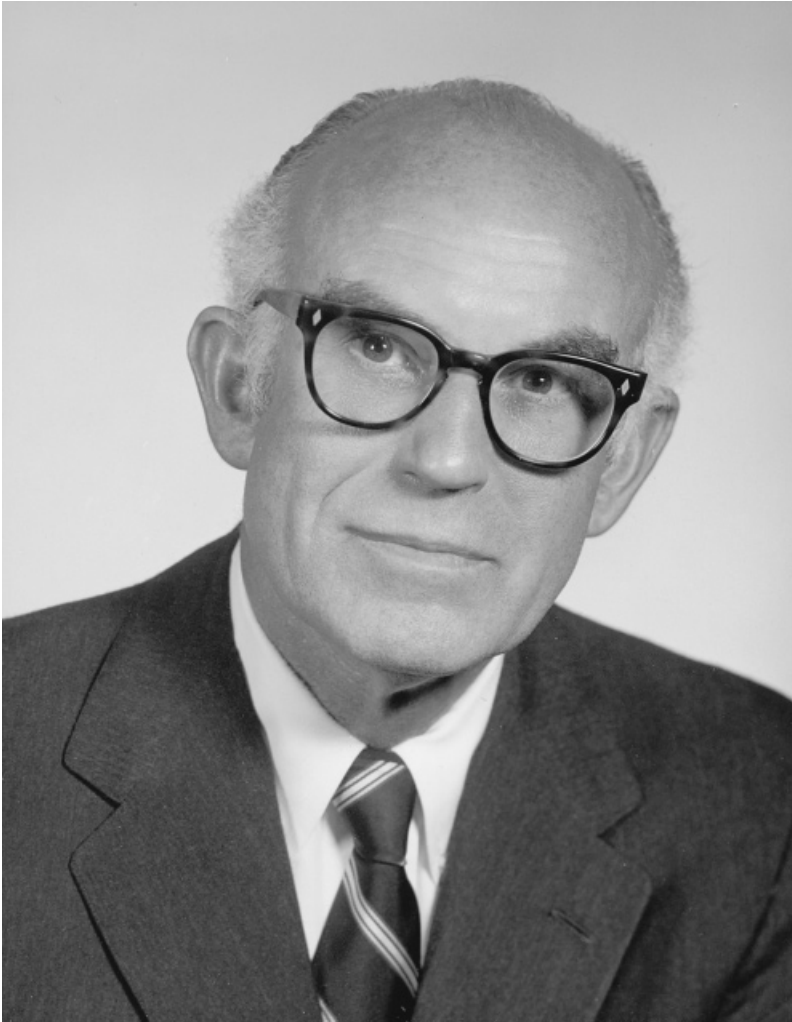


ROBERT ALEXANDER NISBET
(30 September 1913–9 September 1996)



Ray Manley Portraits

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Sociologist and historian Robert Alexander Nisbet died in his sleep, at home, in Washington, D.C., on 9 September 1996, just three weeks short of the eighty-third anniversary of his birth. His death followed a long and valiant battle with prostate cancer. He is survived by his wife, Caroline (née Burks); two daughters from a previous marriage to Emily P. Heron, Martha Rerhman, of Davis, California, and Constance Field, of Skokie, Illinois; an adopted daughter, Ann Nash, of Albuquerque, New Mexico; and four grandchildren. Among others mourning the loss of Bob are the countless former students and colleagues who were simply awed by his erudition and gentility.

I

During a career spanning more than fifty years, Robert A. Nisbet established himself as a man of letters and a leading *public intellectual* on both sides of the Atlantic—his audience, that is, was not limited to academicians and scholars, but included informed citizens from all walks of life. Nisbet wrote perceptively on a variety of subjects, from current issues to historical and sociological topics.

In addition to scores of prestigious public lectures and addresses far too numerous to list here, Nisbet's scholarship included almost two dozen volumes (translated into the major tongues of the world) and more than 150 articles, reviews, encyclopedia entries, and book chapters. The reviews of his books number well into the hundreds, and they appear not only in the usual social science and scholarly journals, but also in major newspapers and popular periodicals. The present writer quickly identified 249 domestic reviews simply by checking the better-known periodical indexes. It is entirely possible that, with the obvious exception of Mr. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), no sociologist, living or dead, has been more widely—and for the most part positively—reviewed than Robert Nisbet.

