

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND LIBERAL PACIFISM, 1914-1940

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By

ROBIN N. J. LATHANGUE, B. Arts & Sci.

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Author: Robin N. J. Lathangue, B. Arts & Sci.
(McMaster University)

Supervisors: Dr. J. C. Robertson
Dr. G. Vallée
Dr. L. Greenspan
Dr. T. Kroeker

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ABSTRACT

Many contemporary theologians and political thinkers find in the life and writings of Reinhold Niebuhr the strong critique of complacency and evidence of an unrelenting quest for social justice. Others, however, interpret Niebuhr in the light of neo-conservative tenets, and see him as one father of American political realism with its appreciation for stable community life and tradition. These two polarities of interpretation highlight the split between left-liberal sympathies for a theology and politics of liberation and the right-liberal disposition toward values expressed most fully in a democratic capitalism. That thoughtful people of both political and/or theological stripes can trace their intellectual roots back to Niebuhr is witness to the complexity of Niebuhr's thought.

Within the broad agenda suggested by these observations, this study seeks to develop and analyze Niebuhr's position on 20th century liberal pacifism. Specifically, it is concerned to trace Niebuhr's reaction against older styles of liberal theology which lent credibility and theoretical support to, among other things, the liberal pacifism which achieved some status in the political and theological debates of wartime North America. The concluding section of the thesis attempts to draw from the study of Niebuhr's criticism of liberal pacifism certain principles which hint at the resolution of the polarities of interpretation of Niebuhr's corpus.

I would not deny, however, that although I should not have been among the crucifiers of Jesus, I should also have not been among his supporters. For I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. But if there is no way of preventing the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God's hands . . . If I am to confess what is truth for me, I must say: There is nothing better for a man than to deal justly - unless it be to love; we should be able even to fight for justice - but to fight lovingly.

Martin Buber (1939)

In a perfect world we'd all sing in tune,
But this is reality so give me some room.

Billy Bragg ("Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards", 1988)

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INTRODUCTION

There has been in recent years a "renaissance" of interest in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Study of his work is especially timely for several reasons, not the least of which is the rise to prominence - at least in Anglo-American politics - of more "conservative" powers and policies. One need only give a cursory glance at the results of recent elections in both the United States and Canada to see that this is a significant trend in modern international politics. Recently a Michigan member of Congress, the son of evangelical theologian Carl F. Henry, was asked how he could justify his support for the contras in Nicaragua in light of his Christian faith. He is said to have responded, "If you really want to know, look up Reinhold Niebuhr".¹

Robert McAfee Brown, who actually studied and taught with Niebuhr, finds this hailing of Niebuhr as a precursor of the new conservatism astonishing. "It remains curious (and painful) to those who knew Niebuhr and whose thought was shaped by his", writes Brown, "that many in the new generation . . . use him to support extreme conservative positions he would almost surely have opposed".² Yet Michael Novak, a prominent "neo-

¹Letter by Bill Kellerman, contributing editor of Sojourners magazine, Vol. 16, No. 6, June 1987.

²Robert McAfee Brown's introduction to The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. xxi-xxii.

conservative" who also claims Niebuhr as his spiritual father, would have little trouble embracing the Congressman's remarks. While Brown finds in Niebuhr the strong critique of complacency and the unrelenting quest for social justice, Novak might interpret Niebuhr in the light of neo-conservative tenets, and see him as a father of American political realism with its appreciation for tradition and community. Their differences highlight the split between the left-liberal sympathies for a theology of liberation and the right-liberal disposition toward values expressed most fully in a democratic capitalism.³ That both Brown and Novak (important theologians in their own right) trace their intellectual roots back to Niebuhr is witness to the complexity of Niebuhr's thought. With this thesis I shall be grappling with one of the world's most important modern Western thinkers. And within the broad agenda suggested by the foregoing observations, I am concerned to elucidate Niebuhr's position on liberal pacifism, to trace his struggle with it to the outbreak of World War II, and to clarify the arguments he uses to criticize it. Further, in the process it is hoped that we will arrive at some understanding of Niebuhr's analysis of the inter-relation between love, justice, and power - all of which bear on our overarching question in fascinating ways.

