JOHN DEWEY AND REINHOLD NIEBUHR: CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

John Dewey (1859-1952) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) are perhaps the most influential thinkers of twentieth century America. Dewey was a naturalistic philosopher for whom knowledge could only be confirmed by experience. Niebuhr was a political thinker and a theologian for whom truth was not necessarily empirically demonstrable or logically coherent. Dewey's renown derives from his "instrumentalism" in philosophy and his contributions to social psychology, education, and political theory. Niebuhr is noted for his "neoorthodox" theology, his somber and critical assessments of American society, and the school of "political realism" which he helped to establish in the 1950s. Each received the noteworthy distinction for an American of being named a Gifford Lecturer of Edinburgh, Scotland. Each was a prolific writer, and each was well

1The school of "political realism" was one with which George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Thompson identified. Kennan, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, was to say, when speaking of Niebuhr and their like-minded group: "Niebuhr is the father of us all."

2Dewey was a Gifford Lecturer in 1929; Niebuhr in 1939. Dewey's Gifford Lectures were published as The Quest for Certainty (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930). Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures were published as The Nature and Destiny of Man, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943).
known for their involvement in political affairs.

During the Depression of the 1930s, Dewey and Niebuhr each held political positions to the left of the mainstream of American public opinion: Niebuhr was a qualified Marxist and Dewey a democratic socialist of the British Fabian variety. Their political activities were often similar; they each supported labor organizations, championed the rights of the disadvantaged, and worked together in such organizations as the League for Independent Action in 1929 and in the early 1930s. In spite of the similarity of their day-to-day politics, Dewey became Niebuhr's intellectual bête noire. In his Gifford Lectures in 1939, Niebuhr remarked: "No one expresses man's uneasiness about his society and complacency about himself more perfectly than John Dewey." 3 Seven years earlier in the Introduction to his Moral Man and Immoral Society, he noted his work was intended as a polemic against "moralists" who held excessively optimistic views of social progress. Among those in the Introduction of whom he was most critical was John Dewey. Dewey never responded to

3Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, p. lll. Niebuhr renounced Dewey because of an alleged excessive faith in the social uses of science. However, Niebuhr did not refer specifically in the Gifford Lectures to Liberalism and Social Action. His criticism of Dewey preceded the publication of Liberalism and Social Action, a work which is distinctive because of Dewey's extravagant claims for the social uses of science. Niebuhr wrote a very critical review of Dewey's work in The Nation 141 (10 September 1935):303. It is probable that Liberalism and Social Action served to significantly deepen Niebuhr's disagreement with Dewey.
these attacks. 4

This thesis will investigate Dewey's and Niebuhr's chief area of political disagreement--their views on social action--during the Depression. Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action*, published in 1935, and Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, are their principal statements about their respective views on social action. Each work was a response to the deep economic and social problems of the 1930s. To those whose sensibilities regarding social action were either formed or altered during the tumult of American society in the 1960s, Dewey's identification of social action with reliance upon the scientific method will invariably appear naive and ineffectual. Niebuhr's concept of social action is more in keeping with contemporary views. Unlike Dewey, Niebuhr maintained that the discriminate use of violence may be necessary to effect social justice.

Dewey's and Niebuhr's divergent views of social action are best seen against the background of the spread of Marxism among well known American intellectuals of the 1930s. Niebuhr identified with this Marxist movement; Dewey, though

a socialist, was opposed to the Marxist advocacy of force. *Liberalism and Social Action* was Dewey's response to the threat he believed Marxists posed in American society. It is thus a polemical expression directed against Marxists who wished to use force to resolve the problems of the Depression.

Dewey's proclivity for optimism and Niebuhr's for pessimism reflect the tempers of the period into which each grew to intellectual maturity. Accordingly, a discussion of their intellectual backgrounds will prove to be helpful in understanding the thrust of their respective positions.

Dewey, thirty-three years older than Niebuhr, was in his late twenties during the tumult and the guardedly optimistic reform activity of the Populist-Progressive era. The United States at that time, still enjoyed a substantive isolation from the vagaries of international politics. Niebuhr was in his late twenties in the period of disillusionment following World War I. Disillusionment deepened as the international political situation became more precarious in the 1920s and 1930s, and as economic problems mounted.
CHAPTER I

INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

My objective in this chapter is to discuss the temper of the periods in which John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr each grew to intellectual maturity. I shall also discuss the intellectual climate to which each later contributed and which each served to shape. Such a discussion will provide a background for an exposition of their views on social action.

More than a generation separated the two men. Dewey, who was born in 1859, was in his thirties in the 1890s--a period of incipient social reform and measured optimism. Dewey's social meliorism reflects the reformed temper of this period. Niebuhr, who was born in 1892, was in his thirties in the 1920s--a period of disillusionment among intellectuals almost everywhere in the Western world. World War I, a war which none of the major powers had really wanted, now appeared senseless and irrational. The Versailles Treaty resolved little, for by the mid-1920s, ominous signs of continued international turmoil were apparent. The onset of the Depression significantly enhanced this disillusionment in the United States. Niebuhr's attack upon liberalism and his
emphasis upon the problematic aspects of social progress reflect an intense disillusionment among intellectuals and a widespread discontent in American society. The following discussion should serve to place the optimism of Dewey and the somberness of Niebuhr within an historical perspective.

Social Protest and Measured Optimism (1875-1914)

During much of the nineteenth century liberalism was associated with the laissez-faire economics and individualism of Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and Richard Cobden. The "evolutionary conservationism" of Herbert Spencer strengthened this belief in government noninterference in economic and social matters. Spencer's American disciples, William Graham Sumner, Edward Youman, and John Fiske had

1Discontent was justified and indeed it was shared by liberals and nonliberals alike. But much of the criticism against liberalism derived from an unwarranted extension of traditional liberal thought from the domestic to the international realm. While there were many naive proponents of inevitable progress, traditional liberal thinkers for the most part were not among them. The optimism of such thinkers as Locke, Harrington, Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill was qualified. They believed in representative government and inviolable fundamental rights. They based their thought upon "reason" rather than a priori moral truths. They did not ignore and were not inclined to abandon a coercive capacity permitting the enforcement of the law for those bent upon violating it. The democratic institutions about which they wrote did not exist in the international realm; nor did the conditions exist from which such institutions might quickly emerge. Accordingly, the disillusionment with the international scene during the 1920s and 1930s which found expression in an attack upon traditional liberal thinkers was misdirected.
propagated their mentor's thought and it became the ethic of a significant segment of the middle-class and well-to-do. Spencer and his disciples held that the regulation of big business, government assistance to the poor, and labor strikes constituted interference with a cosmic process. For the well-to-do, Spencer's thought was an optimistic faith. For most others, it was a fatalistic belief. It held that social and economic reform movements were doomed to fail, and government and well-intentioned private agencies should therefore let life run its own course. The ethic held not only that the fittest would survive, but that the fittest should survive, and accordingly, the weak should perish. Evolutionary conservatism provided a convenient rationalization for those who chose not to attempt to correct society's burgeoning ills of the period.

The tenability of Spencer's evolutionary conservatism and laissez-faire liberalism was threatened with the onset of labor strife, social disorder, and economic problems during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The railroad strikes of 1877, the Haymarket Riot, and the Homestead Strike were among the most destructive of labor confrontations in terms of human life and property in the country's history. A succession of arid summers after 1886 brought financial disaster to many thousands of heavily mortgaged farmers. The

national depression of 1893 aggravated tensions. In 1892 the Populist Party was organized and presented a slate of candidates for local, state, and national office. Four years later, William Jennings Bryan, committed to economic and political reform, became the Democratic candidate for the presidency.³

Societal stress and turmoil also became manifest in social commentary and literature. Lester Ward, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and William Dean Howells were highly critical of the social order and embraced either some form of socialism or economic planning as a means of checking abuses. Others such as Jacob Riis, Jane Adams, and John Spargo wrote of the pathetic plight of the urban poor.⁴

Lester Ward was perhaps Herbert Spencer's most persistent American critic. Ward rejected Spencer's fundamental canon—that the human community could not appreciably alter the "survival-of-the-fittest" ethic of nature. Ward not only believed that the human community could alter the laws of nature but that it must do so, for its own collective survival. He distinguished between biological and social process. He maintained, for example, that humans through social process (action) could expand the food supply

³For further discussion see Harold U. Faulkner's Politics, Reform and Expansion (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. 59-60; 203-211.

⁴See "The Restless Decade" and "The Revolt of the Cities" in Faulkner's Politics, Reform and Expansion.
to accommodate the rapidly increasing population. This assertion was contrary to Malthusian doctrine which had become integral to Spencer's thought.

Ward considered Spencer's belief in government laissez-faire and its correlative, "rugged individualism," inconsistent with an "organic" view of society. Spencer believed that as society progressed economically, it would become increasingly integrated and interdependent. Collectivism in the form of social action, Ward maintained, would be a more characteristic feature of the integrated society than government laissez-faire. He did not believe that a modern interdependent society could survive without substantive government regulation. ⁵

By the 1890s, a number of reform-minded professors gathered at the University of Chicago; they were to have significant influence on the reshaping of the concept of economic liberalism. George Herbert Mead, James Tufts, and John Dewey of the Department of Philosophy and Pedagogy, Thorstein Veblin of the Political Economics Department, and Albion Small (who was a disciple of Lester Ward) and W. I. Thomas of the Department of Sociology comprised the group. Although they were not Marxists or anarchists, they called for government regulation of monopolies, and government

⁵See Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought for an expanded discussion of Ward's ideas, pp. 67-84.
ownership of public utilities. 6

This group, which labeled itself the "genetic" school of social psychology, believed in the plasticity of human nature. This view reinforced their belief in the capacity of the human mind to order the environment to suit man's needs. Such a view also contributed to their belief that social reform could transform social and political conditions and make possible marked individual and social growth. The capacity of humans throughout history to develop effective behavior modes (e.g., habits and occupations) in adapting to diverse climates and terrains demonstrated, at least for the genetic school, the versatility of the human mind and human personality. With industrialization an increasingly complex society emerged, and behavior patterns became progressively more removed from the satisfaction of immediate needs of sustenance. Many of early man's behavior patterns were consequently no longer appropriate. Members of the genetic school believed that man's energies could now be directed to matters of social reconstruction. As Dewey relates it:

ceased to be immediate and became loaded and surcharged with a content which forced personal want, initiative, effort and satisfaction further and further apart, putting all kinds of social divisions of labor, intermediate agencies and objective contents between them. This is the problem of the formation of mental patterns appropriate to agricultural, military, professional and technological and trade pursuits, and the reconstruction and overlaying of the original hunting schema.