The broad outlines of Nisbet's perspective are suggested by the books he himself marked as having had the greatest influence on his

work, namely, Frederick J. Teggart's *Theory and Processes of History* (1941), Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835–40) and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), and Albert J. Nock's *Our Enemy, the State* (1935) (Nasso 1977:517). As a sociological theorist with an uncommon grasp of the canons of historical analysis, Nisbet examined both the sweep and details of social and cultural change in Western society. Although his intellectual interests were wide-ranging, he contributed, especially, to our understanding of the nature of social and cultural change, and to our appreciation of the vital role of *intermediary* association in large-scale societies (Perrin 1997).

In reorienting the analysis of social change away from what he dubbed a *developmentalist* approach, Nisbet boldly challenged mainstream theories across the social sciences. He demonstrates (particularly in *Social Change and History* [1969], and again in *History of the Idea of Progress* [1980]) the fallacies inherent in attempts to explain *actual*, historical (as opposed to metaphorical) change by drawing on concepts and principles such as immanent causation, necessity, cumulation, continuity, casual uniformity, directionality, stages, and the like. Against this hegemonic view (developmentalism), he offers a historical approach that, with rare exception (e.g., the work of Max Weber), has virtually eluded sociology since its nominal founding by Auguste Comte in the 1830s. Nisbet shows how fundamental change in society almost always presupposes conflict and crisis, something usually contingent on unexpected, event-borne “interferences,” “interruptions,” or “intrusions” upon otherwise settled social life. Actual change, Nisbet evidences, is not smooth, stage-by-stage development that can be neatly plotted or projected, but the mostly fortuitous outcome of conflicting groups, peoples, and ideas. *Except* by selective reconstruction and the aesthetic device of metaphor (to compress time and obscure differences), major change does not resemble growth, development, evolution, progress, or an unfolding of some indwelling or already-present trait or quality within a group, society, or culture; nor is significant change the “natural” outcome of inherent and day-to-day social tensions and institutional strains that somehow gradually accumulate over long periods of time. Major social and cultural change is not like metamorphosis, where great transformations are explained by internal mechanisms and processes. Nisbet thoroughly discounts the utility of popular biological analogies and “systems models” in making sense of “a succession of differences” within “a persisting identity” such as a society or culture or social institution.

Nisbet explains how important historical changes—the succession of *big* differences “in time” in society or culture—are neither logically nor empirically deducible from ubiquitous or *timeless* qualities of human social life such as scarcity, curiosity, selfishness, deviance, “role strain,” “cultural drift,” imperfect intergenerational socialization, perceived gaps or disparities between what is ideal and what is actual in social life, so-called systemic or structural “imbalances,” or latent cultural “contradictions” that slowly disaffect certain segments of a population. Instead, major changes are provoked by events that are, in principle, *datable*, and, for the most part, random, and thus mostly unpredictable. Accordingly, *general* theories of social and cultural change are simply not possible, and their continued pursuit is a waste of time. As such, only closely argued *historical* accounts are truly valuable to social science. The study of change in the social sciences, especially sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics, cannot, in the interest of erecting an elegant and all-encompassing Theory of Change, simply dispense with inconvenient particulars. For Nisbet, *actual* change in society and culture owes to *actual* happenings or critical events such as wars and invasions; actions and reactions of heroes and villains; leadership of the gifted and charismatic; migrations of people across space and ideas across time; trading; innovations and inventions; culture contact and diffusion of values, beliefs, and technology; environmental shifts; and natural disasters. It came as no surprise when Nisbet, after exposing the theoretical naïveté of conventional theorizing about change, greeted the new, much-trumpeted “science” of the future—“futurology”—as patent nonsense: “. . . the present does not contain the future, and the past did not contain the present” (Nisbet 1982:132). Futurologists are pseudo-scientists and “extrapolation charlatans” (*ibid.*, 131–35). The future, or the shape of things to come, is not reached by an embryonic unfolding of what lies within the present, but is the result of choices, chance events, and variable conditions that, by definition, cannot be meaningfully anticipated. The study of social change does not in any real sense form part of a predictive science.

With respect to substantive social and cultural change in Western society, Nisbet was particularly interested in the causes and consequences of the ascendancy of Leviathan—the modern, runaway political state, which dates to the French Revolution. He especially noted the erosion of community and intermediate forms of association. The French Revolution provided the first modern example of the *total* state, a colossus that attempted—in the name of *good*—to be all things to its citizens while refusing to countenance any group or affiliation or “par-