Broadly speaking, pacifism centers on the relationship between love and coercion, or the use of violence. Is it

³See R. Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. ix-x.

possible to be loving and coercive at the same time? How do we hold together the attempt to live a "selfless" life with the reality of force and conflict? Is violence altogether that necessary? These are only some of the questions that make up the host of complex issues with which pacifism is fraught. Our particular concentration throughout the discussion will be on Niebuhr, for whom the popularity of pacifism (especially liberal pacifism) in the first four decades of this century brought into sharp focus the tension between the Christian law of love (thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself) where life is brought into harmony with life, and the use of coercion or force as a means of either asserting legitimate claims of the self, or of safeguarding them. Pacifism and most of its variations is to be found, in Niebuhr's view, in those situations where the option of absolute non-resistance is exercised in the face of violent aggression.

We will begin by noting Niebuhr's attitude toward pacifism in the early years of his career - through World War I and into the early 1920's. The purpose of this strategy is to demonstrate an enduring and characteristic aspect of Niebuhr's intellectual pilgrimage early on: his openness to experience. As a young man, Niebuhr's position on the question of pacifism altered several times, but never whimsically so. His thinking shows the mind of one who would take the stimulus of his immediate personal world, and the larger international scene, quite seriously. Niebuhr was never one to embrace political dogmatism; at the end

of the day he favoured an approach to difficult questions that was more experiential and pragmatic in character.

The years following his visit to the Ruhr Valley (in 1923) are quite transitional in terms of Niebuhr's attitude on the pacifist issue. Through the 1920's Niebuhr is still liberal and still sees himself in the light of convictions expressed in response to the Ruhr visit. He cannot bring himself to advocate coercion or violence on any scale, yet his disaffection with the apparent naivete and hypocrisy of the liberal-pacifist agenda (and especially the "outlawry of war" movement) grows incrementally as the decade wears on. Niebuhr's essential position on pacifism would change for the last time in 1932 with the publication of his ground-breaking Moral Man and Immoral Society. Here, finally, we find arguments against liberal pacifism that set the tone of his thought on the subject for the rest of his life.

For the mature Niebuhr, pacifism as non-resistance implies the following fallacies: (1) That there is no difference between the morality of the individual person and that of collectives or groups. (2) That social ideals - such as those embodied in the Kingdom of God - can be actualized in history, and through our own powers. (3) That human beings are perfectible creatures. These three elements were of the very nature of the liberal pacifist position which Niebuhr criticizes from 1932 onwards. We shall anticipate what follows in the body of the thesis by briefly considering those areas of Niebuhr's thought which have

direct bearing on the issues raised by these statements.

The first of these fallacious statements directs us to an aspect of Niebuhr's thought which is extremely important. Niebuhr is now famous for having developed a conception of ethics that takes into account the morality of both the individual and the collective. This dual emphasis and distinction are developed most extensively in Moral Man (1932), and again, though not to the same degree, in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935).

The obligation of the individual, Niebuhr argues, is to serve and comply with the law of love. But human collectives, he observes, are not individuals and therefore cannot be "unselfish" in the same way or to the same extent. Niebuhr's point is that the moral capacities of the individual conscience outstrip by far, in his view, those of the collective. If we understand the refusal to assert the interests of the self (including the urge to self-preservation) as a form of unselfishness, pacifism can be seen as an expression of this ideal. It may be a viable alternative for the individual, according to Niebuhr, but for the collective and its representatives it is inappropriate. Hugh Cecil is quoted by Niebuhr with approval: "No one has the right to be unselfish with other people's interests".⁴

The second aspect of Niebuhr's thought which has significance for the criticism of pacifism is his understanding

4R. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 267.

of the relevance (and irrelevance) of ethical ideals. This is developed most fully in the fourth chapter of An Interpretation: "The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal". It is in the context of discussing ideals such as those embodied in the Sermon of the Mount that Niebuhr develops the notion that while ethical ideals may hover over every moral question as goals, guides, and aims, they cannot be made into simple options for justice. According to Niebuhr's first argument against pacifism, then, non-resistance is at best an individual, rather than a collective, moral option. According to his second line of argument, non-resistance is ethically too ideal to be made collectively concrete in a relative and sinful world.

