

Caritas and Community: Reflections on the Conservative Sociological Art of Robert Nisbet

Judith Adler¹

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Abstract Nisbet's conception of sociology practiced as an art form: multivocality, tolerance for uncertainty, wealth of invention, reservation of judgement. Tocqueville as exemplar. Nisbet's own writings evaluated in the light of his best insights. A southern white perspective on the central state, shaped in later years by quest for recognition in a rising conservative movement. Lesson to be gleaned: discernment in the deployment of wit, and cultivation of 'caritas', essential features of sociological writing capable of enduring the test of time.

Keywords Nisbet · Tocqueville · Conservative sociology · Art of sociology · Neo-conservatism · Southern sociology · Sociological theory

"I believe that it is only as an artist that man knows reality. Reality is what he loves, and if his love is lost it is his sorrow."¹

¹ Morse, M (1959) Mathematics and Art. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. 15(2): 55–59, quoted as the concluding lines of Nisbet, R (1962) 'Sociology as an Art Form.' *The Pacific Sociological Review* 5(2): 67–74.

✉ Judith Adler
judithadl@gmail.com

¹ Department of Sociology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL A1C 5S7, P.O. Box 4200, Canada

Critic of the Sociological Art

Behind Robert Nisbet's conception of sociology as an art form lay admiration for Burke, Tocqueville, Simmel, Weber, his little-published teacher, Teggart and, above all, his understanding of social science as an exercise in imagination.² Masters of sociology become the intellectual contemporaries of later generations, he believed, not as founders of schools, or "isms," but through readers' direct encounter with their original words. Weber, rather than Weberianism, remains vital. And of Tocqueville Nisbet writes, "It is in a way a high tribute to Tocqueville that at no time has there been, or is there likely to be, anything called Tocquevillism."³ Inspired works renew themselves over time by yielding multiple readings and speaking in unforeseeable ways to the future, this very instability and multivalency making them irreducible to any formula or system.

Nisbet holds up Tocqueville's openness to reality, wealth of rendered impressions, and ability to evoke a sustained mood as exemplary, observing that though many of Tocqueville's ideas failed to be confirmed he remains an enduring fount of insight. In fact, Tocqueville's very indecisiveness, ability to tolerate and register ambiguity and—like Burke—to reserve judgement, are precisely the strengths that keep his writing alive and fecund. Nisbet goes so far as to suggest that detachment from the empirical immediacy of his material gave Tocqueville's imaginative rendering of it enduring life: "this very mixture—indeed confusion—of what, on the one hand, are direct observations...and, on the other hand, intuitions,

² Adler, J (2014) Sociology as an Art Form: One Facet of the Conservative Sociology of Robert Nisbet. *American Sociologist* 45:8–21; Nisbet, R (1976) *Sociology as an Art Form*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Nisbet, R (1986) *The Making of Modern Society*. New York: NYU Press, p.56.

abstract reflections and ideal types, has in no small degree kept *Democracy in America* an iridescent classic. It is not so much a book of prophecy... as a book of many and diverse images to which time and circumstance lend mutability and variant evocation."⁴ In short, the enduring vitality of Tocqueville's art, attributable to its capacity for sustaining variant interpretations over time, is rooted in his uninhibited registration of 'mixed' perceptions, his tolerance for uncertainty and reservation of judgement.