tial association” (as Rousseau termed it)¹ between itself and the solitary individual. (Even private charity and educational and literary foundations were banned by the new French state.) It was Nisbet’s seminal contribution to the history of the social sciences to show how sociology’s rise in France is not conceivable except as part of a larger *conservative* reaction to the dislocation and atomism caused by the revolution’s wholesale assault on traditional society.² Guided by Enlightenment ideals of individual (qua individual) and state—*individualisme* and *étatisme*—revolutionaries sought to eliminate autonomous social groups, that is, the *société* or social fabric that lay “intermediate between the individual and the state” (Nisbet 1943:156). French social theorists such as Auguste Comte, Frédéric Le Play, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Émile Durkheim³ were alarmed by the impairment and sometimes disintegration of traditional forms of attachment and association—and, consequently, morality and solidarity—by, first, the political revolution that swept through France in the late eighteenth century, and, second, the Industrial Revolution, which began in England and eventually drew the rest of Europe into its vortex. Nisbet’s *Sociological Tradition* (1966) notes how these two revolutions altered the existing social landscape while advancing the centralized state. Sociology’s *idées-clefs* or “unit ideas”—community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation—were largely reactive to and critical of the new order, seen through the contrasting concepts of society, power, class, the secular, and progress. The five paired concepts epitomize the conflict between tradition and modernity, between what is past and what is present. Nisbet, then, corrected conventional wisdom, showing that the

¹ Rousseau, whom Nisbet saw as a champion of the total state, opposed even the family, reasoning that its abolition by the state would have the virtue of separating children from the wrong-headed notions (“prejudices”) of their fathers. Nisbet (1982:111) observes that the “war between family and state is very old in human history”; as a rule, there is “an inversely functional relation between the two institutions”: When one is strong, the other is weak.

² For a concise account of the central tenets of conservatism, as it emerged in the wake of the French Revolution, see Nisbet’s “Conservatism and Sociology” (1952). In brief, conservatism values the sacred, the family, social rank, property, viable intermediary social bodies, local community, tradition, and political decentralization.

³ Along with Tocqueville, acknowledged by Nisbet as his greatest intellectual influence—as, indeed, “foremost in [his] mind” (Nisbet 1969:201), the French writer Durkheim was of especial interest. Nisbet’s two books on him (*Émile Durkheim* [1965] and *The Sociology of Émile Durkheim* [1974]) are noteworthy not only for placing his thought in the context of turbulent nineteenth-century France, but also for recognizing in Durkheim a prescient grasp of the problems of modernity, including challenges to mental health and social order that persist to the present moment (e.g., isolation along with egoism and anomie).

sociological tradition was primarily forged out of *counter*-Enlightenment and *antirevolutionary* materials.⁴

Throughout his career, Nisbet analyzed the excesses and evils of the modern state in ways that caught the attention of thinkers across the political spectrum. Indeed, one authority said that Nisbet was “so resolutely unfashionable that he regularly came back into fashion” (Dionne 1967:67). Nisbet argues that the troubles of modernity stem from a head-to-head conflict between the values of *tradition* (for example, authority, hierarchy, community, and the sacred) and those of *revolt* (for example, rationalist conceptions of power, mandated equality, individualism, and secularism) (see Nisbet 1968:3–13; Perrin 1999). In his 1953 classic, *The Quest for Community* (from a manuscript rejected by three publishers), Nisbet warns that the greatest social and political problem of our time is the deterioration of “intermediate association” and, *pari passu*, the growth and consolidation of a goliath state, the fingers of which touch and direct every man. Put differently, modern history has swept away the hoary communities of kin, region, and faith, and into the vacuum has come the total state.

Revolt has trumped tradition, and the price is paid daily with distinctively modern pathologies such as social isolation, moral uncertainty, and personal anxiety. True freedom, Nisbet insists, is not found in the empty spaces of an omnipotent state, but in a *pluralistic* society where a variety of social groups and institutions *intermediate* to the individual (*corps intermédiaires*) and the central state have real functions or responsibilities and, by definition, enough autonomy to carry them out, thus offering individuals a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging. The continual weakening of human association bonded by kinship, ethnicity, faith, work, locality, voluntarism, private pursuit, or shared interest by a jealous, power-hungry state creates what Nisbet (in *The Present Age* [1988]) calls “loose individuals.” These are untethered or atomized souls drifting from the safe harbor of community into the torrents of an impersonal, bureaucratized state that cannot, from its elevated seat of vertical power, replace the intermediary social bonds and moral community it has dissolved in ever pressing its claim for still greater responsibility for each of its subjects or citizens. During an intellectual career approaching six decades, Nisbet detailed how personal

⁴ *Sociology as an Art Form* (an expansion of his celebrated presidential address to the Pacific Sociological Association in 1962) completes Nisbet’s reconceptualization of the roots and nature of sociology. Although Nisbet acknowledges the obvious differences between science and art, he firmly believes that what is common to them is much more important than what is different.

freedom, including being able to seek and find refuge, solace, and purpose in the interstices and immunities of social institutions and groups close at hand, has increasingly become a casualty of an interventionist, paternalistic state that seeks always to enlarge its influence and control in the name of “the public good” and abstract, endlessly twistable ideals such as “equality” and “rights.”

