

The Realist of Distances: Reinhold Niebuhr and the “Great Debates” in IR

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During the Twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr was not only an important public intellectual but also a seminal thinker in IR. His prophetic voice echoed in the American culture from the Thirties until the Sixties and beyond. At the same time, statesmen and public opinion found in his political theory an essential contribute both for reflection and action. However, the protestant theologian suffered a harsh contrast by scholars, in particular by the positivist ones. This article analyses the path of Niebuhr’s international political thought across the “Great Debates” of IR. From the First “mythical” debate until the last and still open one, it examines the role of Niebuhr’s Christian realism in the development of the discipline. By using Flannery O’Connor’s concept of “realist of distances”, this essay tries to prove how Niebuhr was able to anticipate and, what’s more, exceed all debates.

Keywords: Reinhold Niebuhr; Great Debates; Christian Realism; International Relations Theory; History of International Thought

Introduction

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor observed that all novelists “are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality”. Therefore, she added, “if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious”, then “what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself” (O’Connor, 1969: 40-41). According to the novelist of Savannah, the writer is and should be a prophet. Indeed, she immediately noted that the prophecy “need not be a matter of predicting the future”, but rather “is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (O’Connor, 1969: 179; 44). The prophet, arguing the authoress of *Wise Blood*, is a “realist of distances”, namely, one who “does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth” (O’Connor, 1969: 179). In other words, the prophet is a realist of distances, because he has a larger vision of reality which enables him to better understand and describe what happens.

Despite not being a novelist, Reinhold Niebuhr was what O’Connor called a “realist of distances” (Elie, 2007). Many analysts have noted that the protestant theologian was a “prophetic voice” for his time (Landon, 1962), as he was able to show as much the mystery of history as the ambiguity of politics. But, above all, he helped his contemporaries see distant things close up. More than providing a series of requirements to be followed or establishing a real school of thought, he offered a “critical matrix” of thought and action with which to link

morality and foreign policy without giving in to the opposite risk of cynicism or utopia (Kaufman, 1996: 316). Niebuhr did this through his international political theory, Christian realism. This theory was a Christian version of political realism in which Niebuhr’s understanding of politics had its roots not only in Christianity (Niebuhr, 1941-1943, 1949), but also specifically in S. Augustine’s thought (Niebuhr, 1953: 119-146). In stark contrast to other approaches or schools, Niebuhr tried to re-introduce the Augustinian tradition in international politics with different outcomes (Epp, 1991).

From the Thirties until the Sixties, Niebuhr was an important public intellectual that had—and continue to have—a “constant dialogue” with American intellectual culture (Halliwell, 2005). He wrote numerous historical, theological and political works, and was a tireless polemicist and animator of some journals (such as, for example, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *The New Leader*, *Christianity and Society* and *Christianity and Crisis*). His influence on American public debate took on an exceptional importance that hardly had previously been (or will be) joined by other members of a religious congregation (Brunner, 1956: 29; Schlesinger, 1956: 149). In other words, Niebuhr has been the theologian who more than any other not only has played a significant role in society after Jonathan Edward (La Feber, 1976: 47), but also has influenced the development of American politics in his time (Bundy, 1963: 306). In fact, in 1962 Hans J. Morgenthau called him “the greatest living political philosopher of America” (Morgenthau, 1962: 109). In his lasting and successful career as a commentator of international affairs, which never took a systematic form, Niebuhr dealt with

almost all the so-called “Great debates” of International Relations (IR).

This article analyses the path of Niebuhr’s international political thought across the Great debates of IR. During the last century, in fact, Niebuhr’s theory touched on many of the topics of those debates time after time, such as the contrast between realism and idealism or the clash between traditionalism and behavioralism. Through Christian realism Niebuhr anticipated and, what’s more, exceeded all debates. This essay is organised into three sections. The first section summarises the anticipatory role of the protestant theologian in the mythic First Debate. The principal conclusion drawn from this review is that Niebuhr actually did not win the debate, but rather identified a summary of the realist/idealist dichotomy in his political theory. The second section traces Niebuhr’s trajectory in the clash between Hedley Bull and Morton Kaplan. I argue that while he is framed in the “first image” by Kenneth Waltz because of his lack of methodological rigour, his strong opposition to positivism allowed his thoughts to avoid the shallows in which neorealism ended up. This leads to the conclusion that Niebuhr’s fate in the Second Debate brought him closer to the “English School”. The third section briefly explores the normative dimension of Christian realism. I contend that since the middle of the last century the core of Niebuhr’s reflection can be regarded as a prototype of the normative approach to IR that spreads only many decades later.

