criticisms of Dewey, who served as the principal foil to his "liberal realism" in its formative stages.

Like the Bourne-Dewey confrontation, the Niebuhr-Dewey clash (which was also absent much direct engagement between the principals) has become a staple in the textbook diet of recent intellectual history, providing, it is often said, a sharp contrast of perspectives by which to define a critical moment in the course of American social thought. Just as radicals have taken Bourne's break with Dewey as a pivotal moment in the history of their critique of the merely technical rationality of corporate liberalism, so liberals have taken Niebuhr's scornful repudiation of Deweyan "optimism" as a decisive contribution to the maturation of a responsible liberal world view. But what is often overlooked in the latter instance, as in the former, is the degree to which Niebuhr's criticisms were advanced from within a set of assumptions and commitments he shared with Dewey. (Common ground, it should be said, overlooked not only by many historians but, usually, by Niebuhr and Dewey themselves). Many, if not all, of the supposedly irreconcilable differences between Niebuhr and Dewey were differences of emphasis. In the end, these matters a great deal in the development of liberal-democratic thought, but this importance should not obscure their nature.47

Niebuhr first forcefully broached his disagreements with Dewey in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), and this critique may well have come as something of a surprise to the philosopher, for the two men had marched through the twenties pretty much in lockstep. Dewey and the young rising star among liberal Protestant intellectuals supported many of the same causes, wrote for many of the same journals, joined the same organizations, shared similar hopes for an "American" socialism, and found friends and political allies in the same network of activists. As pastor of Bethel Church in Detroit, Niebuhr had captured national attention with his sharp criticisms of Henry Ford, and when he left his pulpit there in 1928 for a professorship of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary, Dewey had every reason to believe that he had acquired a neighbor with whom he could make common cause.

Indeed, shortly before the appearance of Moral Man and Immoral Society in the fall of 1932, Dewey was a featured speaker at a campaign banquet for supporters of Niebuhr's candidacy for Congress on the Socialist party ticket.48

Moral Man and Immoral Society, Niebuhr's sharp indictment of the sentimentalism of both secular and religious liberalism, set the mold for his treatment of Dewey, a mold that, despite Dewey's protests, would never be broken. The book, Niebuhr said, was a polemic against moralists "who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectivities." Dewey was singled out as a leader of such moralists, a sunny exponent of the inevitable triumph of human intelligence who lacked any appreciation of "predatory self-interest" and who attributed social conservatism solely to ignorance. Dewey, Niebuhr charged, had failed to understand "the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations." Consequently, he could not appreciate that "relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group." Conscience and reason could qualify a struggle for power but they could not abolish it. "Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power."49

Flexing the muscular, Marxist-sounding rhetoric he favored in the early thirties, Niebuhr declared that capitalism was dying and the only remaining question was how it would finally expire. One thing certain was that capitalists would not commit suicide as he claimed Dewey and other liberals believed. "Those who still regard this as possible are rationalists and moralists who have only a slight understanding of the stubborn inertia and blindness of collective egoism." In a thinly veiled swipe at what he now regarded as the hopelessly bourgeois League for Independent Political Action, Niebuhr declared that "liberalism in politics is a spent force" and "futile will be the efforts of liberals who stand to the left of Mr. Roosevelt and who hope to organize a party which will give the feverish American patient pills of diluted socialism coated with


liberalism, in the hope that his aversion to bitter pills will thus be circumvented.” What American workers required was less the disinterested social intelligence Dewey advocated than morale, and “morale is created by the right dogmas, symbols, and emotionally potent oversimplifications.”

In his only public response to Niebuhr, Dewey objected vigorously in a couple of articles published in 1933 and 1934 to Niebuhr’s caricature of his thinking in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and elsewhere. He readily admitted that intelligence in itself was powerless; he had never claimed otherwise. “Intelligence has no power *per se*.” It became powerful “only as it is integrated into some system of wants, of effective demands.” Dewey was not the sort of rationalist Niebuhr was attacking, the sort of rationalist who rested his hopes on self-sufficient reason. Indeed, he had himself long been a critic of such rationalism, which separated intelligence and action and conceived of action as “a merely external expression” of reason. “If I held that notion of intelligence,” he said, “I should more than agree with the critics who doubt that intelligence has any particular role in bringing about needed social change.” This notion held that knowledge came first, a notion completely at odds with Dewey’s conception of the mediating function of thought in both individual and social experience and contrary to his notion of human beings as “thinking desire.” Niebuhr, he contended, had criticized him “on the basis of attributing to me the very idea that I have been concerned to overthrow.”