II

Nisbet’s lifelong interest in how to analyze social change and the causes and consequences of the rise of the political state in Western society did not prevent him from contributing perceptive books and essays on a number of other (related and unrelated) topics. These include examining conservatism (the “protection of the social order . . . from the ravishments of the centralized political state” [1982:55]) and its dim prospects in today’s society (viz., life as a small gadfly in a giant “liberal welfare state”); decommissioning “social class” as a key sociological concept in interpreting modern America; exploring the psychological and social functions of community while extending Émile Durkheim’s insights on the isolation, egoism, and anomie that would increasingly define modernity; interpreting sociology as an art form as well as a science; pinpointing the attraction that centralized public power holds for liberal intellectuals; fashioning a broad, historical perspective within which to understand the cultural decline of Western civilization; critically examining the radical redirection, especially since the Second World War, of the university from pursuing “knowledge for its own sake” (scholarship) and teaching to calculated grubbing for governmental and private largess, all while teaching is increasingly marginalized and students are “managed” rather than challenged; and probing the curious relationship between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Josef Stalin to shed new light on the former’s foreign policy concessions.

Perhaps, Nisbet’s most lively writing—and one that reveals the range of his remarkable erudition and great wit—is *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary* (1982), a collection of seventy urbane essays on timely and sometimes timeless topics such as abortion, bureaucracy, death, environmentalism, envy, human rights, liberalism, old age, and victimology. For example, Nisbet ignores what is fashionable and proclaims that environmentalism “is now on its way to becoming the third great wave of redemptive struggle in Western history” (the others being Christianity and modern socialism); it is “a mass socialist movement of . . . sun worshipers, macrobiotics, forest druids, and nature freaks generally committed by course if not yet by fully shared intent to the

destruction of capitalism” (1982:101, 107). And he (1982:210–17) diagnoses modern liberalism as inherently “schizoid,” championing incessant state interventionism and ever-closer regulation and control of individual behavior while also promoting liberty-turned-moral-and-legal-license, so that social order or control is regularly and rudely disturbed by “thrice-convicted felons,” pornographers, and an endless variety of strident and militant groups, all beneficiaries of liberalism’s generous compassion and political protection.

Another vexing problem of modernity is *envy*: it “proliferates . . . where equality has come to dominate other values” (1982:108). Still another bane of the modern age is its intense *subjectivism*, that is, a “self-spelunking, ego diving and awareness intoxication” where serious study is driven out by “psychobabble” about “self-development, realization of potential, sexual and psychosexual fulfillment, meditation awareness, with advanced courses ahead on awareness of awareness” (1982:243, 245). Nisbet notes that Goethe connected subjectivism with periods of social dissolution and decadence. On less disputatious subjects, Nisbet (1982:15, 217) considers all true creativity to include an “implicit measure of anomie,” and he understands a metaphor as much more than “a simple adornment of language”; it is “a profound and indispensable way of knowing.” It is vital to both the formation of language and the evolution of thought. For three generations, Nisbet wrote insightfully on scores of subjects. That his books either remain in print or are being reissued confirms his continuing relevance for today and tomorrow. As Irving Louis Horowitz has well said, Robert Nisbet’s “words and works [will] live on well into the next century” (correspondence, 4 April 1998).⁵

III

Robert A. Nisbet was born in Los Angeles on 30 September 1913. He was the first of three children—all sons—born to Henry S. and Cynthia (Jenifer) Nisbet. Robert’s earliest years were spent in the small California desert town of Maricopa, the sheer barrenness of which made books attractive as a means of escape and vicarious experience.

⁵ Indeed, a four-day symposium entitled “The Modern State, Civil Society, and the Future of Freedom in the Thought of Robert Nisbet” has already been scheduled to meet in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2000, for the purpose of exploring the “enduring relevance of the work of Robert Nisbet.” The symposium’s 14 July 1999 thematic statement continues, “Long before it became fashionable, Nisbet called attention to the indispensable role of . . . intermediary institutions in the overall economy of human social life and the catastrophic consequences of their decline in the course of modern history.”

The elder Nisbet managed a retail lumberyard, and the family's circumstances were secure, if humble. The nearest and only toilet (actually an outhouse), for example, was some fifty yards from the back porch of the small, one-bedroom house provided, rent-free, by the lumber company. In the Nisbet household, education was a supreme value, and it was always understood that Robert would go to college, an experience that his parents had missed. Family mealtime conversation revolved around how the Nisbet children were doing in school, whether they were studying enough, what courses lay ahead, and the like.⁶ The Nisbets, on holiday in the north, visited the University of California, Berkeley, spending a few hours walking around the beautiful campus. Robert was eight or so years old, and the impression was indelible: one day, he told himself, he would go to Berkeley.

