

Hometown Hero

Robert Nisbet's conservatism of community against the state

By Susan McWilliams

THE TOWN OF MARICOPA, in the southwestern corner of California's San Joaquin Valley, has one diner and one gas station. Its landscape is all oil wells and sagebrush, grit and heat and dust, just as it was a century ago when the sociologist Robert Nisbet, one of the 20th century's great conservative minds, grew up there.

It wasn't a pretty hometown, not the kind of place you'd ever see pictured on a postcard or memorialized in a Norman Rockwell painting. Nisbet would later write, in his elegant and restrained tone, that Maricopa's setting offered a "hostile challenge to the human spirit."

Even so, he remembered life there as happy. If the residents were daunted by their bleak surroundings, they didn't let on. In that unfriendly environment they thrived, largely by being friendly with one another. The Nisbets were part of an active small-community scene in Maricopa. His father had a regular poker game, his mother had her church friends, and Nisbet had devoted teachers and a well-stocked local library.

As a child, Nisbet felt the power of what would come to be a central focus of his work: the "intermediate society" that lies between the individual and the state and gives dignity and depth to both. Everywhere he went in his early years, Nisbet saw the influence of intermediate society: in the memories shared by his grandparents' neighbors in Macon, Georgia; in the clubs that defined his high-school years in Santa Cruz; and in the bohemian subculture among his classmates at Berkeley in the

early 1930s—the "Old Berkeley" he called it.

It was at Berkeley, under the tutelage of the iconoclastic Frederick J. Teggart and his department of social institutions, that Nisbet found a powerful defense of intermediate institutions in the conservative thought of 19th-century Europe. Nisbet saw in thinkers like Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville—then all but unknown in American scholarship—an argument on behalf of what he called "conservative pluralism." Against an ever-centralizing modern state, these thinkers saw small, partial, and local centers of authority as vital to human freedom and any genuine sense of community.

Nisbet's discovery of this European conservative tradition would supply the enduring focus of his intellectual life. First as a professor at Berkeley, then as an administrator at the University of California in Riverside, later as the occupant of Columbia University's prestigious Albert Schweitzer Chair, and finally as an American Enterprise Institute scholar—he made it his mission to articulate the ideas of thinkers like Burke and Tocqueville in America.

For Nisbet, conservatism is premised on protection of the social order—"family, neighborhood, local community, and region foremost"—from the politically centralizing and socially atomizing effects of the modern state. This involves more than a single-minded commitment to order or liberty—and it certainly doesn't mean privileging one of these goods at the expense of the other.

Nisbet criticized libertarians who think unfettered markets should lie at the center of conservative doctrine. "There has never been a time when a successful economic system has rested upon purely individualistic drives," he wrote. Yet he was more trenchant about those conservatives for whom order implied militarism. Military statism, he wrote, contributes to the "brutalization of cultural standards" and a disabling "bureaucracy and regimentation."

Order has to be built from the ground up, nurtured and reinforced within the structures of a local community. When centralized authorities try to impose it from a distance, the result is actually disorder: individuals become increasingly isolated, cut off from participation, and convinced of the meaninglessness of the political process. Liberty, too, is realized most fully in social groups. "The individual alone is powerless," he wrote. "Individual will and memory, apart from the reinforcement of associative tradition, are weak and ephemeral." Even what we tend to think of as individual greatness depends on a healthy social sphere: Nisbet emphasized that the figures we call "founders" and "geniuses" were not solitary creatures but social animals embedded in communities marked by shared memory.

The present-day United States, Nisbet warned, is like most modern states in that its intermediate society has become desperately weakened. The many ways in which Americans seek a sense of belonging—in the psychiatrist's office, in psychotropic drugs, in cults and "easy

religion”—testify to that enervation, as Nisbet detailed in his 1953 breakout book, *The Quest for Community*. The anxiety and estrangement felt by so many Americans are not due to technology or feminism or any of the usual suspects, he argued. Rather, they arise from the concentration of power in the modern political state, which has elevated national political relationships above all else, rendering the traditional primary relationships of family and neighborhood—which offer affection, friendship, recognition, and prestige to the individual—functionally irrelevant. As those relationships have shrunk, they have left a community-sized hole in the American heart. Individuals are so frantic for community, Nisbet feared, that they might give up freedom to get it. Thus America needs a “new *laissez faire*” that respects the dignity of autonomous groups, as opposed to the old *laissez faire* oriented toward autonomous individuals.