Niebuhr and the First “Mythical” Debate

The story of IR has always been narrated in terms of a series of great debates—debates through which all analysts and scholars have explained the development of the discipline (Waeber, 1998: 715). In more recent years some critical readings of this narrative have started to rise¹. In particular, the First debate was to be interpreted as a “myth”, in other words a later scholar’s invention that would have falsified historical reality (Wilson, 1998). According to Ashworth, the realist component of this debate has centred on the attacks of Edward H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau towards liberalism (Ashworth, 2002: 35). Niebuhr was never referred to as an actual participant in the First debate, but was rather regarded as the inspirer of both scholars.

“The Father of All of Us”

Niebuhr is considered by all scholars as the point of origin of “Classical realism” (Bell, 2008). The protestant theologian was a “key formulator” of this approach (Torbjørn, 1997: 241) that has not only had a “profound impact” (Donnelly, 2000: 27) on the emergence of the first generation of realists, but has contributed in a formidable and indispensable way to the development of this all tradition (Rosenthal, 1991; Mearsheimer, 2001). In the mid-twentieth century, George F. Kennan identified the beginning of realism in Reinhold Niebuhr, defining him “the father of all of us” (Thompson, 1955: 168). The Niebuhr’s legacy in the development of classical realism can be detected in the works of Carr and Morgenthau. In the preface to the first edition of *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, the English historian defined *Moral Man and Immoral Society* as extremely important, because “though not specifically concerned with international relations”, it was able to highlight “some of the fundamental

problems of politics” (Carr, 1939). The references to the protestant theologian’s political theory are several in Carr’s well-known and controversial work. Moreover, also Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, which represents his intellectual and methodological manifesto, is affected by Niebuhr’s influence (Morgenthau, 1946). However, it is not possible to assert a rigid and one-way derivation of Morgenthau from protestant theologian thought. Morgenthau came into contact with Niebuhr only after the conclusion of his intellectual formation. Niebuhr’s works seem to confirm Morgenthau’s ideas, rather than being their original source of inspiration (Zambardi, 2010). Despite this, in a brief essay on Niebuhr’s legacy on American political life and thought, the author of *Politics Among Nations* recognised him the merit to make a genuine “rediscovery of Political Man” possible (Morgenthau, 1962: 99).

Similarly to Carr, Niebuhr dissents from the idealistic idea of a possible harmony of interests between states in international affairs. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* he pointed out the different and incompatible behaviors of individuals and the political community. Indeed, while the former can achieve the goal of mutual and disinterested love, the latter can only pursue the collective egoism of national interest (Niebuhr, 1932). In the same way as Morgenthau, the protestant theologian emphasizes the role of human nature in international dynamics: the *animus dominandi* of man creates a struggle for power, insecurity and anarchy. According to him, beyond every national or imperial community there is only international chaos. World affairs are ruled by anarchy. The Balance of power is a kind of administration of anarchy. But this is a system in which anarchy prevails over administration in the end (Niebuhr, 1944).

