



No Earthly Paradise

Review of Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nations and Empires*

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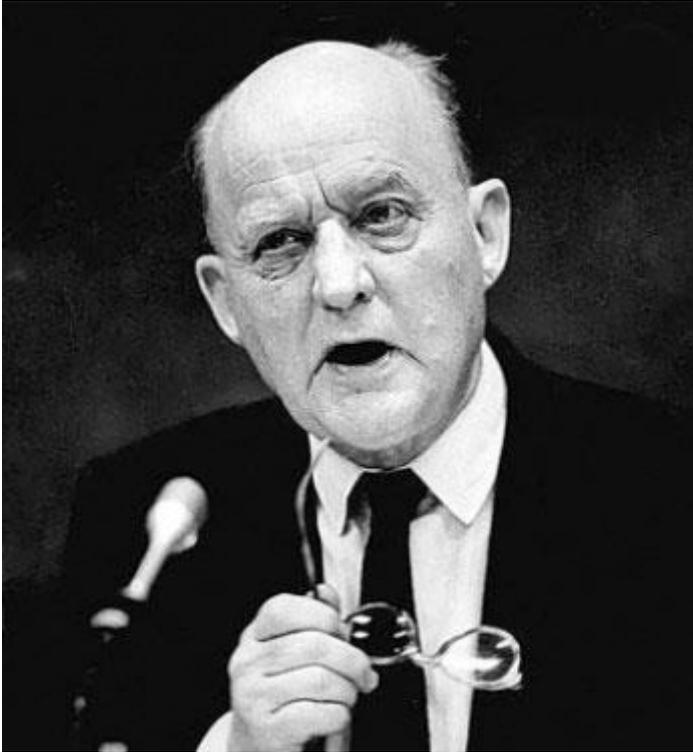
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No Earthly Paradise

Review of Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nations and Empires: Recurring Patters in the Political Order* (London, 1960: Faber), *Guardian*, 25 November 1960, 7



REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S *Nations and Empires* is a bold and interesting attempt to place the political predicament of our time in historical perspective. Professor Niebuhr's purpose is 'to describe the historical constants and variables in the dominion of nations and empires', in order to treat the conflict between the American and Soviet republics as a particular case of a recurrent combination of factors. These factors are the need for order and the craving for justice; the interplay of self-interest, force, tradition, and 'majesty' or prestige; of nature and contrivance; of the factors

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that made for unity and those that break it for the sake of independence; above all, of the power of the utopian vision of the universal reign of virtue, and of the claim that this perfection, or at any rate its promise, is incarnated in some earthly order or constitution, a class, a nation or social force – the empire of Alexander, or the Rome of the Antonines or Constantine, or in Islam, or the papacy, or the Germanic race, or the British nation, or the American democracy, or the Communist Party. Professor Niebuhr is among the few writers on political topics who know that at the heart of differing political theories there lie differing conceptions of the nature of man, so that the controversies between the great classical thinkers of the West, in the end, reduce to unbridgeable gulfs between their notions of what constitutes the essential attributes of men and their purpose or lack of purpose.

Professor Niebuhr's own conception of man rests on his theology. Like Augustine, he believes not only that man is doomed to be at war with himself here on earth, but that he does evil not because his free spirit is overcome by his recalcitrant flesh but because man abuses his freedom, narrow though it be, and through 'the persistence and power of his self-regard', his megalomaniac and utopian illusions, chooses evil, and so brings suffering on himself and others. When to the impulse to dominate (which is not necessarily diminished by man's awareness of it) there is added an obsessive vision of some final solution to all human problems, attainable through some given political or economic or social arrangement, and men of sufficient strength and ability make an attempt to translate this dream into reality, it becomes a nightmare.

Militant Communism seems to Dr Niebuhr only the latest of many such attempts; but he does not exonerate the West from similar delusions of its own power and virtue and impartiality. He charges the fathers of modern democratic nationalism – Herder, Mazzini, Rousseau, Fichte, Godwin, Jefferson – with a radical misunderstanding of the nature of power, in particular of the interplay of what he calls 'dominion and community' – the will to dominate and the need for peace, stability, solidarity, continuity.