But by these various agencies we have not so much destroyed or left behind the hunting structural arrangement of mind, as we have set free its constitutive psycho-physic factors so as to make them available and interesting in all kinds of objective and idealized pursuits -- the hunt for truth, beauty, virtue, wealth, social well-being, and even of heaven and of God. 7

Dewey, Mead, Small, and others viewed reason and its effective institutionalization in government as constituting the crowning stage of man's evolution. Reason was the tool by which society could be ordered. They employed Spencer's concept of an organic interdependent society, but their perspective was collective and predicated upon government involvement, while Spencer's was based on individualism and laissez-faire. In a passage representative of the group's thought, Mead idealizes science and speaks of human social evolution, in which he believed science was embodied:

The human animal as an individual could never have attained control over the environment. It is a control which has arisen through social organization. The very speech he uses, the very mechanism of thought which is given, are social products. His own self is attained only through his taking the attitude of the social group to which he belongs. He must become socialized to become himself. So when you speak of this evolution, of its having reached a certain climax in human form, you must realize that it reaches that point only in so far

as the human form is recognized as an organic part of the social whole. Now, there is nothing so social as science, nothing so universal. Nothing so rigorously oversteps the points that separate man from man and groups from groups as does science. There cannot be any narrow provincialism or patriotism in science. Scientific method makes that impossible. Science is inevitably a universal discipline which takes in all who think. It speaks with the voice of all rational beings. It must be true everywhere; otherwise it is not scientific. But science is evolutionary. Here, too, there is a continuous process which is taking on successively different forms.\footnote{George Herbert Mead, \textit{Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century}, cited by Schneider, \textit{A History of American Philosophy}, p. 391.}

Albion Small, observing the reform temper of the period both within and without the university, noted that there was a growing belief that social and political problems could be effectively handled if they were analyzed and appropriate action taken. Evolutionary conservatism and government laissez-faire were giving way to a belief in the practicability of reform and social meliorism, which Small called the "Spirit of New Humanity":

We no longer believe that the evils of life are chiefly necessary evils. We believe that the conditions of life can be so understood as to reduce social failures to the status of risks against which society can ultimately insure its members as systematically as we now insure against death, or fire, or crop failure, or faulty titles, or breaches of trust.\footnote{Dykhuizen, \textit{The Life and Mind of John Dewey}, p. 104.}

Dewey's reform activities during the 1890s were, for the most part, confined to education. While he was at the University of Chicago, he was on the Board of Trustees
and a lecturer at Jane Adams' Hull House. Like other lecturers at the social work agency, such as Henry Demarest Lloyd, he discussed the important social issues of the period. In 1899, Dewey published his first work, *School and Society*. For Dewey, the function of the school was to provide a "special environment" which would prepare children for vocations and cooperative attitudes essential for citizenship. By molding a new generation of citizens, society could be reformed. Dewey believed that teaching should not be authoritarian or learning passive; children should learn and become by active participation. In 1902, Dewey had the opportunity to apply his pedagogical philosophy when he accepted an appointment as Director of Colonel Parker's School of Education.

By the turn of the century, Dewey had formulated the methodological basis of an epistemology he was to employ throughout his professional career. He was critical of Kant's psychology and epistemology which separated subject from object. Dewey had written critically of Kant's psychology in his doctoral dissertation in 1883 and in two papers which he published in 1886. In lieu of Kant's perspective, Dewey had written critically of Kant's psychology in his doctoral dissertation in 1883 and in two papers which he published in 1886. In lieu of Kant's perspective,

10Ibid.


Dewey, like Hegel, employed a holistic methodology. Subject and object, Dewey believed, presupposed consciousness. In his later work, he expressed this consciousness within the context of experience which he defined as the interaction of the individual with the environment. "Experience" did not belong to any one person; it was pervasive and fundamental to human existence. It was an experience within which each human participated and interacted.

In accord with his interest in reform, Dewey was to define knowledge consistent with an activist (behaviorist) definition of consciousness. Thus, for Dewey, knowledge became that which contributes to the resolution of existential problems. Dewey later was to embody his holistic, metaphysical concept of experience within a concept of society or the public. Such a concept was basic to his views about political reconstruction until at least 1939. Until that time, Dewey was optimistic as to the extent to which government could effectively adopt the scientific method and thereby mold the behavior pattern of its citizens. This "deterministic" view of human behavior was consistent with Dewey's view of the plasticity of human nature.

By the turn of the century, a new concept of economic liberalism had emerged, with many now believing that government should involve itself in economic and social reform programs. The transformation from laissez-faire economic

liberalism to a liberalism that favored government legislation was due to several factors: labor strife, intense economic distress, the political organization of the discontented, and as Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, the awareness of many who were well-to-do and politically powerful that reform was essential to the general health of society.  

One of the groups whose beliefs reflected the tenets of the new liberalism was the Social Gospel movement. It encouraged confidence in the efficacy of social reform, although such confidence was by no means pervasive throughout society. Many Social Gospel adherents believed that evolution--biological and social--was an instrument of God's will. They believed the Kingdom of God, with human effort, could either be approximated or actually achieved on earth. This human effort, they argued, should take the form of social reconstruction. Accordingly, such key figures in the movement as Washington Gladden, William Bliss, Dwight Martin, and Walter Rauschenbusch worked on behalf of either labor or the disadvantaged.

The social psychology of George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Albion Small, Thorstein Veblin, and others of the genetic school also generated confidence in the efficacy of social reform, but, for the most part, their influence was confined to intellectuals. But the genetic school provided

15See Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform (New York: Macmillan, 1919).
a philosophic foundation for government intercedence in economic and social affairs in the Populist-Progressive era, as well as the New Deal era.

However, the general optimism of American society at the turn of the century derived not so much from the prospects for social reform but from the seemingly unlimited possibilities for national growth. The United States enjoyed an overseas empire which included Hawaii, the Philippines, Samoa, and Puerto Rico and had long since established a hegemony in the Caribbean. Except for the American Indians, blacks, and Orientals whose sublevel status as American citizens determined their position outside of the pale of the American dream, some measure of hope for social reform existed for all. The discontented of white America who believed the rate of social change was not sufficiently rapid were to some extent assuaged in their dissatisfaction by their nationalistic temper. And these discontented, who believed the United States enjoyed a unique blessing of providence, perhaps rationalized their dissatisfaction as temporary and part of a necessary cosmic process. Indeed, until the Moroccan Crisis in 1905, there were few international events that disrupted national optimism and foreshadowed the massive upheavals in the international structure that were to come.

**International Chaos and Economic Depression, (1914-1939)**

In the first decade of the century, many in the
United States, and in Western society in general, still had expectations of considerable social and political progress. But the reality of the first two decades brought little to justify such optimism. Even before the outbreak of World War I, Henry Adams presented his "phase theory" which predicted the imminent destruction of Western man.\(^\text{16}\) A year after the bloody conflagration, Oswald Spengler, in _The Decline of the West_, also prophesized the demise of Western civilization. World War I had impelled the painful awareness that Western man had the means to destroy himself.

Paul Valery, the French symbolist, reflecting on the prospect of a cataclysmic end of Western civilization, wrote:

> We later civilizations . . . we too now know that we are mortal. . . . We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished . . . And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. . . . The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Meander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers.\(^\text{17}\)

World War I dramatically changed both international culture and the concert system of power. It was the first major war in nearly two generations, and it served to remind people that warfare, with all its brutality and destruction, was an omnipresent possibility of human existence and that


modern civilization was by no means exempt from it. It also served to remind some that if the institutionalization of reason constituted the culmination of human evolution, the exercise of reason was not an elemental human impulse. Leonard Hobhouse, the British sociologist, writing of his changed perspective during the war, observed:

It turned out to be in sober truth a different world from that which we knew, a world in which force had a greater part to play than we had allowed, a world in which the ultimate securities were gone, in which we seemed to see all of a sudden through a thin crust of civilization the seething forces of barbaric lust for power and indifference to life.18

For many intellectuals in the United States, the period after the war was disappointing. The war, and the disappointment it wrought, as Henry F. May had indicated, marked "the end of American innocence."19 The conflict seemed to have resolved nothing. Many had glibly accepted Wilson's pronouncement that World War I was an idealistic enterprise and the "war to end all wars." The vindictiveness and territorial aggrandizement of Great Britain's David Lloyd George, France's Henri Clemenceau, and Italy's Vittorio Orlando; the extraordinary inflation in Germany in 1923; the erratic state of German politics; and the rise of Japanese militarism foreshadowed future international turmoil. And to the chagrin of many Americans, the United States


after World War I could no longer remain isolated from European politics.

The extent of change during the 1920s was profound. The generation born at the turn of the century best reflects the depth of change. This is the generation which Gertrude Stein designated as "lost" and the generation to which Reinhold Niebuhr and such writer-intellectuals as Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein belonged. Many of these writers chose to live in exile during the war and the decade which followed. Although their level of disenchantment was probably deeper than that of most American intellectuals at the time, these writers illustrated a growing disappointment with historical events among American intellectuals. Their cultural disavowal of the United States implicit in their self-imposed exile, reflects the end of American political and cultural isolation from Europe. Some of these writers withdrew from politics into such art movements as Dadaism; some participated in radical political movements; and some, such as Hart Crane and Harry Crosby, reacted to the changes of the period by committing suicide.  

20Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return (New York: Viking Press, 1934), pp. 282-288; 231-234. Cowley, in Exile's Return, describes the cultural dislocation he and others experienced during and after the war: "... the generation deserved for a long time the adjective that Gertrude Stein had applied to it. The reasons aren't hard to find. It was lost first of all, because it was uprooted, schooled away and almost wrenched away from its attachment to any region or
In The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot had pictured Western civilization as barren and incapable of sustaining life. For Eliot as well as a number of other intellectuals, World War I and the continuing tenuousness of the world order shattered whatever identification they might have had with liberalism and its chief article of faith—the efficacy of human reason. Like Eliot's The Waste Land, the art of Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst emphasized the absurdity and the irrational in human life. Dada, meaning "hobbyhorse" in French, was purportedly chosen at random from the French dictionary.\(^\text{21}\) The term illustrated perfectly their sense of near futility and nihilism. After the retirement of Duchamp in 1924, surrealism displaced Dadaism as the dominant artistic medium of social and political expression. Surrealists announced their art would derive from a genuine thought process unalloyed with reason and subjective values. It was to be based upon "pure psychic automatism . . . intended to express . . . the true process of thought . . . free from the exercise of reason and from tradition. . . . It was lost because it accepted no older guides to conduct and because it had formed a false picture of society and the writers place in it. . . . The generation belonged to a period of transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created. . . . They were seceding from the old and yet could adhere to nothing new; they groped their way toward another scheme of life as yet undefined . . ." p. 9. 

any aesthetic or moral purpose."\textsuperscript{22} The low status to which surrealists relegated reason, and their preoccupation with the unconscious and random aesthetic effects, indicated a withdrawal from a socially purposeful and assertive existence. Disillusionment with historical events and a skepticism with respect to the socially ameliorative powers of science in the 1920s and 1930s also marked the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Gaspar Ortega y Gasset, and the existentialists Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Miguel Unamuno. With the exception of Ortega y Gasset, each of these thinkers expressed a belief in the suprarational, in the form of either spirituality or religion.\textsuperscript{23}

During and after World War I, John Dewey was perhaps the most persuasive figure on the American intellectual scene committed to the efficacy of human reason within democratic liberal society. Dewey argued that not all political problems could be resolved peaceably and consequently, that no inherent contradiction existed between force and reason. Notwithstanding the difficulties involved in the exercise of reason, Dewey maintained that it was the most valuable resource for political reconstruction.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 534.

During the early part of World War I, but prior to April 1917, Dewey opposed American military involvement. Nonetheless, he cautiously advocated national military preparedness. Dewey was highly critical of Prussianism—which he identified with authoritarianism. He believed that Kant's separation of pure reason and practical reason (the distinction basic to his moral philosophy) had contributed to an authoritarian temper in Germany which in turn had contributed to the onset of World War I. In 1915, in *German Philosophy and Politics*, Dewey attacked Kant's belief that practical morality stems from a personal "sense of duty." Dewey believed that German society placed excessive value upon patriotism and unquestioning national loyalty. He maintained that such traits were characteristic of authoritarian society while critical thinking was characteristic of democratic society. Dewey argued that ethical or moral questions, whether of a personal or a political nature, could be decided without reliance upon "moral laws" such as Kant's concept of obedience or Christian ethics. Instead

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Dewey maintained that such questions could be resolved, *sui generis*, i.e., by an analysis of the consequences of the reasons for which the goal was believed to be desirable and by an analysis of the consequences of possible actions which might be taken to achieve the goal.\(^{26}\) Thus Dewey, unlike Kant, did not make use of a moral a priori, preempting the full exercise of reason in moral matters.