Finally, liberal pacifism verges on heresy, in Niebuhr's view, because of its "Renaissance faith" in the perfectibility of humanity and in its emphasis on the process of sanctification over against the Reformation doctrine (Lutheran in origin) of justification by faith alone.

These three points are aspects of the whole of Niebuhr's thought which bear directly on the illusions regarding human interaction and human nature which he sees at the heart of liberal pacifist thinking, and the essential character of Niebuhr's anti-pacifist posture did not change from this critique and variations on it (even after 1932 when he published Moral Man). What follows after this seminal text, so far as the debate on pacifism goes, is really a fleshing out of trajectories of

argument already present between in covers.5

5In addition to this important text, however, we will draw significantly from An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, Niebuhr's diary to 1928, The Nature and Destiny of Man (1939), and several shorter but exemplary pieces (including some letters and sermons). As well, the reader will find numerous references to Richard Fox's biography Reinhold Niebuhr (1985), to Roland Bainton's history of pacifism, Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace (1960), to Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr.'s The Cycles of American History (1986), and to Michael Howard's The Causes of Wars (1983).

I: Pacifism and the Young Niebuhr

The attitude of the young Niebuhr toward the question of pacifism and violence is best seen in the context of his perspective on the involvement of the United States in World War I. Niebuhr's thought on the subject at this stage is comprised of a tension between skepticism and loyalty.

Niebuhr's skepticism toward the rhetoric which sanctions a war effort can be seen in what he understands, at this stage, as the nation's "crime" against the individual soldier in a time of war. At the level of the individual combatant, Niebuhr could appreciate armed conflict in terms of its eliciting noble passions - courage, for instance, expressed in the willingness to sacrifice one's life for another. At the level of international relations, however, Niebuhr found it difficult to countenance the fact that nations often put such passions to less than noble use. In times of war, according to Niebuhr, loyalty and courage are made ultimate virtues "without regard to the ends which these virtues may serve".⁶ From Niebuhr's perspective, such sacrifices could be, and often were, made in vain:

The willingness of men to die in struggles that effect no permanent good and leave no contribution to civilization makes the tragedy of individual life all the more pathetic. The crime of the nation against the individual is not that it demands his sacrifices against his will, but that it claims a life of eternal significance for ends that have no eternal value.⁷

Even while on a speaking tour of German Evangelical congregations

⁶ Fox, RN, p. 46.

⁷ Fox, RN, p. 47.

and military camps in the U.S. in an effort to stir up loyalist sentiment, Niebuhr confessed to having some serious second thoughts about modern warfare:

When I talk to the boys I make much of the Wilsonian program as against the kind of diplomacy which brought on the war. But it is easier to talk about the aims of the war than to justify its methods.⁸

Yet whatever private doubts Niebuhr may have harbored, both his correspondence and his public statements "bristled with militancy", according to Fox, in support of the American war effort after the U.S. entered the fray in 1917.

At this stage, the tension in Niebuhr's thought between the loyalist and the skeptical perspectives is resolved more in the direction of the loyalist. For him, pacifism stands in the way of declaring allegiance to a "new nation" sensitive to the foreign elements within its borders. He writes in his diary:

I cannot bring myself to associate with the pacifists. Perhaps if I were not of German blood I could. That may be cowardly but I think a new nation has a right to be pretty sensitive about its unity.⁹

Niebuhr even goes so far as to later seek military service as a chaplain: "As a young man of draft age I no longer feel it right that I should stay out of the struggle".¹⁰

Clearly, for the young Niebuhr, the question of pacifism is rooted not in some abstract philosophical debate but in his

⁸R. Niebuhr, Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1929), p. 14.