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The Marxists understand this better, but they, in their turn, falsely identify the coercive hierarchy of the Communist state as the last stage on the road to a perfect classless society.

Dr Niebuhr passes Babylon and Persia, pagan and Christian Rome, the Spanish and British and Russian empires in vague and rapid – over-rapid – review; he glances at Egypt and the Aztecs, the great empires of Asia and the medieval *imperium*. Everywhere he finds certain recurrent factors: the desire to conquer and coerce in conflict with the yearning for equality and individual or communal liberty; the craving for order on the one hand and for justice on the other (Plato and Aristotle, like primitive societies, in his view, in their search for order, pay too high a price for it in terms of justice), for earthly dominion and ideal empire – utopian dreams, which at one and the same time create goals beyond the reach of history that inspire and drive men forward, and at the same time cause them to practise barbarities when they find that what they had hoped for seems difficult (and is, in fact, impossible) of attainment.

The vistas upon which Dr Niebuhr looks are long and wide, his quotations are drawn from many worlds; he draws an arresting parallel between the falsification of facts by Seneca when he extols Nero, or by the Christian propagandists of Constantine's empire – Eusebius and Lactantius – or by Thomas Aquinas in his estimate of the papal rule of his time, and the panegyrist of the later empires, notably of the Soviet Union today. Only the sense of reality – knowledge – can save mankind: that is Dr Niebuhr's first and last word. Knowledge not in the sense in which the rationalists preached that perfect knowledge will of itself create the perfect society, but because only the realisation of man's incurable imperfection can break the spell cast by the totalitarian solutions in the name of which men are maimed or destroyed in vain.

Similarly, only admission of man's finiteness can save us from the equally fatal fallacies which led Wilson, in the name of national self-determination, to convert Europe (as Trotsky once remarked) into a madhouse, but failed to provide the inmates with strait-

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jackets; or, like Eisenhower, to mislead the world to its doom by attributing an absurd degree of authority to the United Nations which it does not and, given the realities of the distribution of power, cannot possibly possess. Americans in particular are charged with a tendency to overestimate the power of human contrivances, and underestimate the power of tradition and the non-rational impulses of men which, in the author's view, Hume and Montesquieu, Adam Smith and Burke understood better than either Marxists or their liberal opponents.

In the meanwhile nuclear annihilation threatens us: Dr Niebuhr examines our prospects of survival. He does not hope that we shall soon be cured of either set of the incompatible and equally fatal Marxist and liberal delusions. His argument against the unilateralists who wish to capitulate to the Soviet Union are trenchant and conclusive, but he does not, perhaps, allow enough for the attractive power of these pathetic attempts to escape from painful choices. He wonders whether the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union (he largely ignores the even more relevant development of China) will now ultimately check the power of the Executive, much as the Whig aristocracy did in England in the eighteenth century. He speculates, too, as others have, on whether the education which Soviet citizens are obtaining will now inevitably make them more critical of their regime. These parallels are not too plausible. The Central Committee does not greatly resemble the great Whig lords; nor does German acceptance of National Socialism argue for education as a necessarily liberating influence.

The book ends on a note of sober gloom. It is filled with suggestive ideas, sagacious reflections, curious historical examples which cast alternate light and darkness on the subject, imaginative parallels, moral and political maxims and scattered ideological sketches which move forward and backwards in time and space and stimulate the moral and historical imagination. But central to his entire discourse is Dr Niebuhr's justly celebrated view of man as being doomed to imperfection, unable and unwilling to face the

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truth, and lured on by a fatal mirage of an earthly paradise conceived in terms incompatible with human capacities, engaged in destroying the real world in which alone at least some of his values could partially be realised. It is the eloquence and insight with which he urges his central thesis – that man's idealism and belief in the perfectibility of his species, so far from promoting either freedom or democracy, can be their worst enemy, and that it is man's realistic vision of his own imperfection that alone makes life tolerable on earth – that has made Dr Niebuhr one of the most interesting and influential thinkers of our day.

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