Despite being very adverse to idealism, this does not mean that Niebuhr was completely in agreement with Carr, Morgenthau and Kennan. Although he showed great respect for the last two in particular, the protestant theologian tried to go beyond both. With reference to national interest, he asserted that Kennan “does not intend to be morally cynical”, but he thought that the solution offered by the author of *American Diplomacy* “is wrong”, because “egotism is not the proper cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism” (Niebuhr, 1952: 148). Instead, in discussing the problems of the morality of nations, Niebuhr wrote that, “the most brilliant and authoritative political realist”, Morgenthau, “despite his critics, is not a proponent of arrogant nationalism”: the author of *Politics Among Nations* not only seemed to propose that “nations are loyal to interest, values, and structures of culture higher than their own interests”, but also “is merely suggesting that it would be both honest and moral for nations to confess their real motives, rather than to pretend to have nobler ones” (Niebuhr, 1965: 71-74). All nations, the protestant theologian observed, “are involved in a web of interests and loyalties” and, therefore, their problem “is to choose between their own immediate, perhaps too narrowly conceived, interests and the common interests of their alliance, or more ultimately of their civilization, in which, of course, their ‘national interest’ is also involved” (Niebuhr, 1959: 277).

Niebuhr tries to go beyond Morgenthau and Kennan because he wants to analyse the problems of justice, moral and values in international relations in more depth. As he noted, in his last works, “[t]he consistent tendencies of nations to seek their own interests is so marked that the realistic interpretation of international relations would seem to be the only valid description of

¹In this regard, in addition to Peter Wilson, see Lucian M. Ashworth (2002) and Joel Quirk—Darshan Vigneswaran (2005).

their behavior, and possibly the only true solution to the problem this behavior poses”, nevertheless, “it is important to raise once again the question whether a realist interpretation may not err in obscuring the residual capacity for justice and devotion to the larger good, even when it is dealing with a dimension of collective behavior in which the realistic assumptions about human nature are most justified” (Niebuhr, 1965: 71).

Therefore, national interest is not the final word on international politics. In fact, man can reduce anarchy but not eliminate it. In his view, the “modern nation’s self-regard and power impulse has not eliminated the residual capacity of peoples and nations for loyalty to values, cultures, and civilizations of wider and higher scope than the interests of the nations”. For this reason, he added, “(t)he importance of establishing this residual creative freedom in collective man lies not in the possibility of subordination the lower to the higher of wider interests—but in the possibility that even a residual loyalty to values, transcending national existence, may change radically the nation’s conception of the breadth and quality of its ‘national interest’” (Niebuhr, 1965: 76-77).

The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness

In his discussion of national interest it is possible to see a sign of his will to reconcile realism with idealism through Christian realism. In fact, Niebuhr refuses exclusive validity to both. According to him, idealism and realism are terms that refer to two different states of mind in the explanation of human behavior rather than actual doctrines. The former, in the esteem of its proponents, is “characterized by loyalty to moral norms and ideals, rather than to self-interest, whether individual or collective”, but, in the opinion of its critics, is “characterized by a disposition to ignore or to be indifferent to the forces in human life which offer resistance to universally valid ideals and norms”. The latter instead “denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power” (Niebuhr, 1953: 119-120). In either cases, there is an incompatible interpretation on the effect of human freedom upon man’s social and political life. While realists “emphasize the disruptive effect of human freedom on the community”, idealists “regard man’s rational freedom primarily in terms of its creative capacity to extend the limits of man’s social sense [...] and to give preference to his ‘moral’ or social sense over his self-regard”. Therefore, on the one hand, the former “are inclined to obscure the residual moral and social sense even in the most self-regarding men and nations”, on the other hand, the latter “are inclined to obscure the residual individual and collective self-regard either in the ‘saved’ or in the rational individual and groups”. But both theories fail “to observe the intricate relation between the creative and the disruptive tendencies of human freedom”. Instead, Christian realism “holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter” (Niebuhr, 1965: 31-33; 39). Over the centuries, realism and idealism contribute to the elaboration of many political theories that tend to overestimate a partial aspect of human behavior.

Niebuhr saw the antithesis between realism and idealism in the dynamics of the Cold War too. In particular, he found it in the different tendencies of the US towards Soviet Union. Idealists require the fulfillment of a world government that guaran-

tees global peace and dispels the inevitability of war. On the contrary, realists theorise even the idea of a preventive war, because they accept the inexorableness of war and do not consider the reaching of an agreement with the USSR as possible. But, according to Niebuhr, both sentimental and cynical politics appear limited and counterproductive (Niebuhr, 1950).