Yet despite this recognition of his capacity to register ambiguity as a key to Tocqueville's power, elsewhere, when addressing a Conservative readership, Nisbet begrudges his exemplar this very multivocality. Stating that Conservatism "possessed" certain values "by historic right," he complained of the "abuses" of "the conservative totem" by "enemies and strangers" who have "borrowed egregiously from conservative symbolism." Intent upon securing Burke and Tocqueville as conservatism's exclusive possessions, he asserted: "Predictably, the Left 'found' a radical vein of gold in Tocqueville's rolling hills of periphrasis, ambiguity, and outright contradiction in the two separated parts of his *Democracy in America*. But among serious and knowledgeable minds there was never the slightest question of Tocqueville's provenance. Whatever fancies may be aroused by a first reading of that classic are quickly put to rest when one has seen... what an aggressive conservative... Tocqueville was." Similarly, though Nisbet had once noted that Burke never considered himself a conservative,⁵ this did not prevent him from complaining that the Left was wrong in professing to find libertarian roots in Burke.⁶

Insisting that pretensions to scientific forecasting are a con, Nisbet observed that the prophetic powers with which great writers are credited are due less to their every hunch being vindicated than to their wealth of invention, enhancing the chances that some of their ideas will retrospectively appear to have been prescient. "Was Tocqueville gifted, as some have said, with genuine prevision? It is tempting to believe that he was. I am mindful, though, of Tocquevillian intuitions gone wrong... I would prefer to go back to my characterization of *Democracy in America* as a composite ... of perception and reflection, of observation and sheer brooding. Historical vicissitude gives them pertinence."⁷ The works Nisbet admired illuminated experience; he did *not* require that they yield predictions, nor did he gage the stature of social scientists by the verification (or even verifiability) of their claims.⁸

But this begs a question: can art be falsified? Or does art fail only in ceasing to command interest? And with respect to

an art whose status as science Nisbet never explicitly called into question, it begs another: does relaxation of the demand for empirical verification ease the way for ideologically motivated attacks on empirical research per se? (In the very decade when equalization of economic conditions was coming to an end Nisbet, confidently claiming that a higher degree of equality of economic condition existed than at any time in the past, asserted that equalization had already gone too far).⁹ (Irving Kristol, a neoconservative associate, was soon to argue that research on income inequalities was ideological because social class—a concept Nisbet too claimed had become obsolete—was a matter of self-definition.)¹⁰

When Nisbet writes of sociology as an art he envisages teaching as well as writing. "In the Thirties, the lecture had been a veritable art form at Berkeley," he recalls. In this performative art practiced by the university's strongest scholars, the undergraduate audience's discerning appreciation for 'heroic' performances, expressed in bursts of applause, was as decisive as the teacher's vision and expertise.¹¹ Nisbet disapproved of the withdrawal of senior professors from undergraduate teaching, as he disapproved of the penetration of the university, and distortion of research, by post-war state-funded projects.

Yet the value Nisbet placed upon individual vision is not to be confused with a taste for lyrical subjectivism. Impatient with "self-spelunking" narratives, Nisbet quotes Goethe multiple times on Subjectivism as a sign of cultural decadence.¹² Obsession with self, a symptom of "unmoored" individualism, he held to be a symptom of weakened social bonds and degraded social science.¹³ Together with overt politicization, and the organization of professional meetings as "a monster rally on behalf of all the liberal and radical icons," subjectivism and ostentatiously hard-nosed scientism together, he believed, spelled the decline of the social sciences.¹⁴

⁹ Nisbet, R (1975) *The New Despotism*. *Commentary* 59(6): 31–43; Nisbet, R (1975) *Twilight of Authority*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.201; Nisbet, R (1988) *The Present Age*. Scranton: Harper and Row, p.134.

¹⁰ Nisbet, R (1959) *The Decline and Fall of Social Class*. *Pacific Sociological Review* 2(1): 11–17; Kristol, I. (1983) *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead*. New York: Basic Books, pp.76ff.

¹¹ Nisbet, R (1971) *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma: The University in America, 1945–1970*. New York: Basic Books, p.183; Nisbet, R. (1992) *Teachers and Scholars: A Memoir of Berkeley in Depression and War*. Rutgers: Transaction Publishers, pp.109–120, 123, 161.

