adam Smith (1723-1790) helped solidify classical Liberalism by defining, and filling in the gaps, specifically in regard to economic theory that Locke had left behind. For Smith, there were two forms of economic organization: the plan and the market. Speaking in terms of spontaneous order, this meant organized and spontaneous order respectively (Nemo 360). Each form would have its unique role to play in society, because, according to Smith, rule of law, on which Locke had written a large amount, and the (free)-market economy were “two faces of one and unique phenomenon, spontaneous order of society” (qtd. in Nemo 361).<sup>20</sup>

Though best known and associated with his economic philosophies, Smith nevertheless started by writing on morals and sympathy in his work *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). This is where he laid out his basic outlines for political economy. There has been debate about whether the theses highlighted in *Theory* and then in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) can be reconciled. Recent thinkers have defended the idea that there is no contradiction in the basic moral philosophy exhibited in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the economic analyses in *Wealth of Nations* (Schneider 44). The debate stems from the concept that because *Theory* discussed sympathy and how an individual *should* live in a society based on virtue, it is therefore *de facto* contradictory to *Wealth of Nations*, which attempted to demonstrate how the State could use self-interest for the benefit of all. Clive Crook, in his article “Adam Smith on CSR” believed Smith would have found no contradiction at all between the two works:

The two books, though written with different purposes...were a single intellectual project and fit together comfortably. [...] Smith believed that most people are self-interested, sympathetic, and wish to be well thought of. Successful commercial societies, he argued are built on these traits. (paras 7-8)

Similarly, Charles L. Griswold added: “*il est important de remarquer un second aspect du corpus de Smith, à savoir que l'économie politique est une branche de la philosophie morale*” (127). Therefore, though the two deal with two different subjects, they are still complimentary works, enforcing the theoretical approaches of Smith in his understanding of not only human nature, but society as well.

Smith’s understanding of society stemmed from his belief in the theory of spontaneous order in which human interactions, and more specifically, the benefits received from these interactions, were not the result of the brilliance of human reason, but rather derived from some

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<sup>20</sup> “*deux faces d'un seul et unique phénomène, l'ordre spontané de société*”



natural impartial spectator which regulated and helped society along. This came to be known as his oft-quoted, “invisible hand.” Or, put another way: due to the natural limitation of an individual, in the sense that s/he is not omniscient, s/he is therefore incapable of seeing the actual results of any decision taken because the infinite interconnectivity between individuals’ actions is unknowable. This is an interesting notion because once “we drop the teleological and theological vocabulary from [Smith’s theory], we are left with what many scholars have regarded as one of the most fundamental insights or perspectives in the social sciences” (Schneider 52). Furthermore, it is not hard to see the link here between Smith and Dewey as both felt that the limits of interconnectivity within society and interactions between individuals were unknowable and necessary. This “modern functional analysis” of society according to Smith, demonstrates that human nature was “evoked by society, and it [was] sustained by society.” This means that a person is as much a product of the society in which s/he lives, as the biological factors making up his/her DNA (Schneider 58-61).

Smith differed though in his understanding of society from other liberal thinkers (Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu) in the sense that he did not believe or defend the idea of a social contract, a sentiment shared by Dewey who felt that the Social Contract theory was just erroneous in theory and in practice—there was no evidence to support any such theoretical or practical contract had ever been used in human history. As James M. Buchanan claimed:

Adam Smith explicitly rejected a contractarian explanation for the emergence of government and for the obligation of persons to abide by law, preferring instead to ground both on the principles of authority and utility. Furthermore, he did not recognize the possible value of using a conceptualized contract as a benchmark or criterion with which to evaluate alternative political structures. (121)

Part of the reason for his attitude against social contract theory can be explained through Smith’s sociological approach where he focused not on theoretical backgrounds or explanations, but rather on history and experience to explain the development of society and the State. Law and government were not created in some abstract state of nature, they were direct consequences of conflicting interests, crashing together, and ultimately, forming some stable form of civilization in which all could prosper from the vital function of the State: security. It is here where Smith’s invisible hand is best expressed, not as some divine force, but as the sociological unforeseen consequences of individual actions causing massive ripple effects that change communities on large scales.

It was because of this interconnectivity that Smith stressed the importance of morality within political economy. Therefore, though he is the father of modern economic liberalism, the actual theory and philosophy behind it are quite different than what many modern-day interpretations may understand when using Smith's name. Illustrating this disconnect, the political economy had to determine the appropriate role of the State in society in order to determine how the State could afford necessary public services. He also highlighted the need of the State such as: defense, administration of justice, and public spending. (Boyer 187; 189-192) Though its role was not the arbitrary distribution of wealth (punishing the rich to the benefit of the poor), the State was nevertheless required, due to the interconnectivity of individuals in society, to make laws which fostered a sense of solidarity amongst its citizens in the hope of reducing economic and social inequalities (Biziou, "Libéralisme" 192).

This is a far cry from the *laissez-faire* liberalism most often associated with Smith. This is simply the result of a misunderstanding of political economy and Smith's original philosophies. About a century later, Dewey would make similar arguments on the "corruption" of Liberalism. For example, Biziou argues:

*Concevoir l'économie politique comme une partie du système de la philosophie morale va à l'encontre de notre classification des disciplines. En revanche, cela est pleinement conforme à la classification des disciplines qui avait cours au sein des universités écossaises dans lesquelles Smith enseignait, où n'existait pas encore de chaire d'économie politique. (Adam Smith 124)*

The reason why morality and political economy went so well together in Smith's thought was his emphasis on the necessary virtues in a society, each corresponding to a different "passion," common to individuals. The first was social in nature where a person concerned about the interests of another is represented by the virtue of benevolence (*bienveillance*). The second passion was self-interest and was tempered by prudence. Finally, the last passions were "asocial" in which a person sought revenge for a perceived wrong against his/her own personal interest or the interest of another. This passion was resolved with the virtue of justice which would seek an objective resolution to any conflict or perceived wrong-doings toward one person or between individuals (Biziou *Adam Smith*, 129-130). These passions and virtues were all trumped by Smith's "cardinal virtue" ("*vertu cardinale*") or the virtue of "self-control" ("*maitrise de soi*") that enabled civilizations to reach their ideal potential (Biziou, *Adam Smith* 131).

These moral factors within the political economy of Smith all seem to lead to one thing: that the modern interpretation of Smith's Liberalism is completely off base. To quote Biziou:

*On aurait donc tort d'imaginer, comme ont pourtant tendance à le faire bien des lecteurs, qu'en parlant de l'avènement de la société commerçante Smith pense à une société de marché où la présence de l'État s'effacerait de plus en plus, voire disparaîtrait. En réalité, selon Smith, c'est le contraire qui se produit, et cela de façon tout à fait naturelle, c'est-à-dire conformément aux principes de la nature humaine. L'activité économique va de pair avec la législation imposée par l'Etat, elles naissent et se développent dans un même processus historique.*  
(Adam Smith 154)

Biziou continues this line of thought in the same work by arguing: “[...] **le problème est moins de libérer le marché de l'intervention de l'État que de libérer l'État de l'intervention des marchands**” (180).<sup>21</sup> But Smith was not the only philosopher to discuss spontaneous order or the role of the state. Edmund Burke did as well, though as will be seen, he did so in a different manner altogether.

Turning back now to the politico-historic side of spontaneous order philosophy and coming toward the latter part of this philosophical timeline was Edmund Burke (1729-1797), best known for his work *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He differed greatly from his earlier spontaneous predecessors in that his understanding of society and the role of the individual in that society was very historical and linear. His thesis, in the grand scheme of things, was that human reason was extremely limited. Ultimately for Burke, it was tradition and customs which keep society together, not the spontaneous free-for-all pursuit of self-interest. Again, following very much in the English/Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, Burke still thought highly of the individual, and of the social contract that less than a century earlier John Locke had openly discussed. Burke's philosophy can be best explained in the following passage from *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure — but the State ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or forme other such law concern. [...] It is to be looked on with other reverence. [...] As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained

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<sup>21</sup> Biziou's emphasis.

in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular State is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and the invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. (143-144)

What's interesting to note here is the emphasis on the interconnectivity of generations and its role in ensuring the continuation of society. The "primeval contract" for Burke, was similar to Smith's invisible hand, guiding societies throughout history as an unseen and invisible force ensuring the benefit of all. Similar to Smith, Burke's emphasis on the "oath which holds all physical and all moral natures" highlights the beneficial role of the State in society. Here, the State was to remain out of economic affairs through any direct intervention. However, that did not mean that it had no role to play whatsoever. Similar to Smith, Burke's political economy did not exist within a vacuum, void of any and all morality; on the contrary, it was the duty of the State to ensure that morality was established by linking the generations together through societal norms and values.

These last few thinkers from the English/Scottish Enlightenment have been prominent in the history of liberal thought, and their influence reached the subjects of this research. This is especially true with Dewey and his pragmatic emphasis on the interconnectivity of people in society. However, liberal thought was not just an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Liberalism was influenced by the ideas from continental Europe, specifically the French Enlightenment. Similar to the English/Scottish Enlightenment, focusing on one philosopher over another is done for two methodological reasons: the first being again, time and scope, the second will be discussed below. The Enlightenment, regardless of the country or period, is a huge subject. Though an introduction into Enlightenment thought is needed for the sake of understanding classic and contemporary liberalism as well as Dewey and Niebuhr's intellectual roots, one must be careful not to tread down this pathway too long, for fear of losing one's way. The second reason is that when studying intellectual history or the history of ideas, one can never be entirely sure that one thinker truly influenced another, or had a *direct* impact. All that can be done, is to infer a relationship based on texts, personal accounts, and the other references available. The consequences of this second reason mean this will look at a single French Enlightenment author, not because he is more significant than others, but because his works have been fundamental to liberal thought, specifically with regards to the American model of Liberalism.

### 1.2.2 The Separation of Powers and Need for Moderation: Montesquieu and Liberal Thought

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède and de Montesquieu (1689-1755), was an important figure in liberal thought, though not necessarily for his theories in economics or even for his theories on the place of the individual in society. What made Montesquieu important, as well as unique in a liberal framework and to the scope of this research, was his emphasis on real political structure and organizations. He demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of different regimes based on comparative study. Several commentators have mentioned Montesquieu's unique approach as being one of the major precursors for sociology. Victor Goldschmidt in his introduction to *De l'esprit des lois I* maintained:

*Pour la première fois, les lois sont ici envisagées dans leur devenir historique, et replacées dans leur devenir historique, et replacées dans leur environnement climatique, géographique, économique, moral et religieux. On comprend qu'ici encore, une discipline inédite ait pu revendiquer l'auteur comme un précurseur, sinon comme son fondateur : la sociologie. (21)*

It is important to take notice of this, because Montesquieu analyzed different civilizations and history not from any normative or religious point of view, but merely as historic or cultural fact. However, considering the previous discussions on the neutrality of a scientist, Montesquieu's own neutrality can be called into question and reviewed, due to the subjective nature of the social and human sciences. Nevertheless, credit should be given where it is due when Montesquieu put forward:

I have, first of all, considered mankind; and the result of my thoughts has been that amidst such an infinite diversity of laws and manners, they were not solely conducted by the caprice of fancy. [...] I have not drawn my principles from my prejudices but from the nature of things.<sup>22</sup> (1777: 30)

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<sup>22</sup> "J'ai d'abord examiné les hommes ; et j'ai cru que, dans cette infinie diversité de lois et de mœurs, ils n'étaient pas uniquement conduits par leurs fantaisies. [...] Je n'ai point tiré mes principes de mes préjugés mais de la nature des choses" (1979 :115).

In his most famous work *De l'esprit des lois*, Montesquieu presented arguments against the abuse of power. Montesquieu defended this thesis in *De l'esprit des lois* when he maintained that “to prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power” (1777:211).<sup>23</sup> Of course growing up in a very different social and historical context to his contemporaries across the Channel, Montesquieu lived under the absolutist regime of the French monarchy. Granted, coming from the Bordeaux region, Montesquieu benefited from a certain degree of intellectual freedom not potentially granted in other cities or courts. Furthermore, having been to England, he was able to view France’s political system from a new perspective, especially when it came to the separation of powers, which he commented on, saying that “[...] there are three sorts of power: the legislative; the executive in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the executive in regard to matters that depend on civil law” (1777:213).<sup>24</sup>

Similar to many authors of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu discussed the nature of man and how it played a role in his political philosophy. Reflective of other contractual theorists (Hobbes and Locke), Montesquieu elucidated the different states a person could find him/herself in: nature and/or war. However, there were some stark differences between Montesquieu and his contemporaries, especially when it came to the state of war. Where for Hobbes, the state of nature and state of war were synonymous, and for Locke the state of nature was peaceful, and one went into society to avoid the state of war, for Montesquieu, the state of war was started when a person *enters* society, as s/he was now competing for resources (Pangle 33). It was at this point, when a person went into civilization that s/he became aware of things such as justice or injustice (Diedieu 118).

This may seem like a very cynical approach, and one could even question why Montesquieu did not share more with Hobbes, given their seemingly common pessimistic view of human nature. However, as Pangle maintained, “Montesquieu [did] not challenge the notion that the selfish desire for security is the predominant and crucial human desire; but he contended that it is tempered by weak social desire” (36-37). Therefore, where Hobbes only saw violence in human nature, Montesquieu stressed that there were social links which established positive feelings and affection amongst people within a society. Focusing on the complexities of human nature, Niebuhr would argue something similar a few centuries later in that individuals were

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<sup>23</sup> “*Pour qu'on ne puisse abuser du pouvoir, il faut que, par la disposition des choses, le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir*” (1979 :293).

<sup>24</sup> “*Il y a, dans chaque État, trois sortes de pouvoirs ; la puissance législative, la puissance exécutrice des choses qui dépend du droit des gens, et la puissance exécutrice de celles qui dépendent du droit civil*” (1979 :294).

both capable of good, but also capable of evil. He even praised Montesquieu in his analyses of human nature and politics stating how:

[a]s other theorists such as Hume, Burke, and Montesquieu have shown, [the] authority [of the State] rests upon an implicit consent derived not so much from rational calculations as from emotions, habits, and traditions, growing out of organic and historical experiences, and analogous to the sources of loyalty in traditional communities. (*On Politics* 112)

Society reflected the governing State to a certain degree, both Niebuhr and Montesquieu agreed on this. However, organic factors such as emotions, habits, and traditions had to be taken into account for stability's sake. This did not necessarily signify that these relationships could control negative human nature, but at least they could temper it. Here, Montesquieu acted as a sort of intermediary between Locke and Hobbes, softening Hobbes's realism while simultaneously, if not exactly criticizing, at least highlighting, the overly optimistic tone of Locke. It was this moderating effect of society which led Montesquieu to argue for a more sensible government, rather than for the Labyrinth of Hobbes. In Montesquieu's vision, as summarized by Pangle, government's role was security and freedom, the "freedom from domination and from threat of death or attack by other men. The purpose of government [was] to use the power of the state to suppress the natural war among individuals" (49).

Montesquieu's view of human nature was an equally important contribution to liberal thought. This was where Locke and Montesquieu shared common ground: freedom was not absolute in society. However, where Locke reasoned that one was free to do what s/he wished, provided there was no infringement upon the liberty of another, Montesquieu took the approach that a person was free "only when he limit[ed] his doing as he wishe[d] to activities not forbidden by law" (Pangle 109-110).

These basic ideas were often the most cited, and the most studied, and significantly influenced liberal thought. The very debate on power and the proper use of it was one Niebuhr's major thesis throughout his career, arguing that it was dangerous indeed, but necessary in political affairs. Montesquieu was a judge, under an absolutist regime, able to persuasively argue on the benefits of limiting power through its separation; or basically by playing human nature against itself. If power were separated between multiple parties, each party would naturally want to take as much as it could. This would cause each faction to equally fight against the other so that no faction obtained supreme power thereby creating a form of stable equality between institutions. The three sorts of power to which Montesquieu referred,

are known in contemporary times as executive, legislative and judicial. Though Montesquieu did not say judicial, the executive power he cites, “in regard to matters that depend on civil law<sup>25</sup> can be inferred to mean the legal system whereas the executive “in respect to things dependent on the law of nations”<sup>26</sup> would be more of what a president or State leader would do in acting as a head of military/head of state (1777:213). Joseph Dieudonné confirms this summary of different powers when he explains:

*Le pouvoir exécutif fait la paix ou la guerre, envoie ou reçoit des ambassades, veille à la sûreté intérieure, prévient les invasions. Le pouvoir législatif fait des lois pour un temps ou pour toujours, et corrige ou abroge celles qui existent déjà. Le pouvoir judiciaire punit les crimes ou juge les différends des particuliers.* (160-161)

His defense of the separation of powers stemmed out of the need for protection from arbitrary use of power. According to Montesquieu, if the executive and legislative were combined, then tyranny followed, because nothing would stop the ruler to both create and then enact “tyrannical laws” (*des lois tyranniques*) (1777:213). Worse, should there be no separation between the judiciary and other powers,

[...] there is no liberty, if the judiciary power be not separated from the legislative and executive. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control; for the judge would be then the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with violence and oppression (1777:213).<sup>27</sup>

It was only through a parting of these powers, that a person would be able to enjoy the natural liberty s/he was born with. Each branch of government had their own responsibility in ensuring political freedom for its people. The legislative branch, for example, addressed the

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<sup>25</sup> “[...] *la puissance exécutrice des choses qui dépend du droit des gens* [...]” (Ibid.).

<sup>26</sup> “[...] [*la puissance des choses*] *qui dépendent du droit civil.*” (Ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> “*Il n’y a point encore de liberté, si la puissance de juger n’est pas séparée de la puissance législative et de l’exécutrice. Si elle était jointe à la puissance législative, le pouvoir sur la vie et la liberté des citoyens serait arbitraire : car le juge serait législateur. Si elle était jointe à la puissance exécutrice, le juge pourrait avoir la force d’un oppresseur*” (1979 :294).



concerns and needs of the people. In Montesquieu's legislative body, it was a bicameral system with an upper house and lower house which would address them (1777:216). The reason for two distinct houses was because of the varying and conflicting interests between the nobles and the people. A unicameral body would surely end up being corrupted, as it would serve only the needs or interests of the chosen body, most likely the nobility, and would ignore or purposely exploit the others.

Montesquieu believed that executive power was best placed in the hands of a strong leader, or in his specific case, a monarch (1777:217). It was the monarch, or strong executive, who was capable of making those decisions which needed to be made quickly and without deliberation. Often these decisions would involve foreign policy, war, or internal or external crises as their very nature required swift, decisive action not long and complicated debate about what should be done.

This independent legislative and strong executive powers do eventually come together in Montesquieu's thought. For contrary to what may be believed, Montesquieu's ideal regime was not a democracy or republic, but a constitutional monarchy, such as he found in England. In his analyses of the different roles that each branch (legislative, executive and judiciary) played in a government, he acknowledged that the three could never be *truly* independent from one another since government would then cease to function, as each branch would be acting without knowing or seeing what the others were doing. Or to give an analogy in which the three branches are a part of a human body: the left arm writes a note, while the right arm pours a glass of milk; all the while the person is actually sleeping unaware of what is going on.

The executive and legislative must work together to achieve some sense of liberty, and consequently establish the basics of a functioning government order. Almost paradoxically, they worked together best when they were competing to work against one another the most. As previously discussed in the natural pursuit of power, each branch would try to amass the most in order to dominate the others, and it was here where Montesquieu discussed the ideas of limits imposed by the executive and legislative on each other. He argued:

Here then is the fundamental constitution of the government we are treating of. The legislative body being composed of two parts, they check one another by the mutual privilege of rejecting. They are both restrained by the executive power, as the executive is by the legislative.

These three powers should naturally form a state of repose or inaction. But as there is a necessity for movement in the course of human affairs, they are forced to move, but still in concert.<sup>28</sup> (1777:219)

Montesquieu's defense of the English model, or specifically of a strong monarch could be viewed cynically, as merely a means of protecting himself from political or religious prosecution, since he was living under an absolutist monarchical regime. This is doubtful though, given the amount of time he devoted to justifying why a constitutional monarch was better than a republic or democracy.

Arguably, the primary strength or reason Montesquieu found for defending the English model was the "modern liberal republicanism" (qtd. in Pangle 125-126). In this system, the people were not directly involved in politics for a variety of reasons (size of country, inability to attend meetings, or sheer ineptitude in public policy), however, they still needed to make sure their interests were addressed by those in power. Therefore, a system of representatives was established, in which a small group of elected officials represented various people throughout a given country. It was through this representative government that the separation, and more importantly, *balance* of powers, could be accomplished, as it would truly pit major interest groups (the people, the nobility and the monarch) against one another in a peaceful way in order to guarantee that all benefit from liberty and are free from any abuses of arbitrary power.

What should be noted by this defense of the English model is how the arguments were political and were not based on "metaphysical reasons" (*les raisons métaphysiques*) (Diedieu 167). Montesquieu did not base his arguments on any personal prejudices or philosophical arguments to emphasize the strengths of the English model, instead he used concrete political examples to express how a truly republican political regime was excellent for expressing the desires of the people, but inept at actually accomplishing anything in any correct manner (Diedieu 167).

Spanning several centuries and different countries, liberal thought has had numerous sources to pull from in developing into what is come to be known as modern liberalism. However, what has been studied thus far is of a European nature and is also referred to as classic

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<sup>28</sup> "Voici donc la constitution fondamentale du gouvernement dont nous parlons. Le corps législatif y étant composé de deux parties, l'une enchainera l'autre par sa faculté mutuelle d'empêcher. Toutes les deux seront liées par la puissance exécutive, qui le sera elle-même par la législative.

*Ces trois puissances devraient former un repos ou une inaction. Mais comme, par le mouvement nécessaire des choses, elles sont contraintes d'aller, elles seront forcées d'aller de concert*" (1779 :302).

Liberalism. For the purpose of this research, it is not European liberalism which is the most pertinent in understanding Niebuhr and Dewey, it is American liberalism. Nevertheless, it is necessary to master the foundations of Liberalism to best understand the two. Furthermore, American liberalism was not something that appeared out of nowhere. By being taken from a European and “Enlightened” context and applied to one in which people were dealing with the “noble savage” and the wild frontier, authors such as Locke, Smith and Montesquieu contributed to American Liberalism. It was during this adaptation to new circumstances that European liberalism evolved and changed to have an American identity.

### **1.3.0 Americanization of European Thought**

American political philosophy has always been an interesting subject to dive into due to the difficulty of defining exactly what it is. Being a “somewhat vague” term, it can encompass philosophers born in the U.S., or thinkers who immigrated to America; it can deal with classic philosophy such as metaphysics or epistemology, but can equally branch out to different domains in linguistics, interconnectivity, or experience (Boersema par. 1). When American political philosophy is studied, those attempting such a task acknowledge the difficulty of the subject, not simply for the enormity of the challenge but also because “American political theory has long been neglected” (Shklar 91).

What makes analyzing American political thought so difficult is the recurring belief that it is not original. Many believe that it is “mired in the legacy of John Locke and a mindless optimism. [...] In any event our petty intellectual squabbles are mere shadow-boxing compared to the *real thing*, the kind of ideological combat that feudalism and class war generated in Europe” (Shklar 91.). This statement is telling, as those studying American political philosophy tend to find themselves constantly on the defensive, due to the belief that American political theorists simply pick and choose from a catalogue of European intellectual philosophies. Yet, it would be unfair and inaccurate to say that American political thought is just mere repetition of European thinkers. To claim this is to ignore the cultural and historic specificity of the American situation, whether it is the belief of starting a New Jerusalem with the Puritans, or interpreting Enlightenment thinkers to fit American needs, American political philosophy is a mix of foreign-rooted ideas adapted to a new and vast world.

Equally difficult for those studying American political thought, is the lack of any linear evolution. Constantly growing between various contradictory forces, it seems American political history takes one step forward but two steps back, especially when it came to

progressive developments. This was related to two reasons: one practical and linked to the geographic distance between the US and Europe. The other was cultural and was linked with historic differences between the two continents (Rodgers 62). One cannot ignore the fact that the creation of institutions capable of great democratization were also the same ones that maintained the establishment, and defense, of slavery in a modern state. This contradiction between freedom and slavery, is just one of four points Judith Shklar highlights as “distinguishing American political thought” (92). She pointed out that:

At least four obvious political phenomena have contributed to distinguishing American political thought from its cultural neighbors (Europeans): the early and painless acceptance of white adult male suffrage, federalism, judicial review, and most deeply, the prevalence of chattel slavery long after it had disappeared in the rest of the European world. (92)

So then, how is one to reconcile all of this with what has been analyzed thus far? The best way to do that is, first of all, to admit that American political thought was, and still is, influenced heavily by European political thought. This influence, however, is very much limited to that: *influence*. This does not imply a direct copy, and to think that American political thought is simply a poor reflection or imitation of European thought is to seriously misunderstand American intellectual and political history. This is especially true when Enlightenment thought is taken into consideration and analyzed with regards to American Liberalism.

Similar to what has been previously stated, the concepts and terms used in one time may vary and change in another. Gordon Wood demonstrated this in his classic work on America’s foundation when he claimed: “Although the vocabulary of the period (1776-1787) was familiar, I found the meaning of much of that vocabulary strange and peculiar, and I learned that words such as ‘liberty,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘virtue,’ or ‘republicanism’ did not possess a timeless application” (vii). Therefore, the first thing that needs to be kept in mind when comparatively analyzing the European Enlightenment on American political thought is the specificity of the vocabulary. Though words may be familiar, they can, of course, have a variety of connotations or definitions depending on the context and *époque* in which they were being used. With that in mind, looking at specific Enlightenment philosophers and how they influenced American Liberalism can be examined.

### **1.3.1 “Keep Calm and Carry On”: Moderation of Montesquieu and the Scottish Enlightenment in America**

Montesquieu's influence has always been a topic of study, even going back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The then-Ambassador James Bryce stated:

This book [*L'Esprit des lois*] had won its way to an immense authority on both sides of the ocean [...]. No general principles of politics laid such hold on the Constitution makers and statement of America as the dogma that the separation of these three functions is essential to freedom. It had already been the groundwork of several State constitutions. It is always reappearing in their writings; it was never absent from their thought. (qtd. in Cattelain 71)

What is interesting to note here is the scope of Montesquieu's influence. Most observers of American political history can easily associate Montesquieu with the Federal Constitution, given the strict separation of powers demonstrated between the three branches. However, what few realize, is that the ideas of Montesquieu were imbedded in the individual State Constitutions before 1789. The principles of the separation of powers were already established throughout the thirteen original states. Montesquieu's words can even be found directly in the State Constitutions. For example, the New Hampshire Constitution of 1783 stated: "The people of this State have the sole and exclusive rights of governing themselves" (Cogan 1044). This is a direct interpretation of Montesquieu's Book II Chapter 2 in which he discusses Republican governments and democracy.<sup>29</sup>

One of his primary influences on the American model was the creation of a strong judiciary which could ensure liberty, not because the judicial branch would be stronger than the executive or legislative, but because it would be equal. It was this idea which was truly unique, for in feudal or aristocratic societies, the judiciary was consistently thought of as being a mere extension of the executive. The judiciary was not independent, and therefore was more or less governed by the whims of the monarch. By creating a strong, and independent judicial authority, judges could then truly analyze whether or not a law was just, leading to the very American concept of judicial review. Cattelain best summarized this when he maintained that: "*La création d'un département national judiciaire est également due à l'influence du juriste bordelais. Jusqu'ici, nul gouvernement n'avait de pouvoir judiciaire séparé. Les recommandations de Montesquieu furent suivies à la lettre*" (97).

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<sup>29</sup> *C'est encore une loi fondamentale de la démocratie, que le peuple seul fasse des lois* (1979 :136).

Aside from Montesquieu, American Liberalism stemmed from the British/Scottish Enlightenments and also played a role in American political thought, specifically the American adaptation and evolution of the Whigs in the colonies. Similar to Smith and the idea of the Invisible Hand which guides personal interest toward common good, colonists felt that freedom was not necessarily the freedom found in the state of nature, but a political liberty which enabled for certain rights; signifying that a person is willing to sacrifice total liberty for the Commonwealth (Wood 80-90).

This idea of sacrifice for the common good and an “Invisible Hand” would be taken up time and again during America’s intellectual history. This was due to the political and religious divisions between the diverse socio-political and ethnic enclaves throughout the United States which evolved and constantly debated the appropriate roles for the State and the individual. Dewey and Niebuhr were 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples of this debate, with both thinkers redefining these roles depending on the historical influences taking place at any given time. For example, the idea advocated by Smith and his Invisible Hand regarding society’s unlimited interconnectivity was the basis for much of Dewey’s work on politics, ethics, and society. Similarly, Smith’s Invisible Hand was reflected through Dewey and Niebuhr’s specific vocabulary. Dewey explained the same phenomenon via the individual’s ignorance of social interaction’s globality. Niebuhr, conversely had a more theological understanding in which the Invisible Hand was an omniscient God, watching from afar as His creations continued acting as creature and creator, ultimately understanding little of His complex plan.

Added to this idea of an unseen force linking together all the unknowable consequences of individual interactions, was the average temperance brought about by the English/Scottish Enlightenment. A sobriety that understood the idea that an individual can never totally set aside said interests for the pure benefit of society. Even during the Revolution, there was a certain degree of temperance, the Americans did not necessarily strive for the betterment of human nature, rather for the betterment of society. This is a product of the English/Scottish influence in America, and Smith reflected this temperance. To quote Thomas Sowell:

The American Revolution, which occurred in the same year as the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, was very different from the French Revolution of the same era. The French Revolution was faster, more violent—and shorter-lived. It was based more on abstract principles, on abstract speculation about the nature of man and the potentiality of government as an instrument of human improvement. Smith was much more in the tradition of the American Revolution — more based on historical experience of the limitations of man as he is, of

government's shortcomings as actually observed, and above all, a rejection of the idea that anyone has either such wisdom or such nobility as to wield the unbridled power to shape and direct his fellow-creatures. (14)

The need for soberness was not expressed uniquely by Smith, but by other members of the English/Scottish Enlightenment. Edmund Burke, who was pro-American during the Revolution, spoke out for the need of temperance from the Crown, stating before Parliament that they should

[...] revert to [their] old principles—seek peace and ensue it; leave America...But if intemperately, unwisely, fatally, you sophisticate and poison the very source of government by urging subtle deductions, and consequences odious to those you govern, from the unlimited and illimitable nature of supreme sovereignty, you will teach them by these means to call that sovereignty itself in question. [...] If that sovereignty and their freedom cannot be reconciled, which will they take? They will cast your sovereignty in your face. (qtd. in Simms 569-71)

This was in no way similar to Burke's thoughts on the French Revolution. In *A Letter from Mr. Burke to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), Burke argued for the importance of temperance in the French mindset stating that "...men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters." This was Burke's, and to a certain extent, the English/Scottish Enlightenment's issue with the French Revolution. Their criticism was not that the people wanted to be free from the authority of the Crown, but the way they carried out this desire. In this context, it was succumbing to human passion, rather than using history and experience to moderate their desires. This time, it would be Niebuhr who would pick up where Burke and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers left off simply because Niebuhr's theology was always skeptical of the modern belief in the "goodness" of human nature. Similar to his 18<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual forefathers, Niebuhr felt that self-interest, greed, and the darker sides of human nature needed to be considered and controlled when discussing humanity. This sentiment was by no means new, as authors dating back to Antiquity and even those of the American Revolutionary era defended the same arguments. Though Antiquity and Classic thinkers may have been the first to grasp the inherent conflicts of human nature, the American Founding Fathers did the same, this time however in the context of a "virgin" continent, "free" from the restraints of the Old World.

### 1.3.2 *The Federalist* and the Economic Pursuit of Self-Interest

Anyone who has studied American history knows the famous phrase of “no taxation without representation” the philosophical *raison d’être* of the American Revolution. After the Revolution was over, and the Articles of Confederation established, the issue of taxation was a contested and hotly debated one. It is important to mention and discuss *The Federalist* in the context of Dewey and Niebuhr, because it was the Founding Fathers who laid the ground work for much of Dewey and Niebuhr’s work. The debates that Hamilton, Adams, Madison, and Jefferson were having throughout the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, were the same ones that Dewey and Niebuhr would have had in the 20<sup>th</sup>. These debates centered namely around the role of the individual and the State, the power the State should have over the individual, and the very nature of humanity itself. Thus, in order to best understand the 20<sup>th</sup>-century context, a brief analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century debates regarding these issues through the works and lives of some principle figures of the era needs to be extrapolated.

Fearing ultimately that citizens would be unjustly taxed without proper representation, States ensured that any revenue collected would be for the use of the individual State, and not the Federal government. The results of such debates were that under the Articles could not directly tax the people of the Confederation. Instead, any money raised for the Federal government, was to be given by State legislatures, on their volition. Of course, this clearly created problems, as not many States were willing to give up large sums of money as there was no economic or political interest in doing so. States, under the Articles, could conduct business and treaties with foreign entities at their will. Therefore, it was almost counterintuitive for individual States to give money to the Federal government so they could pursue “national” interests that would end up, most likely, against States’ own interests. To avoid this issue, as well as any other problems related to revenue, Hamilton argued that a strong Federal government, capable of levying taxes directly on citizens was necessary, in lieu of depending of the volition of the States (60).

Tied into this idea of economic liberty was Hamilton’s criticisms in the *Federalist No. 22* in which he discussed the problems associated with Congress’s authority of regulating commerce. As stated previously, the Articles allowed for individual States to trade with each other, or with foreign entities entirely independent of the national government’s will or interest. Of course, philosophically, it can be understood why such an approach was taken, given that the Enlightened idea was to follow one’s economic and political self-interest without interference from external parties. Therefore, why should the States be subjected to Federal



regulation or oversight which would undoubtedly harm the State's individual interest? Hamilton's argument was that this created undue and unnecessary chaos between the States and that only a strong Federal government should have the absolute authority to deal with commerce.

These were just but some of the issues that the Articles of Confederation, and consequently the citizens throughout the thirteen States had to contend with and resolve. And it was not until 1787 that these issues were put to rest through the ratification of the Constitution of the United States. This was in part due to the brilliance of Hamilton, Jay and Madison whom each contributed to *The Federalist* to persuade the American people of the necessity of a strong Federal government. The Articles of Confederation attempted to take the pure idealism of Enlightenment thought and apply it to government, and has been seen, it was not completely successful. It was only through a moderate approach, specifically influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment, and the *réal politique* attitude of Hamilton and Adams, that Enlightenment idealism could properly be put to use through the Constitution of 1787.

Madison continued Hamilton's approach by highlighting the major advantage of a strong Union in a society filled with various factions, "[a]mong the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than this tendency to break and control the violence of faction" (30). Madison was as much a product of the Scottish Enlightenment as Hamilton, Adams and Jay. Thus, for him, human nature naturally drove individuals to seek out their own self-interest, something that both Dewey and Niebuhr attested to as well. Similar to Smith, Mandeville and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, Madison did not see this as a vice of human weakness, but rather as an opportunity to use these motivations for the betterment of society. However, in order to understand how these factions, or what would be known today as lobbies, could be used within a society, it is best to begin with Madison's definition of a faction for though separated by centuries, Madison's astute political savvy on how to use factions against one another would be taken up by 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers such as Niebuhr himself. Madison reasoned:

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. (30)

What is important to take away from Madison's definition, and what is relevant to this research, is that a faction was not bound by any type of ethnic, religious or social creed. It is quite

conceivable that in a Madisonian approach, someone from the upper-class could be a part of the same faction as someone from the working class or a farmer. The factions were simply derived from the “common impulse” either to protect the interests of the few, the many, or the greater community as a whole.

Factions have existed throughout all societies and all ages, the difference being how individual regimes managed factions. Within classical thought, factions were either controlled through the sheer force of will of the absolute ruler in a monarchy, through reasoning and “virtue” such as in an aristocracy (i.e. Philosopher-Kings), or through the voice of the people and simple majority decisions as in the classic democratic model of the Greek City-States.

For Madison, and thus for Adams and Hamilton as well, factions were a natural part of society and inherent in an individual. He even argued that should there ever be some form of society in which factions were not easily present, people would actually start looking for the smallest reasons and trivialities to create a faction. Madison maintained:

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. [...] So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. (30)

Continuing in the same line of thought, Madison’s *Federalist No. 10* is a truly brilliant example of adapting European Enlightenment thought to the American context. Madison first argued on the utility of factions in society, as not just something natural, but actually something necessary to the health of a functioning Republic. These principles stemmed directly from the Scottish Enlightenment, specifically the ideas of the Invisible Hand and the theory of Spontaneous Order. Understanding that there always need to be checks and balances between the various factions, and thus varying powers within the government, Madison continued by highlighting that a Republican government ensured the freedom of all simply by pitting the interests of these factions against one another. Dewey would recognize this in his work, though he argued that these various factions could and would eventually work things out to find some common ground through experience, education, and dialogue.

*The Federalist Papers* are strewn with such examples. Hamilton wrote often and profoundly, on the importance of commerce in a free society, specifically how a strong Union can ensure the economic liberty for all. It was in this text that the roots of American liberalism

took hold. Understanding the dangers of unbridled *laissez-faire* commerce within the different states, Hamilton argued that however paradoxical it may appear, a strong Union, with adequate military and naval power, would actually protect the economic liberties of the citizens better than the then-functioning model of each State for itself. Hamilton's primary concern was that foreign governments would use the very free-trade policies that existed between the States against them (33-35). To give an example: State A and State B have independent treaties with Country C. State A and State B both have similar economic interests and general economies (plantations and primarily agriculturally based). Therefore, Country C could try to pit State A and B against one another for its own profit, (i.e., preferential tariff pricing, and cheaper goods) in order to get the better deal, thus causing the "loser" State to be at a great disadvantage.

It was only through regulation enforced by a strong Union that states avoided such a problem. Hamilton claimed that "[b]y prohibitory regulations, extending, at the same time, throughout the States, we may oblige foreign countries to bid against each other, for the privileges of our markets" (33). He later contended that a strong Union not only protected the States from foreign influence, but also against domestic infighting and commercial exploitation.

Perhaps though it was *The Federalist No. 48* which best expressed Enlightenment ideas in an American context. In this particular essay of which the subject is the "Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments," Madison took Montesquieu's idea of the separation of powers and demonstrated how they could be adapted to the American situation. According to Madison, safeguarding liberty was only possible through distinct and separate branches of government:

In order to lay a due foundation for that separate and distinct exercise of the different powers of government, which to a certain extent is admitted on all hands to be essential to the preservation of liberty, it is evident that each department should have a will of its own; and consequently should be so constituted that the members of each should have as little agency as possible in the appointment of the members of the others. (142)

The departments to which Madison referred was the executive, legislative and judiciary. It should be noted here, that though Madison argued for a strict separation of powers, that did not mean an absolute separation. When analyzing the English Parliament, Montesquieu understood the need for some form of interaction between the different branches of government, else the results would be stagnation at best or absolute anarchy at worst. Madison followed suit, albeit lightly, when he said that "each should have as little agency as possible in the appointment of

the members of others” (142). Like Montesquieu, Madison acknowledged the necessity for the three branches to have a basic degree of cooperation in order for the proper functioning of government. What was important, was not that each branch function without recourse from the others, but rather that the appointments or selection processes of the different branches, should remain independent as possible in order to prevent political rivalries (in the vulgar sense) from disrupting government.

For Madison, and consequently the other Founding Fathers, it was preventing these political rivalries that drove the division of power and thus the different branches of government. Again, reflecting the Scottish Enlightenment’s idea of personal interest and human nature, Madison stated in *The Federalist No. 48* that

[...] the great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others. The provision for defense must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. [...] If Angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. (142)

Madison did miss one thing in his analysis of human nature and government, in that if humans were governed by angels, neither external nor internal controls on “government would be necessary” but consequently, government itself would not be necessary. Therefore, the fact that government exists highlights how complicated the human condition is.

Hamilton’s constant reminder of the imperfectability of human beings is reflected in the American model. Understanding the dangers of direct democracy, and how it would lead to popular rule, by following the passions or whims of mob mentality, Hamilton successfully reasoned for the establishment of a Federal American Republic. As Staloff so perfectly summarizes:

Ours may be a government for the people, but it has never been a government by or of the people. On the contrary, it is a representative republic whose institutions were explicitly designed to ensure that the popular will would rarely directly drive political policy, and whose representatives have always been drawn from the social and economic elite. [...] Hamilton knew this, and his experience and legacy remind us of it. More than that, he reminds us why, despite our protestations to the contrary, we want it that way: the people do not always know best. ‘The people are turbulent and changing,’ Hamilton claimed; ‘they seldom judge or determine right.’ (129)

Hamilton, Jay and Madison took the ideas from the Enlightenments, specifically the Scottish one to try to put into political practice the theoretical ideologies of the time via *The Federalist Papers*. The purpose of which was to, of course, convince the American people of the need of a Federal Constitution. Tempered by human nature and an understanding of its imperfectability and the belief in the Invisible Hand, Hamilton, Jay and Madison set the foundations for American Liberalism, and thus the groundwork for Dewey and Niebuhr. For example, Madison’s and Hamilton’s emphasis on a strong central government and the need of a powerful State were the roots of American political realism that Niebuhr would apply two centuries later during the volatile and violent early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Enlightenment thought did not stop with them, instead it was taken up by other Founding Fathers, including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who provided their own interpretation on and analyses of it as well.

#### **1.3.4.2 John Adams: The Enlightened Federalist**

Thanks in part, to his education in New England John Adams, like Hamilton, shared a realist view of Enlightenment thought and its application to the American situation, specifically in terms of the betterment of the human condition. At the time, New England benefited from an extremely high literacy rate and “(with the possible exception of Scotland) boasted the most extensive and effective system of public education in the English-speaking world” (Staloff 140). This education was put to use and found Adams with a profound appreciation for the sciences.

Adams’s Enlightenment influences can be seen in his analysis of government and the role it should have in society. Adams felt that the social sciences, specifically Political Science, functioned, similarly to Newton’s natural laws. This meant that as the natural world could be described, studied and analyzed, so too could the science of government. This type of approach could arguably make Adams one of the early precursors to modern sociology as he tried, mostly

in vain, to find causal relationships between certain factions and the results in society. For Adams, the fundamental law was that “Power always follows Property,” highlighting the strong Enlightenment influence regarding property and freedom. Keeping in line with the idea of Adams being a precursor to modern sociology, his view was that as the natural sciences had their subject, so too did political science. However, where the natural sciences analyzed the properties explaining the natural world, Adams saw the object of political science as “human nature and human life” (Staloff 146).

The importance of education in Adams’s Enlightened thought continued throughout his political career. The Massachusetts Constitution, written by Adams in 1780, demonstrated his devotion to education as not only a privilege but a national right for all citizens at the expense of the State. As Francis Newton Thorpe summarized in his article “The Political Ideas of John Adams,” the Massachusetts’s Constitution was not only a direct reflection of Adams’s political philosophy, but also a reflection of Enlightenment thought in terms of Government:

But Adams’s concept of the purpose and functions of government are more completely expressed elsewhere in that Constitution, as in its provision- the earliest of the kind on record for universal education at the expense of the State, - the celebrated provision for public schools, grammar schools, the University at Cambridge, private societies and public institutions, the promotion of the arts and sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country. (9)

Education, the arts, commerce; these liberal values, which would be taken up by Dewey specifically in his discourses on democracy and education, were at the heart of Adams’s thought and were expressed in the State Constitution.

If Hamilton, Madison, Jay and Adams all represented common reflections and analyses in Enlightenment thought, albeit with subtle variations, Thomas Jefferson had a completely different point of view. Educated in the best schools, submerged in Enlightenment thought throughout his education, becoming advisor under Washington’s administration, and eventually creating the opposing party, Thomas Jefferson was a unique figure in America’s adaptation of Enlightenment thought. Jefferson was unique, if for no other reason that where the previous Founding Fathers were all primarily influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment and Montesquieu, Jefferson gladly accepted French Enlightenment ideas, and set up the foundations for American Romanticism, a sort of critique and evolution of the Enlightenment.

### 1.3.4 Thomas Jefferson: The Revolutionary Enlightenment Thinker

Jefferson had a distinctive understanding when it came to applying Enlightenment principles, especially when adapting them to the American context. As Ambassador to France from 1785 to 1789, Jefferson had a first-hand experience to Continental European Enlightenment and of the events leading up to the French Revolution.

Throughout the later-half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “Anglomania” was starting to dissipate in France, partly thanks to such thinkers as Francois Quesnay, Turgot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Belonging to a sort of pre-Romantic philosophy known as Physiocracy, these thinkers questioned the very teachings of the Enlightenment, specifically the ideas of mixed and representative government. Even more disconcerting for several of the Federalist Founding Fathers, was the Physiocrats’ seemingly dogmatic belief in their own philosophy and approach to science. This “fanaticism la[id] at the heart of the rupture between the older modes of enlightened discourse and the new proto-Romantic ethos of authenticity” (Staloff 175).

Physiocrats disagreed greatly, however, with the Federalists’ point of view on politics and government. Where the Federalists championed for a bicameral system in which the interests of the few (the rich) would be balanced by the interests of the many (the poor), thus enabling not only political, but economic liberty as well, the Physiocrats rejected such an idea:

Following Rousseau, they insisted that there was only one legitimate source of political authority, the general will. Unlike the interests of various social groups and classes, the general will spoke for ‘the people as a whole’ and thus ‘is always right and always tends toward the public utility.’ The mixed government of England simply ensured that ‘the private interest of two orders is given first and second place’ while the ‘public interest is merely third place.’ (Staloff 175)

In almost poetic irony, the philosophy that the Enlightenment inspired the most, Physioracy, ended up being the very reason for the Enlightenment’s decline in intellectual and philosophical popularity. Claiming to represent “pure” science and truth, the fanaticism that was fought against in the 17<sup>th</sup> century seemed to make a comeback under a name of a new god: Science.

Jefferson, being a privileged Founding Father, was one of the few to receive a classic education in which he studied the modern authors of his time. Under the private tutelage of

George Wythe, who would educate future American leaders such as Chief Justice John Marshall and President James Monroe, Jefferson benefited from a truly Enlightened childhood:

Under Wythe's tutelage, Jefferson pored over the tedious pages of Edward Coke and the voluminous William Blackstone. [...] He studied the political implications of the law in authors like John Locke, Joseph Priestley and the Baron de Montesquieu, just as he explored its ethical basis in the writings of Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames and the Marquis de Condorcet. [...]

The years of close reading under the direction of...Wythe steeped Jefferson in the learning of the Enlightenment, leaving him deeply committed to its values. Indeed, the booklist he supplied for Robert Skipwith's private library in 1771 reads like a who's who list of 18<sup>th</sup>-century learning. Bayle, Bolingbroke, Buffon, Burke, Franklin, Hume, Kames, Locke, Montesquieu, Reid, Robertson, Rousseau, Smith, Stewart and Voltaire were all prominently listed among a bevy of 'modern' literary figures such as Addison, Congreve Fielding, Goldsmith, and Sterne to name just a few. (Stalhoff 250)

To say that Jefferson was immersed in Enlightenment thought is an understatement, but what was unique about Jefferson was his enthusiasm for it, and general idealism when applying it.

Jefferson was probably the most idealist of the Founding Fathers in terms of adapting the authors he had grown up with into concrete political thought. When he became governor of Virginia, "Jefferson practiced the politics of Enlightenment in his native state." (Stalhoff 252) His idealism and approach to Enlightenment thought changed drastically following the American Revolution, and even further after he took up his position in France. Similar to Hamilton and Adams, the American Revolution tempered Jefferson's faith in the ability of his fellow citizens to put aside personal interests for the common good. However, it was not until his post in Paris that the Enlightenment Statesman became a pre-Romantic thinker, questioning the bedrock beliefs of the Enlightenment.

His faith and emphasis in educating the common people for example, as well as his notion of the will of the Majority, were very reminiscent of Rousseau's General Will. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Dewey would continue this debate, defending the need of quality education within a democracy as a means to prevent tyranny and to protect liberty. In a letter to his friend James Madison from Paris on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1787, Jefferson explained:



After all, it is my principle that the will of the Majority should always prevail. If they approve the proposed Convention in all its parts, I shall concur in it cheerfully, in hopes that they will amend it whenever they shall find it work wrong. I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe. Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.

This exchange with Madison referred to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Jefferson felt that a bicameral system with a strong Federal government would infringe upon the liberties and powers of the individual States. Thus, the best defense against any of these infringements was to ensure the power was centered on the masses and not in the hands of the wealthy or natural aristocracy.

This emphasis on education and the power of the people reflected the influence of Rousseau, and other proto-Romantic thinkers on Jefferson. However, as Staloff rightly summarizes:

At first glance, Jefferson's belief in popular sovereignty looks a lot like Rousseau's majoritarian doctrine of the 'general will.' In fact, however, it was far more radical. Even Rousseau had acknowledged that the majority could transcend the limits of natural right. Madison in particular sought to point out the failings of majority rule to his friend and mentor. The people were not a solitary entity. Rather, they were a collection of interests and factions, and in 'a simple Democracy' it was doubtful whether 'a majority having any common interest, or feeling any common passion, will find sufficient motives to restrain them from oppressing the minority.' By contrast, Jefferson was remarkably sanguine. The majority 'may sometimes err,' yet those 'errors are honest, solitary, and short-lived.' It was therefore best to 'bow down to the general reason of the society,' for 'even in its deviations' from the course of justice it 'always soon returns again to the right way.' (297)

Thus for Jefferson, the majority was always right, even when it was wrong. Such an approach may seem the pathway to totalitarianism given how unlikely it is for a majority to relinquish its

power. Nevertheless, Jefferson's vision of democracy was not as encompassing as what might be imagined.

For Jefferson, the counter balance against any form of totalitarian rule or abuse arising from the majority rested in the hands of the individual and the belief in Republican values. This can be seen in a letter from Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval in 1816 where he wrote that the "true foundation [was] the equal right of every citizen, in his person and property, and in their management" (qtd. in Staloff 299). Therefore, protection against tyranny did not come from the State, as would be the case for the Federalists. Instead, it came from the citizens themselves in a form of negative liberty, in which only through the lack of government presence in everyday life could freedom be ensured.

Sharing another idea with Rousseau was Jefferson's approach to property in that it was "political rather than natural" (Staloff 302). It would be a mistake though, to read too far into this statement or try to argue that Jefferson might want to divide property equally amongst the citizenry; quite the contrary. His argument was that it was the fault of the State itself for such random and arbitrary division of property. This can be seen in a letter to Madison in 1785 where he said: "the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right." What Jefferson meant by this was that because central governments divide up land according to special interest groups, rather than the actual needs of the people or according to the best use of the land, much of the land was thus wasted. This in turn created arbitrary divisions between people and classes which would have otherwise been avoided had the State given the people the negative liberty they needed to flourish.

Perhaps one of the greatest demonstrations of French influence on Jefferson was in regard to his attitudes toward the contractual continuation of society from one generation to the next, as well as for society's need of rebellion. The Scottish Enlightenment, best exemplified here by Burke, reasoned that society functioned and evolved through a contract from one generation to another, binding existing generations to previous ones primarily through history and tradition. Jefferson disagreed with this assessment, and sought to break away from this argument. In a letter to Madison from Paris on September 6 1789, Jefferson wrote:

The question whether one generation of men has a right to bind another, seems never to have been started either on this or our side of the water. Yet it is a question of such consequences as not only to merit decision, but place also, among the fundamental principles of every government. The course of reflection in which we are immersed here on the elementary principles of society has presented this question to my mind; and that no such obligation can be so

transmitted I think very capable of proof. I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, "*that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living*": that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it.

For Jefferson, society should be reconstructed essentially with every new generation, as each generation's values and societal norms would have changed according to the different times in which they lived. Not only that, the new generation would have to adapt to the unforeseen challenges of the previous generation.

On top of this rupture between contractarian theories, was Jefferson's unequivocal support of insurrectionary activity. Jefferson contended that healthy Republics experienced bouts of spontaneous insurrection, and rather than trying to squash them, central governments should embrace them. "A little rebellion now and then is a good thing. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government," he wrote to Madison in a letter from Paris in 1787. His greatest example of support for healthy insurrection and rebellion was the French Revolution of 1789. What made Jefferson's view so unique was that he was present during all of the important steps leading up to, and including, the Revolution itself:

Jefferson had borne witness to the early stages of the world historical upheaval. He had observed the gathering of the Assembly of Notables in 1787 with calm optimism... he was present at the opening of the Estates General in 1780 and helped Lafayette with early drafts of the [*Déclaration des droits et des devoirs de l'homme et du citoyen*]. When blood was at last shed, Jefferson did not shy away from it. In fact, as Conor Cruise O'Brien has argued, Jefferson's commitment to the French Revolution actually grew as it became more radical and violent. (Staloff 306)

In his time as ambassador, Jefferson had clearly changed from Enlightened Statesman to Romantic Idealist and it was a combination of these ideas and passions that he would take back to the presidency.

Jefferson represented a break between Enlightenment thought, its American application, and the new philosophical movement that would dominate the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romanticism. Though nurtured in the wells of Enlightenment thought, Jefferson saw the limits of such philosophies, ultimately rejecting it for more idealistic and democratic values, rather than the cold, calculated analyses of the Federalists and their distant approach to how self-interest can benefit society. Of course, like all idealists, he would end up betraying many of the

values and ideals which he had so vehemently fought for prior to his presidency. Jefferson had a substantial impact on American political, economic, and social thought by using this combination of Enlightenment upbringing and Romantic idealism. He changed the American landscape politically through the creation of the then-new Republican political party as well as physically through the Louisiana Purchase.

Hamilton, Adams, Jay, Madison and Jefferson are obviously not the Alpha and Omega of American political thought. Nevertheless, they represent various approaches to how the European Enlightenments were used in an American context. One in which the landscape, and to a certain extent, the people, were blank slates ready to receive the lofty, and often complicated, ideas of the Enlightenments. The importance of studying these thinkers, as well as the foundations of the Enlightenment itself, were necessary steps in this research since no thinker or philosophy exists in a vacuum. Analyzing and discussing the development of Europe's Enlightenment, and its evolution in America, has thus set up the framework and basis for the next sections of this research. Political Pragmatism and Christian realism were continuations of the Enlightenment and the American revolutionary period. In order to understand Dewey's political Pragmatism or Niebuhr's Christian realism, Montesquieu, Adams, Hamilton, et. al. needed to be studied as Dewey and Niebuhr exemplified Enlightenment ideas in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century framework. For example, in matters concerning public education and the focus on society, Dewey brought Rousseau and Jefferson's ideas in time through his pragmatic vision. Likewise, the Scottish Enlightenment and its emphasis on a measured analysis of human nature that continued on through Adams, Madison, and Hamilton, will be examined within Niebuhr's Christian realism. However, though Pragmatism and Christian realism may be continuations of these philosophies, the experiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that generated these new philosophies that will be next discussed.



# History, Religion and Politics in Pragmatism and Christian Realism

## 2.0.0 Freedom, Equality, and Religion in Pragmatism and Christian Realism

Finding America's unique intellectual voice was a challenging feat given the very large scholarly shadow cast by the thinkers and *philosophes* of Europe during the Enlightenment. Those who would debate that Pragmatism is "the distinctively American philosophy" ironically forget to approach Pragmatism's history from an actual pragmatic point of view (Mounce, *Two Pragmatisms* Introduction). In spite of it being a philosophy which "arose in America," Pragmatism was nowhere near the pure product of American philosophical ingenuity as some would argue (Mounce, *Two Pragmatisms* Introduction). Instead, Pragmatism was an expression of European philosophy on American soil, and owed much of its metaphysical and intellectual debts to the Old Continent (Shusterman). Though against the grain of some, admitting that Pragmatism was the product of experiences adapted to new situations by no means devalues it, nor does it make it any less "American." Acknowledging Pragmatism's diverse philosophical roots merely adapts a pragmatic approach to its own intellectual historic development through viewing itself as the convergence of various ideas and experiences. Take for example Arnaud Schmitt's argument that even the term "Pragmatism" itself is a borrowed one:

*[Charles] Peirce aurait emprunté à Kant le terme même de pragmatisme ; en effet, le philosophe allemand développe dans La Critique de la raison pure le concept de 'croyance pragmatique,' la seule envisageable pour Peirce. Il est ensuite possible de discerner dans cette combinaison d'empirisme, de faillibilisme et d'anti-essentialisme qu'est le pragmatisme dans sa première mouture diverses influences, que l'on peut certes faire remonter aux sophistes, mais où prédominent celles de l'idéalisme allemand et de l'empirisme britannique. (5)*

Following the creation of the American Republic, there was little groundbreaking political thought or philosophy which defined American intellectualism. Part of this was due to a lack of interest in philosophy. De Tocqueville remarked as such when he stated: "*je pense qu'il n'y a pas, dans le monde civilisé, de pays où l'on s'occupe moins de philosophie qu'aux*

*Etats-Unis*” (*Démocratie II* 9). Scholars throughout America’s history have noted that it was America’s political and legal institutions which helped formulate American political and philosophical thought, rather than any type of metaphysical meditation removed from society.

The noticeable institution for de Tocqueville was the judiciary, due to the particular mentality found within early Americans. De Tocqueville wrote: “*C’est aux Etats-Unis qu’on découvre sans peine combien l’esprit légiste, par ses qualités, et je dirai même par ses défauts, est propre à neutraliser les vices inhérents au gouvernements populaire*” (*Démocratie I* 369). This *esprit légiste* was at the root of the American political psyche, which actually helped foster, develop, and empower a branch of government usually mistrusted and ignored by other, specifically continental European powers: the courts.

In the American legislature, de Tocqueville saw nothing more than aristocrats trying to hold onto their power and prestige through legal procedures and policies. Anytime the general populace would rise up to try and express the desire for a new law, or demand effective political change, the legislative branches would balk at these demands and find refuge within their governmental powers. Consequently, the American courts were endowed with a specific and almost unrivaled power when compared to their European counterparts. De Tocqueville illustrated:

*Lorsque le peuple américain se laisse enivrer par ses passions, ou se livre à l’entraînement de ses idées, les légistes lui font sentir un frein presque invisible qui le modère et l’arrête. A ses instincts démocratiques, ils opposent secrètement leurs penchants aristocratiques ; à son amour de la nouveauté, leur respect superstitieux de ce qui est ancien ; à l’immensité de ses desseins, leurs vues étroites ; à son mépris des règles, leur goût des formes ; et à sa fougue, leur habitude de procéder avec lenteur. (Démocratie I 369)*

Thus, in order to express their political needs and desires against the seemingly reactionary influences of the legislative, the people found another viable source of power.

It was the courts, and specifically the Supreme Court, which seemed to hold the greatest control for de Tocqueville, most notably due to the power of judicial review to determine the constitutionality of the law. He commented that the authority of the Court, and to a greater extent the “*esprit légiste*,” were so prevalent that de Tocqueville proclaimed: “[i]l n’est presque pas de question politique, aux Etats-Unis, qui ne resolve tôt ou tard en question judiciaire” (*Démocratie I* 370).

There is a paradox in American political philosophy however: it is supposed to be a democratic government in which “the people” are sovereign, yet at the same time, the political reality was one in which a group of non-elected, elitist judges, the Supreme Court, and judicial review had the most impact on public policy. Shklar acknowledged this paradox:

[The Supreme Court] is an institution which is obviously irreconcilable with democracy, but results from the conjunction of the three following facts: legal traditions inherited from the Colonial and Revolutionary period, distrust of any government, and a democracy which had little confidence in itself. This convergence has given to the United States two sovereigns, the people and the Supreme Court. (113)

The contradiction of having two sovereign powers should be immediately noticed, as it is contrary to the very definition of sovereignty. Once more than one sovereign power is introduced, neither the former, nor the newly established, are actually sovereign. They are instead a cooperative of sorts.

Conflicts were thus resolved pluralistically via multiple procedures and methods. Any struggles that took place reflected America’s notion of freedom and equality; two concepts which took on different dimensions in the United States when compared with the classic European comprehension of these dichotomies. It was the “complicated situation” of the American idea of freedom and equality that gave the United States its unique philosophical approach (Shklar 113). Constantly redefining these notions was one of the goals of two of America’s major philosophical contributions, namely Pragmatism and Christian realism.

As previously stated, Pragmatism is considered to be an authentically American philosophy because it was an intellectual “export” compared to other philosophies, which had always been imports (Mounce, *Two Pragmatisms* Introduction). Pragmatism was not the first philosophical experiment that America dabbled in. Mounce described three major philosophical “periods.” The first period was one in which Christianity, specifically “its Calvinist form” attempted to come to terms with European scientific breakthroughs while maintaining universal truths in Calvinism. The second period was “dominated by the Transcendentalists” (Mounce, *Two Pragmatisms* Introduction). The reason why these were not “authentically” American philosophies was that they were dependent upon or modifications of previously existing European thought. Because they did not organically “grow” out of the American continent and were simply American versions of European philosophies, they did not merit being “distinctively” American.



There are two problems with Mounce's classification. The first has already been discussed regarding his misconceptions of Pragmatism's "American-ness." As demonstrated earlier through the various Enlightenment thinkers, Pragmatism was influenced as much by other European philosophies as anything else. In it, traces of Kant, empiricism and anti-essentialism can all be found, all of which had European and Classical roots. Mounce's rejection of anterior influences actually highlights the other major problem with his arguments. He either completely excluded, or otherwise ignored, one of Pragmatism's foundational principles: interconnectivity. Within most branches of Pragmatism, ideas and philosophical movements are as much a result of previous experience, as of ideas. Therefore, to suggest that Pragmatism is "distinctively" American because it stemmed out of America misses the point entirely by turning a blind eye of the events, ideas, or philosophies that led up to Pragmatism's creation. It is the equivalent of suggesting that the Enlightenment(s) was/were the product(s) of one particular country or person.

Adhering to a pragmatic approach to intellectual history, this research includes Christian realism alongside Pragmatism as being a uniquely "American" philosophical tradition. Though Niebuhr was the son of German immigrants and therefore received first hand European influences, Christian realism was able to emerge because of this. If Pragmatism is accepted as being "uniquely" American in spite of several European influences as authors such as Shusterman and Schmitt have demonstrated, then Christian realism should hold an equivalent status. It is not the intellectual or philosophical roots that define a movement's "citizenship," it is how it is used within the context of the moment or location. The "Americanness" of Niebuhr's Christian realism therefore lies within its ability to take a mixture of Classical, Enlightenment, Christian, and political philosophies whilst attempting to apply them to the problems that America, and to a certain extent, the West, were confronted with.

Granted, some of the approaches and ideas Niebuhr proposed had a certain pragmatic ring to them, indicating that Christian realism is indeed linked with Pragmatism. This does not, however, contradict the argument that Christian realism is as American as Pragmatism. On the contrary, if Christian realism is indeed a branch of Pragmatism, which will be discussed later on in this research, then *ipso facto*, it is equally an American philosophy. The Americanness of Christian realism can be demonstrated through two ways. 1) Niebuhr's methodologies in dealing with problems by analyzing, accepting, and using notions of power and conflict of interest in human relations while maintaining a normative standard to judge human behavior, that is Protestant Christianity. 2) Sharing key concepts or qualities deemed to belong to one or more branches of Pragmatism, such as the refusing to adhere to any dogmatic belief or absolute truth in spite of any criticism against Dewey and his understanding of Pragmatism.

A reminder before continuing. The Pragmatism studied for the purpose of this work concentrates on John Dewey's understanding, conception, and defense of it. The lack of consensus amongst pragmatists themselves has made reaching a standard or universal definition of Pragmatism difficult. This challenge dates as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century with James and Peirce, and continued until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with pragmatists like Putnam or Rorty. Authors such as Mounce argue that there are *Two Pragmatisms* on account of James's complete misunderstanding of Peirce's original meaning of the philosophy. This resulted in a complete rupture between the "traditional" Pragmatism of Peirce with James's understanding of it. Adding to this polemic is the epistemology of Pragmatism in which no set dogma or foundational belief can actually be established. With all of this in mind, it was necessary to limit this research to a particular Pragmatism. Thus, any use of Pragmatism or its variants, unless otherwise stated, refers to John Dewey's particular analyses of it. This by no means reduces or detracts from the deep well of other pragmatic theories and philosophies which current exist. On the contrary, in future sections, this work will actually discuss how John Dewey's version of Pragmatism has evolved, in part thanks to Christian realism, to remain relevant in a 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

Within Pragmatism and Christian realism, notions such as liberty, freedom, and the appropriate role of the individual and of society were constantly debated and redefined. For both men, the individual had an active and constant role to play in society in order to improve the situation for both. Though not as fatalistic as de Tocqueville in regard to the power of the people in the face of the legislature, both Pragmatism and Christian realism understood that struggle was always going to be a part of democracy when obtaining any type of justice, equality, or liberty. Similarly, in continuation with the various conflicts of interest and "factions" noted by the Founding Fathers, and commented upon by de Tocqueville and Shklar, both American philosophies realized that any type of "perfection" within society was impossible.

Dewey did not necessarily believe society or even human nature could be perfected, as to believe so would imply some form of eschatology and stagnation. Instead, Dewey and other philosophers belonging to what James T. Kloppenberg labeled the "*via media*" held a particular vision of the world which "avoided fruitless attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable" by trying to find a middle path between natural sciences and religious or spiritual morality. Ultimately, this philosophy was one of a "frank admission of uncertainty" as *via media* philosophers "did not pretend to have solved the problems of social theory" (Kloppenberg 26-27, 413). This was because improvement in society was done via experience and education, two vehicles which were never static and constantly adapting to new situations. With Pragmatism, "perfection" was

equivalent to “stagnation.” For Christian realism on the other hand, “perfection” was always going to be unattainable. Perfection was in God, and God alone; human nature did not allow for perfectibility. The only things it could hope for were approximate justice and relative love.

The next sections will look deeper into these philosophies and examine how they helped shape domestic and foreign policies for the first part of the twentieth century. This will be demonstrated through explaining the principles of both philosophies, as well as how they examined certain social questions and events, such as World War I, religion, and the appropriate role of an individual in society.

### **2.0.1 Pragmatism: American Practicality or Philosophical Wisdom?**

As previously covered, America’s philosophical heritage is a blend of various sources ranging from religious to European metaphysical foundations. However, Pragmatism has been able to escape such an umbrella classification due to the persistent belief in its “American-ness.” Pragmatism enjoys a wide variety of rich intellectual inspiration from Kant and Bacon, to Enlightenment thinkers and 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophy. Though, “American,” Pragmatism does lack certain clarity especially in terms of defining it in any general way. The word itself is imbedded with misconceptions. On the one side, there is the popular sense of the word which means to do something or act in a way that makes the most sense. This is similar to being utilitarian. From a philosophical point of view, Pragmatism breaks away from other philosophies in that it rejects the classic rational conception of thought, i.e., describing reality or finding some universal “truth.” Instead, philosophical Pragmatism chooses to focus on experience, action, and interaction as a means of understanding; that essentially the only “truth” which exists, is that any given “truth” will change over time, because either society’s or a person’s experience will change how it is viewed.

Even when looking at Pragmatism in its “noble” or philosophical analysis, there is still little agreement over what it actually is. Though William James invented pragmatism “as a favor to Charles Peirce” who was the man behind the term and much of the philosophy, the overall consensus on what it meant, or means today to *be* a pragmatist is still in debate. At its conception, even other founders of the Metaphysical Club such as William James, Charles Peirce, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, did not all agree on how this new philosophy would describe or explain reality, and more importantly, experience to others. Matthew Festenstein explains the philosophical differences between the founders, adding John Dewey into the mix, as perhaps Pragmatism’s most famous legacy and most oft-cited name with the philosophy.

Equally highlighting the differences between not only the intellectual founders of Pragmatism but the evolution of its philosophy, Festenstein argued:

There is a case for opposing Peirce and Dewey to the more individualist and nominalist James. There is also an argument for distinguishing Peirce from James and Dewey, since the latter two lacked Peirce's interest in establishing the reality of conceptions by reference to what emerged 'at the end of inquiry' and sought to tie the fixation of belief rather more closely to present human needs and interest than Peirce believed was intelligible. [...] ...there is no accepted understanding of the 'two schools' pedigree of pragmatism either. The difficulties multiply when the net is cast more widely, in order to include (for example) Mead, Lewis, Rorty, Nelson Goodman or Sidney Hook. (3)

Menand attempts to synthesize some form of comprehension or understanding of Pragmatism by stating it was "an account of the way people think- the way they come up with ideas form beliefs, and reach decisions" (351). At first glance, this may appear to describe any and all philosophy at once, seeing it is often thought of as one form of thinking. However, Menand uses a specific word that differentiates Pragmatism from other philosophies: *how*. Pragmatism is a *process*, not just some metaphysical reflection on the world; the world interacts with the subject thereby creating the process of how. Whether it is deciding on what to have for dinner or whether a person is guilty or not beyond a reasonable doubt, a pragmatic approach calls for deliberation on the specific circumstances, otherwise known as thinking; and though personal taste and impersonal judgment are not the same on an ethical or philosophical level, both require a certain level of consideration (Menand 351-353). This differs from other philosophies which start from a given ideological conception of reality or the world. These approaches then try to base conclusions on the established ideology, then try to force reality or society to fit into the ready-made ideology's arguments.

Why though, did Pragmatism's founders view the world through such different metaphysical lenses? Common explanations such as religious upbringing, class background, or family lives do not apply to all of its founders, as they all came from different backgrounds, each having different life experiences. Major factors in Pragmatism's development are potentially linked to two pivotal historic events; one in American history, the other in world history. These events, which each had profound effects domestically as well as abroad, were the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

## 2.0.2 The First Modern War: Creation of the Non-Ideology Ideology

Considered to be the “first modern war” by many historians, including Steven Dutch, the US Civil War not only profoundly changed the makeup of the American landscape, it also had unforeseen influences on the next century of American economic, social and political development (Dutch; Menand). Bloody, violent and costly, the immediate aftermath of the war was almost as devastating politically, culturally, and financially as the actual war itself. What was “remarkable” was how after the war, the United States went through no change in government or regime. Instead, it maintained the very “system of government that had been established at the nation’s founding” (Menand ix). Louis Menand offered a realist analysis of congressional actions during the war, offering that even with war raging across the continent, the Union Congress was still extremely active, passing laws, supporting science and research, establishing national taxation systems, and with the Confederacy’s defeat, making the Republicans a national force. Of course, this “validation” was illusory if one considers the realities that in classic, as well as modern democracies, citizens are supposed to *avoid* violent conflict, especially with one another. For some, “[...] the Civil War was a terrible and traumatic experience. It tore a hole in their lives. To some of them, the war seemed not just a failure of democracy, but a failure of culture, a failure of ideas” (xi-xii).

This “failure of ideas” led to some deep soul searching, including several cultural and psychological existential crises. Adding to the conundrum was the human cost of the war. Yes, the institution of slavery had been abolished, but those were not the only drastic changes to sweep over the country. American intellectuals, of all creeds and regional affiliations were lost as well. America did not recover from this loss until nearly half a century later when new cultures could replace them, new “ideas, and a way of thinking” (Menand x). It was from the torn and scarred remains of the American psychological, cultural, and political landscape that Pragmatism would emerge.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Associate Justice on the US Supreme Court (1902-1932) and legal scholar, was best known as being a staunch proponent of civil liberties, even if not for classic or typical reasons.<sup>30</sup> This should not, however, undermine Holmes’s influence within

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<sup>30</sup> Whereas it may be thought that Holmes fought for civil liberties of laborers or pacifists because he agreed with their ideology or argument, the fact of the matter is that Holmes often disagreed with the both. He defended their civil liberties simply because “the key to Holmes’s civil liberties opinions is the key to all his jurisprudence: it is that he thought only in terms of aggregate social forces he had no concern for the individual” (Menand 65).

general Pragmatism as his legal philosophy, developed in the still-used publication *The Common Law*, was paramount in analyzing law and jurisprudence via Pragmatism.

Holmes's legal philosophy was a direct result of the horrors of the Civil War

[...] although he read almost every other kind of book imaginable, he could not bear to read histories of the Civil War. He rarely mentioned the issues that had been the reason for the fighting or expressed a political opinion about the outcome. The war had burned a hole, so to speak in his life. [...] The lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence. (Menand 61)

For Holmes, it was the belief in certitude, or to go even further, in ideology, that had led to so much death and destruction. This skepticism of any deeply held belief, would spill into other pragmatist philosophers. William James, for example, found other means to explore the fluidity of belief, not necessarily through the horrors of the Civil War as he had been too young to serve, but through metaphysical existential crises which led him to the writings of Charles Renouvier, a French Protestant who wrote extensively on freedom and more importantly on human being's inherent free will (Viney 30).

Though not stemming from the same root, both Holmes and James agreed on the banality of certitude. The only thing certain was that nothing was. That is, until a given belief could be tested, tried, and results seen. Refusal to acknowledge any potential weaknesses in ideology or certitude was not merely due to man's stubbornness, but as Holmes had seen, in wrong or powerful hands, it could lead to massive violence. Even with small arguments or debates, failure to back down from one's convictions would inevitably lead to some form of violent outburst as one party or the other would feel the need to defend his/her opinions. It should be noted here that Holmes by no means felt that total and utter pacifism should be the aim; that "he, too, was capable of taking up arms in the name of what he thought was right" (Menand 63).

