between the chapters but also because the book *assumes* throughout the usefulness of tragedy to democracy, almost as if its ubiquity in contemporary democratic discourse was a marker of its value and salience rather than the opposite. Still, how could any contemporary democratic theorist interested in the politics of culture resist a book that glides effortlessly from, among many others, McNamara (who emplotted the Vietnam war as tragic) to Havel, Rossellini, Mandela, Christa Wolf, and Hannah Arendt? That in so doing, the book navigates its way from the abdication of political responsibility to its fullest assumption is an expression of precisely the hope that Pirro invests in tragedy and its promise for democracy.

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WHAT NOW?

Charles Lemert: *Why Niebuhr Matters*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi, 252.)

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Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, there has been a resurgence in the study of Reinhold Niebuhr's thinking. Prominent journalists, analysts, academics, and politicians—including Barack Obama—have in recent years cited Niebuhr as an inspiration. In his fascinating new book, Charles Lemert endeavors to explain this revival. Lemert argues that the current era is a "what now?" moment for global politics in general and the United States in particular, meaning it is an era of great uncertainty, threat, and structural change. Niebuhr's political thought, Lemert argues, is well designed to help leaders and analysts deal with these developments. Hence the renewed interest in Niebuhr's writings.

The foundation of Niebuhr's understanding of politics and history, as Lemert makes clear, is his particular, biblically inspired, view of human nature. The most important component of this anthropology is sin. Niebuhr's views of sin are best understood at two levels. The first component is what many would call selfishness: the assertion of particular interests at the expense of the good of the whole. To Niebuhr, all political interactions—both international and domestic—revolve around group selfishness, and from this core belief flows the realism of his philosophy. Because all groups are inherently selfish, to understand politics we must first comprehend the power relationships that underlie interactions. The powerful invariably adopt policies that disproportionately benefit their interests, thereby creating conditions of injustice. This reality exists even if individuals genuinely believe that their actions are creating social goods. People and nations all too often

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delude themselves into thinking that the pursuit of their particular interests will benefit the whole. Even in cases where this position is to a certain extent correct, when policies disproportionately benefit the powerful they will be viewed as unjust, and thus a potent source of instability and conflict.

Niebuhr's understanding of sin unmasks the pretensions and power realities that underlie policies, to great analytical benefit. This framework helps explain, for example, why the United States is deeply unpopular throughout the Middle East. America's policies advantage US interests more than other groups' objectives, which is likely to result in widespread resentment. This resentment will exist even if US actions do create some international benefits. *Disproportionate gain* for America—and thus perceived inequalities, injustices, and selfishness—will tend to drive perceptions. Similar analysis applies to the actions of powerful (usually affluent) groups at the domestic level.

To Niebuhr, the best—perhaps the only—way to achieve significant levels of justice is to create stable balances of power among contending groups. The separation of powers and checks and balances that are at the core of liberal democracies help create such balances at the domestic level. Niebuhr did assert, though, that he believed economic interests were becoming unbalanced—which is a charge Lemert highlights as part of the reason for the renewed interest in Niebuhr's thought. Niebuhr also foresaw that the United States, because of its great economic power, could become fundamentally incapable of being balanced at the international level. He advocated self-restraint and policies that worked for increasing levels of relative justice abroad as the best means of preserving US hegemony by reducing the resentment and backlash directed against it, though he doubted that US leaders would have the wisdom to consistently pursue such actions. He instead criticized the increasing militarization, self-glorification, and unilateralism of American foreign policies, critiques that are of obvious high relevance over the last decade.

The second key dimension of sin to Niebuhr is what some have called the proclivity of "absolutizing the relative," or the tendency for individuals and especially communities to deny the partiality and inherent selfishness of their policies and ideas and instead view them to be absolute and perfect. From this human tendency flow such negatives as xenophobic nationalism, cultural arrogance and pride, and ideological proselytization. Lemert pays frequent attention to this dimension of Niebuhr's understanding of politics, and for good reason: it helps us understand the highly ideological era in which we live. Materialists, secular realists, and liberals all predicted that the end of the Cold War would mark the end of ideological conflicts. To Niebuhr, however, pronouncements of the "end of history" will always be premature. Human creativity means that no political system can ever be considered final or perfect, while human sin inclines individuals to believe in the inherent superiority of their system in relation to alternatives. These dynamics, taken together, create recurring incentives for conflict, as well as for forced ideological promotion abroad.

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A palliative to these problems—which Lemert places under the category of "messianic nationalism"—is "prophetic messianism" (185). A principal insight of prophetic religions, and one of the keys to Niebuhr's political philosophy, is the belief that God's law forever transcends humans' understanding and accomplishments. According to Niebuhr, "A religion of revelation is grounded in the faith that God speaks to man from beyond the highest pinnacle of the human spirit; and that this voice of God will discover man's highest not only to be short of the highest but involved in the dishonesty of claiming that it is the highest" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man* [Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949], 1:203). In other words, the wisdom of a prophetic religion, as Niebuhr time and again explains, not only powerfully reminds people of the incompleteness and imperfections of their endeavors and beliefs, but shatters repeated pretensions to the contrary. The awareness of finitude and sin despite humans' highest achievements creates in both individuals and groups a sense of humility. This disposition helps both to limit the often fanatical ambitions found in politics and to foster a sense of compromise and conciliation, which are key preconditions to increasing levels of peace and justice, both domestically and internationally.

Lemert does an admirable job of analyzing these and other core dimensions of Niebuhr's writings, though not always as systematically as one might wish. The book, though, does suffer from some weaknesses. Two in particular stand out. The book periodically dedicates significant time to tangential issues, at least for readers who are most interested in the political dimensions of Niebuhr's thought. Topics such as the origins of evangelicalism, Christian religious traditions, and the generic perils of the pulpit and preaching receive significant attention, without clear benefit for understanding Niebuhr's philosophy. Even more troubling is that the book too often engages in personal commentary that detracts from its overall argument and objective. Statements that describe Richard Nixon as "perfectly evil" (143), American conservatives as "bereft of any perceptible values other than those useful to the acquisition and holding of power" (143), Neville Chamberlain as "an ass" (153), and that today "only [!] the United States totters uneasily in an ideological stupor" (198) do not help us understand Niebuhr's thought or why it matters today. To the contrary, they distract from this analysis.

Despite these weaknesses, Lemert's book is a welcome addition to the renewed interest in Niebuhr's writings. Although assertions that political and economic progress is not inevitable, that sin must be resisted in both others and ourselves, and that we need to humbly recognize our limits after being disabused of beliefs about the purity of our motives and the absolute treachery of our adversaries, may seem obvious and come as sage advice, political actions too often move in the opposite direction. Hence the enduring relevance of, and need for, Niebuhr's political insights.

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