The protestant theologian introduced the ambivalence between moral sentimentalism and moral cynicism in a very incisive and suggestive manner through two famous biblical categories. So he defined idealists “children of light” and cynics “children of darkness”. He didn’t avoid a clear judgment, and formulates a well-balanced and highly pragmatic one. The children of darkness are wicked because they understand the power of self-interest. While the children of light are virtuous but unwise because they don’t recognise the will to power and underestimate the peril of anarchy both in the national community and in the international one (Niebuhr, 1944). Rejecting both these positions, Niebuhr believes that their synthesis is necessary. In this perspective, his rediscovery of St. Augustine’s thought is crucial².

According to Niebuhr, the Bishop of Hippo is “the first great ‘realist’ in western history”. In Augustine’s works, the protestant theologian finds an effective and exact description of reality. He is also convinced that Augustinian thought is able to contribute to the understanding of international politics. Indeed, Augustine knows that “good and evil are not determined by some fixed structure of human existence”, and is aware that “realism becomes morally cynical or nihilistic when it assumes that the universal characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative”. Instead, Augustine bases his thought on a different account of human behavior. The latter “can escape both illusion and cynicism because it recognizes that the corruption of human freedom may make a behavior pattern universal without making it normative” (Niebuhr, 1953: 120, 130). Augustine’s approach allows correcting a serious and widespread error of modern realism³. That is, to possess a reductive conception of national interest. In fact, Augustinian realism: “corrects the ‘realism’ of those who are myopically realistic by seeing only their own interests and failing thereby to do justice to their interests where they are involved with the interests of others. There are modern realist, for instance, who, in their reaction to abstract and vague forms of international idealism, counsel the nation to consult only its own interests. In a sense collective self-interest is so consistent that it is superfluous to advise it. But a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests because it will fail to do justice to the broader and longer interests, which are involved with the interests of other nations. A narrow national loyalty on our part, for instance, will obscure our long range interests where they are involved with those of a whole alliance of free nations. Thus the loyalty of a leavening portion of a nation’s citizens to a value transcending national interest will save a ‘realistic’ nation from defining its interests in such narrow and short range terms as to defeat the real interests of the nation” (Niebuhr, 1953: 136-137).

²According to Roger Epp, during the first half of Twentieth century four fundamental elements of Augustine’s thought return at the centre of IR. That is the concepts of history, human nature, order and *caritas* (Epp, 1991: 3-5). The renewed interest in Augustinian tradition in IR was due exactly to Niebuhr (Jones, 2003).

³Most probably the target of Niebuhr’s critics is the idea of national interest proposed by Kennan. Moreover, the protestant theologian had already accused the American diplomat of having an egoistic idea of national interest of their country (Niebuhr, 1952: 148).

The rediscovery of the Augustinian tradition—in Niebuhr’s view—is important because not all kinds of realism can overcome sentimentalism without falling into nihilism. Thomas Hobbes e Martin Lutero, for example, stressed a too cynical conception both of human nature and politics. Their “realistic pessimism” did indeed prompt “to an unqualified endorsement of state power”. And this only because “they were not realistic enough”: both “saw the danger of anarchy in the egotism of the citizens but failed to perceive the dangers of tyranny in the selfishness of the ruler”, therefore “they obscured the consequent necessity of placing checks upon the ruler’s self-will” (Niebuhr, 1953: 127). Instead, Augustinian realism turns out to be a more reliable guide to the understanding of a crumbling and decaying world. As the protestant theologian stated: “Modern ‘realists’ know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understood the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love must take the place as the final norm for these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure the power and persistence of self-love. Thus Augustine, whatever may be the defects of his approach to political reality, and whatever may be the dangers of a too slavish devotion to his insights, nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker. A generation which finds its communities imperiled and in decay from the smallest and most primordial community, the family, to the largest and most recent, the potential world community, might well take counsel of Augustine in solving its perplexities” (Niebuhr, 1953: 146).