In a letter written to his friend Harold Laski, Holmes defended his reasoning for eventually taking up violence. Holmes wrote

You respect the rights of man - I don't, except those things a given crowd will fight for- which vary from religion to the price of a glass of beer. I also would fight for some things – but instead of saying that they ought to be I merely say they are part of the kind of world that I like- or should like. (qtd. in Menand 63)

It is interesting to note Holmes's jurisprudence and legal Pragmatism, which seeped through his philosophy on appropriate use of violence in defense of one's beliefs. On the one hand, violence could not serve a simple individual end, and thus, had to be for some social benefit; something people would rally behind. Secondly, Holmes denied any pretense of appealing to some higher authority or ideology. He acknowledged that part of the reason for wanting to fight for something is also linked to self-interest. It should be clarified though that this self-interest is not the full driving factor, Holmes simply stated that self-interest is only a factor. The primary reason for fighting remains the *social need*; would a given conflict bring about a social benefit, and would there actually be enough people to support the conflict? If either answer were no, then conflict was to be avoided.

### **2.1.0 An Evolutionary Revolution**

Another influence on Pragmatism which was not as bloody, but no less important was the work of Charles Darwin, especially when considering not only the scientific language used to analyze philosophy, but also pragmatists' near reverence for experience, results, and the scientific method. Even Holmes's judicial philosophy highlighted this admiration when he stated, "the life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience" (Holmes 1). Law was no longer a lofty profession based on rhetoric or values such as Justice or Truth; rather it lay on the individual case, on given circumstances, due to the fact that the law did not serve to regulate the heavens but society. As such, because of its overall objective in society to obtain results and work within given circumstances, the law was therefore mutable and could adapt.

Darwin's findings equally shook other disciplines down to their core. Theological and philosophical thinkers had to suddenly come to terms with a natural or scientific understanding not of just the world, but of the origin of man. It seemed that Darwin took the divine spark out of humanity, turning it instead into a part of nature, and subject to its environment as any other creature would be. These revelations, however, did not stop people from twisting Darwin's message, even amongst his supporters. The popular understanding of natural selection still had a certain metaphysical or supernatural ring to it, indicating some higher intelligence that was behind everything, an image seemingly vindicating the Free Mason concept of the Great Architect. However,

Darwin regretted that the word 'selection' suggested an intention: natural selection is a blind process, because the conditions to which the organism must

adapt in order to survive are never the same. [...] [Darwin] thought that variations occur by chance, and that chance determines their adaptive utility. [...] The ‘selection’ of favorable characteristics is therefore neither designed nor progressive. No intelligence, divine or otherwise, determines in advance the relative value of individual variations, and there is no ideal type of ‘finch’ or essence of ‘finchness,’ toward which adaptive changes are leading. (Menand 122)

Understanding Darwin’s true message was even more dangerous as it was more than just trying to explain the origin of human life. It meant that the dominance of the species was not the work of some Divine creator. It was instead the results of pure happenstance.

If this chance encounter drove some theologians and philosophers into metaphysical panic, for pragmatists, it was the start of a new way to view the world; more importantly the human world and the social world. What could be taken from Darwin’s findings within philosophy and the social sciences was not a rejection of either discipline, but clarification on how to better study them. Another way to look at Darwin’s theory of evolution was to observe that the environment and subject were not two separate entities, but were intertwined, one affecting the other, in this case, the environment influencing the finch population. Philosophy, for pragmatists, erred in the past due to its strict dialectics, i.e. mind/body, physical/ethereal, lower/higher self, etc. Darwin could physically show that such an approach was erroneous, but at least it laid the groundwork for some of Pragmatism’s ideas.

Holmes’s legal philosophy was not the only one Darwin influenced; William James’s general philosophical understanding of the world also underwent an “evolutionary” change. Darwin’s findings gave James new philosophical hope as it implied a new point of view on essence and the nature of things. Skrupskelis summarizes James’s position in the preface to a previously unpublished letter from James to Darwin’s son when he puts forth, “as in the nature of things there is no rightness or wrongness, so apart from knowers, in the nature of things there are no essential properties” (748). This letter was in response to Francis Ellingwood Abbot’s (1855-1903), who believed that in spite of Darwin’s findings with which he agreed, the randomness of natural selection was only random to human perception; that essentially some higher “design” or “plan” existed. Such a hypothesis for James and other pragmatists was an unresolvable paradox between Darwin’s actual theory and theological speculation.

Darwin demonstrated that there was no Divine hand guiding any organism. Instead, all organisms essentially, were at the same time the by-product of and the self-realized result of interacting environments. Generalizing Darwin’s influence on James, Skrupskelis says “the



importance for James of the Darwinian outlook with its rejection of abstractions and its emphasis on the activities of concrete organisms is evident without detailed analysis” (749). This “rejection” was clearly seen in James’s letter to William Erasmus Darwin when he states that “there *is* not one rightness for this creature and another for that” (750). His reference to “rightness” was speaking about the anthropocentric tendencies of philosophers and theologians who asserted that there was some form of hierarchy within nature. This anthropocentrism was expressed via the complexity of organisms where a more complex organism was considered “better” than a less complex organism. Such an approach ignored the environment or other factors which can make up that creature’s something-ness. Taking what he considered to be Darwin’s point of view, James criticized Abbot’s arguments, by comparing a rabbit and a lion, arguing that use of any universal standard for the two creatures would be absurd. James maintained,

Now I take it that your father meant to protest against this ideal of a perfection equally binding on all types of creature, no matter what their physiological differences. It was something far too abstract for his mind, accustomed as it was to consider concrete things in the plenitude of their peculiarities and with all the consequences thereof. For him the virtue of the rabbit could not with any kind of sense be measured by the same ‘objective’ standard as that of the lion. The phrase is meaningless; virtue can’t swing in vacuo, - it is relative to the facts of life. (qtd. in Skrupskelis 750)

Otherwise put, Darwinism meant for James, that all understanding, whether within the natural sciences or when studying philosophy was a matter of relation; relationship to the environment or circumstances, otherwise known as “the facts of life.”

Though Holmes and James demonstrated their own personal reflections on Darwin’s influence via their respective legal and metaphysical philosophies, John Dewey actually wrote an essay on Darwin’s general influence on philosophy in a collection entitled *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy: And Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*. The initial essay was published upon the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Origin*’s publication. Although never mentioning Pragmatism specifically, Dewey’s pragmatic philosophies permeated his analyses. Dewey noted that *Origin* “introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion” (*Darwinism* 2). Right from the beginning, Dewey’s Pragmatism was evident in that the logic of knowledge was by no means separated from other disciplines; there is no classic epistemology. For Dewey,

“knowledge” was loyal to no one particular field; thus, what affected knowledge, affected all disciplines.

Contrary to popular belief, the controversy surrounding Darwinism was not founded within the religious community but originated within the scientific and philosophical ones (*Darwinism* 3). Previous scientific discoveries acknowledged some sort of predestined order, which in almost mechanical terms, provided some semblance of control and planning. Thus, the findings were “extended to nature” in that “She does nothing in vain; but all for ulterior purposes” (*Darwinism* 10). Not only did Nature provide order, but also meaning, in that within these natural works there was some form of unmeasurable essence which existed, “bring[ing] about a subordination of matter and sense to its own realization, and this ultimate fulfillment is the goal of nature and of man” (*Darwinism* 10).

Darwinism cut away this idealized vision of the universe by revealing that nature was random. No longer could humanity “shift a burden of responsibility” of its own actions upon the “shoulders of the transcendent cause” i.e. God, or the supernatural (*Darwinism* 17). For Dewey, this classic approach within science and philosophy simply opened the door to dialectic divisions which was something he viewed as counterproductive as it created false opposition. Darwinism forced philosophy to take on the pragmatic approach of experimenting with hypotheses; to study, analyze and interpret ideas and findings. In forcing science and philosophy back down to Earth and recognizing the limits of each, both became humbler, and more modest. This modesty would actually create a better philosophy because it would make a “philosophy that humbles its pretensions to the work of projecting hypotheses for the education and conduct of mind, individual and social [...]” (*Darwinism* 18). This newfound responsibility within philosophy aided through a scientific approach of hypotheses and testing was for Dewey the true revolution of Darwinism on philosophy.

### **2.1.1 Political Pragmatism: The Individual and Society**

Though Pragmatism is “usually described as a philosophy of evolutionary learning,” in a political context, Pragmatism refers to the relationship between society and individual (Ansell 5). The classic dichotomy between individual and society has been at the forefront of political theory since human beings formed communities. The question was always finding the appropriate relationship between the needs of the individual versus those of society. Resolving this dichotomy usually focused on trying to find an appropriate relationship between the needs of the former versus the needs of latter. Of course, what was “appropriate” was very much dependent on the given period, with some societies prioritizing service to the State over

individual liberties or rights. In Ancient Greece for example, Plato argued in Book Six of *The Republic* that a person should be bound to a certain place in life based on their essence and that their inner self was best used when used for the benefit of the City-State. In such a society, the ruling class, the Philosopher-Kings, were the only ones to have the “essence” to rule and see the objective interests of the State.

The importance of serving the needs of the State did not change much throughout classic thought. Roman political thought was based on the needs of Rome over those of individual, with Cicero and Marcus Aurelius praising service to the State through Stoicism. Such State-centered philosophies continued on into the fall of the Roman Empire and well into the Medieval Era. Here, in lieu of an idealized philosopher-king, it was a combination of traditional power forces, such as the monarchy and church. Like Classical thought, Medieval or Scholastic philosophy idealized the stratified relationship between individual and society, each civilization having a hierarchical structure between various classes ultimately leading to the summit of a Divinely chosen leader. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* was probably one of the best examples of this. Hobbes demonstrated that only through total surrender to the State in the form of a monarch could citizens be safe. This relationship did not really change until the Enlightenment, as was viewed earlier, and its questioning of traditions, specifically those of societal roles. Instead of a strict hierarchy between classes, Enlightenment thinkers felt that the individual was not merely at the service of society, but that society could potentially be at the service of the individual.

Dewey’s approach to the question was different from classic or other modern thinkers. He refused to see the society and individual in contrasting opposition, and above all refused to think of the relationship between the individual and society as atomic in nature, wherein each individual is his/her own atom. Instead, Dewey took on a more “organic” vision of society, thanks to influences from Green and Hobhouse in which everything was social (language, education, and relationships) thereby allowing the State to have a larger role in societal affairs (Audier 18). It was not one in constant struggle or combat with the other. Instead, it was a symbiotic relationship where one influenced the other. To handle the dichotomies of the world that Dewey constantly came up against, Christopher Ansell analyzed three “approaches” to dealing with this dualism. First, was “transaction” or the interdisciplinary approach that Dewey held which argued that all boundaries between disciplines and fields were illusionary. Secondly, was mediation, in which two opposing parties have an independent third party of some kind to intervene and find a solution between the opposing views. Finally, Ansell reasoned that Pragmatism sought to dissolve the dichotomy often encountered via the pairing of meaning in action. In other words, a person only learns through action, not necessarily through philosophical or historic analysis (9-10). This last part was the most Deweyan approach as it

called for a participatory and dynamic democracy, one in which an informed public would be able to interact and positively influence society. Of course, an easy criticism of this approach is that it is ironically not practical given that such a method of governance with large populations or large States with various social groups and varying interests would be extremely difficult.

Even when faced with these criticisms, Dewey and his supporters said that experimental democracy could happen, but only if the supporting institutions within a given society functioned correctly at creating an informed public. For pragmatists, such as Dewey, public institutions were more than monolithic and omnipotent representations of State power taken form. Instead, they could be meeting places between meaning and experience, or the actual playground where citizens could learn through action, where

an institution can be both a cultural framework *and* a technology and it is this Janus-faced perspective that makes institutions good candidates for evolutionary learning. As cultural frameworks, institutions sustain and accumulate meaning; as technologies, they are used to address concrete problems. Potentially, they sustain and accumulate the lessons from past problem solving while subjecting those lessons to the test of contemporary problems. (Ansell 23)

This pragmatic understanding of institutions is important because it personifies them, not to the extent of the Leviathan, but rather as an extension of the private sphere into the public. This concept is something which tries to ultimately close the gap between subject and object, resolving the dichotomy.

One of Dewey's works, *The Public and Its Problems* discussed this constant struggle between the individual and society. The major difference between Dewey's analysis and other philosophers was how the State came to be. Unlike Enlightenment thinkers who conceptualized the State as a result of the "General Will" as in Rousseau, or the realization of some social contract as in Locke, Dewey understood that the State was the result of various and immeasurable interactions between actors and activities (*Public* 39). Dewey went on further reanalyze the very nature of the Public itself.

### **2.2.0 Democracy and the State: Model versus Reality**

Whereas classic democratic political theory views the government led and ruled "by the people," Dewey dismissed this and instead argued that the "people" take shape in terms of majorities and these majorities simply show support or oppose a given political idea or party

(*Public* 61). This reality implied that rather than having a government “for the people” and “by the people,” there was a technocratic order of elites who, at a given time, either face the support or opposition of the majority. Instead, a “Deweyan democracy [...] was an elusive thing to describe in positive terms” as it “[...] must involve the active and interested participation of every American on terms of free, open, and equal communication” (Ryan 217).

Never one to accept the classic elite theories advanced by Pareto, Aron, or others of this school of thought in which all governments, regardless of democratic ideology, were governed by a small handful of elites (Pareto) or who represent various interests within society (Aron), Dewey sought to understand how the changing global world could shed light on the classic struggle between the individual and society, otherwise known as the private and public spheres.

To understand how this happened, Dewey went back to the philosophical question of how the State, or Public Sphere came into being. According to Dewey:

We are not concerned, however, with writing either a cyclopedia or history of political doctrines. So we pause with these arbitrary illustrations of the proposition that little common ground has been discovered between factual phenomena of political behavior and the interpretation of the meaning of these phenomena. One way out of this impasse is to consign the whole matter of meaning and interpretation to political philosophy as distinguished from political science. Then it can be pointed out that the futile speculation is companion of all philosophy. The moral is to drop all doctrines of this kind overboard, and stick to facts verifiably ascertained. (*Public* 5).

Thus, debating any philosophical state of nature or state of war was a waste of time as nothing could be proved or verified.

Instead, Dewey proposed looking at the State, or Public Sphere, for what it actually was. He proposed several ways to view it, and this was very much dependent upon the value judgments of whom was being asked. For example, the State could be seen as socialized life in harmony to the highest degree. Looking from a different perspective, the State could also be viewed as nothing more than a combination of numerous social institutions. On the other hand, the State could just serve the more classic and authoritarian role assigned during scholastic and medieval thought: organized oppression or as simply an instrument to prevent people from fighting with one another through imposed order (*Public* ch. 1).

Ultimately, Dewey’s biggest criticism against social contract theorists was looking for a rule of causality rather than a rule of consequence (*Public* 12). In other words, classic political

philosophy viewed the State as an independent and almost monolithic creation. Separated from the parts making up the whole, classic political theory ignored the consequences of human action and its influence on the State's very creation. Extending from classic Pragmatism in which boundaries were illusory, Dewey argued that the standard conception of the State ignored the interconnectivity between public and private. What Dewey claimed essentially was that the Public and Private could not be separated, as each influenced the other. All interaction, be it between two individuals, or between groups and the State were, and are by nature social.

Also, contrary to traditional political theorists, Dewey's notion of the State was not finite. For classic theorists, once the State was created, it was created and save severe internal (revolution/civil war) or external (invasive wars, economic treaties) forces, the State never changed. Dewey fought for a different understanding, one in which it is constantly and regularly analyzed. He maintained:

By its very nature, a state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made. Thus the problem of discovering the state is not a problem of theoretical inquirers engaged solely in surveying institutions which already exist. It is a practical problem of human beings living in association with one another, of mankind generically. It is a complex problem. It demands power to perceive and recognize the consequences of the behavior of individuals joined in groups and to trace them to their source and origin. (*Public* 31-32)

Dewey used the comparison between the State and the Public to highlight the necessity of analyzing the State for what it is, as well as analyzing it from its own historic reality. Doing so, he discovered that the State was the organization of the public done via civil servants looking to protect shared interests amongst its members. The Public, however, existed when these civil servants do their job efficiently (*Public* 33).

Continuing his political Pragmatism, Dewey claimed that the creation of the State, or more precisely, the evolution of the State, had to be an experimental process; that the State must always be "rediscovered" (*Public* 33-34). Such a statement is unsurprising given general Pragmatism's esteem for the natural sciences and the scientific method as well as Dewey's own belief that political science and any analysis of the State should be done similarly to that of the natural sciences exploring their fields.

Studying the interactions between the public and private spheres was the only accurate way to understand the State as it came into being. Dewey acknowledged that though there was no

universal model for it, there nevertheless was a universal understanding of the State. Hence, regardless of how monarchies differ from democracies, or totalitarian States differ from authoritarian ones, the concept of the State as the archetypical entity continued within philosophy and political science (*Public* 45). What is interesting, however, was Dewey's sweeping and harsh criticism of not only this conception of the State, but essentially of modern political philosophy. He lambasted:

In spite of the fact that diversity of political forms rather than uniformity is the rule, belief in *the* state as archetypal entity persists in political philosophy and science. [...] The idea that there is a model pattern which makes a state a *good* or true state has affected practice as well as theory. It, more than anything else, is responsible for the effort to form constitutions offhand and impose them ready-made on peoples. [...] The attempt to find by the 'comparative method' structures which are common to antique and modern, to occidental and oriental states, has involved a great waste of industry. (*Public* 45-47)

These are substantial criticisms of comparative politics, a branch of political philosophy that has existed since Ancient Greece. This subdivision typically seeks, in part to answer some of the very questions that Dewey thinks philosophers were wasting their time on. Instead, Dewey claimed that discussing the diversity of existing State models did not come from innate "State-ness" which suddenly appeared. Instead, each state was an adaptation to the interactions, which in turn express the needs and desires of a public, between individuals, institutions, and other actors. Or to put it otherwise, a State-model comes into existence as a result of the interactions between the public and private spheres. However, Dewey was careful not to claim that such an analysis or understanding was without problems or without its methodological traps.

He highlighted these potential problems and issues by looking at modern Western liberal democracies. In theory, these governments are run by a class of representatives who are supposed to support or protect the "public interest." The problem though is that there is not just one "public." In fact, States are made up of various "publics." In order to understand how these different publics would often have various interests of their own, sometimes in contradiction with one another, Dewey argued that in order for a democracy to truly work, it had to be more than a simple system of government, it also had to be a "community" (*Public* 142).

For Dewey, this social conception of democracy was an idea that was larger and more complete than any particular democracy currently in existence. It encompassed every aspect of human life by influencing and affecting the truly social nature of human beings. A true

democracy was one in which family, school, industry, religion, etc., were all influenced, raised, and taught with this notion of democracy. This approach would make political institutions nothing more than mechanisms for obtaining the goals and interests of this newly democratic society serving, above all, the community (*Public* 146). In order to obtain this great community in which a true sense of democracy could develop, society needed to improve its methods of communication. Dewey reasoned how “[...] the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action. (*Public* 155). Dewey explained that bringing about these improvements, primarily through two means: 1) an individual had to be equipped with the necessary intelligence required to make informed decisions. 2) There should be universal suffrage, frequent elections of civil servants, and a rule of majority which would guarantee responsibility from those elected.

Though Dewey’s analyses are interesting and thought-provoking, they are not devoid of criticism. On the one hand, his use of the term “democracy” throughout many of his works was varied, with the only common point between them being how democracy needed to be more than a type of government. It should instead, be a way of life. Similarly, Dewey’s understanding of democracy overlooks the varying interest groups and factions seriously into consideration. In its place, Dewey apparently offered little more than glorified conflict resolution as a means to resolve any dispute between these groups. He ignores, or gives the impression of being unaware that there simply are certain issues where there is no middle ground or consensus.

Theoretically and institutionally, his arguments for a social democracy seem almost omnipresent and omnipotent as if they were a sort of catch-all for society’s problems. Essentially, the solution to democracy’s problem according to Dewey, was more democracy. Similarly, the idea that improving methods of communication between both the public and private spheres begs the questions: what type of information? Through which means? Who determines what the “correct” information is? The increase of diversified information means plurality in ideas, but it also means contradictory ideas.

Institutionally speaking, his ideas on improving current democracies are, in theory, already in place. Someone of voting age is supposed to be intelligent enough to make rational political decisions. However, what Dewey forgot was that an individual can be informed, but will often decide based on his or her own personal interest, not necessarily for the greater good or for the “public.” Secondly, modern democracies, even from his period, all had universal suffrage, frequent elections, and were supposed to guarantee responsibility from those elected. Did he mean that children should be able to vote? Elections every year? What method does he envisage as a way of ensuring that leaders are responsible?



These are important criticisms, and ones often levied by his detractors. Nevertheless, Dewey was on to something when he discussed that democracy needed to be more than just a type of government; it needed to be, if not perhaps a “way of life,” then perhaps a new means by which to understand the world. For Dewey, the best means of achieving a democratic culture was to insert democracy within society’s most fundamental institution: education.

### **2.2.1 Democratic School Reform: Education and Democracy**

It is no surprise that Dewey devoted much of his life to education and its influence within democracy given his pragmatist attitudes. Dewey understood that in order to have the democracy a society deserved, its citizens needed to be educated. However, this education was not in the scholastic or traditional sense of simply memorizing dates, figures, or other facts. Education was supposed to be based on experimental reform, one in which the pupil would learn through practice, rather than abstract theory. Ultimately, “at the center of Dewey’s social and political philosophy [was] an ethical account of individual self-realization through participation in a concrete form of life” (Festenstein 46). Essentially, what was good for the individual was good for society. The way to best understand and achieve this was through proper education in a democratic culture in which a society exercised the open sharing of ideas and experience as the forefront of pedagogical practice.

Dewey’s analysis of school in democracy was based upon his own frustrations with modern philosophy and pedagogy. He was convinced that the philosophical epistemology that divided the world into opposing dichotomies was to blame for a lot of society’s problems, especially within education. In the school, it was perhaps seen most easily as students are taught theoretical maxims that have little to do with practical or real-world incidents (Westbrook 96). In his work, *The School and Society* Dewey discussed the old family unit as the primary transmitter of any and all information, including what would now be considered as vocational skills (woodwork, metal work, sewing etc.). He faulted modern society for treating these subjects as disciplines, rather than seeing their social interest as well as their societal function. He argued,

We must conceive of [these vocations] in their social significance, as types of the processes by which society keeps itself going, as agencies for bringing home to the child some of the primal necessities of community life, and as ways in which these needs have been met by the growing insight and ingenuity of man; in short, as instrumentalities through which the school itself shall be made a

genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart to which to learn lessons. (*School 9*)

Thus, school did not serve the simple purpose of creating automatons, instead, school was supposed to be a place where the interactions of ideas as well as skills contributed to the growth of the community for “[t]he goal of education [...] must be to assist children in exercising their natural capacities by placing them in situations where their minds are put to work, not filled with data” (Kloppenber 374).

In typical liberal mentality, Dewey put the school as a whole at the center of not only improving democratic culture, but as the institution through which “children shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man” (*School 13*). Part of the problem in achieving such realization, however, was the current system’s division of a “cultured” elite and workers, or as Dewey would say “the separation of theory and practice” (*School 19*). Modern education had been broken down into two almost opposing camps. On the one hand, there was classic liberal education in which the humanities, social, and natural sciences composed the primary material taught. On the other, there were vocational programs which train carpenters, plumbers, electricians, or other skills viewed as solely vocational. What this division did, according to Dewey, was actually play out in society via social and class distinctions between what would be considered “white collar” and “blue collar” professions. Thus, for Dewey in order to rectify the various problems modern education had wrought, the very system needed to undergo a huge revolution. One in which the traditional barriers between “liberal” and “vocational” educations were removed, and instead appreciated for their social importance. Not shy to discuss the systematic issues facing schools, Dewey argued substantially for the reduction of waste in public school formats. The biggest waste seen by Dewey was from the perspective of the child: “From the standpoint of the child the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school” (*School 46*). Instead, schools should focus not on creating a particular output or desired “end-student,” rather it should focus on allowing the student to organically adapt to everyday life; that ultimately, there is no hierarchy between what is learned in school and what is learned outside. This “child-first” education model was, and is still misunderstood as it seems to imply that the child is undisciplined, following his or her whim regardless of structure. However, “[d]iscipline was at the heart of Dewey’s vision of fostering intelligence, but it was a radically different sort of discipline. Instead of passing information to mute pupils, he

instructed teachers to engage children's native enthusiasm by connecting learning to life" (Kloppenber 374).

The misunderstanding of Dewey's pedagogy stems from the belief of education being state-run mind-control. For Dewey, experience was adaptive and unique to the individual student, therefore, education should be equally adaptive. The actual political regime also played an important role in protecting students from so-called brainwashing as "[t]here is nothing intrinsically reactionary about education for citizenship, so long as the conception of citizenship is democratic, open-ended, and centered on the dual ideas of voluntary action and community responsibility" (Kloppenber 377). Education could not brainwash, only undemocratic regimes which had a restrictive definition of citizenship and closed to debate could do so.

Aside from the problems fabricated by school and its relation to society, Dewey also pointed out the structural issues within school districts, specifically the issues between the student and what they learn. This dichotomy is best seen in his work *The Child and the Curriculum* in which he argued that one of the main issues in education was opposing the child from the curriculum, or as he saw it, "individual nature vs. social culture" (*School* 104). Rather than letting the child discover or learn through experience, in school "facts [were] torn away from their original place in experience and rearranged with reference to some general principle" (*School* 105). Thus, the student no longer understood the historic or cultural importance of any given memorized fact because the curriculum has removed the social context and relevance.

Institutionally, Dewey remarked that school had four major functions all leading up to the education of the child "as a means of 'social control'" (Westbrook 170). The first function was to provide a simplified environment in which students could learn the necessities without being overburdened with subjects that were too abstract. Secondly, schools had to change their current environment to meet the needs of the students and be selective as to what is actually taught. Third, schools should be an egalitarian haven in which students could "escape" their current socio-economic situation and see fellow classmates as equal citizens within society. Finally, the school cannot be a separate entity which ignores any and all outside influences on the child's education; it should take into consideration community values, religious lessons, family dynamics and other interconnecting factors which would influence the child's education (*Democracy* 19-22).

Of course, improving education in democracy was not simply a question of institutional reform, it also depended on cultural restructuring. Dewey highlighted three eras of education in democratic society. First, as discussed, was the classical age, where society works best when each member of society does what s/he can do best to benefit society. Here, education's purpose was to determine who was good at what skills so the State can optimally benefit from its

citizens. Secondly, Dewey described the so-called “individualistic” ideal of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where Nature was opposed to social organization and education’s goal was to bring out a person’s talent for the sake of personal fulfillment. However, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers were heavily influenced by Plato and classical thought. Consequently, the focus on individual fulfillment still served a social purpose, the latter though being the good of human progress as a whole, ultimately leading to human kind’s liberation from the evils of society. The modern use of education, as has been discussed, comes down to a form of social control. Rather than the benefit of “human kind” as was the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, education’s goal was the improvement or betterment of the State. States essentially used education as a way of social cohesion as well as a method of unification in order to pursue national policy interests (*Democracy* 92-95). Understanding the importance of education on the formation of a given society, Dewey warns against any type of drastic change in educational reform, given that “the conception of education as social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind” (*Democracy* 97).

Establishing this democratic culture via education had to be done through use of multiple sources which should be tapped into including, but not limited to: nature, man, and society. He was moderately cautious about any extreme in pedagogy, whether it was an approach which was too generalized or too specific. He warned that “[...] an attempt to train for too specific a mode of efficiency defeats its own purpose. When the occupation changes its methods, such individuals are left behind with even less ability to readjust themselves than if they had less definite training” (*Democracy* 119). Based on this, Dewey’s ideal education was one in which the student upon completion of his/her degree, could adapt to any given situation. It is important to note here that Deweyan thought claimed that a person never truly stopped learning, as new experiences brought about new lessons. Using a combination of the different sources of education, the student would then be able to meet economic hardships more easily than if the student had been trained in one vocation.

From the perspective of the student, Dewey believed above all, that a teacher’s responsibility was to help him/her achieve his/her maximum personal potential; that essentially a teacher does not have to turn everyone into geniuses. The problems, or rather, paradoxes arose once pedagogy is considered. The student not knowing the material needed to depend on the teacher in order to learn it. The problem, however, was that both, the student and teacher each had their own unique method; one to teach and one to learn. This did not always translate into compatible learning experiences. Dewey maintained that the best way to achieve this goal of maximum potential is to remember that humans learn best through doing, or through shared

experience. Above all, Dewey argued against strictly utilitarian or “ends only” approaches. He cautioned,

Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of specialized cultivated class. The notion that the ‘essentials’ of elementary education are the three R’s mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for the realization of democratic ideals. (*Democracy* 192)

For Dewey, proper education and curriculums took real situations into account. These situations in which the problems of living in society were debated, where “observation and information [were] calculated to develop social insight and interest” (*Democracy* 192).

Not being one to sit by and just idly write about the problems of education in America, Dewey decided to try and put his pedagogical theory to the test by launching the Laboratory School in Chicago where his experimental philosophy would be put to work. After all, failure to actually test his theory would be an insult to his very philosophy as he acknowledged the “necessity of testing thought by action” (Westbrook 95). In this school, emphasis was placed on the children’s firsthand experience where real-world situations and theoretical applications were used to solve problems. The best example of this was actually building model farmhouses or other real-world applications, as doing so would use mathematics, working together, and other social skills. Westbrook summarizes Dewey’s approach when he puts forth:

Providing children with firsthand experience with problematic situations largely of their own making was the key to Dewey’s pedagogy, for he believed that ‘until the emphasis changes to the conditions which make it necessary for the child to take an active share in the personal building up of his own problems and to participate in methods of solving them (even at the expense of experimentation and error) [the] mind is not really freed’. (103)

Focusing on real-world problem solving, as well as the fulfillment of an individual’s full potential were vital in achieving this democratic culture.

Though not long-lasting, Dewey’s Laboratory School was considered successful (Westbrook 105). The reason for this success is often attributed to Dewey’s ability to foster a sense of culture and community within the School. Dewey was essentially able to make the

students realize their school was a part of the community, and therefore, they became more active within both, thereby increasing its democratic culture. Dewey stated that schools

must have a *community* of spirit and end realized through *diversity* of powers and acts. Only in this way can the cooperative spirit involved in the division of labor be substituted for the competitive spirit inevitably developed when a number of persons of the same presumed attainments are working to secure exactly the same result. (qtd. in Westbrook 105)

Though a touching statement, Dewey's philosophy was often viewed as being extremely utopian, as it again ignored the issues of competing interests between a "number of persons."

This utopianism was not limited to Dewey's insistence on cultural democracy, it also overlooked the hard realities of having such experimental education programs nation-wide. It would first involve a significant amount of devotion and work from the teachers involved as said teachers would no longer have a general goal to work with, or standardized criteria of success. Instead s/he would be forced to adapt each class to the particular needs of every student. This would imply extremely small class sizes just due to the sheer natural human limitations of the teachers. Additionally, such sizes would infer, of course, more teachers, and therefore more money. Dewey was fortunate to have benefited from private donors. Similarly, would this new pedagogical approach imply immediate changes to current faculty? Would existing teachers be immediately trained or replaced? Each one of these options comes with its separate set of complications which are too various to list here.

Looking at his numerous works on education, Dewey also ran into some theoretical problems as well. Even Dewey scholars who view him more as a radical figure in American intellectual history admit that there are some holes in Dewey's theory. Robert Westbrook is one of these supporters who, when analyzing *Democracy and Education* admits

what remained absent in the treatment of industrial work in *Democracy and Education* and thereby limited its radicalism was anything resembling a *political* strategy for the redistribution of power Dewey proposed. He remained wedded to moral exhortation as the sole means to ends that required democratic politics. (179)

This criticism regarding Dewey's lack of understanding of political reality, and in a broader sense, the notion of power is quite common. Dewey discussed power specifically in his support of American intervention during World War I, and argued that democracies needed to use it wisely. However, he brushed upon the issue at best, and instead of discussing practical or real use of it to bring about change, he relied on morality and philosophical arguments as justification.

Still, in spite of these criticisms, Dewey's emphasis and "endurance" in the defense of education in democracy cannot be ignored. Even with all of its flaws, Dewey's pedagogy reflected his faith and belief that engendering a democratic culture was the surest way of providing freedom for all:

No other progressive could match the endurance of Dewey's confidence in education as democracy's redeemer. [...] Dewey's vision of democracy focused so clearly on education because he conceived of citizenship in terms of the Greek ideal of *paideia*. Rather than reserving this ideal of personal development for a few superior individuals, however, he believed it could be extended to every member of society. (Kloppenber 393)

Yet, Dewey's inability to consider power in education and democracy was indeed, a major criticism in his thought. This omission is why this concept, and all that is associated with it in political philosophy and political science calls for a transition to the other major subject of this research: Reinhold Niebuhr and specifically his philosophy known as Christian realism. Though Niebuhr agreed with Dewey on many of society's problems, especially when analyzing the definitions of democracy, and more importantly, its implication on society, Niebuhr nevertheless diverged sharply from Dewey when discussing power. Changing perspectives and going from a less-idealized vision of the world, the next section will discuss the Christian realist understanding of power and specifically, its application on interactions within the State.

### **2.3.0 Christian Realism: An Ethical Use of Power?**

One of the questions that preoccupies many philosophers and political scientists is why do societies stay together. This is often broken down, for better or worse, and throughout various structures, into one simple notion: power. The definitions of power, in a political or a philosophical sense, are as varied as definitions of democracy, truth, or justice. Robert A. Dahl acknowledged such difficulty when in his article "The Concept of Power" he lamented that "we

are not likely to produce—certainly not for some considerable time to come—anything like a single, consistent, coherent ‘Theory of Power’” (202). Nevertheless, Dahl affirmed that there is a certain underlying universal truth when it comes to power. He argued that power is when “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (203). Thus for Dahl, power was taking away someone’s ability to choose. For Raymond Aron, power did not necessarily mean taking away one’s choice, rather it was imposing one’s own will or choice upon another. Regardless of the author or the definition, there is always some level of imposition, where someone is coercing, making, or otherwise dictating to another what to do. This imposition can sometimes happen with the consent of the individual, at other times against their will.

This concept is important as it is often associated with the major political paradigm of realism, which dates back to Ancient Greece, if not before. For centuries, realism was more or less the dominant political theory, especially within international relations. The works of Thucydides, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Morgenthau and Kissinger all belong to one branch or another of realism. Each author analyzed the events of their time through the microscope of power.

This paradigm is important to this research in that Niebuhr, though beloved by liberals and progressives, nevertheless accepted and integrated certain aspects and theories of realism into his own political philosophy. This is even more the case when looking at Niebuhr’s analyses of human nature, society, and international relations. Thus, in order to get a better understanding of Niebuhr’s concept of power and his Christian realism, it is best to begin with a general analysis of classic and modern conceptions of realism, so that the similarities and the subtle differences between Niebuhr’s and others can be identified.

### **2.3.1 Human Nature: What It Is and not What It Ought to Be**

If there is a “beginning” of realism in Western political thought, it starts with Thucydides and his work *History of the Peloponnesian War*. George Menake summarized Thucydides as being in opposition to Plato, stating that it was “the work not of a philosopher who wished to guide men according to a vision of the ‘ought’ but a social scientist who took human nature as it is and attempted to describe and explain what he considered recurrent patterns of events” (147). Thucydides understood what would later be modern realism’s basic tenet: that relations, especially between nations, are naturally in a state of anarchy. Comprehending the inherent chaos of human nature which was driven by self-interest, fear and desire for more, the best Thucydides could hope for was “that political forces could be at least sufficiently guided by



intelligent statesmen so as to conserve the security and power of their respective states” (Menake 148).

Perhaps though it is the dialogue in Thucydides’s work which best defines and articulates the classical realist analysis of the world. In this dialogue, Athenian ambassadors attempted to persuade Spartan leaders not to invade and put aside any notions of open aggression. They did so first through an understanding of human nature and power. They also acknowledged that only after these goals were achieved, could other more altruistic notions could enter into relations. They proclaimed that:

We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so- security, honour, and self-interest. [...] It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power...you, too, used to think that we were; but now, after calculating your own interest, you are beginning to talk in terms of right and wrong. [...] Those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nevertheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation. (qtd. in Menake 154)

Thucydides’s Melian dialogue demonstrated this line of thought regarding the necessity of self-interest in politics. Here, the neutral City-State of Melos is visited by the Athenian delegation which hopes to persuade Melos to join them in the war. Melos, using morality and reason attempts to persuade Athens to leave them as neutral since they were not an enemy and there was no need for the Athenians to conquer them. Dismissing the arguments that ultimately the rest of Greece would see Athens as weak for maintaining Melos’s independence, the Melians continue to try and persuade the Athenians not to invade. In the end, Athens conquers Melos, killing all adult males and putting the women and children into slavery, as “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides ch. 17).

For classical realists,<sup>31</sup> the Melian dialogue is one of the best examples of political realism due to the fact that though Melos may have had the moral, religious, and philosophical high-ground, in “real” terms, none of this matter as they very much lost in the end. Thus, the notion

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<sup>31</sup> In most International Studies departments, “classic” realism actually refers to those realists coming in the late 1930s to 1970s. The term “classic” here is used to refer to pre-20<sup>th</sup> century realism or some variation of it.

of power for classical realists was to be understood in natural terms: the strong will always dominate over the weak. Any and all other arguments are secondary since “[r]ealism implies recognition of the limits of purely moral solutions to political problems and calls for attention to the realities that shape social, political, and economic conflicts” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 6).

In modern times, other realist political theorists shared similar views with Thucydides. Two works which best reflected this realist notion were *The Leviathan* from Hobbes and *The Prince* by Machiavelli. In both works, the authors provided not only arguments but the structures necessary to maintain order within the State through the appropriate use of power. Both works, like most, were reflections of their times. Both were written during extreme political strife where chaos and disorder were rampant. Seeing the violence this brought on, both focused on the notion of a strong central State, which authorized use of power to maintain control over the negative aspects of human nature.

Menake considered Hobbes to be the primary intellectual inheritor of Thucydides, especially in regard to this negative view of human nature. Hobbes viewed human nature “[...] and the life of man [as] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (171). Similarly, Hobbes demonstrated one of the first social contract theories which was used to try and explain the origin of the State and society. Contractual theorists would often rely on theoretical hypotheses of what human nature and human activity was like prior to the establishment of any formal or imposed State. They often explained phases of human nature such as the state of nature and the state of war. Depending on the author, these two states could be one in the same. In Hobbes’s case, the State of Nature *was* the State of War, and was best summarized by Hobbes’s famous expression *homo homini lupus* or “man is a wolf to [his fellow] man.”

For Hobbes, human nature defined and best explained these different states. Human beings, according to such an understanding, cannot resist fighting with one another for three reasons: competition, diffidence, and glory (170). These primary aspects of human nature were omnipresent in the State of Nature where everyone was fighting one another due to the individual’s inherent total liberty to do as s/he wished. This freedom was complimented by complete authority to defend against any assault (*Leviathan* ch. 13). The only way to avoid this constant struggle, and constant anxiety about one’s personal security was to escape the State of Nature thus escaping the State of War. In order to do as such, Hobbes argued that a portion of one’s natural liberty had to be surrendered to some higher authority which would choose what was good for the whole. This higher authority would appear as society and the State was expressed through a central power. In exchange for surrendering certain liberties, the authority, or State, would then ensure security and protection of individuals from other citizens who might

rob them of their personal security or possessions. This authority would be the leviathan, named after the gargantuan Biblical creature whose power and might were nearly unstoppable. Hobbes uses this analogy to describe what the State should resemble and how to use its power and might. The State or leviathan would be an entity greater than any one group or social class and would be ruled by a firm hand in the form of a King or other divinely chosen leader.

Politically “evolving” from this draconian conception of power within the State, Machiavelli took a subtler approach to the role of power, moving from the goliath State presence of the leviathan to one in which understanding and exploiting human nature was the primary creed. Machiavelli is most often associated with the idea of the ends justifying the means, summed up in his *Discourses* works, in which it is contended that “[i]t is certainly appropriate to say that although the deed accuses him, its outcome excuses him, and when what is done is good [...] it will always excuse him [...]” (Machiavelli 165). Agreeing with Thucydides and Hobbes on human nature, *The Prince* nevertheless tried to use these negative traits to the benefit of society and the State through the appropriate use of power. Machiavelli arguably demonstrated one of the first modern understandings of political realism in the sense that like Thucydides, Machiavelli saw the State for what it was, not for what it ought to be. Machiavelli nevertheless felt that the State, when properly managed by the wise Prince, could use the self-motivated nature of human beings for the State’s benefit.

*The Prince* is essentially a “how-to” guide to governance. Acting as the faithful advisor, Machiavelli broke down his book into various chapters which touched upon numerous subjects on how a Prince can best use State power to control society, and to a certain extent human nature. His methods were considered so successful and insightful that it coined a phrase after the author. However, when used, it is rarely seen as a compliment. Nevertheless, to be Machiavellian is to have an acute understanding of the darker side of human nature which ultimately can be an understanding to benefit all.

Machiavelli’s *Prince* understood that rulers, or more precisely those using power, could not be confined to normal societal virtues (*virtu*). Instead, these “princes” had to rely on the principle that what was best for the State determined how the prince should rule. Avoiding traditional morality meant that the prince had to consider every action and choice thoroughly, more so than the average citizen. This meant carefully thinking how to elicit support from the populace and whether or not the prince would be loved or feared. This idea was a break from Hobbes as that within the Leviathan, the subjects had no right or desire to revolt since the State’s primary concern was protecting the physical well-being of its citizens. Machiavelli had a “realer” vision of society and the State, acknowledging that the populace’s support could make things easier or more difficult for the ruler depending on the ruler’s personal governing style.

In an oft-cited section of *The Prince*, Machiavelli asked the question of whether or not a ruler should be feared or loved. Though he grasped as to why a ruler would want to be loved, he cautioned against a leader demonstrating too much mercy, otherwise outside influences or forces could take his mercy as a sign of weakness which could create chaos. He even cited various historical leaders who were ruthless and cruel, but ultimately, he stood by the idea that

[this type of ruler] must not mind acquiring a bad reputation for cruelty in order to keep his subjects united and loyal, for, which very few examples of cruelty, he will be more merciful than those who, because of too much mercy, allow disorders to continue, from which spring killing and plundering, for those usually harm the whole community, while the executions that come from the prince just harm particular individuals. (Machiavelli 71)

Such an approach was definitely utilitarian in that it called for a ruler to only take into consideration that which is best for the community.

Returning back to Machiavelli's initial question of whether or not a leader should use his power to be feared or loved, Machiavelli said that ideally, a wise Prince should be both. A prince should be loved for his fairness but feared should his citizens try to revolt or break laws. Machiavelli acknowledged that such a balance was difficult to maintain and that if such a balance was not possible then "it is much safer to be feared than to be loved" (Machiavelli 72). The reason for this sentiment stemmed from Machiavelli's understanding of human nature in which he described men as "[...] ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites and dissemblers, avoiders of dangers, greedy for gain; and while you benefit them, they are entirely yours [...] but when you actually become needy, they turn away" (72). However, in the final analysis, Machiavelli cautioned against a Prince being hated, as that never ended well for the Prince nor the kingdom.

The true Prince for Machiavelli would use his power to manipulate circumstances and more importantly, human nature, which would normally be out of his control or favor. When discussing on how princes should control territories obtained through "Fortune" or other means (*The Prince*, ch. 7), Machiavelli had no qualms about manipulating lower nobles to benefit the newly acquired territory and consequently the ruler him/herself. In an historical anecdote, Machiavelli discussed Mr. Remiro d'Oroco, a man "both cruel and efficient" who was given absolute power to bring in an unruly and recently acquired territory. D'Oroco was vicious not only to his army but to the citizens as well, exercising dictatorial control and terror over his people. Knowing that this would happen, the wise Cesare waited for the grievances and complaints of his newly obtained subjects. Putting forth the sympathetic ear, Cesare told his

subjects that he would handle the situation. Handled it he did for the next morning, Remiro d'Oroco's body was found in the center of the town square in two pieces and with "chopping board and a bloody knife beside it." This sent a strong signal to the locals. On the one hand, the new leader Cesare had taken heed of the townfolks' pleas, on the other, his means of doing so were brutish and severe. Cesare had achieved, through the real and appropriate use of power, what, according to Machiavelli, few leaders could achieve: obtaining the balance between love and fear (Machiavelli, ch. 7).

For most of the Renaissance, and until the Enlightenment, combinations or variations of the aforementioned realisms were popular and used by state governments to maintain control over their citizenry through some use of power, regardless of whether the use of said power was justified or appropriate. Though falling out of fashion throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the advent of political and economic liberalism as mentioned before, realism nevertheless managed to regain some form of foothold in political philosophy in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily following World War I and the advent of the Cold War. It is with this modern realism that Niebuhr and other realists would find some common ground. To understand this connection, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of some of celebrated contemporary realist authors as well as some of their main arguments.

### **2.3.2 Post-War Realism: Balance of Power**

Where modern realism centered on domestic policies and the use of power to maintain control of the local population, post-war and contemporary realism instead focused on the importance of international relations and the role of the State in these relations. Part of the reason for the change in point of view from internal analysis to external analysis, was simply due to the notion of the State itself. No matter what form it took, be it democracy or monarchy, the State was, and remaining within a Weberian framework, the legitimate power which maintained control over a population, through use of violence or coercion.

Internationally however, things were more complicated. There was no international force to govern the actions of States and to prevent them from using violence against one another. Arguably, this situation remains to this day. The roots of contemporary realism are best understood via these basic principles of power and vision of the world. This origin branches off into what David Battistella considers to be the four major propositions of realism. One proposition is that the international structure has no primary authority to govern. This means that the world is in a state of anarchy, where at any point, violence or chaos *could* happen. This state of anarchy is also synonymous with Hobbes State of War in that nothing *truly* prevents

States, the primary actors within realism, from lashing out at others to take what they wish. Secondly, the principle actors within international relations are conflict groups, which since the treaty of Westphalia have been organized as Nation-States, usually assigned to specific geographic areas. Thirdly, States are represented via the leader within the executive branch (as monarch, president, or prime minister) who, on behalf of the State, makes decisions based on maximizing national interests in terms of power in relation to the existing system. Or to put it otherwise, States will do as much as they can do without causing too much trouble. Finally, the only reason why there are not constant large-scale wars on the international level reflects the theory of balance of power. In this, world order is based upon a handful of powerful States maintaining an equitable sharing of power over a territory. This might not create peace, but at least it will maintain a precarious stability. Constant evolution and changes within history dictate the circumstances, and thus, powers. Those changes can bring about a shift or dramatic change in the balance of powers at a given time. Any sort of change according to this theory, can lead to large-scale wars (Battistella 123-124).

Analyzing these main principles of contemporary realism, Battistella comes up with the following conclusions: the first is that war is a natural recourse in defending or obtaining national interests for a State should more peaceful means, such as diplomacy, fail. Likewise, due to the fact that international relations are determined and managed essentially by the strongest, any other form of international entity, specifically international organizations, are mere extensions of those in power. Though it is meant to represent the interests of the planet, and specifically the poorer nations of the world, ultimately, the United Nations would be a classic example of this, for UN decisions are guided by the member nations of the security council, and thus by their interests. This means that although a decision may be beneficial for the greater international community, if one of the five members of the security council uses its veto, *their* interests are followed; not those of the global community.

Contrary to many democratic theorists, especially any from a liberal perspective, contemporary realism ignores the electorate or public opinion as international relations are considered *high politics* and therefore, ordinary citizens are unable to understand the complex matters of national interests. Proponents of this idea believe that public opinion should be ignored, since taking it into consideration would be an “obstacle” to appropriate diplomacy (Battistella 125). Finally, any form of international law which may exist only does so because the more powerful States allow it to. Essentially, international law and institutions can exist only if they cooperate and adhere to the interests of those States in power.

Contemporary realism saw its return to prominence, especially within political philosophy and international relations, following the breakdown of the League of Nations and the onset of

World War II. Prior to World War II, specifically in the interwar period, the primary philosophy running international relations was Wilsonian Idealism. World War I was known as the Great War. After its end and the creation of the League of Nations, it was heralded as the Last War. Thanks to the League of Nations and Wilson's Fourteen Points, war would no longer be the normal recourse as the Points would ensure that, via the establishment of democracies and economic liberalism to promote trade and commerce, war would be against the national interests of a State. Therefore, since war ultimately costs States in terms of human life and economics, as well as governmental power, leaders, being rational, would therefore avoid war as they wished to enhance and secure their State's economic and national self-interest.

With the utter failure of the League of Nations and the Fourteen Points to prevent the rise of Hitler and the onset of World War II, proponents of contemporary realism seized the opportunity by heavily criticizing idealism and its inability to accurately portray human nature and the notion of power. One such thinker was Edward H. Carr, a British historian. Carr ultimately saw through idealism's economic claims, primarily because he understood it as nothing more than justification for Britain's economic hegemony. It seemed very hypocritical to Carr that Britain boasted of the peace that the pursuit of economic interests brought about, especially as it was atop the global ladder and benefitted the most of all, often at the expense of other nations. For any other nation, such beliefs would have been extremely naïve as it was as if Britain were telling the rest of the world that they should share a small fraction of the world's resources and be *happy* to do so.

Carr summarized international relations, and thus politics, to one concept: politics is power policy (Battistella 127). Summarizing Carr, Battistella argues that:

*Estimant que la politique de puissance est un fait évident, une banalité, Carr ne va cependant pas plus loin que ce rappel qu'il estime salutaire de l'omniprésence et de l'inéluctabilité de la puissance en relations internationales, que ce soit comme fin, comme moyen, ou comme cause et, plus exactement, il ne s'interroge pas sur le pourquoi de cette politique de puissance [...] (127)*

What mattered was not the *why* but simply that it was happening. Similar to classic realists, Carr shared an interest in what *was*, not for what *ought* to be. And for Carr, what *was*, was power: in any type of political relation, power is the deciding factor, regardless of where it comes from or the justification for its use.

Niebuhr is often grouped together with Carr due to the fact that both are considered to be responses to Wilsonian idealism's failure following World War I. Where Carr focused on power as the source of all international relations and politics, Niebuhr's approach was subtler, arguing that, indeed, power was important, but not the end-all of the debate. For Niebuhr, there was a more refined method where power, interests, and human nature could be taken into consideration without succumbing to cynicism or nihilism. This was the basis of Niebuhr's Christian realism that would later, through the various world conflicts and his own experiences, evolve into what is being argued in this research: Christian Pragmatism. Niebuhr's realism understood that human nature, although capable of great accomplishments, was equally capable of great horrors. It was this paradox, and this dualism that Niebuhr hoped to harness in order to improve Western society.

### **2.3.3 Ethical Statecraft? A Christian Realist Balance**

In the forward to his work *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*, Niebuhr gave one of his most quoted epithets: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." This statement reflected Niebuhr's understanding of a person's place in the world, acknowledging the duality that exists within humanity. This sentiment would be echoed once more in *Pious and Secular America* (1958) in which he defended democracy as being a controlling factor for the arbitrary use of power, yet acknowledging how little it has done to drastically change society or any notion of justice: "Democracy has brought arbitrary power under check and made it responsible, but it has not seriously altered the hierarchical structure of the community" (63).

Unlike the idealism and liberalism of Dewey in the pre-war period, Niebuhr's Christian realism focused on the influence of interests and power politics between not only nations, but between people as well. Contrary to idealists, Niebuhr understood that there was no panacea for solving the world's problems. When it came to analyzing different cultures, political systems, and ideologies, he was very much engrained in a Western philosophical culture and framework (Naveh sec. 4). Such a perspective led him to understand that "[d]emocracy is on the one hand the characteristic fruit of a bourgeois civilization; on the other hand, it is a perennially valuable form of social organization in which freedom and order are made to support, and not to contradict, each other" (*Children* 1). Such a view may seem Occidental-centric in that it links democracy with a bourgeois, and therefore economically liberal, society. However, seeing Niebuhr's analysis as such is to grossly over-simplify



Niebuhr's arguments. Although working within the framework of western culture, Niebuhr comprehended the need to constantly critically criticize Western culture and society.

Demonstrating how Niebuhr's philosophy could even be adopted by postmodernists, Eyal J. Naveh argues in his essay "Beyond Illusion and Despair: Niebuhr's Liberal Legacy in a Divided American Culture" how Niebuhr's regular criticism and questioning of societal values was a proto-postmodernism. Postmodernists and Niebuhr share similarities by continuously challenging "[...] a Western, modern, scientific, and primarily progressive universe [...]" (Naveh 278) As a matter of fact, Naveh believes that Niebuhr's ideology was a basis for many postmodern theories:

[...] Niebuhr's crisis discourse and the non-utopian alternative he had articulated during most of his life seemed a viable foundation for the postmodern attitude. Indeed, one can find postmodern dispositions in Niebuhr's dialectical, ambiguous, paradoxical, and ironic approaches toward politics and culture, morality and knowledge, human nature and human history. (278)

The only thing that surprised Naveh and other intellectuals like him, was how little postmodernists referenced or cited Niebuhr. Regardless of whether Niebuhr was the prophet for the postmodernism movement, his criticisms and insight into Western culture, via his understanding of human nature cannot be ignored.

Niebuhr's primary tool for understanding the world, and thus human nature, was through dualism. This dualism was rooted in an Augustinian conception of the world opposing the *Civitas Dei* with the *Civitas Terrena*. However, Niebuhr went beyond Augustine's analysis in that he felt the City of God was never going to be achieved on Earth, and that humanity had to come to terms with this revelation. The best way for humanity to do so was to have an "ironic" understanding of human history and nature. For Niebuhr, irony was important because it enabled humanity to be simultaneously apart of and independent from the fluctuations, tribulations, and trials of history. Where pathos elicits some form of pity, this is a relatively neutral pity as the factors that led to such emotions are often out of the person's or group's control. An equally inaccurate description regarding human nature was the concept of tragedy. Tragedy often involved having to make an "evil" decision for the greater good, whilst being aware of the evil of such a decision. This too, took some degree of responsibility away from humanity. Rather than just bestowing pity upon the recipient however, it could also bring forth admiration because the person or group is *aware* of the bad choice that needs to be made (*Irony* Preface).

Only irony, often presented through the form of a paradox, could enlighten humanity's true role in the world and in history. For Niebuhr, having an ironic sense of history was to appreciate events as they came, often looking on them at first as nothing more than a series of fortuitous events, only to later discover a deeper meaning behind them. The meaning, and thus the humor, could only be discovered through the revelation of the paradox, or as Niebuhr put it in his preface of *The Irony of American History*, "[...] if a hidden relation [were] discovered in the incongruity" (xxiv). The final component of Niebuhr's use and understanding of irony fell on the notion of responsibility. In the end, human beings were ironic creatures because they shared a certain level and degree of responsibility within history and for the world. Humanity was neither as removed from nature and history as it hopes, nor did it control either as thoroughly as often believed.

Supporting this was Niebuhr's conception of freedom. For Niebuhr, "[t]his freedom enable[d] [man] to make history and to elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent" (*Children* 2). It was this autonomy that allowed humanity to reach both extremes of the moral spectrum: equally capable of great destruction, and of great creation. Niebuhr's notion of freedom came from a Divine source as he was a devout and practicing Protestant. Religiously tolerant, Niebuhr nevertheless touted the benefits of Protestantism over other faiths as Protestantism allowed humanity to express and maintain his/her individuality in face of the Divine rather than needing an intermediary (i.e. the Church), or being spiritually lost and absorbed into some great "One-ness" (Eastern or *mystic* religions) (*Nature and Destiny*, chs. 5,8). Niebuhr fathomed that humanity's liberty simultaneously enabled it to be aware of its situation in terms of being mortal and finite creatures, while constantly trying to overcome this finiteness. Comparing Christian realism's understanding of freedom to Greek classical thought, Niebuhr argued that

[m]an's freedom is unique because it enables him, though in a temporal process, also to transcend it by conceptual knowledge, memory and a self-determining will. Thus he creates a new level of coherence and meaning, which conforms neither to the world of natural change nor yet to the realm of pure Being in which Greek idealism sought refuge from the world of change. (*Faith* 15)

The problem with classical and what he called, "mystical thought" (i.e. Eastern religions), was that both "[...] separate[d] the freedom of man too absolutely from his nature as a creature of nature [...]" (*Faith* 16).

This freedom granted by God was the source of humanity's problems as well. For Niebuhr, humanity's ultimate sin was pride. Pride can best be summarized in the introduction to *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, written by Langdon B. Gilkey, where he explained that "[...] Niebuhr call[ed] all these claims of ultimacy – of truth, of morals, and of religion – *pride*, the pride of the creature taking place of its Creator. Such pride or idolatry defies God and results in injustice" (xxii). Because humanity existed paradoxically simultaneously within and outside of nature, particularly by being aware of their finiteness, human beings constantly try to surpass their natural limits by attempting to master or control the course of History, something only God, according to Niebuhr, was capable of.

Grasping Niebuhr's notion of sin is paramount to understanding Christian realism as it gives the necessary framework to analyzing, and potentially resolving political problems that are based in power politics. This conception of pride made any form of perfectibility within society, and thus human nature, impossible especially when considering how liberal idealism ignored the very sin that existed within all humanity.

Niebuhr spent most of his academic life, as most political philosophers do, trying to find the balance between the individual and society. Niebuhr's analysis however, was different in that he did not focus on the classic individual/society dynamic unlike many of the other philosophers who have been discussed so far. Instead, Niebuhr focused on a very Christian notion of love, specifically the different types of love that exist, especially the idealized *agape* that was personified with the figure of Jesus Christ and the Cross. *Agape* is the love demonstrated by Jesus in terms of true sacrificial love without thinking of the self. Niebuhr believed that individuals were capable of such love, even if it could be tainted through selfishness and pursuit of personal interests (*Nature* ch. 3).

However, on the societal level such love was impossible as communities were often brought together through some form of shared mutual interest which by definition put them at odds with other groups. This is not to say that Niebuhr fell into cynicism by refusing to allow societies or groups to demonstrate *agape* in some form, he just understood the natural limits of human beings in large communities. Rather than abandoning communities to their selfish and interest-driven pursuits, Niebuhr instead contended that the *agape* demonstrated by Jesus could be used as a means to develop creative solutions to society's problems (*Nature* 70-80).

Such an idea of applying "creative solutions" to societal problems was troublesome when considering the paradox of balancing love and justice. If society were to truly govern following the "law of Christ" in perfect *agape*, all justice would be meaningless. Conversely, any form of justice without love, was not justice at all but a form of oppression or tyranny. Niebuhr discussed this very paradox in one of his most celebrated works, *Moral Man and Immoral*

*Society*, in which he debated the problems of States or societies adopting a Christ-like vision of justice:

If nations and other social groups find it difficult to approximate the principles of justice [...] they are naturally even less capable of achieving the principle of love, which demands more than justice. The demand of religious moralists that nations subject themselves to 'the law of Christ' is an unrealistic demand, and the hope that they will do so is a sentimental one. Even a nation composed of individuals who possessed the highest degree of religious goodwill would be less than loving in its relation to other nations. It would fail, if for no other reason, because the individuals could not possibly think themselves into the position of the individuals of another nation in a degree sufficient to insure pure benevolence. (74-75)

One can understand Niebuhr's statement from two different points of view, which ultimately highlight the truth in the second. Taking the classic "realist" perspective on human nature, Niebuhr's statement simply underscored communities' and societies' inherent pursuit of self-interest which made any form of external empathy or compassion impossible. Simply put: communities are selfish and would always be selfish.

There is a second perspective to Niebuhr's statement which warrants analysis as it provides a deeper insight into Niebuhr's theology. As previously stated, the ultimate sin for Niebuhr was that of pride, which he expressed and defined as a person trying to be like God. Keeping this in mind, Niebuhr's argument is simply a reflection of this aversion to pride. As only God can know pure *agape* for all human beings, to expect communities or societies to know pure *agape* would be to suppose God-like behavior out of a group of human beings. Thus, it was not only unrealistic to imagine societies or communities to empathize or love different communities or groups, it was also prideful.

However, "creative solutions" could be applied through communal introspection in which communities would investigate the symbolism and metaphors offered by the Bible and the story of Christ, where Christ was both a symbol as well as a figure of power *and* wisdom (*Nature* 91). It is important to stress Niebuhr's emphasis on symbolic and metaphoric representations offered by Biblical tales. Niebuhr was by no means a fundamentalist nor did he argue for literal interpretations of Scripture. An example of such symbolism was Niebuhr's comprehension of the Fall of Man from the Garden of Eden. For Niebuhr, there was no real

figure of Adam and Eve, rather, both represented the myths and the dangers of the sin of pride, or of wanting to be God-like.

His comprehension of this myth was vitally important for analyzing the reality of world politics. This was especially true when looking at different communities or States as well as when analyzing classic Christian theologians. The myth of the Fall shed light onto matters such as economics, politics, and private property according to Niebuhr. In *The Children of Light*, Niebuhr reasoned that

[a]ccording to the Christian theory (which was partly borrowed from Stoic thought, when it became necessary for the Christian movement to come to terms with the exigencies of politics and economics, property, as well as government is a necessary evil, required by the Fall of man. (89-90)

In spite of Christians not necessarily liking the state of the world, nor how far the City of God seemed out of attainable reach, Niebuhr's Christian realism took such realities as the norm and decided to work within the framework of the actual world, rather than the idealized pre-Fall Eden that many Christians and liberals hoped to find.

Niebuhr realized that humanity's freedom gave it a unique ability that no other creature was capable of: impacting history through its actions. This freedom, according to Niebuhr,

[...] enable[d] [humanity] to make history and to elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent. But [humanity] also requires community because [it] is by nature social. [Humanity] cannot fulfill [its] life within [itself] but only in responsible and mutual relations with [humanity's] fellows. (*Children 2*)

Thus, in order for humanity to grow, adapt, and change, human beings had to interact with one another via communities and civilizations. Humans could not remain isolated from one another as found in the state of nature with some contractualist theorists. Instead, Niebuhr maintained that the way to best develop the sense of *agape* was through social interaction, which in turn lead to self-discovery.

Much of Niebuhr's work focused on the pride and arrogance of nations, in particular, the United States and its relationship with its own history and identity. Niebuhr contended that all nations had imperial ambitions in spite of what these countries, America included, may have preached. For Niebuhr, America needed to drastically rethink its position and place in the world

through a proper realist analysis. Gary Dorrien sums this idea up in his essay “Christian Realism: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology, ethics, and Politics” when he says,

[t]o Niebuhr, a strong dose of realism about America’s struggle for world power would have been redemptive. Americans needed the love-perfectionism of Jesus and the cunning realism of Machiavelli. Realism without a moral dimension is corrupt, he cautioned, but any moral idealism not chastened by the world’s evil is pathetic and dangerous. (27)

This sentiment was expressed in Niebuhr’s work *Children of Light* in which he reasoned how a society could maintain Christian realism without succumbing to cynicism.

Niebuhr divided the world into what he considered to be the “children of light” and the “children of darkness.” Both existed within all societies and both, according to Niebuhr, had something useful to contribute to prideful nations. The “children of darkness” were the moral cynics who “know no law beyond their will and interest” whereas the “children of light” “[...] believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law” (*Children* 8). The “children of darkness” could teach society that the pursuit of interests, power, and pride, were indeed real and prevalent and were forces which needed to be contended with. The “children of light,” on the other hand, provided a form of morality and universal good which would seek to improve society through control of the “children of darkness.”

Though it may appear that Niebuhr would have supported the “children of light,” he was actually extremely critical of them, especially for what would be considered their naiveté. He did however acknowledge their virtuousness,

[t]hey are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will. They underestimate the peril of anarchy in both the national and the international community. [...] It must be understood that the children of light are foolish not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness. They underestimate this power among themselves. (*Children* 10)

Democratic states were examples of these “children of light,” especially the United States which was often blind to its own self-interest, frequently arguing that any given action was for some greater good all while ignoring that “[...] the same man who is ostensibly devoted to the ‘common good’ may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbor” (*Children* 10).

The paradox however, was that society had to learn to manipulate and manage the traits of the “children of darkness” by respecting their wisdom, without succumbing to their cynicism. In other words, society had to simultaneously remain morally pure and good as the “children of light” would argue, while using the tools and means of the “children of darkness.” It was this paradox of balancing power politics and realities with the morality that was necessary for Niebuhr in order to avoid falling into a classic realist pitfall of cynicism.

#### **2.3.4 The Paradox of Man and Society: Power, Conflict, and Patriotism**

Niebuhr understood, like the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers before him, that States and governments had to use power to coerce some form of peace or stability within them. This was simply due to the varying and competing factors or interest groups that existed within said states. A clear example of such was the idea of several nations existing within the borders of a single state. These nations may only cooperate or exist together due to a force imposed upon them by the State. However, this is not the final or comprehensive picture of the truth on the coexistence of several nations in that “[t]he fact that state and nation are roughly synonymous proves that, without the sentiment of nationality with its common language and traditions, the authority of government is usually unable to maintain national unity” (*Moral Man* 83). Thus, there *is* something to be said about a common language or cultural identity that can keep a multi-nation group together without the total use of coercion from the state. It should be noted though, that Niebuhr wrote before the turmoil of the Civil Rights era, Women’s Liberation, and LGBT Rights Movement. Accordingly, this notion can seem naïve to contemporary readers as these movements highlighted cultural differences rather than suppressing them. Nevertheless, one can say that such pluralistic identities are not trying to destroy the national American identity, but rather trying to expand it so that these experience and pluralism would be *added to* the “common language and traditions,” instead of being ignored or oppressed by the existing hegemonic dominating groups.

Contrary to the liberal idealists such as Dewey or other progressives of the early twentieth century, Niebuhr was extremely skeptical on the notion of human perfectibility and the power of the social sciences. He was especially critical of the “cultural lag” theory contended by Dewey. It stated that humanity and societies would be able to advance greatly and rapidly once the “lag” in the social and human sciences caught up with natural sciences in terms of mastery over the object of study. Otherwise put, humanity would achieve true advancement once the

objects of study, i.e. human beings and more importantly their behavior, were as well understood and closely analyzed as the atom, nature, or the human body.

Niebuhr was also critical of Dewey's approach because it ignored the very real class bias that existed within social scientists and theorists, who argued for an educational and cultural overhaul. According to Niebuhr, idealists either ignored or were unaware of the class perspectives which tainted their ideas and ideologies, and similarly overlooked the stark class realities which tainted a person's pursuit of interests. This could be seen, particularly, in idealists underestimating the conflict of interest between these classes. Niebuhr stated,

[a] careful study of the history of political and economic life proves conclusively that the educators, as well other middle-class moralists, underestimate the conflict of interest in political and economic relations, and attribute to disinterested ignorance what ought usually be attributed to interested intelligence. Their very error in this regard is a result of the faulty perspective of their class. [...] Whatever social intelligence is created in the total body of any privileged class, can be used to mitigate the conflict between the classes, but it will not be powerful enough to obviate the necessity of such a conflict. (*Moral* 214)

Ultimately, class clashes, and struggles in general, would always exist, since interests between different communities and classes would always, and at some point, come into conflict with one another.

Niebuhr even saw the very notion of advancement, specifically within technology and economic affairs as exacerbating humanity's problems, not providing a solution to them. This was expressly true for any form of international relations. In *Moral Man* Niebuhr argued that:

[w]hile rapid means of communication have increased the breadth of knowledge about world affairs among citizens of various nations, and the general advance of education has ostensibly promoted the capacity to think rationally and justly upon the inevitable conflicts of interest between nations, there is nevertheless little hope of arriving at a perceptible increase of international morality through the growth of intelligence and perfection of means of communication. The development of international commerce, the increased economic interdependence among the nations, and the whole apparatus of a technological



civilization, increase the problems and issues between nations much more rapidly than the intelligence to solve them can be created. (84)

Indeed, a different form of globalization was happening at the early part of the twentieth century with the creation of the telephone, Morse code, and air travel. For Niebuhr however, such innovations, while creating new technological ease for humanity as a whole, also created unforeseeable consequences and posed unforeseen questions. Similarly, the Wilsonian idea that lasting and international peace could be maintained through cooperative economic agreements was equally disconcerting for Niebuhr.

For one thing, such a proposal ignored the varying competing interests that made up economies. State economies were not merely singular monolithic creatures focused on one particular branch or form of economy. Arguably, the only thing that all state economies searched for was growth, but obtaining that growth was never universal, equal, or fair. Instead, state economies competed with one another for varying and often, limited resources as well as for economic domination amongst one another in terms of tariffs or protectionism. In the case of any form of trade deal or economic treaty, all countries were not created equal, and most of the time, there was a definite winner and loser, principally when countries from two different “categories” i.e. global north/global south, industrialized/non-industrialized, first world/third world, created an accord; frequently with the country from the “greater category” benefiting at the expense of the latter.

Secondly, economic treaties and agreements often only last as long as things are going well. Once the economic system is threatened or there is some form of economic crisis, countries often close up and return to a type of basic protectionism, regardless of the consequences on the international scene. The Great Depression is a historic example where states retreated from grandiose economic and political treaties in order to protect their own. A contemporary example of this can be seen with the European Union and the constant criticism by member nations of lost sovereignty and economic power.

Thirdly, economic and political treaties are often portrayed as a win-win game, when in fact they are zero-sum games in which each individual country attempts to maximize its interests at the expense of the other. Wilson’s League of Nations was a classic example of this. In theory, the nations which signed up would be equal players on the democratic landscape. However, in reality, American cultural, political, and economic values were being imposed on a world scale in order to protect and spread American interests. Returning to the European Union, this modern union can be criticized for simply pursuing the interests of a few member nations

(Germany, France, Belgium) at the expense of the other states which make up the Union as the former are economically wealthier and politically more powerful.

States are incapable of pursuing and following the *agape* notion of justice and love as has been stated previously. This is linked to factors such as communities being unable to properly empathize on a larger scale, and as Niebuhr argued the very composition of states are “[...] held together much more by force and emotion, than by mind” (*Moral* 87). Such an appreciation goes contrary to Dewey’s belief in the rationalization of society through education for Niebuhr acknowledges that, in large communities, humanity is incapable of thinking rationally. This inability to think rationally means that they are unable to think critically. Consequently, without the ability to think critically, there can be no self-criticism, the key ingredient in Niebuhrian morality.

Nations were equally guilty of corrupting the very morality of individual citizens. They did so through the paradoxical notion of patriotism. The paradox existed because it “[...] transmute[d] individual unselfishness into national egoism” (*Moral* 90). The State was able to do so because patriotism

[...] [became] the vehicle of all the altruistic impulses and expresses itself, on occasion, with such fervor that the critical attitude of the individual toward the nation and its enterprises is almost completely destroyed. The unqualified character of this devotion [was] the very basis of the nation’s power and of the freedom to use the power without moral restraint. Thus the unselfishness of individuals [made] for the selfishness of nations. (*Moral* 90)

States abused and used this power simply because they lacked the ability to be self-critical. Therefore, states never questioned their actions because they did not have the means to do so. Similarly, they felt they did not need to as their interests were naturally justifiable and defensible.

To highlight this abuse of power by the State, Niebuhr used the example of the Spanish-American war to demonstrate how nations act with impunity in terms of manipulating and maximizing patriotism for optimal national interests. Niebuhr took Roosevelt and Secretary Hughes’s argument that these actions were meant “[...] not to exploit but to aid; not to subvert, but to help in laying the foundations for a sound, stable and independent government” as simple propaganda to add a moral element to an immoral action (*Moral* 105). Niebuhr argued that these arguments were common among many nations and that for this conflict “[...] every impartial history clearly records the economic motives which prompt[ed] our policies in our relation to

our southern neighbors” (*Moral* 105). Justifications by States simply attempt to persuade a people of the “rightness” of their actions, while purposely ignoring the true reasons behind them.

Thus, the Christian realist State was one which tried to find a balance between maintaining national interests as was the State’s prerogative, while simultaneously appealing to some form of moral authority. As Kenneth W. Thompson summarizes, “[Niebuhr] concluded that focusing too narrowly on the national imperative as almost as hazardous as viewing the world through idealistic prisms. At the same time, he warned that moralists who engaged in foreign policymaking were more likely to be destructive of a nation’s ideals than were cynical realists” (140). Essentially, Niebuhr believed that the State needed to be consistently constructed around a system of checks and balances. Unlike many classic realists, Niebuhr did not think that international relations should be limited to the realm of the political or academic elite. He did believe that public opinion played a role in decision making.

Nevertheless, Christian realism acknowledged the importance and reality of national interests and power in politics. Thus, Niebuhr

[...] saw national interest as a useful concept [for the State] and he invoked it increasingly in his later years. Increasingly, he wrote of the need for prudence as an operative principle in politics and of national interest as a criterion for guiding foreign policy making. Yet, to the end, he remained skeptical that national interest was comprehensive enough to do justice to the goals of international society. (K. Thompson 143-144)

Hence, national interests always had to be tempered by some form of morality and criticism, usually coming from an intellectual and elite minority.

Still, Niebuhr was not always critical of all American leaders. Feeling that entry into World War II was not only politically and economically justifiable, but morally as well, Niebuhr praised Roosevelt’s handling of the war as the antithesis to Wilsonian idealism. In the review *Christianity and Crisis* Niebuhr wrote a piece entitled “The Death of the President” where he praised Roosevelt, stating:

As the war finally drew to a triumphant conclusion, Roosevelt, seeking to avoid Wilson’s mistakes, developed an international policy which, though it may err on the side of making too many concessions to the pride and power of the great nations, does at least guarantee that America will not again withdraw from the

responsibilities in the world community. Nor can the concessions be regarded as merely unwarranted expediency. They are derived from a shrewd understanding of the limits of the will of a nation in creating international authority above. In both the conduct of the war and in the peace negotiations Roosevelt has, in other words, expressed a higher form of political maturity than this nation has previously achieved. (qtd. in K. Thompson 145-146)

For Niebuhr, Roosevelt understood and accepted America's new place in the world order. The United States could no longer remain politically and economically removed, in spite of its geographic isolation. Power politics and the rising USSR demanded a response, and due to the devastation in Europe and necessity to rebuild, the responsibility fell on the United States.