¹² *The New Despotism*, p.37; Nisbet, R and Perrin, R (1977) *The Social Bond*, pp. 304–5; Nisbet, R (1982) *What to Do When You Don't Live in a Golden Age*. *American Scholar* 51(2): 232–3; Nisbet, R (1982) *Genius and Milieu*. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 126(6): 448; *The Present Age*, pp.129ff.

¹³ Nisbet, R (1973) *The Myth of the Renaissance*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15(4): 476.

¹⁴ Nisbet, R (1982) *Prejudices*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp.286–288.

⁴ *The Making of Modern Society*, p.153.

⁵ Nisbet, R (1978) Preface. *Journal of Contemporary History* 13(4): 630.

⁶ Nisbet, R (1985) *The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective*. *The Public Interest*, 81: 133–134, 140.

⁷ *The Making of Modern Society*, p.165.

⁸ Merton, Robert and R Nisbet, eds. (1976) *Contemporary Social Problems*. New York: Harcourt Brace, p.736.

It is easiest to specify what Nisbet's ideals rule out. Rejected is any sociology in thrall to reifying abstractions and esoteric jargon. "First, be fruitless and reify," he mocks. "Snuff out the lives of particulars through suffocation by structures and systems."¹⁵ Neither Methods nor Theory should be taught as special subjects, or have their own sections at professional meetings. Sociology, he insisted, must not confuse social problems with sociological problems, or shape its practices in fealty to foundations and granting agencies. There is little question, judging from a multitude of negative remarks about "feminized" university classes,¹⁶ affirmative action initiatives, changes in the family, and political projects aiming at 'equality of outcome' that Nisbet did not welcome Feminist, Queer, or Black Social Science. And it is easy to imagine the derision with which he would have greeted Pierre Bourdieu's recommendation that sociology be practiced as a "martial art." If sociology is committed to serving any interest, it is that of affirming the reality and value of social differentiation, local communities and authorities, knowledge sedimented in tradition, and institutions capable of protecting individuals from a strong central state. Nisbet disapproved of a sociology enlisted in the service of humanitarian projects designed by intellectuals (for whom he reserved unrelenting suspicion), and he was emphatic that scholars and teachers should not play the part of philosopher-kings, social reformers, or healers.¹⁷

Nisbet never ceased to appeal to realism when seeking to parry hopes motivating projects of equalization. The manifest irrationality of egalitarianism, he held, is that, like other redemptive ideas, it aims at all mankind. Sociology must give paramount attention to what *is*, undistracted by ameliorative fantasies of what *ought* to be. His essay "Conservatism" begins by asserting that the conservative tradition "profited from its 'realism' ... It abstained from speculating about a 'natural' order other than the one that existed; it studied society as it was."¹⁸ Social thought attentive to the sedimentation of rights and freedoms in custom, and hostile to projects of social engineering based upon speculative abstractions, answers to his taste.

But realism, as Nisbet understood it, led to some striking failures of prescience. Even to shrill jeremiads. "Our borders are in tatters, and we shall be lucky if we escape as only a two-language nation. With wide intermarriage native American genetic stock will almost certainly improve. But not our last rampart, the American national state."¹⁹ Attacking "judicial

activism" deployed to force integration, he asserted it would take "many millennia" to "erase discrimination against peoples of a different physical stock."²⁰ He warned "of what South Africa will be if a black majority gets the one-man, one-vote nightmare that our liberals are calling for there" and castigated the "blindness to reality" of "minds beset by moralism."²¹ Was this simply the anxiety of a white man born in 1913, and identified through family ties with the white South? To be fair, always on guard against populism and democratic totalitarianism, suspicious of the political relation per se as "an acid on the social fabric," Nisbet was wary of any expansion of the electorate as an expansion of the state. Universal suffrage, he drily noted, had gone hand in hand with universal conscription.²²