⁹Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 14.

¹⁰Fox, RN, p.55.

intense effort to slough off his German heritage in favour of what he wants desperately to be his real identity: Niebuhr wants to be and to appear as being an American. The United States does have the right, in the mind of the young Niebuhr, to ask of him his allegiance in a time of international crisis. Niebuhr for now is content to respond, outwardly at least, with a youthful bellicosity of support. The effort to become American, despite his having been born there, is of more import than a rigorous pacifism which clearly has some alluring moral qualities for him.

The hopes of 1919, however, of "making the world safe for democracy", went unfulfilled, and by the early 1920's Niebuhr is again expressing strong doubts about Wilsonian diplomacy.

Eventually, he comes to regret his defence of the war effort on the basis of Wilson's reformist principles. As Fox writes:

(Niebuhr) had imagined that Wilson could throw the weight of the American nation behind the Allies and then enforce a new world order based on reconciliation, democracy, and open markets. Like other liberal he failed to notice that such a world order was on one level a Pax Americana of direct political and economic advantage to the United States.¹¹

Niebuhr had justified American participation in World War I by referring to lofty ideals, but he is now growing increasingly cynical of these ideals. Soon, in the Ruhr Valley of 1923, Niebuhr would declare himself a pacifist upon witnessing firsthand the vengeance wrought upon the German civilian population by the French occupying forces.

¹¹Fox, RN, p. 58.

The Ruhr Valley Confession

In June of 1923 Niebuhr, with friends Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page and thirty others, sailed for England on a ten week "American Seminar" comprised of interviews and lectures delivered by English dignitaries. Fox notes that much of the talk while in England focussed on the French occupation of the Ruhr Valley - Poincare's six-month-old attempt to extract unpaid German dues by seizing control of Germany's industrial centre.¹² In early July, upon hearing that the French were about to close access to the Ruhr, Niebuhr decided to witness what he could of the occupation firsthand. The visit prompted the following thoughts and reflections which he entered in his personal diary:

The Ruhr cities are the closest thing to hell I have ever seen. I never knew that you could see hatred with the naked eye, but in the Ruhr one is under the illusion that this is possible. The atmosphere is charged with it If you can gain the confidence of Germans so that they will talk they will tell you horrible tales of atrocities, deportations, sex crimes, etc. Imagination fired by fear and hatred undoubtedly tends to elaborate upon the facts. But the facts are bad enough.¹³

Niebuhr was so appalled at the near starvation of German children, and the brutality of the French occupation forces, that he made this emotional resolution in the same journal entry:

One would like to send every sentimental spellbinder of war days into the Ruhr. This then is the glorious issue for which the war was fought!

This is as good a time as any to make up my mind that I am done with the war business. Of course, I wasn't really in the last war. Would that I had been!

¹²For an account of Niebuhr's trip, see Fox, RN, p. 78ff.

¹³Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 46.

Of course, we really couldn't know everything we know now. But now we know. The times of man's ignorance God may wink at, but now he calls us all to repent. I am done with this business. I hope I can make that resolution stick.¹⁴

As Fox notes, the vindictive Versailles Treaty had again made Niebuhr skeptical about wars fought for liberal ideals. The hatred and suffering that Niebuhr observed in the Ruhr Valley in 1923 persuaded him not only to reject all war, but also to project this sentiment as much as possible into all of his relationships. Thus begins the "adventure of trust":

For my own part I am not going to let my decision in regard to war stand alone. I am going to try to be a disciple of Christ, rather than a mere Christian, in all human relations and experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past.¹⁵

The sentiments expressed in this diary entry were to characterize Niebuhr's thought and action through to the end of the 1920's. And yet, according to Fox, Niebuhr had good reason to doubt that he could make his resolution stick. For one who struggled so deeply with the notion of realism about human nature and society, this pacifist orientation seems an anomaly. Fox writes:

Niebuhr never made a good pacifist, even when his emotions were most predisposed, as they were in the Ruhr. He was too aware of the possibility . . . that 'the principle of non-resistance' is too ideal for a sinful human world.¹⁶

Clearly, Niebuhr's attitude toward pacifism vacillates significantly throughout his years as a young adult (1914-1925).