Avoiding an unproductive form of reductionism, the Augustinian influence led Niebuhr to elaborate his “Christian realism”. This is a conception of human nature, politics and history that considers both self-regarding and social impulses of man, knowing that the former is stronger than the latter. In other words, Niebuhr creates a *tamed realism* that exceeds cynical realism but does not lead to a sentimental idealism. In the First mythic debate, Niebuhr achieved two important goals. On the one hand, he played an unconscious anticipatory role because he began to attack idealism before Carr and Morgenthau, more or less influencing both in the end. On the other hand, he could exceed the harsh contraposition between realism and idealism, for he tried to establish a new and comprehensive approach to international affairs. An approach that constituted in a way an advance of synthesis produced by the neo-realism versus neo-liberalism debate, even if upon different premises. Such an attempt was full of difficulties because it is destined to clash with the growing positivism supported by many scholars of IR. And from this strife the “Second debate” arose in the 1960s.

Niebuhr and the Second “Not Positive” Debate

During the Second debate, the core of the matter moved from the issue of content to the methodological one. The behaviourist revolution⁴ that occurred in the other social sciences, broke into IR. The supporters of the positivist approach strongly contrasted the historical perspective which had dominated the discipline until then. They claimed for a new “scientific” approach in IR. A common way to narrate this debate was in term of the struggle which pitted traditionalists against behaviouralists, history against science. In fact, behaviouralists—such as Mor-

⁴In this regard, see for example Easton (1962; 1969).

⁵Kaplan (1957); Singer and Small (1966); Waltz (1979).

ton Kaplan, David Singer and Kenneth Waltz⁵—believed that the discipline could move forward only thanks to the method of natural sciences. For them, “the path to knowledge was via the collection of observable data” and “the path to theory started with what was observable” (Hollis & Smith, 1990: 28-29). Instead, classical realists focused on human nature, history, law and philosophy. As Stanley Hoffmann summarized in a derogatory way, it was “the battle of the literates versus the numerates” (Hoffmann, 1977: 54). Even if the debate was much more broad and complex⁶, it was generally associated with the dispute between Hedley Bull and Morton Kaplan. The former thought that behaviouralists “have done a great disservice to theory in this field”, because these scholars, with their renouncement of history and philosophy, “have deprived themselves of the means of self-criticism, and in consequence have a view of their subject and its possibilities that is callow and brash” (Bull, 1966: 370; 375). Conversely, Kaplan is convinced that the traditionalists “have confused the relationship between intuition and scientific knowledge”. According to him, they “have not helped to clarify the important issues in methodology” because they “mistake explicitly heuristic models for dogmatic assertions” (Kaplan, 1966: 3; 20). Despite the fact that both Bull and Kaplan “shared a more similar view of the international political system than their location on the two opposing sides of the debate would suggest”, because “[t]his was not a debate between theories, but one within a single theoretical orientation and about how to conduct enquiry within that approach” (Hollis & Smith, 1990: 31). As it was effectively noted, the key point of contestation in the Second Debate was “whether the natural and social sciences can be studied similarly” (Curtis & Koivisto, 2010: 435).

As in the previous debate, Niebuhr did not participate in the dispute but he anticipated it. In fact, starting from 1930s he pointed out an anti-positivist approach to social sciences and IR. The protestant theologian was a traditionalist. He was convinced—such as Bull—that history, philosophy and law could help the better understanding of politics rather than the positivist method. But also he was sure—unlike the author of *The Anarchical Society*—that the Christian faith was essential for an authentic knowledge of reality.

The Common Sense of the Man in the Street

In his battle against positivism, Niebuhr wanted to unmask the unwarranted pretensions of the secular ideologies in reaching a scientific comprehension of man and politics. “The hope”, he observed, “that everything recalcitrant in human behaviour may be brought under the subjection of the inclusive purposes of ‘mind’ by the same technics which gained man mastery over nature is not merely an incidental illusion, prompted by the phenomenal achievements of the natural sciences”, but “it is the culminating error in modern man’s misunderstanding of himself” (Niebuhr, 1949: 14). An error which was especially evident in the United States. In fact, as he noted in *The Irony of American History*, “no national culture has been as assiduous as our own in trying to press the wisdom of the social and political sciences, indeed of all the humanities, into the limits of the natural sciences”. It caused, in the author’s view, a widespread bewilderment of the cognitive ability of social and political science. Indeed, “when political science is severed from its

⁶See for example Hollis and Smith (1990), Kurki and Wight (2006), and Curtis and Koivisto (2010).

ancient rootage in the humanities and ‘enriched’ by the wisdom of sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists, the result is frequently a preoccupation with minutiae which obscures the grand and tragic outlines of contemporary history, and offers vapid solutions for profound problems” (Niebuhr, 1952: 60).