The Quest for Community touched a cultural nerve, proving popular not only with the emerging conservative movement but also, much to its author’s bemusement, with student radicals. Eventually, Nisbet realized that young leftists and conservatives shared a basic antipathy to doctrinaire liberalism. Both are suspicious of the liberal tendency toward atomized individualism, and both have been wary of the transfer of political power from the land to impersonal forms of capital. But radicals, especially after Marx, have concurred with liberals in a progressive view of modern history that imagines some ultimate human triumph is possible. In subsequent books, notably *Social Change and History* (1969) and *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980), Nisbet contrasted those perfectionist visions with a conservative sensibility tragic to its core. The conservative tradition sees modern history not as progressive but as

containing totalizing forces that will “in time desolate culture and personality.”

Modern liberalism and modern radicalism raise the specter of totalitarianism, a specter that haunts Nisbet’s work. Like most conservatives writing in the wake of Hitler’s Germany and during the Cold War, Nisbet worried about the rise of all-consuming states and believed that conservative thinking offered the surest guard against the totalitarian impulse. But he also faulted his fellow conservatives for their insistence that totalitarianism is irrational. Nothing could be more basic than the appeal of totalitarianism in the modern world, he argued: it begins by offering community to the individual, and community is what citizens of the modern state desire most. Thus totalitarianism was not just an external threat, for “when the small areas of association become sterile psychologically,” as they do under modern liberalism, “we find ourselves resorting to ever-increasing dosages of indoctrination from above, an indoctrination that often becomes totalitarian in significance.”

Nisbet feared that under these conditions a totalitarian spirit was seeping even into so-called conservative politics. He found it “most amusing” that “commerce-threatening, budget-expanding enthusiasts for great increases in military expenditures” had begun calling themselves conservatives during the Reagan era. For Nisbet, who thought that the military promotes a stifling bureaucratic mode of social organization, the Right’s love affair with the military was deeply worrisome. Such conservatism neglects the obvious fact that expanding the military is only putting “more government on our backs,” effectively expanding the powers of the centralized state at the inevitable expense of local communities.

He reserved his real fury, though, for those self-appointed guardians who

decry the “economic provider-state” but seek a “moral provider-state.” He was particularly frustrated by the growing evangelical movement within the Republican Party, a frustration he explained in *Prejudices* (1983) and *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (1986). “From the traditional conservative’s point of view it is fatuous to use the family—as the evangelical crusaders regularly do—as the justification for their tireless crusades to ban abortion categorically, to bring the Department of Justice in on every Baby Doe, to mandate by constitution the imposition of ‘voluntary’ prayers in the public schools, and so on,” he wrote. Such laws actually assault the family by proscribing its legitimate authority, striking at the core of family rights. In the end, they are totalitarian in spirit, since “the surest sign of despotism in history is the state’s supersession of the family’s authority over its own.”

What these professed conservatives failed to inherit from the traditional Right, Nisbet argued, is its essentially pluralist spirit. Social differentiation, in its formal manifestation of federalism as well as in its informal practice, helps to diversify and make more concrete the social bonds that prefigure human flourishing. It also distributes the risks attendant to the imperfection of human nature across a broader plane, providing a kind of political insurance against mortal frailty. According to Nisbet, the Constitution as it was first composed in Philadelphia—with its careful separation of powers and underlying wariness about human nature—expresses a pluralist conservative sensibility. The Constitution’s safeguards stand in distinction to the contemporary trend toward liberal perfectionism. But the conservative pluralist founding has been buried by the subsequent triumph of the national state, which tempts even would-be conservatives away from

humility and toward hubris—away from the idea of limiting the state and toward the dream of capturing it.