¹⁴Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 47.

¹⁵Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 48.

¹⁶Fox, RN, p. 98ff.

His pacifist and non-pacifist declarations both were never without some kind of qualification. Niebuhr's convictions around the pacifist question seem provisional at this stage in his life, and his written and verbal communications were, by all accounts, gilded with reservations about strategies of non-resistance in a world of conflict. I believe this can be seen, in the very least, as witness to Niebuhr's sincere attempt to be open to and integrate life experience into his thought.

II: The Early Criticism of Pacifism (1929-31)

The period from 1926 to 1931 represents a stage in Niebuhr's perspective on the pacifist question which is less provisional than in his early years. Niebuhr's convictions now foreshadow the full criticism of pacifism that we find in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932). This period marks the beginning of Niebuhr's mature argument against pacifism, and is a prelude to his full rejection of non-resistance as a political strategy. It is a significant stage for Niebuhr, firstly because of the publication of his "Critique of Pacifism" in the May 1927 issue of the Atlantic, and secondly, because of a short series of discussions with his brother H. Richard Niebuhr on various Christian responses to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

Fox's picture of the Reinhold Niebuhr of these years is fascinating because Niebuhr is seen as a man of intellectual polarities and tensions. One side of him was moving steadily toward Socialism (Niebuhr was to join the American Socialist Party in 1929). The other side of Niebuhr, according to Fox, was "applying the brakes" because of strong convictions regarding the Christian law of love. Niebuhr was still liberal enough to believe that love had to be invoked indiscriminately in all human relationships, individual and collective. At the centre of this polarity was the growing attraction of Socialism for Niebuhr, which at the same time seemed too akin to the Communism which he rejected as an unchristian "strategy of hate". The question

turned on how, if at all, Niebuhr could integrate a political philosophy that had, at its basis, not love but the confrontational, even violent, struggle for justice. Fox points out that the Niebuhr of the 1920's was not yet ready to advocate force, much less violence, in the struggle for social equality. But Niebuhr did not as a consequence disengage himself from the question. Instead he began to doubt, openly, the Christian liberalism which naively expected love to work (a world-view to which many of his friends and colleagues subscribed). At this stage in his career, we shall see that Niebuhr cannot furnish a positive alternative to pacifism. He confines himself, rather, to the negative task of giving expression to the falsehood of pacifism. "A Critique of Pacifism" is prime evidence of Niebuhr's efforts in this direction.

Niebuhr would be misrepresented if it were not noted that, in 1927, he counts himself among those Americans who espouse the cause of pacifism - of non-resistance and mutual trust. In his journal entry regarding his experience in the Ruhr Valley in 1923, Niebuhr had written:

I am done with this business . . . I am not going to let my decision in regard to war stand alone. I am going to try to . . . experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past.¹

In 1927, four years later, Niebuhr still sees himself in terms of this "experiment". His language in "A Critique of Pacifism" is reminiscent of the journal entry noted above. Niebuhr speaks, in

¹Niebuhr, Leaves, p. 46f.

speaks, in "A Critique", of pacifism as an "adventure of trust" borne of religious imagination which "maintains that trust itself is creative, that men tend to become what we think they are, that they become trustworthy only as we trust them and lovable only as we love them".² At times Niebuhr insists with his pacifist colleagues that "if our nation or any other nation would be willing to make the venture of disarmament itself it could successfully challenge its neighbors to similar experiments in confidence".³ There is no reason, according to pacifists such as C.C. Morrison and Kirby Page, why at this time a "simultaneous experiment in disarmament and mutual trust" should not be initiated.⁴ But Niebuhr, in his "Critique", is at pains to expose the naivete and potential hypocrisy of the pacifist position and the "outlawry of war" movement with which it had become identified (thereby distancing himself from some of his closest friends and colleagues).

