The Thought of Robert Nisbet
Michael Matheson Miller
Research Fellow, Acton Institute
Director/Producer, Poverty, Inc.

Part I: Robert Nisbet: Vision and Context

I. Introduction: Central Themes

- Decline of Community
- Authority
- Individualism and Centralization
- Thinking Sociologically
- Recovery of the Social

II. Major Works, Biography, and Influences

Major Works
- The Quest for Community
- Social Change and History
- The Sociological Tradition
- Sociology as an Art Form
- Emile Durkheim
- The Social Bond
- The Making of Modern Society
- Tradition and Revolt
- The Social Philosophers
- Social Change, editor
- History of the Idea of Progress
- Metaphor and History
- The Twilight of Authority
- The Degradation of Academic Dogma
- Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary
- Conservatism: Dream and Reality

Biography
- Maricopa, CA “Hostile to the human spirit” (MMS)
- Fredrick Teggart: Social Institutions
- UC Berkley
- UC Riverside
Influences

- 19th Century Conservative Reaction to Revolution
- 19th Century Sociological Tradition
- Bonald, Le Play, Durkheim, Haller, Comte Chateaubriand
- Alexis de Tocqueville
- Edmund Burke

III. Overview of Main Concepts in Nisbet’s Work

A. Social Change /Development / Progress
   (SCH, HP, MMS, SC, QC, State and Family)

B. Rise of Individualism (QC, ST, MMS, TA, SP)
   - Hobbes, Rousseau

C. Two Revolutions (ST)

Industrial

- Condition of Labor
- Transformation of Property
  - Large Scale Industrial Property—Transfer of Political Power from Land to Capital
  - Burke: New Dealers
- Industrial Urbanism
- Technology
- Factory System

French (Democracy)

- Individual
- Associations
- Family
- Education
- Church

Effects of the Revolutions: Individualization, Abstraction, Generalization (ST)

Individualization

- Group ➔ Individual
- Guild ➔ Entrepreneur
Abstraction
Related to Individualization—but in moral sphere: Historic values became increasingly secular, utilitarian, but also “separated from the concrete and particular roots...which had given them symbolic distinctiveness and means of realization” (ST)

Generalization
Broadening of man’s thought to the general—from the family and local community to the nation, to democracy, and international order. Seeing others in the aggregate: the poor, the working class, capitalist, master, voters, bureaucracy, citizenry etc.

Methodological Individualism and the two Revolutions provide the context for the rise of sociology, and for Nisbet’s work on Community and Authority.

Part II: Community, Authority, and Liberty

I. Individualism and Centralization

- Strong Connection between Individualism and Centralization

- Individual vs. Association/ Group

- Role of Equality

II. The Quest for Community

Nisbet identifies 4 types of Community (SP)

- Political Community (SP, QC, TA)
- Religious Community
- Ecological Community
- Revolutionary Community

Monism vs. Pluralism
Monism: Unitary vision of the state—Political Community of Rousseau and Bentham

Pluralism: Social diversity and various levels of authority: Burke and Tocqueville

III. Restoration of Authority and the

- Functional Autonomy
- Decentralization
- Hierarchy
- Tradition
  - Reliance on non-formal law—“governance vs. government”
- Compare with Tocqueville: Three main obstacles to “soft despotism”

IV. “New laissez-faire”: Revival of Localism

A laissez-faire of associations and social invention
Two Traditions of Citizenship: Burke vs. Rousseau
New laissez-faire is the Burkean view of plurality and social diversity that “citizenship must be rooted in the groups and communities within which human beings actually live.” (TA)

Part III: Conclusions

Lessons from Nisbet
1. Individualism and Centralization
2. Thinking Sociologically
3. Incorporate 19c Conservative and Sociological Reflection on Liberty
4. Application of Burke and Tocqueville to Contemporary Democracy
   a. Renewed Appreciation for the Social—The Importance of Associations
5. Alternative to much of Communitarianism and contemporary localism
   a. Limited Government approach to community and localism
6. Awareness of new and traditional forms of community

www.michaelmathesonmiller.com