In April 1917, when the United States entered World War I, Dewey abandoned his opposition to American involvement. His advocacy of war resulted in the disaffection of his most loyal votaries, among them Randolph Bourne and Jane Adams. Bourne, in the "Twilight of the Idols," wrote that Dewey's instrumentalism had met a "power too big for it" and that "creative intelligence" could not be effective in crisis situations such as war.\(^{27}\) Dewey responded by saying that peace requires cooperation from all parties and that if one party willfully and consistently violates the peace, nothing the other party(ies) can do can preserve the peace without constituting a hazardous acquiescence.\(^{28}\) In effect, Dewey's

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Those who rejected human reason as a consequence of World War I expected too much from it. For "reason" to be effective in mediating international conflict, a basis for a mutuality of interest as well as a capacity to mediate such
retort indicated that not all personal and political problems could be resolved peaceably and, thus that no intrinsic opposition existed between the use of force and the exercise of reason.

This relationship between force and reason was the subject of a careful discussion in the *International Journal of Ethics*, April 1916, a year before Dewey announced he favored the United States' entry into World War I. In this article, Dewey stated that "creative intelligence" and force were not incompatible and he labeled those political thinkers who were categorically opposed to the use of force "moonstruck." Distinguishing between force and violence, Dewey wrote that what was bad was not force, but its "wasteful" or ineffective usage, which he called violence. He considered force to be ethically neutral inasmuch as it was an omnipresent aspect of human existence underlying the enforcement of law and basic to all matter in the form of energy. Essentially, Dewey embraced a pragmatic approach to the social and conflicts must exist. There may well have been a mutuality of interests between the major powers in 1914 such that none desired the outbreak of war. However, it is clear that the capacity to mediate the conflicts which precipitated the war was absent or severely weakened. An armaments race and a proliferation of secret treaties heightened mutual suspicion among nations. So too, massive changes in Europe between 1870 and 1914 severely weakened the balance of power of the old concert system.


30 Ibid.
political uses of force. This article was Dewey's most careful discussion about the relation between force and reason in socio-political matters.

Throughout this period, Dewey still subscribed to the tenets of the genetic school of social psychology—the belief in plasticity of human nature and the social origin of the modes of human behavior. In 1922, he formulated his theory of social psychology in *Human Nature and Conduct*. The work is a "deterministic" account in which social and cultural institutions rather than individual intelligence primarily shape individual behavior. Dewey extended his behavioristic views of social psychology to his political thought in *The Public and Its Problems*, which he considered to be his best political work. In it he asserted that the principal problem in American society was social fragmentation and alienation which he labeled the "eclipse of the public." The challenge, as Dewey viewed it, was to discover the means by which social alienation could be displaced by effectively shared experience and "face-to-face" relations.

31 Somjee, *The Political Theory of John Dewey*, p. 3. John Dewey wrote *The Public and Its Problems* partially as a response to Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), and his *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925). Dewey argued that both works were overly pessimistic. Lippman maintained in the latter work that the concept of a cohesive "public" was an illusion. He argued that "modern society is not visible to anybody, nor intelligible continuously . . . as a whole." See *The Phantom Public*, p. 42.

Dewey did not pretend to know the conditions under which American society in 1927 could be transformed into the "great Community." Nor did he know how likely such a transformation was. He regarded *The Public and Its Problems* as a "hypothesis regarding the democratic state."33

With the onset of the economic and social crises of the Depression, Dewey's political writing became more inclined toward impromptu activism and less inclined toward careful analysis. It is not unexpected that Dewey's attempts at social engineering were weak when one considers the remoteness of the tenets of his social psychology (the "signs and symbols" and "habits" of shared experience) from the interplay of political power in government and when one considers Dewey's use of the scientific method. The scientific method as an agency for political activism needs a force to sustain it., i.e., a political body vested with the authority to enforce its findings. Dewey, however, relied upon a spontaneous public outgrowth for the implementation of the scienti-

33Dewey wrote:
"The study will be an intellectual or hypothetical one. There will be no attempt to state how the required conditions might come into existence, nor to prophesy that they will occur. The object of the analysis will be to show that unless ascertained specifications are realized, the Community cannot be organized as a democratically effective Public. It is not claimed that the conditions which will be noted will suffice but only that at least they are indispensable. In other words we shall endeavor to frame a hypothesis regarding the democratic state to stand in contrast with the earlier doctrine which has been nullified by the course of events." *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 57.
fic method. He hoped that this outgrowth would be a by-
product of his economic policies.

The period following the onset of the Depression served to politicize the disillusionment of intellectuals. At this time the critical question before many intellectuals was: Could the injustices of capitalism be corrected peacefully and within the context of liberal democracy? Some believed that it could not.

An articulate and well known group of intellectuals embraced Marxism; Reinhold Niebuhr, who was one of them, described his Marxist credo in Radical Religion in 1935:

We believe that a capitalistic credo is destroying itself and yet that it must be destroyed, lest it reduce, in the delirium of its disintegration, our whole civilization to barbarism. We believe that the social ownership of the means of production is the only basis of health and justice for a technical age. We believe that such a society can be established only through a social struggle and that in that struggle we ought to be on the side of the working man. In these things we support socialism wholeheartedly. 34

John Chamberlain,35 in Farewell to Reform, and Edmund Wilson,36 in articles in the New Republic argued that the capitalistic system was defective, and that it could not be


35 Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 53-56. This work is a fine account of the intellectual ferment of the 1930s.

36 Ibid., pp. 56-59.
transformed without force. Granville Hicks, the literary editor of the Marxist journal, *New Masses*, was one of the most widely read of the American Marxist. In his *The Great Tradition*, he noted that "American life is a battleground, and that arrayed on one side are the exploiters, and on the other, the exploited. If there is any other working interpretation of the apparent chaos [that of the Depression] than that which presents itself in terms of class struggle, it has not been revealed."37 Joseph Freeman, senior editor of the *New Masses* and author of *An American Testament*, noted that Marxism had provided him with a "clear philosophy which could explain and integrate those contradictory ideas which could bring order and indicate purpose in the apparent chaos surrounding us."38 Others such as Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Lincoln Steffins, Theodore Dreiser, Max Eastman, Erskine Caldwell, Lillian Hellman, Langston Hughes, Dorothy Parker and Harry Ward also identified with Marxism.

Dewey did not join the Marxist intellectuals, who argued that democratic capitalism needed to be dismantled to be corrected. His economic position, however, was to the left of that of President Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal reforms. In *Individualism Old and New* (1930), Dewey described a "crisis of cultures" and called for economic planning as the first step in the political institutionalization of the scientific method. In *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935)  

Dewey remained loyal to liberalism, but insisted that it must now become "radical." Calling his program of social action, "renascent liberalism," Dewey again argued for the political institutionalization of the scientific method. Now, however, Dewey called for the peaceful socialization of the means of production. Dewey's discussion of the political institutionalization of the scientific method, particularly in *Liberalism and Social Action*, was diffuse and polemical.

Of those intellectuals who argued that democratic liberalism was inadequate to cope with the problems of the Depression, Reinhold Niebuhr may have been liberalism's harshest and most persuasive critic. Niebuhr's critique was not confined to the political aspects of liberal ideology; it was also directed to what he considered to be the pervasive temper of Western society.

For Niebuhr, faith in the "idea of progress" and in reason or science constituted the myth of post-Enlightenment Western man. Niebuhr considered democratic liberal ideology to be an integral part of the myth. In a passage written in his "Intellectual Autobiography" in 1956, but nonetheless characteristic of his views during the 1930s, Niebuhr describes the "religion of modernity" and what he considered to be its principal fault:

The fault of modern man contains two related articles: the idea of progress and the idea of the perfectibility of man. Man is regarded as indeterminately perfectible because it is not understood that every growth of human freedom may have evil as well as virtuous consequences.
The root of this error is that reason is identified with freedom, and it is not seen that reason may be the servant rather than the master, of the self. The essential religion of modernity is not less "dogmatic" for being implicit rather than explicit, and it is no more true for being arrayed in the panoply of science.\textsuperscript{39}

As he did in this passage, Niebuhr often overstated his argument against modern Western culture. The relationship between science and democratic-liberalism which Niebuhr attacked is a historic one which has its roots in the thought of Enlightenment philosophes, such as Condorcet, Voltaire, and Helvetius. The relationship was further developed by the nineteenth century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, and by liberalism's most vigorous proponent of the twentieth century, John Dewey. But, contrary to Niebuhr's statement, Western society has not idealized the value of human freedom to the extent that it maintains freedom may not be abused. Indeed, the notions of "freedom" and "license" are important dual concepts of Western jurisprudence.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39}Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography," Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{40}In Niebuhr's assault upon liberalism, he appeared unaware of the Americans--James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams--each of whom based their political thought upon a belief in the "corruptibility of human nature" and designed government to prevent such corruption. In Madison's "Federalist X," one certainly finds no poverty of the egocentric view of human nature. It is hyperbole to, in effect, label one hundred and fifty years of political parties and interest groups such as the Federalists, the Whigs, the Southern Secessionists, the Know-Nothings, the Populists, as excessively optimistic in their assessment of human nature. American historians Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin differ with Niebuhr; they view American society throughout its history as essentially pragmatic.

Excessive optimism is also not characteristic of either the important French or English political thinkers
In spite of the tendency to exaggerate, Niebuhr's critique of American society is nonetheless incisive and penetrating. His qualified espousal of Marxism during the Depression illustrated his profound discontent with traditional American political institutions and its resources to overcome social problems. Although Niebuhr emphasized the value of Christianity for the individual, the general ineffectiveness of Christianity in political affairs was a central theme in his writing. As shall become evident, his thought during the late 1920s and early and mid-1930s underwent frequent change—in some instances arising from changed historical circumstances and in other instances arising from his own intellectual growth.

In 1927, Niebuhr, in Does Civilization Need Religion, expressed his disillusionment with the deep tensions of the postwar scene. Niebuhr argued that religion provided man with his most important resource for international betterment. He then identified liberalism with balance-of-power of the Enlightenment. The balance of power implicit in Montesquieu's tri-partite government (described in "Spirit of the Laws") was perhaps the germinal influence of much of Madison's thought. Perhaps Helvetius and Condorcet are the most optimistic of Enlightenment thinkers, yet neither held grand illusions about man. It was Helvetius who said: "In order to love mankind, we must expect little from them." Condorcet did write that human "perfectibility [was] indefinite." But, Condorcet did not intend that humans could become perfect. He meant that short of perfection, there was no assignable limit for human improvement.
politics, a position he reversed in the 1930s. Leaves From the Notebook of an Untamed Cynic (1929) indicated that Niebuhr's disillusionment had developed into cynicism.

In the early 1930s, Niebuhr maintained that religion could play only a negligible role in political affairs and during this period he became a qualified Marxist. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) and Reflections on the End of an Era (1935) were both attacks against Western bourgeoisie society advanced from qualified Marxist and Augustinian frameworks. Each work was explicitly intended as a critique of the optimism and naivete which Niebuhr ascribed to liberalism and the Social Gospel movement. The political and social thought in these two works derived from a social psychology based upon the primacy of the human will to power. While Niebuhr advocated the Christian ideal of selflessness in individual affairs in these works, he also called for the pragmatic and discriminate use of violence in political matters.

Although Niebuhr was critical of the role of science in modern Western culture, he respected science and its accomplishments. He only inveighed against what he considered the exalted claims of science. Niebuhr was by no means ingenuous with respect to Western analytic philosophy. He was particularly interested in the basic suppositions of the empirical tradition and what he viewed as the limits of

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scientific inquiry beyond which it could not effectively explain or interpret. For Niebuhr, one of these areas was human consciousness and the phenomenon of human choice. Such matters, he argued, lay in a realm that was impervious to rational understanding.42

Niebuhr, like the existentialist philosophers, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Heidigger, maintained that the question of what it is to be human could not be dealt with by principally scientific investigation. The nature of human existence was of fundamental interest to Niebuhr, as it was to the existentialist philosophers. It was Heidigger's emphasis upon the significance of "dread" and personal mortality in Being, and Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the importance of human freedom and its relationship to anxiety and sin which deeply affected Niebuhr's thought.

