

Niebuhr's America

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These words come to you wherever you are after having been posted by me from New England, then by the editor from Texas. I am old enough to think of their movement from me to you as travel along a wire. But we all know, even without understanding it, that this is a world so fast that “wire” is but a filament of the metaphoric imagination. Some are excited by the speed of a wireless world. For them, the collapse of the distances between and among meaning makers and their intendeds is fraught with promise. Perhaps so. Still, when once people sent each other hand notes, borne across small urban spaces by messengers on foot or horseback, there was a considered charm to their messages. Today, however, small children learn their letters on key boards with mice that roam unconnected outside their electronic nests, their stubby fingers pecking away over an ill-considered time that all but eliminates space by downloading fantasy worlds to abodes without addresses. This, indeed, is a wonder. But is it good?

When once, in the before of time, words were broadcast along wires, there was at least—in the word Derrida unwittingly made famous—a difference in and around the meanings conveyed. When meanings are encrypted on paper or papyrus time is required to traverse the space from sender to receiver. The difference written upon the distance of time is that the meanings are deferred. In the synapse they remain open, unsettled, and indeterminate—thereby erasing the absurd dogma that meanings are unmediated windows on the inner soul of the meaning maker. Oddly, the erasure of distance in this world of mice without nests does not reconstitute the illusion of immediacy. If only because we usually stroke the wrong key or lose the mouse under the clutter all about, time enters before and after the message is sent, leaving behind a void through which no honest line can cross. Everyone knows that even the hardest drives are infected, thus declining toward the final crash that will cremate the already buried digital traces.

When, as now, in the considered medium of Fast Capitalism, a batch of words meant to express an extended idea appears all at once somewhere in cyberspace, the meanings are transformed. With all the talk of time-space, much of it broadcast these days from Great Britain, too little attention is paid to the space beyond time—which may just be the only time that matters in respect to social things. What if Giddens, so gently brilliant though he is, is wrong in claiming that the current digitalized state of global affairs is but an acceptable transformation of the long familiar one? He suggests, among much else, that Globalization-II is really about the disembedding of “social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space,” as he puts it in *The Consequences of Modernity*. I am more than ready to forgive Giddens for the appalling name he gave this process, because distanciation is at least an appealing idea. Still, one is right to wonder if it is the right idea for the times.

Against the confidence that time-space, thus transformed, will provide a nest, if not a bed, one might do better questioning whether we, like the mice at hand, will find our ways back to our intendeds. In fast worlds skepticism is a bother. But it may be more realistic. All along the half-millennium history of modern things, humanoids have been reasonably well nested (if unevenly embedded). Yet, the record is inconclusive as to whether any important number of our kind of animal ever truly sought out social relations that could be said, even remotely, to have been meaningful. The problem of time-space in relation to social things may not, after all, be one of overcoming, or even explaining, the time-space collapse. Rather it seems just as likely that the problem is more moral than technical—a moral failure of nerve to bridge the social distances. In any and all historic times, whatever their degree of distanciation, neither men nor women, and assuredly not their kids, have shown a very strong inclination to reach out across the differences wherein human meanings, such as they are, may be hiding.

In quite another vocabulary—one we who are embedded in the worlds of social theory seldom consult—this

chronic moral incompetence that keeps social relations distant and disturbed is called sin. Well, I should say, it may be called sin when what one is calling out is the willful refusal to close the social distances from others; to overcome, that is, the differences wherein the others in question are those we (if there is a We) loathe, distrust, or fear.

In our all too sophisticated worlds, we who make our livings peddling the truths of social things have grown suspicious, not just of religiously embedded ideas like sin, but even of the ideal that when bad things happen to good people the good is insufficient to voluntary action that would bridge the differentiating distance between it and the bad. Part of the problem, we must admit, is that though a good many social theorists think of themselves as radicals of one or another stripe, in truth we are loyal children of liberal culture (and not even necessarily in the better American, as opposed to European, sense of the word). Truth be told, as Walter Russell Mead once put it, the liberal is one who believes in the good and may be willing even to allow it to trickle down to the lower classes on the sole condition that the cost not threaten their market position. Put this way—and it is not a bad way to put it when one surveys the historical record—the liberal mind is the mind of sin insofar as it declines moral responsibility for the social differences that fascists and conservatives so brazenly think of as eradicable human inferiority. We liberals—even when we masquerade in the guise of a purported radical Left—are far the more willfully dishonest when it comes to the social time-space between us and those so irretrievably nested in the far away time of distant social place. Some of us would far rather scoff at Mother Teresa than suck the breast of our own sour milk.

Today as I write is October 9, 2004. Last night in Paris Jacques Derrida died of cancer. He suffered, he said, as much from the treatment as the disease. But over the years, he suffered ever more as to the state of world. Those who think the ironic is a joke never understood irony to begin with and certainly did not understand Derrida. The irony he understood most was not the double entendre of differences, but the sober withdrawal of time toward death. The world he just left is deadly. In times like these, what is needed is a bracing assessment of the human condition with respect to abuses of power. The crisis at hand when global power is in the hands of an arrogant nation is the crisis of the moral value of political power. The important question is that of power's duty when the principal global state is powerful in the extreme when compared to all others. This is not, however, Lord Acton's dilemma of the corruption that flows from absolute power. It is not so much that absolute power corrupts but that it corrupts by consequence of its refusal to see that power is itself a projection of might, not so much across real geographic spaces (though it is that) as over and deep down through the social spaces it aims to control.