Like Auden, who famously asserted that "poetry makes nothing happen," being itself "a way of happening", Nisbet declares sociology "its own reason for being." Yet, academic writing, decipherable only by a narrow professional coterie, finds no favour with him. While acknowledging the university as the crucial medium for the development of social science disciplines, he is critical of the insular culture universities breed.²³ Too many sociology departments produce only textbooks, or literature whose "gelded placidity of tone," and "vapid optimism" masquerade "under the cloak of scientific detachment." He deplores the production of narrow PhDs whose years of reading about, rather than doing, sociology culminate only in the production of imitative, timid footnotes to other people's ideas.²⁴

Nisbet's Sociology as Art

Nisbet was sometimes in the forefront of North American social science. A decade after Victor Serge, but before Hannah Arendt, he applied the concept of totalitarianism to Soviet and Fascist forms of power.²⁵ "The New Despotism," published the same year as Foucault's *Surveiller et Punire*, struck many of the same path-breaking themes as that book. Nisbet's treatment of diplomatic history was sober and shrewd.²⁶ And he was a superb intellectual historian. Sophisticated about "unconscious traditions of mind," and possessed of an acute sense of irony (e.g., noting the progress toward a militarized

¹⁵ What to Do When You Don't Live in a Golden Age, p.229.

¹⁶ *The Making of Modern Society*, p.9.

¹⁷ Nisbet, R (1974) The Decline of Academic Nationalism. *Change* 6(6): 26–31.

¹⁸ Nisbet, R (1979) Conservatism. In *A History of Sociological Analysis*, eds. T. Bottomore and R. Nisbet. London: Heinemann, pp. 80–117.

¹⁹ Nisbet, R (1985) How Has the United States Met its Major Challenges Since 1945? *Commentary* 80(5): 76.

²⁰ *Prejudices*, pp. 255–257.

²¹ How Has the United States Met its Major Challenges since 1945? p.76; *The Present Age*, p.37.

²² De Bonald and the Concept of the Social Group. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5(3): 315–331; The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p.138.

²³ *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma*, pp.179–181, 230; Nisbet, R (1979) Who Reads Novels? A Symposium. *American Scholar* 48 (2): 165–190; Genius and Milieu, p.448.

²⁴ Nisbet, R (1950) Review of Human Society, by Kingsley Davis. *American Sociological Review* 15(2): 307; *Teachers and Scholars*, pp.176–177.

²⁵ Nisbet, R (1943) Rousseau and Totalitarianism. *The Journal of Politics* 5(2): 93–114.

²⁶ Nisbet, R (1986) Roosevelt and Stalin: the infamous courtship of a patrician and a revolutionist. *Modern Age* 30(2): 103–112; (3/4): 205–217.

surveillance state under the high minded President Wilson), he was attentive to the ways in which historical actors become agents of processes they do not comprehend. Nisbet's wisdom with respect to temporality, and reminder that orientations to past and future are as much a component of social action as norms and values, remain apposite. As do his warnings that while metaphor is indispensable to thought, reified metaphor is its enemy.²⁷ Above all, he brought new balance to the history of social thought, written for the most part by liberal academics, by calling attention to its conservative traditions.

As Nisbet himself would have predicted, his rich output, wide reading, and worldly experience ensured that some of his insights age well. His axiomatic conviction that social bonds are inherently hierarchical, involving asymmetrical transfers, remains a useful prod to perception in every area of sociology, encouraging alertness to asymmetries in transfers of everything from calories, gifts, blessings, smiles, blows and attention, to wealth, labor and political support. His unmasking of the Salvationist ideology used to popularize American foreign policy, and recognition of the persistent importance of war in relation to the development of a militarized state (subjects neglected in that branch of children's literature into which undergraduate textbooks fall), has yet to be assimilated by contemporary sociology.²⁸ His tutelary caution with respect to projects of social reform that undermine local traditions, authorities and institutions remains more pertinent than ever, as such projects are routinely linked to military intrusions. At the height of his powers, Nisbet exemplifies his own values: a wealth of ideas, tolerance for ambiguity, realism. But when his writing does *not* exemplify qualities he identified as conducive to lasting achievement, where, and why, does it fall short?