The idea of responsibility was extremely important to Niebuhr as it is tied directly to his concept of irony mentioned earlier. This responsibility, be it for the State or for the individual was linked to Niebuhr's Protestant theology, specifically, the relationships between God and humanity as well as between humanity and history. Thus, in order to understand the *Christian* notion behind Niebuhr's Christian realism, it is necessary to analyze his metaphysics, first through Niebuhr's criticism of modern society, specifically its over-estimation of humanity's freedom and capabilities, followed by an overall analysis of Niebuhr's religious theology.

### **2.3.5 Pride is the Limit: Modern Society's Overestimation of Human Freedom**

One of Niebuhr's major criticisms against modern society and values was its inability to understand the dual nature of humanity. Modern society failed to appreciate humanity's simultaneous creature and creator status. In *Faith and History*, Niebuhr argued that "[m]an remains a creature of nature on every stage of his development. There are certain bounds of human finiteness which no historical development can overcome" (70). For Niebuhr, modern humanity's primary mistake was equating technological and societal development with a belief that such development would or could "alter the human situation" (*Faith* 70).

Consequently, such faith in progress led modern society to reject any form of Biblical analysis or understanding of the world. Doing so ignored the paradoxical nature of humanity. The paradox is that humanity's

[...] power over nature and history is both limited and limitless. It is limited in the sense that all individual and collective forms of life are subject to mortality. No human achievements can annul man's subjection to natural finitude. But

human power is also limitless in the sense that no fixed limits can be set for the expansion capacities. (*Faith* 71)

Thus, humanity could never escape the fact that it is finite, or that all individual human beings died. Nevertheless, this finiteness imposed no limits on the capacity of humanity to expand its horizons or its capabilities in attempting to overcome humanity's mortal limitations.

Niebuhr distinguished four major categories of human capacities. The first category was the most obvious and present. It was represented by humanity's domination over nature and the natural sciences. Or as Niebuhr put it in *Faith and History*, humanity had the ability to "[...] manipulate the processes of nature, to exploit its treasures and bend its forces to human ends" (71). Examples of such advancements could, and still can be seen with communication technologies, transportation, and even the development of nuclear energy.

The next distinction was to differentiate what he considered mastery over the natural world from "technical power," which he admittedly argued "cannot be rigorously separated from a second category of human capacities which underlies it" (*Faith* 72). The discrepancy between mastery over the natural world and technical power for Niebuhr was the latter "[...] compromises the whole range of human culture, including religion, philosophy, art, and social organization" (*Faith* 72). Niebuhr maintained that though expertise over the natural world was easier to see in terms of concrete examples, humanity's development and mastering technical power added to the evolution of culture. However, Niebuhr admitted that there was "[...] a law of diminishing returns in the relations to technics to culture" and that "[b]etter writing material or the invention of typewriters did not contribute to a higher quality of prose or poetry" (*Faith* 72).

The next category Niebuhr spoke of was humanity's "inherent rational faculty" (*Faith* 73). Humanity's rationality was perhaps most subject to the progress and powerful forces of historical development. Niebuhr claimed that "[...] the history of thought would suggest that the development of conceptual knowledge represents primarily growth in rational experience rather than in rational capacity" (*Faith* 73). Niebuhr was quick to highlight that cultural groups had varying rational faculties, which did not imply superiority of one over another. This merely showed that they were different. However, when grouped together, a specific culture's rational capacity was limited, ironically, by that very group because of societal norms and values. Thus, "[h]uman rational capacities are, in short, infinitely variable, but their limits are more fixed than the collective cultural achievements which are elaborated by these capacities" (*Faith* 73). Left alone, individuals were capable of limitless development and creativity, however, due to the social nature of humanity, and the fact that there were existing norms and standards within a

given culture or society, a person's creativity and thus, his/her development could actually be restricted *by* that society. This can appear extremely paradoxical given this seems to go against any pragmatic understanding of human nature. However, it should be remembered that this was Niebuhr's Christian realist point of view, not that of a classic pragmatist. Likewise, the restricting nature of society can merely be viewed as another form of liberal contractual theory: humans are social creatures and in order to maintain the stability of society, people need to surrender, not freedom or liberty, but a form of creativity by adapting certain values, laws, norms and customs.

The fourth and final category which proved to be the most difficult for humanity and modern culture to accept was that of humanity's "creatureliness" or the "[...] dimension of man in nature" (*Faith* 74). This dimension was difficult to accept due to the "[...] most irrefutable proof of man's involvement in the 'coming to be and passing away' of nature [...]", or a person's death (*Faith* 74). Other natural constraints upon humanity derive from the biological make-up of humanity.

In an arguably controversial passage from *Faith and History*, Niebuhr discussed the role of motherhood and fatherhood and the biological constraints that nature forces upon humanity, specifically upon women. He acknowledged that the modern technical society had opened up various paths of achievements for women, specifically the freedom to pursue new career or vocational interests. Nevertheless, Niebuhr reasoned that more "rationalistic forms of feminism have drawn some extravagant and unwarranted conclusions," specifically in terms of the freedom that modern society has given women in escaping their traditional role as mothers (*Faith* 75). Modern society had indeed provided women more choice to "reduce the responsibilities related to the biological function of motherhood," however such freedoms did not remove the biological fact that women still are the ones who carry children (*Faith* 75). Niebuhr differentiated between motherhood and fatherhood as the former being a type of vocation while the latter was an avocation.

It should be highlighted here that Niebuhr's distinction between vocation and avocation regarding parenthood was simply linked to the biological nature of humanity and was not a question of "should" or "must" for either sex. It is true that Niebuhr's use of both terms could be understood, especially from modern feminist perspective, as being insensitive and as an example of heteronormative patriarchy. What he meant was that because males were able to remove themselves from all parental responsibility should they so desire (existing within a framework where the State does not impose any responsibility upon the known father), men could treat fatherhood as avocational. Women on the other hand, due to the nature of childbearing and childbirth share a bond which makes carrying a child, at the very least

vocational, regardless of whether or not the woman in question chooses to keep the child. To reiterate, Niebuhr's view should be observed and understood from the purely biological perspective, not from a moral or normative one. Niebuhr's claims were made simply to demonstrate that nature and biology place limits on humanity, regardless of humanity's potential desires or wants. If anything, Niebuhr was supportive of women's rights in that he reinforced the idea that "[w]omen may choose another vocation beside that of motherhood or they may exchange the vocation of motherhood for another vocation" but he acknowledged and realized that biology, and to a certain extent, societal norms and values "[...] ma[d]e these choices more difficult than those which a mere male face[d]" (*Faith* 76).

Niebuhr considered ethnic and racial differences as equally problematic for modern society's assessment of human and historic development. Liberal Protestantism and modern society viewed the world as developing towards one eventual global community. This could be best seen via Wilson's League of Nations or the general optimistic view of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Achieving such a color-blind society was possible for many modern secularists and liberal Christians through the use of humanity's inherent rationalism. However, Niebuhr pointed out that such goals ignored the stark realities of ethnic and race relations in the world. Niebuhr used a relatively "neutral" example by highlighting the differences between Welsh, Scottish, and British nationalism and ethnic pride. He stated:

Both the Welsh and the Scottish members of the British national community are exhibiting a strengthened awareness of their ethnic uniqueness, while Eire seeks to displace English with the Gaelic language, and the new state of Israel is born.  
(*Faith* 76)

How was the world thus able to achieve some form of ethnic or racial color-blindness when peoples of "similar" ethnic, cultural, or racial backgrounds could not put aside their differences? If peoples of similar upbringings could not manage to peacefully coexist it was unlikely that peoples from "drastically" different cultures, ethnicities, races would ever be able to do so. The most prominent example of this during Niebuhr's time was the racial segregation that was ever-present in America during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though an ardent supporter of equal rights for all Americans, Niebuhr nevertheless understood the limits that nature and society placed on race relations.

The significant issue that modern society and liberal Christianity ignored however, was death. Modern culture, through its naïve belief in technical mastery over the world and nature, thought that ultimately death could be at least tempered by these advancements. However,

Niebuhr faulted modern society for ignoring the “ironic vengeance” that history wrought upon humanity (*Faith* 78). The irony was that the technology used to secure society’s place in the world (nuclear weapons in particular) also happened to be the potential means of humanity’s own destruction. The proof could be found within the aftermath of World War II where during the Cold War, the seeds of humanity’s destruction were sewn thanks to the mounting tensions between the USSR and the USA. This conflict was the prime example of modern culture’s hubris by trying to conquer nature and death. In attempting to control history, humanity actually brought itself that much closer to the brink of destruction.

This obsession with trying to control nature through technological advancements culminated in the ultimate misconception of modern culture and liberal Christianity: that humanity could control the course of history, thus controlling historic events. This theory argued that “[...] history moves, not by the force of an evolutionary nature but by the extension of human freedom over nature” (*Faith* 80). Such an idea was expressed most notably with the then-contemporary liberal commentator Eustace Hayden who declared that “[...] man’s success is imposing his will on the flow of events” (qtd. in *Faith* 80). Such a statement “[...] contain[ed] the modern error in baldest form” which was

based on the erroneous assumption that the ‘habits of men’ are in the same category of conquerable territory as the ‘face of the earth’ and that there is therefore no difference between the conquest of nature by technical power and the management of historical destiny by the social wisdom which must deal with the ‘habits of men’. (*Faith* 80).

Here, Niebuhr made the distinction between the technological and natural accomplishments of humanity over nature, and how such accomplishments were inferior to the idea of control over history. Again, belief that any society, culture, or State could master the contours and events of history was to fall into the sin of pride by trying to be like God. Humanity could *influence* history through collective action as nothing was predetermined thanks to the freedom bestowed upon humanity by God, yet, this freedom was limited in that it could not *control* history or achieve the *end of history*.

Constant attempts by modern society to direct history were nothing more than humanity’s pride. This was a recurrent point in much of Niebuhr’s work and was fundamental in his theology. Therefore, in order to obtain a more profound understanding of Christian realism, it is necessary to look at Niebuhr’s view of sin within human nature. Paradoxically, the sin of pride was a direct consequence of the freedom bestowed upon humanity by God. Obtaining



atonement, according to Niebuhr, was through confession, contrition and honest repentance. Achieving forgiveness and thus freeing humanity from sin came from one source: Divine grace.

### **2.3.6 The Perks of Being a Protestant: Sin, Pride, and Human Nature**

Niebuhr's perception of religion, and specifically, the role it should play in society was very much based on his belief that criticism, if not achieved via the self or through the nation itself, should be provided by the role of a good prophet. For Niebuhr, this prophet was the Old Testament, and specifically the prophet Amos who acted as a moral counterbalance to the decadence and sin of the old Jewish Kingdoms. A good prophet, much like a good philosopher and political advisor, always cautioned a nation or people about the excesses of decadence and moral decay within a society. The problem was however, that people rarely want to hear negative things about themselves. Therefore, even though good prophets of sage wisdom and warning were needed, leaders from the Old Testament as well as modern States often would listen to "false prophets."

Robin W. Lovin, in his essay "Prophetic Faith and American Democracy" discussed Niebuhr's fascination with the "doomsday" prophets and their necessity. He stated:

False prophets, of course, promised easy victories, leading the kings to complain that they could not get decent prophecies from people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, and Amos. Niebuhr preached with great relish on the passage in 2 Kings 22, where four hundred of the king's prophets try to outdo one another in predicting that Israel and Judah will triumph together over the Syrians, and only Micaiah warns that the expedition will result in utter defeat. This leads the king of Israel to say, 'See, I told you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only disaster.' And disaster was what he got. Where the true prophets came into their own, however, was after the disaster. Because they alone had not promised easy victory, it fell to them to make sense of defeat. What they concluded was that history is always in God's hands. Being God's chosen does not allow a people to write history so it turns out the way they want it to. [...] Sometimes the chosen people have to be spectators while the king of Persia does God's work, whether they know it or not. (226)

Thus, a true prophet was one who was critical of one's nation, even if it was not easy for the leader to hear such criticisms.

This role of being critical was not for the sake of being cruel or even hard-hearted. Niebuhr viewed Amos, and other critical prophets, as well as potentially himself, as truly caring for their/his nations, partially at least because they all understood that the sin of pride was the downfall of all, humanity and nations alike. The best way to combat this pride was through contrition and self-criticism, which were provided by the good prophet. This is not to say that the prophet, or even the prophetic role of certain members of a society, should have the final say in establishing any form of political or legal system of power within a society. Niebuhr was skeptical that such a system could actually work.

Niebuhr argued that Old Testament-style governments or legal systems usually governed through religious leaders or councils and though they were effective in maintaining social order, they were not the best method of governance since they ignored the free nature of humanity in history and on earth. For example, if a people were to follow Deuteronomy and apply some form of legal code to it would give prophetic insight a form of permanent legal structure within society. Though difficult to imagine, especially from a pragmatic or realistic point of view, religious societies nevertheless *attempted* to enact such practices by living according to religious laws, doctrines, or beliefs. Failure to do so would enact divine wrath. Another Old Testament system which Niebuhr discussed was the Pharisee, who were members of an ancient Jewish sect that emphasized a strict interpretation of Mosaic law. Such an approach led Niebuhr to criticize the Pharisee as being self-righteous and hypocritical. Finally, there was classic Old Testament legalism which Niebuhr viewed as a kind of arrested and atrophied religion of history where the Decalogue was seen as being such a special relationship between man and God that it had to be the basis of any and all future laws (*Nature* Vol. 2, 31-40).

Niebuhr's main criticism against these approaches to religion, legalism, and history were as follows:

- 1) Niebuhr believed that no law, no matter the period in history, nor the group of people in question, could actually do justice to the freedom of man in history. This statement was twofold. On the one hand, laws could not limit the creative nature of humanity in putting a final say on the evolution of law, society, and human nature. Analyzing this from the opposite point of view, this criticism charged many of these societies with trying to come up with the "final good" on humanity and civil law. To attempt to do so was to imitate

God, the ultimate sin for Niebuhr. For only God's law could be eternal, omniscient, and completely normative (*Nature* vol. 2, ch. 2).

- 2) No legal system or law was able to do justice to the complexities of interests and motives in humanity. For Niebuhr, many of these legal systems and laws attempted to try and reduce humanity to basic or one-dimensional motivational factors. What these systems failed to take into consideration were the complex and often unforeseeable interactions between human interests and the existing world. For example, what may work one day in keeping society in line, may not the next, if an extremely catastrophic or societal altering event were to happen which made the previous legal restrictions or interests seem superfluous (*Nature* vol. 2, ch. 2).
- 3) These legal systems failed to consider that law cannot eradicate or restrain evil. The best it can do is attempt to chain it. Even if the law were to be chained, it would never be able to eradicate evil from humanity. To do so would again fall into the trap of pride as to eradicate evil in human nature would be to alter it. This could only be done either through the omnipotent power of God, or by removing the freedom bestowed upon humanity. For Niebuhr, humanity's complexity lay in its freedom: its freedom both to do good with great creativity and also simultaneously being capable of great evil through sin (*Nature* vol. 2, ch. 2).

The only historic and religious figure to be able to escape these downfalls and find a perfect system of justice and love was Jesus and the symbolic aspect of the Cross. Niebuhr believed that Jesus achieved this because of his dual nature of prophet and messiah. He was able to establish a law, that humanity was meant to imitate or at least try to follow. This law of love or *agape*, was demonstrated via Jesus's appearance on earth followed by his ultimate self-sacrifice for the sins of humanity in the world. However, as has been seen before, this *agape* was and is unachievable in this world. Therefore, realizing this *agape* could only happen through the second-coming of Jesus and the triumphant revelation of the Cross, and this would also mean the end of history and the end of legalistic social models.

Niebuhr was very careful nevertheless, to specify that the Cross was to be understood as symbolic redemption. He considered any interpretation of the Cross via a transcendent theory

as erroneous. Other transcendent theories that he considered equally as flawed were Marxism, contemporary liberalism, or even liberal Protestantism. The reasoning behind Niebuhr's criticism was that any type of telos in terms of determining an "end" or massive "change" to history was to attempt to usurp God (*Nature* vol. 2, ch.3).

Contrary to many mainstream Christian beliefs, Niebuhr believed that such knowledge of the End of Days, or the Revelation could never be known by any human. To proclaim such information was to attempt to appropriate God's omnipotence, thus making any statement about the Revelations automatically false, as it would be a simple expression of pride. To look at it another way: according to Niebuhr, as long as there were people professing to know when the End of Days was upon the world, this would automatically mean that such a time-period was actually far off, as no human being could ever have such knowledge.

Niebuhr's distrust about the gains and expansion of human knowledge was not limited to the idea of *telos* or individual redemption. He also demonstrated great suspicion regarding the idea of technological developments and perfectibility of society. Within each new technological or societal advance, Niebuhr saw nothing but the paradox of human freedom. In *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* Niebuhr discussed such reservations. He argued:

Every new freedom represented a new peril as well as a new promise. Modern industrial society dissolved ancient forms of political authoritarianism; but the tyrannies which grew on its soil proved more brutal and vexatious than the old ones. The inequalities rooted in landed property were levelled. But the more dynamic inequalities of a technical society became more perilous to the community than the more static forms of unseen power. The achievement of individual liberty was one of the genuine advances of bourgeois society. But this society also created atomic individuals who freed from the disciplines of the older organic communities, were lost in the mass; and became the prey of demagogues and charlatans who transmuted their individual anxieties and resentments into collective political power of demonic fury. (7)

Taking apart this citation reveals that Niebuhr believed that the massive technological developments that were at the forefront of the industrial revolution ultimately allowed for totalitarian regimes to arise. These brutal systems and the unprecedented violence they brought were a direct result of technological advancement. Similarly, due to the "atomistic" nature of

modern society, the previous community links had been destroyed allowing for these new tyrannies to transform their “individual anxieties” or fears into a political weapon.

As a result, the freedom and advancements arising at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were a sharp double-edged sword. A similar sentiment was debated in *Nature and Destiny of Man* where Niebuhr contended that modern humanity’s complete obsession with rationalism and rationality was also cause for the horrors of the early twentieth century. Niebuhr blamed these “political demons” such as totalitarianism on the fact that modern societies had lost the internal balance which theology could provide. Because humanity was focused on a post-Enlightenment rationalism, modern society had lost its place in relation to Nature, and consequently forswore its relationship with the various communities that make up humanity. Niebuhr argued that “[humanity] felt certain that they possessed themselves; and sought in the complacency of their self-possession to extend the range of the self and to make it more inclusive. But a self which possess itself in such a way never escapes itself” (*Nature* 111). Niebuhr’s view of the classically religious notion of possession was not of some form of action taken by a true demonic source. Instead he had on a symbolic understanding similar to his conception of the Cross. “Demonic possession” was figurative and happened when a person believed him/herself to be God’s equal, similar to Lucifer (*Nature* vol. 2, ch. 4).

Ultimately, Niebuhr’s grasp of human nature and history revolved around one key notion: any attempt to dominate history through control of any worldly events was to assume the role of God (J. Smith 40). To counterbalance this optimism which he viewed as rampant throughout modern society, Niebuhr focused on “taking seriously the Christian conception of sin” which he demonstrated via St. Paul’s confession that “[t]he good I would, I do not, and that I would not, that I do [...]” (J. Smith 41). What Niebuhr understood with St. Paul’s confession was that the good that many profess doing was actually a reflection or pursuit of self-interest or self-love. Ironically therefore, even when trying to avoid sin, human nature, power, politics and life within society corrupt the individual thus making avoiding sin impossible.

If Niebuhr was critical of secularism in modern liberal culture, he was even more so of liberal Protestantism. According to Niebuhr, liberal Protestantism ignored the significance of sin within human nature. It focused erroneously on the benefits of social and technological progress as a means of perfecting humanity. Ultimately,

[h]e criticized liberal theology as well not only for playing down the doctrine of sin but also for taking into itself far too much of the optimism – what William James called the ‘sky blue’ outlook – that prevailed in American society about the perfectibility of man, automatic progress through technology, and the belief

that social ills stemming from human self-interest and aggression can be overcome merely by increasing knowledge. (Smith 41).

This perspective was otherwise known as “cultural lag” theory which has been discussed previously. Niebuhr even argued that liberal Protestants chose to use this theory as a means of explaining the violence of the two World Wars (*Faith* ch. 1, sec. 2). In the end, no increase in knowledge, no matter how advanced, and whether this advancement was linked to technology or the social and human sciences, would be enough to erase sin from human nature. To claim so was prideful, as the very pursuit of this knowledge was to risk sin. Such a goal as perfecting humanity was strictly within the capacities of God, and not humanity.

Similarly, “cultural lag” theory also severely misunderstood humanity’s dual essence of being both a creature of nature and being independent from it. This confusion was best expressed through modern culture’s attempt at demonstrating the self as being master of his/her destiny via the growth in technological and societal advancements. Liberal Protestantism as well as general secular culture believed that the negative liberty provided in modern democratic cultures was the means of mastery over the world, and ultimately the self. However,

[t]he self as creator does not master the self as creature merely by the extension of scientific technics. The hope that everything recalcitrant in human behavior may be brought under the subjection of the inclusive purposes of ‘mind’ by the same technics which gained man mastery over nature is not merely an incidental illusion, prompted by the phenomenal achievements of the natural sciences. It is the culminating error in modern man’s misunderstanding of himself. [...] The spiritual confusions arising from this misunderstanding constitute the cultural crisis of our age, beyond and above the political crisis in which our civilization is involved. (*Faith* 12)

Such confusion about the self as creator rather than as creator and creation was at the stem of modern culture’s misunderstanding of humanity’s limits and ultimately its greatest sin.

The way for modern society to avoid such confusion was to accept a Biblical analysis, of history and of human nature. To do so would require modern society to abandon its obsession with rational proof of such truths. Instead, Western societies had to adopt a notion of realistic faith. Realistic in the sense of understanding the symbolism behind Christian faith (i.e. the Cross, redemption, etc.) with faith in God and the Gospel. Niebuhr states that

[t]he Christian Gospel as the final answer to the problems of both individual life and man's total history is not proved to be true by rational analysis. Its acceptance is an achievement of faith, being an apprehension of truth beyond the limits of reason. Such faith must be grounded in repentance; for it presupposes a contrite recognition of the elements of pretension and false completion in all forms of human virtue, knowledge and achievement. (*Faith* 151).

To achieve the Divine grace from God, and ultimately redemption, humanity had to acknowledge the sin of *all* its actions, the good and bad together.

Niebuhr's theology, though interesting, was not necessarily complete. This was a paradox considering that he was considered at one time or another to be America's most prominent Protestant theologian. However,

Niebuhr gave no sustained attention to epistemology, method, or hermeneutics. His theology was very short on the Christian mysteries of the divine Trinity, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, the work of the Spirit, the kingdom of God, and the church as the body of Christ. He wanted Christians to take seriously the 'permanently valid' myths of Christianity as living symbolizations of Christian experience, but he did not analyze the nature of myths and symbols. (Dorrien 24)

Niebuhr felt that deep theological mysteries were better left to the "experts". He never considered himself a true theologian. Instead, he thought himself a philosopher of history. Nevertheless, he felt that Protestant Christianity did have something to offer humanity in terms of symbolism and redemption through its theology of the Cross. It symbolized God's love for humanity as it was the "[...] promise of salvation from humanity's enslaving egotism through divine grace" (Dorrien 24).

Understanding Niebuhr's theology not only provides a better overview of the philosopher, but also adds a vital dimension to comprehending Niebuhr's Christian realism in terms of how it related to actual political and State conflicts. Therefore, keeping Niebuhr's theology in mind, the relationship between Christian ethics and State affairs, can be examined.

### **2.3.7 Christian Realism and State Ethics: A Not-So-Odd Couple**

The primary ideal that should lead nations according to Niebuhr was the paradoxical “impossible possibility,” or the Christian notion of *agape* in State affairs. By categorizing it as an “impossible possibility” Niebuhr was able to simultaneously avoid the pessimism of the cynic as well as the idealism of the liberal. The cynics believed that the Christian ethic of applying *agape* to State or social affairs was impossible. Due to this, the use of power and power politics should be maximized thus ignoring any and all forms of morality. Liberals on the other hand, believing in the perfectibility of humanity, ignored the realities of power in politics and coercion in general State affairs. An approach argued by Niebuhr was that although the true Christian Ethic could not be applied to the world, it nevertheless remained relevant as an “impossible ideal.” Niebuhr “insisted that such an ideal, although impossible to realize, does not lose its relevance or its authority as a norm directing and judging the behavior of men and nations” (Smith 43). Indeed, for Niebuhr, working towards this true Christian Ethic was just as important as actually achieving it. In the end, the journey was as significant as the destination.

Because Niebuhr believed in this pursuit in Christian Ethics at the State level, he was often critical of the United States in particular for avoiding, or flat out ignoring, the social dimension of Christianity and Christian ethics. Such refusal, Niebuhr believed “[...] stemmed from fear of ‘socialism;’ for example, the specter raised by the expression of ‘socialized medicine’ in Niebuhr’s time, and in ours, the conservative mantra against President Obama’s political agenda” (J. Smith 50).

Looking at issues beyond the social gospel, Christian realism also required examination of other larger concepts such as democracy and justice. The primary difference between Christian realists and liberal Christians was that the former understood that power, domination, and the pursuit of self-interest were all factors that were inherent in human interactions, especially when looking at Statecraft and politics. Analyzing Niebuhr’s understanding of Christian realism as a prophetic faith with the notion of human freedom Rice stated:

By denying that any historical standard of justice can be complete or final, the Christian realist draws attention to the fact that it is power that keeps a political system in place, not destiny. This recognition sometimes led Niebuhr to a political calculus that overestimated the importance of power at the same time that he undercut its legitimacy. Power, once recognized, seems to acquire a permanence that is peculiarly resistant to change. Change is not expected unless equally powerful forces are available to topple the existing order, and even then, the order that exists may be preferable to the anarchy that would result if it fell. (Rice 227)



The notion of power in politics and social organization was rendered more complicated once freedom was injected. This was especially true for Western democracies which valued freedom as the ultimate natural right bestowed by the Creator.

The paradox though, is easy to see: if humanity is to live in society, then freedom cannot be absolute as it would create anarchy. However, if society restricts freedom too greatly, then the very notion has been corrupted or destroyed. Power and freedom have always had a complicated relationship as freedom “undermines power” and is “inherent in human nature” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 227). Thus, the constant struggle between the two in democratic societies creates paradoxes, or as demonstrated previously, Hegelian dialectics. One such paradox has already been touched upon: freedom is guaranteed through power, yet a people must be vigilant in maintaining this freedom since once obtained, it may not be permanent, despite popular belief.

Finding a balance between power and freedom was, Niebuhr acknowledged, difficult and required constant supervision and revision. As Niebuhr proclaimed and constantly warned, societies, especially democratic ones, had to find the balance between the children of light and the children of darkness. He constantly reminded society of the follies within idealism, who he referred to as the “children of light,” arguing that “[...] the worst evils of history are derived not from pure selfishness but from self-interest clothed in the pretensions of ideals” (*Christian* 230). The numerous examples of the absolute abuses of and adherence to ideologies are almost countless during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The consensus though is that all resulted in untold human suffering. History is ripe with examples ranging from Germany’s focus on racial unification to Russia’s purification of the ideologically corrupt. Such pursuits resulted in the deaths of millions.

Niebuhr contended that the best approach to democratic society was through a Christian understanding. As Rice argues:

Although Niebuhr’s realism draws from many sources – biblical and secular- his is a Christian realism expressed through biblical understanding and what he regards as the best of Christian tradition. In brief, Niebuhr holds that ‘a Christian view of human nature is more adequate for the development of a democratic society than either the optimism with which democracy has become historically associated or the moral cynicism which inclines human communities to tyrannical political strategies.’ (124)

The major reason why a Christian understanding of human nature coincides best with the development of democracies is because Christianity, especially Protestantism, allows for a maximal amount of freedom to be inherent in, and natural for, humanity. Protestantism, not needing the central authority of a Church for a connection with God, permits humanity to benefit from the truest form of God's given freedom, as a person is "free" to connect directly to God. Niebuhr himself reflected this sentiment by simultaneously acknowledging yet criticizing Enlightenment thought:

The classical age did not put the principle of liberty in conjunction with the principle of equality, but neither was it discovered by the French Enlightenment. [...] The idea of the freedom of the individual did not emerge until it had the support first of the Christian faith, with its high value for the uniqueness of the individual and with its belief that the individual had a source of authority and an ultimate fulfillment transcending the community. (*Pious* 68)

Of course, connecting to God could only be achieved once true contrition and self-criticism regarding the role of sin in one's life had been realized.

Consequently, democracy was also best adept at managing the complete aspect of humanity's natural freedom and creativity. The pluralistic nature of democracies, which accepted various points of views on numerous subjects, allowed for the creative nature of humanity to best develop. Looking at the other side of the coin, democracies were also extremely well suited at managing the negative aspects of humanity's destructive capabilities for the same reason that creativity was encouraged: pluralism and varying points of view. Democracies were the best to grasp that citizens cannot be left completely alone to develop without structure or rules, as do to so would fall back into the contractualist problem of absolute freedom. Therefore, democracies simultaneously allowed and restricted citizens' liberties, ultimately allowing for creativity to flourish, without the former encroaching upon the creativity or freedom of others. Rice argues this by putting forward:

As we have seen, Niebuhr firmly believes that it is the governmental forms embedded in democracies that advance human creativity as well as constrain human destructiveness. Because Niebuhr was inveighing against the excessive optimism and idealism of American culture and continually emphasizing prideful self-interest, his belief in the self's capacity for justice is often ignored.

Such ignoring misses the point of one of the key reasons Niebuhr holds democracy in such high esteem [...]. (127)

Such high esteem for democracy was related to how democracies attempted to resolve inequalities and injustices by using political power and putting it at the service of justice and equality.

This was done in three ways according to Niebuhr. The first was through what would be considered democratic socialism where States distribute economic and political power in order to avoid a massive concentration of political power in the hands of a few. Classic democratic theory showed this through the basic notion of checks and balances between branches of government. Secondly, democracies avoided arbitrary abuse or use of power because they constantly put power under different types of scrutiny, often looking at social norms or moral standards. Finally, power was often put into check through some form of moral or religious authority which constantly argued or restrained abuses of power, looking beyond self-interest and focusing instead of on the societal need of restricting such power (*Irony* 135).

On the role of democratic states in managing justice within societies, Niebuhr and Dewey shared similar points of view. Both understood that modern industrial democracies were the result of various and competing interest groups. The difference between the two however, was Dewey's belief that this competition between groups could find a peaceful or common conclusion by using modernized Hegelian dialectics. Niebuhr maintained the contrary, in that power and self-interest were more prevalent than Dewey cared to admit. Niebuhr realized that these competing interest groups were more concerned with self-preservation rather than societal or global growth. Similar to Dewey however, Niebuhr contended that the rise of economic power surpassing political power was due to 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberals confusing justice with freedom by arguing that the "freer" a person was, the "fairer" the society in which the former lived. Niebuhr saw "[...] both liberty and equality as 'regulative principles' of justice. He knew that if taken to extremes, each would negate the other" (Rice 128).

These sentiments are common amongst political philosophers especially when considering the paradox that is juxtaposing liberty with equality. On the one hand, total liberty, often equated with complete negative liberty of non-intervention from State or societal forces, left unchecked would lead to gross inequalities. In this type of government democracy would devolve into oligarchy where a small minority holds power through great economic inequality. This type of government is a pervasion of the classic Aristotelian breakdown where traditionally, power would be in the hands of a few, the aristocracy. However, believing that a small noble minority would protect the interests of the masses are naive as they ignore the economic factors which

drive most people, including those of the nobility: self-interest. This pursuit would ultimately corrupt the rule of the few from *governing over* the masses to the few *ruling over* the masses in order take advantage of them.

On the other hand, total equality would naturally involve a massive amount of coercion from the State as it would need to be nearly omnipresent and omnipotent in order to ensure that the equality sought after, was achieved. This was most prevalent in the corruption of what would be “secular religions” such as Marxism or Communism in which the State had to act as guarantor of equality as the natural corruptions of the bourgeois class would always tempt the proletariat to gain more than his/her comrade.

Thus, a proper democracy was one that tried to gage the balance between equality and liberty, as both were elements in providing terrestrial, therefore, imperfect forms of justice. Similar to their understandings of the role of varying interest groups, Niebuhr and Dewey also shared a common view that democracy, and thus democratic justice, was impossible to perfect. The best that modern democracies could hope for was constant testing and repositioning of the arrow which is the indicator of equality and liberty. For Dewey, such testing was done through experience and a proper civil education to create a more informed electorate. This was an extension of Dewey’s views of positive and negative liberty, specifically the view that “liberty involves the right not to be excluded by others” (Kloppenber 397) and Dewey’s own admission that “the negative and positive aspects of rights” should be taken into account (qtd. in Kloppenberg 397). Niebuhr shared this approach and “[...] saw no permanent solution for the quest for justice. His was a pragmatic view, recognizing that the value of democracy lay with its being ‘a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems’” (Rice 128-129).

The difference between Niebuhr and Dewey however, on the question of democracy was related to their conception of power. Dewey believed that proper civic education could ultimately lead to a sense of justice as rationality would help citizens realize what was not only best for them, but for society as a whole. Niebuhr however, comprehended that justice without power is not justice at all. The power he chose to enforce this justice was through State power. Niebuhr argued that:

The vast complex balances of power on the social level and the conflict and tensions within such balances led him to conclude that ‘a balance of power is, in fact, a kind of managed anarchy.’ Therefore, the principle of government as ‘organizing center within a given field of social vitalities’ is on a ‘higher plane of moral sanction and social necessity than the balance of power’ as such. There is no automatic equilibrium of power achievable within the broad scope of

vitalities at work within society. [...] Government in a democracy – when it is working as it should and is not serving some vested interest – provides an organized center that is capable of arbitrating ‘conflicts from a more impartial perspective [...]’ This governing center must not only keep social conflicts within manageable limits and interject coercive power where the social instruments of arbitration are insufficient, but it must also ‘redress the disproportions of power by conscious shifts of the balances whenever they make for injustice’. (Rice 129).

According to Niebuhr, a proper democracy functioned continuously, adapting to the surrounding and evolving societal values, especially whenever these values “[made] for injustice,” by preventing a group from obtaining social justice. Examples of this can be seen in American history through either hard-won conflict (the Civil War) or through massive, and sometimes violent, legislative changes to ensure that social protections and justice are provided (Civil, Women, and LGBT Rights Movements).

Achieving such justice and managing conflicts is where Niebuhr’s conception of power comes into play. Finding the necessary balance was not easy task according to Niebuhr. To do so would have to rely on the people’s active participation and a strong sense of national introspection. However, the “realist” part of Niebuhr’s philosophy required a paradoxical skeptical idealism. Idealism was best countered using power via a central government. Nevertheless, he warned against the overuse, and specifically the abuse, of any form of central government. Thus, another Niebuhrian paradox presented itself in that on the one hand, some form of order had to be maintained through a central government, but on the other this power should not be absolute as it would repress any form of freedom or culture. Thus, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man Part II*, Niebuhr warned that “[...] the twin evils tyranny and anarchy, represent the Scylla and Charybdis between which the frail bark of social justice must sail” (268).

Democracies were the better forms of government according to Niebuhr because they were able, albeit sometimes not as well as in other periods, to constantly pitch tyranny against pluralism, resulting in a kind of democratic wisdom. These opposing forces can be better understood as the Founders’ notion of checks and balances. Through Constitutional powers and democratic processes, citizens were able to criticize, and keep the State powers at bay through

various means. What this allowed for according to Niebuhr was for changes and progress to be made, without sacrificing total control or succumbing to anarchy (Rice 129-130).<sup>32</sup>

Niebuhr's understanding of power politics should not be reduced to this simple idea however. To do so would make Niebuhr's philosophy no different to the other realists of his time who equated power with what was right, ignoring any sense of justice or morality within politics. Niebuhr felt that a Christian understanding of history could account for the rise of western democracies and the benefits that it provided. Rice summarizes Niebuhr's thought into three categories for explaining the link between Christianity and democracy.

1) Niebuhr's arguments revolved around the notion of human freedom bestowed by God. Ultimately, "[...] by viewing the self standing before God, Christianity gives the individual a source of authority from which he/she could challenge and even defy the authorities of this world [...]" (Rice 131). It should be noted here that Niebuhr's concept of "Christianity" referred to the Protestant branches of it, rather than Catholicism. A potential reason why Niebuhr did not specifically mention Protestantism, was that during his youth and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were several smaller branches of Protestantism which, though sharing several things in common, did have some differences here and there. These differences were most present for example, when it came to the divinity of Jesus, the role of the social gospel, or the importance of human action in salvation. Thus, if Niebuhr had mentioned Protestantism, he would have run the risk of including one branch at the expense of another. Also, though he viewed what would be considered mainstream Protestantism as the "truer" faith amongst Christianity, this did not mean he believed that Catholicism had not contributed to the growth and rise of democracies.

The theological defense for Niebuhr's belief is simple, and one that has been touched upon briefly before. Ultimately, Niebuhr felt that Christianity provided the best theological framework for freedom. Through Christianity, specifically Protestantism, the individual had a direct link with the Divine, and thus was simultaneously connected to this divinity, all while maintaining his/her independence. Catholicism did the same thing, however the role of the Pope, and the Catholic church as intermediaries between God and humanity created, for Niebuhr, an artificial divide. This divide ensured that the natural freedom enjoyed by humanity, and bestowed by God could never truly be fully enjoyed as the laymen were dependent upon the Church for not only their salvation, but also for the communal links as well. This dependence

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<sup>32</sup> Progress does not mean the technical or Deweyan sense of improving society through improved social knowledge or education. Rather, progress here is in the Niebuhrian sense which looks more at improving social justice, and achieving a better balance between equality and liberty.

made rebelling against the authorities, especially the authority of the Catholic church difficult, if not impossible, for any too great a move against Her authority, would ultimately result in excommunication. Such punishment was not only the removal of the person from the terrestrial community, but also from God's grace, guaranteeing ultimate damnation.

Other religions, specifically what he referred to as the "mystic" religions, were problematic in establishing a culture of freedom because of the various overly-structured and highly-hierarchical religious beliefs that directly influenced these societies. For these "mystic" religions, the ultimate goal was reunification with the Divine source or the One. Depending on the religion in question, this reunification could be done via Karma/Dharma/Reincarnation as with Hinduism or through meditation, spiritual enlightenment, and removal from society as with Buddhism or Taoism. The problem with these beliefs was that they removed the natural freedom that humanity enjoyed. Whereas in Christianity, an individual remains separate even after death thanks to the Christian notion of the afterlife which keeps the individual soul intact regardless of whether this soul is enjoying eternal bliss or damnation. However, in "mystic" religions, the trials and tribulations that the self endures during life (or lives) ultimately disappear, removing all sense of individuality from the soul as it rejoins the Divine, being absorbed back into and losing who s/he was.

These "mystic" beliefs had a direct social and political consequences. Because redemption was based on dharma/karma works to improve one's spiritual, and therefore, terrestrial status, one had to conform to strict rules about how society was governed. If, on the other hand, reunification was through meditation and a hermetic life, then the said individual rejected society and left others to handle the world's problems. Neither case, allowed for societal criticism and rebellion against authority. As a matter of fact, the reverse was true: such beliefs encouraged traditional social roles, and repressed or severely dampened any sense of societal evolution, especially when dealing with notions of justice.

Linking the idea of religion influencing societal structure back to the relationship between Christianity and democracy, Niebuhr's essential argument was that because Christianity enforced a theological relationship in which an individual maintained his/her individuality, even after death and upon meeting the Creator, humanity enjoyed a certain degree of freedom. Therefore, Christians living together in society and following this credence, maintain a notion of self-importance and self-worth and this independence and freedom that makes a political system which values varying opinions and pluralisms. The best system where such an idea could become reality, was naturally a democracy.

2) Niebuhr believed that "[...] in recognizing the self's destructive powers in addition to its creative ones, Christianity justifies checks on both the citizen and on those who govern [...]"

(Rice 131). As mentioned before, the paradox of humanity for Niebuhr was that a person was equally capable of great creativity and good, but also equally capable of great destruction. This stems from the religious notion that freedom was bestowed upon humanity by God. Other religions for a variety of reasons depended upon religious beliefs to maintain a rigid social hierarchy. This rigidity fostered a culture where the abuse and arbitrary use of power was common and difficult to extinguish. This stemmed from the religious belief that people belonging to certain echelons in society were not only physically better than others, but morally and spiritually superior as well. Thus the aristocratic lords, or members of the higher caste systems, could exercise their power over the lower castes/laypeople with near-impunity, as the social order dictated that the former were inherently better than the latter. Questioning or criticizing such a structure resulted in exercises of futility at best, or capital punishment at worst. Catholicism did not escape this particular criticism. This is probably one of the biggest distinctions between Niebuhr's analyses of Catholic and Protestant thought. Because Catholicism supported traditional monarchies and thus the aristocratic structure, the Church was equally as guilty as the "mystic" religions in fostering and promoting rigid societies.

Christianity, unlike "mystic" religions was able to ultimately circumvent the unyielding social and hierarchy structures through its understanding of sin. Due to the doctrine of original sin, Christianity knew that all of humanity's actions were tainted, therefore, these actions had to always be monitored and, if need be, subdued or redirected. Ironically, Catholicism, as well as certain branches of Protestantism (Calvinism, Puritanism, Lutheranism etc.), actually took the notion of sin to the extreme in their attempts to subdue it. By trying to control or remove sin from the world, these faiths had the perverse effect of quelling the natural creativity that God's freedom had provided. Politically and socially speaking, a belief in the inherent sinful nature of all humanity, makes democracy the best option as citizens will constantly keep each other in check for they know that their fellow citizens will be pursuing projects, not necessarily for the good of humanity but most likely for some inherent self-interest.

3) The most difficult attribute to understand about why Christianity helped foster democracy revolved around "[...] the availability of humility and forgiveness in Christianity, assuming it is true to itself, allows for that spirit of toleration without which democratic institutions are in constant jeopardy" (Rice 131). Niebuhr argued that Christianity, in all of its forms, established some notion of tolerance which would allow for a pluralistic society. The reason for the difficulty in understanding this last contribution is the authenticity of Christianity remaining "true to itself" and the lack of historic evidence to support such a notion.

Regarding the first comment, Niebuhr acknowledged that "authentic Christians," who follow the notion of *agape* in both forgiveness and sacrificial love, were difficult to find, if they



even existed. Such difficulty, especially within existing communities and varying notions of justice, arose because of conflicting notions of sin and creativity embedded in human nature. Similarly, finding a genuine “spirit of contrition,” that was “[...] out to issue from the self’s encounter with God and awaken us to the ‘the contingent character of all human claims and the tainted character of all human pretensions and ideals’” was unlikely to manifest within humanity (Rice 131-132). The reason was due to humanity’s reluctance to admit its own selfishness, greed, and pursuit of self-interests. Most people believe they are good, moral, and benevolent so they ignore, consciously or not, the true motives which drive them to any action. What is worse though, are the people who publicly admit their sin, but who are only doing so because they know that is what others want to hear.

From a historic perspective, there is very little evidence to show that Christians were or are more tolerant than other societies. In fact, “[...] Christians have often proved susceptible to intolerance and fanaticism based on what Niebuhr calls ‘arrogance in the name of Christ’” (Rice 132). Examples are numerous and date as far back as the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from persecution or forceful conversion of the pagans at the beginning of the Church, to removing Jews and Muslims from Spain and the dubious role of the Church and Christians on a whole in relation to the Holocaust.

Regardless of the criticisms against Niebuhr’s third contribution, it should be remembered that this was an idealized understanding where each Christian would be open to other communities and peoples because of firm and profound belief in forgiveness and grace. Essentially, Niebuhr felt that because Christians embodied the ideal of “hate the sin, love the sinner,” peaceful coexistence with various groups, communities, or cultures would not be a problem as it would result in a “live and let live” attitude. Such an ideal, may seem a little naïve, and potentially offensive if one were to take Niebuhr’s analysis a step further. Offensive in the sense that Niebuhr’s statement can be quite condescending as it equates other religions or beliefs automatically with sin and damnation as they require “forgiveness” for being different, from the humble and good Christian.

Politically and institutionally speaking, Niebuhr’s argument was based on the premise that due to the lack of grace and forgiveness instilled in their beliefs, other faiths would be more critical of what they would consider “otherness.” These societies would be homogenous in terms of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial makeups. Going further, Niebuhr’s argument suggests that because of this homogenous feature, the established social, political, legal, and economic structure would remain in place, most likely favoring those from the higher echelons rather than all of society. In such an environment, it would also be common for traditional monarchies, or authoritarian regimes to flourish. These regimes would not only reject any

notion of “otherness” but also severely punish it. Democracies on the other hand, theoretically embrace pluralism as these same governments share roots with Christianity and this means, if not acceptance, then tolerance of the “other.”

Niebuhr’s Christian realism thus focused on a strong and moral notion of justice which was based on the “impossible possibility” of *agape* in societal and political relations. Understanding that such an approach is impossible in a complex and modern society, Niebuhr nevertheless argued for the continual fight *towards* this possibility as it would ensure that concepts such as justice, equality, and liberty would constantly be readjusted to the changing society. Though Niebuhr’s philosophy can be criticized for depending entirely on a religious understanding and perspective of the world, he nevertheless, was able to add something previously unheard of in realist political theory: morality.

Up to this point, this research has focused on the various philosophical influences of both Dewey and Niebuhr all while looking at how the evolution of liberalism through the 18<sup>th</sup> and up to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries influenced both authors. Understanding these philosophical backgrounds, evolutions, and developments was necessary before launching into the next part of this work which will look at the practical application of Dewey’s Pragmatism and Niebuhr’s Christian realism to real world issues. The subjects reviewed were chosen because both faced these tribulations during their lifetimes. The subjects include: the use and place of religion in modern society, the proper relationship between the individual and society, as well as the proper role of the democracies, specifically the United States, in the world.

#### **2.4.0 Defined by Circumstance: A Historical Context**

Up to this point, the philosophical development of liberalism in general and an overall outline of Dewey and Niebuhr have been reviewed in order to demonstrate the continuous flow and evolution of these philosophies dating from the various Enlightenments. The purpose of this was to highlight the metaphysical differences between the two, and to demonstrate the common points between both thinkers. Such a comparison is by no means new, and has been made in the past, for example, Daniel F. Rice’s *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey*. He discusses some of the very issues that have, or will be discussed in this research in his excellent study.

However, the main difference between this research and Rice’s work is the categorization that Rice places on Niebuhr. For Rice, Niebuhr and Dewey are classified together under the similar branches of Pragmatism. Such a classification, at best underestimates, at worst

completely ignores, a very vital and real difference between the two thinkers: their age difference. Though both authors experienced several national and world changing events, the perspectives of both thinkers was not necessarily the same. These perspectives were due, not only to different metaphysical understandings of the world and also due to the generational gap between the two. It is a truism to state that people of different generations view and understand the same event differently. Therefore, putting Niebuhr in the same vein of Pragmatism overlooks this extremely important detail.

Instead, as this work has demonstrated, Niebuhr should be understood in a context of a rapidly changing world which gave him a unique perspective and point of view. The generational gap between the two, specifically of thirty-three years, means that events such as World War I were understood from entirely different perspectives. Thus, Niebuhr was energized by the passions of youth, whereas Dewey, well into adulthood, had a viewpoint tempered by age and wisdom, albeit an optimistic one.

This age distinction also generated drastically different conceptions of religion and society in general in terms of accepted norms and values, as well as the overall appropriate role of the individual within both of these larger communities. What will be discovered is that in spite of the drastic differences previously mentioned, both thinkers nevertheless arrived at similar conclusions. Where Dewey based his findings and overall understanding of the world on his metaphysics and epistemology, Niebuhr took a different path, one rooted in theology and rejection of epistemology to arrive at these conclusions. It is this external influence, combined with the internal drive of the Divine that distinguishes Niebuhr from Dewey's brand of Pragmatism. To best demonstrate this, the overall historical context of the two thinkers needs to be provided.

#### **2.4.1 The Double-Edged Sword of Revolutions: The Industrial Revolution and Its Consequences**

To truly understand the philosophy and metaphysics behind both Niebuhr and Dewey's visions of the world, one has to understand the historical context in which both developed. Both lived through extremely difficult and world shaping events that are challenging to comprehend from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century point of view. Nevertheless, this next section will briefly analyze some of these events to try and give an overall global vision.

In order to keep proper perspective on both authors, focus will lean more towards the early twentieth century than towards the nineteenth century. The exception to this is an event that transcended the two centuries, specifically the Industrial Revolution. Though both philosophers

came about at different points in the Revolution, they nevertheless were equally affected by it. Dewey, being born in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century had the benefit of growing up during the rise as well as peak of the industrial revolution. Niebuhr, born in the 1890s experienced its effects and consequences rather than seeing its birth and evolution. From an objective point of view, this could explain the reason for the metaphysical differences between the two. The industrial revolution promised much, economic growth and development for not only the nation, but also for the middle class. It is not hard to see why Dewey viewed technological and scientific progress as a genuinely good thing.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey touted the benefits that the mastery over the natural sciences had brought about, including the Industrial Revolution. He argued:

That science is the chief means of perfecting control of means of action is witnessed by the great crop of inventions which followed intellectual command of the secrets of nature. The wonderful transformation of production and distribution known as the industrial revolution is the fruit of experimental science. Railways, steamboats, electric motors, telephone and telegraph, automobiles, aeroplanes and dirigibles are conspicuous evidences of the application of science in life. (223-224)

He admitted that such progress “[...] has only been technical [...]” and that “[...] no modern civilization which [has been] the equal of Greek culture in all respects” (*Democracy* 224). This optimism, best expressed with these citations, but by no means limited to *Democracy and Education*, demonstrated Dewey’s belief in the potential redeeming powers of the industrial revolution as evidence of a step towards some form of perfection within society.

The Industrial Revolution was a new step in technological development which promised new possibilities, Dewey also believed that growth in technology would also give birth to a new form of intellectual revolution. This idea was demonstrated in a reflective passage where he argued that

[t]he industrial revolution was bound in any case to give a new direction to thought. It enforced liberation from other worldly concerns by fixing attention upon the possibility of the betterment of this world through control and utilization of natural forces; it opened up marvelous possibilities in industry and commerce, and new social conditions conducive to intervention, ingenuity,

enterprise, constructive energy and an impersonal habit of mind dealing with mechanisms rather than appearances. (*Human Nature* 212-213)

This citation is extremely revealing as it expresses and highlights Dewey's inherent optimism. It clearly demonstrates Dewey's attitude that progress, or the "betterment of this world" was only possible through the "control and utilization" of the natural sciences. Such actions would naturally lead to "marvelous possibilities," especially within human thought and philosophy thereby affecting all levels of human life.

Regardless of the hope that Dewey's philosophies and explanations provided, his approach and notion of the industrial revolution exemplified the problems that were expressed by Dewey's type of liberalism and Pragmatism. If the industrial revolution "opened up marvelous possibilities," it was only for a certain percentage and class of American workers. The majority of workers were forced to work in horrendous conditions, for long hours, often at their own personal health or risk as best explained in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Even women and children were not spared from the darker side of the industrial revolution. From a metaphysical point of view, Dewey's conception of the industrial revolution meant a further "disenchantment" of the world, as it would deal with "mechanisms" instead of "appearances." Following Dewey's logic, religion and theology would slowly fade away from the social psyche as the natural world, and the technological advances provided by the industrial revolution, would little by little peel away the "façade" of a religious explanation of the world. This would then ultimately lead to a truly "rational" world in which some form of perfectibility had been achieved.

Based on what has been analyzed thus far, it should come as no surprise that Niebuhr did not share Dewey's unbridled optimism. His experiences as a preacher in Detroit during the pre-war years hardened him to the promises and glories that the industrial revolution offered. For Niebuhr, the sins and problems of the industrial revolution were best expressed in Detroit and the automobile empires that existed there, most notably those of Henry Ford. The irony for Niebuhr was the public perception of Ford and how the workers would praise his name in spite of the economic inequalities that Ford's policies were creating. Niebuhr, however, was far less appreciative of Ford and the offers of the industrial revolution.

Prior to his skepticism however, Niebuhr, much like most of the working class in Detroit viewed Ford and the automobile industry in general as being a boon for society. The reason behind such idealistic visions of Ford and his company, were due to the very prominent and capable propaganda and advertising department. The accommodations, wages, and benefits provided by Ford and his company were considered to be the perfect example of the responsible

business model in which company profits were not gained at the total expense of the workers. However, as Richard Fox highlights in his biography of Reinhold Niebuhr, Ford was much more Machiavellian than anyone, including Niebuhr, had originally understood.

Between 1915 and 1921, one [of the Detroit clergy's] peers, Dean Samuel Marquis of the Episcopal Cathedral, personal pastor and intimate friend of Henry Ford, was the head of Ford's welfare bureau. The 'Sociological Department,' as it was called, was in part a spy agency to regulate workers' private lives, but it did sometimes defend employees – especially older men for whom the ever faster assembly line was a hardship- against capricious dismissals. As long as Marquis was in charge of the Ford experiment in welfare capitalism, no respectable Detroit pastor would publicly second-guess the company's humanitarianism. (95)

Niebuhr was not so easily convinced, especially after viewing the very large profits that Ford was claiming in the early twenties. Despite this skepticism, he nonetheless believed in the narrative presented by Ford and the like even though the “[...] wartime inflation and postwar recession had reduced the Ford worker's wage advantage to almost nothing” (Fox *Reinhold Niebuhr* 95).

This belief in Ford's economic model totally vanished in the late 1920s when he understood that “[...] Mr. Ford [was] a shrewd exploiter of a gullible public in his humanitarian pretensions, or [...] he suffer[ed] from self-deception” and that he was “[...] at least as naïve as he [was] shrewd” (qtd. in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 95). The weekly dealings with his congregation made Niebuhr realize how much the effects of the industrial revolution had had upon American society. In his view, the industrial revolution was best embodied by Ford and the automobile industry which were perfect representations of America. In a journal entry from *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* dated from 1927, Niebuhr emphasized his discontent with Ford, his business practices, and what he viewed as all that was wrong with America. Niebuhr wrote:

I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year. No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fill the depleted family exchequer, and how many more children lived on short rations during this period. [...] What a civilization this is! Naïve gentlemen with a genius for

mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not to make some provision for its unemployed. It is enough that the new car is a good one. Here is a work of art in the only realm of art which we can understand. We will therefore refrain from making undue ethical demands upon the artist. Artists of all the ages have been notoriously unamenable to moral discipline. The cry of the hungry is drowned in the song, 'Henry has made a lady out of Lizzy.' (181)

Niebuhr referenced two major criticisms of Ford and the industrial revolution in general. Part of Ford's genius was how he marketed his car and his brand in the communes which he had built for his workers. These communities would be financed by Ford, and included schools, markets, grocers etc. Though seemingly ideal, these communities were often highly regulated in terms of what the citizens were able to do with their wages, or even what they could do with their personal time. These enclaved communities were nothing more than gilded cages for Ford's workers.

Similarly, this passage highlights Niebuhr's criticism of the American capitalist system. Niebuhr felt that businesses, and governments in general, had an overall responsibility to protect its citizens/employees not only from physical harm, but also to provide a form of economic protection as well. Thus, Niebuhr fought, frequently and hard, for unemployment insurance and other benefits for the common worker. He even went so far as to write several articles criticizing Ford and American free-market capitalism at length in order to achieve these goals.<sup>33</sup>

Due to his theological conception of human nature and the world as it was, Niebuhr understood that the social capitalism falsely promoted by Ford and other business moguls was nothing but a pipe dream. Ultimately, economic self-interest was the primary driving factor for businesses in America. Niebuhr recognized that and criticized it frequently and severely. However, Niebuhr was not alone in feeling sympathy for the working class. Dewey too, felt that more needed to be done in order to protect the working individual. The difference though was the approach.

Niebuhr grasped, much like Madison, Hamilton and Adams before him, that power and appeals to the economic self-interest of corporations were going to be needed in order to persuade, convince or sometimes force, companies to look after their workers. Conversely

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<sup>33</sup> Three articles in total were published in *The Christian Century* in 1926 (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 94).

Dewey in an idealistically Jeffersonian approach, took the social science approach which argued that if companies only “knew better,” they would naturally be inclined to provide the necessary economic and social protections for workers.

The historic “event” that was the industrial revolution was perhaps inevitable given the economic and social situation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the almost inexplicable advancements in technology. Nevertheless, appreciating the industrial revolution was all a matter of perspective. On the one hand Dewey, who grew up more or less with the industrial revolution, saw it as an opportunity for perfecting society through science and rationalism. Niebuhr, on the other, saw the consequences and effects as nothing more than the darker sides of human nature, primarily the blind pursuit of self-interest, which had manifested and presented itself within societal institutions and corporations. In spite of these approaches however, both understood that there were still improvements to make, even if both arrived at this conclusion through different means.

These different means presented by both thinkers were due to the generational gap. This age difference greatly influenced the points of views and therefore, responses from both, justifying why Niebuhr cannot be classified as a Deweyan pragmatist, since the experiences, which are at the heart of *any* form of Pragmatism, were too different to be considered as equal. Thus, the events lived by Niebuhr during his years in Detroit helped set him on the path of becoming a different type of Pragmatist and liberal. However, the industrial revolution was only one such historic “event” which highlights this difference. Their differing experiences of the two world wars also shaped the thinkers.

### **2.5.0 The Great War and Its Aftermath: Liberalism in Crisis**

World War I, or the Great War, is simultaneously one of the most complex and most misunderstood wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This may be particularly true for many Americans who are vaguely aware that it was “caused” by the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. Most do not know about the complex intricacies between European nations, which had required one state to come to the aid of another in a conflict. Similarly, the historic animosities between several of the nations, primarily the French and Germans due to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, remained unnoticed or little remarked upon amongst the average American citizen. Even the extreme violence of modern trench warfare was not nearly as shocking for Americans as it was for the Europeans experiencing their first “modern” war. The reason for this almost apathetic attitude coming from the other side of the Atlantic is linked to a topic previously mentioned: The Civil War. Because brother fought brother, and modern trench warfare was



carried out in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were psychologically “resistant” to the newly encountered massacres throughout continental Europe.

Europe, however, was enormously scarred by World War I. At its end, there was an overall feeling of disillusionment with society and the world, which although emotionally and psychically damaging, led to interesting cultural movements such as DADA and Surrealism. Politically and economically, the horrors of the War to End All Wars, left its mark on the world. For political scientists such as Dario Battistella, the horrors of World War I actually led to the creation of several new departments and disciplines within universities, specifically chairs dedicated to international relations. He argues:

*A l'issue de la première guerre mondiale, le spectacle des massacres inédits et de la durée imprévue de la guerre de 1914-1918 incite des responsables universitaires à créer les premiers départements d'études internationales, et à assigner comme mission à la nouvelle discipline la recherche des 'meilleurs moyens pur promouvoir la paix entre les nations.'* (80)

These new departments would look at preemptive measures in order to avoid the atrocities that much of the world had to endure.

For Niebuhr and Dewey, World War I was a massively influential period as both experienced sharp evolutions in their political and social philosophies. This was by no means a unique or common phenomenon as American progressives in general were “[i]n the face of dismay” at the onset of the war, with many, Dewey included, who “scrambled to figure out how they had misread the signs of history” (Rodgers 274). Ironically, it was even perhaps the interwar period of 1919 to 1934 which saw the largest and most drastic development in their thought since both were burdened with the realizations that their ideologies were not holding up to world events. For Dewey, World War I and its aftermath represented a paradoxical juncture in his social and political thought. The industrial revolution and the mastery over the natural sciences that had brought humanity thus far had seemingly betrayed him as people and nations were still very much subject to their passions, self-interests, and overall selfishness, even in this newly “disenchanted” world. However, the end of World War I had also inspired new faith and energy into the liberal ideas of human rationalism, democratic institutions, and the liberal pursuit of economic self-interest.

One of the immediate existential and epistemological issues facing Dewey at the end of World War I was how “America’s role in [the war] in particular, raised intellectually and emotionally baffling questions about Pragmatism’s ability to find something to say about events

that were not easily explained as intelligent problem solving” (Ryan 157). These questions were raised by many of Dewey’s critics, but he was by no means immune to self-doubt. There was equally a major crisis in philosophy dating back to World War I which seemed to highlight the “emotionally shallow” aspects of Pragmatism such as how it was “light-minded” regarding subjects such as “death and violence and about ethnic and national passions” (Ryan 157). In sum, it appeared that Pragmatism was nothing more than a high-browed past time in which any serious issue such as life, death, nationalism, and human passion were ignored as there was no “intelligent” way to solve them.

Still, when faced with the tragedies of World War I, Dewey blamed determinism as the cause for the Great War. He equally held that the blind pursuit of nationalistic or “scientific” ideals were to blame. He did so all whilst at the same time continuing to argue for the notion of progress. He put forth that

[t]he world war is a bitter commentary on the nineteenth century misconception of moral achievement – a misconception however which it only inherited from the traditional theory of fixed ends, attempting to bolster up that doctrine with aid from the ‘scientific’ theory of evolution. The doctrine of progress is not yet bankrupt. The bankruptcy of the notion of fixed goods to be attained and stably possessed may possibly be the means of turning the mind of man to a tenable theory of progress – to attention to present troubles and possibilities. (*Human Nature* 286-287)

Dewey’s was not criticizing industrial revolution *per se*, rather it was the *misconception* of the philosophies, sciences, and theories developed and analyzed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century which were to blame. The main theory targeted by Dewey’s criticism was the idea of a fixed or deterministic end as adhering to any form of deterministic or finality was to miss the point entirely of Pragmatism and experience.

Having a fixed end for any goal or purpose was to either ignore reality, or worse, to purposely adapt experience and information to fit the narrow goals sought by said determinism. Dewey believed the Germans were guilty of doing this through the philosophies of Kant as well as Hegel and their “idealism” of human nature, progress, and science. As seen earlier, Dewey’s *German Philosophy and Politics*, highlighted the problems he saw in German culture, philosophy and the overall national identity which led to World War I. Analyzing the thought of a Nobel prize winner in literature, Dewey claimed that

[w]hen the philosopher Eucken [...] justifies the part taken by Germany in a world war because the Germans alone do not represent a particularistic and nationalistic spirit, but embody the ‘universalism’ of humanity itself, he utters a conviction bred in German thought by the ruling interpretation of German philosophic idealism. By the side of this *motif* the glorification of war as a biologic necessity, forced by the increase of population, is a secondary detail, giving a totally false impression when isolated from its context. The main thing is that Germany, more than any other nation, in a sense alone of all nations, embodies the essential principle of humanity: freedom of spirit, combined with thorough and detailed work in the outer sphere where reigns casual law, where obedience, discipline and subordination are the necessities of successful organization. (*German* 36-37).

Thus, progress was not the enemy. Instead, the true enemy was misinterpreting the notion of progress and grossly misunderstanding human nature and rationality. Ironically, Dewey’s criticism of German philosophy and nationalism would have resounded quite clearly with a Niebuhrian analysis. Dewey’s reproach can be viewed as an attack on German pride in believing itself a leading nation amongst others; the beacon of philosophy, reason, and culture. Sticking true to a Niebuhrian messianic-prophetic analysis, such belief would become, and in this case, actually was the reason for the nation’s downfall.

If World War I called up a certain level of doubt within Dewey’s liberalism, the end of the War, and specifically the advent of the League of Nations, Wilson’s Fourteen Points, and the overall general optimism of the 1920s quickly put such worries to rest. It is not hard to imagine a renewed, albeit more cautious, sense of optimism in Dewey. Even if the unfolding of the war had not gone according to plan, Dewey “[...] was unwilling to admit that the opportunity to turn the war to democratic ends had been lost, and when the president announced his Fourteen Point peace plan in January 1918, Dewey quickly lent his voice to the campaign for Wilson’s ‘new diplomacy’” (Westbrook 232). Nevertheless, during the 1920s, Dewey spent the time reanalyzing his own philosophy and the overall context of liberalism in general. Works such as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *Experience and Nature* (1925), and *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) attempted to reconstruct liberalism in a 20<sup>th</sup> century context, using advances in social sciences and new philosophical analyses, specifically through the lens of Pragmatism, to prevent a repeat of the disaster which was the Great War.

Niebuhr was not nearly as optimistic as Dewey when it came to the possibilities of humanity and the repercussions of the war. If nothing else, World War I, and the disaster that was the Treaty of Versailles represented everything that was wrong with modern liberal culture. Taking Dewey's criticism of German nationalism, Niebuhr instead applied it to all of Western culture. Where Dewey felt no qualms on criticizing Germany and its nationalism, Niebuhr, the descendant of German immigrants, was caught in a slightly more difficult predicament.

The paradox regarding the influence of World War I on Americans of German descent was that, where previously they felt as American as anything, despite many of them still speaking German in their towns, the war brought out a level of German patriotism not before seen by Niebuhr.

Raw feelings of loyalty to the Fatherland were re-emerging after decades of submission. For Niebuhr the problem of Americanization – for himself, his congregation, and his church- took on grave new meaning. It was no longer a matter of replacing one language with another, but rooting out one preconscious emotion in favor of another. It was a question of politics and ideology as well as culture. (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 43)

Niebuhr himself had made sure to learn and master English as soon as possible in order to adapt to American culture. He knew that this new found “Americanism” with which he identified would create many ideological and potentially political conflicts between the older generations and himself. But, “[h]is flag-waving enthusiasm was in part the typical immigrant's response to war: leap to the defense of one's new nation to prove one's allegiance” (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 43).

Where Dewey criticized German culture, and specifically its philosophy for causing the aggression of World War I, Niebuhr went on the attack domestically with his essay “The Failure of German-Americanism.” For Niebuhr, German-Americans “[...] had failed in two ways [...]” (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 44). His first criticism centered upon many German-American's inability to adhere to the American ideals. He wrote:

However, a nation needs and demands the loyalty of its citizens, not only when its existence is at stake or when it claims upon their allegiance are put with particular force by the crises of physical combat. In times of peace also it requires their loyalty – their loyalty to its ideals, and their allegiance to the principles upon which it has been founded. (“Failure” 14)

Not only should a people remain loyal to a country during times of war, but a people should remain loyal during times of peace. This loyalty was best expressed through adherence to the country's values. According to Niebuhr, German-Americans rejected American values prior to the war. The other major failure for German-American immigrants was how they not only rejected the host-country's values, but also rejected the best values of their home culture. Niebuhr explains that "[t]he German-American appears to have failed to meet either side of this obligation. He has been too often, not only indifferent to our ideals, but untrue to the virtues of his race" ("Failure" 14).

Niebuhr acknowledged that such a criticism could be levied against several different types of immigrants. However, German-Americans differed from others due to the richness of German culture. Ironically, where Dewey criticized Germany for its philosophical dogmas and almost stagnant culture of development focused on obedience and discipline, Niebuhr touted this very culture. Granted, Niebuhr recognized that the "[...] German-American has made contributions to our national life, but they have been economic rather than spiritual" ("Failure" 14). These contributions were relatively meaningless according to Niebuhr in the grand scheme of things when compared to the glory and prestige that was German culture and philosophy.

The two thinkers managed to come together on one criticism when it came to German culture and its philosophy. As previously reviewed, Dewey's major criticism against German philosophy was its determinism and its focus on the end goals, regardless of the means getting there. This meant that as long as the end goals were met, it did not necessarily matter if the individual and society suffered, as the *ends* were considered to be far more important than the *means*. Such was not the case for Dewey and Niebuhr. For both men, a proper philosophy and understanding of the world meant that evolution, change, and progress were, if not at the forefront of society, at least heavily considered in philosophy as they would guarantee the least amount of damage to the individual and society. This would be done in one of two ways: 1) seeing the negative consequences of a given idea or policy, a new approach would be attempted or 2) new discoveries along the way could very much *alter* what the *ends* actually were.

Niebuhr came to the same conclusion via a different route. Niebuhr's criticism focused on German-Americans' individualism in general; outside of any metaphysical context. Niebuhr claimed that

[German-Americans'] virtues seem to be individualistic rather than social. He has unwittingly served the nation through his qualities of prudence and thrift, but he has been indifferent to the problems of the nation that did not directly

affect him. He has manifested no great interest in a single one of the great moral, political, or religious questions that have agitated the minds of the American people in late years. His failure to do so is all the more striking because he comes from a country where interest in community welfare on the part of the individual has reached its highest development. ("Failure" 14-15)

This is not contradictory to what was previously said regarding Dewey's conception of German philosophy. There was a great focus on society, but *at the expense of the individual*. By pointing out German Americans' inability to think of, or be concerned with, larger societal issues, Niebuhr criticized them for their emphasis on the individual, while abandoning the needs of society which was the exact opposite of Dewey's theory. Regardless of the starting point of both authors, they nevertheless managed to come to a similar conclusion in which they found something "wrong" with "Germanness," whether it was expressed through second or third generation immigrants as seen by Niebuhr in German-American culture, or through a strict interpretation of idealistic philosophy as expressed by Dewey.

As the war progressed, Niebuhr's disillusionment with modern society greatly increased while reading about the violence and bloodshed in Europe. This disgust with the events was best expressed in an article, "The Nation's Crime Against the Individual" written for *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1916 in which he said, "[w]e cannot help but think of the thousands of graves on the countrysides of Europe that are mute testimonies to the tragedy of individual life as revealed in this war [...]" (609). To compound the difficulties of the individual in modern States, Niebuhr wrote on the "Paradox of Patriotism" in 1916. The paradox was that within modern governments, a State made

[...] loyalty and courage [...] ultimate virtues. [...] Modern states attracted the undivided allegiance of their subjects, [Niebuhr] wrote, because they had earlier broken down traditional loyalties to church, region, or class. But once a man was in uniform, the state could offer nothing 'to hallow his sacrifices' except 'the selfish and material [value] of securing his nation's prosperity.' (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 46)

Therefore, the tragedy was that a soldier who gave his life willingly for the sake of the State thought that such an act was the ultimate example of self-sacrifice, which indeed it was. However, what Niebuhr highlighted was the bitter irony behind the sacrifice. Though the

individual believed him/herself committing a sacrifice of *agape* which Niebuhr would have defended, the State instead perverted the sacrifice into one of national interests. In the same essay, Niebuhr argued:

The willingness of men to die in struggles that effect no permanent good and leave no contribution to civilization makes the tragedy of individual life all the more pathetic. The crime of the nation against the individual is not that it demands his sacrifices against his will, but that it claims a life of eternal significance for ends that have no eternal value. (qtd. in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 47)

For Niebuhr, the tragedy was that the soldier's sacrifice was entirely selfless and noble on a personal level. However, the purpose or results of the sacrifice were for the "selfish" ends of the State, and not for any holy, moral or truly altruistic purpose.

With the end of World War I, Niebuhr ironically shared in some of Dewey's optimism when it came to Wilson and his Fourteen Points. However, the communal liberal optimism between the two quickly dissipated once it became clear that the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles were at best, nothing more than simple fantasies or political smoke and mirrors, or at worst appeasing and supporting up-and-coming dictators and tyrants. Once this was realized, Niebuhr took on a drastically different point of view, leading to one of the defining points of his life and the establishment of his Christian realism.

### **2.5.1 The League of Nations: The Rise of Fascism and Totalitarianism**

When it became clear that the Treaty of Versailles was simply a tool of vengeance towards Germany, Niebuhr's liberalism quickly dissipated as he understood that beneath any form of international relations power structure, self-interest and pride were at the roots. Domestically, Niebuhr was equally disenfranchised by the growing "Ford-ism" of America. For Niebuhr, the rapid growth of industry, capitalism, and general depravity of the Roaring Twenties, broke the ties that bonded many Americans together because of the blind pursuit of (economic) self-interest.

As a preacher in Detroit, Niebuhr focused on the pursuit of happiness, however, it was a tempered happiness and one that was confused with materialistic satisfaction. As biographer Richard Fox notes:

His most recurrent sermon topic in the early 1920s – the pursuit of happiness-illustrates how he blended reassurance and reproof. His version of reassurance was the opposite of the positive thinking that he believed had taken over too many Protestant pulpits. True happiness, he repeated in one sermon after another, was akin to what the world called unhappiness. (*Reinhold Niebuhr 65*)

This may seem contrary, but for Niebuhr, true happiness was equivalent with humbleness. This is no surprise since for Niebuhr the ultimate sin was pride, and therefore, it was only logical that the method for redemption was found within its opposite: humility. Niebuhr himself actually spoke on the necessity of this paradox via his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. He wrote:

Happy are they who hunger and thirst. Happy are the poor in spirit. [...] Happy are those not who have but who are seeking. [...] Happy are they that mourn. The more spiritual power increases the more pain increases. The capacity to love also produces the capacity to grieve. Peculiar paradox. [...] If you have drugged your conscience you are not bothered but you are not happy. If your conscience is quick and active [...] it will cause you many an anxious moment. (qtd. in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr 65*)

Niebuhr's statements may not lead many to jump on the bandwagon of his version of Protestantism. However, if Niebuhr's understanding of happiness is analyzed from his point of view, it is easy to understand what he meant. Returning to Niebuhr's social and religious ethics, a truly functioning society was one that maintained a "tolerable" and admittedly, imperfect justice. This terrestrial justice maintained a level of social cohesion throughout various allegiances, beliefs, customs etc. Therefore, the contradiction was that by feeling the "pain" of others and thereby reducing one's happiness, a person could then sympathize with another in order to help a metaphorical brother/sister alleviate their pain. Ultimately finding the Niebuhrian sense of happiness, meant reestablishing societal bonds and thereby reducing the pain, anxiousness, and loneliness within a given community. Doing so would pull the community up to a create a form of happiness which, albeit was neither perfect nor modern society's understanding of it, was still a "good" happiness.