Young Robert Nisbet was eventually rescued from the bleakness of Maricopa by his parents' move to the coastal towns of Santa Cruz, and (subsequently) San Luis Obispo, where, in 1927, he began a demanding high-school program involving four years of mathematics, Latin, contemporary foreign languages, English, history, and various natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. Nisbet was graduated from high school in 1931. He spent the following academic year at Santa Maria Junior College. In 1932, just as he had envisioned years earlier, he was matriculated in the University of California, Berkeley, where he completed three degrees (B.A., 1936; M.A., 1937; Ph.D., 1939) in rapid succession. In 1939, Nisbet was invited to join Berkeley's illustrious faculty as an instructor in the Department of Social Institutions (later the Department of Sociology). (He would rise to the rank of professor by 1953.) The department was headed by Nisbet's mentor and lifelong role model, the redoubtable Frederick J. Teggart.

The Berkeley experience was critical for Nisbet. He first met Teggart (then sixty-five years old) in 1935 and immediately idolized him. (Nisbet confessed that he "was smitten by Teggart" [1986:6].) Fifty-one years later, Nisbet described Teggart "as the most erudite man he [had] ever known" (1986:6; see also 1976). Young Nisbet consciously modeled himself after Teggart. Among other things, Nisbet inherited his view of history and his approach to the study of social change directly from Teggart, and the Ph.D. dissertation ("The Social Group in French

⁶ Bob's brothers, Henry S., Jr., and McDougal Nisbet, went on to distinguished careers, the first as a commander in the United States Navy, and the second as a manufacturer in the California wine industry. The Nisbet family value of education and professional achievement continued with Bob's three daughters, Martha, Constance, and Ann, who have very successful careers in public affairs management, library services, and art, respectively.

Thought”) he wrote under Teggart’s direction marked the beginning of his enduring interest in *intermediate* social structures—those groups, associations, and institutions that serve as protective hedges between the individual and the centralized political state. Nisbet’s dissertation topic, which Teggart was eclectic enough to abide, came quite by accident. As a student assistant working in the university library, Nisbet happened upon (and would later plumb) a body of writing (nineteenth-century European conservatism) virtually unknown to American scholarship of the time. Nisbet’s first book, *The Quest for Community* (1953; new editions, 1962 [published as *Community and Power*], 1970, 1990), would continue and develop this early interest in intermediary association vis-à-vis the political state.

The Second World War interrupted Nisbet’s career at Berkeley. He enlisted in the United States Army in 1943, serving in the Pacific until the end of the war in 1945, and achieving the rank of staff sergeant. (The army recruiter had “guaranteed” his naïve recruit an assignment in the European theater.) Teggart retired in 1940, and Nisbet helped provide a vision for what would be a new department, a department of *sociology*. Nisbet’s guidance on departmental matters continued (through regular correspondence) even while he was on the other side of the world fighting a war (Murray 1980). Nisbet returned to Berkeley in 1946, serving as both assistant dean for the College of Letters and Science and acting chairman for the Department of Sociology. He left Berkeley for the last time in 1953, when, with an important book and the better part of a dozen articles published, he was called to serve as dean of the College of Letters and Science at the new Riverside campus of the University of California system. He assisted Riverside’s first provost, Gordon S. Watkins, in academic planning for the new campus, which saw its first students in 1954. Nisbet was given the additional title of vice chancellor in 1960. He held visiting appointments at Columbia University (1949), where he met Robert K. Merton, and the University of Bologna, Italy (1956–57). In Italy, Nisbet completed his second book, *Human Relations and Administration* (1957). *Contemporary Social Problems*, an eminently successful textbook, edited with friend Robert K. Merton, appeared in 1961.

In 1963, after ten years of successful university administration at Riverside, Nisbet chose to return to his first loves of classroom teaching and scholarship. He believed that “administrative work, sufficiently prolonged, has a sterilizing effect upon the creative or the scholarly mind” (1986:16). A timely Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to spend a year (1963–64) at Princeton University, where he began work on his now famous *Sociological Tradition* (1966; new edition, with a new

introduction, 1993). Nisbet returned in 1964 to Riverside, where, over the next eight years, he completed dozens of articles and reviews, as well as some seven books, including *Émile Durkheim* (1965), a collection of previously published essays entitled *Tradition and Revolt* (1968; new edition, with an introduction by Robert G. Perrin, 1999), *Social Change and History* (1969), *The Social Bond* (1970; 2nd ed., with Robert G. Perrin, 1977), *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma* (1971; new edition, with an introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb, 1997), and an edited book titled *Social Change* (1972). In 1970, the University of California, Berkeley, awarded Nisbet the Berkeley Citation, and, in 1973, he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society.

