

Title: Development and 'Technics': A Niebuhrian Assessment of Technology's Contribution to Social Progress

Author: Charles McDaniel (Baylor University)

Abstract:

Among the seemingly endless scholarly exercises in "What would Niebuhr say?" on issues of domestic and foreign policy, few have ventured into Reinhold Niebuhr's extensive writings on "technics" and its consequences for cultural development. Niebuhr's unique assessments on the good and bad of technological advance reflect near obsession not with technology itself but rather its social, moral, and spiritual effects. Technology forges new dependencies between individuals and institutions in ways that can help realize the full potential of civilization; yet, it also has the potential to amplify the human sin present in all institutions. Thus, Niebuhr saw the net effects of technological progress as indeterminate, depending largely on a society's moral framework and social relations.

Niebuhr was insistent that "technical efficiency is more effective in providing the basis for cultural and spiritual values than in contributing to its heights." Technology is critical in establishing a baseline for cultural advance that can serve to narrow differences between social classes. It provides avenues by which those at the margins of the cultural mainstream may enter the capitalist economy and share its bounty. But Niebuhr's writings suggest a "preferential option for the poor" regarding development, for he perceived an optimal level beyond which technology often exhibits diminishing returns. Excessive dependency on the products of science and industry can negatively impact attainment of the social good by contributing to depersonalization, coarseness in communications, and "vulgarization" of social relations.

Reinhold Niebuhr's cautious optimism and balanced view of technical development is a critical aid to scholars exploring technology's potential as an instrument of social progress. His unique perspective suggests that any program of bottom-up development may expose not only the possibilities but also the potential abuses inherent in attempts to direct technology toward social ends.