By the thirties, Dewey was not arguing for “social intelligence” as an alternative to politics but for a radical politics that incorporated social intelligence into its practice. Although at an earlier stage in Dewey’s career Niebuhr’s contention that he hoped to persuade the powerful to admit the injustice of their rule and to relinquish their power might have had some force, by the early thirties it was misplaced. Dewey’s call for an “intelligent” politics was not a plea to the oppressed to abandon the effort to match power with power in favor of reasoning with the “dominant economic interests” but rather an appeal to them to wage their struggles intelligently. It was not disinterested intelligence but “interested” intelligence, tied to democratic interests, that he hoped to foster. “Dominant interest is never the exclusive interest that exists—not when there is a struggle taking place,” he observed. “The real problem is whether there are strong interests now active which can best succeed by adopting the method of experimental intelligence into their struggles, or whether they too should rely upon the use of methods that have brought the world to its present estate, only using them the other way around.” Intelligent politics entailed “the method of considering, on the one hand, urgent needs and ills and measures which will cope with them, and, on the other hand, of forming an idea of the kind of society we desire to bring into existence, which will give continuity of direction to political effort.” As the latter suggests, Dewey advocated a politics guided by moral conviction—inclusive ideal ends that “vanquished” the self—as well as intelligence. Moreover, as he said, even if his faith in intelligent method was an illusion, it might be partially realized if resolutely believed (as Niebuhr said such illusions often were) and “illusion for illusion, this particular one may be better than those upon which humanity has usually depended.”

Dewey’s protests were unavailing. Niebuhr continued to view him as a rationalist squeamish about power and unwilling to face up to the need for a realistic politics if the socialist vision they shared was to be realized. Reviewing *Liberalism and Social Action* in 1935, Niebuhr approvingly cited Dewey’s worries about violent means to social change but at the same time criticized him for seeing “violence only as a consequence of a social ignorance which a more perfect intelligence will be able to eliminate.” As Niebuhr read him, Dewey expected to “soothe the savage breast of an imperiled and frantic oligarchy” by means of sweet reason. But if violence was to be avoided, Niebuhr declared, radicals must rely less on intelligence and more on “securing some modicum of political cooperation between the industrial workers, the farmers, and the lower middle classes.” This, of course, was precisely Dewey’s politics, and in 1935 he remained a good deal more committed to it than Niebuhr.

After 1935 Niebuhr’s political concerns shifted with the growing menace of fascism, and his thinking and activism focused less on securing justice for the working class within industrial capitalist societies and more on defending more or less democratic societies from the total-

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51. “Intelligence and Power” (1934), *Later Works* 9:109–110. Here Dewey noted that the only textual evidence of his thinking Niebuhr offered in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (30) was a very poor reading of a 1931 essay on “Science and Society” (*Later Works* 6:53–63), but he might also have complained that Niebuhr’s quotation from this article was an ellipse-filled, cobbled affair to which Niebuhr had added words like “then” to make it appear that one phrase followed another in a fashion decidedly at odds with Dewey’s meaning.


itarian threat. He abandoned Marxist formulations and began to center his attention on conflicts between nations and on the social cohesion necessary for democratic nations to protect their interests. Having once declared that liberalisms were spent, he now called for a new liberalism, revitalized by a stiff dose of "political realism." In the late thirties, he joined Mumford and Frank in the leadership of interventionist intellectuals, though he was critical of what he regarded as their nostalgic quest for a more organic culture. In this context, he renewed his tendentious attack on Dewey. Delivering his Gifford Lectures as Nazi bombs fell on nearby Edinburgh neighborhoods, Niebuhr sharply rebuked Dewey for naively seeking "a secure place for disinterested intelligence above the flux of process"—a thorough misunderstanding of Dewey's work which might have been easily corrected by a cursory reading of his Gifford Lectures. 54