Against what he saw as this dubious backdrop, Nisbet marshaled not only the tradition of conservative pluralism but also the tradition of sociological thinking. As expounded by thinkers like Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, Nisbet argued, sociology teaches the value of seeing human beings as men-in-society, not as lone creatures in conditions of rational abstraction. Sociology thus exposes the liberal social-contract tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls for what it is: an attempt at omnipotence based on disregard for the social sphere that can provide only a distorted picture of the human animal.

But that does not mean conservatives should abandon the liberal project altogether. Far from it. For Nisbet, the basic values of modern liberalism—the dignity of the individual, the moral sovereignty of the people, and the possibilities of reason—are noble and defensible values vital to Western civilization, worthy of conservatives' defense. Liberalism has only faltered to the extent that it has become unmoored from the social traditions in which it emerged. The great expounders of modern liberalism, like John Stuart Mill, were right to value what they valued—but they were wrong to imagine that a healthy form of individualism could blossom anywhere without reference to social organization. With that in mind, the task of conservatives is to reassert the importance of context—of vibrant and plural social organization—for the proper flourishing of liberal commitments.

“The symbols of liberalism, like the bells of the church, depend on prejudices and social tradition,” Nisbet wrote. “In large part, the present crisis of liberal thought in the West comes, I believe, from the increasing loss of correspondence between the basic liberal

values and the prejudgments and social contexts upon which the historic success of liberalism has been predicated.” Nisbet wanted to save liberalism from itself, and to do so he understood the necessity of saving things that seem illiberal: tradition, authority, hierarchy.

Nisbet hoped that a conservative argument transcending the dichotomies of liberty and order, liberalism and anti-liberalism, might come from the nation's universities. He saw the academy as the last modern institution to retain some of its medieval and therefore conservative flavor. But in his two major works on university life—*The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (1971) and *Teachers and Scholars* (1992)—Nisbet prophesied that the conservative underpinnings of the academy would not remain for long. Institutions of higher education had been too far undermined by the frenzy for corporate and government research money, a craze that unloosed the academy from its customary, protective insularity and exposed it to all the disorientations of the modern state.

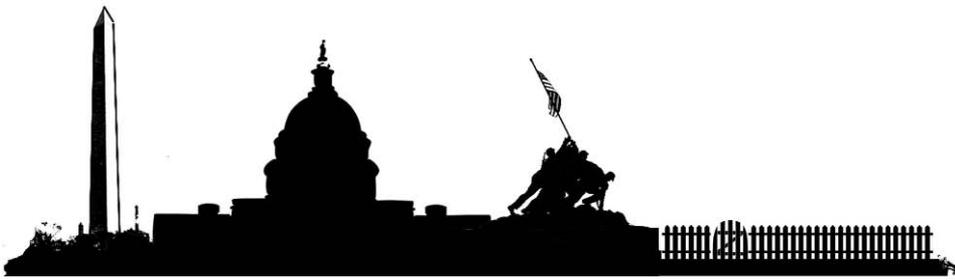
As goes the college, so goes the country. Nisbet did not think that traditional conservatism had much of a future in the United States. The “sheer mass of the liberal-provider state” was too substantial and appealing to its denizens. “Almost everything favors this kind of state, from war to ordinary day-in, day-out civil life, for people at all levels have interests and desires, and there is no surer way of gratifying these than through the provider-state,” he wrote. “Current efforts to reduce this state are like nothing so much as chipmunks trying to bring down a giant Redwood.”

Still, he thought, some trace of traditional conservatism would survive, as it had since Burke, as a counterpoint to the dominant melodies of modernity. If pluralism was not likely to become ascendant as a practical doctrine, conservatives could still work to temper the

totalizing impulses of the age. In the last years of his life, he told audiences that the contemporary Right has two viable goals: to expose the idea of “national community” as fraudulent, a first step toward shrinking “the centralized, omniscient, and unitary state”; and to work at “protecting, reinforcing, and nurturing where necessary the varied groups and associations which form the true building blocks of the social order.”