Nisbet began publishing late in life, and his last book (*Teachers and Scholars*) is one of his best. But a "mood," to use one of his favourite terms, invading the later writing, mars his achievement as a whole. At its worst, the tone is that of a moralist serving up sociological clichés: the "decay of values," "erosion of the sacred," "liquefied" atmosphere of a society whose traditional forms of property have been replaced by dematerialized forms, rising numbers of "loose" individuals no longer moored by marriage, church, or neighbourhood. Nisbet, who often articulated these ideas with hedging modifiers, showed no interest in indicating empirical data that might support, qualify or call them into question—as years later, Robert Putnam usefully did. As for style, which Nisbet always insists is inseparable from content, he sometimes falls in later works into ill-tempered railing—venting scorn upon such objects of invited derision as "bored

middle class housewives," female undergraduates with a mission to save the environment, "militant abortionists" who in a "repugnant spectacle," "march happily with lesbians, homosexuals, and others whose interest...[is] to vent punitive fury upon the family."²⁹ Some of these jeremiads, such as the railing against "egalitarianism, with its destruction of all the moral disciplines that once held mankind in check" have become staples of the contemporary Right. As has his assertion that inflation, a "pestilence" due to the "raging forces of egalitarianism, to passion for eroding away all social and economic difference, and the insatiable appetite for entitlements," is worse than economic Depression.³⁰

In *Twilight of Authority* and *The Present Age*, the scholar who persuasively demonstrated the fallacy of applying metaphors of organic growth to social change in liberal ideologies of development gives every appearance of taking metaphors of decay literally. And the man who praised the public library that afforded his boyhood escape from the "spiritual desert" of a small town, and the world class public university that shaped his intellectual life, never qualifies his opposition to the taxation policies necessary to support such institutions, ignoring the link between resistance to taxation and erosions of "community" that he deplored.³¹ Nisbet's excoriation of "rootless intellectuals," and "disturbers of the peace,"³² reminiscent of Stalin's "rootless cosmopolitans" and National Socialism's similar rhetoric, is jarring in view of the author's anti-totalitarian stance, and his own career.

Critical of an American foreign policy of "transcendent moralism," and of corporate dependence upon defense spending, Nisbet warns that a growing military budget will "in time destroy utterly the economic base of what we like to call the American way."³³ Alert to the "strange bedfellows" of renascent Conservatism—partisans of a huge defense budget and interventionist foreign policy, libertarians, and "political theologians" intent upon capturing the state to impose their own morality, he strains to protect his own understanding of the conservative tradition, independent of its contemporary manifestations.³⁴ Nisbet identified himself as a conservative, never as a neo-con. But over time, he proved reluctant to press questions that would risk political conservatism's uneasy alliances, or unveil the superficiality of ideals deployed as a smokescreen for plutocratic interests.

For decades Nisbet intoned the names of "intermediate groups" charged with limiting the authority of the "centralized

²⁷ Nisbet, R (1969) *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western theory of Development* New York: Oxford University Press; Nisbet, R (1970) Genealogy, Growth and Other Metaphors. *New Literary History* 1(3): 351–363.

²⁸ Nisbet, R (1973) *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Western Thought*. New York: Thomas Crowell.

²⁹ Nisbet, R (1969) The New Philistinism. *TransAction* May: 54–56; *Prejudices*, p.5; What to do When You Don't Live in a Golden Age, p.235.

³⁰ *Prejudices*, p.189; *Twilight of Authority*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.97–99.

³¹ Nisbet, R (1953) *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³² The Myth of the Renaissance, pp. 487–489.

³³ Nisbet, R (1961) Foreign Policy and the American Mind. *Commentary* 32(3): 199–201.

