

Robert Nisbet: Sociologist, Scholar, Conservative



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Defining Conservatism Series

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Nineteen fifty-three was a watershed year for conservative intellectual scholarship. The roots of modern conservatism were formed that year with the publications of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*, and Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*.

Following on the heels of Friedrich Hayek's monumentally jarring defense of liberty in 1948's *The Road to Serfdom*, these four books in that one year created an intellectual foundation and legacy the American conservative movement stands upon today.

Robert Nisbet was perhaps the quietest of the group but, in the opinion of many conservative scholars, the most profound – perhaps second only to Russell Kirk. It is befitting on the 10th anniversary of his death (September 9) that American conservatives honor this distinguished and influential thinker.

A native Californian, Nisbet spent twenty-one years as a student and then professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Department of Sociology beginning in 1932. He later moved on to become the dean of the University of California, Riverside, won a Guggenheim Fellowship at Princeton, taught at the University of Bologna in Italy and the University of Arizona, and then occupied the Albert Schweitzer Chair of the Humanities at Columbia University. He retired professionally while a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

Like Russell Kirk, there was no confusion for Nisbet between libertarianism and conservatism. Nisbet was a communitarian of the good sort – he recognized the inherent value to society of, what he called, “intermediate institutions” and eschewed big government. He also saw the dangers of rampant individualism. He called Herbert Spencer's “man versus the state” theory faulty; that the real threat to freedom was the individual and the state *combined* against family, church, religion, and voluntary associations.

Of the nearly twenty books he authored in his 82 years of life, perhaps none was more perceptive and on point regarding the political nature of authentic freedom than his first, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics and Order of Freedom*. It was therein, on the

back of World War II and during the hardest years of the Cold War era, that Nisbet shaped what has become a clarion challenge to statist and libertarians alike.

As an astute historian and sociologist, Nisbet observed in *Quest* that mankind has an innate need to belong and that this longing to belong led man to voluntarily form families and communities. Quoting another conservative scholar, Ortega y Gasset, Nisbet said, “Human beings do not come together to be together; they come together to do something together.”

Throughout his collective writings he summarized at least seven primary attributes of community. First, every community has a function – a point that should resonate with social conservatives concerned about the breakdown of the natural family structure. He wrote, “Nothing is so likely in the long run to lead to the decay of community than the disappearance of the function that established it in the first place, or the failure of some commanding function to take the place of the first.”

Second, he said, that a “community is strong in the sense of some transcending purpose...” It must live for an ideal. Nisbet loved the word *dogma*; its literal meaning being “seem good.” A strong and vibrant community must hold to something profoundly.

Third, community is characterized by authority from society’s natural institutions, not power by a coercive State. Fourth, community is necessarily hierarchical. “There is no form of community that is without some form of stratification of function and role.” Nisbet wrote at length about the evils of “equality” in that egalitarian ideal. He called the father of egalitarianism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “the real demon of the modern mind.” He observed that, “Rousseau sees the State as the most exalted of all forms of moral community. For Rousseau there is no morality, no freedom, no community outside the structure of the State.”

Fifth, a real community exhibits solidarity, the “we” not the “I.” Sixth, it will exude a strong sense of honor. And seventh, a community also displays a sense of superiority. From grand to lowly, all serious communities feel they are better than another.

The real genius of Nisbet was that he could describe not only what is wrong with society, but what is right with the good ones. In *Quest*, based on his theory of belonging, he detailed how totalitarian leaders such as Hitler and Stalin (remember the book was published in 1953), two political actors far from crazy, knew that the best way to subjugate a people was to destroy those voluntary relationships that they had built over time and tradition.

For these tyrants allegiance to the State must be complete. The Nazi and Communist regimes systematically destroyed their respective society's intermediate institutions. Gone were families, churches, markets, labor unions, and charitable efforts. In their place was the State. Once the individual, with his great need to belong, no longer had his natural social institutions, the State held itself up as a "national community." This precisely explains why otherwise "normal" Germans and Russians could go to "work" every day and commit heinous atrocities against Jews and ethnics and then return home to loving households as if nothing was wrong. This moral vacuity is what occurs when the State becomes the measure of right and wrong.

Not that this moral deficit cannot occur among the very institutions Nisbet defends. Obviously, evil is not the sole province of governments gone wild. But the evil that can occur within intermediate institutions is self-correcting, remarkably, within that same system of intermediate institutions. The State is hardly self-correcting.

Nisbet's analysis was brilliant and has stood the test of time. Its relevancy is remarkable. Of course, he lived long enough to see this scenario play itself out. He saw how ideologies in support of the State used political power to breakdown the natural family structure. He saw religion lose its influence as a moral compass and turn its attentions to assist the new "therapeutic state." He witnessed the transformation of voluntary associations into special interests in a mad rush for government favors. He witnessed the loss of local and genuine community in America and the rise of the "national community" in the image of the State.

The intellectual importance of Robert Nisbet's life for conservatives is many-fold. On the one hand, he exposed the weaknesses of atomistic individualism as represented by libertarians and, on the other hand, he revealed the fraud of socialist communitarians such as Robert Bellah, who speak reverently of communities and the "common good" but only find their value in a greatly expanded role of government.