If Niebuhr continued to use Dewey as a whipping boy, Dewey more or less ignored Niebuhr after 1935, particularly after the latter's work took a theological turn in the mid-thirties. He turned the chores of defending Deweyan pragmatism from Niebuhr's distortions to others, principally Hook, and contented himself with general indictments of various practitioners of "anti-naturalism in extremis," among whom he apparently included Niebuhr. This delegation was unfortunate because Hook, a considerably more "scientific" thinker than his mentor, was not as alert as he might have been to the affinities between Niebuhr's theology and Dewey's metaphysics. 55

Niebuhr himself had suggested such affinities in his brief review of Dewey's A Common Faith, though he did not do much himself to explore them further. Dewey's faith, his natural piety, Niebuhr said, was "the kind of faith which prophetic religion has tried to express mythically and symbolically." Niebuhr was no supernaturalist. "God is not a separate existence," he said, "but the ground of existence." Despite the neo-orthodox label that was attached to him, Niebuhr remained, for all his criticisms of liberal sentimentalism, a liberal theologian. No one recognized this better than H. Richard Niebuhr, one of his severest critics. "You think of religion as a power—dangerous sometimes, helpful sometimes," he wrote his brother. "That's liberal. . . . You're speaking of humanistic religion so far as I can see. You come close to breaking it at times but you don't quite do it." Despite his insistence on a suprahuman God, Reinhold Niebuhr was nearly as anthropocentric in his concerns as Dewey. Both were fixated on the "nature and destiny of man," and, for Niebuhr, Christian beliefs were not literal but "mythic" truths that offered profound insight into the human condition. Moreover, though Niebuhr believed in absolute truth, this was God's truth and was not available to man. "The truth, as it is contained in the Christian revelation, includes the recognition that it is neither possible for man to know the truth fully nor to avoid the error of pretending that he does." Niebuhr had as much contempt as Dewey for the pretense of those who claimed access to divine truth, and when it came to human knowledge, he was as certain as Dewey of its uncertainty. Niebuhr had cut his teeth intellectually at Yale Divinity School on William James, and though Edward Purcell may go too far in saying that Niebuhr's theology was "a Christian restatement of William James's pragmatism," Niebuhr shared far more with James and Dewey and other naturalists than with the antinaturalists Dewey and Hook attacked for their "failure of nerve." Although Dewey's thinking could never be wholly reconciled with that of any theologian, the differences that divided Dewey and Niebuhr were far more akin to those that separated Dewey and James than those that set Dewey at odds with the likes of Mortimer Adler. 56

Dewey was not an optimist and Niebuhr was not a pessimist. Both made a point of distinguishing their position from each of these views of human destiny. Each, albeit in very different language, advanced a view of experience and nature which warned against both the pride and arrogance of optimism and the despair and abasement of pessimism.

54. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Scribners, 1946), 1:111. On Niebuhr's political trajectory see Richard W. Fox, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930–1945," Review of Politics 38 (1976): 250, 256, and Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 193–223. It is exhausting just to read in Fox's biography about Niebuhr's burdensome schedule of teaching, traveling, lecturing, and other public appearances and activities, and it is little wonder that he rarely found the time for careful reading of the work of others, though, in Dewey's case at least, this did not deter him from making pronouncements about its shortcomings.


ism. Both were members of the party of humility and faith. Dewey no less than Niebuhr could caution that "humility is more demanded at our moments of triumph than at those of failure" and advise "a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way without our wish and plan." And Niebuhr no less than Dewey could declare his faith in an ethical ideal that tightly wedded self-realization and community. "By the responsibilities which men have to their family and community and to many common enterprises," he said, "they are drawn out of themselves to become their true selves."

At bottom, the most significant difference between Dewey and Niebuhr was the difference of emphasis each placed on the various elements of this common view of the possibilities and limits of the moral life and of a shared understanding of the task of cultural criticism and politics. As Niebuhr defined this understanding, the task was one of

analysing the moral resources and limitations of human nature, of tracing their consequences and cumulative effect in the life of human groups and of weighing political strategies in the light of the ascertained facts. The ultimate purpose of this task is to find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society. Such methods must always be judged by two criteria: 1. Do they do justice to the moral resources and possibilities in human nature and provide for the exploitation of every latent moral capacity in man? 2. Do they take account of the limitations of human nature, particularly those which manifest themselves in man's collective behavior?