When one state attains global power as the American did after 1991, the power it attains appears to be mighty in the contrast to the lesser powers. But it is not, and never can be, absolute. To the contrary, the irony of American power in these times is the remarkable extent to which comes quickly to its own feeble grip on the reins it coveted so long. State powers of these kind rely on arrogance which in absence of pervasive respect for their hegemonies becomes a necessary, not stylistic, *modus operandi*. Not even Habermas's rephrasing of Weber's idea of legitimation crisis comes quite close enough to the global circumstances all about early in the 2000s. It is not simply that the more global the sphere of political control the more the powerful must distort as a condition of maintaining global power. When it comes to global structures wherein there is but one power, absolute or not, that power has no need to confront its own limitations. In such a circumstance, arrogance is the necessary virtue of power gone wild. In the Abrahamic religions of the West and near-West—Islam, Judaism, the various Christianities—the refusal to come clean as to its normal human limitations is sin, the only word that will do.

In respect to the necessary sin of all politics, no other social thinker of the previous century had so realistic a theory as Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). A theologian by trade and vocation, Niebuhr was certainly among the most influential political thinkers of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Life and Thought," argued in 1956 that Niebuhr was the one thinker of those decades who put thought to the evidence that the naïve liberalism of the Social Gospel and pragmatism of the first decades of the twentieth century were beyond repair. Europe, having suffered the disillusionments of the War of 1914, knew this very well, but not the Americans.

Niebuhr's thinking on the subject of power was shaped by the defining experience of his youth as a pastor from 1915 to 1928 in Detroit. Though called to serve a traditional, declining urban congregation, Niebuhr, still in his twenties, quickly engaged himself on the side of industrial workers in a city where automobile manufacturing ruled by the hand of Henry Ford who presented himself as the patron saint of economic justice in the offer of then higher wages. Thus began Fordism, born not of fairness, but of greed for efficient production. The higher wages famously broke Marx's rule on the suppression of labor costs as the key to the extraction of surplus value. But the break was only apparent. The wages were taken back in the purchase of the automobiles labor produced—thereby

doubly exploiting the laborer.

Reinhold Niebuhr's genius lay in a remarkable capacity to do very many things at once, none more exceptional than applying prodigious night-time study of the ancient and modern texts to the evidence of his day-time work with the poor. His dirty work in the political struggle with industrial capitalism settled Niebuhr on a strong political theory of power. His most famous book may well be one written in 1937, after he had moved to New York City to teach at the Union Theological Seminary. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, written in the aftermath of the Depression of 1929, was Niebuhr's most cutting brief against liberal idealism. He attacks mercilessly the then still prevalent bourgeois idea that man, the alleged agent of liberal history who acts on the basis of love, can be the moral force of social change. Social relations, Niebuhr said (still under the sway of Marx), are fundamentally determined by economic structures, first, then too by the State. What hope there may be for a realistic strategy for the promotion of social and economic justice resides, at best, with the State. Niebuhr's experience in Detroit did little of course to encourage in him the thought that economic progress might issue from corporate capitalism. Yet, the State, even then early in FDR's tenure (not to mention now), is nothing if it is not consumed with its own political interests. While State interests may lead political power into corrupt alliances with business, they may also lead in the direct of social peace. This, of course, was a view formed by the tragic turmoil of the 1930s when economic misery threatened the body politic far beyond capitalism's will to provide.

From the liberal point of view, hardly in the ascendancy in the 1930s, hope in the State's feeble interest in justice was no hope at all. But, from the point of view of Niebuhr's political realism, hope was not the issue so much as justice hard-won. Of this moral dilemma Niebuhr wrote in 1937 in the conclusion to *Moral Man, Immoral Society*: "Society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, coercion and perhaps resentment, which cannot gain the moral sanction of the most sensitive moral spirit." In the terms of his primal vocabulary, political power is as caught up in sin as is the corrupt individual. The moral individual stands no chance of overturning power by means of pious love. Power is sin, not because it is absolute, but because it refuses to recognize, even to contemplate, its own limits.

In the language of secular social theories, to say that power is sin is to confess, *mutatis mutandis*, the first article of political realism—that all politics are engaged with sin, in their foolhardy flight from the reality of human limitations. Social theories of the left have been no less guilty than the pretentious ideologies of the right in their refusal to face the well-structured limits on power's ability to resist social evil. Call this arrogance sin, call it greed, call it what you will, in the end it boils down to the reality that the time of justice is the time beyond time. Everything is judged *sub specie aeternitatis*. Eternity is the final distancing. It is also the ultimate irony in that this time beyond time itself is the only time in which the social differences that distance classes of people from each other can be erased.

Only when the powerful begin to see that power, far from being absolute, is no different from the grass that withers on the autumn fields, will there be some realistic prospect of social and economic justice. The body politic, like all particular bodies, dies sooner or later. Political power dies the sooner because it lives off its own necessary arrogance, the most combustible of all known fuels.

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun.

— *Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy (1937)*