Niebuhr, like Jaspers and Marcel, asserted a belief in a suprarationalistic God or a "transcendence."43 Like Jaspers, Niebuhr did not shun the paradoxes and antimonies out of which suprarationalistic concepts emerged. Niebuhr was to argue in his 1939 Gifford Lectures and in Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953) that there could be no resolution of such paradoxes using present rationalistic de-


43For a discussion of Jaspers' and Marcel's concept of God or "transcendence" see Passmore, A Hundred Years of Philosophy, pp. 487-490.
vices, and a rationalistic attempt would therefore be premature. Niebuhr's suggested resolution lay in the suprarationalistic concepts of his theology. He maintained that as long as his theology was based upon concepts outside of the realm of scientific inquiry, i.e., concepts which could not be falsified or demonstrated to be true, his theology was not objectionable to modern science.44

Niebuhr, wishing to make Christianity sensitive to modern science, demythologized his theology. In *Faith and History* (1949) and in other works, he was to distinguish between prescientific myths, such as the miracles of Jesus, which were untenable in the light of modern science and permanent myths, such as the "mystery" of creation, which science has not resolved.45 Unlike Rudolph Bultman, however, Niebuhr did not eschew permanent myths from his theology. In an article, "The Truth in Myths" (1937) Niebuhr was to argue that permanent myths about the nature of human existence—as long as they were not untenable—provided man with

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44 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp. 175-203. His theology may not have been objectionable to modern science but neither did it receive science's approval.

a more meaningful, unified interpretation of reality than did corresponding, mechanistic, scientific theories. He regarded such scientific theories as "rationalistic mythologies" that lacked the dimension of organicity. 46

American intellectuals in the mid-1930s, responding to the stress of the Depression, also reacted to the threat of international events. Hitler's continued violations of the Versailles Treaty, his subsequent territorial aggrandizement and that of Mussolini, adumbrated the prospect of another world war. Of those American intellectuals who experienced difficulty in accurately assessing Hitler's territorial intentions, none were more perplexed than Marxist and doctrinaire socialists. They viewed the prospect of World War II with the same perspective with which they had viewed World War I. Thus, they did not distinguish between Hitler's Third Reich and Kaiser Wilhelm II's German Empire. Marxists and many socialists viewed Hitler's expansionism as a capitalistic drive for additional markets. Notwithstanding Hitler's threat to the international community, wars between capitalistic nations, they concluded, were not justified. The Popular Front, a Communist organization, had worked with some success to dissuade Americans from advocating a war against Hitler. Bruce Bliven, journalist for the New Republic, wrote in 1938 that American intellectuals "should

not support one type of exploitive international capitalism against another for temporary and opportunistic reasons." In articles in the New Republic between 1933 and 1938, Malcolm Cowley consistently viewed the prospect of a war from this Marxist perspective; so too did Oscar Villiard in The Nation, and he held these views as late as 1940.

Unlike most other Marxists, Niebuhr was able to assess realistically the dangers of the international scene. In 1934, he had resigned from the Fellowship for Christian Reconciliation—a pacifist organization. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, Niebuhr called for economic sanctions against Italy. In 1936, after Hitler's rearmament of Germany, Niebuhr, foreseeing the danger of Hitler's emergent militarism, remarked: "Unwillingness to run some risk of war in the present moment means certain war in the future." But Niebuhr at this time was opposed to outright war against Hitler.

Indeed, Dewey, at this time, consistent with his democratic socialism, also opposed a declaration of war against

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47 Pell, Radical Visions and American Dreams, p. 333.
48 Ibid., p. 391.
49 Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians, p. 73.
50 Ibid., p. 74.
Germany. In 1939, he established with Sidney Hook, "The Committee for Cultural Freedom" which denounced cultural suppression in Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union. In the same year he also published Fre­edom and Culture, in which he inveighed against the totali­tarian nature of Naziism and Communism.

Most American Marxists were soon to change their views about liberalism, Marxism, and war with Hitler. Socialists were also significantly affected. The patent expediency of the Soviet Union in the Rapallo Pact in August 1939 and the Soviet invasion of Finland precipitated such change. Ex­Communist, Lewis Corey, stated: "Mar­xism as a progressive social force is dead." He observed that many radical intellectuals did not realize that centralization of "political power may bring more than economic power. A Stalin and a Hitler are responsible for infinitely more aggression, degradation and misery than a Krupp or a J. P. Morgan."

John Chamberlain, one of the first of young intellectuals to break with the Progressives of the 1920s, maintained that his support of Marxism had been in error. Edmund Wilson recorded his own change of heart in To the Finland Station. The Communists, he wrote, had failed to produce a "classless

53Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams, p. 352.
54Ibid., p. 354.
55Ibid., p. 356.
society out of old, illiterate feudal Russia; [instead,]... they encouraged the rise and the domination of a new controlling and privileged class, who were soon exploiting the workers almost as callously as the Tsarists had done. 56 Other ex-Marxists, such as Granville Hicks, Max Eastman, George Counts, and James Burnham each maintained they had been incautious in their support of centralization of economic and political power. They now came to value pluralism and economic and political decentralization. Many of them reaffirmed their allegiance to the democratic process, thus effecting a volte face.

Niebuhr and Dewey were also deeply affected by international events. Niebuhr, who had abandoned Marxism in the mid-1930s, resigned from the Socialist Party after the Rapollo Pact. 57 Thereafter, he became increasingly active in liberal politics, helping to establish the Liberal Party of New York State in 1944 and becoming its vice-president. 58 In 1947, he became one of the founders of liberal Americans for Democratic Action. John Dewey, whose politics during the 1930s were more radical than that of most liberal intellectuals, also changed his views. Dewey had called for the socialization of the economy in 1935, but four years

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56 Ibid., p. 351.

57 Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," in Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 73.

58 Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians, p. 150.
later he became wary of centralization of economic power in government. Dewey now questioned the extent to which government could effectively employ the scientific method in building the "great Community." Dewey's confidence in reason and humanity was shaken by the consequences of National Socialism in Germany and the "excesses" of Stalin. The volte face of so many American Marxists, nonetheless, must have served to vindicate in his own mind his hortatory polemics of the 1930s.

The generations during which Dewey and Niebuhr came to intellectual maturity were markedly different in temper. The 1880s and 1890s--the aftermath of the Darwinian revolution--were a period of social protest and reform in which science enjoyed a high status. The 1920s were a period of international tension and international depression marked by disillusionment. As a consequence, popular confidence in the social utility of science or human reason fell. Dewey's belief in the efficacy of social reform reflects the reformist temper of the Populist-Progressive era and Niebuhr's generally somber and dark assessment of society reflects the widespread disillusionment of the 1920s and 1930s. Nonetheless, Dewey was not unaware of the problematic aspects of the social application of science; nor was Niebuhr unaware of possible social uses of science.

Dewey and Niebuhr held positions to the left of government policy and to the left of the mainstream of American
public opinion and frequently championed like causes. Each favored socialization of the economy during the Depression and, by 1939, each was no longer convinced of the utility of a socialist economy. It is of interest that their political positions were as close as they were, given the diversity of their philosophic perspectives and Niebuhr's denunciations of Dewey. 59

59Dewey's and Niebuhr's day to day politics paralleled each other. They were inveterate advocates of the rights of the poor and the disadvantaged. Each was a strong supporter of labor unions and of labor's right of political involvement. Unlike Niebuhr, Dewey never joined the Socialist Party. He favored the candidacy of Norman Thomas in the 1928 Presidential election, but because he felt that a Socialist candidate could not win, his support went to Al Smith. Niebuhr was an active member of the Socialist Party throughout the 1930s, and in fact in 1930, ran unsuccessfully for Congress in upper Westside Manhattan on the Socialist ticket.

In March 1930, less than six months after the day of the stock market crash, each helped to form the League for Independent Political Action. The principal objective of the League was the creation of a new political party which, it was felt, could better deal with the problems of the Depression. Dewey was Chairman of the League and Niebuhr was on the Executive Board. Both were dissatisfied with the New Deal because they believed its reforms were not sufficiently radical. Dewey called it "half-way house," and Niebuhr referred to it as a salve rather than a cure: "We have discovered a medicine in other words which wards off dissolution without giving the patient health."

In 1935, they and others worked unsuccessfully to prevent the intimidation and subsequent takeover of a chapter of the New York Teacher's Union by a Communist faction.
CHAPTER II

DEWEY'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ACTION

Liberalism and Social Action, as I have noted, constituted John Dewey's statements about social action during the Depression. Dewey, in this work, presented a program which he labeled renascent liberalism. The political and economic circumstances surrounding this program, its objectives, and its methodology are of principal interest in this chapter. I shall also discuss points of difference between Dewey's thought in Liberalism and Social Action and his general philosophical thought. As will become evident, the key concepts of the genetic school of social psychology--the plasticity of human nature, and the social nature of intelligence and the new concept of economic liberalism--each found an extreme expression in renascent liberalism.

1Dewey presented Liberalism and Social Action at the Paye-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia in 1935. Dewey's political thought has not attracted significant critical attention. A familiarity with his philosophic thought and his views of social psychology is necessary in order to assess his political work. Perhaps it is the absence of this familiarity which is responsible for the dearth of criticism.

There is no work which engages in a substantive analysis of Liberalism and Social Action. The most recent
In 1935—the year *Liberalism and Social Action* was published—the United States was in the deepest throes of the Depression. The international order ominously aggravated domestic discontent. In March of 1935, Hitler denounced the disarmament clauses of the Versailles Treaty. Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931, and Mussolini in the latter part of 1935 was to invade Ethiopia. Intellectuals such as Malcolm Cowley, John Chamberlain, Granville Hicks, and Edmund Wilson believed that only Marxism could extricate the United States from the Depression. They were very skeptical about American willingness to make radical changes in

and probably most important work of criticism of Dewey's political thought is A. H. Somjee's, *The Political Theory of John Dewey* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968). Somjee focuses upon Dewey's best political work, *The Public and Its Problems* and gives only peripheral attention to *Liberalism and Social Action*. Somjee, while maintaining that Dewey was one of the seminal influences of the empirical approach to political theory, argues that his analysis moved too close to that of the physical sciences. He argues that Dewey's "collective" or "social" context does not allow sufficiently for individual differences. Somjee also maintains that Dewey's key concepts of "consequences," "perception" and "organization" lack discriminative value. Such concepts were basic to Dewey's argument for effective societal self-maintenance. Somjee appears to believe Dewey changed his mind totally and irrevocably in 1939 regarding his "deterministic" view of individual behavior (see p. 41 of Somjee's work). But this is not the case. (See footnote 29, Chapter Two of this thesis).

the economy. Many such intellectuals believed that international Marxism offered the only glimmer of hope for world peace. *Liberalism and Social Action* was intended to be Dewey's response to American Marxists. His program of renaissance liberalism, he argued, would make peaceable social reforms possible in the United States.

Dewey's assessment of societal stress in the 1930s led him to fear the possibility that Americans might attempt to resolve their economic and political problems by embracing either Communism or Fascism. If Americans chose either, he believed a death struggle of civilization would ensue. However, it was Dewey's conviction that Americans would ultimately choose to fight for their liberal-democratic traditions:

To narrow the issue for the future to a struggle Fascism and Communism is to invite a catastrophe that may carry civilization down in the struggle. Vital and courageous democratic liberalism is the one force that can surely avoid such a disastrous narrowing of the issue. I for one do not believe that Americans living in the tradition of Jefferson and Lincoln will weaken and give up without a whole-hearted effort to make democracy a living reality.²

The struggle to preserve liberal democracy could be successful, Dewey maintained, only if Americans socialized the means of production.³ Dewey had identified himself


³Dewey writes: "Upon the whole the recent policy of liberalism has been to further 'social legislation;' that is, measures which add performance of social services to the
five years earlier in Individualism Old and New as an economic determinist. "Economic determinism is now a fact, not a theory," he had declared. Dewey at this time subscribed to a different variety of socialism than he would five years hence. Socialization of the means of production was not necessary; economic planning was, and could be achieved by a "coordinating and directive council in which captains of industry and finance would meet with representatives of labor and public officials." In 1935, Dewey noted that liberalism must now become "radical." The exigencies of the Depression apparently indicated to Dewey that a "coordinating and directive council" was no longer sufficient to come to grips with the nation's economic problems.