Niebuhr's preaching style and popularity soon increased rapidly throughout Detroit and he was called away to give several sermons and lectures throughout the US and abroad. One such invitation was when he was at Toynbee Hall and where he met some very influential speakers,



including the British Labour Party leader, and soon-to-be Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. The mid-twenties were an interesting period in geo-political events as the French were doing their best to extract the most out of Germany as reparations for the devastation of World War I. The American and British delegates, speakers, and guests spent most of the time discussing the current political situation, notably the Ruhr.

Much of the talk at Toynbee Hall focused on the French occupation of the Ruhr, Poincaré's six-month-old effort to extract unpaid German reparations by seizing control of the country's major industrial center. The British speakers and American visitors took turns condemning the invasion as a threat to peace and aggravation of the German people's suffering. Neither group saw any justice in the French claim that their economy was also a shambles thanks to an earlier German invasion. In the conflict between the two continental powers, Niebuhr's ancestral allegiance came to the surface. His dislike for the French was intense; the British attitude of leniency toward the Germans on the reparations issue was for him one more proof of their superior political wisdom. (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 78)

It was clear for Niebuhr that the French extortion of the Treaty of Versailles was a thinly-veiled attempt to maximize profits while simultaneously creating devastating losses for the enemy. This was not justice, but rather blind national self-interest and vengeance.

While visiting the Ruhr, Niebuhr saw, firsthand, the devastating psychological, social, and economic effects of World War I. Where once the French feared the German soldiers and viewed them as the invading force, the tables had now turned, and not for the better. Niebuhr commented on such changes in his diary. He noticed that

[t]he atmosphere is charged with [hatred]. The streets are filled with French soldiers in their grey-blue uniforms. Schools have turned into barracks. Germans turn anxious and furtive glances upon every stranger. [...] If you can gain the confidence of Germans so that they will talk they will tell you horrible tales of atrocities, deportations, sex crimes, etc. Imagination fired by fear and hatred undoubtedly tends to elaborate upon the sober facts. But the facts are bad enough. (*Leaves* 46)

There was no doubt in Niebuhr's mind: The Great War had been fought for few valid reasons, and the consequences were much greater and darker than previously imagined. The events and horrors witnessed in the Ruhr brought Niebuhr to discover pacifism.

However, Niebuhr's pacifism was still tempered with the realities of power politics. Far from equating pacifism with inaction, Niebuhr still maintained that the best means of protecting Germany, and thereby ensuring some form of tolerable justice, was through a strong American intervention in European politics. His reasoning was that America, as well as to a certain extent, England, were the only States not driven by any form of retribution. These two countries could potentially resolve any form of issue or conflict without the parties involved claiming favoritism (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 79).

As the 1920s unfolded, it was clear that there was little that America, nor the League of Nations would do to actively intervene in any sort of international conflict or crises. The constant capitulation to the demands of the French in the early 1920s and the converse submission to Germany of the 1930s demonstrated how weak, petty and ineffective the League was. Domestically, Americans were isolating themselves from any type of massive world conflict as they were enjoying the benefits of the Roaring Twenties and the geographic isolation which they believed spared them the international problems that were literally on the other sides of oceans. Taking into consideration the selfishness of humanity and the hypocrisies found within governmental actions, Niebuhr abandoned his very brief, and naïve, foray in pacifism. He understood that nations, and communities in general, always acted within the confines of egoism. Heavily criticizing the "moralists" and those liberals, notably Dewey, who believed in the perfectibility of humanity through developing social intelligence and general improvement in education, Niebuhr instead knew that such ideas ignored the notion of power and conflict. Thus he wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

Moralists who have observed and animadverted upon the hypocrisy of nations have usually assumed that a more perfect social intelligence, which could penetrate and analyse these evasions and deceptions, would make them ultimately impossible. But here again they are counting on moral and rational resources which will never be available. What was not possible in 1914-1918 when the world was submerged in dishonesties and hypocrisies (the Treaty of Versailles, with its pledge of disarmament and the self-righteous moral conviction of the vanquished by the victors, being the crowning example), will hardly become possible in a decade or in a century, or in many centuries. Nations will always find it more difficult than individuals to behold the beam that is in

their own eye while they observe the mote that is in their brother's eye; and individuals find it difficult enough. (106-107)

There was no better example of this drive for power and national self-interest than Germany in the 1930s with the rise of Hitler.

While in Germany, Niebuhr observed how ineffective democratic socialism was against the rise of National Socialism. What could help fight against the seemingly ominous and omnipresent rise of fascism throughout Europe and potentially even the US? Though Communism was rising in popularity, he held that it was not the answer as it was too deterministic and removed the God-given freedom that humanity enjoyed. Similarly, democratic socialism had just proven its uselessness against the rise of totalitarian regimes. This is not to say that Niebuhr believed that socialism held no role to play in American politics. His criticism was that, socialism in the US “[...] had never left its infancy” (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 149). The only viable option for Niebuhr, which could simultaneously defend against the horrors of Fascism while simultaneously providing an outlet for the creativity and freedom of humanity, was via Christian realism which would “[...] use force and even violence if necessary in the battle for justice, but keep the workers' movement under constant judgement” (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 149). With the rise of Hitler, and his unabashed territorial takings throughout the early 1930s, Niebuhr understood that the only way to stop evil was to fight it.

In *Moral Man*, Niebuhr further highlighted the inefficiency of pacifism when thrown against an unwavering enemy such as Fascism. He used the example of pre-Mussolini Italy when the socialists were in power. When it became clear for the Italians that Fascism was on the rise and was becoming a force to be reckoned with, the socialist leaders suddenly “adopted pacifist principles” (*Moral Man* 268). These principles, such as “not provoke[ing]” the Fascists and to “suffer any provocation with serenity” or “[t]o win, be better than [one's] adversary” [sic] were indeed noble and followed a “turn the other cheek” mentality. However noble these principles were, they were useless when compared to the military strength, and power of the Fascists (*Moral Man* 268).

Pacifists, whom Niebuhr would later consider to be the “Children of Light,” were equally erroneous in analyzing the importance and possibility of achieving a “universal principle” or world community (*Children* 158). Due to technological advancements and an overestimation of human pride, the “Children of Light” grossly miscalculated the chances of achieving a universal principle. Niebuhr said as much when discussing the convergence of these two forces of moral and technological cohesion which “[...] creat[ed] such a powerful impetus toward the establishment of a world community that the children of light regard[ed] it as a practically

inevitable achievement” (*Children* 158). As usual, these “children” failed to take into account the “[...] power of particular forces in history” (*Children* 158).

Hitler and the National Socialists were the best examples of this power with harnessing the power of the convergence between moral and technological forces. What was supposed to have been the keys to the City of God on Earth, ended up being the downfall for much of the Western World, as the Nazis perverted this convergence into the ideology of the master race. Niebuhr wrote:

The Nazi effort to unify the world under the dominion of a master race came close enough to success to prove how easily universal forces in history may be appropriated and corrupted for egoistic ends. Long before a genuine universal community can be established mankind must go through a period in which corrupt forms of universalism must be defeated. (*Children* 160)

The way to do so was to maintain a Christian realist approach of balancing the realities of power politics with the notion of tolerable justice. This meant that force and violence were authorized and preferable in situations in which pacifism, signifying here the refusal to engage in any type of violence, would result in greater crimes and suffering than the consequences of violence could engender. Put simply, it was better, from a Christian realist position to fight against the evils of totalitarianism using violence and risk lives, rather than do nothing and allow the untold suffering and injustice that brought about by these regimes to continue.

If Niebuhr actively engaged in the international crises of the end of the twenties and beginning of the 1930s Dewey was more restrained and “[...] played but a minor role in the controversies over American foreign policy engendered by the rise of fascism in Europe” (Westbrook 510). The reason for Dewey’s approach stemmed from the lessons learned during the First World War in which he discovered that “[...] war was a means of social action which set its own agenda apart from the best intentions of the honorable men and women who might attempt to use it to further justice and democracy [...]” (Westbrook 510). Therefore, in spite of the best intentions of honorable men such as Woodrow Wilson, who had a truly liberal version of the world and hopes following the Great War, Dewey quickly realized that other powers and actors would always intervene to circumvent any potentially minute positive influence that war could bring about in affecting true global change.

Following this ideology was difficult as it meant that Dewey became a staunch anti-intervention advocate during the 1930s despite the rise of fascism, Nazi Germany and even the attacks on Pearl Harbor. It was doubly problematic given that he was equally a fervent defender

of democracy and liberalism as being true stalwarts against the rise and horrors of fascism. Thus, “[t]his tension between his antifascist and antiwar convictions led him to make some fine distinctions between the sort of antifascist policies he would or would not support” (Westbrook 510). Such opposition was often criticized heavily from philosophical opponents, including Niebuhr. However:

Dewey’s opposition to American participation in another world war was not grounded, as some of his critics contended, in confidence in the essential goodness of human nature and the power of rational discourse to resolve conflicts of interest with the fascist powers but rather in deep-seated fears about the consequences for democracy in the United States of another war. (Westbrook 511)

The irony of this, as well as of Niebuhr’s sharp criticism was that both thinkers felt that American intervention at one time or another, would ultimately damage American democracy. For Niebuhr, his anti-interventionism during World War I was due to a fear of further splitting an already divided country. Dewey’s fears were rooted in what the perverse effects of fascism would bring about. He carried the lessons of World War I with him and did not want to make the same mistake twice as “[...] the war and its meaning for his vision of the world were constantly on Dewey’s mind. Indeed, Dewey’s espousal of near isolationism during the 1930s tempts one to say that the war was on his mind from 1915 until he died [...]” (Ryan 156). Already, Dewey was critical of modern warfare’s effects on western democracies:

There is no single force so completely destructive of personal freedom as is modern war. Not merely the life and property of individuals are subjected by war to external control, but also their very thought and their power to give them expression. War is a kind of wholesale moral enslavement of entire populations. Peace is a necessary and urgent condition of attainment of the goal of freedom. (Qtd. in Rockefeller 311)

Dewey’s was that any military involvement in Europe would lead to a situation in which the treatment was worse than the disease. By intervening in war-torn Europe, America potentially sacrificed its democratic essence and risked bringing back home a stronger and more violent form of fascism or totalitarianism back home. For Dewey

[i]t [was] quite conceivable that after the next war we should have in this country a semi-military, semi-financial autocracy which would fashion class division on this country for untold years. In any case we should have the suppression of all the democratic values for the sake of which we professedly went to war. (Qtd. in Westbrook 511)

Following Pearl Harbor, Dewey was forced to come to terms with the very real threat that was totalitarian Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. Thus, he gave into American interventionism, but made sure that he was constantly keeping a democratic eye on “[...] preserving civil liberties [...]” (Westbrook 513).

Understanding the evil that fascism and totalitarianism represented to the world, “Niebuhr’s most pressing concern was to establish a firm intellectual foundation in support of the advocates for intervention” (Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* 57). Niebuhr and those agreeing with him like Lewis Mumford and Waldo Frank, felt that contemporary liberals and pragmatists, such as Dewey, were using expediency as a means of avoiding war. For Mumford and Frank, Pragmatism’s anti-intervention approach was simply a reflection of Pragmatism’s base idea of adapting to situations and abandoning any type of moral or theoretical value framework. For Mumford et. al, “Pragmatism’s rational problem-solving way of looking at the world gingerly sidestepped the need to condemn the immorality of Nazism and to issue a call to arms against it” (Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* 57).

Niebuhr’s reflections on the debate between interventionists and isolationists was a bit different. It was not a simple matter of instilling values into modern society or even pragmatically dealing with the issues. Niebuhr’s problem with the debate was that it ignored the theological and metaphysical lapses in arguments proposed by both religious and secular liberals. “What had to be faced was what [Niebuhr] considered the inadequacy of liberal ideas about man and society to answer this question: How can one know what is morally wrong without knowing what is objectively?” (Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* 57-58). What Niebuhr was attempting to highlight was modern society’s lack of moral or religious authority at the center of its life. From this disenchantment of the world, authority was relative as it depended on the current actors and the current situation. This made humanity “feel better” by removing any type of external judgements on the various sins committed, but what it did not do was provide an accurate moral framework by which to judge human actions; good or bad. This relativism in relations to authority was nothing more than the modern expression of pride as humanity refused to allow itself to be judged by any external forces. Instead, modern society was its own judge, and very few, Niebuhr being the clearest example, had a problem with that.

Instead, Niebuhr felt that a return to a self-critical analysis in which judgement came, not from society or from the egoism of the self, but rather from an external and divine source was needed. Once communities were able to critically self-analyze, they could (re)discover the moral framework and foundation needed in order to adequately judge and act against the evils presented by Hitler and the other Axis Powers. Failure to be necessarily self-critical would lead to failure as pursuit of victory would not be “just,” but instead a reflection of the sin of pride, thereby corrupting any and all victories gained by the Allied Powers.

The consequences of the Allied victories though celebrated, were still cause for philosophical reflection for both authors. This was not because both felt that the victories were undeserved. Rather, both felt that the after effects of the war, the rising Superpower status of the US and the USSR, and the general reconstruction era would bring about unforeseen challenges. However, before launching into the Cold War, the Nuclear Age, and Communism, further analysis on the appropriate role of humanity within society needs to be discussed. Only through understanding how both thinkers understood the supple relationship between the individual and society, can a larger comprehension and context such as the Cold War be understood. Therefore, to set the groundwork for the second half of the twentieth century, Dewey and Niebuhr’s concepts of society, and the elements within, will be discussed.

### **2.5.2 Different Paths; Same Destination: Democracy and Liberalism**

In keeping with proper liberal tradition, Niebuhr and Dewey had held high esteem for the place of society in the individual’s life. Rather than considering the individual and society as opposing forces which were constantly a state of conflict with one another, both felt that the society was, in contrast to what conservative or *laissez faire* liberals would have one believe, the essential element in guaranteeing an individual’s “true” freedom. This philosophy was very much the counter-current of what Dewey considered to be the “faux” liberals of the early twentieth century. Returning to a previously discussed concept, Dewey and Niebuhr felt that the proper role of society, and consequently, an individual’s place within it, was one in which a combination of positive *and* negative liberties was upheld.

It was primarily negative liberties which were defended by most *laissez-faire* liberals: individuals were allowed to do as they desired as long as their actions in no way negatively infringed upon the liberties or lives of others. If true negative liberties were respected, then the State would have no reason to “interfere” in the private matters of its citizens. Thus, the State was nothing more than a means of protecting its citizenry from any external threats such as invasion or maintaining domestic security when one citizen infringed upon the liberties of

another. Governments had no business in meddling in economic or political matters. Adding to this approach was the belief in the innate brilliance of human reason. Proponents of negative liberties argued that the citizenry knew its interests better than some omnipotent and bureaucratic State.

For Niebuhr and Dewey, such a concept misunderstood the very nature of not only the citizenry, but of society itself. Though expressing the idea in different ways and to varying degrees, both Niebuhr and Dewey both felt that a responsible State was one that not only protected negative liberties, but one in which *positive* liberties were guaranteed as well. These liberties included some form of social protection against economic inequalities either through legislation or direct State intervention. Both philosophers understood that political freedom meant nothing without some form of economic freedom to go with it. Dewey even went further to say that true freedom depended as much upon developing culture. He stated that

[t]he situation that has developed since [the time of John Adams] may well lead us to reverse the ideas he expressed and inquire whether political freedom can be maintained without that freedom of culture which he expected to be the final result of political freedom. (*Freedom* 13)

Freedom was therefore, something more than simply rights written on a piece of paper. True freedom was a combination of factors, ranging from the political rights to express one's opinion, to cultural development, and to the economic sphere as well.

For example, a citizenry with the right of freedom of speech or the power to vote, meant nothing if they could not feed themselves or were at the total servitude of the higher economic classes and industrial powers. Similarly, though the industrial age may have brought about new economic and technological advances for the country, this did not mean that those caught at the low end of the new economic hierarchy should be bound by the chains of industrial slavery. Both thinkers understood that with technological advances, societal improvements had to follow as well, especially in terms of protection for the working classes.

These protections would be best expressed through analyzing how each thinker envisioned the appropriate relationship between the individual and society. To do so, a few elements of the society in which both lived need to be analyzed. The first element that will be examined is how Dewey and Niebuhr both viewed democracy, as not only a governmental regime, but as a way of life and ideology. Doing so will demonstrate that as modern pragmatists such as Rorty in *Philosophy and Social Hope* thought that, though not a perfect form of



government, western democracies provided the best chance for individuals and societies to achieve a tolerable balance between freedom and equality.

### **2.5.3 The Nature of Democracies: Same Debate, Different Time Period**

In spite of sharing a fundamental belief in the importance of democracy, Niebuhr and Dewey differed greatly on the *definition* of democracy itself. For Dewey, democracy was more than a governmental regime in which the majority ruled. Instead, Dewey felt that democracy was a culture, and had a way of life. Maintaining democracies had to be more than just upholding the institutions, it had to be about setting up democratic values.

The maintenance of democratic institutions is not such a simple matter as was supposed by some of the of the Founding Fathers – although the wiser among them realized how immensely the new political experiment was favored by external circumstances- like the ocean that separated the settlers from the governments that had an interest in using the colonists for their own purposes; the fact that feudal institutions had been left behind; that so many of the settlers had come here to escape restrictions upon religious beliefs and form of worship; and especially the existence of a vast territory with free land and immense unappropriated natural resources. (Dewey, *Freedom* 23)

According to Dewey, establishing a democratic culture meant taking into consideration the external effects surrounding the institutions themselves. This meant that when analyzing its very essence, a democracy was more than just the sum of its institutional parts.

Niebuhr agreed with Dewey on the importance of external influences on American democracy. This statement was clearly echoed in Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*. However, the difference was in the various significations given to any historic circumstance. According to Niebuhr, historic happenstances were not Divine signs raining praise or passing judgements. Fortunate situations were nothing more than a combination of good timing, spacious geographic opportunity, and geopolitical fortune. In *Irony*, Niebuhr heavily criticized how Americans, including Dewey, took these fortunate circumstances as signs of Divine selection or as proof that America was *inherently* better than the rest of the world. For Niebuhr, America was no better or worse than other countries or empires. The United States was simply more fortunate thanks to its geography, geopolitics, history, resources, and “clean slate” status.

Contrary to Dewey's idealism, Niebuhr adopted an unsurprisingly realistic notion of democracies and their institutions. For Niebuhr, democracies were a tool to keep human nature, and more importantly, human greed in check as Eric Patterson summarized:

Niebuhr's fundamental principle of practical democracy is not one of political equality, suffrage, or individual liberty. Rather, it is the institutionalization of checks on power. Democracy checks the license of the governed with the rule of law and formalizes mechanisms for distribution of authority and resources. Democracy likewise checks the power of factions and communities and similarly limits the power of even of government authorities. Niebuhr cites Madison's caution about factions and points to the three great divides in Western public life: ethnicity, religion, and class. Niebuhr recognizes that it is only in democracy that these competing claims can be adjudicated and that their interests of all can be partially served. In fact, it is only in democracy that groups can safely call for change, and at times get it, without resorting to revolutionary upheaval. In sum, these 'checks and balances' are pragmatic in their appreciation of the need to balance power with countervailing power and all for peaceful conflict. ("Christianity" 13)

This was in part due to his constant emphasis on how human nature and relationships were inherently filled with competing self-interests and expressions of power. This is not to say that he was completely dismissive of democracies. Niebuhr acknowledged the importance of democracies in safeguarding freedom as it was an "ultimate norm of political organization." This was due to the fact that "no better way has been found" to reign in the arbitrary use of power by "making every center of power responsible to the people whom it affects" (*Nation* 127). Niebuhr instead had a more reserved appreciation of democracies for he knew that they were the best place for these conflicting interests to express themselves in relatively peaceful manners. Likewise, these competing interests would be represented through pluralistic parties or factions. For Niebuhr, Dewey and other idealists "[...] [were] always embarrassed by the existence of power in social relationships, and [liberalism's] inability to take this factor into the center of its thinking [which] rendered its social policy recommendations dangerous and misleading" (Rice, *Circle* 56). Niebuhr ultimately criticized Dewey's democratic idealism for ignoring the darker sides of human nature, and the role power and self-interest played. Still, Niebuhr did acknowledge that democracy was "advantageous" simply because of its adaptability to "new human innovations" (Patterson, "Christianity" 13).

Admittedly, Niebuhr knew that Dewey's appreciation for democracy was "highly romantic" but knew that

[...] Dewey was not prone to idolatrizing the nation. Niebuhr's criticisms of Dewey's 'religious' view of democracy centered on what Niebuhr regarded as his typically naturalistic myopia toward the deeper spiritual aspirations of human beings that Niebuhr felt no sociopolitical community could not fully express or satisfy. (Rice, *Circle* 73)

The statement may seem paradoxical or misleading, but in order to grasp Niebuhr's criticism, and more importantly, his conception of democracy, one has to return to both philosophers' view on human nature. Dewey believed that with the proper circumstances such as a proper education, the appropriate societal structure in which there were strong economic and political protections, and a flourishing and developed cultural scene, a person could reach his or her full potential and thus his/her full rationality. The basic theorem was: if only all members of society could achieve this level of rationality, then society would naturally improve because its citizens would "know better." Niebuhr on the other hand, held a more realistic view of human nature, knowing that all social relations had some element of power struggle or conflict of interest involved in them, and that no matter how "educated" or "enlightened" individuals were, these conflicts would never dissipate as easily as Dewey and other idealists had suggested. In the end, Niebuhr felt that Dewey's conception of democracy was noble, but fundamentally flawed due to its inability to properly assess human nature, power, and conflict.

This is not to say that Niebuhr discounted or completely discredited democracy as a whole. If anything, Niebuhr understood that democracy was the best choice available given the horrors inflicted upon the world by other regimes including totalitarian Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. To demonstrate this, Niebuhr published a work which has been previously mentioned, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. What was unique about this work is best highlighted through its subtitle: *A Vindication of Democracy and A Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. Niebuhr both criticized the traditional arguments used to defend democracy and argued on its behalf. The criticisms he launched revolved around "[...] the confidence of both bourgeois and proletarian idealists in the possibility of achieving an easy resolution of the tension and conflict between self-interest and the general interest" (*Children* 5). Democracy has to consider the constant struggle between individual freedom and community freedom for "[...] ideally democracy is a permanently valid form of social and political organization which does justice to two dimensions of human existence: to man's spiritual stature and his social character;

to the uniqueness and variety of life, as well as to the common necessities of all men (Niebuhr, *Children 2*). The issue for Niebuhr was that the arguments used by many liberals, romantics, and idealists were based on the moral or philosophical “superiority” of democracy in relation to other types of governments. Niebuhr believed Dewey to be the best example of how all of these thinkers failed to take into consideration conflicts of interest and roles of power within these same democratic societies. Instead, Niebuhr contended that the idealistic “children of light” learn from the “children of darkness” without succumbing to the moral cynicism which plagued the latter. Democracies had to maintain their ideological and philosophical idealism while simultaneously understanding the nature and role of power, coercion, interest, and conflicts inherent in human nature and societies.

From a political perspective, Niebuhr disagreed with Dewey equally on the role of politics and institutions in democracies. Always keeping in mind the inherent combativeness of human nature, Niebuhr recognized the “[...] importance of institutional structures for achieving both an effective balance of power in society and workable forms of democratic governance in which government itself is held in check” (Rice, *Circle 76*). This view of democracy was nothing more than Niebuhr’s religious conception of human nature put into political light. Because human beings were children of God, they were accordingly bestowed with the ability of unlimited potential and self-transcendence. These traits allowed humans to be aware that they were both a part of, and independent from, nature. The other side of this potential and self-transcendence was the problem that any prospective creativity found within humanity could be used for good or ill. This ill was best expressed when humanity sinned by trying to exceed their mortal limits and become Godlike. Democratic institutions, according to Niebuhr, were the best at simultaneously allowing creative freedom to develop while simultaneously keeping the negative aspects of this potential in check. Creativity was expressed thanks to pluralistic societies allowing for varying political opinions, ideologies, and peoples. This same creativity was equally restricted through institutional blocks, laws, and coercive forces requiring these same different peoples, communities, and ideologies to live in a relative, and undoubtedly unstable, peace. Likewise, democracies were also able to *attempt living agape* or applying it to justice due to their changeable and evolutionary reflection of societal norms and values. The analysis of Niebuhr and Dewey’s approaches on democracy have a hint of irony to them as Rice correctly points out in that “[t]here is at least a modicum of irony in that Niebuhr was the one who stressed the pragmatic note of ‘proximate solutions for insoluble problems’ while Dewey, the instrumentalist/pragmatist, would devote so much time and energy to providing a devotional rhetoric for democracy!” (*Circle 76*).

When it came to democracy, the theologian became the hardened pragmatist while the experimental instrumentalist, who viewed democracy on almost religious terms, became a sort of political theologian. This statement will be further developed and analyzed throughout other parts of this research, specifically when analyzing each respective author's view on other topics such as religion and liberalism, as well as Niebuhr's overall philosophical evolution.

Both Dewey and Niebuhr knew that democracy and freedom were fundamentally linked. Niebuhr recognized that "[d]emocracy in the West is both a political system and a way of life [requiring] a high degree of literacy among its citizens, a sense of dignity of the individual but also a sense of responsibility to a wider community than [the] family" (*Irony* 123-124). In spite of the differences argued by Niebuhr, he nonetheless knew that democracies were the best chance for humanity to express the God-given inherent freedom which would simultaneously allow for the improvement of the individual's situation in society and the overall betterment of the latter through an improving and evolutionary justice.

Dewey and Niebuhr's differences on the role and importance of democracy were simply 20<sup>th</sup> century versions of debates previously carried about at the beginning of the United States itself. As Rice contends, "[...] the two individuals within the pantheon of American democratic theorists to whom Dewey and Niebuhr were drawn were Thomas Jefferson and James Madison – Dewey to Jefferson and Niebuhr to Madison" (*Circle* 77).

As mentioned in the first part of this research, Jeffersonian democracy was one in which human rationality, education, scientific enlightenment and self-governance were the tools to create a functioning and evolving democracy. One does not have to look too far or deep to see these very elements in Dewey's thought. "Dewey identified with Jefferson's belief in 'the will of the people as the moral basis of government,' a trust he claimed 'was temperamental' and 'constitutional' with Jefferson" (Rice, *Circle* 77).

Niebuhr's preferred Founding Father was James Madison. This is hardly a surprise given Madison's focus on the importance of self-interest in societal relations. As a matter of fact, Niebuhr considered Madison as a proto-Christian realist as he was "[...] the only one of the founding fathers who made a realistic analysis of both power and interest from a political and democratic perspective" (*Irony* 96). Similarly, Madison, much like Niebuhr, knew that because of the inherent self-interest which drove most human beings, democracy would therefore be limited. These limitations made any of the lofty claims by Jeffersonians on the perfectibility of democracies and human nature, past and present alike, idealistic or naive. Instead, Madison viewed "[...] democracy, not in terms of a vast liberal vision of rational fraternity, but as a pluralistic, ever-contesting, problem-solving society, cajoled into a workable but free community of often divisive groups" (Rice, *Circle* 78).

The democratic creed and regime were not the only complicated matters on which Dewey and Niebuhr debated. Liberalism was another complicated notion that both discussed and at times, disagreed on. However, to summarily put the two in opposing camps is to ignore subtle similarities in philosophies as well as minute distinctions. Furthermore, it also blatantly ignores the fact that, in spite of much of the criticism levied against Dewey, Niebuhr belonged to the liberal philosophical and political camp throughout his life.

### **2.6.0 Niebuhr “*Malgré Lui*”: Understanding Niebuhr’s Criticism of Liberalism**

Niebuhr had an interesting, and somewhat, confusing relationship with liberalism to say the least. On the one hand, he was a product of liberalism thanks to his religious upbringing in which the social gospel played a huge part. As well as being an intellectual descendent of liberalism through his appreciation of Madison, he was also fond and appreciative of one of Pragmatism’s founders: William James. Pragmatism, as has been discussed previously, is a direct descendent of classic liberalism’s ideology in which “Niebuhr who bore the imprint of William James in the dissertations of his early years, continued to work within and creatively apply the pragmatic tradition throughout his life” (Rice, *Circle* 79). In spite of these similarities, Niebuhr was still extremely critical of the liberalism of his times, especially when it came to perceived fallacies portrayed by John Dewey. Yet, in spite of all of this Niebuhr had a paradoxical relationship with liberalism, “especially in its post-Enlightenment forms” as “[...] what he wanted, as he acknowledged late in his career, was a ‘realistic liberalism’ that would combine an appreciation of incremental gains in justice with a realistic assessment of the limits of reason and the power of tradition” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 160).

Niebuhr’s assault on liberalism and John Dewey emerged with the release of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932. The arrival of this book came about due to a litany of factors which contributed to not only his, but to a general disillusionment with world events. The Roaring Twenties had turned into the Great Depression, because of the greed displayed by *laissez-faire* capitalism, as well as the individualism which was promoted throughout the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of fascism, both domestically,<sup>34</sup> and abroad and totalitarianism, as well as the poverty witnessed during the Great Depression was the proof for Niebuhr that both the liberal credo, and conception of human nature were profoundly unsound.

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<sup>34</sup> The Klu Klux Klan for example reached a peak of 4 million members throughout the 1920s. <http://www.history.com/topics/ku-klux-klan>.

Niebuhr was aware that *Immoral Man* was going to raise concerns and much debate. He warned that

[i]nsofar as this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives. [...] They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man's collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. (preface xxx)

Religious and secular liberals<sup>35</sup> were clearly the primary targets in *Moral Man*. No better target for Niebuhr was John Dewey himself whom he picked out in the introduction of *Moral Man*. In the attack, Niebuhr criticized Dewey for simultaneously wanting to understand the problems plaguing modern society while ignoring, according to Niebuhr, the most important problem which was “[...] [humanity’s] predatory self-interest” which “[...] is mentioned only in passing without influencing [Dewey’s] reasoning, and with no indication that he understands how much social conservatism is due to the economic interests of the owning classes” (xxx).

The reason behind Niebuhr’s attacks on Dewey was twofold: 1) due to Dewey’s stature within American philosophy and general liberalism, Niebuhr saw Dewey as a catch-all and perfect representation of liberalism as a whole. 2) Niebuhr, being a full generation younger than Dewey could have seen this opportunity as a moment to metaphorically “kill the father” in which an up and coming philosopher as well as theologian could make his mark. What better way to do so after all, than to attack the bastion of liberalism itself?

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<sup>35</sup> It should be made clear here that Niebuhr’s use of liberals throughout *Moral Man*, *Immoral Society* is simultaneously specific and vague. What Niebuhr meant by “liberal” was a type of “catch-all” term for the following: pacifists, idealists, moralists and secular and religious liberals. If one was forced to find a modern equivalent or adjective to describe the type of people Niebuhr referred to in *Moral Man*, the closest that comes to mind would be “naïve.” It should be specified that Niebuhr’s attack was not *necessarily* against the classic tenants of liberalism which have been discussed thus far, for he was as much influenced by them as any of the “idealists” he would later attack. However, the distinction to be made is that those whom Niebuhr attacks were *naïve* in that they failed to consider power, self-interest, and conflict in their account of human nature.

The release of *Moral Man* did indeed create the polemics that Niebuhr had been looking for, but for slightly different reasons. The overall conclusion of *Moral Man* was that there was a sharp distinction between what was considered to be acceptable behavior at the individual and at the community level. Essentially, an individual was capable of being “moral” because s/he *could* make the necessary self-sacrificial *agape* in order to improve the situation for his/her community and the greater good. Communities on the other hand, defined by Niebuhr as being small towns to full on States, were incapable of showing such *agape* due to the diverse and varied nature composing them. These communities demonstrated “less reason to guide and check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the need of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals who compose the group reveal in their relationships” (Niebuhr, *Moral* xxiv).

On top of this distinction, Niebuhr attacked modern-day liberals for their seemingly unwavering faith in the power of social sciences, human perfectibility and education.

Niebuhr lambasted that scion of ‘socially minded educations’ who, following Dewey, sought to salvage society by using the school system as an agency for extending the social and political intelligence of the general community. The naïve hope that education will bring in its wake the achievement of justice in society belies the fact that ‘the interests of the powerful and dominant groups, who profit from the present system of society, are the real hindrance to the establishment of a rational and just society’. (Rice, *Circle* 65)

The unbridled belief in the development and capacity of human nature was simply not measuring up to historical fact or the then-contemporary situation of the American people. Poverty was rampant, war was spreading, and violence was escalating. The claims from the liberal elites that society simply needed more education or to tap deeper into their innate rationality did not make sense. In the end, Niebuhr attacked these liberals, moralists, idealists, pacifists, and otherwise naïve people, secular or religious, for lacking “[...] an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations” (*Moral* xxxiv).

For Niebuhr, it all came down to power and the role of self-interest in community relations. Uninhibited by the normally restrictive ties of smaller familial or tribal bonds, larger groups, especially States, had to play by different rules in order to ensure their survival. This was not necessarily a *bad* thing for Niebuhr, nor completely without merit, especially when analyzing States at the international level. Because States are composed of various interest groups, races,



ethnicities, religions and other smaller competing factions, a State which acted altruistically was not only implausible, but unrealistic and dangerous. States had a responsibility to protect their citizens against foreign entities. As stated earlier when studying the nature of international relations, there was, and still is no objective independent authority keeping States in check with one another. Because of this lack of universal authority, States have to constantly be not only on guard against any potential attack, whether economic, political, or military, but also be aware that any diplomatic decision made with another country *has to bring some sort of benefit to the home-State itself*. The notion or concept of *agape* in international relations simply does not, and cannot exist in the system of anarchy. Of course, Niebuhr's Christian realism meant that international and community politics were not total nihilistic abandonments of morality. States *could* intervene on problems from a moral standpoint as long as leaders understood the power politics at play, and attempted to use those power politics to spread justice and equality, even if they were imperfect.

Understandably, *Moral Man's* reception was not exactly warm. Many in both secular and religious liberal circles felt betrayed by Niebuhr and his allegedly uncredited, unjust, and over-the-top criticism of modern liberalism. For pacifists, Niebuhr's justification for the use of violence was inexcusable, especially as it "[...] assert[ed] that the responsible Christian had to accept the use of force- otherwise he would have to withdraw from politics altogether – and that the use of force logically implied the use of violence in certain situations" (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 137). Even more reproachable for these pacifists and moralists was the use of one of their own heroes seemingly against them: Gandhi.

Niebuhr used the Indian militant as an example to demonstrate the error in "[...] the belief that violence is a natural and inevitable expression of ill-will, and non-violence of goodwill, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good" (*Moral* 171). Niebuhr started from the premise that in order to maintain some level of justice or equality within a given society, some form of coercion is necessary. This coercion did not necessarily have to fall to violence, but this did not mean that the consequences of non-violent protests were *less* damaging than violence itself. For example, "Gandhi's boycott of British cotton result[ed] in the undernourishment of children in Manchester, and the blockade of the Allies in war-time caused the death of German children" (Niebuhr, *Moral* 172). This demonstrated that "[i]t is impossible to coerce a group without damaging both life and property and without imperiling the interests of the innocent with those of the guilty," or in more theological term: it rains on the just and unjust alike (Niebuhr, *Moral* 172).

For Niebuhr, Gandhi accurately represented Christian realism by knowing how to use coercive non-violence as a means of affecting actual change. Niebuhr also made sure to

highlight Gandhi's real stances when it came to international and State conflict. Gandhi understood that States operate under different norms than the rest of society, and above all, the individual. Using Gandhi's changing stance on the utility of war from World War I to his then-current stance on wars, Niebuhr noted that "[...] the important point [in Gandhi's justification] is that the violent character of government is recognized and the change of policy is explained in terms of a change in national allegiance and not in terms of pacifist principles" (*Moral* 243). In other words, Gandhi's refusal to support the British Crown's use of violence was not a question of philosophical pacifism, it was instead a question of nationalistic loyalty; Gandhi *no longer felt* English nor a subject of the Crown. Or, as Fox put it "Gandhi had chosen nonviolence as a pragmatist, not as an absolutist [...]" (*Niebuhr* 138).

As well as completely overturning the beloved notion of pacifism for many idealists, moralists, and liberals, both secular as well as religious, *Moral Man* equally attacked another pillar of the liberal creed: the role and value of intellectuals. Intellectuals considered themselves to be the bastions of information, enlightenment, and models to be followed. After all, they demonstrated that if only everyone else were like them, society as a whole would improve since the quest for genuine rational and altruistic pursuits would lead to overall improvement for the individual. Niebuhr felt that many of these intellectuals suffered from "self-deception," especially when it came to analyzing or understanding the real motives behind State actions (*Moral* 98). Often, the very intellectuals who thought themselves as being critics of State abuses and actions, frequently ended up buying into its propaganda. The Spanish-American War "[...] offer[ed] some of the most striking illustrations of the hypocrisy of governments as well as of the self-deception of intellectuals" (Niebuhr, *Moral* 98). The hypocrisy stemmed from the American government's justification for the war, which "[...] was launched on a wave of patriotic sentimentality in which both the religious idealists and the humanitarians went into ecstasies over our heroic defense of the Cuban people [...]" (Niebuhr, *Moral* 100). American justification for the war was rallied behind humanitarian principles of protecting the alleged poor and exploited people of Cuba and the Philippines from the tyranny of the Spanish government.

Intellectuals were equally as guilty of this hypocrisy for they were the ones pushing the message and defending the actions of the government. Niebuhr saw through this, and realized that intellectuals were, consciously or not, transmitters of propaganda and American national pride. Niebuhr, was by no means the only person to share such a critical view of intellectuals. Jacques Ellul, for example, shared a similar criticism on the role of intellectuals in society, arguing that it was actually *intellectuals* who were most susceptible to State or other forms of propaganda because of their interest in ideas and *salon* style debates and heavy reading.

Niebuhr had a more nuanced interpretation of intellectuals in society and viewed their relationship with the “stupidity of the average man” as one in which the intellectual promotes myths and idealism, rather than critical introspection (*Moral* 21). Niebuhr saw Marxism and the workers’ movement of the 1920s and 1930s as examples of where intellectuals used their influence to promote ideologies and fantasies. He wrote:

The naïve faith of the proletarian is the faith of the man of action. Rationality belongs to the cool observers. There is of course an element of illusion in the faith of the proletarian, as there is in all faith. But it is a necessary illusion, without which some truth is obscured. [...] These illusions are dangers because they justify fanaticism; but their abandonment is perilous because it inclines to inertia. [...] The true proletarian who nerves himself for heroic action by believing both in the purity of his goal and in the possibility of its achievement is no doubt touched with sentimentality and romanticism, but he is something more than sentimentalist. He is both more dangerous and more vital than the sentimentalist. He is a fanatic. (*Moral* 221)

Thus intellectuals, through their idealism, bought into the romantic notions of the majority class (i.e. the working class) which had neither the desire nor the ability to critically analyze the discourses being fed to them, thereby turning the majority classes from romantic supporters into potentially dangerous fanatics.<sup>36</sup>

In order to avoid this fanaticism, and the dangers that it would bring, Niebuhr argued for a temperance of intellectual and proletariat idealism through profound self-criticism or, from his religious point of view, contrition. However, Niebuhr was not without total hope, nor lost in complete cynicism as he stated that “[...] there is beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions. We can no longer buy the highest satisfactions of the individual life at the expense of social injustice” (*Moral* 276). And yet, being rid of some illusions, such as the moral, political, or legal justification for racial inequality, did not mean that *true* justice could be attained. For Niebuhr, such a thing was impossible as human nature prohibited the perfection required of achieving *agape* and justice. Still, Niebuhr did not waiver, for although sacrificial

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<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that Niebuhr was paradoxical, if not almost contradictory on his stance of the working class. On the one hand, he completely admitted to the “stupidity of the average man” while promoting the “redemptive mission” of this same class (Fox, *Niebuhr* 139).

love and justice could never truly be achieved, they could at least be improved through critical self-reflection. He wrote:

In the task of that redemption the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and 'spiritual wickedness in high places.' The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done. (*Moral* 277)

If this last statement seems contradictory to what has been said thus far, it is because the subtleties of Niebuhr's thought were filled with paradoxes. On the one hand, Niebuhr was extremely critical of the fanaticism and absolutism of idealists, as they could lead to devastating human consequences. Nonetheless, these were the very traits needed in order to constantly push society forward when it came to matters of justice. Conversely, the very thing that Niebuhr criticized liberals for idealizing, rationality, was also the very thing that could keep the fanaticism of idealists in check. The caveat was finding the balance between the two and making sure that one aspect did not outshine or suppress the other. Only when rationality and idealism were in a balanced struggle could societal justice evolve.

Up until *Moral Man*, Dewey's knowledge of Niebuhr was relatively obscure as Dewey knew of him only as an up and coming thinker. Following the publication of Niebuhr's polemic work, Dewey felt that he should respond, not necessarily in terms of self-defense, but more in order to clarify what Dewey considered to be, Niebuhr's gross misrepresentations of his thoughts and philosophies. Niebuhr classified Dewey as the type of liberal that Dewey himself criticized and felt was wrong with liberalism on a whole. As Dewey clarified:

[My method] is very different from that which Dr. Niebuhr criticizes under the name of 'liberalism.' It has nothing to do with sentimentalism to which he gives the name. There has been and still is an immense amount of political immaturity and economic illiteracy in the American citizenship, and I am not questioning either the existence or the futility of what Dr. Niebuhr called liberalism. I am

concerned only to point out the irrelevancy of his description and condemnation to the kind of procedure which I am proposing. (qtd. in Rice, *Circle* 66)

According to Dewey, Niebuhr was right in his criticisms against the idealized version of liberalism, and Dewey even agreed with many of Niebuhr's critiques. However, the difference for Dewey was that he felt he did not belong in Niebuhr's blanket criticism. Dewey's liberalism was one "grounded in empirical methodology," and therefore could not be accused of being overly romantic nor idealistic. His was a liberalism based on science and empiricism. Further defending himself, Dewey stated that he was rooted in those "[...] ever growing methods of observation, experiment and reflective reasoning which have in a very short time revolutionized the physical and, to a considerable degree, the physiological conditions of life" (qtd. in Rice, *Circle* 66-67). Therefore, Niebuhr's criticisms were unfounded, as Dewey was attempting to do exactly what Niebuhr argued liberals needed to do: tone down the idealism, and add some much-needed self-reflection and criticism.

The difference between the two thinkers was a question of methodology, specifically, methodologies used by the natural sciences and which were brought over to the human sciences. In a further response to Niebuhr's arguments, Dewey summarized Niebuhr's own arguments and criticisms as simply being a 20<sup>th</sup> century religious dualism expressed in a different way. For Dewey, Niebuhr represented the very thing that he was trying to get society to break from: "habit, custom, and tradition" (Rice, *Circle* 67) and "[...] Niebuhr clung to a Protestant obsession with sin that he had no need of and in whose intellectual foundations [Dewey] had long ceased to believe" (Ryan 344). Niebuhr was proof of how difficult it was to actually apply Dewey's methodologies and ideas to practical life as many were still grounded in what he considered to be some form of religious superstition or "widespread illusions, generated by intense emotions" (Rice, *Circle* 67).

Dewey was equally defensive when it came to his alleged lack of understanding power and self-interest in social relations. His argument was that power was never some independent or unconnected force as Niebuhr or other realists would believe. Power, was just as connected and "social" as other aspects of life. Put otherwise, "power" for Dewey was defined in relation to how it was being used, or who was dominating whom.

The real problem is whether there are strong interests now active which can best succeed by adopting the method of experimental intelligence into their struggles, or whether they too should rely upon the use of methods that have brought the world to its present estate, only using them the other way around. [...]

Intelligence becomes a power only when it is brought into the operation of other forces than itself. Everything that is done is done by some form of power – that is a truism. (Dewey, “Intelligence” pars. 5-6)

Dewey went on to list several different types of powers, ranging from economic power to military power, even propaganda was a form of it. His point was that because power was defined in relation to its source and destination, anything, at one time or another could potentially be defined as power. The solution for Dewey was not to simply put power on a pedestal and accept it as some monolithic force capable of deciding all, but to submit power, and more importantly, the relationships that it created at a given time, to scientific methodologies and experiments in order to determine if there was a way of improving the situation. In essence, Dewey wanted to “dissect” power, or rather the notion of power, in order to find the “root cause” of the problem in order to “heal” society.

Niebuhr’s criticisms were not necessarily aimed at destroying the validity of reason or denouncing it in general. His criticisms were centered on the overall importance given to reason in society. In response to a criticism levied against him by George A. Coe on his perceived attacks on rationality’s importance in society, Niebuhr responded that “[...] once rational and religious idealists stop fooling themselves and recognize the basic fact of a social struggle in society they will be the more able to direct it morally and rationally” (qtd. in Rice, *Circle* 68). Rationality had a place in society, and an important one at that as it would prevent the rise and takeover by idealistic fanatics. But it was only through taking rationality off the pedestal on which Enlightenment thinkers had placed it, Niebuhr argued, that it could become a useful tool. Secular and religious idealists had to understand that rationality could only be truly useful to society once a better comprehension of human nature had been achieved.

It was this debate that was at the heart of their disagreements over liberalism. Their discussions and sharp differences did not stem from the importance or necessity of liberalism, as both authors agreed that a more just economic and political order could be established through the appropriate application of liberal values. Similarly, both agreed that the *laissez-faire* capitalism of the early twentieth century was corrupting the very foundations of liberalism itself, and ultimately damaging any chance of improvement in social or economic justice. For example, in his essay “The Pathos of Liberalism,” appearing in *The Nation* in 1935, Niebuhr targeted Dewey’s, and to a greater extent, liberalism’s lack of understanding of the larger issues of the world. “[Dewey’s] statement of faith is typical of a large body of intellectual liberalism,” Niebuhr wrote, “which resists the dishonest appropriation and corruption of the liberal creed by the plutocratic oligarchs of our society [...]” (“Pathos” 154).

The reason why the two were so divided over liberalism itself was due to their visions of human nature. Dewey discussed the overall improvement of human nature and society through social intelligence. Conversely, Niebuhr maintained that human nature was what it was: a paradox in which human beings were free and thereby capable of great creation but also great destruction. No amount of social intelligence, social science theories, or “only if” idealisms would change the inherent desire to obtain more within humanity. Tools and issues such as rationality, technology, the social sciences or institutions were just the theoretical and metaphysical battlefields used by the two authors to demonstrate their specific points of views. Technology, for example was capable of creating new methods of communication and relative new ease for society at large. However, the Niebuhrian counterargument was that with each new technological advancement, there were untold and unforeseeable consequences.

Niebuhr’s arguments were simply that the tools mentioned above had to be used in the appropriate manner and in proportion to human nature. He took particular issue with Dewey’s notion of “freed intelligence” arguing that it fell into the typical liberal trap of refusing to acknowledge the importance or role of self-interest or conflict.

[Freed intelligence] does not recognize the relation of social and economic interest to the play of intelligence upon social problems. It does not perceive the perennial and inevitable character of the subordination of reason to interest in the social struggle. Its ideal of a ‘freed intelligence’ expects a degree of rational freedom from the particular interests and perspectives of those who think about social problems which is incompatible with the very constitution of human nature. (“Pathos” 154)

Niebuhr was equally critical of Dewey’s “interested intelligence,” an important component of Dewey’s thought which referred to the alleged neutrality of social intelligence. The social intelligence Dewey argued for was one which ignored conflicts of interests, or the natural human desire for more. Niebuhr, accused Dewey of ignoring the fact that in all social situations, any “intelligence” used to improve society was done through calculations of self-interest or through deliberate choice. There was no “neutrality” in social interactions as all engagements were based on a conscious decision by the actor. However altruistic the motives, the actions of a person were always “interested,” and therefore not “freed” by the fact that s/he decided to engage in the social situation.

Furthermore, the evolutions of Dewey’s “freed,” “interested,” and eventual “organized” intelligence demonstrated another major gap in modern liberalism’s ideology. If, as Dewey

maintained, organized intelligence was responsible for a technical society, “[w]hy then, did not this ‘organized intelligence’ which created a technical civilization create also an economic and political system which would make such a civilization sufferable?” (Niebuhr, “Pathos” 155). The lack of economic and political equality which should have been the product of Dewey’s different types of “intelligence” were proof for Niebuhr that liberalism fundamentally misunderstood human nature. Self-interest was the reason why economic and political justice did not evolve with technology, not because of any inhibited rationality or intelligence. Dewey viewed Niebuhr as being outdated and argued that Niebuhr based his beliefs on a false dichotomy marred in supernaturalism. Niebuhr, for his part, thought Dewey’s views were nothing more than a modern form of naturalism and Enlightenment optimism that continuously argued for a perfectibility of human nature which Niebuhr thought impossible. Ultimately, “Dewey struck Niebuhr as shallow, unable to confront the depth of evil in the world, unwilling to face the doubleness of the human heart” (Ryan 344).

In spite of these philosophical battlefronts, the Great Depression saw a *détente* between the two. Both felt that democracy was threatened with by great economic disparities that the Depression produced. Politically, both feared the rise of extremism, afraid that angry, poor, and hungry Americans would search out a scapegoat, much like Hitler did with the Jews during the same time.

In *Reflections on the End of an Era* published in 1934, during his most radical phase, Niebuhr’s despair over the onslaught of reactionary and radical forces found him suggesting that, with Roosevelt’s efforts bound to fail, American politics will likely ‘disintegrate into a more obvious conservatism and radicalism.’ Niebuhr’s despondent mood was even echoed in the normally unflappable and less apocalyptic-minded Dewey, [...] [who] warned that ‘the conclusion I personally draw [...] is that unless there is organized assertion of economic and cultural democracy in this country, liberals here may find themselves in a position where they see only a choice between fascists and communists of the official stripe.’ (Rice, *Circle* 69-70)

Communism’s belief in total economic equality the inherent evil of private property went against Liberalism’s core values. The fear was that enforcing total economic “justice,” personal freedom and expression would disappear. Even worse, by refusing personal expression, society as a whole would suffer as the rapport between individuals would cease to exist, thereby causing society and individual to become stagnant. Conversely, Niebuhr’s criticisms of Communism



were theologically based for he felt that imposing total equality upon a society or group of people would rob the individual of his/her God given liberty. Furthermore, doing so would not only snuff out a person's Divine spark of liberty and choice, but would remove humanity's unique status of being creatures both apart of, and separate from nature. This would result in humanity losing its transcendental quality and would therefore be turned into mindless beasts accomplishing tasks for society and being prevented from thinking for themselves.

A reactionary regime scenario was equally as terrible, paradoxically for a similar reason. The individual would still be required to give up his/her personal liberty, but instead of abandoning one's natural freedom for the sake of the common good as Communism would demand, fascism would require utter obedience to the State and the regime in power. The freedom to disagree would diminish, as any action performed by an individual or society would have to have some form of benefit for or service to the State. Additionally, both thinkers would have seen a further evil within the confines of a fascist regime: the arbitrary application of justice. The benefit of liberalism in democracies, regardless of whether or not it was Niebuhrian or Deweyan, was that the wheel of justice would always turn and attempt to improve the situations for those found at the lower ends of the societal structure. At the very least, Communism claimed to provide a type of economic justice, albeit at the expense of personal liberty. Fascist regimes could not even claim this, as their legitimacy often rested upon the shoulders of a scapegoat, the downtrodden or less fortunate. Any "justice" that the State brought forward against any of its citizens would serve the State's purpose, not the betterment of society.

Both Dewey and Niebuhr knew they had to act in order to try and reclaim liberalism's importance in American politics. Dewey did this with his publication of *Liberalism and Social Action* in which he defended the classic beliefs of liberalism while denouncing the rise of *laissez-faire* policies running rampant in American businesses. Niebuhr agreed as much in the beginning of his essay "The Pathos of Liberalism" (1935):

No one in America has a more generally conceded right to speak in the name of liberalism than John Dewey. He has been for many years not only the leading philosophical exponent of liberal doctrine but the fountain and source of liberal pedagogical theory and method. He has furthermore been active in a score of political and social movements in which he has proved not only his interest in the practical application of his theories but also a courageous willingness to extend both his theory and his practice beyond the limits set by traditional liberalism. (153)

Niebuhr's praise of Dewey was partly due to Dewey's willingness to engage in the actual polemics and politics of the nation remaining in an academic ivory tower.

In spite of the praise, Niebuhr still criticized Dewey for not getting to the root problem of liberalism: a lack of genuine self-criticism. Niebuhr felt that Dewey ignored, or at best, downplayed the role and importance of power, self-interest, and the genuine darker angels of human nature. Dewey's notion of "freed intelligence" proved too large a hurdle for Niebuhr to be able to accept all of Deweyan thought. This was the same issue as raised previously: it was unlikely, and even naïve, to think that an individual would, or even is capable, of acting independently of his or her desires, interests, or perspectives. These criticisms and distinctions led Niebuhr to differentiate between the "creed" and "spirit" of liberalism. The "spirit" was the overall value-set to which liberalism adhered: freedom, justice, equality, tolerance etc. The "creed" was the application of these values in a real-world setting.

Though some may argue that Niebuhr was pedantically splitting hairs between values and actions, he still belonged to the liberal tradition. For example:

For Niebuhr provided not only a philosophical perspective that was fully developed by the start of the war; he also offered the model of a successful publicist whose hundreds of articles were consciously designed to spark faith in, and mobilize defense of democracy. (Fox, "Emergence" 245)

Or:

In retrospect it appears clear that even in his most radical period Niebuhr was in fact struggling not so much as to destroy liberalism as to transform it into a philosophy that was realistic [...] about the role of power, self-interest, and political mobilization in the social arena. (Fox, "Emergence" 246)

Paradoxically, and not without a bit of pathos, Niebuhr believed that the one way to achieve this philosophical goal was through being "realistic about power" exemplified by Christian realism. The problem though was the disenchantment and overall disillusionment with religion in general.

In spite of the many non-Christians who supported Niebuhr including a group named (with a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor), Atheists for Niebuhr, his religious thought was just as an essential part of his political philosophy as anything else: "Indeed, his explicitly theological work, which began to appear in 1935 after a decade of what he termed his 'socioethical

criticism,' was in fact an integral part of his political advocacy (Fox, "Emergence" 245). Keeping this distinction in mind, and knowing that humanity could never achieve the combination of *agape* and justice, the best that could be achieved was approximate justice and imperfect love. Therefore, his religious points of view and texts were equally political as politics and human nature were not separate entities to be studied. Indeed, in a very Deweyan analysis, the two were so intricately related that it is nearly impossible to distinguish whether Niebuhr's religion influenced his politics or vice-versa.

Thus, in order to further analyze the depths and understandings of both Niebuhr and Dewey's thought, their opinions on religion need to be examined. This next section will focus more heavily on Niebuhr given his theological background and insistence on the celestial/terrestrial dichotomy of reality. Nevertheless, to ignore Dewey's take on the subject, would be to dismiss an important part of Dewey's philosophy. Though Dewey felt that some of the dogmatic beliefs of religion could be forgotten, one did not need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Religion, or more specifically, religious context and vocabulary could still be useful in a disenchanted and modern world when applied to democracy in general. The problem however, was simultaneously removing God from the equation, while maintaining the religious reverence and feeling towards a new idol. In Dewey's case, this new idol would be democracy. Niebuhr, of course, felt that doing so was just a different name on an old principle, primarily that of naturalism.

Thus enters another point of contention between the two thinkers: the role of religion in society. Coming from opposite sides of the metaphysical divide, the two had extremely different things to say. There was Dewey who argued that society needed to essentially take the energy devoted to religion and turn it towards the preservation and maintenance of a democratic culture. Equally, Niebuhr, felt that the concept of original sin, no matter how bothersome to modern ears, was a necessary topic to continuously bring up as it was, so far, the most accurate portrayal of human nature and therefore society. Hence, in order to see Niebuhr's evolution within liberalism, and more to the point, how a theologian and religious thinker of such renown could fit into the confines of a seemingly Godless liberalism, the role of religion according to both will be examined.

### **2.7.0 Losing Their Religion?**

It is not easy to pinpoint a specific time when the influence of religion on society started to decline, should such a point actually exist. One could argue that the decline began with the rise of Protestantism, an emergence which called into question the power of the Catholic Church.

An equally plausible argument could be made regarding the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment where scientific inquiry trumped religious dogma. Moving on into the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the decline of religious influence caused by growing skepticism and the overall rejection of notions such as the infallibility of the monarchy and the Divine right of kings, illustrate the separation of secular and religious power and thought. The influence of monarchies was finally abolished, either through parliamentary reforms, or in the cases of France and America, violent Revolutions which overthrew royal power.

However true these statements may be on the surface, they are no more than supposition. Once a country is examined in more detail, religion's influence and presence can vary greatly. For example, in France the influence of the Church greatly waned through the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and well into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was illustrated by the government's actions during the Revolution and more importantly, the Terror, where the French government seized Church property to boost their coffers and avoid economic ruin.

Conversely, religious influence was vast and ever-present in the United States at the same time. This in part because of the various scattered ethnic communities, as well as the numerous denominations practicing throughout the nation. Being a country with a "clean slate," no "official" Church was ever established, and different points of view and beliefs flourished. Thus religious influence was not as omnipresent as on the other side of the Atlantic which was embodied by massive or monolithic entities such as the Anglican or Catholic Churches. Instead, differing pastors, ministers, and local houses of worship held influence over many communities. This influence was highlighted by Alexis de Tocqueville:

*C'est la religion qui a donné naissance aux sociétés anglo-américaines : il ne faut jamais l'oublier ; aux Etats-Unis, la religion se confond donc avec toutes les habitudes nationales et tous les sentiments que la patrie fait naître ; celui donne une force particulière. A cette raison puissante ajoutez cette autre, qui ne l'est pas moins : en Amérique la religion s'est, pour ainsi dire, posé elle-même ses limites ; l'ordre religieux y est resté entièrement distinct de l'ordre politique, de telle sorte qu'on a pu changer facilement les lois anciennes sans ébranler les anciennes croyances. Le christianisme a donc conservé un grand empire sur l'esprit des Américains, et, ce que je veux surtout remarquer, il ne règne point seulement comme une philosophie qu'on adopte après examen, mais comme une religion, qu'on croit sans le discuter. [...] Les Américains, ayant admis sans examen les principaux dogmes de la religion chrétienne, sont obligés de recevoir de la même manière un grand nombre de vérités morales qui en découlent et qui*

*y tiennent. Cela resserre dans des limites étroites l'action de l'analyse individuelle, et lui soustrait plusieurs des plus importantes opinions humaines. (Démocratie 14)*

Tocqueville correctly pointed out that America's religious influence was different than other nations. This difference was based primarily on the diverging and countless religious traditions, beliefs, and customs which had been practiced throughout the original thirteen colonies, and then eventually the nation itself. This religious diversity forced Americans to cooperate, however begrudgingly, with one another, thereby fostering a sense of community. A majority of these different beliefs or sects still fell under the umbrella of Christianity, specifically Protestantism.

What is equally interesting to note is the change and evolution of religious influence across the Atlantic in contrast to the patchwork harmony of America. Scientific inquiry, rationalism, and logic were at the forefront of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Max Weber's famous *désenchantement du monde* seemed to be the norm in Europe. This was especially true for the 20<sup>th</sup> century where new discoveries and huge leaps in technological progress, brought on new understandings, and ultimately dethroned most major religious influences. Weber wrote:

*Le destin de notre époque caractérisée par la rationalisation, par l'intellectualisation et surtout par le désenchantement du monde, a conduit les humains à bannir les valeurs suprêmes les plus sublimes de la vie publique. Elles ont trouvé refuge soit dans le royaume transcendant de la vie mystique, soit dans la fraternité des relations directes et réciproques entre individus isolés. (Le Savant 26)*

Still, as Weber pointed out, there were vestiges of people trying to reconnect or "re-enchant" the world. However, this was on an individual level for the community as a whole had been removed and separated from the enchanted world. The curtain had been pulled back revealing the very human tendencies and motives previously hidden by religious authority.

Regardless of the seemingly endless breakthroughs in the natural sciences during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans still seemed to retain a religious core. This was demonstrated by the various Great Awakenings, or Protestant revival movements, which occurred throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even the technological age at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to religious revival movements that spread over the United States. Reinhold Niebuhr was the product of one such movement as both he and his father, belonged to The Social Gospel movement which was

popular during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even the bastion of liberalism himself, John Dewey, grew up in a Protestant household, and maintained some religious convictions and notions throughout the first half of his life.

The great divide in religious influence between Europe and the United States can easily be a topic of further inquiry on its own. If not directly tied to this research, the purpose of discussing it is quite simple: to demonstrate that religion, whatever the sect or belief, had various and swaying degrees of influence dependent on geographic location. In spite of Weber's claim that the world was disenchanted, the US was the exception that proved the rule. This of course did not go unnoticed by Dewey and Niebuhr, who at various points and to varying degrees, discussed the importance or utility of religion in society in general. They did so not to try and understand why America handled religion differently to Europe, but whether or not it could actually be a useful and a positive factor for society.

As was the case with Liberalism, Dewey and Niebuhr shared little in common on the role and importance of religion in civilization. The differences were founded as much on biographical factors such as Niebuhr growing up in an extremely religious household as rooted in any metaphysical or philosophical conflicts over defining human nature. In order to maintain consistency with the format and structure of the earlier examinations, Dewey's analyses on religion will be scrutinized first, followed by Niebuhr's, concluding with a general synthesis of the two authors' analyses on the subject.

### **2.7.1 Blessed is Democracy: Dewey and Religion**

Dewey's seminal work on religion, *A Common Faith* (1934) offered his response to the role of religion in society. At this point, Dewey and Niebuhr were familiar with one another, and upon its publication, Niebuhr reviewed *A Common Faith* in order to see what America's eminent liberal scholar had to say on the topic. In his review he noted that "[...] this little volume [was] something of a footnote on religion added by America's leading philosopher to his life work in philosophy. [...] [It was] disappointing only in the sense that it [was] too brief to do full justice to the problem or allow the author scope in elaborating his thesis on religion" (qtd. in Rice, *Circle* 61). Niebuhr was not going to engage in such a lofty debate until Dewey treated the subject more profoundly and in more detail. Regardless of the size of the work, *A Common Faith* did offer the unique perspective of a Deweyan analysis of religion in modern society. The essential premise was that modern cultures had to "take back" religious terminology, and more importantly, the significance behind these religious words and apply it to non-religious, or non-

supernatural forces and institutions. Ideally, Dewey would have wanted democracy to become a civic religion.

Religious connotations and vocabulary had to be “taken back” from religion as only the supernatural could be considered religious. Dewey argued that,

[r]eligions have traditionally been allied with ideas of the supernatural, and often have been based upon explicit beliefs about it. Today, there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural. [...] But they agree in one point: the necessity for a Supernatural Being and for an immorality that is beyond the power of nature. (*Common 4*)

Dewey wanted to turn the vocabulary used to describe the supernatural into something more. According to him, there was “[...] a difference between religion, a religion, and the religious; between anything that may be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective” (*Common 5*). Following this distinction, Dewey’s analysis, building upon William James’s own views on the subject,<sup>37</sup> meant that an experience could be religious without necessarily belonging to a particular religion. He was essentially applying his Pragmatism to religion in that a religious experience is not defined by a particular creed or set of dogmatic beliefs. Instead, it is defined by the interaction between the actor and the experience. He had developed this idea as early as 1892 in an address entitled “Christianity and Democracy” in which he described how ultimate “truth” was not a divine revelation given once and for all, but instead was something to be worked towards in a democratic culture in which “the means” were instrumental and created “by individuals participating in community, dedicated to and fired by religious ideas” (Kloppenber 43). Truth was not going to be given to humanity, only through experience, reason, and thought could humanity constantly strive towards new truths and constant evolution. Religiousness did not have to necessarily be dedicated to strictly supernatural beliefs, it could adapt its function to a given experience

[The process of purification] indicates that further choice is imminent in which certain values and functions in experience may be selected. This possibility is what I had in mind in speaking of the difference between the religious and a religion. I am not proposing a religion, but rather the emancipation of elements and outlooks that may be called religious. [...] To be somewhat more explicit, a

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<sup>37</sup> See William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

religion [...] always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. [...] It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal. (Dewey, *Common* 8)

This meant that a religious experience was personal, and was neither defined nor limited by some external or authoritative power such as a church.

Further developing on this idea, and staying true to his Pragmatic approach, Dewey offered to reverse the very purpose of religion. Instead of religion offering explanation and perspective “[...] into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence” humanity could reverse the question and “[...] say that whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious, not that religion is something that introduces it” (*Common* 17). In other words, rather than explaining an experience in terms of a particular dogma or creed, a person would define an experience as religious, thereby giving it a new understanding and a new “perspective.”

Dewey knew that this change would not be easy for people to accept, therefore he created methods and tendencies to study “faith and its object,” which was the title of the second part in *A Common Faith*. Loyal to Pragmatism, Dewey felt that scientific inquiry, and more importantly, a scientific type of curiosity towards religious belief would help develop greater understanding. A revolution of sorts was needed, one in which “[...] every defeat is a stimulus to renewed inquiry; every victory won is the open door to more discoveries, and every discovery is a new seed planted in the soil of intelligence [...]” (Dewey, *Common* 23). Any type of theistic roadblocks which prevented the theologian from properly understanding his or her topic were not unexplainable Divine mysteries. Instead, they were to be comprehended as new challenges through which novel techniques and scientific inquiry could provide greater insight. The barriers encountered in theology were seen whenever a theologian abandoned any type of religious dogma or doctrine stating that such a belief was “[...] never, after all, an intrinsic part of religious belief, and that without [this belief] the true nature of religion stands out more clearly than before” (*Common* 23). To put it simply, theology adapted to the needs of new societal norms which meant that outdated beliefs could be abandoned for more progressive, and socially appropriate doctrines. Examples of this are abundant throughout modern history ranging from the abolition of slavery to full universal suffrage. Even LGBT rights have benefited from this transition of societal norms amongst the more politically and socially liberal



denominations such as Universalists. At various moments, each of the marginalized and isolated minority groups were targeted and oppressed by society, partly due to religious norms and values. As civilization changed, the “true meaning” of the Scriptures and dogma adapted to an evolving society thereby allowing for the abandonment of outdated or barbaric beliefs and practices in favor of new religious truisms.

This transitory property of religion, or more specifically, the fluid notion of the religiousness of things, was important in order to understand the appropriate role of religion in society. Dewey indicated that

[t]he more significant point as regards the social import of religion is that the priesthoods were official representatives of some community, tribe, city-state or empire. Whether there was a priesthood or not, individuals who were members of a community were born into a religious community as they were into social and political organizations. [...] The temple was a public institution, the focus of the worship of the community; the influences of its practices extended to all the customs of the community, domestic, economic, and political. (*Common* 40-41).

The drastic change for Dewey was that religion went from being a primarily “public institution” to a private one. One was “born and reared” into a church and therefore into the greater community at large. The United States offered a reprieve from this ordeal due to its unique make-up as well as its various religious affiliations. This made any type of forced religious indoctrination on a national or large scale “a remote historic episode” (Dewey, *Common* 41). Admittedly, communities in America were very much influenced by their local churches or pastors, which was the main difference with Europe. In America, religious sway remained on a local level, not on a national or state-sponsored one. Dewey argued that such automatic assimilation and *de facto* belonging to a particular branch of a religion, rather than a national church, was a relatively new phenomenon:

[...] the fact of such membership [to a particular church] may be an important, even a determining, factor in an individual’s whole career. But the thing new in history, the thing once unheard of, is that the organization in question is a special institution within a secular community. Even where there are established churches, they are constituted by the state and may be unmade by the state. Not only the national state but other forms of organization among groups have grown

in power and influence at the expense of organization built upon and about a religion. (*Common 41*)

Through the advent of other social forms of organization, official churches slowly and little by little, lost the monopoly as the central form of social cohesion which used to tie communities together. Essentially, where once churches were the glue that held a community together, they had become just one thread within a secular construct. Dewey credited this evolution and change to the “[...] expansion of associations formed for educational, political, economic, philanthropic and scientific purposes [...]” (*Common 42*). Looking at this from the American perspective, this was simply Hamilton and Madison’s idea of “factions” playing out against one another to ensure that one group, organization, or in this case, social institution, did not maintain a monopoly of influence over all.

The historic evolution and modern reality of religion’s place did not mean that it, or more specifically, its vocabulary and reverence had to necessarily fade into oblivion. On the contrary Dewey felt that a religious attitude could still be extremely useful to modern society, especially when applied to contemporary liberal democracies. The issue however, was separating religiousness, or a religious function from religion itself. Though seemingly pedantic, Dewey stressed that “[...] the distinction that I have drawn between a religion and the religious function [...]” was one in which “[...] the nature of a religion based on the supernatural to draw a line between the religious and the secular and profane [...]” (*Common 44*). Accordingly, religion was dogmatic whereas religious was a point of view. Dewey argued primarily that modern society needed to adopt a religious view on many subjects including philosophy, art, and specifically democracy as “[...] ‘religious’ signifies a certain attitude and outlook, independent of the supernatural, [which] necessitates no such division [between the religious and the secular and profane]” (*Common 45*).

Having a religious attitude and outlook towards societal problems, while simultaneously dropping the dogma of religion, would have untold positive consequences according to Dewey. To drastically improve society, the energies devoted to religion would be reformulated, and no longer wasted on things such as the supernatural. He stressed:

Were men and women actuated throughout the length and breadth of human relations with the faith and ardor that have at times marked historic religions the consequences would be incalculable. To achieve this faith and élan is no easy task. But religions have attempted something similar, directed moreover toward a less promising object – the supernatural. [...] There already exists, though in a

rudimentary form, the capacity to relate social conditions and events to their causes, and the ability will grow with exercise. (Dewey, *Common* 53).

The possibility was there, it was simply a matter of freeing intelligence, and adapting the religious attitude to a non-dogmatic tradition.

Dewey's attempts at reconciling religion and modernity through an adaptation of perspective resulted in mixed reactions. Authors such as A. Eustace Haydon felt that Dewey "point[ed] the way" in trying to bridge the gap and "ever widening gulf" between science and religion (22). Others were less forgiving of Dewey with some, especially amongst secular liberals, feeling betrayed by Dewey's published work, and more critically, his audacity at using the word "God" throughout *A Common Faith*.

Sidney Hook, for example, was not only taken back by the fact that Dewey would devote the time and energy to write on religion, but was also utterly dismayed by his intention to use the term central to classical theism. Hook predicted that a great danger of misunderstanding would accompany Dewey's use of the term *God*, whatever nontheistic sense he planned on giving the word. (Rice, *Odyssey* 148).

However, Hook's fears were unfounded as Dewey simply meant that God was an "active relation between ideal and actual" (*Common* 34). What Dewey did not mean by God was the Freemason architect designing the universe, or any sort of personified singular figure looking over humanity and casting judgment. He was even aware of the risk of using such a term stating that he

[...] would not insist that the name [God] must be given. There are those who hold that the associations of the term with the supernatural are so numerous and close that any use of the word 'God' is sure to give rise to misconception and be taken as a concession to traditional ideas. They may be correct in this view. But the facts [...] are there, and they need to be brought out with all possible clearness and force. [...] A clear and intense conception of a union of ideal ends with actual conditions is cable of arousing steady emotion. It may be fed by every experience, no matter what its material. (*Common* 34-35).

Dewey's "God" was not a being, but the continuous and evolutionary process of experience and development. Any form of practice which evoked strong emotional reaction leading to further learning and improvement was for him, "God." Dewey's God was "[...] a process [...] achieved by disciplined thought and action solely on the part of human beings in relation to a natural world which was sometimes supportive and sometimes not" (Rice, *Odyssey* 148). Dewey would have been better off taking his own advice, as he was constantly bombarded, often by secular liberals for using the term. To summarize, Dewey argued that those harping on his use of the word "God," essentially could not see the forest through the trees, and that they had missed the point of the work.

The goal was not to redefine, theologically or otherwise, the notion or concept of God. A *Common Faith* was written in order to demonstrate that through intelligence, active engagement with one's environment and a religious approach to ideals, concepts and institutions, society could drastically improve as a whole. If anything, Dewey's attempts to change the dogma of religion to a religious perspective on society was an extension of his naturalism. Believing that the self was naturally endowed with the highest degrees of intelligence and rationality, any proper education, training and experience, could make a person experience a religious moment. This moment would be independent of any deity or divine entity, and would be the result of a combination of environment, intelligence, and experience.

Unlike hardline naturalists or atheists, Dewey did not want to completely disenchant the world. To do so would be to remove a part of humanity's innate creativity and ability to interact with it. This was, in part, his defense for using the word God in *A Common Faith*, even though he knew it would create controversy. His conception of God as being a point between ideal and actual was truer to human nature and a sort of middle ground between the two extremist positions he saw around him, namely supernaturalism and atheism. These positions represented the problem of "man in isolation" (*Common* 36). The realization of dueling dualities was very Niebuhrian on Dewey's part. He was able to recognize the common error in religion's and atheism's conception of the place of humanity in the world. Supernaturalism and atheism thus removed the individual from humanity:

For in spite of supernaturalism's reference to something beyond nature, it conceives of this earth as the moral centre of the universe and of man as the apex of the whole scheme of things. It regards the drama of sin and redemption enacted within the isolated and lonely soul of man as the one thing of ultimate importance. [...] Militant atheism is also affected by lack of natural piety. The

ties binding man to nature that poets have always celebrated are passed over lightly. (Dewey, *Common* 36)

Supernaturalism focuses too much on the redemption of an individual's soul to the point of either ignoring one's environment or thinking of it as a contributor to his or her final damnation. Conversely, atheism forces the individual to abandon any sense of innate connection to one's fellow human being, thus ignoring Rousseau's natural *pitié* which made human beings naturally feel empathy for one another. Regardless of which side of the metaphysical pendulum one swayed, the results were the same: the individual was removed from his or her environment.

