Upon her first encounter with Reinhold Niebuhr, his later biographer, June Bingham, was startled at the apparent contradictions between the ideas of contingency and relativism in Niebuhr’s thought; his profound loathing of the hellfire conservatism advanced by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, and yet his frequent use of the language of sin and grace. Puzzled, she inquired as to how he could possibly find use for such old-fashioned terms:

*Bingham:* Honestly, Dr. Niebuhr, I don’t see what’s so good about religion.
*Niebuhr:* Nothing good about religion—as such.
*Bingham:* What?
*Niebuhr:* Bad religion can be worse than no religion.
*Bingham:* You mean it?
*Niebuhr:* Of course I mean it. The worst fanaticisms in history have been religious fanaticisms. In fact, even good religion can become a source of hidden pride, of what we might call original sin . . .
*Bingham:* You mean that original sin is pride?
*Niebuhr:* Did you think it was something else? (Bingham 1972: 7)

It hardly surprised Niebuhr that Bingham did indeed think of sin as something else entirely—the notion of sin as rooted in an undefined corporal evil,
he responded to her, was “a frequent misconception, based on some exaggerated forms of Christian asceticism” (Bingham 1972: 8). The mistake, Niebuhr believed, was due to the fact that modern idealist “after the manner of classical philosophy, place the root of evil in the impulses of the body, and expect ‘mind’ to come in progressive control of the infra-rational impulses” (Niebuhr 1961: 11). They do not perceive that sin is “more spiritual than the ‘lusts of the body,’ of which Plato speaks,” and that “it is not the bad body which causes the soul to sin, but”—as Niebuhr held Augustine to believe—“the bad soul which causes the good body to sin” (Niebuhr 1953: 125). “Only the Biblical-Christian view,” Niebuhr thus concluded, “sees that the evil in man is at the center of the self, and that it involves all the unique capacities of freedom which endow him with dignity and render him, though a creature, also a creator” (Niebuhr 1961: 11).

While recognizing Niebuhr’s embrace of Augustine over Plato is crucial to understanding his view of human nature, it is even more detrimental for grasping his diagnosis and cure for modern democracy. It is not too much to say, that practically all of Niebuhr’s political philosophy—his critique of American liberalism and his attempt to construe of more plural and vitalist alternative to the homogeneities of exceptionalism—are based in these fundamental anthropological assumptions. Hence, only an introduction to Niebuhr’s conception of sin as rooted in the individual’s unique capacity for self-transcendence will help reveal why far from an “anthropological pessimist,” Niebuhr ought above all to be read as a democratic skepticist, dedicated to building a public sphere defined by vision, vitality, and difference.1

Admittedly, Niebuhr’s road toward this stance was long and actually took its point of departure in the very same liberal Protestantism that he would later oppose. This early training in an environment mainly defined by the liberal Millennialism of the Social Gospel Movement is rarely mentioned, but hardly without importance for understanding why Niebuhr’s political analysis came later to be formulated in the language of anti-redemptive or anti-perfectionist ideas. Nor is it irrelevant for grasping why Niebuhr found himself, to quote Ricard Pells, “irresistibly attracted to Marxism” and experienced a brief but important flirt with Marxism’s critique of the belief in ideological objectivity (Pells 1973: 143). Raised on, and surrounded by, the liberal sentiments of World War I, the Marxist creed seemed at first “the perfect anti-dote to the liberal virus because it offered a more realistic—and more religious—understanding of man and his society” (Pells 1973: 143).

In Niebuhr’s early view, Marxism appeared to provide a more skeptic approach to the possibilities of human knowledge and an awareness of the power and interest involved in human agency. Contrary to what he found to be a particularly primitive notion of evil in liberal thought—that is, a notion of