By these lights, Dewey's philosophy emphasized the moral resources and slighted the limitations of human nature, and Niebuhr's philosophy was weighted in the opposite fashion. Niebuhr found that man "constitutorially corrupts his purest visions of disinterested justice," while Dewey asked why he had "to believe that every man is born a sonofabitch even before he acts like one, and regardless of why and how he becomes one?" Dewey worried more about despair than arrogance and Niebuhr more about arrogance than despair. Dewey spoke of God to comfort his readers; Niebuhr spoke of God to discomfort his. If Dewey flirted with sentimentalism about what might be, Niebuhr flirted with complacency about what must be, and neither, at his best, succumbed to these temptations.

But these differences, though less momentous than those posed in the conventional accounts of Niebuhr's slaying of Dewey, were nonetheless of considerable moment for American democratic theory. For Dewey and Niebuhr were not always at their best, and nowhere was Niebuhr's flirtation with complacency more evident than in the democratic ideal he began to advance in the mid-forties, an ideal not only less expansive than Dewey's but one that, as Richard Fox has said, expunged from his own thought "the prophetic, critical, and self-critical element that had been one of its central features in the thirties." Concerned during the war about what he termed "the excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated," Niebuhr offered a more "realistic" reading of the virtues of democracy which neglected any connection it might have with the "moral resources and possibilities of human nature" and recommended it principally as a prophylactic against the abuse of power. The best thing that could be said about democracy in this view, he said, was that it placed "checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious." In a judgment that, as Fox says, would have appalled the author of Moral Man and Immoral Society, Niebuhr declared in 1943 that in democracies like that of the United States "there is such a constant shift in the oligarchy, both in the political and economic sphere, through pressure from below that the oligarchy is kept fluid," so fluid that the "concept of elite does not really apply." Moreover, justice was secured in democratic societies not only by the circulation of elites but by competition between them, "by tension between various oligarchies." By the mid-forties the radical prophet had become a liberal pluralist, lending his support to the corporate order of countervailing powers which was crystallizing during World War II.

The striking thing about Niebuhr's argument for democracy in such books as The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (which established him as an early member of the club C. Wright Mills would term the "balancing boys") was not only that it was shortsighted as a description of American society, but that, as an ideal, it stripped democracy of most of its moral implications and reduced it to little more than a mechanical equilibrium of power. Moreover, by implicitly identifying

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more ultimate than are or than can be the facts disclosed by the sciences." Not content with wisdom or the role as cultural critics which wisdom would afford them, philosophers continued what Dewey had long ago decided was a futile and increasingly hermetic quest for the foundations of knowledge.61

The forties was, as well, no time for cheery political pronouncements by radical democrats, though the situation was still fluid enough before the calcification of the Cold War to sustain a flickering hope ("I became a socialist in 1948," Michael Harrington wrote, "the last year of the thirties"). As I noted, Dewey did his best to nourish this hope. As long as he continued to live and as long as liberals and democratic socialists felt the need to memorialize his longevity, he used these birthday parties, banquets, and other such occasions to remind them of the long road to participatory democracy which remained ahead. People showed up at these affairs, New Republic editor Bruce Bliven remarked, expecting to comfortably salute an aged monument, only to have Dewey dress them down with a stern reminder of the evils of complacency in the face of a society still crying out for reconstruction.62

At one of his eightieth-birthday-party celebrations in 1939, Dewey established the pattern for the speeches he would give on similar occasions for the next decade. He admonished his audience to remember that "creative democracy" remained an ideal and not a fact of life in the United States—a "task before us." Surveying the events of his long lifetime, he noted that Americans could no longer rely on the frontier to regenerate democracy as they had in his childhood: "At the present time, the frontier is moral, not physical," he said. "The period of free lands that seemed boundless in extent has vanished. Unused resources are now human rather than material. They are found in the waste of grown men and women who are without the chance to work, and in the young men and women who find doors closed where there was once opportunity. The crisis that one hundred and fifty years ago called out social and political inventiveness is with us in a form which puts a heavier demand on human creativeness."

Reiterating the familiar themes of his social philosophy, Dewey cautioned that democracy must not be conceived narrowly as external political machinery. Rather, it must be understood to be a way of life