Dewey's religious naturalism was nothing more than a continuation of Enlightenment thought in which human beings, through reason and empathy, felt a part of the community. European thinkers thought that trained reason, and intelligence would not only bring out the best in scientific development, but also in culture and freedom. America's expression of Rousseau's *sentiment naturel* was best demonstrated through Jefferson, who, as previously mentioned, was highly regarded by Dewey.

In spite of Dewey's alleged secularism, Niebuhr latched onto Dewey's version of naturalism. Niebuhr understood perfectly well that Dewey was by no means a classic theist or a deeply religious man who imagined a giant bearded man in the sky. Ironically, Dewey's analyses on religion's role in society, and specifically the transformation of religious attitudes coincided immensely with Niebuhr's. Still, Dewey was a secularist, and Niebuhr a trained pastor. No matter how many points of convergence there were between the two, they still remained at different ends of the spectrum.

### **2.7.2 Sin, Symbolism, and American Protestantism: Niebuhr and Religion**

It would be too simplistic to proclaim that due to Niebuhr's theological background, he felt religion had to have a prominent place in American society. It was much more than that since in order to understand Niebuhr's politics, one must understand his theology. The two went hand in hand for Niebuhr simply because the "[...] doctrine of original sin is the starting point for any theory of politics" (Patterson, "Christianity" 12). In traditional Niebuhrian fashion, the answer is not nearly as cut and dry as one would imagine. Niebuhr understood that religion's place in society had drastically changed since not only America's foundation, but since the Civil War as well. Any sort of prominent religion or church attempting to maintain rigid control over the population or country was conducting an exercise in futility due to the growing plurality of the nation.

Equally important was how Niebuhr discussed the role between religion and society. His arguments were less focused on an actual church or organized religious group. Instead, he argued for a religious, specifically, Biblical, conception of the world. This did not mean that an organized religious group had to be the one diffusing the message or even controlling what was being said or taught. What was important, and what Niebuhr emphasized was understanding the Bible, and therefore the Christian faith on an internal and critical level. Doing so would force the individual to better interact with society as the person would constantly try to apply *agape* to his or her social situations. It was through a Biblical interpretation of the world, and more importantly, human nature, that society could improve. Consequently, as long as there was a strong presence of Biblical interpretation amongst its citizens no official organized church or religion was needed.

Niebuhr decided first to look to history for his justification of a Biblical view on democracies. Specifically, he wanted to analyze how Christianity “created” or at least helped democracies to develop. Niebuhr launched into the debate on who or what created democracy: secular or religious forces, specifically Christian ones? Niebuhr’s answer was, to little surprise, a combination of the two. He claimed that it was through the application of the best aspects of each force that democracy would flourish. He reasoned:

Perhaps a fair appraisal [of the debate] would lead to the conclusion that free societies are the fortunate products of the confluence of Christian and secular forces. This may be so because democracy requires, on the one hand, a view of man which forbids using him merely as an instrument of a political program or social process. This view the Christian and Jewish faiths have supplied. On the other hand, a free society requires that human ends and ambition, social forces and political powers be judged soberly and critically in order that the false sanctities and idolatries of both traditional societies and modern tyrannies be avoided. (*Christian Realism* 96)

Hence, Christian forces offered the necessary and inherent liberty found within humanity so they would not simply be a tool or political peon to any form of government. Equally, secular forces have ensured that human creativity, political power, and non-religious forces were held in check against one another, and more importantly against the citizenry. This was to avoid societal stagnation as found in tribal cultures, or the truly Leviathan monster represented by 20<sup>th</sup>-century tyrannies.

To complicate matters, Niebuhr's view of religion was laced with a practical and political use in society. Niebuhr was not the Medieval monk wishing to hide away from the sins of the world. He was an engaged theologian combining the Social Gospel with political realism. Ideally, political figures would follow this approach as well, not because politicians were inherently better or worse than their fellow man, but rather to add a core of morality to politics.

The problem with this approach was that it was extremely difficult to justify as American religious pluralism increased. Not only were there contesting factions of Protestant Christianity spreading throughout America, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw a sharp population increase amongst Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities due to immigration. Therefore, any sort of political or national leader addressing the people would not be able to rely simply on a form of religious community or identity to do so.

Niebuhr knew that this was the case and contended that the last time the US could have been united under the banner of a "common" faith was with America's "greatest president" Abraham Lincoln (*Irony* 170). Lincoln represented the true "Christian realist" leader in that he attempted to balance religious morality into power politics. This was because Lincoln acknowledged that issues were often more complex than they appeared:

This combination of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgement must be regarded as almost a perfect model of the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal and responsible toward the moral treasures of a free civilization on the one hand while yet having some religious vantage point over the struggle. (Niebuhr, *Irony* 171)

A Christian realist leader had to handle issues appropriately whilst maintaining this "awareness of another dimension" in which morality would and could play a factor. Niebuhr argued that Lincoln's model "would rule out the cheap efforts" of trying to solve a problem. Contrary to other leaders who either would offer empty sympathies or conversely ignore any normative values, a Christian realist approach actually takes both, practicality and morality into consideration (*Irony* 172). Most importantly, and perhaps most Niebuhrian, Lincoln's model of combining power politics and religious morality avoided the righteousness of idealism. Being a Christian realist meant that idealist notions of good fighting against evil had to be abandoned because the realist would admit, understand, and best adapt the actual interests driving any political or state action.

By its very definition, Christian realism requires a religious conception of the world. However, this religious outset does not necessarily belong to any particular Church or religious authority. In keeping with the Protestant tradition, Niebuhr stressed the personal relationship between God and an individual over the official authority of any Church or clergy member. This meant that it was the individual who acted as the conduit between humanity and the Divine. This being said, Rice highlighted that Niebuhr was equally critical of the paradox of America's religiousness and how "[...] America's religious communities drew far broader and more loyal membership than anywhere else in the Western world" and yet were still "[...] the nation [which] generally pursued [the] 'immediate goals of life, without asking too many questions about the meaning of life and without being too disturbed by the tragedies and antinomies of life'" ("Niebuhr's Critique" 317). Thus, Americans seemed to be religious on the surface, but lacked any of the profound analysis, and more importantly, any sort of the internal criticism which was so fundamental to Niebuhr's Christian realism.

For Niebuhr, a religiously moral approach to State or political matters was needed, even within secular society. Again, the major problem he continuously and constantly struggled with in regard to modern secular society was its insistence on how advanced it was, and the general optimistic view it maintained when it came to human nature (*Christian Realism* 99). This is not to say that Niebuhr thought that other classic realists such as Hobbes or Luther were equally correct. According to him, they went down the other absolute path towards tyranny. "Democracy does indeed require some confidence in man's natural capacity for justice," he wrote, "[b]ut its institutions can be more easily justified as bulwarks against injustice" (*Christian Realism* 99). This meant that it was not necessarily because of the "greatness" or impunity of modern man that democratic institutions were created. Rather, these institutions were fashioned more as precautionary measures against tyranny and the abuses of others. In essence, democracy and its establishments were, in part, created to protect humanity from itself. Institutions were not the only safeguard according to Niebuhr; religious conceptions of the world were also needed.

Religion, and more precisely Biblical faiths, such as Christianity and Judaism, were equally essential to the creation and maintenance of democracies. Niebuhr listed three "insights" as to why the "[...] Biblical faith [...] [was] unique in offering [these insights] into the human situation which are indispensable to democracy" (*Christian Realism* 101). The first was a question of rebellion and authority. According to Niebuhr, the Biblical faiths allowed for a person to defy and reject any terrestrial or State power as God was the ultimate authority. This can easily be seen in cases of civil disobedience found throughout Common Law countries in which a person rejects or refuses to adhere to, or be sanctioned by, a certain law if it goes against



his or her personal convictions. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a perfect example of this when he refused to obey what he deemed unjust laws because he responded to a higher authority.

The second attribute that the Biblical faiths gave democracy was an overall sense and general admiration of the individual. This meant that a human being was more than just a political tool to be used by any earthly authority. Niebuhr even criticized scientific humanism for committing this sin as “[...] scientific humanism frequently offends the dignity of man, which it ostensibly extols, by regarding human beings as subject to manipulation and as mere instruments of some ‘socially approved’ ends” (*Christian Realism* 101). Thus, scientific humanism managed to turn humanity back into creatures of nature, rather than the paradoxical beings who were independent from, and also a part of nature. Even worse, Niebuhr saw through this devolution of a person turned scientific object, arguing that totalitarianism and other tyrannical regimes were able to take advantage due to these “socially approved ends.” Scientific humanism, and those that wished to pervert it, were even more insidious because it “[...] justify[d] the charge that a scientific humanism [was] harmless only because there [was] not a political program to give the elite, which its theories invariably presuppose[d], a monopoly of power” (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 101). The real danger was found within those wishing to corrupt it. They could more easily do so because they could claim to be “independent” of political or State forces. Indeed, Niebuhr felt that it was best to be prudent about the benefits of individualism as it could easily be taken to the extreme, resulting in a disconnection of the individual from society.

The third “insight” has been previously elaborated on and discussed. This “insight” was a person’s freedom which enabled him or her to be capable of great creativity, but equally of great destruction. This was Niebuhr’s ultimate paradox as it demonstrated that freedom was “the dignity of man and the misery of man” and that both, the dignity and misery of man “have the same root” (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 101). It was this awareness and realization that Niebuhr credited as being the main advantage of realism over any of the purely secular theories which had emerged. This insight “[...] justify[d] the institutions of democracy more surely than any sentimentality about man, whether liberal or radical” (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 102). Other types of philosophy analyzing human nature simply failed to take into consideration this reality: human beings can be good, and they can be evil. Trying to fit a person into a type of predetermined political system or ideology “[...] obscure[d] the height of [a person’s] spirit, the uniqueness of [a person’s] being, and the egoistic corruption of [a person’s] freedom” (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 102).

According to Niebuhr, these three “insights” or realizations about Christianity’s influence, were fundamental in the rise and maintenance of democratic societies. If for no other reason,

guarding a Biblical vision of human nature was paramount in order to continue towards *agape* and improving the imperfect justice within the world. The age of science and technology which was the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was all the proof Niebuhr needed. Technology, human potential, and the sciences (both natural and human) grew exponentially and with complicated results. On the one hand, people were able to communicate rapidly with one another, travel to new destinations, and otherwise disenchant the world. On the other, these same technologies, advancements, and ideologies were exploited and used by some of the most terrible political regimes in human history, resulting in the deaths of millions. Clearly something was amiss between the pretenses of secular ideologies and historic realities.

Even within Christian ideologies of history, society and human nature, Niebuhr noticed a disturbing trend. Protestant liberals seemed to be falling into similar traps as their secular counterparts. Furthermore, they seemed to fall into the pitfalls of utopianism and unbridled idealism. This seemed to be especially true of American Protestantism which exemplified many of the errors Niebuhr saw within modern society. Niebuhr felt that Protestantism's main vices were direct descendants of the Enlightenment's idealism and philosophies. Weaknesses such as Protestantism's "excessive individualism, simplistic moralism, widespread sentimentality, and perfectionist utopianism" all combined together to create the American Protestant tradition in which the individual and more importantly, his or her interests, outweighed those of society (Rice, "Niebuhr's Critique" 319). The tenets of American Protestantism actually became the roots of conservatism which was "[...] nothing more than a decadent liberalism [...]" (Niebuhr, "Reply" 434).

Remaining true to his liberal principles, and even a bit to Pragmatism, Niebuhr felt that American Protestantism, and religion in general, were entirely missing the point. The purpose of religion and God, for Niebuhr was one in which the improvement of society could grow along with the improvement of the individual. Blatant and unyielding individualism at the expense of the greater society was what Niebuhr considered to be "[...] among the many weaknesses of the Protestant movement [...]" (qtd. in Rice, "Niebuhr's Critique" 320). Nor was just thinking about one's fellow human being enough for Niebuhr. By doing so the individual fell into the trap of simple Christian sentimentality and of "[...] applying the love-commandment to the larger, rather than to the more personal and intimate, relations of life [...]" (qtd. in Rice, "Niebuhr's Critique" 320). Put simply, Niebuhr felt that a truly religious person or one with a Biblical mindset took consideration of his or her fellow human being, not only through paying lip service, but by being active in the community. The larger criticism of Niebuhr towards religion, and specifically Protestantism in America was once more its view of human nature:

While [Niebuhr] claimed that there was a view of dignity of the person in Biblical faith, Niebuhr knew it related both to the image of God and to the reality of sin, that is, to the double aspect of human freedom in its creativity and destructiveness. The overly optimistic and saccharine view of the dignity of the person so pervasive in America's religious and secular circles glorified the self, independent from Go, and it represented little more than a reflect of the type of individualism that both denied the social substance of life and ignored the sense of communal justice involved in the Christian ethic of love. (Rice, "Niebuhr's Critique" 321)

Americans were blinded by their own pride, offering empty sentimentalities of a Christian version of love and justice. The truth of Christian love and justice was so far removed from their understanding, that the tragic irony of it all was lost on them.

America's conception of Christianity was lost and rooted into the sin of pride. Pride is not simply the thought of one believing to be better than another. It is the sin in which a person searches to go beyond his or her mortal limits and to be Godlike. Augustine, whom Niebuhr considered to be the "[...] first great 'realist' in western history," regarded this as "self-love" (*Christian Realism* 121). Niebuhr agreed with Augustine's analysis of human nature, and more specifically his view of self-love and the damage it could cause as the root of evil in most of society's problems:

Augustine's conception of the evil which threatens the human community on every level is a corollary of his doctrine of selfhood. 'Self-love' is the source of evil rather than some residual natural impulse which mind has not yet completely mastered. This excessive love of self, sometimes also defined as pride or *superbia*, is explained as the consequence of the self's abandonment of God as its true end and of making itself 'a kind of end.' (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 122)

Niebuhr made sure to distinguish Augustine's, and therefore his own, conception of self-love from Classic thinkers such as Plato or Aristotle who divided reality into the physical (bad) and mental (good). Self-love was at its very essence, spiritual. All of the other major sins, according to Augustine and Niebuhr were simply a mutation or further perversion of self-love. However, Augustine's approaches to political problems and Christian love were not perfect. For example,

the City of God seemed to resemble the Catholic Church and doctrine in general, and the political realities of his time did not necessarily match modern problems. Still, Niebuhr nevertheless discussed Augustine's superiority in applying Christianity to secular society. For each other type of approach or philosophy, Niebuhr argued that Augustine's view, and therefore his own, was flawed:

Modern 'realists' know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understood the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love must take the place as the final norm for these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure the power and persistence of self-love. Thus Augustine, whatever may be the dangers of a too slavish devotion to his insights, nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker. (*Christian Realism* 146)

Only Christian realism could help society avoid any of the pitfalls of other methods and ideologies.

Thus, Niebuhr and other Christian realists brought Augustine into the 20<sup>th</sup> and consequently, the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by recapturing an Augustinian understanding of the world in four ways: 1) Christian realists and Augustine viewed human nature in the same way, that is to say, both saw human beings as the image of God on Earth with ultimate creative capability which was nevertheless, tainted by sin. 2) History had meaning as well as purpose and was moving towards some final destination and ultimate goal. 3) The belief that some degree of order was superior to a general form of chaos when it came to human interactions. This signified that it was better to have a few wars and other societal sins (inequalities) than total chaos in which all would suffer. 4) A trust in the Law of Love which would transform the will of Humanity through God's Grace (Patterson, "Christianity" 4-5).

Religion's role, and especially Protestantism's role in society was one in which the law of love was transformed into some form of justice. Failure to do so amounted to the same problems as found in secular liberalism where the very conception of human nature was erroneous. Similarly, an effective religion was one in which power, interest, and conflict were real parts of the discussion. To ignore any of those elements was to fall into sentimentality and idealism.

A proper religion was one in which a prophet-like figure was present, and always ready to remind society of its sins. The prophet also makes sure to forever present the potential wrath of

God. Niebuhr defined prophetic preaching as “[...] insist[ing] on the organic relation between historic human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfillment of this existence, and the transcendent” (qtd. in Scherer 315). Niebuhr best exemplified this type of preaching as “[...] [his] preaching [was] best described as prophetic (interpretative) and apologetic, rather than as primarily kerygmatic” (Scherer 314). Aside from being prophetic, Scherer described three other points to Niebuhr’s particular preaching style, and therefore to Christian realism as a whole. The first point, following on Niebuhr’s definition of prophetic preaching, was Scherer’s notion of the demand. This demand was the conflict that occurred when absolute goals met relative principles or “exactions made by [...] the perfect upon the imperfect [and] by the ‘impossible’ upon the ‘possible’” (315). This conflict was always present and irresolvable until the actual the End of Days, thereby forever requiring the presence of the prophetic preacher.

Due to the emphasis on the prophet figure, the next dual point of judgment and mercy was of a mixed nature. Scherer criticized Niebuhr for being more judgment oriented than mercy driven. “It is the theme of judgment that Niebuhr labors,” he argued, “[i]t enters and re-enters, often unexpectedly, never quite able to resolve itself, as if we were dealing with some great fugue on the subject of God’s Holy war” (318). Mercy was lacking in Niebuhr’s Christian realism; a point Niebuhr did admit to later in life. In a response to Scherer, Niebuhr wrote

[...] that [Scherer] is right in suggesting that I have, in the past at least, placed so much emphasis on the analysis of the human situation that I did not have time to preach a positive answer to the human predicament. Also, I dwelt so extensively upon the divine judgement that the divine mercy came short. In my own mind these emphases seemed important at the time because for a good part of my ministry the state of our culture was such that the Christian faith was regarded as completely irrelevant. (Niebuhr, “Reply” 440)

The final aspect of Niebuhr’s preaching style, and to a certain extent his Christian realism, was his apologetics which “inseparably bound the *negatively analytical and critical*”<sup>38</sup> task which was bonded to “the prophetic and interpretive task” (Scherer 319).

What is interesting to note about Niebuhr’s take on religion is that he was not arguing for a massive institutional coup or even for an existing institution, such as the Catholic or Orthodox Church, to be given the power they once possessed. Instead, Niebuhr’s Christian realism was based on perspective, analysis, and criticism. These three features, were best expressed in

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<sup>38</sup> Scherer’s emphasis.

Niebuhr's preaching style and above all in his prophetic stance on politics, society, and human nature. They were correspondingly paramount for the proper role of religion in society.

Far from ever adopting a literal interpretation of the Bible or of Biblical faith, Niebuhr always preached a symbolic understanding of the Cross and general Christian myths. Doing so did not earn him many friends from the religious or even liberal circles. One such case was his former mentor Douglas Clyde Macintosh. It was primarily Niebuhr's use of the word "myth" in association with Christianity that seemed to be at the crux of the problem as it arguably took away any "validity" from the Gospels. After all, when hearing the word "myth" it is often affiliated with Greek, Roman or other Pantheistic stories of wronged gods, and pagan creation accounts. Macintosh "[...] claimed that Niebuhr's disavowal of literal truth with respect to religious concepts was equivalent to emptying religion of all truth" (Rice, *Odyssey* 66). Fundamentally, Niebuhr was criticized for taking the "meaning" out of Christianity by refusing to acknowledge any type of literal truth in the scriptures.

Niebuhr of course disagreed. His argument was that by rejecting a literal interpretation, one could actually plunge deeper into the myth and thus the truth of faith. This new-found truth was one "[...] which accepted the 'poetic,' 'symbolic,' and 'mythical' insights of an admittedly transrational form of language. Niebuhr repudiated both 'the discredited dogmatism and obscurantism of orthodoxy' and 'the superficialities of liberalism'" (Rice, *Odyssey* 66). Niebuhr's point was to focus not on the literal interpretation of religious symbols but rather to take them "seriously" (Rice, *Odyssey* 162). This is not too far a stretch from Dewey's previous conception of taking the religious out of religion. This is just one point of convergence between the two that will be developed later.

The primary goal for Niebuhr was to salvage and reinterpret Christianity in a modern world; one in which disenchantment was seemingly destroying any type of religious mystery. In this modern world, myths could serve a purpose. But it was a unique one and difficult to comprehend. Niebuhr was attempting to actually change the language and the very understanding of myths. These were simultaneously "pre- and suprascientific" according to Niebuhr, which meant that they were more than simple fables or stories used to describe something not-yet understood in the world (Rice, *Odyssey* 163).

By insisting on such a distinction Niebuhr maintained that biblical myths are far more than simply morale-boosting and therefore motivationally useful fictions. They are also ways into the truth about the human condition, with respect to both self-understanding and life's ultimate meaning. Myths do not explain events in the world in the casual sequences as does science, but they do 'illuminate' both

the breadth and depth of human existence as well as the 'end of existence.' What Niebuhr chose to call the 'truth' in myths defied rational confirmation. (Rice, *Odyssey* 163)

Myths offered insight into the paradox of human nature, primarily that of its creativity and its "breadth." Therefore, myths were useful to society, and especially to Christianity as they could shine light or "illuminate" on aspects of human life and experience that either a literal interpretation or traditional scientific method could not. In an ironically pragmatic and almost Deweyan conception, Niebuhr recognized that myths could offer a different definition, and thus understanding of "truth."

To better highlight the necessity of myths and symbols, Niebuhr decided to analyze the issue from three sides. First, and foremost, he attacked outright literal biblical interpretations or the "obscurantism of religious conservatives" who had actually caused more harm than good by obstinately defending and holding onto any type of literal myth (Rice, *Odyssey* 163). By doing so, these conservatives actually weakened symbols' and myths' place in society as they were now associated with archaic beliefs.

The second approach was to examine the other side of the spectrum and "target," for lack of a better term, liberal Christians and theology for the exact opposite reasons as their conservative counterparts. Niebuhr felt that liberal Christians had become far too complacent in their alienated world, and that once again, they were offering empty words, believing that such words would bring about Christian notions of love and justice. Liberal Christianity, had in effect, abandoned and forgotten any sense of religious myths or symbolism. Doing so created the opposite problem to the ones conservatives were dealing with as "[t]he result was that, while rightly rejecting the literal truth in religious symbols, liberalism found neither a way nor a reason to probe mythic language for what, in Niebuhr's view, was 'permanent' as opposed to what was 'primitive' in myth" (Rice, *Odyssey* 164). By ignoring and forgetting myths, liberals were rejecting an important part of Christian faith, one in which "permanent" truths were still applicable.

The third analysis focused on those who did not fit in either camp, the "self-professed humanists" who rejected any sort of myth outside of a literary, psychological, or sociological perspective (Rice, *Odyssey* 164). The issue was that their refusal to observe myths through any type of transcendent lens. It was this third group, and the notion of myths and symbols in general which became the most contentious points between Dewey and Niebuhr concerning religion, the religious, and their role(s) in society. These differences, though important at precise moments were not nearly as numerous as one would believe.

### 2.7.3 Dewey, Niebuhr, and Religion: A (Sort of) Common Ground

Any common ground shared between Dewey and Niebuhr stemmed from general conceptions, notions, or philosophies, rather than specific beliefs or dogmas. For example, both agreed that God was not necessarily a celestial Father looking upon His creations. Instead, God took on a more ephemeral and philosophical nature with Dewey believing God to be the meeting point between “ideal and actual,” whereas Niebuhr felt that God was a transcendent presence which was both independent from, and a part of humanity. These subtleties and degrees of difference did not prohibit the building of intellectual bridges. However, these bridges were only constructed for select issues, as criticisms and differences arose because at the end of the metaphysical day, the two thinkers remained on opposing sides of the spectrum for a very simple reason: one believed in supernaturalism, while the other did not. Therefore, grasping the complexities of Niebuhr and Dewey’s thought concerning theology is no easy task. This next section will look at both, common and diverging points of interest on religion in order to demonstrate their global views on religion.

One point of contention for example, was Niebuhr’s criticism of Dewey’s naturalism as being nothing more than sentimental humanism. According to Niebuhr, Dewey’s naturalism lacked any deity or theism, but maintained a sense of mystery bordering on the supernatural. This was a bit ironic as “[t]he Niebuhrian version of moral realism thus leads us in the direction of ethical naturalism, an account of moral facts which sees them as having a reality independent of our minds, but not independent of other, non-moral facts about the world” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 107). The paradox being that this statement seems to run contrary to Niebuhr’s inherent beliefs. However, Lovin indicates that “Niebuhr’s objections prove to be against a particular form of naturalism” rather than naturalism in general (*Reinhold Niebuhr* 108). Essentially, this implies that there are certain situations in which “right” and “wrong” are known, and they are so despite circumstances and regardless of any empirical proof. If anything, Niebuhr was very much critical of “reductive naturalism” which “[...] attempts to formulate moral judgements by a simple, definitive method [...]” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 109). Moral judgments should not be based solely on the facts provided in a certain circumstance in order to advance any specific economic, political, or ethnic causes.

Dewey rejected any such title as he felt “humanism was based on [...] anthropocentrism” and insisted that any sort of “natural piety” that he held towards the physical world was “respect for the fact that the natural environment both supports our undertakings and aspirations as much as it [...] defeats [...] us” (Rice, *Odyssey* 155). Dewey did not believe in



nature spirits or pagan gods, he simply believed that the natural world deserved humanity's respect. Dewey defined natural piety as

rest[ing] upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable. Such piety is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life. (*Common* 19)

Therefore, for Dewey, nature was as much a part of humanity as it was a part of nature.

Dewey's natural piety shares a striking similarity with Niebuhr's conception of religion thereby linking the two opposing spectrums. Niebuhr always put forward that humanity was unique to other creatures due to a person's transcendent capabilities of unlimited creation or destruction. Dewey, although not arguing in favor of supernatural entities, agreed with the underlying sentiment. He maintained that "'natural piety' ought to lead to a 'sense of the permanent and inevitable implication of nature and man in a common career and destiny.'" In the context of such an understanding an 'increased knowledge of nature' could be seen, not as 'irreligious,' but rather as 'potentially much more religious than all that it is displacing'" (Rice, *Odyssey* 155-156). His "natural piety" in which humanity respected nature was based on Pragmatism and experience which would benefit all. Furthermore, Dewey had a unique conception of religion and God and of how He would "reveal" Himself to humanity, contrary to the Niebuhrian context where revelation was a truly divine project, capable through an external, yet holy, force. Dewey brought Godliness to Earth through human activity by emphasizing "[...] democracy as the only means to accomplish this end, and the conception of the entire enterprise [of God realizing himself on Earth through human agency], are distinctively Deweyan shadings [...] to naturalism" (Kloppenbergs 44).

Another commonality was a shared feeling that any sort of metaphysical, theological, or ideological escapism from the world was to be avoided. Finding "refuge" in theism, mysticism, or rationalism was akin to the individual abandoning his or her responsibilities to society (Rice, *Odyssey* 158). Though both agreed on the general problems caused by those attempting to seek refuge in their respective "isms," Dewey and Niebuhr disagreed on methodology and approach to avoiding this rejection of society. Dewey's

[s]olution was to turn toward a 'religious faith which attaches itself to the possibilities of nature and associated living [and] would, with its devotion to the

ideal, manifest piety toward the actual.’ Niebuhr, on the other hand, drew inspiration from a prophetic faith that knew the law of love required a quest for justice. At the same time Niebuhr’s vision of faith was one that encouraged responsible action, while maintaining an attitude of ‘nonchalance’ without which ‘all moral striving generates a stinking sweat of self-righteousness and an alternation of fanatic illusions and fretful disillusionments. (Rice, *Odyssey* 158)

As seen previously, Dewey wanted to adapt the religious tones and attitudes via its language in order to resolve actual problem. Niebuhr, conversely, based his arguments on a Biblical interpretation of humanity and nature thereby creating a more tempered placement between humanity and nature. Niebuhr’s Biblical interpretation led to the ultimate criticism of Dewey’s natural piety and overall naturalism: it left no room for the possibility of transcendence.

Niebuhr understood Dewey’s pragmatic struggle against “religious and philosophical dualisms,” but he “[...] overstated ‘continuity’ in such a way as to err on the side of monism and thus oversimplified the complexities or ‘depths’ of existence” (Rice, *Odyssey* 159). Dewey’s approach seemed to ignore any “discontinuities” that were demonstrated in history or in human nature. This was where Niebuhr’s dialectic and religious approach accurately analyzed human nature by considering the role and importance of history, something that he accused Dewey of downplaying. By examining the continuities and discontinuities of human nature and the world, Niebuhr unveiled the “diverging half-truths” that both naturalism and idealism represented (Rice, *Odyssey* 159). Only through a dualistic analysis of human nature could society hope to avoid the traps of idealism and naturalism. Niebuhr argued that a person

[w]ho is both in nature and above nature and who has been alternately misunderstood by naturalistic and idealistic philosophies. Idealism understands his freedom as mind but not his reality as contingent object in nature. It elaborates a history of man as if it were a history of mind, without dealing adequately with man as determined by geography and climate, by interest and passion. Naturalism, on the other hand, tells the history of human culture as if it were a mere variant of natural history. These same philosophies are of course equally unable to solve the problem presented by the incongruity of mind and matter in ontology and the subject and object in epistemology. The one tries to reduce mind to matter or to establish a system of psychophysical parallelism. The other seeks to derive the world of objects from the world of mind. (*Christian Realism* 177-178)

Thus, For Niebuhr, Dewey's natural piety ignored two important aspects of human nature: freedom and transcendence.

Human freedom, time and time again, seemed to disprove idealists' and naturalists' conceptions of human nature and society. "Genuine freedom" as Niebuhr pointed out was one in which humanity was capable of either following a given ideological schema, or defying it. Any attempt at forcing human behavior into pigeon-holed concepts or ideas equated to ignoring this fundamental aspect of humanity itself. Niebuhr wrote:

This mystery of human freedom, including the concomitant mystery of historic evil, plus the previous incongruity of man both as free spirit and as a creature of nature, led Pascal to elaborate his Christian existentialism in opposition to the Cartesian rationalism and Jesuit Thomism of his day. Pascal delved 'in mysteries without which man remains a mystery to himself'; and that phrase may be a good introduction to the consideration of the relation of the suprarational affirmation of the Christian faith to the antinomies, contradictions, and mysteries of human existence. (*Christian Realism* 178-179).

For Niebuhr, Pascal's insights highlighted something many modern thinkers, secular and religious alike had forgotten: the paradox of human autonomy.

One of the ways in which this liberty was expressed was through art, culture, symbolism, and myths. Niebuhr felt that "Religion [here Niebuhr's emphasis on religion as a proper noun], to transpose Santayana's phrase, is poetry which is believed. Religion seeks mythically to grasp life in its unity and wholeness" and therefore cannot be understood by purely sensory or "rational terms" (qtd. in Rice, *Odyssey* 161). The importance of myths to society is a continuation of what has been previously discussed in terms of Niebuhr's refusal to accept any sort of literal interpretation of the Scriptures or Christianity. This being said, Dewey was not far removed from agreeing with Niebuhr on notions such as "unity" and "wholeness." Art and culture, for example were equally as important in expressing these sentiments. Expression through forms of art or other cultural events were culminations of high achievement in democratic societies. The veneration of art and culture was the result of Dewey's unique interpretation and role for both in society. The point of his work *Freedom and Culture*, for example, was to demonstrate that free societies were ones in which societies fostered and promoted the arts. This increase in artistic and cultural expression consequently led to a rise in the importance of democratic institutions thereby fostering a truly democratic culture. For

Dewey, experiencing or discovering art was a religious experience as it “elicit[ed] and accentuat[ed]” the particular quality of

[...] being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact [...] is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with esthetic intensity. It explains also the religious feeling that accompanies intense esthetic perception. We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. (qtd. in Rice, *Odyssey* 161-162)

Dewey’s religious appreciation for art actually put him and Niebuhr on common ground on this issue. Dewey’s love of art, and especially the intense feelings, meanings, and transcendence a person felt while experiencing it, was equivalent to Niebuhr’s view of human nature’s innate transcendental properties. Any experience which moved a person beyond him or herself into the greater “unity” and “wholeness” was exactly the type of religious awareness Niebuhr argued for. This concept is not too far removed from Transcendentalism as well. Niebuhr would have agreed with Emerson on the importance of self-reflection and insight for, “[b]efore the revelations of the soul, Time, Space and Nature shrink away” (201). However appreciative Niebuhr may have been of Transcendentalism’s emphasis on the religious experience and importance of finding a personal connection with the Divine, he would have been equally skeptical of the importance and prominence Emerson and other transcendentalists attributed to human capability. For Emerson et. al., transcendence was brought about through isolation. Even if this isolation “must not be mechanical, but spiritual,” transcendence was still a product of human reason and insight, and therefore independent from God (Emerson 201). Niebuhr would have maintained that any genuine “revelation” was genuine was achieved through a combination of self-introspection and above all, Divine grace.

In spite of this concurrence on the religious experience art could offer, Niebuhr and Dewey still had several fundamental disagreements on the role of religion and myth in society. It boiled down to a difference in goal and purpose. Dewey wanted to modify and change language to suit more secular and social purposes such as turning dogmatic energies of supernatural religions towards more civil targets like civil culture and democracy. Niebuhr however, wanted to not just change the tone and language of religion, but actually reincorporate it back into society. Looking from Dewey’s point of view, Niebuhr was a target representing a modern example of supernaturalism. As Dewey argued in *A Common Faith*:

It is sometimes held that beliefs about religious matters are symbolic, like rites and ceremonies. This view may be an advance upon that which holds to their literal objective validity. But as usually put forward it suffers from an ambiguity. Of what are the beliefs symbols? Are they symbols of things experienced in modes than those set apart as religious, so that the things symbolized have an independent standing? Or are they symbols in the sense of standing for some transcendental reality – transcendental because not being the subject matter of experience generally? Even the fundamentalist admits a certain quality and degree of symbolism in the latter sense in objects of religious belief. For he holds that the objects of these beliefs are so far beyond finite human capacity that our beliefs must be couched in more or less metaphorical terms. The conception that faith is the best available substitute for knowledge in our present estate still attaches to the notion of the symbolic character of the materials of faith; unless by ascribing them to a symbolic nature we mean that these materials stand for something that is verifiable in general and public experience. (28)

If this statement by Dewey seems familiar, it is because Niebuhr was arguing for this very transcendental notion of myths and symbolisms. What distinguished Niebuhr is his objection to Dewey's dualistic approach. As Rice correctly points out, Niebuhr seemed "to want it both ways" (*Odyssey* 166).

Niebuhr simultaneously agreed with Dewey is attempting to strip religious symbols or myths of their literal meaning, while arguing that these symbols still maintained a deeper meaning and were "symbolically" true. Essentially, Niebuhr wanted to add his transcendentalist theology of humanity to religious symbols. As seen earlier, Niebuhr's analysis of symbols and myths went beyond their simple face-value or meaning. In essence, he wanted to discover the facets of reality that were hidden within these symbols (Rice, *Odyssey* 166). Attempting to justify his position, Niebuhr wrote a reply to his "friendly" critic Paul Tillich:

If it is 'supernaturalistic' to affirm that faith discerns the key to specific meaning about the categories of philosophy, ontological or epistemological, then I must plead guilty of being a supernaturalist. The whole of the Bible is an exposition of this kind of supernaturalism. If we are embarrassed by this and try to interpret Biblical religion in other terms we end in changing the very character of the Christian faith. ("Reply" 435)

Niebuhr's "admission" to being a supernaturalist was more ironic or tongue in cheek than anything. If he had to force himself into this category in order for others to understand his philosophy, theology, and politics, then so be it. His was a "supernaturalism" based on the Bible, and more importantly based on faith. Understanding Christianity through any other prism would be to corrupt Christianity's *agape* and justice message. In true Niebuhrian fashion, the fact that he wanted symbols and myths to be both independent of literalism, yet maintain a deeper significance or meaning was just a different expression of the transcendental quality he held so important in humanity.

The persistent debates over religion and its myths between Dewey and Niebuhr were numerous and never actually resolved. What they did achieve was a kind of philosophical viewpoint in the *zeitgeist* of the time, and more specifically a better window into western culture. Rice summarized that Niebuhr and Dewey reflected two points of view on religion and myths in general. According to him, Niebuhr represented a kind of post-modern self-awareness of myth. Fundamentally, "[...] the myth has come to discern its own mythological character; that is, the mythological consciousness is conscious of itself as mythical" (*Odyssey* 167). To put into less lofty language: myths are "aware" that they are myths. Humanity is aware of its sinful nature, and more importantly, it is aware that it has lost its place in paradise and realizes that it can never return. Niebuhr incarnated this philosophy and his Christian realism was the philosophical manifestation of this theological suffering aware of sin as an undeniable part of human nature.

Dewey, on the other hand, decided to continue to look for these paradises and "sacred places" in spite of humanity's lost nature (Rice, *Odyssey* 167). The primary problem was Dewey's choice in vocabulary and insistence on the use of "God" and even "religious," as previously discussed. Humanists, simply felt that there was no reason to pursue any mythological sense to reality, as the world had been disenchanted. Dewey, was not so ready to give up on the mysteries of the world, and felt that looking for these "sacred places" could help humanity appreciate and better live in society.

All of these characteristics of religion; its myths, its role in society, and even what it was, were part of a greater question concerning the "central problem of religion" itself (Rice, *Circle* 63). Both men agreed that this was an important question, but again, methodology and process were the differentiating factors. Niebuhr reasoned that finding meaning in life was the very heart of religion itself, regardless of the denomination or sect. His treatise on human nature and theology, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* argued as much:

Implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man's capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. The problem of meaning, which is the basic problem of religion, transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other as the freedom of man's spirit transcends his rational faculties. (175-176)

The only way for humanity to find meaning in life was via a transcendent faith. Through this transcendence, God would provide meaning to humanity's existence. This understanding also supported the importance of symbols and myths in Niebuhr's thought. These symbols had to be taken "seriously" if society were to ever experience the transcendence proposed by God (Rice, *Odyssey* 169).

In *Faith and History* Niebuhr discussed at great lengths the need and importance of Biblical symbolism in helping to understand the meanings offered by religion. He argued that

[...] without the Biblical faith [meaning] degenerates either into Platonism or utopianism. In Platonism eternity becomes a *totum simul* which gathers up all historical events and annuls their unique significance in the eternal moment. The significance of the drama of history with its fateful decisions, its cumulative effects, and its unique events is lost. By the symbol of the resurrection the Christian faith hopes for an eternity which transfigures, but does not annul, the temporal process.

The symbol of the Last Judgement, on the other hand, emphasizes the moral ambiguity of history to the end. It negates Utopian illusions in progressive interpretations of history as rigorously as the symbol of the Resurrection rejects the Platonic flight into an eternity of 'pure' being. These eschatological symbols transcend the ratiom; but they do justice to the temporal and the eternal dimensions of man's historic existence. (237)

The advantage of a Christian analysis of symbols and myths was that it provided an important and real role for history as far as finding meaning for mankind was concerned. Other philosophical approaches looking to define the human condition ignored history by refuting that it actually played a contributing role within human progress thereby placing the significance of events to the wayside. This approach essentially said that all events were equal and therefore,

none were important. Conversely, Utopian, here meaning the liberal definition, had the opposite problem. For Utopians history was a continuous and evolutionary process towards progress, and an ultimate “end.” Within a Biblical interpretation of meaning, humanity was neither confined to the nihilism of history where there was no significance, nor to the idealized vision of human nature. Instead, humanity could develop and adapt to a living history in which it was equal contributor and recipient.

The Biblical revelation offered something that other interpretations of human nature did not: hope. As God stood as “both the basis and fulfillment of the world,” humanity was not bound under some predestined or historical end (Rice, *Odyssey* 170). Because God was simultaneously a part of, and independent from humanity, ultimate tragedy was not necessarily the destiny of humanity. Niebuhr wrote:

We do not believe that the human enterprise will have a tragic conclusion; but the ground of our hope lies not in human capacity but in divine power and mercy, in the character of the ultimate reality, which carries the human enterprise. This hope does not imply that fulfillment means the negation of what is established and developed in human history. Each moment of history stands under the possibility of an ultimate fulfillment. The fulfillment is neither a negation of its essential character nor yet a further development of its own inherent capacities. It is rather a completion of its essence by an annihilation of the contradictions which sin has introduced into human life. (qtd. in Rice, *Odyssey* 170).

There are two important points to take away from Niebuhr’s statement on Christianity: 1) its emphasis on redemption through Divine Grace. Niebuhr believed that only God, and not “human capacity” was responsible for providing mercy. However, this did not mean that the works, trials, and tribulations of humanity were ignored. Instead, history and more importantly, historic moments held that “possibility” of the “ultimate fulfillment” which would be the End of Days. 2) Any eschatological scenario was going to be devoid of lakes of fire or the Great Dragon devouring the world. Instead, when the event was Divinely deemed as “fulfilled” by the figure of the Christ, the contradiction of sin within humanity would be resolved.

Dewey viewed Niebuhr’s attempts at providing meaning to be as another example of Niebuhr’s outdated dualism. Similarly, he found this analysis to be pessimistic considering human nature, as it removed the inherent ability of humanity. Instead, Niebuhr’s Christianity relied on a supernatural force instead of the innate promise, intelligence, and rationality found within humanity. Dewey felt that meaning could be found through experience, and the proper



realization of the connection between the individual, society, and nature when facing the “meaning” of reality. Of course, this did imply that significance would be easily found in reality. Disproving Niebuhr, Dewey expressed a rather sobering, and measured analysis of human nature in *Experience and Nature*:

Men move between extremes. They conceive of themselves as gods, or feign a powerful and cunning god as an ally who bends the world to do their bidding and meeting their wishes. Disillusioned, they disown the world that disappoints them; and hugging ideals to themselves as their own possession, stand in haughty aloofness apart from the hard course of events that pays so little heed to our hopes and aspirations. But a mind that has opened itself to experience and that has ripened through its discipline knows its own littleness and impotencies; it knows that its wishes and acknowledgements are not final measures of the universe whether in knowledge or in conduct, and hence are, in the end, transient. But it also knows that its juvenile assumption of power and achievement is not a dream to be wholly forgotten. It implies a unity with the universe that is to be preserved. The belief and the effort of thought and struggle which it inspires are also the doing of the universe, and they in some way, however slight, carry the universe forward. A chastened sense of our importance, apprehension that it is not a yard-stick by which to measure the whole, is consistent with the belief that we and our endeavors are significant not only for themselves but in the whole.

Fidelity to the nature to which we belong as parts however weak, demands that we cherish our desires and ideals till we have converted them into intelligence, revised them in terms of the ways and means which nature makes possible. When we have used our thought to its utmost and have thrown into the moving unbalanced balance of things our puny strength, we know that that such thought and effort is one condition of the coming into existence of the better. As far as we are concerned it is the only condition, for it alone is in our power. To ask more than this is childish; but to ask less is a recreance no less egotistic, involving no less a cutting of ourselves from the universe than does the expectation that it meet and satisfy our every wish. To ask in good faith as much as this from ourselves is to stir into motion every capacity of imagination, and to exact from action every skill and bravery. (419-420)

This long, and deeply intimate confession highlights several points of Dewey's naturalism. On the one hand, he recognized some of the limits of human nature, specifically in terms of its pettiness and petulance in "disowning" the world when not conforming to a person's desires or wishes. However, Dewey did not fall into nihilistic pessimism as he still felt that "with a chastened sense of [...] importance" humanity could still evolve and develop thanks to its inherent qualities.

Furthermore, Dewey's reveals in his writing how very Niebuhrian he was, or conversely, how Deweyan Niebuhr was when it came to certain themes. As can be seen, Dewey was by no means the Utopist bent on transforming the world through social science, progress, technology and intelligence as Niebuhr believed. Indeed, further development and insight into Dewey reveals that he had a more transcendental view of human nature than previously imagined. Dewey acknowledged that humanity had to find a sort of perfect balance between "ask[ing] more" which "is childish" without abandoning what was properly due to them. Doing so would be equally "egotistic." Knowing the difference was a question of reflection, of "effort and struggle" or to put it simply: of experience.

Thus, the defining characteristic between Niebuhr and Dewey on the question of religion was the source of humility. For Niebuhr, humanity could be "saved" and find meaning in life through a transcendent God who was a part of, and removed from humanity and history. On the contrary, Dewey argued that this very same "redemption" or insight into meaning, was one that would be found internally through naturalistic expressions of reason, intelligence, and above all experience. What both shared in common, in spite of these diverging methodological and epistemological divergences was the concept of criticism. This was the key factor by which humanity would find not only the appropriate role of religion in society, but also divulge any sort of inner or deeper meaning in society.

Through analysis of Dewey and Niebuhr's views on religion, it has been demonstrated that the reality of their views is not as clear cut as one would have imagined. In spite of Niebuhr being a pastor and Dewey being the bastion of liberalism, they managed to come together on various, and more importantly, crucial points concerning religion. The most vital of these convergences being the need for criticism and reflection. Of course, total agreement between the two was never going to be possible on account of their opposing metaphysical origins. Religion was not the only issue where both Dewey and Niebuhr had complex opinions. The next chapter of this research will look at global events, specifically World War II, as well as continue on into the Cold War, this in spite of Dewey's death in 1952. The logic behind this decision being that though Dewey did not have much time to write on it, his reflections on Communism and the rise of the Soviet Union are of intellectual value to this research. Analysis

of The Great War, or World War I has already occurred and, therefore, will not be discussed in the next chapter. Another major concept that will be explored is Marxism. These global conflicts and the rise of Marxism influenced and shaped both thinkers especially Niebuhr, who, within the intellectual framework of Christian realism, evolved profoundly during these conflicts. Christian realism was influential both domestically and internationally. At home, it fought for societal and civil rights for minorities. Abroad, it required military intervention in conflicts such as World War II. Concurrently, during these turbulent times, Dewey's approaches to Pragmatism advocated for the survival of American democracy in the face of totalitarianism.



# The Results of Pride: Pragmatism and Christian Pragmatism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

## 3.0.0 Some Like Them Hot, Some Cold: World War II and the Cold War

If there is a recurrent message regarding the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is its unprecedented death toll and untold suffering for the average citizens of the world. In Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred*, he commented on the horrors experienced throughout the age. He proclaimed:

The hundred years after 1900 were without question the bloodiest century in modern history, far more violent in relative as well as absolute terms than any previous era. Significantly larger percentages of the world's population were killed in the two world wars that dominated the century than had been killed in any previous conflict of comparable geopolitical magnitude. Although wars between 'great powers' were more frequent in earlier centuries, the world wars were unparalleled in their severity (battle deaths per year) and concentration (battle deaths per nation-year). By any measure, the Second World war was the greatest man-made catastrophe of all time. (12)

Part of this carnage of the twentieth century, specifically the "greatest man-made catastrophe," was caused by the mentality of hatred that had found ways of expressing itself through modern technology and factory-line efficiency.

Not only were soldiers killing one another on the battlefield, but thanks to scientific efficiency and expanding technologies, blood-thirsty dictators in totalitarian regimes were now capable of exterminating entire groups of people based on a variety of factors ranging from ethnicity, religion or class with a scientific efficiency due to advances in chemistry and machining technology. The most glaring and frightening examples of this were the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, and the Gulags of Stalinist Russian. These phenomena have been studied and discussed since the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s and there has been "a common assertion among historians" regarding the uniqueness of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century's violence (D. Smith "Review"). Political scientists such as Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, Carl

Friedrich and Raymond Aron, were just a few who dedicated time to the study of either the conflicts of the twentieth century, or their consequences. Beyond analyzing the effects of just the two World Wars or other military conflicts, these authors analyzed in great detail a political phenomenon which seemed to be a new occurrence: totalitarianism.

Contrary to the arguably convoluted origins of World War I, World War II's causes are common knowledge, and therefore, rather than focusing on the historical reasons for World War II, the next section will instead discuss a subject that has been touched upon previously, but not yet fully developed: totalitarianism. Both Dewey and Niebuhr commented on its rise, and were aptly critical of it and the dangers it represented. This commentary provides the logic for including a comprehensive discussion on this new political regime. Additionally, totalitarianism and its horrors were not just limited to a single geographic or political area but saw a global rise during this century.

The atrocities of this regime were not just limited to Nazi Germany, but could be characterized in the rise of communism as well. Thus, in order to understand why Dewey and Niebuhr were so critical of not only the Axis powers in World War II, but equally against the perversion of Marx's philosophies through Communism, a brief analysis of totalitarian regimes, and philosophies will be discussed. For, only through comprehending totalitarianism, can Dewey and Niebuhr's philosophies on democracy, liberty, and political theory be fully appreciated.

### **3.0.1 Manufactured Terror and Industrialized Death: The Totalitarian Regime**

As with most objects within the social sciences, definitions can be as varied as the number of authors. Raymond Aron summarized as much, arguing that these definitions are dependent on which specific aspect of an object, in this case totalitarian regimes, is being examined (284). There are even arguments that suggest that because there were pockets or some form of resistance within totalitarian regimes, this was proof that those regimes were not nearly as "total" or omnipotent as believed to be, therefore, rendering the regime an extreme form of authoritarianism rather than a totalitarian government.

Aron's conception of totalitarianism is based on a strong single party system within the regime which consequently controlled everything and prohibited any form of pluralism from existing. He summarized this hypothesis into five major points: 1) One political party takes control and monopolizes all political activity. 2) This single-party system either uses, or is armed with some form of ideology on which only the party, has total authority, and thereby is the only interpreter of said ideology. 3) Through this authority, the State claims a double

monopoly over physical force and forces of persuasion including, radio, television and other medias. 4) Professional and economic activities function directly under some form of State control and are, in a certain manner, part of the State itself. These activities are often the reflection of State ideologies. 5) Due to the economic and professional activities reflecting the State political ideology, any form of fault or error committed was therefore an error committed against the State and its ideology (284-285).

For Aron, adding to these crucial five elements was a charismatic leader with the voluntary or revolutionary will to lead the actual change of the former structure into this new totalitarian leviathan. He illustrated this through comparison of fascist Italy to the other totalitarian powers. Aron argued:

*Il n'en reste pas moins que l'Italie fasciste, régime de parti unique, n'a jamais connu ni prolifération idéologique, ni phénomène totalitaire comparable à la grande purge soviétique ou aux excès des dernières années du régime hitlérien. Dans les deux cas où l'on parle de totalitarisme, le phénomène essentiel, la cause originelle [lui] paraît le parti révolutionnaire lui-même. Les régimes ne sont pas devenus totalitaires par une sorte d'entraînement progressif, mais à partir d'une intention originelle, la volonté de transformer fondamentalement l'ordre existant en fonction d'une idéologie. Les traits communs aux partis révolutionnaires qui ont abouti au totalitarisme sont l'ampleur des ambitions, le radicalisme des attitudes et l'extrémisme des moyens. (287)*

As terrible as Mussolini's fascism was, he was not "as bad" as Hitler or Stalin, as he lacked the sort of revolutionary will power to truly alter the fundamental structures of society. Ideology was thus the basis of Aron's views and understanding of totalitarian regimes.

Hannah Arendt took a different approach. She maintained that it was through the secret police that these regimes, specifically those of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, were able to commit their atrocities with impunity. The State was nothing more than an "outward façade" of the real power given to the secret police.

Above the state and behind the facades of ostensible power, in a maze of multiplied offices, underlying all shifts of authority and in a chaos of inefficiency, lies the power nucleus of the country, the superefficient and supercompetent services of the secret police. The emphasis on the police as the sole organ of power, and the corresponding neglect of the seemingly greater

power arsenal of the army, which is characteristic of all totalitarian regimes, can still be partially explained by the totalitarian aspiration to world rule and its conscious abolition of the distinction between a foreign country and a home country, between foreign and domestic affairs. [...] Since the totalitarian ruler conducts his policies on the assumption of an eventual world government, he treats the victims of his aggression as though they were rebels, guilty of high treason, and consequently prefers to rule occupied territories with police, and not with military forces. (Arendt, *Totalitarianism* 118)

For Arendt, the secret police was the governing force through which the totalitarian regime controlled its citizens. Having more authority and broader powers than the traditional military, the secret police could act with absolute power and ultimate impunity. The traditional military or civil order forces were to be mistrusted and used consistently in foreign affairs. This left the secret police on constant guard against the worst type of threat: the unseen enemy. By definition, this meant that the secret police were always on watch, needed, and thus patrolling. Any infraction or crime found by these police did not just end with a simple punishment or imprisonment for breaking the law, it meant to also be found guilty of treason.

Other authors have advanced alternate arguments explaining how and why totalitarian regimes were able to rise to power. Aron and Arendt, did not and do not hold the monopoly on defining these regimes; they are merely two well-known names amongst several other authors. Philippe Bénéton, for example, reasoned that totalitarian regimes were able to seize control due to their monopoly on information, propaganda and the “truth.” This “truth” was based on party ideology and was never wrong. Friedrich Hayek had a different method for analyzing totalitarian factors. He argued that totalitarian control happened through State-operated and controlled economic policies for example.

What then can be taken from these various authors and their equally diverging opinions? George Orwell’s *1984* may actually provide one of the clearest examples of an ideal-type totalitarian regime. In the novel, information was heavily controlled through the Ministry of Information, and more dubiously through its “newspeak” where the government would purposely edit a newspaper to reflect ideology, and their “truth.” Similarly, party ideology was followed with a religious zealotry. Any form of criticism or fault within the society resulted in immediate punishment by the massive and omnipresent “Big Brother” who punished through a form of secret police.

Totalitarian regimes often rely on one fundamental aspect which all the aforementioned authors mentioned previously touched upon, even if they never explicitly developed it: the



dissolution between the public and private spheres. In a totalitarian regime, the individual is deprived of any and all liberty allowing the person to act independently of state intervention. This is ultimately a perversion of Dewey's blending of the boundaries between the two. Whereas Dewey felt that the public and private could reinforce one another and interacted in an almost symbiotic relationship, totalitarian ideology removes any notion of the individual, and replaces it with some form of state-run power, propaganda, and ideology. Intellectually, this was one of the primary criticisms Dewey and Niebuhr had with the rising totalitarian powers which they witnessed throughout the 1930s in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Depriving a person of his or her inherent individualism was to negate any sense of freedom that the person had, whether the freedom was bestowed naturally upon a person in the case of Dewey, or through Divine forces as with Niebuhr.

On a humanitarian level, the genuine evils of totalitarianism required the United States, and the other Western nations to intervene and to prevent the geographic spread and escalation of acts of violence and oppression. Now, understanding the basics of totalitarianism and opposition to it, this research can now focus on how Dewey and Niebuhr viewed World War II and the world's introduction to this shocking "modern" regime.

### **3.1.0 We Shan't Forget, Even if We Try: The Unforgettable Lessons of World War I**

If there ever were an existential crisis for Dewey and his pragmatic ideas, it occurred during the 1930s when he was confronted with the rise of totalitarian and fascist regimes. One of the major criticisms levied against Dewey was the disparity between his philosophy and his politics. Or as John Patrick Diggins argued, "[h]ow could an intellect have been so brilliant in philosophy yet so mistaken in politics?" ("Review" 724). Indeed, Dewey did not have a stellar record when it came to adapting his philosophies to politics. The irony of course being that Pragmatism was itself a philosophy in which one decided the best course of action through proper experience. It was only logical to assume that following the pragmatic system of using experience, the scientific method, and intelligence, an accurate political solution would be found. In reality, this was far from true as reflected by several of Dewey's personal choices in political candidates who or parties which never excelled beyond the local level. Poor choices in politicians aside, Dewey's arguments against direct American military intervention in World War II seemed all the more peculiar, given the importance of objectivity when analyzing the past in relation to present events. The errors and experiences from World War I were forever engrained in

Dewey's psyche forcing him to go against one of his principle pragmatic tenets: that history held no eternal lessons on human development.

Dewey's conception of history is important to analyze given how contrary it was to Niebuhr's Christian realism. For Dewey, history was not the Oracle of Delphi in which one could find answers to modern society's problems. Pragmatism's foundations and practices in "empirical methodology," removed nearly all metaphysical significance of history for humanity, or as Diggins wrote, "[in j]oining hands with natural science, [P]ragmatism offered empirical methodology as the answer to epistemological doubt. As 'process' replaced 'truth,' the intellect no longer had to ask unanswerable questions about the perennial riddles and ironies of history and philosophy" ("Peace and War" 213). This emphasis on "process" over any type of philosophical meditation of truth meant that "American scholars could be confident that [P]ragmatism resolved the problems of life" as historians remained anchored in the past, and philosophers debated theory (Diggins, "Peace and War" 213). Put simply, because Pragmatism explored the interconnectivity of events and refused of any sort of general truth or absolutism, history could never be a reference pool of universal truths for modern society, as the measures that led up to a given event in history were unique to those particular circumstances. In sum, history appears cyclical only because humanity fails to go into further detail. Beneath the shallow surface of repetition or "historic truths" was actually a network of conditions which were impossible to fully comprehend or duplicate. Thus, it was pointless to try and find "historic lessons" because the events, values, people, beliefs etc. that led to event "A" one hundred years ago, were completely different than the other conditions characterizing event "B," the current event.

In spite of Dewey's pragmatic attitudes towards history and how it should be approached, the wave of fascism and totalitarianism sweeping the globe, and the events leading up to World War II, pushed Dewey into an existential crisis. The very idea against which Dewey fought, that history should be approached objectively and not as a pool of life lessons, became in fact, his reasoning, whether consciously or not, against any form of intervention in the growing crisis of the 1930s and in World War II. Such an attitude was all the more shocking considering that Dewey had argued heavily for American military intervention in World War I. This was all the more damning considering that throughout World War I, Dewey and other progressives constantly focused on a positive interpretation of the conflict and events unfolding in Europe. The war had been, after all, humanity's chance to rid itself of war once and for all as it was the war to end them all. In fact, the belief amongst many progressives was that the horrors and abuses (political and economic) of the war would be remembered thereby creating a "heightened" sense of what "democratic control" of government would be. Their hope was that

“[...] democratic control would soon come back [...] and send certain of the progressives hunting for a firmer democratic basis” (Rodgers 279). This “firmer” notion would be one rooted in a “British-style alliance with the working class” rather than any vague notion in civic duty (Rodgers 279). He had done so because of his belief that the outcome of WWI would usher in a new world, the spread of democracy, and liberalism. Dewey’s arguments for intervening in World War I had been heavily criticized by those within liberal circles, and many felt betrayed by not only his refusal of pacifism, but seemingly unabashed support for violence as well.

No one better represented this disillusionment with Dewey and his pro-war arguments during World War I than Randolph Bourne, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century essayist and pacifist. Bourne’s most critical attacks against Dewey came about in “Twilight of Idols” originally published in 1917. Bourne’s primary censure against Dewey was that his Pragmatism was instrumentalist in nature, or in other words: it could adapt itself to work towards certain goals by any means as long as the methods used helped society progress and improve. There were no “ends” per se within Pragmatism, as admitting such ends was to acknowledge a fixed or defined teleology.

Dewey’s philosophy is inspiring enough for a society at peace, prosperous and with a fund of progressive good-will. It is a philosophy of hope, of clear-sighted comprehension of materials and means. Where institutions are at all malleable, it is the only for improvement. It is scientific method applied to ‘uplift.’ But this careful adaptation of means to desired ends, this experimental working out of control over brute forces and dead matter in the interests of communal life, depends on a store of rationality, and is effective only where there is a strong desire for progress. [...] What concerns us here is the relative ease with which the pragmatist intellectuals, with Professor Dewey at the head, have moved out of their philosophy, bag and baggage, from education to war. [...] Similarly, with the other prophets of instrumentalism who accompany Dewey into the war, democracy remains an unanalyzed term, useful as a call to battle, but not an intellectual tool, turning up fresh sod for the changing future. [...] in the application of their philosophy to politics, our pragmatists are sliding over this crucial question of ends Dewey says our needs must be intelligently international rather than chauvinistic. But this gets us little distance along our way. (Bourne sec. 2, pars. 1-3)

Thus for Bourne, Dewey and other pragmatists sharing his view, had abandoned their intellectual beliefs. What was worse was that pragmatists, blinded by the awe and prestige of

Dewey, failed to even think about any biases within Dewey's personal philosophies, and more importantly, the instrumentalization of values. Bourne wrote:

To those of us who have taken Dewey's philosophy almost as our American religion, it never occurred that values could be subordinated to technique. We were instrumentalists, but we had our private utopias so clearly before our minds that the means fell always into its place as contributory. And Dewey, of course, always meant his philosophy, when taken as a philosophy of life, to start with values. But there was always that unhappy ambiguity in his doctrine as to just how values were created, and it became easier and easier to assume that just any growth was justified and almost any activity valuable so long as it achieved ends. (Bourne sec. 3, par 3)

Bourne argued that the use of violence and force were the means *du jour*.

Dewey's major response to Bourne and other critics was to dissect their notion of "force" and "violence." His rebuttal against Bourne also allowed for Dewey to equally defend against two major criticisms that Pragmatism constantly faced: its notions of power and justice. Regarding power, Pragmatism was considered to be "morally toothless" when it came to any sort of "moral realism" (Hogan 66). Regarding justice, Pragmatism's lack of commitment to any type of foundationalism or concrete theory, made it impossible to find common grounds for any metaphysical or theoretical defense of legal rights (Hogan 66). Thus, critics of Pragmatism saw it virtually unable to handle any "real" social or political problem, because it lacked a theoretical foundation upon which to base its claims.

Responding to criticism against American involvement in World War I, and to a certain extent, the general criticisms laid out against Pragmatism, Deweyan thought explained why "[...] history could be brought under control if the intellectual focused on the rush of events and thereby came to understand the inevitability of America's involvement" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 214). Dewey attempted to use his reason and intellectualism to explain how Pragmatism and war were not so far removed as believed. The key was to differentiate force from violence.

Common sense still clings to a *via media* between the Tolstoian, to whom all force is violence and all violence evil, and that glorification of force which is so easy when war arouses turbulent emotion, and so persistent (in disguised forms) whenever competition rules industry. I should be glad to make the voice of common sense more articulate. As an initial aid, I would call to mind the fact

that force figures in different roles. Sometimes it is energy; sometimes it is coercion or constraint; sometimes it is violence. Energy is power used with a eulogistic meaning; it is power doing work, harnessed to accomplishment of ends. But it is force nonetheless, brute force if you please, and rationalized only by its results. Exactly the same force running wild is called violence. The objection to violence is not that it involves force, but that it is a waste of force; that it uses force idly or destructively. And what is called law may always, I suggest, be looked at as describing a method for employing force economically, efficiently, so as to get results with the least waste. (Dewey, *Middle Works* 212)

Force was neither automatically associated with violence, nor was violence automatically a negative thing. Everything is a matter of circumstance and application. In a case where violence is absolutely necessary and in a very Weberian argument, Dewey defended the idea that the State maintained the monopoly over legitimized violence. His arguments for American intervention in World War I sound very Niebuhrian in the sense that they acknowledge an actual difference between force and violence as well as providing context in which violence is actually justified. Had Dewey upheld these arguments regarding the necessity for, and proper use of, force throughout the rest of his intellectual career, perhaps Niebuhr and he would have shared more common ground.

Dewey's conceptions of power, force, and violence were limited because they often lacked a concrete definition and focused on the means: "[...] [A] pragmatist [was] more concerned with the outcome than with the origins of the war, with future consequences rather than historical causes" and therefore "Dewey could refer vaguely to 'forces' without specifying their political or economic nature and without analyzing the causal factors behind them" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 216). The irony, and ultimate paradox of Dewey's support for intervention in World War I, and defense of isolationism in World War II stemmed from Dewey's unique, and quite frankly, un-pragmatic view of history. Contrary to classic political scientists who based their thought in some form of theorized world order in which force was used "by appealing to the past" or the idea that historic events justified any contemporary use of force for societal order; Dewey took the opposite approach, arguing that force and power had to be used for "the event which [was] still to be" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 217). The contradiction seemed to have been lost on Dewey. By making force and power serve what "was still to be," he paradoxically gave history an almost Godlike power over humanity and its destiny which "[...] as a pragmatic philosopher, he had no way of perceiving the movement or meaning of history, since the future cannot be known until it is experienced" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 217).

In spite of these arguments for history, force, and power, the political realities following World War I, the general disillusionment within liberalism, and the rise of fascism over the 1930s forced Dewey to fully reexamine his approaches to the appropriate role of the United States in international military affairs. The 1930s and the rise of totalitarianism placed Pragmatism within the intellectual crosshairs of its critics as it seemed powerless in the face of these modern regimes. After all, if Pragmatism was based upon experience, how then could such a philosophy ever hope to cope with something that had never before been seen?

### **3.0.3 The Public, Technology, and Culture: Problems with Liberal Democracies**

Paradoxically learning from history, and simultaneously being bound by it, Dewey was shaped for better or worse by the consequences of World War I. The harsh political lessons he had learned made for a seasoned, and a more cautious Dewey. Realizing how drastically different the desired effects were versus the actual realities of the post-World War I world, Dewey analyzed what, and how, things could have possibly been so mismanaged. Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* allowed for a transitional philosophical approach to the harsh consequences engendered by World War I by reexamining fundamental notions within political science. Long-held notions such as the State, the public, and democracy were now open to Deweyan re-analysis as there was a large disparity between democratic ideals and political realities.

Part of the problem for Dewey, which has been previously discussed, was the transition between the alleged liberal forces that once fought for the individual and society's benefit becoming the pseudo-liberal forces resisting societal improvements. He wrote:

The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislators chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public. 'The new age of human relationships' has no political agencies worthy of it. The democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized. (*Public* 109)

The original sources and powers that brought about liberty over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were now in fact causing the dissolution of the public.

Seeming to have been aware of a general disillusionment regarding liberal democracy, Dewey wrote:

Optimism about democracy is to-day under a cloud. We are familiar with denunciation and criticism which, however, often reveal their emotional source in their peevish and indiscriminating tone. Many of them suffer from the same error into which earlier laudations [of democracy] fell. They assume that democracy is the product of an idea, of a single and consistent intent. (*Public* 110)

Democracy was not the problem for Dewey, nor was the public. Part of the problem as to why liberal democracy had not flourished correctly was the dual factors of the oppressing political machine and the misconceived notion that democracy had been the result of “an idea” rather than an amalgam of a multitude of supporting factors.

Adding to the crisis within democracy was the very technology and advancements that were supposed to be improving democratic and pluralistic life. Though seemingly self-contradictory, technological advancements and “integration” seemed to increase the identity crisis of the public, thereby exacerbating the problems of recognizing and reclaiming a democratic culture (Dewey, *Public* 116). The more the world was interconnected, the less connected individuals were to their actual communities, leading Dewey to postulate: “If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its own whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self” (*Public* 117).

The exponential increase in interconnectivity and simultaneous community disconnection only seemed to decrease the importance and true power of democracy within the public. As citizens were removed from their communities, interests such as voting, or taking an active role within government, thereby enacting a true and actual democratic culture went by the way side. Instead of effecting change, the alleged “public” turned their attention towards other sources. This meant that different authorities and powers could take up the reins of managing institutions and polity. Dewey understood all this to indicate that “[i]t may be urged that the present confusion and apathy are due to the fact that the real energy of society is now directed in all non-political matters by trained specialists who manage things, while politics are carried on with a machinery and ideas formed in the past to deal with quite another sort of situation” (*Public* 124). As a result of the individual’s self-exile from public affairs, political consequences such as voter apathy, and the common belief that the system was naturally set up against the individual flourished. Dewey wrote:

Perhaps the apathy of the electorate is due to the irrelevant artificiality of the issues with which it is attempted to work up factitious excitement. Perhaps this artificiality is in turn mainly due to the survival of political beliefs and machinery from a period when science and technology were so immature as not to permit of a definite technique for handling definite social situations and meeting specific social needs. (*Public* 124)

The means through which the public could regain its influence within liberal democracy was for ideas to change and adapt as drastically as the 20<sup>th</sup> century had changed but also adapted. Interconnectivity had to occur on all levels; not just on superficial ones, such as where people from different countries could quickly communicate, or travel from one end of the country to the other in a relatively short period of time. Communication and connection had to be encouraged at the local level to ensure that politics and institutions were not automated machines. Dewey understood that ideas changed more slowly than technology, and blaming technology was not going to solve the problem. Dewey argued:

In reality, the trouble springs rather from the ideas and absence of ideas in connection with which technological factors operate. Mental and moral beliefs and ideals change more slowly than outward conditions. If the ideals associated with the higher life of our cultural past have been impaired, the fault is primarily with them. Ideals and standards formed without regard to the means by which they are to be achieved and incarnated in flesh are bound to be thin and wavering. [...] Conditions have changed, but every aspect of life, from religion and education to property and trade, shows that nothing approaching a transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals. Symbols control sentiment and thought, and then new age has no symbols consonant with its activities. Intellectual instrumentalities for the formation of an organized public are more inadequate than its overt means. The ties which hold men together in action are numerous, tough and subtle. But they are invisible and intangible. We have physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common. Without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance. (*Public* 141-142)



Adapting a democratic ideal and culture to the new methods of communication and interconnectivity within the world was the key for the public to actually regain and more importantly, maintain its identity.

However, with the Great Depression, and the rise of fascists throughout European liberal democracies, Dewey quickly became aware that relying solely on ideas and ideals catching up with technology was not going to keep totalitarianism at bay. Therefore, in order to defend liberal democracy a new approach defined by a democratic culture was required.

Part of the reason for the rise of totalitarian regimes was due to previous government's inability to not only promote, but defend a proper democratic culture. For Dewey, a society, and thus the State, reflected its cultural values. Therefore, any proper liberal democracy was one in which the free political institutions came from a culture based on liberty (Dewey, *Freedom* 18). In order to defend liberal democracies from totalitarian threats, citizens, and thus the public, had to adopt a democratic culture. This meant, in a surprisingly un-pragmatic sense for Dewey that “[humanity has] to see that democracy means the belief that humanistic culture *should* prevail; we should be frank and open in our recognition that the proposition is a moral one – like any idea that concerns what *should* be” (*Freedom* 97). Democratic culture was inherently better than totalitarian regimes on a moral and normative level.

It was only through the development of this democratic culture that liberal democracies could hold up against the evils of totalitarianism. In a very anti-Niebuhr appeal to the positive aspects of human nature, Dewey argued that the best way to fight against dictatorship

require[d] a positive and courageous constructive awakening to the significance of faith in human nature for development of every phase of our culture: science, art, education, morals and religion, as well as politics and economics. No matter how uniform and constant human nature is in the abstract, the conditions within which and upon which it operates have changed so greatly since political democracy was established among us, that democracy cannot now depend upon or be expressed in political institutions alone. (*Freedom* 97)

Dewey even went on to wonder whether or not these political institutions were actually democratic in nature, highlighting the necessity for a democratic culture to be restored and fostered within a society (*Freedom* 97).

His pragmatic philosophies added to the necessity of democratic culture for in order to achieve “democratic ends” a society and culture had to first foster “democratic methods”

(Dewey, *Political Writings* 205). Though passionate about his defense of democratic culture, Dewey was nevertheless vague about how to precisely go about it. He reasoned:

Our first defense [against totalitarianism] is to realize that democracy can be served only by the slow day by day adoption and contagious diffusion in every phase of our common life of methods that are identical with the ends to be reached. [...] An American democracy can serve the world only as it demonstrates in the conduct of its own life the efficacy of plural, partial, and experimental methods in securing and maintaining an ever-increasing release of the powers of human nature, in service of a freedom which is cooperative and a cooperation which is voluntary. (*Political Writings* 206)

As to what these methods were, Dewey was never exactly clear. One could also easily critique Dewey's claims in terms of efficacy: totalitarian and authoritarian regimes managed to get things done quicker than the seemingly slow approach to fighting it. Ultimately, by maintaining any type of moral high ground, democracies and citizens result in the loss of political and literal ground according to critics.

There was one point in which Dewey demonstrated some clarity, and that was in his fight against the propaganda of totalitarian regimes, and the need for free intelligence within a society. He criticized the "corruption" of the "integrity of language" as being one of the "worst" intellectual perversions that totalitarian regimes had committed (*Political Writings* 207). This perversion and "corruption" of information had to be fought against through the liberal-democratic model of open and free communication. To do so was to develop an essential freedom according to Dewey. "The freedom which is the essence of democracy is above all the freedom to develop intelligence; intelligence consisting of judgement as to what facts are relevant to action and how they are relevant to things to be done, and a corresponding alertness in the quest for such facts" (Dewey, *Political Writings* 208). In essence, information had to be criticized and verified. The only way to do that was to put the information in relation to specific events and facts, rather than sheer speculation.

Tied into Dewey's defense for the necessity of free information, was the defense of the freedom of expression. Contrary to totalitarian regimes, democracies had to maintain their rights to free speech. To restrict or tame speech was to take a large, and inevitable step towards oppression. Returning back to Dewey's basic social institutions, Dewey argued that "[...] we must feed and nourish this particular loyalty with much more energy and deliberate persistence

than we have done in the past – beginning in the family and the school” (*Political Writings* 208).

Finally, “cooperation” and “fraternity” had to be fostered in order to truly combat totalitarianism which would “transform passive toleration into active cooperation.” Dewey defined fraternity as “the will to work together; it is the essence of cooperation” (*Political Writings* 209). Therefore, a democratic culture was one that avoided absolute individualism, because it understood that a culture of cooperation and “fraternity” was the best chance of defending against the perversions and “corruptions” of the other values, such as the transfer of free information, and freedom of speech. This was nevertheless a difficult task especially given how the superficiality of interconnectivity through technological progress negatively impacted these values.