In both Liberalism and Social Action and in Individualism Old and New, Dewey described the individual as the victim of capitalism. Capitalism had deprived the individual of material security. He was not free to realize his abilities and to grow accordingly. Dewey believed that economic inequities between rich and poor were far out of pro-

older functions of government. But the cause of liberalism will be lost for a considerable period if it is not prepared to go further and socialize the forces of production, now at hand, so that the liberty of individuals will be supported by the economic organization." John Dewey, Liberalism, p. 88.


5Ibid., p. 118.

6Dewey, Liberalism, p. 62
portion to differences of ability or effort. He believed that those who wielded economic power and corresponding political power, manipulated it to their gain and to the detriment of society. Describing the psychic effects of capitalism upon the individual, Dewey noted:

Their hearts and brains are not engaged. They execute plans which they do not form and of whose meaning and intent they are ignorant—beyond the fact that these plans make a profit for others and secure a wage for themselves. . . . But there is an undeniable limitation of opportunities; and minds are warped, frustrated, undernourished by their activities. 7

The precarious position in which the United States found itself in the 1930s constituted for Dewey a crisis in liberalism. The individualism and laissez-faire capitalism of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, which prevailed in American society, were, in his opinion, destructive, leading to the oppression of the poor and those of average means. Dewey argued that Bentham's and Mill's views did not accurately reflect the social nature of human intelligence and the organic, interdependent nature of modern industrial society while renascent liberalism did. Dewey consequently urged that his political program was desperately needed.

Much of renascent liberalism is in accord with the thought of the genetic school of social psychology. The hope of the genetic school lay in the institutionalization of reason, or science, in society. Similarly, reason as expressed in the scientific method was the modus operandi of renascent liberalism:

7Dewey, Individualism, p. 132.
The crisis in democracy demands the substitution of the intelligence that is exemplified in scientific procedure for the kind of intelligence that is now accepted... Approximation to use of scientific method in investigation and of the engineering mind in the invention and projection of far-reaching social plans is demanded... 

With the application of the scientific method in social matters, Dewey ultimately anticipated a society in which individuals possessed fundamental rights and the freedom to grow and realize their abilities. "... The ends of liberalism are liberty and the opportunity of individuals to secure full realization of their potentialities," he asserted. Adding detail, he wrote:

Liberalism is committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life... The liberal spirit is marked by its own picture of the pattern that is required: a social organization that will make possible effective liberty and opportunity for personal growth in mind and spirit in all individuals.

Dewey believed that as man learned to harness the physical world about him, he could also, with the growth of social inquiry, vastly improve his own social and political existence. However, Dewey maintained that a destructive "culture gap" now existed between the level of knowledge of the social sciences and the level of knowledge of the physical sciences, with the latter far exceeding the former. He argued that the perpetuation of the individualistic view of economic liberalism and the neglect of the scientific method

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8Dewey, Liberalism, p. 72.
9Ibid., p. 51. 10Ibid., pp. 56-57.
in social matters was responsible for this "culture gap." Dewey implied that the "institutions and habits" of capital-istic society would not have emerged (or if they had, they would have been short-lived) had the scientific method been applied to social matters.

When the culture gap was bridged, Dewey was confident that the goals of his program would be achieved. Socialism was the necessary first step in the social use of the scientific method. Dewey writes time and time again of his confidence in renascent liberalism. Success would come, he insisted, with "organized social planning":

The idea that liberalism cannot maintain its ends . . . is folly. The ends can now be achieved . . . Organized social planning, put into effect for the creation of an order in which industry and finance are socially directed . . . is now the sole method of social action by which liberalism can realize its professed aims. 12

Dewey argued that the application of the scientific method would in effect transform "old institutions and patterns" so that "coercion and oppression" no longer exist:

That coercion and oppression on a large scale exist no honest person can deny. But these things are not the product of science and technology but of the perpetuation of old institutions and patterns untouched by scientific method. The inference to be drawn is clear. 13

His confidence, he maintained, derived from men's accomplish-

ments in the physical sciences:

11Ibid., pp. 81-82. 12Ibid., pp. 54-55.
13Ibid., p. 82.
The reasons for thinking that the effort [renascent liberalism] if made will be successful are also not abstract and remote. They lie in what the method of experimental and co-operative intelligence has already accomplished in subduing to potential human use the energies of physical nature.14

Dewey, however, did not attempt to demonstrate the reasons for his belief in his plan's success. Indeed, the feasibility of a demonstration is highly doubtful. The demonstration would require proof that specific patterns of individual behavior will constitute the social and political behavior for either a period of generations or, in perpetuum.15 Few, if any, philosophers of social science believe this possible. They argue that long range prediction about complex social phenomena with certainty or near-
certainty is either exceedingly unlikely, or impossible.16

Surprisingly, Dewey in Liberalism and Social Action asserted that the social sciences were still underdeveloped, implying that no demonstration of renascent liberalism was then possible. He noted for example: "The social conception of the nature and work of intelligence is still immature; in consequence, its use as a director of social action is inchoate and sporadic."17 Elsewhere he wrote: "The habit of considering social realities in terms of cause and effect and social policies in terms of means and consequences is still inchoate."18

Indeed, all that Dewey offers to justify his zealous support of renascent liberalism is a negative argument. He maintains that a study of past failures of the "method of

16Philosopher, Karl Popper writes on the subject of prediction in the social sciences: "... long-term prophecies can be derived from scientific conditional predictions only if they apply to systems which can be described as well-isolated, stationary, and recurrent. These systems are very rare in nature; and modern society is surely not one of them. ..."

"No basis can therefore be found for the contention that we can apply the method of long-term unconditional prophecy to human history. ... True in so far as it is repetitive, we may perhaps make certain prophecies. But this ... does not take us very far. For the most striking aspects of historical development are non-repetitive. ... The fact that we can predict elipses does not, therefore provide a valid reason for expecting that we can predict revolutions." Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Knowledge (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 339-340.

17Ibid., p. 45.

18Ibid., p. 73.
"intelligence" can not negate the possibility of renascent liberalism's success:

The objection that the method of intelligence has been tried and failed is wholly aside from the point, since the crux of the present situation is that it has not been tried under such conditions as now exist. It has not been tried at any time with use of all the resources that scientific material and the experimental method put at our disposal.\(^{19}\)

Dewey is correct in this assertion but it says very little that is helpful. There are many absurd possibilities whose probability of realization is only infinitesimal. In any case, the plausibility of renascent liberalism is not enhanced by the absence of arguments which categorically reject its possibility of realization.

Dewey seems to imply that the "resources that the scientific material and the experimental method" possess were sufficiently advanced in 1935 to justify his confidence in renascent liberalism, while one generation or two earlier, the "resources" then available were insufficient. He does not, however, indicate the advances which justify his confidence. Indeed, Dewey has already asserted that the social use of "intelligence" is "inchoate," i.e., underdeveloped; thus, any advance to which he might later refer which indicates anything to the contrary is self-contradictory. In effect, Dewey here has preempted the possibility of any reference to a scientific breakthrough he might wish to make.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 51.
Dewey proffers a caveat to the success of renascent liberalism. Even if the scientific method is applied to society, he notes, there is one situation in which it may not work:

The one exception—and that apparent rather than real—to dependence upon organized intelligence as the method for directing social change is found when society through an authorized majority has entered upon the path of social experimentation leading to great social change, and a minority refuses by force to permit the method of intelligent action to go into effect. Then force may be intelligently employed to subdue and disarm the recalcitrant minority.20

But this "one exception" only creates problems for Dewey. Why is the minority "recalcitrant" if its individuals possess "effective liberty and opportunity"? Why do they not follow the method of "organized intelligence"? One may assume that they are self-aggrandizing or unintelligent or in some other way moved to be disinclined. Why is it, however, that those individuals who compose the minority are

20 One may interpret the caveat differently. Renascent liberalism may be viewed as in process but as short of attaining its goals. Thus the "recalcitrant minority" may not yet possess "effective liberty and opportunity." Nonetheless, whether the goals of renascent liberalism have or have not been realized, Dewey's "one exception" is arbitrary. A minority may be "recalcitrant," but so too a majority may misuse and abuse its power.

Ibid., p. 87. Sidney Hook claims that it was he who persuaded Dewey to insert the caveat. (See "John Dewey and the Crisis of American Liberalism," The Antioch Review 29 (Summer 1969):224-233; 227.

Writing of Liberalism in 1939, Sidney Hook praised it excessively: "... a masterly analysis of the social and political philosophy of liberalism ... Liberalism and Social Action is a book which may very well be to the 20th century what Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto was to the 19th ..." Sidney Hook, John Dewey, An Intellectual Portrait (Greenwood: Westport Press, 1939), p. 158.
the "one exception"? Why are they different from the individuals that comprise the "authorized majority"? These are questions which Dewey does not confront.

The individuals which comprise the "authorized majority" are presumably no different in any basic way, from those of minorities. They may be as disinclined to the honest or efficient use of the scientific method as those of a minority. Thus the "authorized majority" may claim to embody the scientific method, but in fact the "authorized majority" may misuse it. It is conceivable that under circumstances of consistent oppression, a minority would be justified in using force in seeking justice. Dewey's "one exception" is arbitrary. A multitude of possible exceptions exist.

Dewey, however, suggests that those who follow the "experimental method" will not misuse it. He maintains that an identity exists between the spirit with which insights are produced through the use of the method and the spirit with which such insights are implemented. Dewey describes the identify he envisions:

The experimental method of science signifies the union of ideas and action, a union that is intimate; and action generates and supports emotion. Ideas that are framed to be put into operation for the sake of guiding action are imbued with all the emotional force that attaches to the ends proposed for action, and are accompanied with all the excitement and inspiration that attends the struggle to realize the ends. Since the ends of liberalism are liberty and the opportunity of
individuals to secure full realization of their poten-
tiality, all of the emotional intensity that belongs to
these ends gathers about the ideas and acts that are
necessary to make them real.21

But, no such identity, no "union of thought and action," has
existed in the physical sciences. Those responsible for the
technology of crematoria most likely did not wish the even-
tual extermination of nearly six million Jews. So too,
Alfred Noble did not desire that dynamite be used in war or
for purposes of human destruction. And further, there is no
evidence which indicates that the "experimental method" will
lead to more of a "union" in political matters than it has
in the physical sciences. Dewey's conclusions, here, are
clearly based upon faith rather than empirical fact.

Dewey's use of the scientific method in renascent
liberalism and his certainty of its success implies a belief
that the social sciences can resolve problems with a degree
of precision which approximates that of the mechanical
sciences. Dewey, in effect, tells us that renascent liber-
alism will provide a perfect or near-perfect system of
justice and that renascent liberalism represents the most
efficient adaptation to the environment. Indeed, the goal
of renascent liberalism, "the liberation of individual so
that realization of their capacities may be the law of their

life," may be reasonable as a goal for which to strive, but
the degree of precision with which Dewey expects to resolve
political and social problems is definitely unreasonable.
The realization of a system of justice which would insure
the "effective liberty and opportunity for personal growth
... in all individuals" would always be exceedingly
unlikely. In any large society (the population of the
United States in the 1930s was approximately one hundred and
thirty million), it is highly probable that individuals or
groups of individuals could be found who do not possess
"effective liberty and opportunity."