Nisbet's renown in conservative circles has waned somewhat since he died in 1993; in the '50s and '60s his name had been as familiar as that of his friend and admirer Russell Kirk. Yet the problems to which Nisbet directed his energies have only become more apparent since his death. His reflections on the dangers represented by the American appetite for “pseudo-intimacy,” for instance, have an immediate resonance in the era of Facebook and Twitter. His cautions about the totalizing forces of modernity take on new urgency in an era when serious people believe that global governance is a practical possibility. On the other hand, his pluralist understanding of the conservative tradition sits uncomfortably with evangelicalism, militarism, and libertarianism—the three world-views that dominate what passes for the American Right. Nisbet's voice is missing in today's politics because conservative pluralism seems to be missing, despite its formative role in the nation's history. But then, as Nisbet might remind us, remembering Maricopa, even when the national atmosphere is hostile, the true local community, the intermediate society, still offers the promise of a happier home. ■

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Strike a Pose

The District is a springtime town, all cherry blossoms, azaleas, and tulip trees. But Georgetown comes into its own in the season of remembrance and newborn chill.

The trees blaze almost like New England; the depopulated streets, which in summer make the place seem like one of T.S. Eliot's unreal cities, become poignant.

And then you get to M Street or Wisconsin Avenue, the boulevards of *Murder Must Advertise's* "city of dreadful day." The display windows hawk haute brands or punk bands, but the basic approach is always the same: turn your longings into accessories.

When I was in high school, my best friend and I thought that we were better than Georgetown; that was one of the many services the neighborhood provided. We were like every student, building papier-mache masks in which every polished statement or "spontaneous" purchase was another wet strip of newspaper laid down to create our faces. If we cheated the Metrobus by using a quarter instead of a bus token, it meant that we were Artful Dodgers. (I always got caught—and if everyone around me were as savvy as the bus drivers, I'd be a better person today.) If we drank peach Nehi at Georgetown Bagelry instead of Coke at McDonald's, it meant that we were unique. I don't regret thumbing through the vinyl at Orpheus Records looking for The Raincoats, even though I liked them half for their music and half for what it said about me that I liked their music.

It's appropriate that this consumer paradise is also the home of one of Washington's best-known universities. Undergraduates are the most sincere

shoppers the world has ever known. And it might be especially apt that Georgetown University is a Catholic school. Out of all the Christian churches now available to those who can't help but believe, the Catholic Church offers the most "display windows": the most varied faces on which to model our masks. Even those of us who attempt a bohemian traditionalism are obviously struggling to project an intriguing self-image. Yet one might argue that the more affected the faith, the more humble because nothing is more humiliating than being called on one's pretensions.

But I admit that my moral theology, on a marinated Saturday night in Georgetown, tends more toward Savonarola than I'd like. The lights are loud and the noise is blinding. The streets are jammed with American children who have outgrown their sell-by date, and I'm reminded that the only fact I ever knew anyone to learn at Georgetown University is how to snort powdered heroin off the cap of a ballpoint pen.

And yet—my own mask peels and I remember that teenage feeling that nothing was as important as knowing names and holding opinions about those names. I remember thinking that Rachmaninoff was a vodka. I remember high school phys-ed, where we had to run up and down the "exorcist stairs," which may be my second-most humiliating phys-ed memory. (The worst is the Presidential Fitness Testing in which I

walked the mile run while reading a library copy of Keats's *Endymion*. It's impossible for me to navigate the strata of pride and shame in that sentence.) I remember wishing I had that talent to always pick the right record, never praise the wrong magazine. It felt great to know the difference between the stores where we were better because we couldn't afford anything (Commander Salamander... oh, how I wanted those couture tutus in Bubble Yum colors!) and the stores where we were better because we could mock them while still giving them our lunch money (Smash, your source for middle-class punk).

It's easy for both the Left and Right to draw a distinction between authentic self-expression and consumerist self-purchasing. Rod Dreher's identification of a "crunchy con" movement got caught in this trap; he sounds like an adman whose pitch line is, "Buy our product because you hate consumerism!" In response, libertarian types argue that all self-images are consumer products, all dissent is commodified, so why worry? My memories of Georgetown suggest that we're more complicated than that. We can't choose our communities the way we choose our commodities, not if we want them to reshape us. I'd suggest that if our self-understanding never humiliates us, never forces us beyond both personal choice and admired community, we will never come face-to-face with our worst selves—our masks. ■

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