Modern culture used presuppositions of an out-and-out faith even if it affirmed to make a scientific analysis (Niebuhr, 1956). The behaviouralists could not be value-free. According to Niebuhr, in the relationship between man and reality there was always an original option which afforded to determinate knowledge. In fact, reason never operates in a vacuum. Its presuppositions make it servant and not master of human impulses (Niebuhr, 1965: 37). At the base of the scientific method there are both the presupposition of human perfectibility and progress (Niebuhr, 1953: 2-4). Niebuhr believed that the realism of many positivist theories of the social sciences, claimed but always roughly denied by history, was only a sign of their helpless irrationalism (Niebuhr, 1940: 188). In his view, political realism was impossible without a realistic comprehension of human nature, but the latter could only be guaranteed by the intuitions which came from the Christian view of history (Niebuhr, 1953: 101). In an irreverent way, the protestant theologian stated that “we have no guidance amid the intricacies of modern power politics except as the older disciplines, less enamored of the ‘methods of natural science’, and the common sense of the man in the street supplies the necessary insights” (Niebuhr, 1953: 124). The man of the street is able to reckon the complexity and ambiguity of politics much better than many scientists. In fact, his shrewd awareness of several human mania allows him to avoid the self-pity of intellectuals (Niebuhr, 1954: 14). Nevertheless, this element of Niebuhr’s thought caused the bitter critiques of Kenneth Waltz. According to the author of *Theory of International Politics*, the protestant theologian’s analysis lacked methodological rigour. Therefore, Niebuhr must be placed in the “First image” of IR which should be integrated and surpassed (Waltz, 1959). As Roger Epp observes, the growing importance of behaviouralist approaches and the ambition to the discipline’s autonomy caused the isolation of Niebuhr thought among American scholars of IR (Epp, 1991: 20). At the same time, the attacks against him came from his transparent personal faith that was always opposed by the social scientists (Patterson, 2003: 47). Even if his strong opposition to positivism allowed his thought to avoid the shallows in which neorealism later ended up.

“An Englishman in New York”

“I’m an alien I’m a legal alien I’m an Englishman in New York”. Few other words as Sting’s famous song *Englishman in New York* could describe Niebuhr’s experience in the field of IR before and after the Second Debate. The protestant theologian was an American German. And for most of his life he studied and taught at Columbia University in New York. Like other classical realists, he had a typical European approach to IR. It is not wrong to suggest that Classical Realism and the so called English School had many elements in common. Both partially shared values, vision and method. The English School was a branch of Realism and the latter maintained its continuity outside American academic borders. It was probably Niebuhr’s methodological approach that brought him closer to the English School⁷, even if he couldn’t be described as a fellow of the

Grotian tradition. As Epp pointed out, there is not a simple and necessary correlation between the English School and Christian Realism (Epp, 2003: 210). However, we cannot hide that some sort of *tamed realism*—just like Niebuhr’s—was elaborated by some scholars of the English School. According to Wight, Niebuhr was the “patriarch” of classical realism (Wight, 1966: 120-121). But with his rejection of positivism and his attention to the relationship between power and justice, the protestant theologian was the nearest realist to the exponents of International Society. During the Cold War, on the other side of Atlantic Ocean, authors as Martin Wight, Herbert Butterfield and Hedley Bull maintained a traditional approach in the study of international affairs. As classical realists, they gave prominence to history, law and philosophy in order to understand the dynamics of world politics. They elaborated a paradigm halfway between realism and idealism. States, anarchy, power and law were carefully mixed to offer a wider explanation of global order.

