

Guest Editorial: Across 8 decades, truth about racial injustice

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One of the most bracing books I read for doctoral work was Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 classic, [*Moral Man and Immoral Society*](#). I pulled it off the shelf recently while thinking about Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, Michael Brown, Staten Island, Eric Garner, the Cleveland police and so on, and so on.



David GusheeWritten to pierce any surviving liberal optimism as the Roaring '20s gave way to the disastrous '30s, Niebuhr's primary thesis concerns the effects of sin on human society and, in particular, on human groups. Niebuhr insists all human life is marked by sin, especially in the forms of ignorance and selfishness, but at least the individual sometimes demonstrates the potential to rise above ignorance and selfishness to reach rational analysis and unselfish concern for others.

Human groups, on the other hand, are both more stupid and more selfish than individuals. They seem especially impervious to rational or moral appeal, easily prone to self-deception and demagoguery, and apparently needful of the imposition of a power greater than their own if they are to

accede to any changes that cut against their own self-interest.

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr primarily analyzes economic problems and the great clash between privileged and proletarian classes. Moral appeals to the holders of great economic power and privilege almost always are fruitless, Niebuhr says.

Their tremendous power must be countered by the effectively organized collective power of the workers, either in the form of revolution—which has its own dangers—or through political processes that gradually win gains for the proletariat through collective bargaining and government regulation to mitigate inequalities and ensure a measure of worker rights and economic security.

Racial injustice, circa 1932

Already in 1932, Niebuhr recognized racial injustice in America could be subjected to the same kind of analysis he offers of the economic problem. Scattered throughout his book, he presents insightful, though not always satisfactory, commentary on the plight of black Americans—whom he called Negroes, in the vernacular of his time—in a land of white privilege. Some of this commentary resonates deeply today.

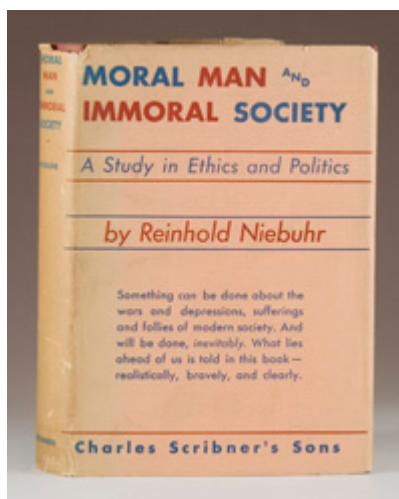
For example, Niebuhr notes, “It has always been the habit of privileged groups to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire.”

He then applies this insight to white attitudes toward black Americans, at the time the issue being white opposition to full voting rights for blacks based on the claim they were incompetent to exercise that franchise. But Niebuhr’s insight here has a broader reach with deep applicability to the attitudes of many white Americans today.

Later, Niebuhr writes: “It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race.” That’s because, as Niebuhr writes throughout, groups that benefit from the existing structure of society have no particular interest in seeing that structure changed.

Self-deception reigns

Moreover, privileged groups have an extraordinary ability to identify their interests with “the peace and order of society.” Self-deception reigns among the privileged because, among other reasons, to see reality more truly would place an unbearable moral pressure on such groups to resign privilege in favor of greater justice. Instead, privileged groups call in the forces of state power in the purported interests of “the peace and order of society” as a whole, but in fact to suppress movements of the oppressed for social change and greater justice.



Knowing only forceful resistance to white privilege has any hope of changing the existing structures of power, Niebuhr ponders whether that pressure will be more effective if it is violent or if it is nonviolent. Niebuhr refuses to draw an absolute distinction between these forms of pressure.

He concludes: “Nonviolence is a particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors. The emancipation of the Negro race in America probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of social and political strategy.”

With these words, Niebuhr anticipated the nonviolent civil disobedience strategy that came to full flower in the civil rights movement and remains favored among Christian activists. But events in the last weeks and months here in the United States remind us the same race-based injustices and the same available repertory of strategies for confronting injustice remain with us—with violence the response of those who become unconvinced nonviolence is effective.

White privilege must end

Niebuhr often is described as a cynic, or at least as a pessimist. Lines like this one help cement that reputation: “However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely 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.”

Friends, Niebuhr wrote those words 82 years ago. As recent events again tragically demonstrate, he was right. The power of white privilege, often incarnated in unjustified and unpunished state brutality against black people, then followed by white resentment that anyone could have a problem with the way things are, remains a reality. Its power must be broken, once and for all.

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