³⁴ The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p. 137.

bureaucratic state,” without articulating the problems raised by a drive to starve the state of tax revenue, or asking where individuals might find protection from the overwhelming power of an unregulated market.³⁵ After 1948 he never suggested that laws inhibiting labor union activity in the name of individual freedom might be destructive of one of those “intermediate groups” whose crucial importance in protecting individual liberty he never ceased to stress.³⁶ He preferred to evoke medieval guilds rather than contemporary unions, and claimed federal minimum wage laws were in part responsible for joblessness and crime.³⁷ While condemning a liberal “clerisy of power” for promoting “statism” in the service of its own interests, he never ferreted out its corollary on the Right, involving a concerted effort to capture the state in order to divert public monies into private income streams—all prepared under an umbrella of “revolutionary” neo-conservatism.

Passages of Nisbet’s writing crafted at a time when he sought recognition and readership in a rising conservative movement, were not prescient; nor do they offer perceptive witness of the times in which they were written. Declaiming rather than questioning, they fail as both art and science. To throw light upon this failure we need only return to Nisbet’s best thinking on sociology as an art form, and on the emotional founts and social matrices of creativity.

Wit: Test of Discernment

Taking pleasure in reformulating a quip by the 19th century Englishman, Sidney Smith, Nisbet observed that Tocqueville rose by his gravity and sank with his buoyancy. He believed a sustained mood of ‘*gravitas*’ to be good form and subjected his own writing to its discipline despite occasional eruptions of irrepressible wit, which he regarded as a liability to reputation. Of Mencken, with whose “contempt” for “any and all forms of equality” he identified, he wrote that due to his “fabled wit,” deemed offensive by liberals, Mencken suffered a “near-coventry.”³⁸ So Nisbet, who had the wit to write, “I remember the way it was supposed to be: the future, that is, back in the 1930s,” and “structuralism is the opiate of the reifying classes”—a man whose most incisive vision was the satirical one turned upon the vanities of the academic clerisy, overestimated the appeal of ‘*gravitas*’ and overlooked the necessity for discernment in the deployment of wit. The highest forms of wit condense surprise and recognition in a flash; its lower forms pander to aggressive impulses aimed at

those who, taking my cue from Nisbet, I shall call Targets (rather than Idols) of the Tribe.

The last entry of Nisbet’s *Prejudices*—a title with defiantly provocative resonance for his generation, proclaiming his identification with Mencken, Burke and other critics of the Enlightenment for whom ‘prejudice’ held positive connotations—is entitled “Wit.” Beginning by noting the “melancholy” proposition that those who live by the quip are more likely to be slain than to slay others with it, he ends the entry, and therewith the book, affirming that of the “greatest men and women” he has been privileged to know, “all but one lacked wit, and *he* confined it to office or home; never did it enter a lecture or published research.” Nisbet’s conclusion? “These figures, one and all, rose by their gravitas.”³⁹

In imagining ‘*gravitas*’ as a mark of quality, and levity as a threat to reputation, Nisbet subscribes to a rhetorical art more favoured by preachers than by artists. Imagination, which Nisbet never ceased to exalt, is nourished by playfulness and flashes of irreverent license. But precisely as a manifestation of freedom wit entails risk. Nisbet’s wariness was justified. For too often, precisely when he permits himself liberties of attempted wit, the weaknesses of his sociological art are exposed.

If Love is Lost

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Nisbet’s “Sociology as an Art Form” concludes with a quotation: “it is only as an artist that man knows reality. *Reality is what he loves, and if his love is lost it is his sorrow*” (italics in the original). But Nisbet omits a sentence in which the author he quotes went further: “The urge to understand is the urge to embrace the world as a unit, to be a man of integrity in the Latin meaning of the word.”⁴⁰ The suggested link between emotional orientation and cognition raises a question: might a certain quality of charitable “embrace” be necessary to understand reality as a whole? Especially if the reality to be known is human, might the possibility of understanding rest upon that disinterested care the Greeks called ‘*caritas*’? Not to be confused with “infusions of religiosity and humanitarian sentimentality” that repelled Nisbet,⁴¹ might ‘*caritas*’ be necessary to yield—not abstract universals, but—adequate perception, and just representation, of *all* particular positions in a social whole? If so, cognition in the human sciences bears a necessary relation to justice and—decisively—to the very dynamic of equalization Nisbet feared and attempted to discredit.