Falling back onto the same critique as just previously mentioned, and in spite of how beautiful Dewey’s arguments were, they seemed to ignore the harsh realities of the efficiency of totalitarian regimes in actually repressing any of the freedoms or democratic cultural values that Dewey had defended. However, one thing that Dewey was absolutely sure of as a result of his experiences from World War I, was that “No Matter What Happens” the US should “Stay Out” (Dewey, *The Later Works* 364).

### **3.0.4 “Just Don’t Mention the War”: Dewey versus Totalitarianism**

In a passionate and personal plea to the public, Dewey felt that any form of military intervention in Europe during World War II would result in America being in a worse situation “democratically” than prior to the war’s beginning. This fear was not based on American military defeat, instead, Dewey felt that involvement in World War II would result in a far more terrible tragedy: the loss of democracy through the increase of non-democratic powers. He wrote:

I have rarely found myself in agreement with Herbert Hoover. But as I read his prediction that if the United States is drawn into the next war we shall have in effect if not in name a fascist government in this country, I believe he is completely in the right. The dire reaction that took place in the early twenties after the World War was mild in comparison with what would occur another time. It would begin earlier, be more rigid, and endure no one knows how long. We are forgetting that the years before the last war were a time of growth for a strong and genuine progressivism in this country, and that if its career had not

been interrupted we should have made whatever gains have been accomplished by the new Deal much earlier and in a much less costly way. It is quite conceivable that after the next war we should have in this country a semi-military, semi-financial autocracy, which would fasten class divisions on this country for untold years. In any case we should have suppression of all the democratic values for the sake of which we professedly went to war. (*The Later Works* 362)

Stopping the evils of totalitarianism via violence and war were remedies that were, according to Dewey, worse than the actual disease itself. His fears were that through the instrumentalization of technology, politics, and the economy, the *post-bellum* military and non-democratic powers that would have been enacted to fight the Axis Powers would be a permanent fixture in American life.

Contrary to pragmatic beliefs, Dewey's opinions on World War II were heavily influenced by the realities and reactions of World War I. "World War II compelled [Dewey] to advise Americans to look backward and remember the 'dire reaction' that occurred in America as a result of entering the war and the unexpected rise of fascist movements in Europe" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 227). According to Dewey, the very powers that the West was fighting against were a direct result of the disastrous conclusions of World War I.

This approach to World War II brought many criticisms against not only Dewey, but Pragmatism itself. The overall intellectual criticism and irony was how Dewey's arguments against intervention in the war ended up turning Pragmatism "on its head" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 226). Pragmatism was a philosophy in which a person could rationally assess history to solve current problems by studying the past "in the light of the present." The issue regarding Dewey and World War II was that he had reversed his own teachings, for he was now "allowing the experiences of World War I to shape his outlook toward World War II" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 226-227).

Detractors used Dewey's refusal to join the war as proof of Pragmatism's inherent inefficiency against real political problems. One of these internal issues was previously mentioned: how can a philosophy based on previous experience actually contend with new and never before seen phenomena such as totalitarianism. The other existential concern was Pragmatism's inability to answer the needs of the "historical moment" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 226). Dewey was only able to explain how to think about this new conflict; he was not able to produce or propose any form of normative value or explanation as to why liberal democracies were intrinsically better than totalitarian regimes. Essentially, Dewey did not

provide a “criterion of judgement” instead he only provided a “procedure of inquiry” (Diggins, “Peace and War” 226).

Similar theoretical problems echoed out of Dewey’s warning to avoid entry into the War. Primarily, the issue of Pragmatism being a philosophy in which no definitive outcomes could be predicted because all was based on experience. Dewey rejected this important tenet of Pragmatism in his warning to above all “stay out” of World War II. As Diggins correctly pointed out: “A philosopher who hesitated to ‘predict anything whatsoever’ about the war may have only been reiterating the Jamesian dictum on the reality of the uncertain; but one who advised Americans to stay out of the war ‘no matter what happens’ was clearly certain that intervention must be resisted for the very reason that its dire results could be predicted” (“Peace and War” 228). Thus, Dewey went against his own guidelines by trying to create a predetermined outcome based on a previous experience rather than analyzing the past through the lens of present circumstances to objectively decide on the best course of action. In sum, the shortcomings of Pragmatism revealed a dual paradox.

Dewey had offered [P]ragmatism as an answer to the crisis of historical knowledge; yet history itself would demonstrate the limitations of [P]ragmatism as philosophical knowledge. As early as 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy had observed rather bemusedly a truth that sooner or later was bound to be found out: that [P]ragmatism cannot provide useful knowledge at all. Unable to certify as truthful that which we need to know before we act, pragmatic philosophy cannot provide knowledge precisely when it is most valuable. Verified ex post facto wisdom, Lovejoy wryly noted in *The Thirteen Pragmatisms*, ‘is as irrelevant and redundant a thing as coroner’s inquest on a corpse is – to the corpse.’ (Diggins, “Peace and War” 230).

Essentially, Pragmatism was unable to provide any form of answer, when faced with moral or political dilemmas, be they concrete or metaphysical ones. Authors such as Lewis Mumford and Waldo Frank accused Dewey, and Pragmatism in general, of taking part in the rise of these totalitarian regimes. For authors like Mumford, Pragmatism was obsessed with facts “[...] at the expense of values, actualities at the expense of desires, means at the expense of ends, technique at the expense of moral imagination, invention at the expense of art, practicality at the expense of vision” (Westbrook 381). Due to this preoccupation with data and methodologies, values fell to the wayside, allowing for a “utilitarian type of personality” to

develop in America (Westbrook 381). This type of personality was perfect for authoritarian ideas to take hold in America.

Frank argued that fascism's rise was due to the empirical-obsessed pragmatic culture that was prevalent throughout the world. The problem for Frank was that "[t]his war, from which we dream to immunize ourselves, is but a symptom of a revolution [...]" (20). The revolution in question was one with a new type of religion, based on empiricism and experience. Because empiricists such as Dewey and other pragmatists viewed the world as one giant laboratory, guilt and responsibility for fascist regimes and ideologies lay with them as pragmatists could "[...] flee 'the responsibilities of moral choice'" (Diggins, "Peace and War" 226). Frank ridiculed and attacked Pragmatism's fascination with description when he wrote:

Empirical rationalism appears to be a theory of reality based exclusively on reports of the senses. What do they report? Things and states, from which the rational process induces other things and states, categories, laws, adding nothing. The approximate sum of them all is supposed to be reality; and man is scornfully advised not to transcend its limit [...] Now, what are these things and states of things and categories and laws of things are, is WORDS. [...] Words are pointers. I am within a continuum of both substance and experience with the table and need to get into a specific relationship with the table. But to know truth even about the table, I must subsume that things and states are joined indissolubly in reality. [...] Now, empirical rationalism came along to tell us that the words only, the categories and sums of words only, are the real. (22)

Simply describing the horrors and atrocities of totalitarian regimes was going to do nothing to stop it. Dewey's empirical rationalism, according to critics, was not equipped well enough to handle the harsh political realities faced by western liberal democracies. Worse still, Dewey's version of Pragmatism wanted to cut away any sort of value, or intrinsic meaning within the words used to describe surrounding events. Prior to empirical rationalism, words had an inner meaning that spoke with a certain "vitality" according to Frank which was now being "asphyxiated" by Pragmatism and its focus on methodology (23). Stating that empirical rationalism had become a "modern religion," Frank argued that it was a one that left "life out" (22-23).

Fighting against fascism could only be effective for Frank, if values and meanings were associated with the reason to fight. Concepts, ideas, and beliefs needed their "pre-rational, organic premise" else they become "unreal idols" and "abstractions from the whole" (Frank

23). Concluding his essay “Our Guilt in Fascism,” Frank actually blamed Pragmatism for the rise of authoritarian regimes due to its inability to let a natural and value driven culture develop. Instead, empirical rationalism stifled any form of value-driven expression, thus

[I]f denied these normative expressions, swirls in subterranean anger; seeks pretexts of rebellion, becomes insanely and demonically destructive: creates *anti-men* like Hitler, and by the millions, the tens of millions, creates in the democracies his passive, self-censored lovers. [...] Under all, empirical rationalism blots out the possibility of human freedom. The intellect, in its own measures, can conceive only the necessity of strict determinism, after the image of its processes. The intellect requires, and rationalism requires, the *pre-rational* premise of the intuition to recognize the mystic truth that men – only within experienced necessity- can be free. Without the pre-rational premise, reason falls into unreason. Wherefore, the Fascist fury against freedom, its glorification of the dark, absolute necessity of the herd, is our modern religion’s most sardonic fulfilment. (24)

Frank was not the only one to share this existential criticism of Dewey and Pragmatism in general. Niebuhr was equally critical, and shared a few points with Frank on how “empirical rationalism” was not equipped to stand up against fascism. One such point was Pragmatism’s failure to consider the limits of human intelligence, reason, and objectivity. This was the unrelenting attack levied against Pragmatism by Niebuhr. He wrote:

According to the naturalistic rationalism of John Dewey, reason cuts the channels into which life will inevitably flow because life is itself dynamic. Reason supplies the direction and the natural power of life-as-impulse ensures the movement in the direction of the rationally projected goal. The theory presupposes a non-existent unity of man’s impulsive life, a greater degree of rational transcendence over impulse than actually exists, and a natural obedience of impulse to the ideal which all history refutes. Nothing in the theory could explain why the nations of the world are still so far from realizing the rationally projected and universally accepted goal of universal peace. (Qtd. in Mounce, “Outline” 52)

Dewey, once more, severely overestimated human capability while simultaneously disregarding any type of inherent conflict that exists within societies. It was through accepting the paradoxical nature of humanity that fighting totalitarianism became not just a rhetorical debate, but rather a call to arms in order to defend democracy, and the inherent freedom found within human nature.

However, human nature was still limited and dependent on a history that was equally a part of, and independent from human activity. This super-history in which God had an interactive yet removed role for humanity played heavily on Niebuhr's understanding of the events following World War I. This led Niebuhr to experience an evolution from relative pacifist to hardened interventionist leading up to World War II.

### **3.1.0 History Has Meaning, but Humanity Misses It**

Contrary to Dewey's refusal to see any type of absolute or eternal lessons within history, Niebuhr adopted the opposite point of view. His Christian faith required him to have a different grasp of history, and the importance that it carried for humanity. Due to this faith, history had to make sense within an overall Divine plan. However, as a Christian realist, this plan was not defined completely by a tragedy in which humanity had no control over its actions. Instead, Niebuhr's notion of super-history, where the Christ figure was the revelation of God's ultimate plan, had to simultaneously be a part of humanity while remaining removed from it. History, in general was

[...] suspended, so to speak, between nature with its casual mechanism, and super-history with its free activity. History is the life of man both in his transcendence over nature and in his subjection to it. There is tension and stress in the life of man; he is caught in repeated contradictions; he is carried first one way and then another, pulled by the activity of super-history and by natural phenomena, each in turn, and often both simultaneously, being disclosed in the behavior of man. History, therefore, has meaning; history is serious, however impotent it is when taken alone. History has this tremendous job to do; namely, to carry meaning. (Jacobson 245)

This is a far cry from Dewey's conception of history and nature. History was not just a series of complicated, infinite events, and causalities coming together. Instead, it was an active shaper in human affairs, and had a definite presence within society's development. Going one step



further, Niebuhr's conception of history was a direct antithesis to Dewey: history had an intrinsic meaning, even if humanity could never actually comprehend it; not at least until the arrival of Christ.

Therefore, "[...] if we characterize Niebuhr's philosophy of history as set consciously over against two alternative interpretations, one attempting to find the meaning of life within the historical process, the other turning away from history to find whatever meaning there is existing entirely and exclusively in a non-spatial, non-temporal reality" (Jacobson 239). The resolution of this paradox was found within Christ, who simultaneously provided as Niebuhr declared, "true meaning" as well as "the fulfillment of that meaning" (qtd. in Jacobson 239).

According to Niebuhr's theology, had there not actually been a Christ figure, history would have been meaningless as there would have been nothing against which humanity could judge itself, or find meaning. Therefore, history needed Christianity in order to provide significance to life and the human condition. Niebuhr wrote:

Christ as the disclosure of the character of God and the meaning of history a) completes what is incomplete in the apprehensions of meaning; b) it clarifies obscurities which threaten the sense of meaning; and c) it finally corrects falsifications of meaning which human egoism introduces into the sense of meaning by reason of its effort to comprehend the whole of life from an inadequate centre of comprehension. (*Nature and Destiny, Vol. II* 6)

Thus, with the arrival of Christ, Niebuhr saw "[...] the foundation upon which one might stand to see the direction in which history will be fulfilled" (Jacobson 240). Niebuhr's emphasis on Christ revealed several key aspects to his theology and consequently his philosophy when it came to the role of history. For example, because Christ was the figure against which all human events and history were to be judged, Christ was the only method of glimpsing into "the mind of God" and thus "the meaning of history." Establishing this foundation meant that God had to be a dynamic yet independent actor; simultaneously judging all of humanity while "suffering" from it (Jacobson 240). This dual aspect of God was described through Niebuhr's understanding and notion of transcendence. As previously explained, human essence is one that is both a part of and unique from nature. This dichotomy is equally presented through God who equally transcended the physical world while remaining a part of humanity. This dual relationship therefore, leads to God's "suffering" as this transcendence, previously explained as humanity's natural liberty, causes humanity to sin.

Jacobson attempted to explain and clarify Niebuhr's belief in super-history by finding "empirical data" which acted as "evidence" (241). Found within this "evidence," Jacobson argued was the proof that Niebuhr's philosophy of history, or in this case, super-history, was dependent upon one key factor: humanity's transcendent capabilities. He enumerated these proofs into the following arguments: 1) Humanity is capable of understanding history through past events which is afforded by their ability to see time flow sequentially. In other words, humanity is capable of comprehending past events, accepting that they happened, and then study the consequences. Similarly, humanity has the imaginative capability to ponder potential outcomes or simply "what is not" (241). 2) Humanity understands its own mortality. 3) Humanity is able to remove itself from simple "causal forces" to find a sufficient sense of liberty. These "causal forces" can be anything from environmental factors such as dangerous living conditions to human causes like war or oppression. In either case, a person is capable of removing him or herself from a given situation as to not suffer tragically from it. 4) History has no direct or immediate meaning; any form of meaning is expressed randomly and sporadically. 5) Humanity is aware of its own imperfection and as created in His image, is unable to cope with this paradox. 6) Due to this paradox, humanity is filled with fear and anxiety when contemplating the end of history and/or death. 7) Conflicts are a natural part of history and can never be truly escaped. 8) The end of history will manifest only in Christ who is super-history, or the resolution of the paradox, incarnate (Jacobson 241). These different points built upon one another, similar to a multi-story house thereby establishing the "proof" for Niebuhr regarding humanity's transcendence.

Transcendence's important characteristic, according to Niebuhr was its capacity to exist without being "limited by the sequence" of events (*Nature and Destiny*, Vol. II 10). There was no final destination; no eschatology which could be determined by human intelligence alone. No sequence of disastrous events, wars, or famines were a precursor or the signs of the "End of Days." Super-history via the figure of the Christ would make itself known when it was time. Such an event, according to Niebuhr, was simply out of the realm of human comprehension and knowledge. Essentially "[t]he conception of a 'last' judgement expresses Christianity's refutation of all ideas of history, according to which it is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth and development, to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgment" (Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. II 293). Niebuhr explained the uniqueness of super-history and transcendence in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, "[f]or any rigorous examination of the problems of man in nature-history clearly reveals that history points beyond itself and that it does so by reason of the freedom and transcendence of

the human spirit. It is never completely contained in, or satisfied by, the historical-natural process, no matter to what level this process may rise” (96).

History could only be resolved through the figure of Christ who would settle the paradox of history, and all the problems found therein. Of course, this was only true for “a culture which [took] history seriously” (Jacobson 247). The tragic irony of super-history and “cultures which take history seriously” as an active participant in human affairs is that

[...] the inadequacies of human reason are such that even with super-history revealed in the purity of Christ, man falters in his understanding of this significant event. Indeed, man fails to understand that Christ actually that to which history directs attention, and a Christ is denied, treated as a conundrum, and crucified. A Christ is expected, but he is rejected, and only as the centuries wear on is man gradually able to see in that cataclysmic event its great meaning and importance. (Jacobson 247).

Thus, by the time humanity realizes that the end of history has come, it will have been too late, and they will have “missed” the event.

Niebuhr’s philosophy of history was one that he carried throughout his life, and he persistently argued how history was more than just a random collision of events void of meaning. He was equally careful not to fall into cyclical determinism in which there was no hope for humanity. Niebuhr endeavored to take his Christian views on history and appropriately apply them to the harsh lessons learned from World War I, and to examine the disillusionment that followed. Knowing that the Great War, the subsequent treaties, and the Depression were not signs of the “End of Times,” but rather part and parcel of natural historical changes as well as human action, Niebuhr looked onto the events folding over the 1930s and into the start of World War II with a more hardened and realist outlook.

### **3.1.1 “Prophetic Christianity” against Liberalism**

Similar to Dewey, the 1930s was a period of profound personal intellectual development for Niebuhr. It was also his most radical period in which he was heavily involved with Marxist ideology. The reasons behind such drastic changes in his personal philosophy were tied to the general sense of betrayal by 1920s’ idealism and the Great Depression. Internationally, Niebuhr reacted to the rise of fascist policies and regimes, where he argued in favor of sanctions against

Japan for instance (Doenecke 471). Events such as these, and the rise of Hitler made Niebuhr all the more aware that America, and to a greater extent, Western democracies were in danger.

It was in the early 1930s and in response to what he saw as the failures of the different expressions of liberalism, that Niebuhr published some of his most interesting, and polemic works: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935). In these publications, Niebuhr attacked the very values and foundations of American liberal ideology, criticizing not only the American political system, but offering an unapologetic reproach of American capitalism.

*Moral Man* demonstrated Niebuhr's first step into radical ideas and philosophies, especially those notions associated with Marxist leanings. Throughout the work, Niebuhr constantly used the word "class" to talk about the differences and conflicts within society. Such vocabulary was not chosen haphazardly, as the use of the word "class" often signifies a Marxist word view. Upon its publication, reviewers could not help but notice that it was the "[d]octrine of Christ and Marx linked" (qtd. in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 136).

Niebuhr demonstrated that regardless of how society is divided, whether by class, or other types of social groups "[these groups} tend to develop imperial ambitions [...]" (*Moral Man* 18). Nevertheless, *Moral Man* was not a call to arms in the traditional or radical sense of the term. Instead, it was a wake-up call for other radicals to join ranks and "take a decisive step toward revolution without landing in Communist ranks" (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 136). If this meant using inflammatory language or vehement rhetoric, then so be it. Using such style of speech was effective against the complacency and ineptitude of liberal culture to accurately assess human nature which, as previously discussed, was Niebuhr's ultimate censure against secular and religious liberals.

Though Niebuhr was drawn to Marxism's ideological description of the world, he still managed to analyze it with an objective and critical eye. Niebuhr understood that in its essence, Marxism and Liberalism were two sides of the same coin: each used one particular factor or mechanism to explain first, what was wrong with the world, and second, how to overcome it. According to Niebuhr, both philosophies demonstrated or fought for some form of utopian ideal. For Marxism, it was through the suppression of the classes and private property leading to pure Communism. For Liberalism, it was the realization of unbridled reason and social intelligence to improve the human condition and thus society. Niebuhr was careful not to call for a total revolution, as had happened in Russia in 1917, for he was aware of the abuses to freedom and democracy that such a rebellion could engender. Still, he had to make other radicals like himself, and the larger society at whole surmount the "social inertia" which had been blocking any type of real social change (Niebuhr, *Moral Man* 268).

The best way to combat this “social inertia” and to bring about effective transformation to the political and economic arena was to demonstrate that radicals needed more than just trust and faith in the commonplace belief that rationalism, social intelligence, and education could be a Panacea for the problems of society. Instead, Niebuhr argued that:

Contending factions in a social struggle require morale; and morale is created by the right dogmas, symbols and emotionally potent oversimplifications. These are at least as necessary as the scientific spirit of tentativity. No class of industrial workers will ever win freedom from the dominant classes if they themselves completely to the ‘experimental techniques’ of the modern educators. They will have to believe rather more firmly in the justice and in the probable triumph of their cause, than any impartial science would give them the right to believe, if they are to have enough energy to contest the power of the strong. [...] Modern educators are, like rationalists of all the ages, too enamored of the function of reason in life. The world of history, particularly in man’s collective behavior, will never be conquered by reason, unless reason uses tools, and is itself driven by forces which are rational. (*Moral Man* xxxi)

One of Niebuhr’s largest denunciations of liberalism was its overemphasis on the positive capabilities of human reason. Tied into this criticism was liberalism’s removal of any and all significance of “dogmas” and symbols.” For Niebuhr, an active radical should be one that does not sit by passively as a participant in liberalism’s social science experiments and expertise. Instead, the working class had to rediscover “emotionally potent oversimplifications” in order to change their lot and achieve social mobility.

Perhaps his most radical piece came about in 1933 via his short essay entitled “After Capitalism – What?” In this polemic work, Niebuhr claimed that because of the current political and economic atmosphere, modern capitalism was going to die. Even more shocking at the time, was Niebuhr’s belief that not only was this event inevitable, but that it *should* happen. Niebuhr justified this certainty by arguing:

[Capitalism] is dying because it is a contracting economy which is unable to support the necessities of an industrial system that requires mass production for its maintenance, and because it disturbs the relations of an international economic system with the anarchy of nationalistic politics. It ought to die

because it is unable to make the wealth created by modern technology available to all who participate in the productive process on terms of justice. (1)

Belief that the system would correct itself was to grossly misunderstand political power and human nature for “capitalism will not reform itself from within” (Niebuhr, “After Capitalism” 2). Anyone who thought otherwise was simply an idealist and delusional to the realities of power politics.

This was particularly true for what Niebuhr considered to be a too-little-too-late approach on behalf of FDR and his New Deal proposals to try and save the American economy; and to a greater extent, American democracy. He thought that if European democracies could not find the balance to incorporate socialism into liberal economies while defending democracy, then America would be no better off. Niebuhr would eventually change his mind, ultimately doing a complete about-face towards the end of the decade, noting that even a little bit of socialism was better than none.

Granted, Niebuhr was unsure of how, or more precisely, when this death was going to come about. The means did not matter as much as the fact that it was bound to, and should happen. Not one to fall into total cynicism, as his Christian faith made sure to maintain some level of hope, Niebuhr believed that

[a]ll this does not mean that intellectual and moral idealism are futile. They are needed to bring decency and fairness into a system of society; for no basic organization of society will ever guarantee the preservation of humaneness if good men do not preserve it. (“After Capitalism” 3)

Failure to appropriately incorporate intellectual and moral idealism into a socialist model would lead to far more severe consequences than the current corrupted capitalist system. Niebuhr’s fear was that should America be unable to radicalize the system, and inject a much-needed American brand of socialism into it, fascism would end up replacing democracy.

Niebuhr’s arguments were simple: because of the corruption within capitalistic liberal democracies, forces of order would try to save themselves by “closing ranks” and “eliminating” any form of “anarchy within [these liberal democracies]” (“After Capitalism” 4). This would be done slowly and relentlessly ultimately leading to the complete disintegration of any democratic system or culture. For proof of these events, Niebuhr had only to look at Germany and the rise of Hitler to demonstrate the inefficiency of idealist and capitalist liberal democracies. He did manage to maintain a pragmatic view of fascism’s end, especially in

America. The reason behind fascism's failure will be that "[...] it will have no way of curing the two basic defects of capitalism, inequality of consumption and international anarchy" ("After Capitalism" 4).

Aside from the need for American workers to unite and become a political force to attempt to bring about needed socialist changes, Niebuhr continued to attack the dominant secular and liberal idealism throughout the country. Indoctrination in the belief that social or improved intelligence would advance society ignoring the realities of human nature and power politics was further proof of the naivety of liberals, such as Dewey:

No amount of education or religious idealism will ever persuade a social class to espouse a cause or seek a goal which is counter to its economic interest. Social intelligence can have a part in guiding social impulse only if it does not commit the error of assuming that intelligence has destroyed and sublimated impulse to such a degree that impulse is no longer potent. This is the real issue between liberalism and political realism. The liberal is an idealist who imagines that his particular type of education or his special kind of religious idealism will accomplish what history has never before revealed: the complete sublimation of the natural impulse of a social group. Dominant groups will always have the impulse to hold on to their power as long as possible. ("After Capitalism" 7)

This citation is simply a continuation of Niebuhr's previous thesis demonstrated in *Moral Man*: modern culture (whether secular or religious) does not understand human nature's pursuit of self-interest demonstrated specifically when groups of people often act selfishly rather than altruistically. Thus, realism prevented any "[...] errors into erroneous historical calculations" that liberals had made which "[...] prolong[ed] the death agonies of the old order and postpone the coming of the new" ("After Capitalism" 8). For Niebuhr, the corrupted capitalist system was simply prolonging its own agonizing death and delaying the arrival of a new socialist order.

Apart from the death of capitalism, another method by which to bring about needed socialist reforms was for society, and more specifically workers, to rediscover the importance of myths and symbols in life. Unfortunately for Niebuhr, "[t]he Christian churches are [...] not able to offer the needed guidance and insight" into rediscovering these myths and symbols (*Interpretation* 2). This was true for both what he considered to be "orthodox" and "liberal" churches. Orthodox Christianity was ill equipped because it drowned itself in religious dogma and literal interpretations of myths at the expense of scientific discovery. Otherwise stated, Orthodox Christianity resembled the ignorant disciple lost in the Grotto while refusing to look

up at the new “light” of scientific discovery. On the other hand, liberal Churches were guilty of the opposite sin by hiding the significance of myth and symbols “[...] under the bushel of the culture of modernity with all its short-lived prejudices and presumptuous certainties.” Such an approach was the more damaging for Niebuhr as it “obscur[ed] what is distinctive in the Christian message and creative in Christian morality” (*Interpretation* 4).

This charge was essentially levied against any form of liberalism, whether secular or religious. In the case of secular liberalism, Niebuhr argued that their beliefs were nothing more than a refurbished and redefined version of naturalism; just using a different lexicon. In the case of liberal Christianity, the message was skewed because it fell into the same pitfalls and traps as secular liberalism by ignoring the sinful nature of humanity. Orthodox Christianity, meanwhile, was too caught up in literal interpretations of myths and dogma to be taken seriously by mainstream culture; even if Niebuhr acknowledged that “orthodox religion has frequently been more shrewd” when it came to comprehending humanity’s darker angels. According to Niebuhr, these circumstances led to crises of faith and morality. There was only one way to avoid these predicaments, and that was to take a more realistic approach to politics, religion, and human nature. In one of the concluding paragraphs of his essay, he maintained:

That is why an adequate political realism will ultimately make for more peace in society than a liberalism which does not read the facts of human nature and human history right, and which is betrayed by these errors into erroneous historical calculations which prolong the death agonies of the old order and postpone the coming of the new. It may be important to say in conclusion that educational and religious idealists shrink from the conclusions to which a realistic analysis of history forces the careful student, partly because they live in the false hope that the impulses of nature in man can be sublimated by mind and conscience to a larger degree than is actually possible, and partly because their own personal idealism shrinks from the ‘brutalities’ of the social struggle which a realistic theory envisages. (“After Capitalism” 8).

The passages from “After Capitalism” demonstrate a drastic turning point within Niebuhr’s political and theological philosophies. Never one to be lumped in with idealists, during the 1920s, Niebuhr still had classically “liberal” leanings, and had even hoped, like Dewey, that Wilsonian idealism would bring about needed improvements for social justice and equality. However, given the harsh realities of the Great Depression and the clear injustices caused on an



international scale by the Treaty of Versailles, Niebuhr formulated the roots of what would later become known as Christian realism.

The 1930s also epitomized a point for Niebuhr in which his philosophical, political, and religious concerns were not just centered on America or its democracy. Niebuhr's views turned global focusing on political and economic issues worldwide. Keeping in with his Marxist leanings, he felt that socialism and the force of the international working class could muster up enough political clout to impose the needed social changes to the world capitalist system. He was also acutely aware of how other nations, especially European countries such as Italy and Germany would use the left-leaning radicals, or "Marxian" as he referred to them, as scapegoats to consolidate power. In an article originally published in *The New Republic* entitled "The Opposition in Germany," Niebuhr pieced together how Hitler was able to use opposing political forces such as the socialists and Marxists, to cement control over Germany. Turning away from the purely domestic issues of the Great Depression, Niebuhr focused on a particular feature within the rising Nazi party in Germany, specifically the genuinely radical element in the party. Niebuhr noted:

This fact not generally understood in the outside world, a fact which sharply distinguishes German from Italian fascism, gives the key to the whole future of German politics. The demagogic skill of Hitler has made it possible for him to capture two opposing political and economic movements: the capitalists, who were afraid of a Communist revolution, and the impoverished lower middle classes, who were in fact more revolutionary than the Socialists but wanted socialism in terms of a national spirit. Their 'nationalism' was created partly by the resentments of a defeated nation against the allied foes and partly by the fact that impoverished middle cases have a stronger loyalty to 'national culture' than proletarians. (169)

Niebuhr saw the dictators of fascist Italy and Germany as examples of power and sin found within human nature and expressed in politics. If the social sciences, and liberal credos exemplified by Dewey's brand of Pragmatism were true, then such leaders and demagogues should not have been able to rise in these democratic countries, especially ones where actual socialism had been established. Niebuhr saw the foundations of secular and religious liberal analyses starting to crack; history, and more importantly, human nature were not proving them right. If anything, the events occurring in Germany and Italy were showing previous Christian thinkers, such as Augustine to be correct. According to Niebuhr, Hitler was able to manipulate

the interests, greed, and fears of the different classes for his own benefit. There was no better proof of this, according to Niebuhr, than the slow and agonizing death of the German Socialist Party of the 1930s.

In “The Opposition in Germany,” Niebuhr brought about an interesting, and profound analysis of Hitler’s motives. He demonstrated that through the cunning use of power relations, and the exploitation of self-interest, Hitler was able to promote his own goals. According to Niebuhr, Hitler was more than capable of eradicating the traditional socialist party, and thereby his rivals, from the government and effectively from power. Instead, Hitler kept the Socialists within the government, as targets and fodder for the growing resentment within the German people. This anger was fueled by the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, as well as the devastating economic effects of the Great Depression which caused the Allied Powers to withdraw their own financial support from the war-torn, and still economically devastated Germany, which in turned further devalued the *deutschmark*.

Throughout all of this, Niebuhr realized, the Socialists had been in over their heads and were essentially the only ones still playing by any sort of constitutional rules. Niebuhr charged that the Socialists should have woken up and understood the necessity to play “dirty” (i.e. power politics) to slow the advance of their enemies on all sides. Niebuhr ironically and critically asked:

What good does it do to trust in elections when political issues are being determined by the power of private political armies [the Nazi’s secret police]? The impoverished middle classes, who make up the backbone of fascism, were in fact more heroically revolutionary than the trade unions. At least they were more desperate, and against their desperation Socialist complacency had no power. (“The Opposition in Germany” 170)

The battle had been lost for the Socialists the minute they had decided to continue playing by the “rules,” rather than understanding the complex and paradoxical existence of human nature.

However, it was important for Niebuhr that those willing to embrace the significance of power politics and egocentrism within human nature avoid moral cynicism as well. In order to avoid the trap, Niebuhr emphasized the necessity of myths and symbols within modern society. He argued this in an *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in which he tried to harmonize his Marxist leanings and Christian faith with the political realities currently facing the West. He hoped to achieve this balance by developing and establishing an independent and unique Christian ethic. His best means of doing so was by reanalyzing myths in society. Myths were

something that he felt modern culture, both secular and religious, had forgotten. The myth of the Fall was Niebuhr's favorite to revisit as it provided a fundamental insight into the nature of humanity: the root of evil.

Contrary to many theologians who felt that evil was innate in humanity because of Eve eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, Niebuhr approached the Fall differently. Niebuhr saw the Fall as a myth which "[...] does justice to the paradoxical relation of spirit and nature in human evil" (*Interpretation* 71). He justified this statement by reinterpreting the myth from his own perspective. Whereas in classic Christian theology, evil was introduced into an allegedly perfect world via an act of rebellion on the part of humanity, i.e., eating the apple, Niebuhr contended that some form of evil, with evil to mean imperfection as well, already existed through the serpent which tempted Eve. Niebuhr claimed:

The world was not a perfect harmony even before human sin created confusion. The idea in Hebrew mythology that Satan is both a rebel against God and yet ultimately under his dominion, expresses the paradoxical fact that on the one hand evil is something more than the absence of order, and on the other that it depends upon order. There can be disorder only in an integrated world; and the forces of disorder can be effective only if they are themselves ordered and integrated. (*Interpretation* 71)

This meant that though sin was an inevitable part of human existence and the world, it was not naturally or originally found within human beings.

Because the world was initially imperfect, some elements of chaos were allowed to enter, in this case through the serpent. Niebuhr implied that evil not only exists, but is also dependent upon the forces of "good," (God) in order to exist. "Thus the devil is possible only in a world controlled by God and can be effective only if some of the potencies of the divine are in him. Evil, in other words, is not the absence but the corruption of good; yet it is parasitic on the good" (*Interpretation* 71). Though paradoxical at first view, Niebuhr's arguments suggest that evil is actually more "positive" than originally believed due to the inherent "potencies" of God within it. Essentially, what this approach to the myth of the Fall does is to remove some of the pessimism regarding human nature within traditional Christian Orthodox dogma while still remaining "dependent" upon the positive aspects found in traditional dualisms. By viewing the myth of the Fall as such, the paradox of human nature is better understood, because it combines the "profound pessimism" and "ultimate optimism" which makes Christian realism different from other philosophical or theological approaches. Within Christian realism, "[...] existence

is more certainly meaningful, its meaning is more definitely threatened by evil, and the triumph of good over evil is ultimately more certain than in alternative forms of religion” (*Interpretation* 73).

This duality of acknowledging real evil in the world, whilst not succumbing to it was what Niebuhr felt modern society needed in order to combat the rise of fascism throughout the West. Myths served this purpose, specifically within “prophetic Christianity,” as they were “able to preserve a dynamic ethic” whilst not falling “into the pitfall” of romanticism (Niebuhr, *Interpretation* 81). In sum, taking myths seriously, and looking at the world through a Biblical analysis supported the transcendent property of human nature so vital to Niebuhr’s Christian beliefs. Such beliefs guaranteed that humanity would not fall into a mysticism which was completely removed from the world.

The rise of fascism within Western Europe, as well as organized racism by groups such as the KKK demonstrated to what point the belief and defense of humanistic rationalism had failed society. He felt that emphasis was placed too greatly upon positive achievements within society and humanity thereby simultaneously ignoring the negative aspects of human capability. He wrote:

In modern culture [...] the unqualified identification of reason and virtue has led to untold evils and confusions. Against the illusions of modern culture it must be maintained that the natural impulses of life are not so anarchic and reason is not so unqualifiedly synthesizing as has been assumed. While natural impulse, without the discipline of reason, may lead to anarchy in the self and in society, it must also be recognized that there are natural social impulses which relate the self to other life in terms of an unconscious and natural harmony. (*Interpretation* 92)

The decisive problem of modern culture for Niebuhr was its inability or refusal to see the paradox within human achievement:

The conclusion most abhorrent to the modern mood is that the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good, and that human history is therefore not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of the good over evil, of cosmos over chaos, as the story of an ever increasing cosmos, creating ever increasing possibilities of chaos. The idea hinted at in the words of St Paul, ‘For I had not known lust, except the law had said thou shalt not covet,’ the idea, namely, that

when the moral ideal challenges the forces of sin, the challenge results not only in submission, but to a more conscious and deliberate opposition, is proved by the tragic facts of human history, however unpalatable it may be to generations which have tried to explain human history in simpler terms. (*Interpretation* 97).

In other words, history was not proving humanists, liberals, rationalists, idealists et. al. right. Instead, it was demonstrating exactly the opposite; that with every advancement, whether cultural or scientific, there was an unlimited possibility of negative consequences that would result due to humanity's sin of always attempting to go beyond its natural limits.

From a Niebuhrian perspective, the criticisms levied against modern culture were best exemplified by Nazi Germany. Prior to Hitler's rise to power, Germany, and especially its major cities, including its capital Berlin, were centers of multiculturalism and tolerance. Similarly, Germany was essentially the philosophical and metaphysical *Mecca* for liberal-leaning scholars. After all, this was the country of Kant and Hegel. Philosophical dialogue, emphasis on scientific achievement, academic study, and the arts were existent in pre-Hitler Germany. If the liberal credo that humanity was constantly improving morally, culturally, and scientifically were true, then Germany of all places, should have been the last place where a totalitarian regime should have risen to power.

For Niebuhr, this over-estimation of the "goodness" of humanity stemmed from modern culture's lack of understanding. The reason for modern culture's belief in the perfectibility of man, the loss of any true inherent symbolism of the Cross or other myths, was related to the problematic teaching of the law of love within Christian liberalism. The law of love was the ethic of Jesus which was paradoxically applicable to all, but impossible to follow within a historic and human framework.

The "Church had failed to teach the law of love adequately because it had allowed the simplicities of the gospel to be overlaid with a layer of meaningless theological jargon" (Niebuhr, *Interpretation* 168). It had over-simplified the law of love turning it into nothing more than a "feel-good" sentiment that people could pay lip-service to without necessarily being self-critical of the inherent paradox within Jesus's ethic. The paradox was simple: the law of love dictated that all of man were to "love thy neighbor" as one would "love thyself." However, this law implies that the world is a place in which no contradiction, self-interest, power politics, or other form of conflict exist. The reality was, and is, much different as these negative aspects of mortal life, are regular, day to day realities making the law of love nearly impossible to apply.

Niebuhr essentially charged that liberal Christianity had watered down the message of the law of love to such a point that it took on a prayer-like status. Rather than it being something to

constantly work towards, through fighting to improve justice within society, the liberal Church instead turned it into a “feel-good” prayer; an “if only” gush that maintained more sentimentality rather than any profound Christian thought.

Yet, Niebuhr acknowledged that modern American culture was not entirely to blame for the predicament of the law of love. He accused Jefferson for being a prime example of America’s corruption, and ultimate weakening of Jesus’s law:

For Jefferson was a typical child of the Age of Reason; and it is the naïve optimism of the Age of Reason, rather than the more paradoxical combination of pessimism and optimism of prophetic religion, which the modern Church as preached as ‘the simple gospel of Jesus.’ The Age of Reason was right in protesting against theological subtleties [*sic*] which transmuted a religion of love into a support of traditional and historic injustice. It was right in assigning an immediate relevance for politics and economics to the law of love and the ideal of brotherhood. In doing that it recaptured some resources of prophetic religion which historic Christianity had lost. Yet it was wrong in the optimism which assumed that the law of love needed only be stated persuasively to overcome the selfishness of the human heart. (*Interpretation* 170)

The error was not necessarily modern society trying to *preach* the law of love. The error was believing that preaching it would be sufficient to remove the innate sin found within the world and human nature.

This flawed attitude was thus applied to the realm of politics with the Church promoting the attitude that only through further spread of the gospel, and its message by word of mouth, could the evils and sins of the world be eradicated. “The unvarying refrain of the liberal Church in its treatment of politics is that love and cooperation are superior to conflict and coercion, and that therefore they must be and will be established” (Niebuhr, *Interpretation* 175). The fault of the liberal Church was believing that the normative values of Jesus’s ethic could actually be fully applied to a corrupt and contradictory world; that “love and cooperation” would somehow eradicate the innate conflict and coercive forces found within society. He further criticized the Church by lambasting how:

Liberal Christian literature abounds in the monotonous reiteration of the pious hope that people might be good and loving, in which case all the nasty business of politics could be dispensed with. In the same vein Church congresses have

been passing resolutions for the past decades surveying the sorry state of the world's affairs and assuming the world that all this would be changed if only men lived by the principles of the gospel. (*Interpretation* 175)

Therefore, for liberal Christians, if only more gospel had been spread, the fascist regimes of Western Europe would not have risen.

Niebuhr dismissed these ideas and approaches easily for they ignored the very real, and very influential power politics and conflicts of interest at play within a society. He never minimized the importance nor the need of Jesus's ethic in the world. Instead, he mostly criticized modern liberal society for ignoring actual realities. Adhering to a strict normative application of the law of love would not actually create the necessary justice within society. Unlike theories in natural law, or even within Jesus's agape, Niebuhr felt that justice was organic. This meant that there was no normative value or universal truth in which Justice, was applicable to all situations. This was Divine and incapable of existing within the imperfect human world. Instead, Niebuhr argued that justice stemmed from a variety of sources including "common labor," "social power," and "conflict of competing interests" to create a system which was not perfect, but still better than anarchy. This was because "[n]o degree of good will alone can cure a deficiency in glandular secretions; and no moral idealism can overcome a basic mechanical defect in the social structure" (*Interpretation* 180).

Politics, by its nature meant that justice happened not through normative values but through "equilibria of power" (Niebuhr, *Interpretation* 188). The major fault for liberal Christians was its confusing power with conflict. He admitted to there being tension, but that did not necessarily signify that tension always led to conflict. Accepting this premise meant that a prophetic Christian was one that acknowledged this reality, thereby making any sort of perfectionist pacifism, or "unqualified disavowal of violence impossible" (*Interpretation* 188). This should come as no surprise given Niebuhr's support and idolization of Gandhi as someone who was able to be a pacifist while still managing to use power.

As the conflicts and situations began to worsen throughout the later part of the 1930s, Niebuhr started to change his beliefs regarding FDR and his reforms. Part of this was due to what he saw as the rise of dogmatic belief within Communist parties, as well as the ultimate betrayal of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939. He turned his attention away from purely economic or class related struggles, to a more normative and realist analysis of world politics. This implied that the Church, as well as American society had to break away from their isolationist and pacifist beliefs. Thus, towards the end of the 1930s, and the early parts of World

War II, Niebuhr stepped fully into his philosophy, embracing a normative and ethical use of power via his Christian realism.

### 3.1.2 Learning from History: America's Responsibility to Intervene

When it became clear to Niebuhr that Hitler's attempts to conquer the rest of Europe by any means necessary were not going to be abated through appeasement, Niebuhr realized that a stronger, and "realer" position within politics was needed. His Christian realism would be that position as "[...] Christian realism provided the intellectual resources for coming to grip with the 'isms' of the day (i.e., fascism and Communism) while serving as a starting point for thoughtful, real-world policies" (Patterson, "Christianity" 1) However, before actually arguing why America needed to enter the war, Niebuhr was forced to fight against the biases and beliefs of the secular and liberal culture that had gripped the nation. The largest challenge, from a normative and theological perspective, was to try and demonstrate why, not just politically, but religiously as well, "the Christian Church [was] not Pacifist."<sup>39</sup>

The Christian Church's failure to comprehend the limits of pure pacifism was linked to its inability to measure "the total dimension of human conduct" (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 2). The Church believed that the world only needed to try harder to adapt the law of love in order to prevent atrocities and war from spreading. This belief was based on the fact that Christ was the "true form" for humanity via *agape*, thereby creating the norm by which would ensure the law of Christ on Earth. However, what the modern Church failed to recognize according to Niebuhr, was that though every person was in some way the embodiment of Christ through salvation, "[...] every man [was] also in some sense a crucifier of Christ" (*Power Politics* 2). This is simply the reiteration of Niebuhr's primary and recurring argument throughout most of his career: modern society, both secular and religious, misunderstood the very nature of humanity.

Pacifist and conscientious objectors to any type of military intervention within the growing conflict in Europe were at best naive, or at worst ignorant of the realities of the world. Still expressing his dismay at the complaisance of the Christian Church in general regarding its inaction towards fascism and totalitarianism, Niebuhr used a pragmatic approach to analyze the logical fallacies expressed by pacifists. He stated:

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<sup>39</sup> This is the title of an essay found within *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940) and within *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (1986).



All forms of religious faith are principles of interpretation which we use to organize our experience. Some religions may be adequate principles of interpretation at certain levels of experience, but they break down at deeper levels. No religious faith can maintain itself in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets. A religious faith which substitutes faith in man for faith in God cannot finally validate itself in experience. If we believe that the only reason men do not love each other perfectly is because the law of love has not been preached persuasively enough, we believe something to which experience does not conform. If we believe that if Britain had only been fortunate enough to have produced 30 per cent instead of 2 per cent of conscientious objectors to military service, Hitler's heart would have been softened and he would not have dared to attack Poland, we hold a faith which no historic reality justifies. (*Power Politics* 6)

Whether tapping into the pragmatic *zeitgeist* of the day, or perhaps letting his Jamesian influences show, Niebuhr highlighted the importance of experience and interpretation to religion. Faith and conviction were not simply privatized inner reflections on a sacred text and one's inner connection with the Divine. Such an approach to life was lambasted by Niebuhr for "[...] those who are revolted by [the ambiguous methods of history] have the decency and consistency to retire to the monastery, where medieval perfectionists found their asylum" (*Power Politics* 175). Religious reflection meant that one had to not only use the Word of God to reflect internally, but also put those Words in context of History through experience. Thus, life was not sitting around contemplating its meaning. Instead, it was supposed to be experienced through engagement; through trying to apply lessons learned in these texts to the actual circumstances being currently confronted, all while basing them on some form of theological doctrine. Pacifists and the Christian Church failed to do this. Instead they were content in continuing to preach their gospel of love and trying to change hearts and minds through *agape*.

The world was an imperfect place in which conflict, introduced partly through sin, was a regular and necessary part of human life. If societies wanted to prosper, they had to deal with conflict on some level. Taking the pacifist, idealist, or modern philosophy to its extreme meant that "[...] a morally perverse preference [was] given to tyranny over anarchy (war)" (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 15). Thus, it was better to be ruled over by a monster than submit to the horrors and atrocities that war would have democracies commit. In sum, for pacifists, the treatment to combat tyranny was worse than the disease itself. He continued:

If we are told that tyranny would destroy itself, if only we would not challenge it, the obvious answer is that tyranny continues to grow if it is not resisted. If it is to be resisted, the risk of overt conflict must be taken. The thesis that German tyranny will throw off this yoke in due time, merely means that an unjustified moral preference is given to civil war over international war, for internal resistance runs the risk of conflict as much as external resistance. Furthermore, no consideration is given to the fact that a tyrannical State may grow too powerful to be successfully resisted by purely internal pressure, and that the injustices which it does to other than its own nationals may rightfully lay the problem of the tyranny upon other nations. (*Power Politics* 15-16)

Only military action, in some shape or form,<sup>40</sup> was an acceptable solution to combat the evils of Nazi Germany and other fascist powers.

Niebuhr was not necessarily critical of pacifist devotion, rather, he faulted their inability to see human nature for what it was. An imperfect solution for Niebuhr was to be found in power politics, not necessarily in religion. In classic realist fashion, Niebuhr argued for a balance of power approach to maintaining an unstable peace and imperfect justice. Acknowledging that these were “something different from, and inferior to, the harmony of love,” he nevertheless supported it as the only viable, and realist solution to keeping some form of tolerable and “free” order to the world. It was better to have the fallible and declining capitalist liberal democracies of the West where freedom of thought, religion, press, and general Enlightenment values were protected, rather than the guaranteed and totalitarian “peace” offered by regimes such as Nazi Germany. If pursuit of these policies led to the occasional war, it was vindicated as being “just” because the war in question was defending the ideals of democracy. Similarly, following democratic peace theory, liberal democracies rarely go to war with one another for economic and normative reasons.<sup>41</sup> Instead, enemies would come from different ideological camps: on the

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<sup>40</sup> Up until the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Niebuhr did not advocate direct intervention from the American military. Instead, he felt that providing weapons, finances, or other supplies to the allies, specifically Britain, was the best way to remain involved. For further discussion on Niebuhr’s ambiguity on World War II intervention see Justus D. Doenecke’s “Reinhold Niebuhr and His Critics: The Interventionist Controversy in World War II.”

<sup>41</sup> For further development on democratic peace theory, see Chapter 15 of Battistella, Dario *Théories des relations internationales*. Sciences Po Presse. Paris 2009. In this chapter, Battistella discusses the competing theories as to why democracies rarely go to war with one another. These reasons range from normative (war is not a democratic “value”) to economic (war hurts trade).

one side liberal democracies, on the other, authoritarian governments. Though seemingly paradoxical, Niebuhr supported balance of power politics and military action. He viewed them as completely complimentary for the goal of the former was to prevent the later. Should the balance be broken because of a threat (real or perceived), then the necessary recourse was military action. This was especially true if it meant that failure to engage militarily would result in a greater injustice than what existed previously.

Continuing to argue for the necessity for balance of power approaches to politics, especially within international relations, Niebuhr actually demonstrated why having only a law of love was potentially harmful to free societies:

[Balance of power politics] is a basic condition of justice, given the sinfulness of man. Such a balance of power does not exclude love. In fact, without love the frictions and tensions of a balance of power would become intolerable. But without the balance of power even the most loving relations may degenerate into unjust relations, and love may become the screen which hides injustice. (*Power Politics* 27)

Because the world was chaotic and conflict was everywhere, such an approach to politics was a necessary evil to promote and guarantee a minimum level of justice.

Through these policies, the American government and people would realize that intervention on behalf of the Allied Powers served American interests. The motivation behind the constant wave of isolationist sentiment (whether secular, religious, or pacifist), stemmed from a misunderstanding of the situation itself. In spite of traditional realist philosophy in which the public was not to be consulted in matters of foreign policy, Niebuhr maintained that “the common people [were] no fools” (*Power Politics* 72). The fault was not with the public for refusing to intervene in World War II; no, instead Niebuhr blamed the intellectual elite who were still adhering to neo-Renaissance/Enlightenment idealism that human nature was not only modifiable, but could be improved as well.

According to Niebuhr, the leaders within Western Democracies failed to appropriately and actively analyze the threat that was the rise of Nazi Germany. To make matters worse, by the time that they had actually realized the threat, it was nearly too late (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 66). Niebuhr argued that even if Hitler was never going to bring his army to New York, this did not mean that the rise of a Nazi Empire in Europe was not going to be a problem for America. In fact, he saw two major issues with a Nazi Europe: 1) conquering Latin American republics and working with Imperialist Japan thereby ultimately making no place safe off of the North

American continent for American interests. 2) A new branch of industrial slavery through forced labor that would tap into the technological prowess and knowhow of developed countries thus leading to not only military, but economic threats to American interests as well. The economic threats would be in the guise of cheap exports that would flood the market devaluing American purchasing power in a Nazi-dominated global economy (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 66-67).

Keeping within the vein of supporting some form of intervention and in probably one of his most polemic and controversial essays “An End to Illusions” (1940), Niebuhr disputed quite fatalistically, that regardless of the faults of modern liberal-democracies and a culture which does not “deserve to survive” (*Power Politics* 168), they were still the lesser evil of the choices modern societies was presented with. This essay also saw the final departure of Niebuhr from the American Socialist party for he could no longer adhere to the party’s pacifist leanings. That is to say, the Socialist Party refused entry into the war on the grounds that it would be against the interests of Mother Russia, home of Marxism. Furthermore, Niebuhr found the Socialist Party’s arguments that World War II would be simply “a clash of rival imperialisms” to be an infantile simplification of the issue:

Of course they are right [that World War II was a conflict between rival imperialisms]. So is a clash between myself and a gangster a conflict of rival egotisms. There is a perspective from which there is not much difference between my egotism and that of a gangster. But from another perspective there is an important difference. ‘There is not much difference between people,’ said a farmer to William James, ‘but what difference there is, is very important.’ That is a truth which the Socialists in America have not yet learned. The Socialists are right, of course, in insisting that the civilization which we are called upon to defend is full of capitalistic and imperialistic injustice. But it is still a civilization. (*Power Politics* 169).

Thus, Niebuhr’s arguments for intervention were essentially a defense of an imperfect system, but such a system, with incomplete and flawed justice, institutions, politics, and economic arrangements, was still better than the totalitarian alternative.

Niebuhr’s attacks on the Christian Churches and overall arguments for intervention did manage to get him a lot of attention, and not all of it was positive. Though his arguments were precise, his tone was not necessarily appreciated by many of his religious colleagues. Nor was his approach well received by a secular American culture which had had its fill of problems

stemming out of the Old Continent. Therefore, with the release of *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940) as well as his overall critical view of liberal secular and religious culture, Niebuhr found himself on the receiving end of many religious and secular criticisms.

### 3.1.3 Straw Men and Over-Simplification: Niebuhr's Critics

Always an outspoken figure, Niebuhr was by no means unaccustomed to criticisms. He knew that his philosophies regarding human nature were not popular with mainstream Christianity or secular liberal culture; but that was his goal. Niebuhr felt that contemporary culture had become far too complacent, and comfortable in a Bourgeois style of life. Modern society believed that human nature was essentially "good," and Niebuhr claimed the contrary. To no one's surprise, including his own, these statements were quickly rejected and censured as coming from a thinker obsessed with sin, and giving little attention to Divine Grace.

Upon release of *Christianity and Power Politics*, Niebuhr came under metaphorical fire from religious thinkers, not necessarily due to the message *per se* of the text, but rather the vocabulary chosen. One such critic was Harold Bosley, a minister in Baltimore who felt that

[...] Niebuhr's interventionist anthology [...] replete with loaded and abusive words. According to Bosley, Niebuhr labeled anyone who did not favor immediate intervention as absurd, pathetic, ignorant, senseless, confusing, hysterical, pitilessly self-righteous, and willfully blind. Indeed, Niebuhr did more than argue with those who did not want the U.S. to assist Britain in securing a knockout victory over Hitler. He called them hypocrites, moral perverts, lovers of tyranny, distorters of scripture, victims of an uneasy conscience, believers in peace at any price, and the most unholy Pharisees of religious history. (Doenecke 467)

It was hard for those on the receiving end of Niebuhr's harsh words not to take them personally, as this vocabulary was essentially an assault on pacifists' characters. Such terminology was not the expression of an independent, calm, and rational intellectual disagreement. Instead, these criticisms were viewed as *ad hominem* attacks, granted against a group, but nonetheless specific in their assault.

Not willing to take these criticisms lying down, pacifists such as Charles Clayton Morrison, then-editor to the *Christian Century*, responded to Niebuhr with a criticism that rings true for

many Niebuhrian critics today: oversimplification of Niebuhr's intellectual opponents. Morrison argued that Niebuhr's image of pacifists was an unjust caricature. Morrison wrote:

The charge that utopianism is an essential implication of the pacifist position is false. The charge that the pacifist is a 'perfectionist' is false. And the charge that the pacifist is seeking to establish a 'sinless politics' in [sic] worse than worse – it is an outrage. [...] We believe the most friendly service we can render to Reinhold Niebuhr is flatly to say that he has too long reveled in a falsification of his pacifist brethren. [...] Insofar as his misrepresentations are accepted, they constitute a threat to the unity of church which the ecumenical movement is striving to maintain. (qtd. in Doenecke 469)

Pacifists felt that Niebuhr completely misrepresented them by oversimplifying, and personally condemning their views. Modern thinkers, critics, and Niebuhrians alike are aware of this reproach. Authors such as Richard W. Fox or Robert Moats Miller reasoned that the oversimplification of his intellectual adversaries was prevalent and led to several epistemological errors within Niebuhr's critiques.

This was seen earlier with Dewey and Niebuhr. Niebuhr over-simplified Dewey's liberalism, and placed him in the very same vein of liberalism opposed by Dewey. Fox explains this approach as having its "political uses" for it was "vintage pamphleteering" (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 195). Niebuhr's style was for effect and things like details and subtlety were more easily ignored. This was simply part of Niebuhr's intellectual style and personal life. Time was of the essence, thus there was:

[t]he passionate intensity, the urge to speak, the carelessness with detail, the impatience with logical consistency. Speak now, discriminate later. Always on the run, with suitcase packed, in dread of passivity. Obsessed with delivering his message; there may not be enough time. A spiritual vocation with evident if obscure psychological roots. (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 203-204)

If attacking one particular person, or reducing intellectual arguments to *reductio ad absurdum* was necessary to get the message across, it seemed that Niebuhr did it.

On top of this was the accusation that Niebuhr enjoyed setting up "straw men." This accusation was not new, and defenders of Dewey often reproached Niebuhr of the same. Critics maintained that Niebuhr targeted his ire and intellectual attacks on one particular figure who

was meant to symbolize that specific wrongdoings or errors. For the case of secular liberal culture, John Dewey was chosen as his target in *Moral Man, Immoral Society*. Pacifists like Bosley were chosen to be the strawmen for Niebuhr's crusade against pacifism.

Not allowing Niebuhr's attacks to damage the mission that was pacifism, theologians such as George H.C. Macgregor developed "the most detailed" criticism against Niebuhr (Doenecke 473). Macgregor essentially went counter to every belief of Niebuhr's regarding human nature. Unlike Niebuhr, Macgregor felt that humanity could arise, through the ethic of Jesus as well as through Divine Grace, beyond its sinfulness, and that contrary to Niebuhr's claim "a group can rise above the sum of its members as well as fall below it" (qtd. in Doenecke 469). These debates and criticisms remained heavily influenced by theological debate rather than any real political issues. Otherwise put, no one was debating that Hitler was bad or should be stopped, the question centered around the appropriate normative response to stopping him, and the general rise of fascism.

Even though Niebuhr was for intervention, the degree of intervention, as well as the sincerity of such a call, were points of contention for some critics such as historian Robert Moats Miller. Miller had two major denunciations against Niebuhr. The first was an attack on the actual reason why Niebuhr fought for some degree of intervention in World War II. In sum, Miller accused Niebuhr of wanting "the thrill and delicious pride" of having intellectually fought in this "great moral struggle" against totalitarianism, without any real cost (qtd. in Doenecke 475). After all, in 1940, Niebuhr was well beyond the age to serve in the military, similarly, his family, including brother and children, were not of the right age as well. Thus, it was "easy" for Niebuhr to support military intervention, considering he would not have to pay the human cost of it.

Similarly, up until Pearl Harbor, Niebuhr had consistently argued for some form of involvement without actually stating that American troops should be sent overseas. This, in spite of Niebuhr's constant moral attacks against totalitarianism. This argument was all the more abhorrent for critics like Miller who wrote:

It may be that 'all measures short of war' was the most immoral of all positions. If the 'war against tyranny' was in fact 'our' war, then the United States should have flung itself into the crusade, openly, fully, committing without measure the lives of American boys. [...] Allied soldiers might now be armed with American weapons, but no American blood was to mingle with theirs. No Americans would be expected to kill or be killed. No devastation would come to American

cities. The defeat of Hitler could be accomplished [...] by no greater sacrifice than the lending and leasing of materials. (Qtd. in Doenecke 476)

Miller was accusing Niebuhr of the very allegation of hypocrisy that Niebuhr had levied against pacifists. If Nazi Germany were truly that evil, and was going to destroy Western civilization, and if Niebuhr were as religious as he claimed, then nothing short of full-on military intervention should have been advocated. Anything less was opportunism and hypocrisy.

Of course, today, most scholars agree that American intervention was the correct choice. Nevertheless, the degree of the debate, as well as the intellectual intensity of the arguments between Niebuhrians and pacifists, demonstrated how America, twenty years following World War I, was still very much influenced and psychically damaged. This effect was two-fold as Americans were shaped not only by the actual atrocities of modern war's violence, but also by the devastating political and economic fallout.

Still, the 1930s and the period leading up to World War II demonstrated clear turning points for both Dewey and Niebuhr. With the star starting to decline for the former, and rise brilliantly for the latter, it was clear that both thinkers were going to come out of World War II changed. In spite of these changes, and the sometimes-draconic differences in methodology, Dewey and Niebuhr felt that though the 1930s highlighted the severe political and economic injustices in liberal democracy, it was still the best option on the table.

### **3.2.0 Democracy Isn't Perfect, But It's the Best We Got**

With threats mounting on all sides, Dewey and Niebuhr had their intellectual work cut out for them when it came to preserve and defend democracy. The economic turmoil of the Great Depression called into question whether or not democracy was truly the best way to combat economic inequalities. The fact that liberalism was "the first ideological casualty" of the Depression led many to ponder democracy's fate (Walters par. 8). It seemed that Marxism was the only viable option against liberalism and more importantly, capitalism's cancerous hold on the American people.

Though not often associated with America, the Marxist movement did gain massive appeal through the late 1920s and well into the 1930s. One of the major supporters of the American Communist party was African-Americans as "[...] [the Communists] had placed black liberation on the Left political agenda as it had not been placed before, and had taken preliminary steps to appeal to poor blacks north and south" (Buhle; Georgakas, par. 16). During the tumultuous Scottsboro Boys affair (1931) for example, in which several young African



American boys were falsely accused of raping two white women, the Communist Party came to the aid of the alleged rapists. They did so by providing legal representation for the boys and continuing to fight on their behalf well throughout the 1930s (Wormser, pars. 1-3).

Along with the support of many African-Americans, the Communist party did see a large increase in membership throughout the later part of the 1930s. This was not an immediate result of the Great Depression, as fighting within the party prevented any common political front and strategic growth from forming. This was the reality of the party's situation until the end of the 1930s when many left wings within the Communist party decided to "tone down" the early "sensationalism" of previous messages to a "more workmanlike" approach, in order to create "solid Left journalism" (Buhle; Georgakas, par. 21). The realignment paid off and following the rebranding technique within the Communist party, the membership numbers skyrocketed to "[...] 65,000 members and attained a very wide following in many sections of American life" (Buhle; Georgakas par. 22).

The growing appeal for many Americans throughout the interwar period was understandable, even for Dewey and Niebuhr. They acknowledged that there was something amiss within American liberal democracy. Admitting this did not mean that Marxism was the solution to the problem. Instead, the common ground that Dewey and Niebuhr found throughout the 1930s was important in the overall defense of democracy as "[d]emocracy is [...] the most attractive form of society because it is the one in which society is most essentially itself" (Ryan 185). It was also in this period that Niebuhr's Christian realism started taking form, and maintaining itself as an authentically American philosophy. However independent a name Niebuhr was making for himself, he nevertheless was unable to fully escape the pragmatic influences that were omnipresent.

Both Niebuhr and Dewey defended democracy and in spite of its imperfections, it was still the least-worse option in terms of political regime. Prior to the Great Depression, democracy was considered to be normatively better than other regimes. However, with the political and economic failings blatantly in front of them, they had to defend democracy from a different point of view. Thus, for both thinkers, the defense transformed from a normative one to a more practical one. This was so whether democracy was viewed as a culture or simple systemic form of government. Regardless, of form democracies managed to guarantee basic fundamental rights for its citizens against the abuses or tyranny of the government.

The way to improve democracy depended on the author. As explained previously, Dewey felt that a better development of social intelligence and the growth of a "democratic culture" were the tools needed to create a society in which individual rights and a sense of public or community would simultaneously be developed. Niebuhr's point of view was less focused on

the culture or actual system of government. Instead, he concentrated on the overall values of the West. Though Niebuhr supported Dewey in the defense of democracy, he still felt that Dewey's approach was problematic:

The issue for Niebuhr was not between intelligence and the absence thereof. Rather, it was between a view of scientific rationality that Niebuhr took to be extremely naïve, and a more circumspect intelligence that gauges the facts of sociopolitical life more realistically and more in line with the complexity and type of experience being considered. Human reason, Niebuhr charged was never free from self-interest or local perspective. [...] The political realism in men such as Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau found Dewey's overconfidence in reason and moral suasion simply naïve as regards the need for balancing power amid conflicting interests. (Rice, *Circle* 56)

Niebuhr was not arguing for a return to dogmatic belief to save or protect democracy; his criticism was that Dewey, placed too much emphasis, almost to the point of dogma, on the capabilities of human reason. Intelligence was a good thing, and achieving Dewey's goal of improving social intelligence was a perfectly respectable pursuit. However, Niebuhr felt that Dewey, as usual, overestimated human nature and ignored power politic realities.

Theoretically and philosophically, Niebuhr agreed with much of Dewey's major sentiments regarding the importance and necessity of democracy. However, what he could not bring himself to do was to continue wholeheartedly supporting it during the interwar period. Niebuhr felt very much "duty bound by the temper of his times" to reanalyze liberal culture and its appreciation of democracy (Rice, *Odyssey* 237). Still, in a truly pragmatic approach, his dialectics ironically made sure to balance his views of democracy so as not to fall into, on the one hand the extremist defeatism in which human nature was beyond redemption, and on the other, the blind idealism of modern liberal society. Democracies played upon people's self-interests admittedly, but they still managed to foster a feeling or sentiment of cooperation within a community; even if the basis of such cooperation was for selfish reasons. He wrote:

The achievements of democratic societies refuted [the pessimism regarding human nature] and with it the purely negative conception of the relation of government and systems of justice to the ideal of brotherhood. History reveals adjustments of interest without the interposition of superior coercive force to be possible within wide limits. The capacity of communities to synthesize divergent

approaches to a common problem and to arrive at a tolerably just solution proves man's capacity to consider interests other than his own. Nevertheless, the fact that a synthesis of conflicting interests and viewpoints is not easy, and may become impossible under certain conditions, is a refutation of a too simple trust in the impartial character of reason. It would be as false to regard rules and principles of justice, slowly elaborated in collective experience, as merely the instruments of the sense of social obligation, as to regard them merely as tools of egoistic interest. (*Nature* Vol., II 258-259)

It was important to simultaneously recognize democracy's merits, while acknowledging humanity's limits.

Niebuhr did not wish to abolish democracy through his criticisms, instead, he hoped to reconstruct it through a realist vision of human nature and power politics. In his opinion, democracy was always going to be the superior option in terms of governmental structure when compared to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. This was not because it was inherently or normatively better than other regimes, as Dewey argued. Instead, democracy was the more viable option simply because it understood, and recognized inherent conflicts of interest. As a matter of fact, in his own way and to a certain extent, Niebuhr respected the idealism found within Dewey's democratic philosophy. To an extent, idealism was important in democracies for Niebuhr. Still, it was only useful as long as realism could keep idealism in check. To put it another way: it was great to believe in the cooperative capability of humanity and communities. However, this optimism had to be tempered when it was apparent that self-interest, greed, and egotism were not allowing the progress to happen.

One area in which Niebuhr felt that realism was desperately needed in democratic culture was within international relations and foreign policy. He wrote: "The terrible plight in which the democracies have found themselves in warding off the threat of totalitarian tyrannies is partly the consequence of a natural weakness of democratic government in the field of foreign policy" (*Power Politics* 65). Seeing that democracies are aware of, and encourage various points of views (Madison's factions), they are unable to come to consensus quickly or easily. Supplementing the institutional weaknesses found within democracy, liberal culture hastened democracy's destruction. This occurred because liberal culture was "[...] deficient in the 'tragic sense of life.' It has no capacity to gauge the kind of monstrous evil which the Nazi state incorporates. It is full of illusions about the character of human nature, particularly collective human behavior. It imagines that there is no conflict of interest which cannot be adjudicated" (*Power Politics* 68). Interwar modern liberal culture was thus unable to truly understand the

enemy it was facing because it could not understand a desire, or conflict which could not be mediated. This was why solid realism was needed in order to compete against the atrocities of totalitarian regimes. Though Niebuhr realized that modern liberal culture was “superior” to Nazi barbarism, he reproached liberal society for not organizing what he called “physical resources” i.e., the military, to be ready to meet the “barbarism” of fascist and totalitarian regimes. Modern liberals did not “[...] know that civilizations must periodically meet the threat of barbarism by an organization of their physical resources, somewhat comparable to that which barbarism is able to achieve” (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 69).

Aside from readying the “physical resources” available, democracies could also reinforce some of its own institutional weaknesses through strong leadership. The ideal leader would be “[...] willing to risk is prestige by words and actions which anticipate the perils to which the State is exposed and which defy the common lethargy of the moment in order to ward off ultimate peril” (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 71). Niebuhr knew that even with a strong leader, the weaknesses of democracies would never fully be overcome; the system did not allow for it. By its very definition and institutional rules, democracies functioned on varying and competing interest. Thus, reaching any form of consensus could not as easily be guaranteed as in a dictatorship.

Niebuhr was still aware of Dewey’s genuine contribution, and support for democratic culture. Even if Niebuhr was skeptical of Dewey’s desire to turn democracy into a religion as the “failure of secular naturalism to adequately gauge the heights and depths of existence [...]” made such a feat difficult to properly accept the limits in human nature, he never doubted Dewey’s sincerity and more importantly the “genuine democratic character” of Dewey and his philosophy (Rice, *Odyssey* 227-228).

Though critical and polemic during the interwar period, Niebuhr’s tone would soften immensely, especially towards Dewey in the later part of his career following World War II. As touched upon earlier, many of the differences found within Niebuhr’s attitude were related more with actual age than any sort of ideological difference. The Niebuhr of the 1930s was one that was openly engaged in intellectual conflict, and almost thrived, much to his detractors’ dismay, on creating blanket statements, or straw-men attacks so that he, himself, could be heard.

Following the allied victory, Niebuhr kept some of Dewey’s democratic culture intact within his own philosophies. Niebuhr was thus able to maintain the more idealized nature of democratic culture found in Dewey whilst mixing it with his own realist points of view. Hoping to ease the debate between secular and religious cultures on the nature, and more importantly the “roots” of democracy, Niebuhr, in a surprisingly conciliatory tone stated:

For a long time, a debate has been waged between Christian and secular leaders on the question whether democracy is the product of the Christian faith or of a secular culture. The debate has been inconclusive because, as a matter of history, both Christian and secular forces were involved in establishing political institutions of democracy; and the cultural resources of modern free societies are jointly furnished by both Christianity and modern secularism. Furthermore, there are traditional non-democratic Christian cultures to the right of free societies which prove that the Christian faith does not inevitably yield democratic historical fruits. And there are totalitarian regimes to the left of free societies which prove that secular doctrine can, under certain circumstances, furnish grist for the mills of modern tyrannies. The debate is, in short, inconclusive because the evidence for each position is mixed. (qtd. in Rice, *Odyssey* 229)

Taking simultaneously a pragmatic and Christian realist approach to the question of democracy's origins, Niebuhr arrived first pragmatically at a middle-ground approach in refusing to acknowledge any total absolutes. Furthermore, Niebuhr's Christian realist analysis looked at the question through the lens of history. Moreover, Niebuhr recognized that democracy was more than just a political system, contending that it was equally a "way of life" as Dewey had suggested (Rice, *Odyssey* 231). Again, the devil was in the details as Niebuhr knew that focusing solely on the cultural or "living" aspect of democracy as a secular religion, could lead to unforeseen consequences by modern liberal culture. History demonstrated that the costs could be simply transferring fanaticism from religious to secular grounds. Robespierre during the French Revolution is one example which justified this fear. What started off as enthusiastic support for republican values quickly turned into the Terror, causing the deaths of nearly 40,000 people (Bastille-day.com, sec. 2 par. 1).

Regardless of their profound respect for the importance of democratic culture in maintaining freedom, both philosophers shared perspective on the reason, if not the source, for the rise of Nazi Germany. However, the two arrived at these similar conclusions a war apart: German "culture." For Dewey, this was the result of the dichotomy between philosophy and science, as well as its Hegelian obsession with service to the State as being the ultimate expression of individualism. Niebuhr argued, which will be discussed further on, that it was German's misunderstanding of religious doctrine that led to Hitler's takeover.

Niebuhr's understanding of Nazi Germany was formulated in the scope of the 1930s and the event leading up to World War II. Looking at it from a Marxist point of view, Niebuhr still found German fascism to be a "[...] consequence of, and an effort to remedy, the economic

sickness of our society” (*Power Politics* 131). That is not to say that the criticism stopped there. Where Dewey felt that Germany’s militarism stemmed from deep rooted philosophical idealism, Niebuhr proclaimed that “[t]he conflict between Germany and the western world, is in a sense, a conflict between pessimistic and optimistic corruptions of Christianity” (*Power Politics* 49). Nazi tyranny was nothing more than the extremist expression of Lutheranism which sought “not justice but coerced order and peace” (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 50). Nazi society was “peaceful” in the sense it lacked chaos, but it was not a “free” peace in which individuals were able to express themselves.

Further sharing Dewey’s criticism of not only Nazi Germany, but economic corruption in general, Niebuhr echoed Dewey’s emphasis that political freedom and economic freedom were linked. Political freedom meant nothing if one did not have the means to express one’s opinion. Looking at it another way, if one were forced to work all day in unsafe, unfair conditions just to make basic minimum wage and afford food on the table, did that mean that said worker could actually benefit from his or her political so-called freedoms? Exercising one’s free speech meant nothing if s/he were trapped at work in an inescapable economic situation.

Seeming to literally pick up where Dewey’s *German Philosophy and Politics* left off, Niebuhr stated:

It would not be just to hold Lutheran pessimism responsible for all the perversion of political standards which the Nazi state has achieved. May other factors have contributed to this development. The Hegelian worship of the state as the incarnation of man’s universal will, the Nietzschean transvaluation of values and the romance emphasis upon race and vitality in Herder and Fichte, are all compounded in the Nazi creed. (*Power Politics* 59)

German idealism was indeed part of the problem. Niebuhr took a slight detour though in blaming the rise of Nazi Germany on religious misinterpretations as well. This deformation of Lutheranism was a fragment of the overall problem within western culture: secular religions.

The subject of secular religions was a diverging point between Niebuhr and Dewey. This was because the former considered the latter’s branch of naturalistic liberalism to be an example of it. Niebuhr felt that these beliefs were attempting to provide existential, moral, and eternal responses to questions that only a genuine Christian faith could answer. Nazi Germany’s solution was an expression of barbaric nationalism which was “[...] the cheapest and most dangerous sort of secular religion [...]” and was a complete “anachronism” as it was nothing more than “perverse primitivism” (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 137).