Nisbet retired from the University of California in 1972, with more than thirty years of service. At the time, he told me he that he needed a change: he wished to leave the state of California without being too far away from it. Nisbet accepted a position (as professor of sociology and history) with the University of Arizona, where he remained for two years (1972–74). While there, he published *The Social Philosophers* (1973; rev. ed., 1983) and *The Sociology of Émile Durkheim* (1974). During a June 1974 visit with Bob and his lovely wife Caroline in their newly built Tucson home, Bob told me he knew almost immediately that coming to Arizona had been a serious mistake. He confided that the pace or tempo and atmosphere at the university—especially in the humanities and social sciences—were so slow and somnolent that faculty members and even students seemed “already retired.” Happily, it was not long after Nisbet’s arrival in Tucson that his friend of many years, Robert K. Merton, telephoned to ask if he would accept—if offered—the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Columbia University. The appointment would begin in 1973. Nisbet answered in the affirmative, stipulating only that, for the sake of “academic decorum,” the appointment be postponed until 1974. The Schweitzer Chair was alleged to carry the highest salary of any chair in the United States at the time.

In the late summer of 1974, Nisbet moved to New York to join Columbia University as its Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities. He took a flat at 220 East 72nd Street, some thirty floors up. Nisbet later opined that New York was, perhaps, America’s only *real* city, and that he had experienced true *neighborhood*—all this from a man often identified with small-town life and small-town solutions to social problems (cf. Lemann 1991)! Nisbet taught in both the sociology and history departments. He especially enjoyed the time he spent with eminent friends—both inside and outside the university—such as Irving Kristol, Amitai Etzioni, Sigmund Diamond, Jacques Barzun, Fritz

Stern, Henry Graff, Lionel Trilling, Ernest Nagel, Meyer Schapiro, and, of course, longtime friend Robert Merton. The Columbia years saw the publication of *Twilight of Authority* (1975; new edition, with foreword by Robert G. Perrin, 2000), *Sociology as an Art Form* (1976), and the fourth edition of *Contemporary Social Problems* (1976, with Robert K. Merton).

Four years after arriving in New York, Nisbet formally concluded his university career. He was sixty-five years old, but still in full physical and mental vigor. Columbia tried to persuade him to remain for at least another five years, but he had made up his mind. Columbia graciously awarded Nisbet emeritus status, even after only four years' service. Bob confided to me that, after forty-two years of teaching, he felt the disenchantment and malaise he had sensed in Teggart two generations earlier. It was time for him to leave the classroom forever. He wrote, "I am happy to report that I have just received my highest, most cherished of all honorary degrees: Emeritus!!!! It's the one I've been looking for, or forward to, for a long time now" (correspondence, 25 May 1978).

In 1978, Nisbet moved to Washington, D.C., where he was affiliated (first as resident scholar, then adjunct scholar) with the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research until 1986. He saw "a fair amount of [former president Gerald R. Ford] and liked him immensely," adding that Ford "definitely, genuinely does not want to [run for] president" in 1980, and did not expect a deadlocked convention "with his own acceptance of [the] nomination as the only means of resolving it" (correspondence, 23 May 1979). Within easy hearing distance of the nation's heartbeat, Nisbet easily anticipated the nominees for the 1980 presidential election and quite confidently (if cheerlessly) predicted the outcome: "It will be Reagan-Carter, and I don't recommend betting on Reagan. . . . It'll be Carter" (correspondence, 17 March 1980). Of course, the rest is history!

In Washington, Nisbet edited (with Tom Bottomore) *History of Sociological Analysis* (1978) and published *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980; new edition, with a new introduction, 1993) and *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary* (1982). The argument of the second-named book, begun in New York in 1976, is quite novel: Far from being a strictly modern concept, the idea of progress is, in fact, a secularization of St. Augustine's rendition of the Christian epic, especially as found in *The City of God* (413–26 A.D.). Two more books, *Conservatism* and a collection of previously published essays called *The Making of Modern Society*, appeared in 1986, the year Nisbet formally retired from the institute.