Moreover, it is an open question whether a legal
system which is based upon government ownership of the means
of production can provide the most efficient adaptation.
Indeed, it is by no means clear whether liberal democracy
even without socialism is a practicable political philosophy
in a modern industrial society. It might be argued that
liberal democracy exists more as a symbol or an ideal rather
than as a reality. Dewey notes the problems of modern indus­
trial society in **Liberalism and Social Action**, but he does
not offer an analytic methodology which can demonstrate that
a society based upon liberal precepts and socialism will
provide man's best adjustment to his contemporary environ­
ment.

Dewey also makes no mention of those circumstances
which lie largely outside of human control which could play
havoc with, or even destroy, the orderly functioning of his
planned society. Man is still powerless to prevent natural disasters, such as massive earthquakes and flooding. Moreover, a nation cannot prevent war and its destructive effects if an aggrandizing enemy attacks. There are a variety of possible occurrences which can have a destructive impact upon a society and which lie largely outside of human control. Indeed, although man learns more and more about his environment, it is very doubtful that he will ever be its total master.

As I have said earlier, Dewey intended Liberalism and Social Action to be a response to the attacks of a burgeoning number of American radicals—particularly those who were Marxist and who emerged on the American scene during the Depression. In a highly tense and uncertain atmosphere, Dewey engaged in a defense of democratic-liberal tradition and its capacity for orderly social change. Accordingly, his support of renascent liberalism may perhaps best be viewed as a tendentious or polemical counter to strident Marxist attacks upon American society by American radicals. Although their methods are conflicting, Dewey and Marx each, are certain of success if their prescriptions are followed. As dogmatic as Marx, Dewey displaces the inexorable laws of dialectical materialism with the scientism of renascent liberalism.

It should be of no surprise that a difference in quality exists between Dewey's thought in Liberalism and
Social Action (and also Individualism Old and New) and his thought in earlier works, such as The Quest for Certainty and The Public and Its Problems. Liberalism and Social Action is not carefully constructed and in places its argument contradicts Dewey's thought in his more systematic works.

For example, Dewey's belief in economic determinism is at a total disjunction with his general philosophical thought. Determinism of any variety was a bane to instrumentalism. It was a vestige of a Newtonian world in which it was believed everything could be comprehended in terms of absolute laws. Dewey did not seek "truth" or determinist explanations; "truth" was at best statistical in nature. Dewey sought an effective "system of inquiry" and the knowledge it could yield. Knowledge consisted of doing and was inseparable from its experiential realization. Prediction thus was a mental abstraction. At best prediction constituted a "warranted assertion" but it did not constitute knowledge. As averse as Dewey was to determinism in the physical sciences, given the increased complexity of human behavior, it would seem reasonable that he would have had a greater aversion to varieties of individual and social determinism, such as economic determinism.  

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23 Implicit in Dewey's objection to determinism was his objection to "ultimate values" or "fixed ends." As
Dewey was more careful in *The Quest for Certainty*. He spoke not of economic determinism but of the central role played by economic factors in society.\(^{24}\) He also remarked: "No mechanically exact science of an individual is possible. An individual is a history unique in character."\(^{25}\) Indeed, Dewey was more circumspect about the social uses of the scientific method in *The Quest for Certainty*, noting that it is invalid to attempt to predict the results of the "revolution" which would come with the social use of the scientific method. The confidence in a political program such as

Dewey indicated in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 141; "Growth itself [was] the only moral 'end.'" Thus for Dewey there were no other "ultimate values" which could be asserted in advance of the existential situation. Dewey has been criticized by Morton White (Social Thought in America, p. 244), and Lee C. MacDonald (Western Political Theory: The Modern Age, pp. 446-448), for his advocacy of "fixed ends" in politics. For example, Dewey intended renascent liberalism not as a program for a singular existential political problem but as a program for all political problems in the foreseeable future. White writes: "There are I suggest two Deweys. There is the Dewey who revolted against formalism and who feared the consequences of setting up inalienable rights and self-evident principles for political and moral action. Then there is the Dewey who wanted to be a social engineer but did not succeed." (p. 244).

Dewey would have responded that he advocated liberalism insofar as it facilitated personal "growth." Thus Dewey, at least theoretically, remained consistent. However, the critical question remains how realistic is Dewey's concept of liberalism? Basic to Dewey's liberalism are his concepts of "open communication" and "shared experience." It is questionable however whether the "open communication" and "shared experience" of Dewey's "great Community" are capable of realization in the large, industrial society.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 238.
renascent liberalism was simply not present in 1929:

The nature in detail of the revolution that would be wrought by carrying into the region of values the principle now embodied in scientific practice cannot be told; to attempt it would violate the fundamental idea that we know only after we have acted, and in consequences of the outcome of action.26

Elsewhere in The Quest for Certainty, he argues that we do not now know enough about the social uses of science to permit us to order our communal existence to a significant extent:

... The complexity of the conditions upon which objects of human and liberal value depend is a great obstacle, and it would be too optimistic to say that we have as yet enough knowledge of the scientific type to enable us to regulate our judgements of value very extensively.27

In The Quest for Certainty, Dewey also discussed the uncertainty of human existence in primitive cultures and civilizations and the variety of responses which such uncertainty generates. To cope with it, primitive man developed an array of magical omens and rituals. The ancient Greeks and Romans often deified those processes upon which their survival depended. Christians developed an eschatology which provided a reward in the after-life for a virtuous earthly life. Man, according to Dewey, sought "certain and absolute answer[s]" where life afforded none. The Newtonian fixed, block universe was one expression of the "quest for certainty." Ironically, Dewey's renascent liberalism appears to be another "certain and absolute answer[s]."

26Ibid., p. 263. 27Ibid., p. 260.
It is an expression of his deep concern that violence or suppression of democratic rights may be used to initiate social change. Dewey, knowingly or unknowingly, was a victim of a syndrome which he had earlier diagnosed.

By 1939, Dewey had questioned several of the basic suppositions of renascent liberalism. He was no longer certain that the scientific method could be institutionalized in government.\(^{28}\) He became disillusioned by the rise of dictators who had come to power claiming to support socially melioristic ideologies. He, like many other socialists and Marxists, now believed that socialism itself was not adequate assurance of effective government.

Dewey now placed greater emphasis upon the individual as an arbiter for determining the desired nature of government and society. Earlier he had emphasized the "collective intelligence" and the social nature of intelligence; individual intelligence was purported to be little more than an anachronism. Now Dewey believed individual intelligence was needed as a counterpoise to the collective intelligence. Dewey contributed, in 1939, to a collection of essays entitled *I Believe*, in which he wrote:

> I shall now wish to emphasize more than I formerly did that individuals are the finally decisive factors of the nature and movement of associated life.

In rethinking this issue in the light of totalitarian states, I am led to emphasize the idea that only the voluntary initiative and voluntary cooperation of individuals can produce social institutions that will protect the liberties necessary for achieving development of genuine individuality.\textsuperscript{29}

Dewey also altered his concept of economic liberalism in 1939. He no longer advocated socialization of the economy. While he still did not believe in laissez-faire capitalism, he admitted that government economic regulation was far more complicated than he had earlier thought:

\ldots there is one thesis of Herbert Spencer that could now be revived with a good deal of evidence in its support: namely, the economic situation is so complex, so intricate in the interdependence of delicately balanced factors, that planned policies initiated by public authority are sure to have consequences totally unforeseeable,--often the contrary of what was expected \ldots \textsuperscript{30}

It is difficult not to view renascent liberalism principally as a tendentious expression intended for the general public. It is an expression of Dewey's intense concern with the grave economic problems of the United States in the 1930s and the threat of Marxist violence as an attempted solution to these problems. Had Dewey been principally interested in an academically sound work, he no doubt would have qualified his assertions about renascent liberalism's success, for at best he could only have demonstrated the likelihood of its success, not its certainty. Whether


\textsuperscript{30}Dewey, \textit{Freedom and Culture}, pp. 141-143.
Dewey, at the time of writing believed the great stress of the period justified the weaknesses and oversimplification of his work or whether he was even aware of it is simply not known. Ultimately, renascent liberalism rests upon an unwarranted exaltation of the scientific method in its application to political and social affairs and upon an oversimplification of political and social problems.
CHAPTER III

NIEBUHR'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ACTION

In this Chapter I will discuss Moral Man and Immoral Society, Reinhold Niebuhr's principal statement about social action.¹ This work, like Dewey's Liberalism and Social Action, was prompted by the economic and social stresses of the Depression. As we know, Niebuhr did not object to violence as a minority instrument for social action, and did not offer a specific plan of social action with prescriptions to be followed. Moreover, Niebuhr, unlike Dewey, did

¹Niebuhr's political thought has attracted a significant body of critical scholarship. Ronald H. Stone's Prophet to Politicians (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), is probably the most comprehensive, critical work about Niebuhr's thought. June Bingham's biography, The Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), is useful but, because it was published in 1961, it does not deal with Niebuhr's subsequent political and intellectual changes. Morton White's Social Thought in America, and Charles Frankel's Case for Modern Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), are important attacks on Niebuhr's political thought and its underlying positions. However, because of Niebuhr's change of views in the 1960s, much of White's and Frankel's attack has become dated.

not confine his remarks to the political and social setting in the United States.

When writing *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr was motivated by a desire to attack secular liberals and Social Gospel liberals for what he considered their excessive optimism. As I noted earlier, chief among the liberals he criticized was John Dewey. For Niebuhr, liberals did not assess accurately the harsh realities of political existence. Labeling liberals as "moralists," Niebuhr wrote:

Insofar as this treatise has a polemical interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill... They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society.2

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr offered a generally somber view of human society. Aggrandizement, or the will to power, he believed, was basic in human society;


Of the above works, only MacDonald's Western Political Theory, Stone's Prophet to Politicians, and Bingham's Courage to Change discuss Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in a significant manner.

it derived from fear and the impulse for self-preservation.\(^3\)

Aggrandizement in turn resulted in a heightening of the existing level of fear and served to proliferate mistrust in society. For Niebuhr, aggrandizement and the impulse of self-preservation became so intertwined that it became exceedingly difficult to distinguish one from the other.\(^4\) Niebuhr argued that humans are more aggrandizing than lower animals:

> In the animal the instincts of self-preservation do not extend beyond the necessities provided by nature. The animal kills when it is hungry and fights or runs when it is in danger. In man the impulses of self-preservation are transmuted very easily into desires for aggrandizement... The economy of nature has provided that means of defense may be quickly transmuted into means of aggression. There is therefore no possibility of drawing a sharp line between the will to live and the will to power.\(^5\)

Human reason, Niebuhr asserted, often served the interests of the will to power. Thus, he implied, a balance of power or a system of law would not be capable of significantly eliminating aggrandizement in society. In later works, Niebuhr was to argue that egocentrism, a personality trait more basic than, but comparable to aggrandizement, constituted original sin.\(^6\)

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 42. \(^4\)Ibid., pp. 42-43.

\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 41-42.

\(^6\)In Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), he identified egocentrism or egotism with "the Biblical and distinctively Christian conception of sin." (p. 188). Niebuhr was aware of the contradiction inherent in the Christian doctrine of man and sin, i.e., that man sins inevitably but yet possesses free will. But Niebuhr maintained that this was a contradiction for which there could be no immediate resolution. He believed that human freedom transcended categories of human comprehension and thus, he held that one should not be
As we might expect from Niebuhr's attacks upon lib-

bound by such categories when describing human freedom. He argued in Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1: "But there is no resource in logical rules to help us understand complex phenomena, exhibiting characteristics which seem to require that they be placed into contradictory categories of reason . . . Loyalty to all the facts may require a provisional defiance of logic lest complexity in the facts of experience be denied for the sake of a premature logical consistency." (p. 263).