However, between Niebuhr and the first scholars of the English School there were similarities and differences. The former almost totally concerned the method, while the latter partly regarded the topics. Similarities between the two consisted in the effort to investigate international relations from a strong historical perspective and also with a constant attention to the ambiguity of human nature. Differences rose above all from the particular sensibility to legal elements which lacked in Niebuhr’s works. He underestimated the function of natural law, even if he recognised the important role of law, justice and order in international politics. He seemed to share more elements with Wight and Butterfield rather than with Bull. In fact, it was the Christian faith that united the horizon of their international thought. These scholars believed that their faith had something to say *on* and *to* power (Patterson, 2003: 17). Unlike the Australian author, who was an atheist, Wight and Butterfield had a strong attention to religion. In fact, both English authors’ theory and their Christian faith were firmly related (Hall, 2002, 2006; Bentley, 2011: 340). At least for a moment, Niebuhr, Wight and Butterfield reclaimed an Augustinian tradition in IR but were defeated by positivism (Epp, 1991, 2003). Despite this, the protestant theologian, similarly to Wight and Butterfield, continued in his research. He remained an important voice for his time and for American culture but he faced many problems with academic scholars until the end of his existence.

Niebuhr and the Other “Missing” Debates

After a life on the stage of American public opinion, Niebuhr died at the age of seventy-eight in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on June 1st, 1971. However, his thought continued to influence both US domestic and foreign politics. Many scholars, practitioners, politicians were inspired by him (Rice, 2012). In this way his “long shadow” crossed not only the last decades of Twentieth century (Schlesinger, 1992, 2005), but also the early years of the Twenty-First century (Diggins, 2011). Therefore, Niebuhr’s legacy also reached the White House. In fact, Barack Obama doesn’t hide the protestant theologian problematic and ironic influence on him (Holder & Josephson, 2012). Nevertheless, many different and incompatible posthumous interpretations of his thought exist (Smith, 1986: 130).

Niebuhr certainly never took part in the Inter-Paradigm Debate, nor in the one between rationalists and reflectivists⁸. In the

⁷At this regard see Dunne (1998), Linklater and Suganami (2006).

⁸On these debates see Wæver (1996), Lapid (1989), Kurki and Wight (2006), Brown (1997), and Smith, Booth and Zaleski (1996).

latter, a heterogeneous front of post-positivist approaches rose up against the reductionism of those theorists that sought to emulate the scientific methods of natural sciences to understand IR. This attempt, that still continues today, gathered up many scholars with only few things in common (Brown, 1997: 58). As Yosef Lapid noted, the debate represented a “disciplinary effort to reassess theoretical options in a post-positivist era” (1989: 237). Among these very different post-positivist approaches—such as Constructivism, Postmodernism and Critical theory—the only one that seems to share something with Niebuhr’s Christian realism is the Normative theory⁹.

A Normative Realism

If “[a]ll theory” in IR “is normative theory” (Cochran, 1999: 1), this observation is valid for Niebuhr above all. According to Chris Brown (1992: 3), by normative theory in IR “is meant that body of work which addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation generated by the discipline”. Contrasting the positivist bias, this approach, that is broadly linked with political philosophy, should try to explain the fundamental ethical aspects of IR. The protestant theologian performed the same operation in all of his works. During the Twentieth century, Niebuhr not only fought against positivism but also developed a political theory that referred to norms and ethics. On the one hand, in his continuous clash against positivism, he reaffirmed that many liberal theories “derive their defects from the failure to make a sufficiently sharp distinction between the natural and the socio-historical sciences between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*” (Niebuhr, 1953: 80). On the other hand, he proposed a classical theory of IR which is nevertheless innovative and peculiar to him. This approach, recognising the impossibility of “sacrificial love” and the limited “ethical realities of history”, finds its synthesis in the “norm of mutuality” between men and nations (Niebuhr, 1941-1943). In this way, he “invokes a traditional normative theory, anchored in Judeo-Christian beliefs, that transcends interests and conflict in the name of love and justice” (Smith, 1995: 187).