Nisbet aptly described himself as an “incurable writer.” Having officially retired from the University of California, Columbia University, and the American Enterprise Institute, he was still not retired. In 1988, Nisbet was the Jefferson Lecturer for the National Endowment for the Humanities. From this came *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (1988), a book that was unsparing of both the unemotional “cash nexus” of capitalism and never-ending political centralization. Relatedly, Nisbet spotlights the costly proclivity of the political juggernaut to intervene in foreign affairs having little or no bearing on American interests. Domestically, the present age in America consists in scattered or loosely connected individuals trying to cope with the hard exigencies of both the impersonal marketplace and the omnipotent political state. Increasingly, people cope alone, or without the once-taken-for-granted benefit of well-working *intermediary* groups, which assuage adversity while nurturing a sense of individual worth and purpose.

Roosevelt and Stalin: The Failed Courtship followed in 1989. With the help of only recently released documents, Nisbet reveals how Roosevelt was hopelessly optimistic and fatally naïve in his dealings with Stalin, while reserving his fear and distrust for Britain’s Winston Churchill. Nisbet’s last book, *Teachers and Scholars: A Memoir of Berkeley in Depression and War* (1992), offers a charming and insightful account of life at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1930s and 1940s. Nisbet’s nostalgic yet judiciously balanced narrative is enriched by his having experienced Berkeley both as a student, undergraduate and graduate, and as a faculty member, junior and senior. He provides a richly detailed and personal memoir of heady times, decisive events, and striking personalities such as Ernest Lawrence, J. Robert Oppenheimer, A. L. Kroeber, and, of course, Frederick J. Teggart, for whom Nisbet’s affection always remained in full glow.

In 1995, Nisbet was invited to address the Jowett Society of the University of Oxford, which for more than a century has been the most prestigious academic forum for philosophical debate and discussion. Sadly, Nisbet’s declining health precluded the journey to England. Other honors, fellowships, public lectures and addresses, and service in professional societies and posts, far too numerous to name here, are, of course, listed in *Who’s Who in Writers, Editors, and Poets* (4th ed., 1992) and *Who’s Who in America* (1996).

IV

Robert A. Nisbet will be remembered for many things besides his formal scholarship and abundant publications. In the classroom, he was

simply awe-inspiring. He was stately in appearance, and he possessed a resonant, perfectly modulated voice that orators and speech coaches could envy. When lecturing, he stood immediately in front of his class, rather than farther back, behind a lectern. He spoke in virtually publishable paragraphs: everything, it seemed, was perfectly said and sufficiently important to warrant transcription in full. Of course, mere human hands, however young and agile, could not write fast enough to record all that should be recorded and committed to memory. Nisbet lectured without notes and without props or aids such as blackboards, films, overlays and overhead projectors, or even simple class handouts. The only exception was that he occasionally read a striking passage or two from an original source that he had brought to class for that day's lecture. His mimeographed, half-a-page syllabi were plain-Jane, even by the "low-tech" standards of the late 1960s.

When Professor Nisbet walked into the classroom, undergraduate or graduate, all chatter and movement ceased forthwith. Classes began on time and, for students, they ended all too soon. Students often remained for several minutes after the dismissal bell, struggling to complete their notes. Any course with Robert Nisbet was an intellectual and even physical challenge. A day's class typically consisted in incessant waves of information, analysis, interpretation, and arresting insights on, for example, community, social change, civil society, the political state, small groups, the family, authority, the social structure of European feudalism, or the thought of men such as Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, Turgot, Bonald, de Maistre, Comte, Marx, Maine, Max Weber, Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, W. I. Thomas, Spengler, Toynbee, F. J. Teggart, or Talcott Parsons. Moreover, it was not even an average class period if students, graduate and undergraduate, did not hear at least a half-dozen unfamiliar words, which, of course, had to be looked up soon after class. Indeed, I purchased Merriam-Webster's *Third International Dictionary* (unabridged) for the then-princely sum of \$49.50 after only a few days of attending the upper-division course in which I served as Nisbet's graduate assistant, and one of his graduate seminars in sociological theory. I probably owe the larger part of my vocabulary to my erudite professor, first, from his classroom lectures and seminar discussions, then, in following years, from his books and essays, all of which I read with my prized 2,662-page dictionary nearby. In reviewing my classroom notes for this memoir (and correcting my initial phonetic spelling), I came across hidden gems of the English language such as adscititious, aleatory, anfractuou, conation, daedal, edacious, glabrous, illative, nimiety, paraclete, and velleity.