Nisbet also was not a fan of the free market for its own sake, a wholly authentic characteristic of modern conservatism. In *Quest* he writes,

There is indeed a sense in which the so-called free market never existed at all save in the imaginations of the rationalists....Most of the relative stability of nineteenth-century capitalism arose from the fact of the very incompleteness of the capitalist revolution. Because large areas of Europe and the United States remained predominantly rural and strongly suffused by pre-capitalist relationships and desires, a large measure of national stability coexisted with the rise of the new industrial cities and the new practices of manufacture and commerce.

He added,

Not all the asserted advantages of mass production and corporate bigness will save capitalism if its purposes become impersonal and remote, separated from the symbols and relationships that have meaning in human lives.

And yet, in that same book, Nisbet attributes great influence on his thinking to Karl Polanyi. As Allan C. Carlson, a Nisbet colleague later in life, would describe, “Polanyi was a member of that band of economic geniuses born in the late 19th century and raised in Vienna, only to be cut adrift by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the rise of fascism. This remarkable band did include Hayek and [Ludwig] von Mises, along with the great 20th century management guru Peter Drucker.”

Nisbet loved and admired the functions of the free market. He was a champion and defender of it. But he knew of its limitations whenever it was separated from and exalted above the moral threads that held communities together. Both Polanyi and Nisbet believed that the doctrine of laissez faire, so often attributed to conservative intellectual roots, was actually a 19th century encouragement of the State to achieve very mechanistic ends. That is, it progressed the “atomistic individual” whom the State could subsume and was adversarial to the “autonomous social group” which the State despised.

Again, Nisbet,

Far from proving a check upon the growth of the omniscient State, the old laissez faire actually accelerated this growth....To create conditions with which autonomous groups may prosper must be, I believe, the prime objective of the new laissez faire....What we need at the present time is the knowledge and administrative skill to create a laissez faire in which the basic unit will be the social group [i.e., the natural family].

The conservatism of Nisbet, like his contemporary Russell Kirk, is genuine. It pinpoints the sources of true freedom. It incorporates the essential value to society of the natural family structure and all other natural human associations. Yes, it has its moments with classic liberalism and the libertarian defenders of Hayek and von Mises, but they are all in the same boat rowing in the same direction.

Carlson uses an effective “rowing” metaphor to make this point. Describing a scenario wherein von Mises and Nisbet are in a two-man scull, Carlson writes that,

This fusionist boat would not be noted for its serenity. Rather, Nisbet would have been out on the water earlier in the morning, marking off large areas into which von Mises and his theories might never go: family relations, religious authority and truths, the bonds of village and neighborhoods, cooperatives, and workers' associations. And, in his own genial way, Nisbet would also be continually warning and cajoling von Mises about the dangers lurking within his free market. Nisbet would insist that the productive wonders of capitalism be tempered and restrained by revealed truth, moral sensibility, humane learning, and healthy tradition. Whenever the market system seriously clashed with natural institutions, Nisbet would insist that the market give way. Von Mises would fret and fume about inefficiencies, rent seeking, statism, and dangers to personal liberty. The arguments would be boisterous and sustained. And yet, somehow, this noisy little fusionist boat would still manage to glide through the water, admired by those who saw her from a distance.

On this 10th anniversary of Robert Nisbet's death, conservatives and the cause of true freedom owe him a debt of gratitude for helping to build the intellectual framework that has made America and Western Civilization the lasting influence it has become in world history. Nisbet has added productively to the quality of life, our "pursuit of happiness," that Aristotle, Aquinas, Smith, Tocqueville, Burke, Bonald, de Maistre, and our Founding Fathers have formulated through time.

Nisbet's legacy lives on in the lives of other esteemed sociologists, friend and foe, such as Sandel, Ehrenhalt, Etzioni, Eberly, Fukuyama, Putnam, Berger, and Neuhaus – all of whom are simply echoing thoughts with which Nisbet blessed the modern world for decades. Robert Nisbet deserves to be read and studied by every person claiming to be a faithful conservative.

Author Brad Lowell Stone concludes his fine biography of Nisbet with these words,

Nisbet...believes that intermediate associations, indirect administration, and social intervention require that *we* act. We must inspect our hearts, our mores. In his view, all effective change begins with our salient beliefs, manners, and morals. Clearly, Nisbet's worldview is at a great disadvantage in the marketplace of ideas. But it has the more than minor advantage of being *truthful*. For those who are serious about the truths of our social world and who seek guidance on how to better it, his works are an excellent place to start. [his italics]

Suggested Readings

Robert Nisbet by Brad Lowell Stone, ISI Books, Wilmington, DE, 2002. (A wonderful biography in honor of this great thinker.)

The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom by Robert Nisbet, Oxford University Press, New York, 1953. (Reprinted in 1962 and 1970 by Oxford and in 1990 by the Institute for Contemporary Studies Press.)

Twilight of Authority by Robert Nisbet, Oxford University Press, New York, 1975. (A new edition was republished by Liberty Press, 2000.)