Niebuhr would spend much of his later life reflecting on the causes of these secular religions. His findings were very similar to Dewey's own regarding the cause of the collapse of liberal values: technics. The interconnectivity of the world had the tragically ironic effect of disconnecting communities and people from one another. He wrote:

Meanwhile, the introduction of technics into the various national economies tended to destroy the more organic and traditional forms of community on the national level. Urban life produced atomic individuals who lacked the social disciplines of the older and more organic societies and industrialism substituted dynamic inequalities and injustices in place of them ore static inequalities of an agrarian society. (Niebuhr, *On Politics* 6)

Thus, Niebuhr shared Dewey's criticism of a technological society and its effect on democratic culture. However, Niebuhr took his analysis a step further, arguing that this paradoxical connection-disconnection actually led to the rise of what he deemed as "political religions." Western society had long ago abandoned any Christian imperative for action stemming from the community and individual, creating an atomic-centered model of society which was only exacerbated by a technological society. As civilization no longer had any strong moral factor driving it, a vacuum was left in which three different political faiths emerged: 1) a liberal faith in which societies evolve towards a unified community. 2) A Marxist faith in which capitalism was not the savior but rather the damnation of society as it would lead to violent revolution, paradoxically still bringing about a unified world. 3) Fascism which Niebuhr felt was unique and different than the other two faiths. He claimed that:

Fascism, which is distinguished from the first two creeds by its nationalism, particularism, and cynicism. Its explicit repudiation of the ethical universalism, which underlies the other two political religions, gives it an avowedly 'anti-Christian' character while the other two forms of political faith are heretical forms of the Christian religion. But fascism shares with the democratic and socialist creed the effort to reduce the meaning of human existence to purely social, political, and historically realizable terms. (*On Politics* 11)

Technics, willingly or not, exasperated the growth in which these secular religions developed as any form of organic or community connection existed between peoples, communities, and

cultures dissipated. The void for meaning needed to be filled, and these “religions” were readily available.

Ultimately, the relationship between Dewey and Niebuhr was simply a 20<sup>th</sup>-century reflection of a debate existing since America’s founding. Dewey’s philosophies were a continuation of Jeffersonian idealism, which was itself an Americanization of French Enlightenment thought, where democracy worked best when the people were educated, and at their most “rational.” Niebuhr, on the other hand, represented a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hamiltonian/Madisonian political philosophy, which was a continuation of Scottish/English Enlightenment thought, where the opinion of democracy was more reserved. It was better than tyranny, obviously, whether in the form of an absolute monarchy or 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarian regimes. However, Niebuhr, like Hamilton and Madison, felt that democracy was most useful because it pitted egoist human nature against itself to create relative justice and an uneasy peace. Human nature would never change, so why not make the best of it.

In spite of the subtle, yet profound differences in regard to democracy, both Dewey and Niebuhr felt it was still the best system available in an imperfect world. It certainly was better than “secular religions.” One such religion that both thinkers not only discussed, but were drawn to for a time, was to become the *de facto* worst secular religion of them all: Communism.<sup>42</sup> Though both thinkers toyed with Marxism, and understood the value of its basic ideologies, Dewey and Niebuhr ultimately felt, for various reasons that will be elucidated later as to why it was not appropriate for America. The popularity of Marxism prompted the two to write on it extensively. Therefore, this research will provide a brief reminder of Marx and his theories to facilitate an understanding the critiques levied against it by Dewey and Niebuhr. Additionally, it ties in with the overall theme of this research of treating political and historic events, in this case Marxism, from the perspective of both authors.

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<sup>42</sup> Author’s note: Communism refers to the idea of a classless and stateless society in which the people control the means of production. This is to be differentiated from Marxism, which is the political and economic philosophy of Karl Marx used to justify such a society. These are different still, than socialism/socialist which, for the purpose of this research, refers to a political party and type of government aimed at achieving Communism. Communist and Socialist were, and still are to a certain degree, used interchangeably to designate someone wishing to either control some (Socialist) or all (Communist) means of production within society.



### 3.3.0 The Inevitability of Class Warfare: Marx and Dialectical Materialism

There are few thinkers who have achieved an equal level of prominence and polemic as Karl Marx (1818-1883). Marx would revolutionize, both literally and figuratively, the world of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the pinnacles of Marxist thought was in the early twentieth century, following the Great Depression which should come as no surprise given the global collapse of modern capitalism. Citizens of the world were looking for answers, and more importantly, solutions to the economic woes they were encountering.

Marxism offered such explanations, and an ideal to strive for while conveniently providing a scapegoat to receive the wrath of the disenfranchised workers of the world. Marx's dialectical materialism, in which history was explained by a series of conflicts between social classes brought about through material needs, was a breaking point with traditional German Hegelian Idealism. Where Hegel sought to explain reality through ideation (i.e., reality was shaped by the ideas that formed it) Marx felt differently. He argued instead that ideas were important, but that order was reversed. Ideas reflected the material world, and therefore it was the physical that influenced the mental. Marx wished to explain the world through analysis of the constant conflict between two opposing sides (Dialectics) when compared with their physical influences (Materialism). According to Marx "Hegel fell into the error, therefore, of considering the real as the result of self-coordinating, self-absorbed, and spontaneously operating thought, while the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is but a way of thinking by which the concrete is grasped and is reproduced in our mind as concrete" (*German Ideology* 16).

Aside from the methodological or epistemological discrepancies he had with Hegel, Marx hoped to achieve a truly scientific analysis of humanity, and more importantly human history. He wanted to study the world as it actually was, not look at it through some idealized vision or hope. He even refuted any sort of ideological or religious doctrine, stating:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way. (*German Ideology* 36)

Marx found that all of the evils of the world resulted from one source: private property. Later on in his career he summarized the Communist ideology down to "a single sentence" which

represented the goal for all Communists: “abolition of private property” (*Communist Manifesto* 13). On account of private property, the conflict between classes was a constant and permanent fact of human history with the land-owning class exploiting the other.

Though property was the root of all evil for Marx and fellow communists, it still could not be a catch all human conflict. To fill in the philosophical gaps between ideology and reality, he looked throughout history to explain how the modern bourgeois capitalist society came to be. What he found was an exploitation of the proletariat classes by the bourgeoisie classes, or essentially, capitalists (those in power and controlling “capital”) over the working class. His analyses led him to discover that work was more important than many previous thinkers had believed. *Homo faber* was true, but what Marx highlighted was not only humanity’s ability to create and use tools, but how the creation of those tools, and in further analysis, the overall production of things in general, actually led to humanizing the individual. Work helped define and reshape a person, especially when that person was able to benefit from the work, or craft s/he was practicing.

By thus acting on the external world and changing it, [a person] at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. [...] At the end of every labour-process we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman’s will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be. (Marx, *Capital* 116)

The notion that any effort (work) put into a particular task, should benefit the person who actually toiled to accomplish it, is nothing new to the West, as the roots of this idea stem all the way back to John Locke and his defense of private or personal property in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Marx just took it a step further.

For him, work benefited a person when it was something s/he cared about or had an interest in doing. By working on something, a simultaneous evolution occurred. On the one hand, the commodity was being formed or shaped both mentally (idea) and physically (product) by the person. However, and this was where Marx's analysis demonstrated some of his brilliance, the object being worked upon had an *equal* influence on the artisan. Working on a particular project, provided it with a "purpose," thereby helping to define and shape that person. Clearly, the ideal worker according to Marx was an artisan or another specialist in a skill. Artisans practiced a craft in a field that was simultaneously productive for themselves and society.

This idealized vision of workers and craftsman came to an abrupt halt when those in power, the bourgeoisie, corrupted commodities with use-value and exchange-value. Although these two terms were linked Marx managed to separate the two. Use-value was based on a commodity's "utility," and was "limited" by its physical characteristics and on which its existence was dependent upon the commodity (Marx, *Capital* 13). Exchange-value on the other hand, was a "quantitative relation" based upon the need or demand for the given quantity. Otherwise put, use-value was potential profit found within an object, whereas exchange-value was the price. Price, for Marx, was "[...] the money-name of the labour realised in a commodity" (*Capital* 62). Put another way, the price was the monetary value of the time put into a particular commodity.

Problems arose when those in the higher echelons of society were able to produce wealth, or "capital" without investing the time into the commodity, or actually "working." In mercantile societies, or the "simplest form of circulation" of goods, the breakdown was "C-M-C" or taking a commodity (C), exchanging it for money (M), then turning that money into another commodity (C). Along with the "C-M-C" model, there was the concurrent "M-C-M" model in which money was exchanged for goods, and those goods resold for more money. This system, by itself seems without issue. However, Marx looked beyond the simple theory, to expose the actual corruption behind it. Essentially, the "M-C-M" model was nothing more than an "M-M" economic model, in which capital was exchanged for more capital. Marx argued that "[t]he result [of the "M-C-M" model], in which the phases of the process vanish, is the exchange of money for money [...]" (*Capital* 93).

According to Marx, the "M-C-M" economic model was the favored one for the bourgeoisie and industrial classes. Work was no longer valued as it was in the times of artisans and medieval commerce. The effects were that because of this depreciation, both normatively (workers were of a different, and lower class than capitalists), and in reality (they were working longer for a smaller sum of money), workers within industrialized societies were being exploited on a global scale.

The abuse of the workers was an important stage in Marx's Communist theory, as these injustices, would eventually result in a world revolution bringing about a pure Communist society. In this society, the means of production would belong to the masses. Marx saw history as a series of steps leading up to this eventual global revolution.

### 3.3.1 Back to "Class": Marxism 101

The economic model of 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial England was explained by Marx's eschatological understanding of history.<sup>43</sup> Marx explained that history was nothing more than separate classes fighting for control, until the point in which an event, or revolution, would occur thereby granting the lower class the ability to overthrow the higher one. Thus, the cycle was repeated until the next suppressed class did the same thing. Ultimately, this revolutionary cycle would eventually end and bring in Communism.

Marx broke down history into different stages in which dialectical forces were opposed, with the "oppressor" on one end and the "oppressed" on the other (*Communist Manifesto 2*). These stages, going from most ancient to contemporary, were tribal, primitive communism, feudal or estate property, capitalism, socialism, culminating in Communism (Felluga pars. 1-4). Each transition between different stages was the result of conflict and revolution (Marx, *Communist Manifesto 2*).

Modern capitalist systems would prove to be no exception as the growing inequalities between the classes would require some form of conflict. Discussing the transition from feudalism to the current bourgeois capitalism, Marx wrote:

The economic structure of capitalistic society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former. [...] Hence, the historical movements which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exist for our

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<sup>43</sup> There is some debate as to whether or not Marxism is itself eschatological. It depends on how Marxism is actually viewed and whether or not the reader believes Marx and Engels were able to ignore the Judeo-Christian culture around them. Marxist authors such as Roland Boer in his article "Marxism and Eschatology Reconsidered" argue the contrary, stating that Marxism is not eschatological and any argument stating otherwise misunderstands Marx and his philosophy. For the purpose of this research, it is the author's argument that Marxism is indeed an eschatological philosophy given that it provides a definitive end as well as destiny for humanity. This understanding is based upon a Niebuhrian analysis of Marxist thought which will be discussed later in this research.

bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire. (*Capital* 364)

The working class or proletariat, would be required to do the same thing. However, the difference was that with this particular revolution, humanity would transfer from one stage of history to another. Instead of going from feudalism to capitalism, society would transition to the penultimate stage of socialism before finally ending in a classless and private-property-less society: Communism.

Marx knew that the bourgeoisie classes would not so easily let go of their control, and would make sure to stack the cards against the workers. He explained this system through dialectics, positioning one group, in this case the base (infrastructure) against the superstructure. It is in this description that Marx explains how the bourgeoisie class was able to control everything through the means of production. In Marxist thought, true economic freedom was controlling one's own means of production, or in other words, controlling one's own body, and thereby work, to produce commodities that have value to not only society, but to the person as well. However, the bourgeoisie class made sure to prevent this from happening via their manipulation of historical dialectics.

At its very core, Marxist thought explains social relations and interactions through the apparatus of the state economy. Essentially, everything boils down to “the economic structure of society” (Marx, *Capital* 483). It is true that the base and superstructure are pitted against one another, with those within the superstructure oppressing the lower classes in order to protect their economic interests. Normally, this would result in massive resentment amongst the proletariat class thereby bringing about some form of rebellion or revolution. However, the cunning of bourgeoisie capitalism is that the base is simultaneously opposed to, but dependent on the superstructure.

Any values, judicial systems, politics, religion, or social conventions are nothing more than a modified expression of the superstructure's class interests. It is the economic structure that governed the rules of a society. Those within the superstructure would define social norms through control of the means of production thereby “[...] determin[ing] the character of the social, political, and intellectual life [...]” (Marx, *Capital* 484). Thus, even though the proletariat is against the bourgeoisie controlling the superstructure, it is unaware that this same superstructure is actually supporting the infrastructure which reinforces the economic and social

inequalities between the classes. Furthermore, the capitalistic bourgeoisie system ensures further enslavement of the proletariat through the “heavy artillery” of cheap commodities through which it could tear down any protesting society, or continue distracting the current one (Marx, *Manifesto* 5). Put simply, capitalists were able to flood the market with affordable goods thereby distracting the proletariat from realizing its weaker social position thus keeping them under the control of the bourgeoisie. The contradictions found in such a system, as well as the need to awaken the proletariat class, led Marx to publish probably one of the best known philosophical and political works of the modern age: *The Communist Manifesto*.

The *Manifesto* was a combination of political pamphleteering and philosophical discourse. Politically, it savagely attacked bourgeoisie capitalism for not only enforcing the inequalities between the classes, but for actually being the “worst” kind of inequality. For Marx, feudalism was better than bourgeoisie capitalism for it maintained “patriarchal” and “idyllic relations.” Yes, there was inequality between the aristocracy and the peasantry, but this was a “natural” inequality that required some form of benevolence on behalf of the aristocracy. This “benevolence” was expressed when the lords had to protect the lower echelons of society, or by actually providing for them in terms of food. Demonic bourgeoisie capitalism “pitilessly tor[e] asunder” these links (*Manifesto* 3).

Marx also made sure to demonstrate how bourgeoisie capitalism was starkly different than other stages in human history. Comparing the plight of the common worker to slaves, or serfs, Marx wrote:

The modern laborer [...] instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society.

Bourgeoisie capitalism was actually worse than slavery, according to Marx, because it could not guarantee nor provide the basic necessities of human life. Though evil, Marx contended that

at the very least, the slaver had to worry about the health of his slaves. The modern economic system provided no such guarantee.

Going beyond the political pamphleteering, Marx expressed the authenticity of his arguments by using the social sciences to justify his findings. He argued:

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, form a historical movement going on under our very eyes. (*Manifesto* 13)

Marx had no need to call upon a higher authority, or ideological metaphysics to justify the need for revolution. The “facts” in terms of actual events were speaking for themselves.

The path to Communism meant that the proletariat had to demonstrate its “political supremacy” in order to take “all capital from the bourgeoisie,” thereby placing the means of production and State power in the hands of the proletariat (*Manifesto* 18). The people controlling the means of production would then remove the bourgeoisie from power. Still, this would not ensure a smooth transition to Communism. There was the required “dictatorship of the proletariat,” mentioned in Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850*, which would guarantee the transition from socialism to Communism. Yet, what was never clear was how long such a dictatorship would need to last. Furthermore, there is still debate today over Marx’s intention and use of the word “dictatorship.”<sup>44</sup>

What was clear for Marx, was the need for the utopian and idealist eschatology guaranteed by a classless society. Following Marxist thought to its end, and assuming everything followed Marx’s dialectal materialism as indicated, the State would disappear. Political power, Marx wrote was “[...] merely the organised power of one class for [sic] oppressing another” (*Manifesto* 19). Once a classless society is achieved, the need for political power, and therefore the State vanishes. Communism would ensure that “[...] the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (*Manifesto* 19).

Given its rich intellectual development, and keen insight, it should come to no surprise as to how Marxism became “[a] spectre” which was “haunting Europe” (Marx, *Manifesto* 1). Intellectuals and workers alike were swept up in the fervor of a classless society in which social

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<sup>44</sup> See Draper, Hal. “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’: From Marx to Lenin*. Monthly Review Press, 1987.

and economic justice were not phantom words used by the superstructure to oppress the infrastructure. Instead, Marxism offered a new explanation on century-old problems: inequality and class warfare. Even though the “spectre” haunted Europe more than America, Marxism still resonated with many Americans, specifically during the economic disaster of the Great Depression. From an intellectual point of view, Dewey and Niebuhr found Marx’s insights to be invigorating, providing a fresh look at the serious inequalities within American society. Both authors attempted, at one point or another in their intellectual careers, if not to fully incorporate, at least to address the arguments put forward by Marxism. Niebuhr was the more affected thinker, given his genuine attempts to include Marxist theory into his own during the early 1930s. Nevertheless, both Dewey and Niebuhr, in spite of their flirtations, would ultimately reject Marxism, in part due to its treatment of individual liberty, and primarily because it promised the very thing both authors were profoundly against: man-made eschatology.

### **3.3.2 Socialism versus State-Enforced Socialism: Dewey’s Relationship with Marxism**

Dewey had an interesting relationship with Marxism in general in that he seemed to contradict himself regarding his opinions on the class-based philosophy. This confusion can be alleviated to the various terminologies used. For example:

Because Dewey was so much encouraged in his anticommunism by Sidney Hook, it is easy to get the impression from Hook’s autobiography and his many books and essays on Dewey that anticommunism was the central political passion of Dewey’s life in the 1930s and 1940s. It was nothing of the sort. In the 1940s Dewey became more aggressively hostile to Stalinism and the Soviet Union, but this was a wholly understandable reaction to the starry-eyed view of Russia that many people took during the Second World War. (Ryan 297)

Thus, Marxism and socialism could contain some interesting and useful ideas, but Communism and worse, Stalinism, were totalitarian perversions of the formers’ ideas.

This meant that although never fully behind state-sponsored Marxism as in the USSR, Dewey was considered to be “sympathetic” to socialism in general (Westbrook 248). This ambivalence meant that Dewey never provided a clear-cut answer to whether or not he considered himself to be a socialist, that was, until Jim Cork asked him to clarify his stance. Dewey stated that no “[...] existing brand of socialism has worked out an adequate answer to



the question of *how* industry and finance can progressively be conducted in the widest possible human interests and not for the benefit of one class.” He did finally concede saying that he “[...] can be classified as a democratic socialist. If [he] were permitted to define ‘socialism’ and ‘socialist’ [he] would so classify myself today” (qtd. in Westbrook 429).

The benefits that Dewey saw in socialism did not stem from the rigid hierarchy and state-planning of society and the economy. Instead, Dewey saw a valid criticism of the current economic system which clearly was not only unjust, but actually a threat to democracy. Though Dewey classified himself as a “democratic socialist,” authors looking at Dewey from a more radical point of view, such as Westbrook, would instead argue that he was a “socialist democrat” for “[...] socialism was a proximate end to which he became committed in his search for means to the more inclusive end of ‘democracy as a way of life’” (430). Socialism was a step in the right direction, just not the final destination. The final goal in Deweyan thought was the creation of a “democratic culture.” Indeed, socialism added a different perspective, one that focused on the economic inequalities of the day, but it either ignored, or worse, supplanted political liberties in its search for economic justice.

Thus, in 1935 Dewey released *Liberalism and Social Action*, a work which, according to Sydney Hook was “[...] to the twentieth century what Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* was to the nineteenth century” (Hook 158). Floating between pillars, liberalism had become a “refuge” for those unwilling to engage in any form of political debate (Dewey, *Liberalism* 60). Dewey agreed with Marxist critics that America’s democratic roots lay in bourgeois capitalism but this did not mean that Dewey felt the intrinsic values of liberalism, like “[...] liberty, individuality, and the freedom of inquiry, discussion and expression” were inherently bad (Westbrook 430). As mentioned previously, the solution to fixing liberalism was to return to its source: to overthrow and bypass the corruption that 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberals did to the philosophy. The issue, and this is where Dewey and socialists found some point of convergence, was redefining, and reintegrating the notion of power and liberty. In his essay “Liberty and Social Control” (1935), Dewey declared that liberty was power. He highlighted the paradox that liberty was once used as an emancipatory idea against oppression, but during the economic crises of the 1930s, it was instead being used as defense of the status quo. He wrote:

Every effort at planned control of economic forces is resisted and attacked, by a certain group, in the name of liberty. The slightest observation shows that this group is made up of those who are interested, from causes that are evident, in the preservation of the economic status quo; that is to say, in the maintenance of the customary privileges and legal rights they already possess. When we look at

history in the large we find that the demand for liberty and efforts to achieve it have come from those who wanted to *alter* the institutional set-up. (The *Later Works* 360)

Because liberty meant power, whether it was political or economic, any form of financial suppression was also a form of depriving a person of his/her liberty. In sum, political liberty meant nothing unless economic liberty was guaranteed too as it was only with both that a person could be truly free.

Skeptical that rigid economic state-planning could provide the necessary cures needed to fix democracy, for it risked suppressing the individual for the sake of the whole, Dewey instead continued to profess his consistent democratic theory in which the “egalitarian distribution of knowledge” was what would fix inequalities (Westbrook 436). The system was indeed broken, keeping the average citizen down and deprived of his/her rights. Only a “radical change” in education could bring about such changes, and believing always in the capacities of citizens, he heavily criticized the current capitalist society (Westbrook 437). Dewey explained:

The indictments that are drawn against the intelligence of individuals are in truth indictments of a social order that does not permit the average individual to have access to the rich store of the accumulated wealth of mankind in knowledge, ideas, and purposes. There does not now exist the kind of social organization that even permits the average human being to share the potentially available social intelligence. Still less is there a social order that has for one of its chief purposes the establishment of conditions that will move the mass of individuals to appropriate and use what is at hand. Back of the appropriation by the few of the material resources of society lies the appropriation by the few in behalf of their own ends of the cultural, the spiritual, resources that are the production of the individuals who have taken possession but of the cooperative work of humanity. It is useless to talk about the failure of democracy until the source of its failure has been grasped and steps are taken to bring about that type of social organization that will encourage the socialized extension of intelligence. (*Liberalism* 125-126)

Dewey agreed that the system was stacked unfairly against the average citizen. His solution was not the radical transformation of its economy, rather a drastic change to the distribution of social intelligence and knowledge.

Based on Dewey's sharp criticism of the then-current economic system, he should have been a prime candidate for Marxism and its theories. However, even with the strong socialist bent found in his politics and philosophies throughout the 1930s, the rise of the USSR and the "specter of bureaucratic collectivism" forced Dewey to redefine his terminology (Westbrook 452). He instead focused more on a collective movement that still placed democratic control over the State. He clarified:

I should want to see politics used to forward the formation of a genuinely cooperative society [...] where workers are in control of industry and finance as directly as possible through the economic organization of society itself rather than through any superimposed state socialism, and where work ensures not only security, leisure, and opportunity for cultural development but also such a share in control as will contribute directly to intellectual and moral realization of personality. (qtd. in Westbrook 452-453)

Workers should be able to organize, and fight for their collective rights. But these rights should not be under the auspices of the State. Furthermore, the collective activity of different groups should not just lead to economic ends of having more material gains, but should equally participate in the cultural and educational amelioration of society.

As it became clear that State-sponsored socialism was no better than capitalism, Dewey found himself in between two ideological pillars, and trying to find, in a truly pragmatic approach, a middle ground approach that balanced the validity of both. He felt that "there was a socialism that was not state socialism" (Westbrook 464). The issue was finding what that actually meant.

One of the first things that Dewey noted was a seemingly apparent truism that "[...] democratic conditions automatically maintain themselves, or that they can be identified with fulfillment of prescriptions laid down in a constitution" (*Freedom* 33). Democracy was something that constantly had to be protected, safe-guarded, and defended. Threats were not always external, and as the roaring twenties and disastrous thirties demonstrated, economic inequalities were just as dangerous to democratic culture as foreign enemies.

One thing was certain for Dewey however: Marxism was not the answer. Even if some of his disciples became stout Marxists, such as Sydney Hook who pursued Marxist thought with the benediction of Dewey himself, Dewey nevertheless felt that whatever the tone, "[...] communism posed at least as great a threat to democratic values as did corporate liberalism" (Westbrook 465-468). Dewey, along with other leading intellectuals of his day such as Bertrand

Russel, actually responded to the call and defended their points of view. Thus, Dewey explained “why [he was] not a Communist” (1924).

Dewey criticized Communism for multiple reasons, the first being the “[...] almost entire neglect of the specific historical backgrounds and traditions which have operated to shape the patterns of thought and action in America” (Dewey, “Why” 81). This criticism is probably the easiest to understand as it highlights one of Dewey’s most basic tenets in Pragmatism: historic and cultural relativism. He charged that Communists attempting to install Soviet-style socialism in the United States were doomed from the start as they tried incorporating, and more importantly imposing a non-Western and completely new ideology onto a country and people that shared nothing with the original culture. The major problem was with trying to impose a dogmatic ideology. “Communism,” he wrote “has made the practical traits of the dictatorship *of* the proletariat and *over* the proletariat, the suppression of the civil liberties of all non-proletarian elements as well as of dissenting proletarian minorities, integral parts of the standard Communist faith and dogma” (“Why” 81). Equally problematic for Dewey in regard to Communism was its deterministic ideology. Within Marxism, and consequently Communism, History<sup>45</sup> was predetermined and fixed. Marxism believed in an eschatology in which the State and classes would disappear. As a pragmatist, Dewey had to inherently reject such a notion for it went against the understanding that there was never an “end,” rather constant and ever-changing improvements to society. Another point was that according to classic Marxist theory, societies were to develop towards Communism in a specific and structured order within history. This was all well and good, except for the problem that: 1) the United States never fit into such a specific formula. Dewey remarked that the “[...] United States have no background of a dominant and overshadowing feudalism” (“Why” 82). Feudalism, was a necessary step on the road to Communism, one the United States never experienced.<sup>46</sup> 2) The United States, the country of ultra-economic liberalism and center of the Great Depression thus making it the idealized location for Communism to take hold, never succumbed to its thralls. These shortcomings proved that Communism’s determinism was not as evident as Marx claimed.

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<sup>45</sup> History is capitalized here to demonstrate the living-essence of it and thus its impact on humanity.

<sup>46</sup> Marxist critics would probably point out that institutional slavery would “count” as America’s feudal phase, however, this implies that slavery was indeed nation-wide, which it was not. It was more of a regionalized institution that the nation had to support for economic and political reasons up until the Civil War. Also, as Louis Hartz pointed out, the feudalism in the Antebellum South was a pale copy of European feudalism. The Slave Society structure of the South punished not only slaves, but non-land holding whites as well. This is a subtle but important difference for these white land owners were still *politically* equal to their land-holding brethren, even if they were not economically so.

One of his final criticisms, along with the fatalistic approach within Marxism that class warfare was “destined,” was displayed in “Why I am Not a Communist.” This reproach was in regard to the dogmatic and deterministic tone in Marxism. He lamented:

It is not irrelevant to add that one of the reasons I am not a Communist is that the emotional tone and methods of dispute which seem to accompany Communism at present are extremely repugnant to me. Fair play, elementary honest in the representation of facts and especially of the opinions of others, are something more than ‘bourgeois virtues.’ They are traits that have been won only after long struggle. They are not deep-seated in human nature even now- witness the methods that brought Hitlerism to power. The systematic, persistent, and seemingly intentional disregard of these things by Communist spokesmen in their speech and press, the hysteria of their denunciations, their attempts at character assassination of their opponents, their misrepresentation of the views of the ‘liberals’ to whom they also appeal for aid in their defense campaigns, their policy of ‘rule or ruin’ in their so-called united front activities, their apparent conviction that what they take to be the end justifies the use of *any* means if only those means promise to be successful – all these, in my judgment, are fatal to the very end which official Communists profess to have at heart. (83)

The ends, according to Dewey, were justified by means, provided they passed an interdependence test. The idea that class warfare was “destined” to happen was unacceptable for Dewey. Marxist determinism claimed that the only “means’ justifiable was reduced to one particular method: the inevitability of violent conflict between the classes. Overall, “Dewey thought [...] that Communists held a simpleminded, monistic theory of history and had altogether too little sense of the specific and local features of the society [...]” (Ryan 301).

In a response to Leon Trotsky’s “Their Morals and Ours” (1938), Dewey analyzed, and ultimately attacked Trotsky, and thus Marxist doctrine on the inevitability of class warfare. Though Dewey agreed with Trotsky on some points, specifically the absurdity of “absolutist and supernatural ethics” (Westbrook 471) or that “[...] the end in the sense of consequences provides the only basis for moral ideas and action, and therefore provides the only justification that can be found for means employed” (Dewey, *Political Writings* 230), Dewey ended up using Trotsky’s own arguments and analyses against him to highlight the logical fallacies found within Marxism.

### 3.3.2.1 Science in Name Only: Dewey's Absolutist Critique of Marxism

Similar to his earlier critiques of Marxism's alleged positivist nature, Dewey argued that Marxism's focus on only one means (that of revolution negated any legitimacy to its claims of being neutral, or in fact, scientific at all) for "[...] the real question [was] not one of personal belief but of the objective grounds upon which it is held" (Dewey, *Political Writings* 231). Trotsky's decisive error, according to Dewey was making the "means" of arrival to the Communist ideal solely dependent upon class struggle. Contrary to Pragmatism, in which interdependence between methods and results was paramount, Marxism removed such a factor:

Since the class struggle is regarded as the *only* means that will reach the end, and since the view that it is the only means is reached deductively and not by inductive examination of the means-consequences in their interdependence, the means, the class struggle, does not need to be critically examined with respect to its actual objective consequences. It is automatically absolved from all need for critical examination. (Dewey, *Political Writings* 232)

Though Pragmatism shared similar beliefs when it came to means and ends, specifically the attitude that all means can be considered, it still felt that important critical cross-analysis was needed. This required any immediate consequences of those chosen methods to be considered in order to ensure that the road traveled was not actually worse than the situation before. In other words, a true pragmatist would reject any policy justifying any sort of *gulag* or concentration camp regardless of the inequalities within a given society for the consequences of such extreme measures would end up being worse than the situation that preceded it.

Aside from highlighting the importance of culture to freedom and the fact that culture "[...] pointed to human experience as an ongoing series of interactions between individual human nature and the social environment," Dewey also emphasized how culture was anti-Marxian at its core (Westbrook 472). He criticized Marxism for "[...] the type of social theory which reduces the human factor as nearly as possible to zero; since it explains events and frames policies exclusively in terms of conditions provided by the environment" (*Freedom* 63). One of the problems found within Marxism was its removal of the human element from the environment. This vision of the world was extremely anti-pragmatic for it not only ignored, but rejected the notion that humanity could itself have any direct influence or say over its environment, and to a greater extent, history.

Apart from this over-emphasis on the importance of the environment, Dewey charged Marxists with the ultimate pragmatist reproach: absolutism. He argued:

For its adherents [Marxists], by reason of the very nature of the theory, readily become so absolutistic in their attitude that they can see only a display of class-bias, unconscious or deliberate, in any criticism of their theory – an attitude now summed up in calling any opposition pro-Fascist. (*Freedom* 63)

Absolutism was by no means a new assessment of Marxist thought. Those against it argued that because history, and thus human development, was explained solely through the class struggle, any other form of explanation was rejected. Hence, because everything was a question of dialectal materialism, nothing was actually clarified. For, as demonstrated earlier, once a philosophy or approach attempts to explain human nature or phenomena with a singular cause, it signifies that nothing has actually been elucidated.

Dewey was careful though not to completely dismiss all of Marxism's philosophical groundwork as he did recognize and offered Marxism "a way out" of its dated epistemological vision. Marx acknowledged that the "non-economic" superstructure influenced the base (infrastructure), which left room for a more complex analysis and understanding of social and economic relations than perhaps Marx himself would have admitted. Dewey was very much in favor of this type of "sophisticated Marxism," for it blended nicely with his own pragmatic vision of the world (Westbrook 473). It did so because it acknowledged the very real and consequential economic inequalities that existed in the world; a problem which Dewey felt socialism and more importantly, democratic culture could rectify. Additionally, the complex relations between super and infrastructure reduced the determinism found within "extremist" Marxists.

The problem however, was that there were very few Marxists who were "intelligent" enough to understand this. Most Marxists tended to view their politico-economic theory as absolute. Though critical of the idealism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marxists seemed to replace one type of "romantic absolutism" with another which was "more in harmony" with the values of its time: "science and scientific law" (Dewey, *Freedom* 66). For Dewey, the scientific pretention of Marxism was "dated." Dewey accused Marxism of approaching a modern issue from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century point of view:

For just as *necessity* and search for a *single* all-comprehensive law was typical of their intellectual atmosphere of the forties of the last century, so *probability*

and *pluralism* are the characteristics of the present state of science. That the older interpretation of the idea of causal necessity has undergone a shock does not need to be told to those acquainted with recent developments. [...] There is a worldwide difference between the idea that causal sequences will be found in any given set of events taken for investigation, and the idea that *all* sets of events are linked together into a *single* whole by *one* causal law.<sup>47</sup> (*Freedom* 69)

Marxists were claiming to be a rational and objective analysis of human development and society, but Dewey maintained that they were going about it the wrong way. Proponents of Marxism were attempting to study a valid problem, but with the wrong tools and understanding. Science was no longer looking for the secret forces behind the veil; the *ether* of the world. Instead, science was looking for “[...] a more modest quest for non-metaphysical empirical generalizations that could make sense of observed relationships between events” (Westbrook 473).

Dewey did not fault Marx for his overall generalization that there was a problem within the bourgeois capitalist economy, in actuality, Dewey agreed with him on that point. Nonetheless, he could not tolerate the presumptive scientific nature of Marxism. It was in fact, nothing more than “metaphysical mumbo-jumbo” (Westbrook 473). Dewey wrote:

The criticism made is not directed then to any generalization made by Marx on the basis of observation of actual conditions. On the contrary, the implication of the criticism is the necessity for *continued* observation of actual conditions, with testing and revision of all earlier generalization on the basis of what is now observed. The inherent theoretical weakness of Marxism is that it supposed a generalization that was made at a particular date and place (and made even then only by bringing observed facts under a premise drawn from a metaphysical source) can obviate the need for continued resort to observation, and to continual revision of generalizations in their office of working hypotheses. In the name of science, a thoroughly anti-scientific procedure was formulated, in accord with which a generalization is made having the nature of ultimate ‘truth,’ and hence holding good at all times and places. (*Freedom* 71)

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<sup>47</sup> Italics are Dewey’s emphasis.



Dewey underscored Marxism's philosophical fallacies regarding dialectical materialism into two points: 1) Marxism claims to be a tell-all and know-all of human development. 2) Its findings and understandings were nothing more than rehashed metaphysical discourses dressed in the language of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century world.<sup>48</sup> Both of these problems boiled down to Dewey's most controversial reproach which was simply that Marxism was not scientific. He clarified this statement in *Freedom and Culture*: "It is ironical that the theory which has made the most display and the greatest pretense of having a scientific foundation should be the one which has violated most systematically every principle of scientific method" (81).

From a political perspective, Marxism's "scientific" approach simply demonstrated why democracies were "better" than other regimes and merited being defended. Whereas "extremist" Marxists refused to acknowledge any different perspective in their world-view, democracies welcomed other viewpoints and "diversity of opinion" (Dewey, *Freedom* 81). Furthermore, Marxism seemed to offer Dewey the converse problem that liberal democracies were facing. Where rampant and unbridled individualism pushed liberal democracies towards the economic inequalities that caused the problems of the 1930s, Marxism was forgetting the individual for sake of the whole. In place of "political collectivism," Marxism offered "economic collectivism." Dewey's argument was that because "political collectivism" was being ignored more and more by the wealthy and bourgeois capitalists, there was a genuine change in direction where these collectivities would move "in the direction of state socialism" in order to exercise political control (*Political Writings* 236).

Trying to take some control over the means of production was not inherently a problem for Dewey, and he even understood the desire to do so. Still, he feared that drastic and massive turns towards State-sponsored socialism created more problems and greater inequalities than already existed. Rather than swinging to the other side of the pendulum, Dewey instead argued that a more balanced approach between political and economic collectivism was required. There were two political ways to ensure that falling into the absolutism of one end or the other would be avoided: 1) ensuring a culture where political collectivism could guarantee liberties such as "free speech, free publication, intercommunication, and free assemblage," all of which were factors necessary to not only a democratic system of government, but a democratic society as well. 2) The State had to have a more active role in society, not in the sense of state-run economies, but in a more positive sense to "encourage and promote" the needed "growth of a great variety of cooperative undertakings" (Dewey, *Political Writings* 236). Dewey was not

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<sup>48</sup> This is an ironic charge that Dewey made against Marxism, for Niebuhr accused Dewey of doing something similar by dressing his naturalism with 20<sup>th</sup>-century pragmatic vocabulary.

against socialism *per se*, he instead chose to make the distinction between one which could be beneficial to the American way of life, but only if it were applied correctly. Thus, Dewey promoted a socialism which “was not state socialism” and which would be more in-line with the democratic-socialist European government model, in which certain positive liberties, like healthcare or different social protections, were guaranteed by the State (*Political Writings* 237).

Part of Dewey’s distrust regarding state-sponsored socialism was coming from Stalinist Russia and the abuses Dewey saw Stalin commit against his people. At one time, he even considered the USSR to be a potential framework for a society in which the “economic security” and “participatory democracy” could flourish. He wrote:

If I venture in the direction of a prediction, it is only by way of calling attention to two movements already going on. The factor of greatest importance seems to me to be the growth of voluntary cooperative groups. In the orthodox theory, these form a transition stage on the road to the predestined end of Marxian Communism [...] Side by side with this factor, though of less immediate practical force, I should place the experimental aspect of the educational system. There is, of course, an immense amount of indoctrination and propaganda in the schools. But if the existing tendency develops, it seems fairly safe to predict that in the end this indoctrination will be subordinate to the awakening of initiative and power of independent judgement, while cooperative mentality will be evolved. (qtd. in Westbrook 478)

Dewey’s optimism was unexpected, and a little naïve considering that the very nature of indoctrination and propaganda was to prevent independent thought. It was not clear in Dewey’s thought processes how the students in this radical educational model would rise up and throw off the chains of ideological indoctrination.

Still, Dewey’s optimism regarding the possibility of a participatory democracy arriving in the USSR was short lived. One example demonstrating the burst in Dewey’s proverbial optimistic bubble was the Moscow Trials in which Trotsky was charged with committing crimes against the USSR, and consequently Communism itself. Dewey decided to interact and be a part of the historic trials. In spite of his anti-Marxist philosophies, Dewey felt it was important to defend Trotsky for the sake of the truth. Though Trotsky was “wrong” in many ways according to Dewey, especially when it came to epistemology and general world vision, it was ludicrous to believe that he was a traitor to the Soviet cause.

The Commission (1937), later known as the Dewey Commission, housed many radicals and American liberals including George Novak. Novak was no friend of Dewey's, and as a matter of fact, later on in his career, published *Pragmatism versus Marxism* (1975), which provided a Marxist critique of Pragmatism. According to Novak, Pragmatism was expected to be "America's philosophy" for it was just a continuation of bourgeois democratic thought. Similar to Mounce, Novak assumed that America had three philosophical traditions, culminating in the pragmatic school, specifically "Dewey's instrumentalism" which "[...] arose as the philosophical rationale for middle-class liberalism at the turn of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century" (Novak 15). However, Novak made a unique distinction by pointing out the hypocrisy of those who would claim Dewey as a radical. Pragmatism was nothing more than a metaphorical bandage on a broken system, meant to ease the worries of those genuine radicals concerned with class struggle by providing empty platitudes which offered "broad solutions" without action (Novak 45). Novak maintained:

In his criticism of the bourgeois-democratic outlook on life, Dewey did not probe very deep below the surface or go far beyond his predecessors. Accepting the basic views and values of the petty-bourgeois schools that had gone before him, he readjusted them to cope with the new conditions and problems confronting the American middle class in the first half of the twentieth century. (44)

Though this critique was written after the Dewey Commission, Novak must have been suspicious of Dewey actually being the chair of the committee given his relatively weak, if not hypocritical, radical notions.

Dewey was not alone in being anti-Stalinist but "pro"-Trotsky for there were other prominent names such as Sidney Hook and Reinhold Niebuhr who were equally part of the commission. Still, with such lofty names, Dewey was aware that the commission would be seen as little more than a "Trotskyist front" whose aim was to promote "Trotsky's political aims" instead of dealing with any actual "charges." These fears however had to be ignored, because defending Trotsky would actually prove the scientific nature of Dewey's philosophies, while simultaneously disproving the methods of "scientific socialism" which Stalin and Trotsky held so dear (Westbrook 480).

In the end, Dewey's scientific nature and astuteness led the Commission to decide that Trotsky was innocent of the charges levied against him. Yet, Dewey took advantage of the trial to demonstrate the severe philosophical and moral issues that could be found within revolutionary Marxism. As highlighted, Dewey agreed with the Marxist point regarding the

problem between classes. However, Dewey demonstrated that the violent nature of Stalin's regime would only beget more violence. Democratic societies were better because of their pluralism which provided a variety of sources and ideas that were openly discussed. In democracies, progress was a slow process, but one that usually brought about peaceful change to society. Consequently, and as seen in *Freedom and Culture*, this meant that the relationship between means and ends had to be developed and analyzed before making a specific decision. Achieving a desired goal was a noble cause, but if the ends resulted in worse situation than before, those means had to be reevaluated. Failure to take into account the interdependence between ends and means ultimately signified that the methods and arguments used between Stalinist Russia and Hitlerian Germany were more similar than Marxists cared to admit. Dewey underlined this feeling when he paraphrased Shakespeare: "The essence of fascism is no sweeter if called by some other name" (qtd. in Westbrook 481).

Dewey continued these philosophical attacks on Stalinist Russia through the creation of the Committee for Cultural Freedom in 1939. Here, he blatantly compared fascist and totalitarian states, arguing that they were one and the same. He surmised:

The tide of totalitarianism is rising throughout the world. It is washing away cultural and creative freedom along with all other expressions of independent human reason. [...] Under varying labels and colors but with an unvarying hatred for the free mind, the totalitarian idea is already enthroned in Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan, and Spain. There intellectual and creative independence is suppressed and punished as a form of treason. Art, science, and education have been forcibly turned into lackeys for a supreme state, a deified leader, and an official pseudo-philosophy. (qtd. in Westbrook 484)

For Dewey, Stalinist Russia was just as bad as Nazi Germany for both regimes stifled one of the very foundations of democracy: freedom of expression. By forbidding any form of artistic or cultural expression, including the freedom of scientific inquiry, democratic culture was muted.

Of course Dewey's criticisms were not well received by the American radical left, and many of the arguments made against him, including that he was simply a "mouthpiece" for the American capitalist system, were expected and rehashed by Novak in the 1970s. However, what Dewey did lament was the radical left's attacks against what he considered a needed element of "free inquiry" within democracies (Westbrook 482). Democracies should encourage open debate and scientific discussion. The fact that one party does not agree with another should not

be a deterrent for carrying out the study. Similarly, if the findings of an objective inquiry were contrary to popular belief, then a truly democratic and more importantly, scientific culture, would embrace these findings and adapt accordingly. The radicals' resentment towards Dewey's comments further proved how Marxism was more an absolutist ideology than an actual scientific theory.

What made matters more complicated was the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression pact which many radicals found difficult to defend. Prior to the agreement, many American radicals felt that Communism was still a stalwart against fascism. However, with the treaty's signature, such arguments were difficult to believe. Still, many radicals and liberals continued to support the pact, believing that perhaps the Communists would somehow change Hitler's mind. What was certain though, was that Dewey could no longer be the head of a commission which had so many members with such disheartening beliefs. The Communists had "discredited" themselves, and were now open to attack from all sides. The ultimate irony of it all for Dewey was that by having political and social forces uniting against Communism, the zeal to chase it underground would result in the employment of some of the very undemocratic and almost fascist methods anti-Communists were decrying. The danger was that the "[...] anticommunist campaign, like that against fascism, would enlist allies who threatened not only communism but also democracy (Westbrook 486). The democratic spirit of free-inquiry and scientific debate disappeared, and was replaced with absolutist convictions coming from all sides.

While the scientific spirit and pursuit of free inquiry were key to saving democracy for Dewey, Niebuhr felt that other tools were needed in order for the bastions of liberal democracies to stand up to the threat of Marxism. The overall disillusionment with the philosophy as well as the quasi-religious nature of Marxism, eventually turned Niebuhr away from his radical tendencies of the 1930s. Instead, and like Dewey, he saw an equal threat in Communism as he did with totalitarianism. Not only was Marxism a threat to democracy, Niebuhr maintained it was also a threat to human individuality; the ultimate gift from God.

### **3.3.3 Protecting the "Little Guy": Don't Hate the Philosophy, Hate the Extremists**

As previously discussed, Niebuhr turned heavily towards Marxism in the early part of the 1930s, publishing several works with Marxist hues, including *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, "After Capitalism-What?", *Moral Man and Immoral Society* or even *Reflections on the End of an Era* which Niebuhr himself considered to be his "most Marxist work" (qtd. in McCann 141). However, his Marxist-leanings would go under some critical evaluations and changes. He would eventually drop any and all defense of Communism while maintaining certain Marxist

appreciations, especially when concerned with attitudes of social justice. For Niebuhr, “[d]ealing with the problem of social justice, it may be found that the relation of economic classes within a state is more important than international relations” (*Moral Man* 83). When social justice was his primary concern and Marxism provided a unique perspective in at least addressing the issue. Achieving this justice required a simultaneous radical political devotion combined with a conservative religious approach (McCann 141). The paradox was not lost on Niebuhr as he admitted in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934) that this methodology would “[...] satisfy neither the liberals in politics and religion, nor the devotees of traditional Christianity” and that “[t]hese reflections are therefore presented without much hope that they will elicit any general concurrence” (qtd. in McCann 141-142).

Still, it was Niebuhr’s hope that by tackling social injustices through these dichotomous foundations, some form of economic justice could prevail. In contrast to Dewey, Niebuhr appreciated the “realism” of Marxist thought, specifically its ability to determine economic injustice through the dueling class structure. As much as he may have appreciated Marxian thought, he nevertheless rejected Marxists’ “utopianism” (McCann 144). Niebuhr further denounced it, referring to it instead as idealism, especially when discussing socialists. He completely acknowledged that the current economic system was “chiefly the result of modern capitalism and industrialism” (*Moral Man* 142). Furthermore, Niebuhr slightly defended the scientific nature of Marxism. In a potential slight against Dewey and similar anti-Marxist critics, Niebuhr wrote:

Critics may contend that Marxism is not so much the natural political philosophy of proletarians, as it is a disease with which they have become infected. They may claim, for instance, that the idea of the class struggle is a dogma which creates, rather than is created by, the conflict experience of the worker. While such criticisms may have a measure of validity, or at least of plausibility, it is a fact that Marxian socialism is a true enough interpretation of what the industrial worker feels about society and history, to have become the accepted social and political philosophy of all self-conscious and politically intelligent industrial workers. (*Moral Man* 142-144)

He was also aware of the “moral cynicism” found within Marxism, for it assumed in no uncertain terms that the Revolution to bring about Communism had to be a violent one.

Of course, some Niebuhrians such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. actually charged that part of Marxism’s appeal to Niebuhr was in fact its negative eschatology, where violence was the

ultimate end. Marxism best represented human nature in terms of political theories, as it recognized the inherent struggle between individuals and societies. More to the point, Marxism acknowledged that when put together in communities, or in Marxian terms, classes, conflict was bound to occur. Summarizing Marxism's appeal to Niebuhr, Schlesinger wrote:

The appeal of Marxism to Niebuhr was a measure of his recoil from the optimism and moralism of Christian liberalism. One great attraction of the Marxist analysis was evidently its catastrophism. Rebounding from the liberal belief in the inevitability of progress, Niebuhr was all too susceptible to an equally extreme belief in the inevitability of catastrophe. The recurrence of the 'end of an era' formula in his writings of the thirties suggest his shocked fascination with the possibility of some basic turn, some drastic judgement in history. He found the Marxist appreciation of the 'fact of judgment and catastrophe in history [...] closer to the genius of Hebrew prophecy than liberalism, either secular or religious'; the notion that unjust civilizations would destroy themselves seemed only a secularized version of the prophecies of doom in which the Old Testament abounded. ("Role" 138)

Marxism reminded Niebuhr of Old Testament prophets for whom through humanity's pride brought about its own destruction. Following the failed promises of the 1920s, and the Great Depression, it seemed that a proletariat revolution was the only logical procession in historic events.

Writers like McCann argued that Marxism may have played a larger role than many believe in Niebuhr's general theological analysis of the relationship between love and justice. McCann broke down Niebuhr's Marxist understanding in two ways:

The first is that the Marxist suspicion of all moral idealisms helped to focus Niebuhr's attention upon the impossibility of sustaining an actual relationship of mutual love on the basis of a formal ideal of mutuality. Unlike the Marxist, who defers the possibility of mutuality until after the revolution, Niebuhr reaffirms mutuality as a possibility here and now insofar as it is qualified concretely by sacrificial love. The second point concerns the Marxist critique of formal structures of justice, such as the ideal of democracy. Niebuhr concedes that formal democracy is no substitute for substantive justice. (152)

What McCann insinuated about Niebuhr's theology was related to the critique of Marxism's incapability of grasping the totality of human nature. For the Marxist, the only time where humanity could come together in any form of mutual respect, here to mean justice, was after the revolution. Any time prior simply meant that the relationships of mutuality were illusory and ploys used by the superstructure to maintain its domination over the infrastructure. Niebuhr's Christian theology instead allowed for some form of genuine cooperation between groups and classes to exist prior to the eschatological revolution.

The second point, which was one of the biggest influences that Marxism had on Niebuhr, and perhaps was one of its most problematic. Niebuhr felt that Marxists were correct in attacking liberal democracy's empty institutions and "formal structures of justice." However, where Niebuhr differed, both from Marxists and in a certain way from Dewey, was how he approached these institutions. As a reminder of Dewey's view, democracy was more than the sum of its parts, it was a culture to be developed. Conversely, Marxists considered democracy to be a tool for the bourgeoisie to dominate the proletariat and thus, they demanded its destruction through revolution. Niebuhr's approach was somewhere in the middle:

But unlike the Marxist, who therefore repudiates formal democracy in his passion for substantive justice, Niebuhr proposes to set the formal structures of democracy to work in pursuit of a kind of rough justice based upon proximate solutions and skillful political arbitration among a plurality of social interests. (McCann 152-153)

These "proximate solutions" required an apt understanding of humanity in society, and therefore, took a more realist approach to politics and avoided the traps of idealism. Tied into Niebuhr's criticism, was a point Dewey and Niebuhr shared in common. Both viewed Marxism's historic determinism to be another name for absolutism. However, and in regular fashion of the two, both felt that Marxist determinism was incorrect but for different reasons.

Niebuhr's emphasized, almost ironically, that the particular reproach of being unscientific carried out by Dewey was missing the point. The importance and value of Marxism was not found in its scientific inquiry or its doctrine (which Niebuhr did admit was impressive). Rather, Marxism's appeal was that "[i]t conform[ed] to the experience of the real proletarian, the truly disinherited worker [...]" (*Moral Man* 150). Theory was not what was significant, it was instead experience. In spite of all this though, and throughout some more somber reflection on his part, Niebuhr realized that Marxism was not exactly everything it promised to be.



Where Dewey criticized Marxism for not being a “real” science, Niebuhr analyzed it from a different perspective, offering to focus instead on the “false” religious sense of it. He declared: “There is something rather imposing in this doctrine of Marx. It is more than a doctrine. It is a dramatic, and to some degree, a religious interpretation of proletarian destiny” (*Moral Man* 152). Indeed, Niebuhr felt that Marxism was a “bad religion” (qtd. in McCann 145). This was two-fold: 1) the cynicism found within it meant that there was no room for grace or an alternative to the Marxian eschatology of class-warfare 2) Marxism maintained religious connotations, and inspired an almost spiritual devotion from its followers, however it lacked “[...] the transcendent perspective from which it could itself be criticized and held accountable” (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 138).

Seeming to pull in Dewey’s own arguments against it, Niebuhr highlighted that the “Marxian imagines that he has a philosophy or even a science of history. What he has is really an apocalyptic vision” (*Moral Man* 155). A proper religion was one that not only provided an eschatology, but one that also provided a capacity of freedom within history. The Marxist philosophy removed all of that through dialectical materialism in which the end was predetermined and there were no means of changing it. In the end, it seemed that both Dewey and Niebuhr did agree on one thing, even if they took different roads: absolutism. Whether it was secular or religious, it was Marxism’s ultimate intellectual weakness. Niebuhr forewarned: “Absolutism, in both religious and political idealism, is a splendid incentive to heroic action, but a dangerous guide in immediate and concrete situations” (*Moral Man* 198).

Ultimately, Niebuhr felt that Marxism’s problem was not its economic analyses, but its religious connotations. “The fundamental Communist error” stated Schlesinger when summarizing Niebuhr’s thought, was that Communism “[...] in [Niebuhr’s] view, was a new form of liberal heresy: that is, the Communists found the Kingdom of God *in* history; they perceived in the Soviet Union the incarnation of the absolute” (“Role” 139). Marxism was nothing more than the sin of human pride expressed in a secular religion; a religion which was not even a good one due to its complete misrepresentation of the complexity of human nature. Niebuhr faulted Marxism essentially for committing the same logical errors as liberalism, except from the opposite point of view. Where liberalism refused to acknowledge the negative aspects of human nature (i.e. its capacity for destruction and pursuit of self-interest), Marxism failed to consider humanity’s positive nature (i.e. capacity for cooperation and creation).

There were political problems that Niebuhr illuminated upon further intellectual reflection. It should be noted that Niebuhr was always a thinker of his time, meaning that he structured his political and theological philosophies in relation to the events occurring around him. Whether it was dismantling the Ford empire in Detroit, or the economic and political impacts of the

1930s, to even the Cold War, Niebuhr quite pragmatically, adapted his thought to the circumstances of his time. Therefore, when it came to Niebuhr's analyses, there were "two factors" which caused Niebuhr's disillusionment with Marxism: 1) "[...] the rapidly changing political and social situation in the depression years in both the United States and Europe." 2) "[...] his increasingly profound appreciation for the specific religious genius of Christianity [...]" (McCann 146). The economic and political inequalities in the West, as well as the rise of the totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia quickly opened Niebuhr's eyes to the dangers of enforced Marxist thought. Theologically speaking, Niebuhr's dabbling with Marxism made him appreciate Christianity's advantages over Communism all the better.

Politically, Niebuhr saw Marxism demonstrating its incapability to deal with complex human nature and any real political situations. Aside from Marxism's inability to properly analyze human nature, Niebuhr felt that its followers were just as equally blind utopists as the bourgeoisie liberal counterparts that they berated. In regard to America's neutrality during the late 1930s, many socialists were adamant for the United States to remain as such, for the war was nothing but rival imperial powers seeking world domination. Marxists were thus capable of a "cynical detachment" from any intervention in the war because they were "[...] secure in their conviction that war is the inevitable consequence of the capitalist economy" (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 78). It was therefore easy for Marxists to remain hidden in their cellars, waiting for the end of capitalism with bated breath. Nevertheless, the problem was understanding power politics and history which drove human nature. Underscoring this paradox, Niebuhr wrote:

Utopianism is always a source of confusion in dealing with immediate issues, because it accentuates the evils encountered by comparing them with perfections which history does not know and probably will never know. Many contemporary utopians, for instance, believe that along drawn-out war issuing in a stalemate would be a good thing because it would produce a general breakdown, in which the British Tories and French reactionaries would be swept out before a socialist revolution. (*Power Politics* 79)

Marxists, along with liberals, were looking in history for something that simply was not there. There was little evidence to demonstrate that a pure proletariat revolution would happen the way it was written. What was even more inconsistent for Niebuhr, was the belief that the USSR was the shining example of this revolution. He scorned the Marxists for "clinging to the absurd belief" that the socialist utopian dream was somehow a reality in Russia (*Power Politics* 80).

Aside from having an idealistic view of history and the revolutionary goal, Niebuhr charged socialist utopists with ideological hypocrisy or ignorance. One of Marxism's charges against the West, and consequently World War II, was that nations acted on behalf of their own national (capitalist) interests, rather than on behalf of any ideology. Niebuhr argued that though this was correct for the United States and many Western European nations, it was equally true for Russia. He claimed that the major fault of the idealists was their emphasis on ideology over reality. For Niebuhr, power was important but the "relation of national interests" to the alleged values of a State were what mattered (*Power Politics* 108).

### **3.3.3.1 National Interest Trumps Ideology**

The other major issue that Niebuhr took with Marxist ideology was its refusal to acknowledge *realpolitik*. Marxists, he charged, were equally blind when it came to defending Russia in terms of socialist ideology as liberals were in defending democracy. He pointed out this hypocrisy, choosing to focus on how Russia was "anti-fascist" up until the point where it stopped serving their national interests: "Russia was at the center of the whole united-front movement against fascism until it appeared that the defensive requirements of the Russian state were better served by an alliance with, rather than against, Germany" (*Power Politics* 108).

Niebuhr simply pointed out that although all nations were guilty of this particular sin, this did not necessarily decrease the ideological basis for countries. This was just a matter of power politics displayed within the world. The United States and other Western powers indeed valued democracy, freedom, and liberty, but as history demonstrated, and continues to do so, nations will often intervene (or not) for national interest. Niebuhr explained: "No nation is ever true to the cause which transcends its national life if there is not some coincidence between the defensive necessities of that cause and the defensive requirements of the national organism" (*Power Politics* 109). Put simply, nations would "defend" their ideological values when it became prudent to do so. Take America's involvement in World War II for example. American military power was only used when it was actually attacked and not before.

Furthermore, Niebuhr criticized the intrinsic hypocrisies of one people against another. Countries were often ready to leap at an opportunity to morally reproach another for a perceived betrayal of ideology. However, what Niebuhr argued was that these judgements were based upon a nation's own "ideological bias" which clouded its opinions. He specifically made sure to highlight this allegation when it came to Marxists and their support of the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and Russia. In the past, it was often the same groups who "tore their hair" out over Great Britain's "appeasement" policy which allegedly allowed Hitler to run

rampant through Europe, who became suddenly the first to defend and be “complacent” with the non-aggression treaty (*Power Politics* 108). Normally this type of hypocrisy was the normal expression of human nature, however, Niebuhr was not ready to let the Marxists off the hook so easily:

The recognition of this universal ideological taint in human affairs, including the inclination to be conscious of the foe’s dishonesty but not of our own, does not, however, do full justice to the problem involved in the Nazi Soviet Pact. Russia is a slightly different case, being the national embodiment of an international movement which claims to have risen above nationalism and imperialism in politics and above ‘ideology’ (in the exact sense of that word) in culture. It is the thesis of Marxism that rationalization of interest is characteristic of bourgeois society but that a classless society is free of this dishonesty. It is the Marxist claim that nationalism is a product of capitalism and that the sentiment of nationality is transcended in the new society. Marxist doctrine affirms that the state is merely the instrument of class domination, that power and coercion are necessary only so long as the classless society is forced to contend against internal and external foe. [...] [Marxists] remain devoted even when *Izvestia* disavows the whole ‘ideological’ battle line of yesterday and declares that like or dislike of fascism is a matter of taste. (*Power Politics* 110-111)

Since Russia was the ideological “home” of Marxism, the fact that it so unashamedly changed ideological grounds on the basis of national interest was inexcusable.

Marxists, similar to liberals, had to abandon their idealism and adapt their political and economic philosophy to reality. Doing so would ensure that the “pretensions” of any ideological attack would be balanced against policy. The fact that proletarians belonged to a disadvantaged class did not make them necessarily “better” than those in the bourgeoisie class contrary to what traditional Marxists professed. To believe this normative difference was to simply provide further political and authoritative power to a dictatorial government, as they simply had to constantly reinforce the ideological purity of their statements without any intensive self-reflection. Otherwise stated, Soviet leaders were exempt from scrutiny because all the problems of the world were the faults of capitalist nations.

For Niebuhr, Russia was proving to be more like its ideological enemies than it was ready to admit. Similarly, through refusing to acknowledge its own biases regarding the defense of its

national interests, Russia demonstrated how much of a “State” it actually was, in spite of Communist dogma demanding the contrary:

Thus Russia has graduated into the position of a completely modern State. Not only does it engage in the general rationalizations of which all nations avail themselves and which consist in interpreting facts from a particular national perspective, but it has learned the art of the tyrannical State, which so controls all organs of opinion that it can manufacture, rather than merely interpret, facts to suit its purposes. (Niebuhr, *Power Politics* 114-115)

These criticisms were not just linked to Marxist hypocrisy. Niebuhr also censured Marxism’s approach to, and understanding of power. Indeed, Communists realized that power politics were important and that human nature was rampant with varying conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, the pursuit of the pure Communist society led to greater tyrannies than the bourgeoisie democratic capitalism had engendered.

### **3.3.3.2 Power Isn’t Everything: Marxism’s Tyranny**

Communism seemed to “breed fanaticism and tyranny” by the very nature of its economic policy threatening individual liberty. In Niebuhr’s eyes, the pursuit of acceptable fairness required simultaneous respect for “adequate” justice whilst maintaining a fundamental admiration for a person (Schlesinger Jr, “Role” 139). Otherwise stated, societies had a responsibility to protect minorities or those found within the fringes of society, but not at the expense of the individual. To ignore the innate individualism of humanity was against Niebuhr’s politics, and more importantly, his theology. Communism appeared to argue for a “mystic” reality where all “souls” blended together (i.e. the proletariat). However, where in “mystic” religions this happened in the afterlife, Communism seemed to be pushing this onto the terrestrial plane through the pursuit of a classless society. Thus, the fundamental and unique relationship between God and the person was abandoned. Furthermore, the Communist ideal according to which the suppression of the classes would bring about a peaceful society was a gross misunderstanding of human nature. There seemed to be a paradox within Marxist thought that Marxists were either unaware of or blatantly ignored: if conflict or power was at the “source” of society, and therefore of the individual, how then would the great Revolution which would herald the classless society, remove this element from human nature? Analyzing this

very point, Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that “[...] the destruction of economic privilege could hardly be expected to alter human nature to the degree that no one thereafter would desire to make selfish use of power” (“Role” 139). Once again, it appeared that Marxism had fallen into the same trap as liberalism. Marxists were nothing more than “hopeless romantics” when it came to assessing the finer points of human nature, especially when it came to power and its uses. For example, Niebuhr criticized Marxist theory for ignoring the inherent power not only in *owning* property, but also in *managing* it. This was one of the reasons why Marxist theory required such a massive concentration of power:

Another reason for the excessive concentration of power is that the Marxist theory wrongly assumes that economic power inheres solely in the ownership of property and obscures the power of the manager of property. It therefore wrongly concludes that the socialization of property causes economic power to evaporate when in fact, it merely gives a single oligarchy a monopoly of both economic and political power. (Niebuhr, *On Politics* 29)

It seemed then, that the very freedom Marxism wished to bestow upon the masses through the abolition of private property, would ultimately be the very thing that led to tyranny. Furthermore, the paradox was that Marxists used power willingly and without restraint to achieve their goals. They argued, as Dewey pointed out, that it was the “only” means to bring about the desired ends, while simultaneously stating that once the mission was accomplished, this innate desire of violence and the pursuit of power would disappear.

Niebuhr was already aware of, and highlighted this contradiction when it came to Marxist control of the state economy. He realized that to achieve the economic equality so desired by ideology, the State would have to amass great political power thus giving it “tremendous authority.” This State would then “[...] necessitate dangerous concentrations of political power in the hands of a few individuals and a small group.” Consequently, its creation would imply the “abuse of power by communistic bureaucrats” whose own influence would grow as “[...] the purer revolutionary idealists are supplanted by men who have consciously sought for the possession of power” (Niebuhr, *Moral Man* 192).

This concentration of bureaucratic power was none other than Marx’s (in)famous dictatorship of the proletariat. Trying to grasp this complex notion while consequently highlighting not only the logical fallacies found within, but also the sheer lack of comprehension of human nature Niebuhr clarified:

The theory of communism is, that the dictatorship [of the proletariat] is only a transitory state and that it will become unnecessary as soon as the whole community has accepted the equalitarian ideals of communism and no one challenges the regime. This theory fails to do justice to the facts of human nature, revealed not only in the men of power but in ordinary men. [...] Since, according to the tenets of communism, the dictatorship is necessary until all the enemies of the proletarian state are 'liquidated,' and since external enemies will remain for many decades or centuries, even if all internal enemies should be destroyed, the power of the dictatorship could be perpetuated indefinitely without any conscious dishonesties. (*Moral Man* 192-193)

It was therefore easy for Communist leaders to maintain political and economic control over their respective country because threats were in essence, everywhere. Here, Niebuhr pointed a key similarity between Nazi Germany and Russia: the ideological and "practical" defense of absolutism. Since the ideological enemies of the proletariat were everywhere, the dictatorship needed to remain intact until they could be dealt with. This meant in no unexaggerated terms, that those men in power had to remain so up until the world had turned Communist. Any country existing outside of Russia not bound by Communism was a threat, and therefore justified the prolongation of the dictatorship.

Niebuhr equally criticized the romantic notion that even if such a world existed, "[...] the new society will create only men who will be in perfect accord with the collective will of society, and will not seek personal advantage in the social process [...]" (*Moral Man* 192). In almost an ironic twist, Niebuhr indicated the "Rousseauistic" elements found in Communists' romantic beliefs. This was ironic because one of the intellectual "founders" of liberal philosophy (even if he was more societally concerned than others) shared so many similarities with a philosophy meant to be "anti-liberal." Niebuhr drew a parallel between Rousseau's "general will" and the Communist ideal, for both are "prophesies" of "pure sentimentality" which "[...] obscure[d] the fact, that there can never be a perfect mutuality of interest between individuals who perform different functions in society" (*Moral Man* 194). Similarly, Niebuhr heavily criticized this notion as one which "obscures the fact that there is a conflict of wills in every living community" and underlines how this "Rousseauistic conception leads to constitutional forms which offer inadequate safeguards to the minority." (*On Politics* 117). In a Marxian context, Niebuhr's argument simply meant that, even within a "classless" society, people were going to have different tasks. These responsibilities called upon different skills and varied resources, which would put people in conflict with one another. The "Rousseauistic"

critique of Marxism was equally applied to Dewey's brand of liberalism. Or at least, it was for the younger and more polemic Niebuhr of the early 1930s who viewed Dewey as a continuation of Rousseau's thought with Jefferson as the intellectual "bridge" between the two.

Regardless of these criticisms, Niebuhr continued to use some of Marxism's basic ideologies to persist in his fight for social justice within democracies. In spite of the allied victory of 1945, Niebuhr understood, even before the end of the war, that the fall of fascism in Europe would lead to a different type of conflict, one in which ideology was going to be the primary line of defense: The Cold War. This was a particularly interesting period for Niebuhr as it represents a stark breaking point for him as a thinker. His star was burning brightly for he focused on not just democracy as a culture, but on global peace as a result of the appropriate use of power to obtain reasonable forms of justice. His influence as an international relations thinker set him apart from many of his liberal contemporaries. World War II had demonstrated that idealism and liberalism were not the solutions, and a more "realistic" approach to global politics was needed, especially when faced with the growing powers of the USSR. Thus, the next sections will turn their attention strictly to Niebuhr and his intellectual analyses of the Cold War. This is done, in part for the reasons above, but also simply because Dewey died in 1952, at the beginning of some of the greatest tensions between the West and the USSR.

Another aspect that shot Niebuhr to the top of international relations circles, was his changing tone and rhetoric. Because of the wide variety of Niebuhrians that can be found, ranging from left-wing Marxists to right-wing neo-conservatives, discussing Niebuhr is often reduced to the following question: "which one?" The Niebuhr of the Cold War, for example, was one that was harsher and more critical of the rival empires, underlying differences and ironies in history. It was during this time that his Christian realism evolved into something else: Christian Pragmatism which was a unique branch of Pragmatism that considered the realities of power politics, and competing national interests all whilst basing its thought on a normative framework.

#### **3.4.0 A Bridge Forged in (Cold) War: The Rise of Niebuhr's "Christian Pragmatism"**

The victory of the allied forces in World War II brought not only Niebuhr, but America, onto the international scene and in full force as well. Individually, Niebuhr saw his popularity quickly rise as he became the "official" voice of American political theology, a trend which culminated when *Time* magazine selected Niebuhr to be on their cover in 1948. *Time* felt he was the "theologian for a Lenten [sic] age" (qtd. in M. Thompson 836). On the national level



and with Europe in shambles, America was thrust onto the global scene by becoming a super-power, seemingly, overnight.

According to Niebuhr, this new status provided an interesting opportunity for the United States, but only if America handled it appropriately. It was important to Niebuhr that America lead the rest of the free world out of the rubble of World War II, but it had to do so without falling into the tumultuous sin of pride and ending up creating more international conflicts than existed at the time. One struggle that he saw brewing as early as World War II, was the Cold War. Not necessarily placing a name on it, Niebuhr “was not out of touch with the early phases of the Cold War.” He knew a new system of “[...] ideas and preparations for a new world order and postwar international system” was needed “even before the end of World War II” (K. Thompson 145). Of course, he did not necessarily think that America was ready for its new-found responsibilities, but he quickly realized that even if the USA were a “young” nation, “[t]he pattern of the historical drama gr[e]w more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation” (*Irony 2*).

During the Cold War period, Niebuhr managed to add much needed reflection and criticism on a nation suddenly thrust into the spotlight. Due to his experiences with the two World Wars, Niebuhr understood as well as any other realist that “[...] the nature of politics imposed necessities and requirements that set it apart from other spheres of human endeavor” (K. Thompson 141). His astute grasp of power politics led others who shared his political philosophies, such as Hans Morgenthau, to claim that Niebuhr was the “greatest living political philosopher” in America (M. Thompson 836).

However, there were still major epistemological disagreements between Niebuhr and classic realists when it came to foreign policy. Though Morgenthau revered Niebuhr and his political insight, the two disagreed on subtle, yet important policy issues. One such issue was Germany in post-war Europe. Being a traditional realist for whom power politics decided all, Morgenthau believed that Stalin, being the strong military dictator that he was, would keep his word, that is to say a peaceful existence with the West, as he had very little to fear from his ideological opponents. Niebuhr disagreed, arguing instead that ideology was just as important as power politics claiming that forgetting the importance of ideology in politics meant running the risk of running into future problems later on. As Kenneth Thompson best summarized:

The debate illustrates, however, another area of contention between Niebuhr and other realists. While he was willing to concede the influence of interest and power as determinants of foreign policy, he insisted that the residual force of ideology should not be overlooked. Niebuhr agreed in part with Max Weber’s

observation: ‘Interests (national and ideal), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men. Yet the ‘images of the world’ created by these ideas have very often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests keep actions moving. (142)

Power mattered, but ideology should not be forgotten. Often, the two went hand in hand, with one justifying the other. Niebuhr pointed this out with the intellectual fallacies found within Marxism: ideology was actually what *kept* Soviet leaders in power, as the “enemies” of the Revolution were still omnipresent, both domestically and internationally.

Ironically, for he would later become famous as a Cold War thinker, Niebuhr was often accused of being a “late bloomer” when it came to threats stemming from the USSR. This may have been true on a completely superficial level, but even before the Nazi-Soviet pact, Niebuhr was aware that Stalinist Russia was going to be a contender in world politics. Therefore, when World War II finally concluded, Niebuhr was optimistic that the remaining leading nations were at least coming together to discuss power, politics, and economics. Furthermore, the remaining powers were also debating a structure in which the superpowers could “peacefully” coexist. A new period in American foreign policy seemed to be emerging in which it was taking itself, and more importantly, its position in the world more seriously.

Niebuhr’s emphasis on the international scene as well as his “realist” approach to the growing threat of the Cold War, were turning points in his political thought. Moving slightly away from moral abstracts and purely theological understandings, Niebuhr managed to take a “pragmatic” approach to world events. This stage in his intellectual development saw a paradoxical Niebuhrian balance between Christian realism and political Pragmatism. On the one hand, Niebuhr maintained that it was important to guard a sense of morality when using power politics. On the other, and unlike his pragmatic proponents who were accused of ignoring power, Niebuhr understood the necessity and influence of it in international affairs.

Thus, the Cold War provided an interesting intellectual development phase for Niebuhr in which his Christian realism evolved to include elements of pragmatic thought. However, Niebuhr’s vision of Pragmatism carried different perspectives and thus, a unique philosophical framework: Christian Pragmatism. This particular branch of pragmatic thought seemed to combine the strengths of both opposing philosophies without falling into, at least too severely, any of the major pitfalls either had demonstrated. Therefore, understanding this transition works best through an analysis of the subtle differences between Niebuhr’s Christian realism and his Christian Pragmatism in the context of the Cold War.

### 3.4.1 New World Order, New World Threat: Niebuhr versus Communism

With America thrust onto the center stage of world affairs, it now had a new role as defender of Western culture against the growing, and ideologically opposed, threat of the USSR. Keeping true to his Christian faith, Niebuhr's main piece of advice during the Cold War was one of self-reflection and self-criticism. The technological advances brought about by World War II, exemplified by the start of the nuclear age, provided Niebuhr with a great sense of "foreboding" for he felt that America, young and powerful, was not ready for the burden of this dangerous age. He wrote:

If the Christian faith has any word to speak to the nation in such a dread time as this, it must certainly contain these warnings drawn from the Gospel, reminding us that we face not merely a Russian or communist peril but the threat of a divine judgment. We are drifting toward a possible calamity in which even the most self-righteous assurance of the justice of our cause will give us no easy assurance. (qtd. in K. Thompson 851)

Granted, part of the issue was the ideological enemy that America was facing, but the larger part was modern culture and humanity itself. History had thus far proved how incapable human beings were of handling massive changes in technology and power. A person need only look at concentration camps, *gulags*, Hiroshima and Nagasaki as examples of this difficulty. Yet, the world was now faced with the possibility of total annihilation with "only" a handful of bombs capable of devastating the planet for centuries to come.

