

## **The Thought of Robert Nisbet**

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### **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

- Columbia

### *Influences*

- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Conservative Reaction to Revolution
- 19<sup>th</sup> 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

- Class/Estate → Citizen
- Corporate/Liturgical Tradition → Individual Reason

### *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
  - Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Book 4, Chapter 2-3
- 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