As Patricia Stein Wrightson rightly argues, Niebuhr theory is a “normative realism” which “differs widely both from classical political realism, for which morals have at best an ancillary value; and from neorealism, which scarcely takes morals into account at all” (1996: 377). Since Christian realism recognises the inextricable ambiguity of human nature and politics, it considers both ethical and historical contingencies in international affairs. There are no easy political choices. As Niebuhr noted in *Nations and Empires*, “all historic responsibilities must be borne without the certainty that meeting them will lead to any ultimate solution of the problem, but with only the certainty that there are immediate dangers which may be avoided and immediate injustices which may be eliminated” (1959: 298). For this reason, he continued by observing that “[o]ur best hope, both of a tolerable political harmony and of an inner peace, rests upon our ability to observe the limits of human freedom even while we responsibly exploit its creative possibilities” (Niebuhr, 1959: 299). The protestant theologian outlined an approach in which the problematic relationship between ideals and fulfilments returns. Thus justice, humility, prudence, mod-

eration and irony are the keywords that define Niebuhr’s political theory from the Thirties to the Sixties. He constantly reflected on the just balance between order and justice in international relations, believing that “there is no purely moral solution for the ultimate moral issues of life; but neither is there a viable solution which disregards the moral factors” (Niebuhr, 1952: 40). In this regard, he added: “Men and nations must use their power with the purpose of making it an instrument of justice and a servant of interests broader than their own. Yet they must be ready to use it though they become aware that the power of a particular nation or individual, even when under strong religious and social sanctions, is never so used that there is a perfect coincidence between the value which justifies it and the interests of the wielder of it” (Niebuhr, 1952: 40-41).

The moral ambiguity of politics did not lead Niebuhr to relativism but represented for him a challenge *of* and *for* politics. In other words, a challenge to which politics must provisionally respond taking ethics, values and interests into account. But this human effort is undertaken without any certainty of success because men see their present and will peer their future “through a glass darkly that they would make no claim of seeing at all” (Niebuhr, 1946: 152).

Conclusions: “The Realist of Distances”

According to Flannery O’Connor, “we are not living in times when the realist of distances is understood or well thought of, even though he may be in the dominant tradition of American letters”, indeed “the novelist is asked to be the handmaid of his age” (O’Connor, 1969: 46). During the Twentieth century, Niebuhr was not a handmaid of his time. Instead, he was a sign of contradiction. With Christian realism, the protestant theologian faced both domestic and international American political dilemmas. Living a strange paradox, he was very successful among public opinion as well as statesmen but suffered a harsh contrast by scholars, in particular by positivist ones. The former considered him a critical but precious voice that made his wisdom available to politicians and common men in order to solve many moral problems tied to politics. Instead, the latter rejected his approach because it appeared not exactly scientific in an increasingly positivistic IR. Indeed, he had strong difficulties with what Stanley Hoffman defined “an American social science” (Hoffman, 1977).

His being a realist of distances does not affect his ability to predict the future but to see distant things close up. Niebuhr anticipated and exceeded all debates in IR. In this way, he developed Christian realism, which has two peculiar characteristics. It is tamed and normative. It is tamed because it can gather both realism and idealism in a more comprehensive approach that tries to consider all contrasting aspects of man and politics. It is normative because it seeks to interrogate statesmen, scholars and simple individuals about the moral and ethical dimension of international affairs. Both these characteristics go together in Niebuhr’s reflection. Especially in a post-positivist but not yet post-secularist moment of IR, Christian realism can represent useful means of developing the academic debate. During his long and busy life, Niebuhr contributed to asking questions rather than giving answers. He once noted that “[n]othing is more unbelievable than the answer to a question that is not asked” (Niebuhr, 1941-1943: 6). Not only in the Great debates, but also in contemporary IR, it is necessary to understand *whether* and *how* to ask Niebuhr a question so that he can answer.

⁹In this regard see Brown (1992), Frost (1986; 1996), Nardin (1983), and Brown, Nardin and Rengger (2002).

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