Because we do not understand a phenomena such as human behavior, it does not necessarily follow that we must suspend our logical categories. Our incomprehension may or may not stem from the logical categories we use. In any case, it is doubtful whether Niebuhr's concept of human egocentrism as "inevitable but not necessary" assists in any way our understanding of human behavior. Niebuhr defended the suprarationalism of his epistemology in his Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp. 175-203. It is the suprarationalism of Niebuhr's concept of human freedom which Morton White in Social Thought in America, and Charles Frankel in Case for Modern Man found objectionable.

In later years Niebuhr was to abandon his doctrine of sin. In 1956 in the Kegley, Breal work, Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, . . . Niebuhr indicated his dissatisfaction with it, in a reply to criticism from William John Wolfe (p. 437). By 1965, Niebuhr abandoned altogether the Christian framework of his concept of egocentrism. In Man's Nature and His Community, Niebuhr indicated that human egocentrism or excessive self-regard stemmed not from the absence of "saving grace" or "unbelief" but from the lack of proper nurturing as a child and as an adult (pp. 106-125).

The well known similarity between Hans Morgenthau's political thought and Niebuhr's might be noted here. Morgenthau's thought was to a large extent derived from Niebuhr's concept of original sin. Niebuhr's use of ego-centrism or pride as the pervasive characteristic of human nature was analagous to Morgenthau's use of the drive for "power" as the pervasive characteristic of nations. See Part One of Morgenthau's Politics Among Nations (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954). Morgenthau's use of "power" as the fundamental national impulse was an oversimplification of which he was aware, but it was nonetheless a useful one. The kinship between the two men was significant for Morgenthau dedicated his work, Science: Servant or Master (New York: New American Library, 1972), to Niebuhr who had died in 1971.
erals, he derived little inspiration from the atomistic individualism of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. But he also took little from the neo-Hegelian, Oxford Idealists T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet and Francis Bradley. For the latter group, society was neither based upon self-interest nor force; it was instead an expression of an absolute spirit and objective reason. Niebuhr rejected this interpretation.

It is Augustine whom Niebuhr acknowledges as a seminal influence. Niebuhr called Augustine the "first great realist of Western history." Niebuhr reminds his readers that Augustine, in *Civitas Dei*, portrays the City of Man as destined to chaos and unhappiness. Constructed by Cain, the City of Man is ruled by the devil. Though not as morose as Augustine, Niebuhr also viewed society as incapable of achieving love and altruism as dominant norms. Niebuhr obviously considered Augustine's somber thoughts a healthy anecdote to liberal optimism.

Reflecting Augustinian pessimism, Niebuhr posited a law of human groups which holds "the larger the group," the more immoral or "selfish" it is. He wrote:

The larger the group the more certainly will it express itself selfishly in the total human community. It will be more powerful and therefore more able to defy any social restraint which might be devised. It will also be less subject to internal moral restraints.

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9Ibid., p. 48.
Niebuhr also argued that in large groups the difficulty in communicating increases as do the sheer numbers of conflicts. He argued that the larger a group became, the greater difficulty it would experience in transcending its myriad of interests and in attaining justice or an altruistic commonality. He also maintained that a large group has great difficulty in attaining a uniform consciousness of any sort, except perhaps one which generates the desire for war or violence.

Niebuhr's sensitivity to power politics notwithstanding, his law of human groups oversimplifies the nature of the political realm. Moreover, with regard to the internal justice of politically autonomous groups, i.e., nation-states, his law of groups minimizes the extent to which power politics has been effectively tempered. Although large groups are more complex and may experience a range of difficulties which small groups do not, no simple relationships exists between the size of a group and the extent of the injustice within it. Relying upon population alone, therefore, one cannot be assured that a large community will have proportionately more internal injustice than a smaller community.

It is apparent that the conduct of international affairs differs considerably from that of internal or domestic affairs of nation-states. The exercise of raw power

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10Ibid.
politics in the latter case is much more pronounced. Nonetheless, it is not clear that the relations of large societies with those around them are consistently more immoral than the external relations of small societies. To be sure, large societies usually have a greater capacity for aggrandizement, but so too they have a greater capacity for good. An analysis of the morality of large groups should be based upon a careful study of the range of their available choices as against their corresponding actions. Such a study is absent from Niebuhr's analysis.

Niebuhr's law of groups denies the possibility for peace and justice in the domestic and international realms. Accordingly, his law of human groups is an excessively pessimistic statement which derives from incomplete analysis and oversimplification. Elsewhere, his pessimism is qualified.

Niebuhr's somber thoughts in Moral Man and Immoral Society reflect not only an Augustinian perspective but also a qualified Marxist perspective. He was never an unqualified Marxist, however. He could not accept the maxim that a proletariat revolution would inaugurate a classless society. Niebuhr, nonetheless, accepted the concept of class struggle, an economic interpretation of history, and a belief in the pragmatic use of violence.\footnote{Ronald Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr, Prophet to Politicians, pp. 58-66.} Niebuhr observed significant disparities of wealth, political power and social privilege
between the classes in Western nations. He noted that, generally, the wealthy and powerful tended to remain so and that great difficulties faced the economically underprivileged when they sought to improve their plight. He observed the injustices visited upon such groups as the blacks in the United States and noted the absence of real desire on the part of those in power to give the economically underprivileged an opportunity to better themselves.

As one would expect, Niebuhr viewed the privileged classes of Europe and the United States as principally interested in the preservation of their position of wealth and power in society and as unconcerned about providing opportunity for the social and economic advancement of the proletariat.\textsuperscript{12} He noted that the privileged invariably constructed a self-laudatory ideology which praised themselves as virtuous and diligent and denigrated the underprivileged as indolent and inept.\textsuperscript{13} In societies dominated by such self-aggrandizing classes, Niebuhr believed that altruism or Jesus' dictum of "love" was simply ineffective as a tool for social reform.\textsuperscript{14}

Niebuhr did not credit religion with being an effective force in removing social injustices in history; nor, did he believe that Christian ethics could play an effective role in the context of the class struggle. One needed a new

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., pp. 128-131.  \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 129.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 74-75.
set of tools for social action, a set which was not in accord with Christian ethics. Too many religionists, he argues, embraced overly optimistic liberal thinking and failed to grasp the stark realities of continued social conflict:

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 good will 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.15

Furthermore, these religionists had too often allowed their faith to be used as a justification for war and immoral national policies.

In the 1930s, Niebuhr found little grounds for optimism about the prospect for peaceful social reform. He looked with dissatisfaction at the records of contemporary parliamentary governments in England, Germany and France.16 He felt that leaders such as Snowden and MacDonald had compromised their socialistic principles in seeking personal power. He also saw no prospect for a successful violent proletariat revolution in either the United States or Europe unless a major international upheaval occurred.17 From this assessment of the contemporary scene, Niebuhr concluded that coercion—violent and non-violent, but short of revolution—was necessary in order to effect social change.

15Ibid., p. 75. 16Ibid., p. 224. 17Ibid., p. 190.
Given these views on the need for coercion, it is not unexpected that Niebuhr was wary of rationalistic plans promulgated and embraced by religious and secular liberals. Rationalistic plans, he maintained, were based upon a presumed accord between the rationality and morality of societal man. We know Niebuhr questioned this presumption. In his opinion, the injustices of society which arose from capitalism could not always be corrected by the use of reason, and without accompanying force. Nor could the injustices be corrected by appeals to Christian ethics.

Niebuhr favored a political morality which did not preclude the use of violence as a tool to effect social reform. Contrary to the teachings of Christian ethics, Niebuhr believed that violence was not inherently immoral. He held that justice was of greater value than non-violence and thus one could morally employ a tactic of violence in order to achieve it. The social ramifications of a violent act had to be considered in assessing its morality. In effect, Niebuhr maintained that if those ramifications are less troublesome than the initial social injustices, then the "ends do justify the means." He writes:

A rational society will probably place a greater emphasis upon the ends and purposes for which coercion is used than upon the elimination of coercion and conflict. It will justify coercion if it is obviously in the service of a rationally acceptable social end, if it is obviously not in the service of momentary passions.  

18Ibid., p. 234.
At this point, it seems clear that Niebuhr's political morality is at a disjunction with Christian ethics, and as we know, the latter for Niebuhr is not basically useful in the context of social change. How is this morality of violence reconciled with Christian ethics?

He attempts to resolve this apparent problem by establishing a dual morality. He justifies his "dual morality" by employing his law of groups, which maintains that the moral capacity of large groups is less than that of small groups and thus that the moral capacity of society is immeasurably less than that of the individual. Dual moral standards are therefore necessary: one for society and one for the individual. The morality of society should be based upon whatever form of social action is required to attain social justice, including, of course, coercion and violent revolution. The morality of the individual should be based upon Christian ethics. As one might expect, the ultimate virtues in societal and individual morality are not identical. For society, the ultimate virtue is justice and for the individual it is moral disinterest and benevolence. Niebuhr explains:

A realistic analysis of the problems of human society reveals a constant and seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the needs of society and the imperatives of a sensitive conscience. This conflict, which could be most briefly defined as the conflict between ethics and politics, is made inevitable by the double focus of the moral life . . . From the perspective of society the highest moral ideal is justice. From the perspective of the individual the highest ideal is unselfishness.
Society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance [and] coercion. . . . 19

What forms of violence does he propose and who may use them? He advocates "negative physical resistance" when an oppressed minority has only a negligible possibility of triumph through force. Niebuhr objected to such terms "non-violence" or "passive" resistance because they failed to denote the physical destruction or harm to human lives which frequently resulted from resistance of this type. He cited the boycotting of English cotton-spinners by Gandhi and his followers. 20 In this instance, the "passive resistance" led to unemployment which undoubtedly resulted in poverty for some who could not find employment elsewhere and perhaps led to sickness as well. "Negative passive resistance," Niebuhr argued described the realities of this type of resistance.

He suggested that American blacks adopt negative physical resistance. On the subject of the need for some form of coercion to improve the blacks' situation, his thoughts bear the test of the ensuing years well:

However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so.

19Ibid., p. 257. Although Niebuhr maintained that the moral capacity of individuals was greater than that of groups, he was less optimistic about individual moral resources than the title of the book indicates. In Man's Nature and His Community (p. 22), Niebuhr wrote that "The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Community" would probably have been a more appropriate title.

20Ibid., p. 241.
Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.\textsuperscript{21}

In Niebuhr’s opinion, a black violent revolution would not be effective, and reliance upon the altruism of the American white man had not given the black man equality of opportunity. He proposed therefore, that blacks take such specific steps as nonpayment of taxes to those states in which black educational facilities are inferior to those for whites.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, he suggested boycotting of employers and public service corporations discriminating against blacks.\textsuperscript{23}

Violent revolution of the proletariat was in the realm of moral possibility for Niebuhr. However, specific circumstances had to be given considerable thought. Did the injustices present in society warrant the violence of revolution? If so, what was the possibility of a successful revolution? Violent revolution did not seem effective to him in the early 1930s. Too many of the working class had in his judgment, been absorbed into the middle class, adopting both its living standard and its ideology.\textsuperscript{24} He viewed this absorption as a bane rather than as a blessing. There would always be a proletariat and such absorption only delayed the possibility of revolution or other forms of social change. Of the possibility of violent revolution in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21}Ibid., p. 253.
\item \textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 254.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
\end{itemize}
future, he prognosticated that such might occur but only after another world war.\textsuperscript{25} He posited that a Communist government in Asia and a semi-Socialist West, might then result.\textsuperscript{26} With the establishment of Communist China in 1949, and the rise of socialist governments in Scandinavia, Great Britain and Portugal, his insight has been partially borne out.