One major locus of hypocrisy, according to Niebuhr, is the "outlawry of war" movement of the 1920's and '30's. For Niebuhr it is an "ethical sublimation of an essentially selfish national position".⁵ It is an attempt to gloss over isolationist sentiment by muddying the water with a poetic vision of America

²Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism", Atlantic, Vol. 139, No. 5, May 1927, p. 638.

³Ibid, p. 638.

⁴Ibid, p. 638.

⁵Ibid, p. 641.

standing alone so as not, in Niebuhr's view, to spoil her "virtue". Essentially, this movement gives sanction to a "policy of isolation which has its real basis in quite other considerations".⁶ Niebuhr is concerned here that he and his pacifist colleagues may have forgotten that "America today has a standard of living in such flagrant disproportion to that of any other part of the world that it is arousing the envy of practically every nation".⁷ The material advantages that Niebuhr and his fellow "adventurers" enjoy destroy human fellowship, according to Niebuhr, and make the use of force necessary. It requires an army, in other words, to preserve such a standard of living: "Those of us who are pacifists ought to realize more clearly than we do that spiritual attitudes can never guarantee us security in the possession of material advantages".⁸ But most Americans, Niebuhr notes with irony, have never given thought to these economic realities. They wish for the United States to trust the world and expect that this trust will not go unrequited. For Niebuhr, their faith is naive:

They do not realize that a nation cannot afford to trust anyone if it is not willing to go the length of sharing its advantages. Love which expresses itself in trust without expressing itself in sacrifice is futile. It is not thoroughgoing enough to be creative or redemptive.⁹

Niebuhr's point is not that love cannot "work" amongst the

⁶Ibid, p. 641.

⁷Ibid, p.639.

⁸Ibid, p. 641.

⁹Ibid, p. 640.

relationships between nations. He is still too liberal in 1927 to give up the belief that it can.¹⁰ His plea is, rather, for consistency: It is not that our willingness to love and to trust is wrong-headed. It is, rather, that this stops too short of the mark to be efficacious or redemptive:

Many individual idealists are taking the justified position that the best way to bring unethical groups under ethical control is to dissociate themselves clearly from the unethical conduct of the group, at whatever cost. Too few of them have realized that, if such action is to be morally redemptive, it must dissociate the individual not only from the policy of using force but from the policy of insisting on material advantages which destroy human fellowship and make the use of force necessary.¹¹

Niebuhr cannot yet bring himself to condemn as irresponsible (or irrelevant) the "justified position" of the pacifist idealists. He opts at this stage for an "engaged" pacifist strategy, as opposed to an isolationist or purist one. What remains for Niebuhr to come to grips with and articulate, however, is that engagement cannot remain pacifist for very long in increasingly perilous international circumstances.

¹⁰See Fox, RN, p. 99.

¹¹Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism", p. 641.

III: The Contribution and Challenge of H. Richard Niebuhr

It is interesting that the only published disagreement (according to Fox) between brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr occurred in March of 1932, and centred on precisely the question of the viability of non-resistance as a responsible Christian attitude. In his "The Grace of Doing Nothing" (Christian Century, March 23, 1932), one of the so-called "War Articles", H. Richard argues for non-intervention by the United States in the Sino-Japanese conflict of the early 1930's. He suggests, instead, that the U.S. should opt for a peculiar kind of activity - which may appear as inactivity to many - repentance.¹

While Reinhold comes out clearly on the side of non-violent coercive measures against Japan (i.e., economic sanctions), H. Richard proposed an alternative course, one in which self-reflection before divine judgement, not moral action, is normative. With this pivotal emphasis on repentance Richard furnishes a critique of all moral action, including pacifism and non-pacifism. Richard B. Miller, one of H. Richard Niebuhr's most recent and able commentators, explains that the latter's conception of repentance "requires all individuals, regardless of their position on war, to recognize the hubris that animates every moral endeavour; repentance focuses our gaze in the

¹Much of what follows is based on "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles", by Richard B. Miller, The Journal of Religion, Vol. 68, April 1988, pp. 242-262.