Because it was hard to get class material "down pat" (one could

write or *reflect*, but not both at the same time), some students would meet after class to develop and then typewrite “composite notes,” which, once completed, were hoarded as treasures. Thirty years later, I still have mine in a safe place. If there was a single, overarching theme to Nisbet’s teaching, it was his steadfast evenhandedness and sense of balance: whatever his own views on a subject, all sides or positions were noted, and received fair-minded exposition. For instance, the lectures on Rousseau and Marx, whose political views were plainly anathematic to Nisbet, abounded with examples of their keen insights into society and the human condition generally. The extent to which Nisbet paid *everyone* his due was truly extraordinary. This intellectual habit flowed naturally from his personal civility.

I met Robert A. Nisbet on 5 September 1968, when I began graduate work at the University of California, Riverside. We remained in regular contact for the next twenty-eight years, almost to the month. One of the last—and, certainly, most poignant—exchanges from Bob included a set of obituaries, torn from the pages of a recent issue of the American Philosophical Society’s *Proceedings*, with a note reading, “Typical obits for APS. . . . Models, more or less, to aid you on me. Bob.” He was like that, anticipating and trying to ease what would surely be my great angst over so bittersweet an assignment as writing his obituary.

My initial meeting with Robert Nisbet was no accident. I was so impressed with *The Sociological Tradition* (1966), which I read while majoring in sociology at California State University, Northridge, that, with some prompting from my major professor, Joseph B. Ford, I decided to go to Riverside in the hope of studying with its famous author. Ford, who introduced me to sociological theory, was personally acquainted with Nisbet (Ford received his Ph.D. at Berkeley in 1951) and graciously wrote to him about my interests and prospects.

Even in fall 1968, with fourteen or fifteen books still to come, Robert Nisbet’s reputation was such that graduate students froze in place around a long table as he entered the large seminar room and momentarily surveyed each of our anxious faces. Then, he sat down at the head of the table, leaned back in his chair, and smiled broadly. That was when our breathing resumed. Nisbet had an irresistible charm and personal magnetism. Male students tried to imitate his interpersonal style and grace, while female students, young and not-so-young, were simply enamored. The topic of the course (Sociology 268), the first of many with Nisbet, was the sociology of Max Weber. Nisbet came to class equipped with a roll sheet and a term-paper topic for each person on it. Student presentations would begin the following week, and in the

precise order assigned. I was to write a paper on Weber's sociology of religion and present it in a fortnight. Never before or since have I got off to such a quick start on a writing assignment. After each paper was presented, Nisbet facetiously asked its author a series of what seemed like \$64,000 questions. It was a baptism of fire.

However exalted his reputation, aristocratic his bearing, and arduous his classes, Nisbet was actually unassuming and remarkably modest. He answered his telephone, "Mr. Nisbet." He personally answered letters within a day or two of receipt, and he invariably typed his own correspondence on his own typewriter, all while his colleagues made regular use of the ample secretarial staff. (He was not quite an accomplished typist—letters invariably contained handwritten corrections.) Nisbet credited his groundbreaking *Social Change and History* (1969) to his mentor, Frederick J. Teggart, averring, in the dedication, that it was really Teggart's book. Two generations after the fact, Nisbet told me that he was still a little upset with himself because of what Teggart had said about his graduate-level essay examination on Rousseau: "Yes, Bob, you passed, but you could have done much better." The first paper I submitted for publication was titled "Nisbet and the Debate over Functionalism." After the paper was accepted, I proudly notified Bob, who had read it earlier. After some warm, congratulatory remarks, he concluded by saying that it was "a wish" that I substitute a title that did not include his name, because the essay's boundaries extended beyond his own work. He suggested the title ("The Functionalist Theory of Change Revisited" [1973]) under which, in fact, the paper was later published. Few authors, indeed, are so restrictive about the conditions under which they allow their names to appear in the titles of published works.

Nisbet had a quiet intellectuality; it did not announce itself, yet it was irresistible. It even affected my senses. For years, I routinely described Robert Nisbet to my own students "as aristocratic in bearing and appearance, and quite tall, *well* over six feet, in fact." Finally, a brash graduate student who knew I was seventy inches tall, asked why a framed photograph of Bob and me standing side by side revealed no perceptible difference in our heights. I had never noticed that Bob and I were about the same height. I had always thought of him as around six and a half feet tall. Later that same year—1976—Bob came to the University of Tennessee to deliver the Alumni Bicentennial Lecture ("Tocqueville and the Significance of *Democracy in America*"). He spoke eloquently to a packed auditorium and, to me, still appeared to be at least six and a half feet tall. That perception never changed.

The world has lost an "intellectual giant" (Horowitz 1997), and

those of us privileged to have known Bob personally have also lost a wonderful friend and a truly inspiring example of civility, generosity, and commitment.

ELECTED 1973; Councillor 1977–80; Committees: Membership III 1977–83, Nomination of Officers 1979–81

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