Niebuhr's concept of a dual morality emerged as we know, from a rejection of rationalistic plans, that is, plans which are predicated on an assumed harmony in society. Although he does not dismiss the power of reason as a tempering influence on the egocentric impulses of individuals in society, he insists that rationalistic plans exaggerate such power. For Niebuhr, emotional impulses such as the desire for power or material wealth, misplaced pride, and dishonesty are--at least as often as rationality--the forces which shape political decisions in society.

More specifically, he believed that rationalistic plans were based upon an assumed accord between individual impulses and desirable social ends. Such programs often accepted forms of political expression which were objectionable to religious ethics, such as for example, the interplay of self-interest. On the other hand, such programs denied legitimacy to forms of political action required by political reality such as the discriminate use of violence.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 191. \textsuperscript{26}Ibid.
As he expressed it:

Rationalism in morals therefore insists on less inner restraint upon self-assertion than does religion and believes less social restraint to be necessary than political realism demands.\(^\text{27}\)

Niebuhr was not unaware of the difficulties inherent in his concept of dual morality. He admits for example, that it will lead to an "uneasy harmony":

A rational compromise between these two types of restraint [Christian ethics and the restraint of political violence] easily leads to a premature complacency toward self-assertion. It is therefore better for society to suffer the uneasy harmony between the two types of restraint than to run the danger of inadequate checks upon egoistic impulses ... Social control must consequently be attempted, and it cannot be established without social conflict.\(^\text{28}\)

This "uneasy harmony" is, however, more precarious than he indicates in Moral Man and Immoral Society. A precise and absolute line of demarcation beyond which individual behavior is unaffected by social influences is very difficult, if not impossible to define. By the very use of language the individual exhibits acculturation. Even in the privacy of reverie and reflection, the individual exhibits wishes and attitudes shaped by social influences. The commitment of revolutionaries who oppose the injustices of a government is shaped by political circumstances. Thus the opposition between the individual and the social influences upon him, inherent in Niebuhr's moral ideal, does not exist. Although individuals frequently choose among alternate paths of action, individual behavior exists within a social context.

\(^{27}\text{Ibid., p. 261.}\) \(^{28}\text{Ibid., p. 262.}\)
Correspondingly, a precise and absolute line of demarcation between a working political morality and a working individual morality may very well be impossible to define.\(^{29}\) This becomes clear when we examine Niebuhr's moral duality. If we accept his pragmatic approach to political morality, we find that, for all practical purposes, his moral duality reduces to a moral unity. It is a moral unity in which the individual views both political matters and non-political individual matters in a comparable manner and, accordingly, one in which little or no premium is placed upon selfless behavior. Indeed, Niebuhr identified his moral ideal in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) as an "impossible possibility."\(^{30}\) So too, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1939) Niebuhr wrote: "It is . . . not the highest perfection for man to achieve a unity of his being from which all natural and historical vitalities have been subtracted. The highest unity is a harmony-love in which the self relates itself in its freedom to other selves in their Freedom under the will of God."\(^{31}\)

\(^{29}\)Political institutions constitute only one set of institutions in society, albeit a very significant one. Political influences are less inclusive than social influences, yet political influences are singularly important.


\(^{31}\)Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, pp. 94-95. Although Niebuhr labels his moral ideal an "impossible possibility" he nonetheless argues that the moral ideal should be striven for. Niebuhr's moral ideal is problematic. Fellow theologians, John Bennett and Daniel
As I have said earlier, Niebuhr intended *Moral Man* and *Immoral Society* to be an attack upon liberal thinkers whom he described as excessive optimists. Yet in actual fact, Niebuhr is not a pessimist. The parameters of his "realism" are defined by his assertion that perfect justice will be unattainable. However, no responsible political theorist, whether of liberal persuasion or not, maintains that perfect justice is possible! Accordingly, the basis upon which Niebuhr attacks liberal thinkers is less convincing than one might otherwise believe. Indeed, some theorists, such as the noted German political thinker, Hans Kelsen, have been critical of Niebuhr's attack upon liberal thought. Kelsen has argued that Niebuhr has set up a "straw man" and has created a false argument.32

Although the pervasive tone of *Moral Man* and *Immoral Society* is somber, one may find statements in the work which indicate that Niebuhr is quite optimistic. In the following passage, Niebuhr maintains that man will be able to improve the human community without limit but short of perfect justice and perfect peace:

Williams express criticism of the moral ideal in Kegley's and Bretal's Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought. . . . Niebuhr implies that behavior motivated by self-interest cannot be charitable or indeed loving. Moreover, he offers little guidance for the day-to-day implementation of his moral ideal. Furthermore, he does not emphasize the importance of relationships founded upon mutual respect and affection as a potential source of proximate selflessness.

To the end of history the peace of the world, as Augustine observed, must be gained by strife. It will therefore not be a perfect peace. But it may be more perfect than it is. If the mind and the spirit of man does not seek to conquer or to eliminate nature but tries only to make the forces of nature the servants of the human spirit and the instruments of the moral ideal, a progressively higher justice and more stable peace can be achieved.  

There are other examples of Niebuhr's guarded optimism. In 1935, in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, he noted: "No absolute limit can be placed upon the degree to which human society can yet approximate the ideal [of perfect love]." Four years later, in The Nature and Destiny of Man, he again expressed a comparable optimism.

Aside from undermining his attack upon liberals, Niebuhr's optimism results in--what is for practical considerations--a contradiction. Niebuhr asserted in the above passage from Moral Man and Immoral Society that the human community will improve immeasurably if human efforts are executed in accordance with the individual moral ideal; i.e., the "law of Christ." It was noted earlier that Niebuhr believed the effective application of the "law of Christ" to society was "unrealistic" and that consequently such an application was doomed to failure. But either the "law of Christ" is, or it is not useful in the political framework;

33Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 256.
34Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 111.
it cannot be both. As guidelines for political action, his contradictory statements are thus unworkable. Political action cannot be based upon the possibility of the discriminate use of violence and at the same time be based upon principles to which it is in fundamental opposition.

Moral Man and Immoral Society, as I noted, was intended partially as a polemic against liberal thinkers. Perhaps not unexpectedly, Niebuhr's attack upon liberals and Western culture was intemperate. Contrary to his arguments, most traditional liberal thinkers were neither naive nor unqualified optimists. Traditional liberal thinkers such as Hume, Locke, and John Stuart Mill were not oblivious to balance of power politics and the need for coercive authority in government. Interestingly, Niebuhr in the mid-1920s did not identify liberal thinking with naiveté, but rather with balance of power politics. At that time, he expressed his distaste for both liberals and Realpolitik.36 Within a few years he came to see the usefulness of Realpolitik, but it was not until 1965 that he recanted much of his attack against liberal thought. At that time, in Man's Nature and His Community, he admitted that his earlier criticisms had been "rather violent, and sometimes extravagant."37

In spite of the problematic nature of Niebuhr's individual moral ideal and the contradiction upon which his

36Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr, Prophet to Politicians, pp. 50-51.
37Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His Community, p. 21.
optimism is based, Niebuhr's concept of social action, the belief in the social efficacy of the discriminate use of violence, reflects a sober and realistic assessment of the entrenchment of political injustice. If Niebuhr's political morality is taken as a prescription for action, it might be viewed as an encouragement for political license. Certainly acts of social violence could lead to much that is senseless and destructive. Niebuhr, however, did not condone every act of social violence; on the contrary, he argued only that some acts of social violence may be morally justified. Nor did Niebuhr grant to individuals a power to commit social violence which they did not already have. Indeed, in Moral Man and Immoral Society, he did not advocate the use of organized violence as an instrument of social action in the United States. And, in retrospect, organized violence in the form of social action did not prove to be essential for the restoration of the prostrate economy of the 1930s.

Niebuhr's political views changed considerably after the publication of Moral Man and Immoral Society. Thus, it is not entirely clear to what extent, Niebuhr, in the 1950s and 1960s maintained his belief in the discriminate use of violence as a form of social action. He abandoned Marxism in the mid-1930s and resigned from the Socialist Party in 1939. By 1947, Niebuhr was to identify increasingly with the two party system. At this time, he was perhaps less inclined to advocate violence as an instrument of social action. In the preface to his 1960 edition of Moral Man and
Immoral Society, Niebuhr wrote that he was still committed to its main thesis—a moral duality. At least in principle, then, he continued to advocate his concept of social action. 38

38 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. ix.
CONCLUSION

The 1930s in American society, and in Western society in general, were a period of unusual strain and tumult. Niebuhr's embracing of Marxism and Dewey's espousal of socialism during this period impress one, in retrospect, as over-reactions to societal stress. Their economic leanings, however, might well have posed serious alternatives for many Americans had World War II not served to revive the prostrate economy.

The war served as a turning point in American intellectual thought. It resulted in deep changes in Dewey's and Niebuhr's outlook and resulted also in a transformation of the economic and political outlook of a generation of intellectuals. It resulted in the attenuation of a dissenting tradition, as well, and not until the mid-1960s, did intellectuals again assert themselves forcefully. Perhaps the weakening of the dissenting tradition owes more to the intellectuals' infatuation with Marxism and socialism and to the ignominy with which this infatuation was viewed during the Cold War than any other single factor. One may conjecture whether the massive American involvement in the Vietnamese War would have occurred had a strong dissenting
tradition existed throughout the Cold War.

Dewey in 1940 was eighty years of age. Thereafter he was less active in political affairs. Although he continued to write until his death in 1952, he did not comment principally on political and social matters, and his later writings did not alter his earlier thought. Niebuhr during the 1940s became a vigorous and unrelenting opponent of Communism. He also continued to attack what he considered the excessive optimism of the liberal tradition. In 1947, he joined General George Marshall, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Thompson and Paul Niete on the United States' Foreign Policy Planning Staff. Niebuhr, no longer a Marxist-radical calculating the utility of revolution, was now conservative in outlook and he remained so in the 1950s. His conservatism tempered in the 1960s. He then became an activist in the civil rights movement and an outspoken critic of American involvement in the Vietnamese War. He died in 1971.

Niebuhr's renunciation of Dewey in the Gifford Lectures was obvious hyperbole. It is clear that Dewey was not the most "complacen[t]" thinker of his time; nor was he by any standard a complacent thinker. If Dewey had written nothing other than Liberalism and Social Action the thrust of Niebuhr's remark might be justified. Dewey's 1935 work, however, cannot be understood without taking into account the pressures of the period; it is a polemical response to
equally polemical claims made by dogmatic Marxists. This is not to say that apart from *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey's political thought does not have weaknesses. Dewey acknowledged that his social psychology lacked adequate development of the role of the individual,¹ and A. H. Somjee has developed this area of weakness. Niebuhr, however, unlike Somjee, never engaged in a thorough analysis of Dewey's thought to buttress his remarks. His frequent critical comments are, in fact, invariably cursory in nature.

Dewey and Niebuhr were each significant political thinkers. Their thought was complementary; Dewey emphasized the amenability of human conflict to rational resolution; Niebuhr emphasized the obstacles involved in rational resolution of conflicts. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is obviously more representative of Niebuhr's work than is *Liberalism and Social Action* representative of Dewey's work: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* presents a more realistic assessment of societal injustice and possibilities for societal improvement. Dewey's most careful explication on the subject of social action is his 1916 article in the *Journal of International Ethics*. In this work Dewey's thoughts on social action parallel Niebuhr's in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* but Dewey's thoughts do not bear the onus of Niebuhr's problematic moral ideal. As I have noted, Niebuhr, ¹Horace Kallen, "Individuality, Individualism, and John Dewey," *Antioch Review* 19 (Fall 1959):303.
in his last book, *Man's Nature and His Community* described his attack upon liberals as "violent and sometimes extravagant." However, it is not clear whether he intended his *volte face* to extend to Dewey. Whether or not Niebuhr had this in mind, it is regrettable that he did not explicitly recant his renunciation.
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