America's particular position as the leading Western power also gave Niebuhr cause for worry. There were "three defects" which made America's position "awkward": 1) how the US approached problems from a business-like angle instead of based in classic political theory. 2) Its geographic isolation. Since America was physically removed from most of the world, and separated by oceans on either side, it added a sense of moral and political aloofness to America's view of the world and its problems. 3) The relative "youth" of the American government and its experience when it came to international politics. Being a "young" nation, and one founded on Enlightenment idealism more than anything, Niebuhr was skeptical that America could actually handle the role of an international leader. Niebuhr further added to these potential difficulties by explaining America's unique religious practices that seemed to dominate its culture, especially when it came to international relations and the oversimplification of conflicts, i.e. "good" nations versus "evil" nations (Rasmussen 165-166).

Furthermore, America's problem of being a young and inexperienced international power, was the anarchy of the international system itself. The liberal idea of a "world community" was, for Niebuhr, all but impossible. The world simply did not allow for such a community, not without at least a massive and strong imperial force to regulate the natural chaos of the international order. The problem was twofold: 1) human nature would never allow for this harmonic community to exist. 2) For a world federation to exist, an authoritative hegemonic power would have to be in control and dominate the anarchy of international relations. He clarified:

The organization of, and the achievement of peace and justice in, the community have been considered up to this point with the understanding that the national community was usually under consideration, but that the social problem of mankind transcended the national community, though the nation has been for some centuries the only effective organ of social cohesion and cooperation. Beyond the national (and in a few cases the imperial) community lies international chaos, slightly qualified by minimal forms of international cooperation. (*Children* 153)

What added to the problems was the fact that political astuteness and clarity had not evolved with technology, essentially creating the situation of children (young nations) playing with firearms (nuclear weapons).

Niebuhr remarked that one of the major distinctions between previous societies and nation-states at the time of the Cold War, was how ancient civilizations were often bound by geographic area or a certain "particularity." The modern age provided humanity with unprecedented achievements which "reduced the space-time dimensions" of reality, thus leading to "a phenomenal increase" of "interdependence" amongst states (*Children* 156). These advancements created newfound opportunities for civilizations to expand and to interact, and could have been the basis of the "global community" that liberal idealists had so long praised. However, he clarified that:

The development of technics thus confronted our epoch with a new situation. The political institutions of national particularity were no longer challenged merely from above but also from below. From above they felt the impact of the sense of universal moral obligation and from below they were under pressure from the new technical-natural fact of a global economy. (*Children* 158)

The moment had come for the children of light to establish the global community. Niebuhr chided these “children” nonetheless, for they once more fell into the trap of overestimating human nature for the “[t]wo world wars in one generation [had] prove[d]” them wrong. Improvements in technology did not manage to “correct” or “advance” human nature, in spite of liberal idealists’ best hopes.

These sentiments were echoed with the notion that “[...] technics have established a rudimentary world community but have not integrated it organically, morally, or politically” (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 15). Another error for Niebuhr concerning modern culture was its thinking that technological advancement could resolve or reduce the gap between civilizations and cultures. The political and international situation of the Cold War demonstrated this incapability (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 17).

Contemplating the growing threat of Communist regimes and the power of the USSR, Niebuhr nevertheless understood the need and importance of some semblance of a global community. Thankfully, the United Nations managed to avoid some of the major problems of its predecessor, primarily because it acknowledged the necessity of the use of power and managing national interests within the framework of international relations. Added to this comprehension, Niebuhr argued, were three interdependent and related factors that benefited the United Nations’ establishment and effectiveness. These elements principally boil down to a common “overtone of universality,” and a fear of anarchy. The third factor actually stemmed from the second: fear of a common and concrete foe” (Niebuhr, *Children* 168). Though seemingly idealistic, the “overtone of universality” was a necessary step in establishing some form of world government and tied perfectly into Niebuhr’s theory of international relations: power is important, but so is ideology. Nations need to “believe” that what they are doing is “just” or “right,” even if all concrete evidence proves the contrary. After all, every nation, even the USSR, “wants” to exist peacefully with the rest of the world. Unfortunately, there are factors that prevent this global peace from happening. In addition to this idealistic morality, was war-fatigue. The world had just concluded another devastating World War and there were very few who were ready to leap back into another costly and bloody conflict. Niebuhr admitted that the first principle binding nations together was the weakest, he still did not discredit it. Arguing for the importance of ideology made him different than other realists who would have simply claimed that it was a mask for national interest of power politics.

Aware that the US, Russia, and Britain<sup>49</sup> were the key players in the new world order, Niebuhr summarized that in spite of idealists' claims that a truly democratic world order would rise out of the ashes of World War II, balance-of-power politics would "become the actual consequence of present policies" (*Children* 173). Though there were instantaneous benefits of balance-of-power politics in terms of an immediate peace, it simply was delaying the inevitable conflict that was brewing. The period of peace was nothing more than dressing wounds and rebuilding weapons caches. The source for this instability came down to human nature within communities. Niebuhr forewarned that:

No participant in a balance is ever quite satisfied with its own position. Every center of power will seek to improve its position: and every such effort will be regarded by the others as an attempt to disturb the equilibrium. There is sufficient mistrust between the great nations, even while they are still locked in the intimate embrace of a great common effort to make it quite certain that a mere equilibrium between them will not suffice to preserve the peace. (*Children* 175)

It was only a matter of time for Niebuhr before the great powers of the post-World War II world would end up falling out of balance, and plummeting the world into war again. It was unlikely to be a conflict between the United States and Great Britain for various reasons, including common values, language, and more importantly, interests. This left only the possibility that the conflict would arise between the USSR and the West.

Along with the potential chaos and rivalries between the two worlds, were the actual policies carried out by the great powers, primarily that of the competing spheres of influence. The criticism was that by dividing the world into different "spheres," conflicts would not dissipate but instead be postponed by these spheres (*Children* 179). Avoiding conflict meant that nations had to have a culture of self-criticism which was no easy feat, for imperial or great powers often had difficulties in acknowledging how they were a threat to other nations (*Children* 180).

For Niebuhr, Russia proved to be the nation for which it proved the most difficult to adopt such a culture. This was not linked simply to the fact that it was "Communist." The reason for Russia's difficulty in self-criticism was related more to the "simple religion and culture" which

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<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr included Britain as a "great power" (*Children* 175). However, it is the author's belief that this was done out of intellectual and historic reverence for Great Britain rather than actual fact. Great Britain's early involvement in WWII meant that it had suffered more socially, politically, and economically than America, and it was unlikely that immediately following the war, Great Britain was still a "great power" due to these various losses.

made “self-criticism difficult and self-righteousness inevitable.” These criticisms call to mind Niebuhr’s earliest and most basic reproaches against Communism: its inability to correctly understand human nature. Any action or motive from another country was immediately viewed with suspicion for other nations were the capitalist enemies against the “innocency [sic] and virtue” of a country which was their ideological opponent, and as they would argue, superior. He further clarified that:

The naïve self-righteousness which flows from these presuppositions is more dangerous to a mutual accord between nations than any of the real or fancied vices which are attributed to Russia. The tendency toward self-righteousness is accentuated in Russia by the absence of democratic institutions through which, in other nations, sensitive minorities may act as the conscience of the nation and subject its actions and pretensions to criticism. (*Children* 182)

Although imperfect, democracies at least provided an outlet for criticism. Of course, this did not necessarily mean that reproaches were heeded or retained, but at least the government was aware of the discontent amongst its citizenry.

As America stepped into the role of being a world superpower, Niebuhr maintained that it had to continue this culture of self-criticism in order to avoid falling into the same pitfalls as Communist Russia. By doing so, Niebuhr hoped that America would realize that it shared some elements in common with its ideological adversary. The most obvious to Niebuhr was the fact that both the USSR and the USA hoped to achieve total hegemony, thereby creating a world order based on the respective nation’s “conception of justice” (*Political Problems* 22). Thus, establishing this new world regime would be difficult at best, and most likely impossible for neither nation was ready to surrender any ideological ground to the other.

That being said, Niebuhr maintained that the US should not actually cede any ideological ground, but it still had to remain self-critical. Niebuhr took this stance because as the Cold War played out, he acknowledged that Communism was going to be a slightly different, but somewhat familiar phenomenon. The world had seen something like it before, but in the guise of the Nazi regime: a totalitarian regime. Because of these similarities, Niebuhr launched into a profound analysis of American foreign policy in face of this threat with one of his most famous works *The Irony of American History* (1952). He also asked himself, and thus the US an important question: “why [was] Communism so evil?” (*Political Problems* 33).

### 3.4.1.1 The Totalitarian Nature of Communism

With the Cold War in full swing, Niebuhr saw events unfolding from a unique perspective. Where the rest of the West viewed an “us vs them” conflict, Niebuhr understood, through his use of dialectics, that ultimately the two ideological imperial powers shared more in common than either side would attest. The world had entered the “Atomic Age” and with it, new-found capacities for self-destruction. Niebuhr felt that this new era made the international political situation all the more precarious, especially for any “victorious” power which managed to emerge from the Cold War. Niebuhr foresaw two consequences: 1) actual violent conflict and total annihilation from which Western civilization would be unlikely to recover. 2) Should physical conflict be avoided, the surviving power would “[...] also face the ‘imperial’ problem of using power in global terms but from one particular center of authority, so preponderant and unchallenged that its world rule would almost certainly violate basic standards of justice” (*Irony 1*). Niebuhr’s theory was that because nations rarely acted selflessly, the victor of the Cold War would benefit from an unprecedented global influence and hegemonic power that would result in multiple abuses of justice, particularly against weaker nations.<sup>50</sup> Whoever the victor and because of the corrupting nature of imperialism, the winning nation would ultimately become what it had fought against.

The danger for Niebuhr existed in the professed ideology on both sides of the quarrel. Niebuhr likened the ideological struggle with Don Quixote, with proponents on both sides looking to vanquish the other and the ideological evils they represented. Niebuhr argued that both Superpowers were fighting chimeric “windmills” on all fronts, ultimately creating more problems than actually resolving. It was “obvious” for Niebuhr that Communism fell into this pattern, but what was unique was how Niebuhr managed to point out the same “double” ironic flaw within American democracy as well. He warned:

Our own nation is both the participant and the victim of this double irony [of claiming to protect certain values while actually destroying them] in a special

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<sup>50</sup> One could argue that Niebuhr was right in this fashion, especially given the global economic and political domination of the US following the Cold War and throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. However, what Niebuhr failed to take into consideration were “non-traditional” sources of opposition which did not act as usual Nation-State models. This is a common criticism against realists in general. Regional economic and political unions (i.e., the European Union) or terrorist organizations are just some examples of “checks” on the totality of American hegemony.



way. Of all the ‘knights’ of bourgeois culture, our castle is the most imposing and our horse the sleekest and most impressive. Our armor is the shiniest (if it is legitimate to compare atom bombs with a knight’s armor); and the lady of our dreams is most opulent and desirable. The lady has been turned into ‘prosperity.’ We have furthermore been persuaded by our success to formulate the creed of our civilization so passionately that we have suppressed its inconsistencies with greater consistency than any of our allies. We stand before the enemy in the first line of battle but our ideological weapons are frequently as irrelevant as were the spears of the knights, when gunpowder challenged their reign. Our unenviable position is made the more difficult because the heat of the battle gives us neither the leisure nor the inclination to detect the irony in our own history or to profit from the discovery of the double irony between ourselves and our foe. If only we could fully understand that the evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our own, we might be better prepared to save a vast uncommitted world [...]. (*Irony* 15-16)

The United States and the USSR were more alike than either cared to admit, specifically when it came to the ideological defense of military or political actions.

One such similarity was the alleged innocent and virtuous nature between the two nations. The USSR felt that it was philosophically and morally superior because it was carrying out the revolution of the proletariat in order to bring about a unified world order and a classless society. The United States conversely, was defending “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as well as the protection of the individual against any sort of ideological indoctrination. Undoubtedly, Communist regimes removed any sort of distinction between the public and private sphere, which made some of America’s criticisms of the USSR accurate. Still, Niebuhr argued that some of the USSR’s reproaches against America were not too far off either, particularly with regard to the creation and affluence of a bourgeois society. This society attempted to “solve all” potential problems through the “expansion” of any economic activity. Communist alleged that inequalities were solved in America with more inequalities for resolutions to problems were economic rather than political (Niebuhr, *Irony* 28).

In spite of this criticism, Niebuhr did claim that America was slightly better than its adversaries for they at least acknowledged something that Communists did not: self-interest. America was, “more virtuous” because it understood, since its founding and thanks to Hamilton and Madison, that conflict and human egotism would drive most interactions in society. Therefore, justice was “tolerable” because it was pragmatic. Even America’s more liberal

founders, such as Jefferson, were still aware that power and conflict would be useful to obtain this type of proximate justice (*Irony* 30-34).

The primary concern for Niebuhr was maintaining a certain level of adequate fairness on a global scale, especially should the US be victorious in the Cold War. He warned that “[t]he progress of American culture toward hegemony in the world community as well as toward the ultimate in standards of living has brought us everywhere to limits where our ideals and norms are brought under ironic indictment” (*Irony* 56). What he meant was that with the rise of the United States as a superpower, its values, norms, practices, and general culture would be under heightened scrutiny, and the claims of being an “innocent” nation would be met with skepticism at best, and derision at worst. This was especially true from the point of view of historic and current allies, such as Western Europe. Niebuhr summarized the caustic attitude of the world towards American hegemony by highlighting the French criticism of American culture:

For the European nations, France especially, find our culture ‘vulgar,’ and pretend to be imperiled by the inroads of an American synthetic drink upon the popularity of their celebrated wines. The French protest against ‘Cocacolonialism’ expresses this ironic conflict in a nutshell. Our confidence in happiness as the end of life, and in prosperity as the basis of happiness is challenged by every duty and sacrifice, every wound and anxiety which our world-wide responsibilities bring upon us. The cultural aversion of France toward us expresses explicitly what most of Europe seems to feel. In its most pessimistic moods, European neutralism charges in the words of *Le Monde*, that we are a ‘technocracy’ not too sharply distinguished from the Russian attempt to bring all of life under technical control. (*Irony* 56-58)

Niebuhr agreed to a certain extent that the European criticism of technocracy. Yet, he pointed out that Europe, too, was technocratic just in a different form, one that was tamed by a “traditional aristocratic culture” (*Irony* 58). Nevertheless, Niebuhr did admit the ideological and “technocratic” similarities between the US and the USSR, but he managed to defend American society as it was less corrupt than its Marxist counterpart.

Communist regimes abused technocratic efficiency for the sake of domination by giving a “monopoly of power” to the dictatorship of the proletariat. This dictatorship then sought to change the course of human nature and destiny by setting “simple limits” against a profounder comprehension of “life’s meaning.” These “simple limits” were expressed through the Marxist dogma of the strict separation of classes with the proletariat being intrinsically better than the

bourgeoisie. This meant that any form of paradox, irony, or complexity were ignored thus reducing the depth of “life’s meaning.” Niebuhr indicated that democracy’s advantage remained within the hands of the people and more importantly, institutions which could act as safe-guards against any form of absolute abuse. Democracies thus averted “the consistent application” of a technocratic society by reminding it that there were human costs to pure efficiency, thus preventing any form of tyrannical abuses (*Irony* 58).

These same democratic institutions, and more particularly America’s unique place in \ history, created incongruous elements in the situation of the United States as hegemonic power. The primary source of irony according to Niebuhr was that through sheer happenstance, primarily related to prime geographic location and abundant natural resources, America gained a large amount of power “without particularly seeking it” thereby making it stronger than “any other nation in history.” The subtler, and second element of the American situation was related to its role as a superpower and the fact that as such, the United States was “less completely master of its own destiny.” The paradox was that prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US was a younger and weaker, both economically and military than other powers which actually meant it was more in control of its destiny than it was during the Cold War. The fact that it was thrust onto the global scene, and now in charge of protecting democracy and Western values, meant that it was bound by certain international moral, economic, ideological, and political obligations. Niebuhr explained how:

[t]he same strength which has extended our power beyond a continent has also interwoven our destiny with the destiny of many peoples and brought us into a vast webb [sic] of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our won, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the ‘happiness of mankind’ as its promise. Even in the greatness of our power we are thwarted by a ruthless foe, who is ironically the more recalcitrant and ruthless because his will is informed by an impossible dream of bringing happiness to all men if only he can eliminate our recalcitrance. (*Irony* 74)

Because the United States was the “better” of the two superpowers, it could simply not “impose” its will on other nations, even if it wanted to.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Critics may argue that the United States does indeed impose its will on other nations through economic or military intimidation, especially those nations which were caught in the middle of the Cold War. Though this may

Still, the key to managing America's new and ironic world situation, was to make sure it avoided the dangers of Communist regimes. As stated earlier, the first and most glaring was that both the US and the USSR felt that they were the innocent victims in an ideological war, where victory of the other would mean "the end" of civilization as it was known. Additionally, both powers managed to fundamentally misinterpret human nature, leading to each nation having a unique perspective on its development, and ultimately, on the fate of humanity.

For liberals, and thus Western culture, the misunderstanding was one Niebuhr had been discussing since his early writings: overestimation of human capability and optimism. Blended with the idealism of the 1920s, it was now a dogmatic belief of economic liberalism in which a free market could be a frontier between Western society and Communism, providing the foundations for a free and prosperous society. Though heavily critical of Marxist state-planning, Niebuhr faulted this approach with focusing too much on materialism and not enough on actual justice.

Communism demonstrated the opposite problem. As Niebuhr highlighted in the 1930s and as seen previously, Marxists underestimated human positive potential. Its emphasis on historical materialism left no room for a creative or independent human spirit, otherwise known as Divine Grace, to allow for some type of free will to appear in human development. Aside from removing individuality from the equation, Communism also attempted to usurp God through its dialectics. Admittedly, God had a plan for humanity which of course indicated a certain degree of determinism, but He was the only one to know it. Although, this idea expressed through platitudes such as "God has a plan" indicates that free will is not as "free" as Niebuhr claimed. However, theologians have been debating this problem since the foundations of Christianity, with different branches handling the paradox through various means. Lutherans, for example, avoided the debate by arguing the principle of "predestination" in which God had already decided before a person was born. Regardless of this theological conundrum, Niebuhr felt that Communists' claims of knowing the ultimate end of history was no more than the expression of the eternal sin of pride.

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be splitting hairs, Niebuhr did not view it as the same as Communist influence or domination. Communism justified any form of tyrannical domination for the "greater good" and the idea that any horrors done today, would justify the glorious future of a classless society tomorrow, especially through defeat of their bourgeois enemy. American imperialism was "better" in that it searched only containment of the Red Menace, and could only suggest a vision of "happiness." This may have been done through military or economic intimidation, but it still meant that democratic "happiness" was better than its Communist counterpart.

Niebuhr argued that Liberalism's and Communism's largest error stemmed from the belief in a "rationally ordered" meaning to the universe. He did indeed believe that the universe had a structure and order to it, however, "[...] the modern man lack[ed] the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history [was] enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management" (*Irony* 87). The realm, knowledge, wisdom, and power of God were so strong that no mere mortal could comprehend His plan, and had to content him/herself with that (lack of) knowledge. It was only by keeping this humble position in the face of history and thus, human development, could a person actually maintain "a sane life." Distancing himself from other realist thinkers of his time through his theology, Niebuhr maintained that the not knowing was a good thing. Comprehending or grasping some of these "mysteries" was based on faith, an aspect that "modern man" had lost. It was this lost faith that had led to the common error between liberalism and Communism causing both to fall back onto the internal element of human reason to be the answer to the world's problems. Thus, he explained:

[The modern person] hovers ambivalently between subjection to the 'reason' which he can find in nature (liberalism) and the 'reason' which he can impose upon nature (communism). But neither form of reason is adequate for the comprehension of the illogical and contradictory patterns of the historic drama, and for anticipating the emergence of unpredictable virtues and vices. In either case, man as the spectator and manager of history imagines himself to be freer of the drama he beholds than he really is; and man as the creature of history is too simply reduced to the status of a creature of nature, and all of his contacts to the ultimate are destroyed. (*Irony* 87)<sup>52</sup>

Rediscovery of this lost faith was possible for Niebuhr, even for secular society, but only if America were to avoid the "ironic elements" of what he considered to be "American idealism."

Keeping true to his core, Niebuhr felt that the "[i]ronic elements in American history" could be dealt with, if American idealism came "to terms with the limits" of human capability. This included the "fragmentariness of all human wisdom" as well as the precarious nature of humanity in history, especially in the Nuclear Age where one wrong move could mean planetary destruction, and above all, the "mixture of good and evil" in human action (*Irony* 132).

Added to the complexities of the American situation as a world power was its "historic situation." America's new position in the world meant it was unmatched in power. This brought

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<sup>52</sup> Parentheticals in this citation are author's emphasis to highlight liberalism's and Communism's faulty logic.

about the secondary problem that because of this power, there was no easy path to avoid war or tyranny. Furthermore, there was not a precedent based on which States could make appropriate decisions (*Irony* 132). This did not mean that the United States was doomed for failure. Instead, it had to avoid the traps of its own idealism and appreciate its new-found place in the world.

The first way to do so was the “strategy of bringing power under social and political review.” Power had to be checked with power and not simply checked with idealistic goals. Niebuhr saw the United Nations as a potential source for this power, basing his arguments less on the institutional merits of it, but instead on the fact that it would be “an organ in which even the most powerful” democracies would be brought “under the scrutiny of public opinion” (*Irony* 135). This structure would prevent the previous first half century’s errors from being recommitted by keeping nations’ “pride of power” in check. Seeing a prominent place for Europe in the United Nations, he even predicted a European Union-style government stating that “[i]t will be even more hopeful for peace and justice of the world community, if a fragmented Europe should gain the unity to speak with more unanimity in the councils of the nations” (*Irony* 135). The hope that Niebuhr had carried for the United Nations reflected his Christian Pragmatism. Keeping within the traditional realist, and pragmatic framework of international relations where the use of power was between states, was the primary factor, Niebuhr dismissed any liberal idealism that the UN would act as a deterrent of political or power abuses by nations. Power begets power, and the only force that would prevent another State from action was a State or a union of States acting together matching or surpassing the strength of the former.

Unlike traditional realists though, Niebuhr argued that the UN was still an effective institution because it united elements of political power that were typically ignored by thinkers such as Morgenthau. Factors like public opinion, ideology, and morality were often dismissed by traditional realists as they did not fit into the classic concept of the State as an independent entity. States were responsible for “high politics” which was reserved for the elite or state officials and never for the public, since the latter had little understanding of the complexities of the international system, and therefore did not warrant contributing to the discussion. Niebuhr disagreed wholeheartedly, claiming instead that because the public was concerned with the decisions made by these “elites,” often resulting in immediate physical (war) or economic (sanctions/inflation) consequences it should have a say. These opinions could, and more importantly should be considered, provided that the information was accurate. Philosophically it was important because in democratic governments, the need for the consent of the governed was paramount as well as the idea that the public would be a moral and ideological check upon State action.

The international scene itself proved to be another problem regarding America's position as a superpower as a clear path to either avoiding conflict, or winning a conflict was unlikely to appear. As Niebuhr proclaimed, any type of "victory of democracy over tyranny" or "peaceful solution" could not be guaranteed (Niebuhr, *Irony* 140). The Cold War demonstrated a new global situation that was similar to, but still unlike, the Age of Empires in which large spheres of influences were opposed to one another. It was similar in terms of the size of these "empires," with the US being the head of the West, and the USSR being the lead power for Communist ideology. The major differences though, thereby making the Cold War a new and unprecedented situation, were first that these empires were directly opposed to one another and engaged in an active ideological and semi-active military conflict between each other. Secondly, the size of the spheres of influence had never been seen before in history.

Ancient empires existed primarily as independent and individual "units" in which anything outside its walls or sphere of influence was viewed as the "other" or even "barbarian." States, as contemporary political science understands them, did not exist at this time, thus adding to the complexity of the current situation. Similarly, the European empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century exercised their power on weaker territories, denying to give them an equal status in political or international relations. The Cold War situation demonstrated a different situation for the US, for they had to at least present a certain image of respectability regarding the sovereignty of independent States. Likewise, their sizes, though large in old-world standards (such as the Roman, Greek, or Persian empires) paled in comparison to the spheres of influence shared by the US and the USSR. The Cold War saw an era in which, literally, entire continents and regions were political, economic, and ideological pieces on a global chessboard, with each superpower hoping to outsmart, and out maneuver the other.

One of the particular difficulties for the US in the Cold War was coping with the "impatience" of a situation "which require[d] great exertions without the promise of certain success" (Niebuhr, *Irony* 140). Otherwise put, because the conflict was based on ideological grounds as much as military or economic ones, the traditional rules of war did not seem to apply, especially when considering the fact that both superpowers were armed with nuclear weapons. These devices, as well as the newly structured sphere of influence, meant that the US could not rely on traditional war tactics of invading the enemy nation for a clear and decisive military victory. Any direct invasion of a satellite nation was the equivalent of a direct attack on Mother Russia. Thus, the US had to handle the Cold War differently, and the best way to do so was, contrary to what realist George Kennan argued, not through policies based strictly on national interests. Instead, Niebuhr again demonstrating the difference between his Christian

Pragmatism and classic realists, was for the State to focus on other issues aside from power politics. He maintained that:

The cure for pretentious idealism, which claims to know more about the future and about men than is given mortal man to know, is not egotism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a 'decent respect for the opinions of mankind,' derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power. (*Irony* 148)

Avoiding the costly fallouts of a nuclear war required self-reflection and more importantly, self-criticism. Communities and States had to start reevaluating their position in history by defining not only geographic borders, but also historic and contemporary limits to their power. Through a combination of critical public opinion and a strong leader, States could work together cooperatively and peacefully because they would realize that the attitude of "going it alone" was erroneous. Taming the anarchy of international relations did not mean having one strong, independent, and tyrannical power. Rather, peace, and more importantly, tolerable justice, was a collaborative effort between nations. Aside from the West being aware of its own limits, in terms of capabilities and power, Niebuhr also warned of the "evils" of Communism in general.

Niebuhr lambasted the naïveté amongst Communists in claiming that the horrors and atrocities committed in the USSR were simple "fortuitous corruptions" of the Marxist creed. Niebuhr clarified how, even though "Marxism did not indeed plan the highly centralized power structure of communism" it still allowed for a "dictatorship of the proletariat" which meant that the "progressive moral deterioration" of this type of government was "inevitable" (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 35). Niebuhr justified this statement through his criticism of Communist state structure. By having such a segregated hierarchy where there was only the powerful and powerless, corruption was expected as there was "no way of preventing the gradual centralization of the monopoly of power." If power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, those "powerful" were never going to abandon their posts as they would continually safeguard their position as the "vanguard of the whole class." This would devolve via the corruption of the powerful into an oligarchy resulting in a strong tyrant and dictator (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 35).

The USSR was proof of Niebuhr's criticisms. The best example was demonstrated by the Trotsky trials for he was proven to be "as powerless as the most powerless peasant" to contradict the authority and power of Stalin (Niebuhr, *Political Problems* 35). As the Dewey Commission found, Trotsky was by no means a traitor to Marxist ideals. His conviction by the USSR was



the result of political corruption and pressure more than anything else. Stalin's absolute control over the government and party policy was evidence that the Communist regime was doomed from the start to end in dictatorship and tyranny; there was simply no means of internal checks or controls that prevented the abuse of power.

Another criticism levied against Communism was its idealism and the "moral pretension" which was based on the "utopian illusions" found within Marxism. Niebuhr even went so far as to argue that Marxism idealism was more dangerous than Nazism. Niebuhr lambasted Communist supporters for their blind adherence to ideology and an "ends justify the means" approach. He scathingly wrote:

The fact is that the Utopianism [of Communism] is the basis of the evil in communism as well as of its greater danger. It provides a moral façade for the most unscrupulous political policy, giving the communist oligarch the moral warrant to suppress and sacrifice immediate values in the historical process for the sake of reaching so ideal a goal. (*Political Problems* 37)

Thus, Communists were blinded by "self-righteousness" and were willing to risk everything, and more importantly, anyone, for their goals.

Niebuhr equally shared a Deweyan criticism and attacked "Marxist dogmatism" and "its pretensions of scientific rationality," both of which were sources of Communism's evil. Similar to Dewey, Niebuhr unveiled the almost dogmatic approach of Communists when it came to their ideology, which, through "tyrannical organization," prevented any sort of criticism or "re-examination" when faced with facts or events which "refute[d]" these beliefs. Communists were also worse than Nazis for the dogmatic adherence to their beliefs was based upon some form of "mystic institutions." The error stemmed from a zealous vision which looked "[...] at the world through the spectacles of inflexible dogma which alter[ed] the facts and creat[ed] a confused world picture" (*Political Problems* 41). This blind vision of the world was not only misleading, but also created an "ideological inflexibility" leading Niebuhr to profess that Communism was "consistently totalitarian" in every shape or form.

For Niebuhr, finding any sort of ideological, political, or economic abuse committed by the Communists was easy. He reasoned that:

The combination of dogmatism and tyranny lead to shocking irrationalities in communist trials, where the victims [were] made to confess to the most implausible charges. Since the communist dogma allow[ed] for no differences

of opinion among the elect, every deviation from orthodoxy [was] not only branded as treason but [was] attributed to some original sinful social taint. Thus, the fallen Czech communist leader Shansky confess[ed] that his alleged 'nationalist-Zionist' treason must [have been] attributed to his 'bourgeois-nationalist' origin. (*Political Problems* 41-42)

Though Christianity acknowledged that original sin was a part of human nature, there was still Grace to bring the individual into God's light. Niebuhr's criticism was that Communism focused strictly on the "inherent" evils of class, without offering a "way out." Essentially, if someone in a Communist country was stained with the bourgeoisie class, s/he was to be branded for life, and no amount of alleged political loyalty or ideology could change the Party's stance.

Niebuhr's biting reproaches against Communism made him a favorite amongst conservative commentators and scholars in the US, especially throughout the early years of the Cold War. Nevertheless, during the tumultuous 1960s and the Vietnam War, Niebuhr became critical of not only Communism, but America's response to it. Though originally supportive of the Vietnam War, arguing that "Southeast Asia would fall" if the US abandoned South Vietnam, the "created disaster" of the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies pushed Niebuhrians to the left and the anti-war movement (Dorrien 28).

Niebuhr himself was growing more and more disturbed by the American response: "The carnage and futility of the war sickened him. Niebuhr protested that containment should not be enforced beyond the boundaries of America's vital interests, and the anti-communism had become over-ideologized and militarized." The Vietnam War demonstrated the faults of the containment policy, and it was in his later years that Niebuhr argued that the two superpowers "had to work out a coexistence that lessened the threat of a nuclear war" (Dorrien 29).

His changing stance regarding the Vietnam War reflected his specific religious and political philosophies which focused on events in relation to human nature. The change in point of view was surprising for many Americans as "[h]is fame rested heavily, of course, on his having urged the US to enter World War II [...]" (Dorrien 25) Niebuhr had always felt that the best way to defend against Communism was maintaining a democratic Europe. Asia was culturally too different, and too far removed for American intervention to succeed. Containment was indeed possible, but when centered and focused on the right geo-political areas. However, it would be simplistic to focus only on his political realism for his Christian realism was also a moral reflection of the events and times surrounding him. Hence, discussing Niebuhr's thought revolves around a pertinent question: which Niebuhr? For the engaged leftist of the 1920s would

have not recognized the more seasoned, tempered, and critical Niebuhr of the Cold War (Shinn 16).

Nevertheless, it was this change in Niebuhr's thinking that heralded a drastic modification of his political philosophy from one based on Christian morality to one grounded on Christian Pragmatism. It was this specific Pragmatism, focused primarily on international relations, the use of power, and an applicable standard of justice which made Niebuhr the bridge between Pragmatisms. His critical approach, combined with a mastery of the written word and an impressive intellectual prowess, provided examples of proximate solutions to global problems. This amalgamation allowed Niebuhr to be the springboard connecting the classical Pragmatism of Dewey, who focused on education and democracy as culture, to contemporary pragmatists such as Rorty who analyzed the importance of language. This bridge was forged through Niebuhr's simultaneous moral and realistic analyses of the world around him. By focusing on international relations and power politics, Niebuhr laid important groundwork for future pragmatists to approach philosophy through a morally globalized context, and expand Pragmatism beyond the simply "American" philosophy that it was, continuing to add to the rich intellectual history of American liberalism.



## **Conclusion: Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The argument that Niebuhr reflects a certain branch of Pragmatism is nothing new. Authors such as Daniel F. Rice, Roger Shinn, Mark Douglas, and Mark L. Haas, as well as Niebuhr himself, have all at one point or another defended or explained how Niebuhr, in spite of his youthful and biting criticisms of Dewey, carried on, if not in name, certainly in pragmatic traditions. For example, Roger Shinn argued that Niebuhr's vision of Pragmatism was one "[...] aimed not to write about the problems of theology but to write about human problems" and thus was "a pragmatism in a theological context" (qtd. in Rice, "Introduction" par. 5). Rice himself agreed with Shinn, adding that Niebuhr's Pragmatism was performing a functional service to theology by attempting to ground it in the realities of the world. Similarly, Niebuhr rejected any form of metaphysical absolutism or aloofness that would remove the human element from politics, faith, and religion (Rice, *Circle* 5).

What this research has tried to demonstrate, through a pragmatic historic analysis of world events, is how Niebuhr was not as anti-liberal as he claimed, but instead was an intermediary and evolutionary step in American Pragmatism and liberalism, thereby making him a unique addition to Pragmatism's rich history, rather than simply a part of any existing branch. Modern pragmatists such as Richard Rorty or Hilary Putnam also identify pragmatic thought in Niebuhr's philosophies. Rorty believed that because Niebuhr distrusted any form of ontological or epistemological "pretensions," he functioned as a "peripheral" theologian. This put him in perfect alignment with contemporary pragmatic thought. He stated that Niebuhr:

[w]ished to keep 'alive the historicist sense that this century's (20<sup>th</sup>) superstition was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described. (qtd. in Rice, "Introduction" par. 6)

Niebuhr was pragmatic in his approach to theology because he attempted to relate his theology to actual problems, and not hide away in an academic ivory tower or otherwise remove himself from the world as the clergy of medieval Europe did.

Even if Niebuhr was “willing to describe himself as a Jamesian pragmatist,” Niebuhr’s relationship with Pragmatism was complicated to say the least (Douglas 221). Furthermore, when scholars agree on Niebuhr’s pragmatic influences, they are often less quickly to do so when it comes to the degree of this influence. On one end of the spectrum are thinkers such as Richard Fox who claimed that:

Niebuhr was a thoroughgoing Jamesian pragmatist, as he had revealed in his BD and MA theses at Yale. Truth in the moral realm was personal, vital, a product of the will as much as mind, confirmed not in logic but in experience. Truth was what ‘worked’ – as long as it contravened no known facts – in the furtherance of desired ends. (*Reinhold Niebuhr* 84)

Niebuhr’s refusal to acknowledge any form of universal truth led credence to the argument as all pragmatists did likewise. However, other scholars, such as John Patrick Diggins, felt that Niebuhr’s religious background, and *de facto* belief in some form of structured and thus, absolutist universe, was evidence that there were fundamental differences that could not be overcome (Douglas 222).

At the other end, Diggins and others believed that Niebuhr fell into a category all of its own. What Diggins called “Christian existentialist” others referred to as “Christian Pragmatism”, including Niebuhr due to how his particular form of naturalism was expressed: “Niebuhr himself eventually adopted ‘Christian pragmatism’ as an appropriate name for the ‘firm resolve that inherited dogmas and generalizations will not be accepted, no matter how revered or venerable, if they do not contribute to the establishment of justice in a situation’” (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* 241-242). Niebuhr was by no means the first to be donned with the title, nor did he coin the term. Nevertheless, his particular blend of theology and political realism did resonate with other religious scholars. Conversely, not all of these scholars were necessarily as dichotomous as classic pragmatists would believe. Authors such as Howard R. Burkle, for example, understood and appreciated the value and need for Pragmatism, in both a philosophical and religious sense.

Burkle, similar to Niebuhr, was aware of Christianity’s precarious position in a modern, and increasingly secular world. He lamented how many young college students misunderstood Christianity’s very nature, believing it to be a completely pacifist, and therefore weak,

“contemplative philosophy” in which any meaningful action or cause was replaced with a “feel good” self-righteousness of “if-only” sentimentality. He wrote:

Most students simply do not comprehend the profound relevance and power of Christian theism. They are polite toward it, sometimes even eager and reverent, but they do not regard it as a transforming power in the secular problems of contemporary life. In a word, Christianity is impractical. In what follows, impractical will be used in this sense: as the impotence of a point of view, when acted upon, to produce important beneficial consequences in the crucial problem-areas of contemporary affairs. (578)

Modern society viewed Christianity as an outdated relic which believed that a better world was possible if only humanity were “good.” Burkle disagreed completely with this assessment, and to a greater degree with Dewey’s attack against traditional Christianity, especially the notion that it was “[...] contemplative rather than active, mythological rather than factual, speculative instead of controlling, conservative instead of progressive” (578).

Burkle argued that Christianity and Pragmatism were not so mutually exclusive as everyone believed. The issue was not an either/or approach where religion was dated on the one side and Pragmatism heralding in a new era on the other. In true pragmatic form, Burkle found that the solution to the misconception of Christianity laid partly within the problem itself. Contrary to the belief that “Christianity ha[d] nothing to offer” in political or economic times of crises, a pragmatic approach to Christianity provided the necessary “opportunity” to confront real-world problems from a pragmatic Christian approach. There were two main components of Burkle’s philosophy and arguments as to the relevance of Christianity in a modern world: 1) Christianity itself had to be viewed as “practical” in the sense that it can produce “important beneficial consequences” in modern life. 2) Christians need to remember that “[...] a living faith must perpetually read the signs of the times and mobilize its resources to meet changing conditions” (Burkle 579). Put otherwise, Christian values needed to adapt and change with societal values. The universal “truth” or “laws” of God were not as set in stone as many Christians believed.

A point of contention between Christianity and Pragmatism was the importance and need of scientific inquiry. As anti-scientific as traditional Christianity may have appeared, Burkle claimed that there were three common points shared between science and Christianity. First and foremost, science and Christianity “appealed” to experience as it taught “the subject to sensitize and accommodate himself to an order of things which exists independent of his mind” (585). Secondly, both maintained some level of “serious consideration of universal truth-claims”

(585). Burkle's opinions were simply that just because science had not found any universal laws or truths yet, did not mean that they did not exist. Finally, both attempted to "validate hypotheses" through action and "submit their conclusions to communal certification" (585). For science, it was through peer review, in Christianity it was through divine revelation and the innate personal connection between the individual and God.

These traits of Christian Pragmatism did not go unnoticed by Niebuhr and his intellectual disciples. Mark L. Haas viewed Niebuhr as such a pragmatist. Though Niebuhr was less focused on scientific theory and approach, he did share a strong belief with pragmatists, including Dewey, on the notion of justice. Haas demonstrated how:

[Niebuhr's] pragmatism was based on the goal to realize the greatest degree of justice that the permanent and often intractable presence of sin and necessity would allow. In other words, Niebuhr did *not* examine consequences because there was no other standard other than ends by which one's acts could be determined and judged. (607)

Similarly, as human nature was imperfect, justice was a movable target, and one that had to constantly be improved.

Of course, these overt, and major similarities between Dewey and Niebuhr did not mean that their relationship was unproblematic. Douglas commented on this factor by highlighting what he called Niebuhr's "two pragmatisms." Douglas broke them down into being "explicit" and "implicit." The combination of which made Niebuhr a "frustrating pragmatist – or a frustration to pragmatists" because he ended up rejecting the very notions that made him a pragmatist. He did so by, ironically and exasperatingly, using pragmatic means (223).

Niebuhr's explicit Pragmatism was the easiest to recognize as it was one in which he disagreed little with Dewey and other pragmatists. This was mostly seen either through outward affirmations, adorations, or explanations of the benefits of certain pragmatic principles, such as refusal to adhere to dogma, the importance of free thought, and educated inquiry. This "explicit Pragmatism" was best exemplified by Niebuhr's "social ethic" and his constant struggle towards relative standards of justice and equality. The second Pragmatism for Niebuhr was more complicated, and paradoxical to understand. Douglass argued that it was one that ran throughout Niebuhr's "corpus" and was "[...] marked by the notion that human experience [was] tested against the demands of relevance rather than truth" (223). This meant that like other pragmatists and in spite of his religious convictions, Niebuhr did not necessarily search out Truth, here to symbolize some universal goal or ideal. Instead, Niebuhr's concentration was on



the methods and means at arriving at whatever was “true” for the given circumstance. This is all the more confusing and paradoxical given that Niebuhr was a religious man who believed in a universal God. What made Niebuhr a Christian pragmatist, however, was that this universal power (God) was unknowable to humankind. Simultaneously, man used experience and the freedom (intelligence and will) bestowed upon him by God to adapt to a History that was equal parts out of humanity’s control as influenceable by their decisions. Andrew J. Bacevich echoed this sentiment in his introduction to *The Irony of American History* when he maintained that Niebuhr would have lambasted anyone claiming to know History or its ultimate outcome as “charlatans or worse” (par. 12).

It would seem then that Niebuhr should have openly accepted the mantle of pragmatist. However, he never did so, not necessarily out of any errors found within the philosophy or methods, but due to an absence of “trust” in regard to Pragmatism. In very Niebuhrian terms, Douglas maintained that it was a lack of “integration” that led to the “irony of Niebuhr’s pragmatism.” It turned out that Niebuhr’s critiques of Dewey and other pragmatists were based upon pragmatic methods and “considerations.” Douglass contended:

Niebuhr [saw] pragmatism as useful because it represent[ed] a way of doing ethics that [could] recognize the degree to which historical problems must be met with proximate solutions. Yet he also [saw] pragmatism as limited because those proximate solutions addres[ed] neither the ultimate origin of those problems (sin) nor their final resolution (love). Paradoxically, however, his suspicions about pragmatism’s limitations [were], themselves, derived for his pragmatic insistence on the ultimate relevance of sin and love in making sense of the human condition. That is, only a religious position like that of prophetic Christianity [could] adequately account for both the historically revealed failures of human beings and their ability to make significant advances in history. (238)

Christianity held a slight advantage over Pragmatism in that it could be “true,” in the “non-pragmatic sense” (Douglass 239). The paradox was that as a Christian, Niebuhr wanted to believe in universal truths or absolutes, but being a pragmatist, he understood that these truths may not have been discovered yet. This lead Niebuhr to an ironic point as Douglas maintained:

[h]is explicit pragmatism [was] necessarily driven by his implicit pragmatism, but since he always want[ed] to say more than his implicit pragmatism [would] allow, he ke[pt] trying to distance himself from it. Yet he [could] not do this

without distancing himself from the very aspects of pragmatism that he accept[ed]; namely its ability to deal with historical contingency in responsibly relevant ways. And as a result, he [was] never able to resolve his relationship with the pragmatists and pragmatism. (239-240)

If, nothing less, Niebuhr had difficulty in aligning himself with Pragmatism, future authors and thinkers seemed to have had little, to no trouble finding shared ground between Dewey and Niebuhr.

Daniel F. Rice is one such author who maintains that when both men agreed, it was due to “common pragmatic heritage and orientation” which highlighted that “at heart, Niebuhr and Dewey represented divergent views of Pragmatism” (*Odyssey* 261). The issue is more a matter of choice in vocabulary than anything else. In efforts to either distinguish, contradict, oppose, or align Niebuhr with Dewey, notions such as “Christian realism,” “Christian Pragmatism” or even Rice’s Christian ‘pragmatic realism’ were all designated to show how Niebuhr was against liberalism’s “pragmatic rationalism” (*Odyssey* 262).

Rice went even further to highlight the pragmatic theological aspect of Niebuhr’s thought. He wrote how:

[i]t should also be recognized that Niebuhr’s theology was a theology in a pragmatic context. Niebuhr’s *theological* pragmatism [was] the proper clue to both his lack of interest in establishing himself as a theologian in the usual sense and to his basic dispute with Paul Tillich. Niebuhr’s confession of a lack of interest in the fine points of theology understood in the European context and his acknowledgement of de Tocqueville’s observation of the ‘strong pragmatic interest of American Christianity’ go much more deeply than has been generally recognized. (*Odyssey* 263)

Niebuhr’s pragmatic influences stem from his refusal to deal in absolutes or universal truths, in spite of what his religious convictions may have wanted him to do. God was important, and Christianity was vital in a world of sin and pride, however, theology needed to be applied in a more pragmatic way, and Christianity had to escape the confines of idealism. Both of these things could be done via Niebuhr’s unique brand of political and religious philosophy which looked at the real world, and thus international problems through the lens of human nature, power, and relative justice. This meant that liberalism itself had to be transformed and, ironically, become more “pragmatic.” Contrary to others who focused on philosophy or

morality, Niebuhr looked at the world differently. This difference created a new philosophical approach (especially when discussing international relations): “liberal realism” (Rice, *Odyssey* 265).

Seemingly an oxymoron, “liberal realism” was Niebuhrian thought applied to politics and international relations. It was one in which institutions were important, contrary to what traditional realists believed. This was not because they were independent or powerful factors in creating some form of world government. Instead, thus demonstrating Niebuhr’s liberalism, institutions could be used as moral and ideological tools to evoke slow, but progressive improvements in justice. Niebuhrian politics required a more concrete understanding of power politics in international relations which consequently demanded a better comprehension of human nature for “[a] Christian realist analysis of international affairs recognizes that power is central to international politics-it is still power politics out there. Power is the fundamental currency of security” (Patterson, “Christian” 173).

It is a combination of these principles, beliefs, and ideas that make Niebuhr a unique pragmatist and pertinent figure of study, even if Niebuhr is considered a thinker of a “long ago world,” where problems were “simpler” and people did not have to deal with the complex realities of multiple “worlds.” However, this belief grossly underestimates the need to study Niebuhr in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century context. Due to his biblical understanding of history, he recognized better than most, that society’s, and to a greater extent, the world’s problems are slight modifications of previously existing ones. This was even the case for the Cold War. Though it was indeed a new global phenomenon, it was still an extreme version of old-world empires in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century context. Discussing Niebuhr’s prominence as a modern thinker, Patterson agreed, arguing how:

First and foremost, Niebuhr reminds us of the complexity of human nature and human collectives. We should recognize the vast potential inherent in humankind (light) while also being aware of the propensity for pride and self-promotion of individuals and communities (darkness). Second, in the ‘third wave’ of democratization since the Cold War’s end, we should be cautious in building political structures in transition countries based on utopian views of capitalism or representative government. Instead, democratic governance should be based on the orderly rule of law that checks the ambitions of the governed as well as those who govern. (“Christianity” 14)

Echoing this thought, Rice highlighted the insight and wisdom of Niebuhr when he stated:

Clearly, what continues to be relevant about Niebuhr is the intellectual framework and understanding he brought to bear on such patterns and problems. He both recognized and forcefully addressed these ingrained habits of our nation's life. Niebuhr was a man wise about religion, insightful about politics, and astute about the contours and shenanigans of American culture. (*Circle* 247)

One "shenanigan" that Niebuhr constantly pointed out was the idea of the "critic of national innocence" which was nothing more than a "delusion" for any nation (Schlesinger, Jr. "Forgetting" par. 5).

The plagues and problems running rampant through the world are not as new as many Niebuhrian detractors claim. They are simply rehashing old arguments, using different vocabulary. Regardless of the point and era in time, Niebuhr's philosophy provides needed insights such as the necessity for nations to stand up to the overt aggression of others. Praising Niebuhr's reaction to World War II, Schlesinger, Jr. wrote: "The heart of man is obviously not O.K. Niebuhr's analysis of human nature and history came as a vast illumination. His argument had the double merit of accounting for Hitler and Stalin and for the necessity of standing up to them" ("Forgetting," par. 9).

There is equally little shock regarding the speculative resurgence of Niebuhr's popularity when looking at the problems facing the world, and more specifically the West today. Charles Lemert, for example argues that there are two reasons for "the Niebuhr revival." The first is due to the "religious challenge to the modern ideal of political culture." There seems to be a global trend of religiosity appearing throughout the world threatening traditional divisions between secular and religious cultures. The second threat:

[i]s the anxiety rising from the evidence of a deep structural decline of the global dominance of the West. As the new millennium takes shape, The United States, but Europe also, has been politically challenged from the outside as never before—from the terrorisms of vaguely Islamic fringe actors, by the resource-rich nations from the Arctic and Venezuela to Africa and the Middle East, but also by the economic authority and diplomatic independence of East and South Asia. (Lemert, Introduction par. 9)

*Pax-Americana* is being threatened and a Niebuhrian analysis helps quell some of the fears stemming from the sudden loss in position and power, especially as his particular brand of

political philosophy managed to maintain morality without succumbing to idealism, all whilst using power and not plummeting into cynicism. Perhaps though, it is Niebuhr's emphasis on the importance of reflection, self-criticism, and penance that are the best lessons for the modern world.

As highlighted in *The Irony of American History*, many of the problems that America faced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were related to its inability to understand, and therefore manage, its new position in the world. The United States wished to remain "innocent" even though all evidence was demonstrating the contrary. Its actions were based on "morality" and "ideology" rather than on national interests. Perhaps had the U.S. recognized its own limitations in world politics, especially given its relative "inexperience" on the world scene, many problems could have been avoided. The irony was that the difficulties which the United States faced were self-created, all because it failed to recognize its position, and acted out of "innocent ideology" rather than through an apt comprehension of power politics.

This guiltless attitude engendered even more issues for America in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. George W. Bush's administration's vision of the world was far too simplistic and divided between an "us and them" mentality. This approach was admittedly and understandably shaped by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. As influential as these attacks may have been, Bush's religious beliefs entered greatly into his foreign policy decision-making, an aspect that Niebuhr would have found troubling.

The Bush Doctrine was simply the 21<sup>st</sup>-century expression of American Exceptionalism, and thus American "messianic" nature. In connection with this research, there were some commonalities between the Bush Doctrine and Niebuhr's philosophies, as Mark Amstutz pointed out: 1) A common framework and a 'reliance' on a mutual approach to morality and power. 2) A shared point of view on the necessity and use of power. 3) Both represented a view of politics which was "rooted in Christian anthropology" which demonstrated how Protestant Christianity was the best means of explaining human history and human nature (127). 4) The two agreed on the common goal of spreading freedom and democracy, albeit for Bush it was through spreading and implanting democracy abroad (122-127).

Nevertheless, any similarities between Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism and the Bush Doctrine are only surface-deep. Niebuhr would have heavily criticized Bush's "excessive social engineering" and the idea that humanity can massively improve society and human nature with only positive results (Amstutz 129). Furthermore, Bush was far too confident in his victory as well as in the positive change such a victory would entail, thereby ignoring the importance and influence of history. Similarly, the simplistic rhetoric and general naïve moralism of the Bush Doctrine overlooked any underlying political or normative values "in tension" between the

opposing political and military forces. Finally, Niebuhr would have ultimately been critical of the “excessive self-confidence” and “self-righteous nature” of Bush’s foreign policy (Amstutz 130-132).

Seemingly to speak to Bush, and to a certain extent to other neo-conservatives of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Niebuhr wrote how “[s]uch dreams, though fortunately not corrupted by the lust of power, are, of course, not free of moral pride which creates a hazard to their realization” (*Irony* 71). Compounding on the error, was America’s handling of terrorism itself. Where once it was common place to attack individual terrorist cells, terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has evolved into a general “War on Terror” with no theoretical or practical end in sight. Again, Niebuhr can help shine light on contemporary international and political issues through his analyses of politics and power. Though he would have agreed that military power was an appropriate response to the current terrorist threat, he would also have suggested a more seasoned approach, one in which consequences would be at least considered (Cool 28). He wrote:

Men and nations must use their power with the purpose of making it an instrument of justice and a servant of interests broader than their own. Yet they must be ready to use it though they become aware that the power of a particular nation or individual, even when under strong religious and social sanctions, is never so used that there is a perfect coincidence between the value which justifies it and the interests of the wielder of it. (*Irony* 40)

It was understandable how the U.S. was tackling terrorists, but a prolonged, costly, and unending War on Terrorism did not constitute appropriate use of power.

Reducing the conflict to a Manichean view of “good versus evil” was an oversimplification of international relations and was a result of “self-righteousness and pride” and use of “[m]oralistic language” which “should [have been] avoided” (Amstutz 121). One such example of this was the Hussein regime in Iraq. It was clear that Hussein was a threat to his people, but also, as the Bush Administration argued, the world itself. This menace therefore had to be taken care of, with or without the consent of the world. Niebuhr’s Christian Pragmatism would have pointed out several problems with this approach, including but not limited to, the conflict of competing values. As a matter of fact, contemporary Niebuhrians would “[...] have been highly skeptical of, if not downright aghast at, much of the American response to the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001” (Cool 26). Though speaking of the Cold War, Niebuhr’s analysis could have easily been applied to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He warned that:

Many of the values of [a] democratic society which are most highly prized in the West, are, therefore, neither understood nor desired outside of the orbit of western society. [...] But even if they did understand [Western values], they cannot be expected to feel the loss of liberty with the same sense of grievous deprivation as in the West. (*Irony* 126)

America's fault was its naïve belief that all nations strove to be like the United States, or wanted American-style freedom. Aside from the moral and philosophical errors of trying to implant Western institutions and values in a non-Western context, there were serious security and political consequences as well. For instance, there was the rise in sectarian violence in 2006 as well as the simple historic difficulty for any Western power to hold the Middle East. Similarly, Niebuhr would have analyzed the Hussein regime from a balance of power perspective, understanding that though a cruel dictator, he nevertheless was a stabilizing force in the region, adding weight to the adage: better the Devil one knows than the Devil one doesn't. As a consequence of Hussein's fall, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaida and ISIL have managed to gain significant strongholds in the Middle East, creating further security, political, and economic issues for America and her allies.

Niebuhr's thoughts and analyses have been better reflected, although not perfectly, with the Obama administration. This is not surprising considering Obama quoted Niebuhr as his most influential author. Holder and Josephson, for example, saw "four particular topics" which appeared apparent when highlighting Niebuhr's impact on the Obama presidency: 1) a shared "suspicion of unregulated or irresponsible power." 2) Both Niebuhr and Obama demonstrated critical points of view when studying human nature in communities. 3) Obama, like Niebuhr examined problems through a realist political lens, understanding power and the necessity to use it when required. 4) When confronted with political situations, Obama established an "analysis of human ethical and political situations through the lenses of irony and paradox" (40).

Aside from similarities in political philosophy or beliefs, President Obama seems to reflect Niebuhr's theology as well. In spite of what his detractors may claim, Obama is a devout Christian, following in the lines of "Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King." Like them, Obama has a normative structure which would convict "the Christian right of sin." This paradox is due to the fact that Obama, like his Christian realist predecessors "[...] suggest[s] that the true Christian will work in the public square to accomplish the concept of social justice, 'caring

for the least of these,' that [were] derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ" (Holder, Josephson 179).

In spite of these similarities, and the importance of Niebuhr's legacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Obama, and other Niebuhrian politicians are faced with a difficult reality: Niebuhr, though brilliant in theory and philosophy, is not always "a superb guide for politicians" (Holder, Josephson 182). The reason for this can be broken down into three factors, or as Holder and Josephson summarize:

In short, the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr for governing may be sophisticated and interesting. But politically, Niebuhr's legacy creates a significant headwind. Theory- even the theory of a Christian realist- is difficult to make practically effective. This is true for (at least) three reasons- Niebuhr's doctrine of sin and the effect this causes in both policy and how policy is spoken about; Niebuhr's tendency to focus on proximate goals; and finally, the ironic-tragic figure of the American president in Niebuhr's scheme of history. (183)

The difficulty of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is perhaps the easiest to understand. This issue can be boiled down to the idea that people, especially Americans, do not like being told they are not "special" or "unique." To maintain a Niebuhrian conception of human nature would imply that political rhetoric would have to "profoundly change." This means that America "can no longer be the best hope of the world" and the rhetoric that America is the "best nation" would have to stop (Holder, Josephson 183).

The issue of proximate goals is related to Niebuhr's conception of human nature as well. Contrary to Bush 43, who proudly waved a "Mission Accomplished" banner following the fall of the Hussein regime, a politically astute Christian realist would never declare victory too soon. Though pragmatic and calculating, policies such as these do little to "stir popular opinion" (Holder, Josephson 184). In fact, it is most likely that following Niebuhr's proximate goals focus to its end, would result in a one-term presidency as the person in question would be considered ineffective, weak, or indecisive.

Finally, Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism is difficult in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world because of the general populace's inability to understand its own ironic-tragic position in history. Niebuhr recognized that leaders had to commit morally evil acts for the societal benefits of all. S/he has the responsibility to "condemn while saving" and "must be able to subjugate while liberating." Nevertheless, the American public is not ready to accept this reality, and focuses instead on an



“impossible model of purity.” This indicates that regardless of its brilliance, “Niebuhrian statesmanship is too subtle for public consumption” (Holder, Josephson 184).

All in all, Niebuhr’s contemporary influence cannot be ignored, even if he is not the easiest or “superb guide” for statesmen Obama demonstrates that Niebuhrian thought is alive and well. This being said, Niebuhr’s prominent resurgence in popularity and interest does not mean that politicians are lining up by the droves to announce their total dedication to America’s greatest theologian. For:

[w]hile Obama seems to have drunk deeply at the Niebuhrian trough, that drought may be a little too bitter for the American populace to drink willingly. Further, it is fair to ask whether it is too acerbic at times even for the president himself. The undercutting of cherished American popular notions of American exceptionalism both in its national character and its mission in the world; the suspicion of the motivations of both individuals and collectives; and the denial of the ideal of a Christian commonwealth or Christian politics—all of these may simply be too much for an electorate raised on the ideal of unassailable virtue and unlimited possibilities, and too much for a president who campaigned on hope and change. (Holder, Josephson 184)

Regardless of the difficulties of adapting Niebuhr’s thought to the modern world, his notions, philosophies, and analyses made Niebuhr not only one of the greatest political and theological minds of the twentieth century, but a valuable and interesting topic of research, if for no other reason that modern struggles have evolved beyond the classic State versus State conflict. As Robin W. Lovin, a contemporary Christian Realist, states in *Christian Realism and the New Realities* “[w]hat we have is not a clash of civilizations, but a new kind of competition of forces within the one modern world. What is new is the idea that something other than the power of states might set the terms for global order. Business and religion, in particular, seem poised to take this new role” (164).

This work was completed through an expository analysis of Niebuhr, which led to a deeper understanding of two American “isms.” The first was something that authors such as Louis Hartz identify as being almost as American as apple pie: Liberalism. Thus, this research returned to the origins of liberalism itself, specifically via the various Enlightenments that occurred in Europe.

European thought shone through the American Founding Fathers such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Each one representing a particular

“Americanized” branch of European philosophy. Whether it was through Jefferson expressing the “General Will” of Rousseau, or Hamilton and Madison demonstrating the need of conflicts of interest and using human nature against itself *à la* Scottish Enlightenment and Montesquieu, it appeared that the Founding Fathers had managed to take the various Enlightenment sources to create a truly unique, and American, branch of Liberalism.

This first “-ism” led in part, to the second, that being Pragmatism. Though never abandoning its liberal roots, Pragmatism was forged in war more than in philosophical *salons*. Ideology, absolutism, and mysticism had proven to be the cause of, not the salvation from, the woes of humanity. This was best demonstrated by the American Civil War, which not only scarred the landscape, but the American psyche for generations to come. As a result of the psychological damage, John Dewey understood the need for a non-absolutist approach to the world which was exemplified through his particular vision of Pragmatism.

John Dewey’s Pragmatism aimed at taking back control of the liberal values he believed had been corrupted by *laissez-faire* “faux liberals”, who were stuck in economic ideological dogma rather than allowing true human liberty to develop. The basis for Dewey’s political thought was to reanalyze the role of the individual and society. Where dogmatic liberals, and to a certain degree, transcendentalists created a strict separation between the two, arguing for the freedom of the individual over any sort of collective responsibility, Dewey instead focused on how the dichotomies of the world were illusory and the fact that the public and the individual were one and the same. Dewey, and to a greater extent Pragmatism enjoyed a massive amount of popularity in the United States and became *the* “American philosophy.” That was until global events shook the foundations of Pragmatism, thus leading to the ultimate and most interesting aspect of this research: pragmatic analysis of historic events.

The interest in this methodology stemmed from the idea that by studying world events from a pragmatic point of view could avoid a simple historic retelling while simultaneously allowing for an analysis of how these same events shaped the thinkers’ visions and philosophies. Instead, particular problems in circumstances, and actions were examined thanks to the philosophical “eyes” of two of America’s prominent liberal and pragmatic thinkers: John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr. Granted, Niebuhr never assumed these titles, but as has been demonstrated throughout this research, he was a liberal pragmatist in spite of himself. To prove this, the evolution of liberalism, first in Europe and then in America, had to be developed in order to underline and highlight the similarities between liberalism and Pragmatism. However, Dewey’s vision of Pragmatism was not infallible, and the events of the Two World Wars demonstrated many of these logical fallacies. The first and most glaring was, of course, Pragmatism’s complete misunderstanding of human nature and science. Dewey and other early 20<sup>th</sup>-century

liberals, felt that society could improve if only education were better, and people could master their darker selves. The events of World War I, and more specifically the political, economic, and social fallout of the inter-war period demonstrated just how wrong pragmatists were.

Thus, a different type of thinker emerged. Reinhold Niebuhr, growing up in the pragmatic and scientific age, was able to see the intellectual and philosophical failures of Dewey and his pragmatic beliefs. He argued instead for a return to a more basic, and more to the point realist, understanding of human nature. History had simply proven liberals wrong. Therefore, in order to achieve any form of improvement for humanity, proximate goals had to be set in place which understood power, self-interest, and the darker side of human nature.

Niebuhr's criticisms of Dewey and Pragmatism had an ironic effect, for in spite of claiming how much Dewey was different from Niebuhr, the latter's arguments, policies, and philosophies seemed to demonstrate that he was just a different branch of Deweyan thought. This was known by many names, including Christian realism or Christian Pragmatism, but as has been shown, regardless of the name, Niebuhr was more Deweyan than he either recognized or cared to admit.

Keeping this in mind, and continuing with the overall theme of analyzing historical events through pragmatic analysis, Niebuhr's thoughts and criticisms on World War I, the inter-war period, World War II, and the Cold War simply proved that Niebuhr was also a continuation and evolution of both American liberal and pragmatic thought. More importantly, and thanks to his Cold War reflections, Niebuhr demonstrated that he was a new type of realist, a "liberal realist" who managed to combine the best aspects of both international realism and liberalism whilst avoiding their pitfalls. The period of Niebuhr's "liberal realism" during the Cold War provided not only new insights into international politics, but was a turning point in his intellectual career. It was during this time that he was able to, as this research has demonstrated, to be a bridge between classic liberals and pragmatists and contemporary ones. By focusing on a combination of power and morality, of circumstance and overall values, Niebuhr managed to carry Deweyan pragmatic and liberal ideas to modern American society. He did so partly via his manner of analysis, but also through his use of language as well: "Niebuhr's pragmatic manner of theologizing involved his ability to appeal to, and draw upon, the sideboards of a theological tradition that had been marginalized, thus bringing its insights back into the conversation, if not entirely back in vogue" (Rice, "Introduction" xxi). Contemporary pragmatists were thus able to see a bit of themselves in Niebuhr's ability to look at information that was relevant to a situation, regardless of its source. Further proof of Niebuhr as a bridge rests on the importance of discourses and dialogues. As Rice argued, when he highlighted the link between Rorty and Niebuhr:

Set against the vapid and naïve idealism of our secular age, Niebuhr conceived of theology as a legitimate and creative mode of conversation through which crucial insights could be reintegrated into the center of the West's own cultural discourse. He played the role Richard Rorty valued so highly, namely, 'that of the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses' in whose 'salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices' and where 'disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of conversation.' In aiming for relevant connection to the worlds of society and politics, Niebuhr did so as a theological apologist who, akin to Friedrich Schleiermacher, effectively engaged secular despisers of religion as well as those residing within the religious communities. ("Introduction" xxii)

Niebuhr was an important voice in at least bringing groups to speak to one another, groups who would normally not do so. This factor alone makes Niebuhr and his particular brand of Pragmatism a continuing source of intellectual and philosophical wealth.

That being said, this research like most, has been unable to provide true totality when it comes to any of the topics discussed thus far. For example, each of the major components of this work, ranging from liberalism to Pragmatism, and from Dewey to Niebuhr themselves, all warrant independent, complex and dedicated studies. This work has attempted to be as complete as possible, by recognizing a variety of sources, both primary and secondary, as well as using pragmatic historic analysis to find as complex and as global a picture of both "isms" and thinkers as possible.

Admittedly, this means that the primary limit of this work is related to its depth of critical analysis of either "ism" or thinker. That is to say that not all critics, past or contemporary of the subjects studied may have not been discussed. Aware of this constraint, it has been the goal to remain as objective as possible when analyzing the subjects at hand. Thus, when able and pertinent, criticisms or logical fallacies from secondary sources or this research's author have been expressed. Therefore, this work is by no means exhaustive, and there are several other areas of research that this dissertation can potentially generate. One possibility is to further explore the relationship between Dewey and Niebuhr's naturalism. Another, as Rice suggested, is further exploration of what he referred to as Niebuhr's "theological pragmatism" (*Odyssey* 263). Perhaps though, the greatest potential for research lies in Niebuhr himself and his availability in the Francophone world. Contrary to Dewey who has seen a dramatic increase in popularity in France either with new translations of his books appearing or even analyses of his

thought such as Jean-Pierre Cometti's *La Démocratie radicale* in which Cometti attempts to portray Dewey as a radical thinker, Niebuhr has not yet known such popularity in France. A francophone analysis, and more to the point, French translations of Niebuhr's works would be the first logical step in creating *des niebuhriens français*. Keeping the French-speaking world in mind, another possible research opportunity would be any form of link between Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism and Jacques Ellul's political philosophy.

These opportunities are a few of the avenues available for future research and can be potentially based upon the philosophical foundations of both authors which have been established by this work. This has been done through a unique examination of each thinker responded to the world events surrounding them. Ranging from incidents that occurred before their births such as the American Civil War, all the way through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the benefits of this research have been to look at these events through pragmatic analysis. Even if there are "Thirteen Pragmatisms" as Arthur Lovejoy proclaimed, it does not diminish the intrigue, depth, and abundance of pragmatic thought. Instead, Pragmatism encompassed a variety of opinions and authors, often with conflicting points of view, who all still claim to be pragmatists. That is because in spite of the variations portrayed by Dewey, Putnam, Rorty or even Niebuhr, there are still certain fundamental beliefs that are shared. The primary one shared amongst most pragmatists is in regard to absolutism, whether in politics, philosophy, or religion and how it is to be avoided, as all answers to problems are dependent on the particulars of the situation. Interestingly, Niebuhr and Dewey share a second similarity, that is unique to them. Niebuhr to a much larger extent than Dewey argued against any criticism of relativity for both felt that there was the possibility of universal truths; humanity just has not discovered them yet. Discovering these truths would need to be based in experience (either religious in the case of Niebuhr, or scientific in the case of Dewey). In the meantime, societies have to continually work to improve themselves either through social intelligence (Dewey), or through proximate solutions (Niebuhr). Regardless of the position taken, it is clear that Pragmatism, whether it is Dewey's vision of pragmatic naturalism, or Niebuhr's Christian Pragmatism, has continued to be a defining and important part of American political philosophy. It is one which has evolved from the roots of the European Enlightenments, and has adapted to meet particularly American circumstances. A situation which allowed it to continue to transform from a classic *laissez-faire* liberalism to a philosophy in which the individual and society are not opposed to one another, but two parts of the same whole that have to work together in order to improve society.

Niebuhr was a pinnacle point in Pragmatism's evolution since "it [was] this [P]ragmatism and naturalism that relates Christian realism to all forms of human knowledge, which also relates it at once to other ways of thinking about ethics and politics" (Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*

242). This allowed Niebuhr to act as the bridge between the idealism of the early-1920s to the Cold War realities of the 1960s. Though at first as idealistic as Dewey, his interactions with world events generated a harsher critique of politics and society, reminding peoples of all nations that humanity is not as easy as philosophers, whether Enlightenment or Marxist, would have them believe. The reality of human nature is that it is capable of great creation and great destruction; aspects that classic liberalism and Marxism failed to consider. Therefore, Niebuhr centered the debate once more on what it means to be a human being, and the ironies and paradoxes that go part and parcel with it. Moreover, he focused not just on philosophical questions on the nature of democracy but how to appropriately use power within democracies in an ever-changing and complex world, thereby demonstrating not only why he was an important and prominent thinker, but also provided the pathway for American liberalism and Pragmatism to continue well on past his death into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Résumé et Mots Clés

*Mots clés : Pragmatisme politique, réalisme chrétien, Dewey, Niebuhr, libéralisme, idéalisme, pensée politique, philosophie politique.*

Ce travail visera à analyser la pensée politique du théologien et politologue américain Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), et plus particulièrement la façon dont le Pragmatisme, la pensée philosophique dominante au début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle aux États-Unis, a pu influencer son œuvre. Critique à l'égard de l'idéalisme libéral de John Dewey (1859-1952), de ses contemporains, et plus spécifiquement à l'encontre de l'optimisme dont faisait preuve le pragmatisme politique et un pan des sciences sociales vis-à-vis de la nature de l'homme, Niebuhr n'arriva pourtant pas à échapper à l'influence du pragmatisme, d'où le sujet de ce travail de recherche : les influences du Pragmatisme politique, celui de John Dewey plus particulièrement, sur l'œuvre de Reinhold Niebuhr et sur son réalisme chrétien. Cette thèse rassemblera les grandes œuvres des deux penseurs pour comparer la pensée politique de chacun aux fins de révéler aussi comment les deux auteurs se situent dans une évolution générale du libéralisme américain. Pourtant séparés d'une génération, les deux hommes ont tous les deux très présents sur la scène intellectuelle libérale pendant la majorité de la première partie du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle américain. Plus jeune que Dewey, Niebuhr a longtemps considéré la pensée de son aîné comme naïve quant à la nature humaine et donc incapable de conduire à une analyse acceptable du monde contemporain. Selon Niebuhr, la pensée Dewey n'était qu'une continuation de l'idéalisme des Lumières ; Dewey restait figé dans un optimisme injustifié à propos de la vision globalement bonne de la nature humaine. Néanmoins, malgré cette critique, Niebuhr fut influencé par ce dernier, de manière plus ou moins consciente. L'objectif de cette thèse est de souligner ces influences sur le travail de Niebuhr afin de montrer que la pensée niebuhrienne est en quelque sorte un prolongement de la pensée pragmatiste de Dewey, démontré par le Pragmatisme chrétien, et que Niebuhr fait partie du courant de pensée libérale malgré lui. Au mépris des différences fondamentales entre les deux hommes, nous allons donc tenter de démontrer que Niebuhr s'inscrit dans une tradition intellectuelle typiquement américaine, le Pragmatisme étant considéré comme le seul mouvement philosophique authentiquement américain, afin de parvenir à une plus grande connaissance de ces deux penseurs majeurs, mais, aussi, du paysage politique américain.

## Summary and Key Words

*Key Words: Political Pragmatism, Christian realism, Dewey, Niebuhr, Liberalism, Idealism, Political Thought, Political Philosophy*

This work aims to analyze the political thought of the American theologian and political scientist Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). More specifically, it will analyze the way in which Pragmatism, the dominant philosophical thought at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, was able to influence Niebuhr's writings. Critical towards the liberal idealism of John Dewey (1859-1952) and his contemporaries, Niebuhr's Christian realism was a counter against the optimism that political Pragmatism and some parts of the social sciences demonstrated in regard to the nature of man. Despite these criticisms, Niebuhr was unable to escape Pragmatism's influence. This influence is the reason for this research: how political Pragmatism, specifically that of John Dewey was able to have an effect on Reinhold Niebuhr's works and his Christian realism. This thesis will study the major works of these two thinkers in order to compare the political thought of each as well as to demonstrate how Niebuhr was, in spite of any criticisms, a part of the overall American liberal tradition. Although separated by a generation, these two men were present in the liberal intellectual scene of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Younger than Dewey, Niebuhr had for a long time considered Dewey's thought as nothing more than an idealized and outdated continuation of Enlightenment optimism which was incapable of accurately analyzing the contemporary world. For Niebuhr, Dewey remained frozen in an unwarranted optimism regarding the positive vision of human nature. Nevertheless, Niebuhr was, consciously or not, influenced by Dewey. This thesis's goal is to highlight the influences of Pragmatism in Niebuhr's works in order to show that Niebuhrian thought, in some ways, just a continuation of Dewey's pragmatic thought, specifically through the notions of Christian Pragmatism and therefore, fits within an overall framework of American Liberalism. In spite of the fundamental differences in thought between these two men, we are going to attempt to show that Niebuhr was a part of the typically American intellectual tradition, that is to say, Pragmatism; considered to be a uniquely American philosophical movement. It will be analyzed in order to achieve a greater understanding of these important thinkers, but also, of America's political landscape.





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