³⁵ Nisbet, R (1980) Conservatives and Libertarians: Uneasy Cousins. *Modern Age* 24(1): 2–8; The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p.129.

³⁶ Nisbet, R (1948) Politics of Social Pluralism: Some Reflections on Lammennais. *The Journal of Politics* 10(4): 764–786.

³⁷ *Twilight of Authority*, p.96.

³⁸ The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, pp.316–318.

³⁹ *Prejudices*, pp. 316–318.

⁴⁰ *Mathematics and Art*, pp.57, 59.

⁴¹ Nisbet, R (1959) The Contribution of Georg Simmel: Comment. *American Sociological Review* 24(4) pp.479–481.

‘Caritas’ is compatible with wit deployed against sentimentality and pretence (“Idols of the Tribe”). But it is not compatible with disdain for the weak, or attempts to orchestrate mockery against Targets of one’s Tribe. The moments when Nisbet fails to create a sociological art resistant to time are precisely those in which he fails to keep the channels of ‘caritas’ cleared of the detritus of collective resentments. There are the ill-tempered snarls: against “pro-abortionists, equal righters, health food addicts,” “any given Earth Day’s mob,” “environmentalists,” “tenured creative writers in English departments,” “editors of a half dozen of New York’s radical chic magazines,” “tobacco abstainers,” “seat belt fanatics,” “progressive schools” and, finally, an entire undifferentiated “age,” declared not to be “golden.” Nisbet wrote many a line whose mortality, to a discerning ear, should have been evident at birth: “Environmentalism in our day is the perverse metamorphosis of the conservation envisioned at the beginning of the century... When the Friends of the Earth or the Audubon society look at a forest, they see a bosky shrine for druids, a race that must outdo all others in numbers of lobbies in Washington, D.C.” Or: “Some of the hybrids that are produced are lamentably infertile. Thus the heart rending story of the young lady who majored in Eco-feminism... the great majority of those who study things like Eco-Feminism do not need jobs,” etc., etc.⁴² Such targets are unworthy of the conservative critic whose portraits of Wilson and Roosevelt unmasked an enduring “farce” of American diplomacy, who developed discerning critiques of ideologies of progress and development, foresaw the far reaching dangers of Alien and Sedition legislation enacted under a liberal administration, and limned perceptive portraits of then emerging, but now dominant, academic types.

Nisbet lived through a period of momentous change. In touching upon these changes, he sometimes failed to write in ways that would speak to future generations. But in his very failings he bears witness to an idea he often voiced: when sociology is deployed as a martial art it risks the very quality that enhances its chances of lasting life: imagination, transcending passing parochial interests, spurred by a “reach” to understand reality as a whole. Nisbet, the astute historian of ideas, prodding us to give due weight to publics, patrons, and institutional environments, lights our way to understanding the stumblings of a first rate mind into slackly formulated assertions disciplined neither by art nor science. His weakest work was written for public interest journals after he moved into the orbit of conservative foundation patronage. Retired from the university, no longer tempered by the discipline imposed by students and academic peers, perceiving opportunity in new constellations of intellectual-political power taking shape in Washington during the Reagan years, Nisbet was not one whose most mature writing is their last.

⁴² *Prejudices*, pp.106–107; What to do When You don’t Live in a Golden Age, pp.230, 234–236.

Gone with the Wind Sociology

*“It is in no spirit of festering wound, no mood of trauma-induced melancholy that I...”*⁴³

*“Prophets of the past they [the European Conservatives] were...But they did two things: in their hatred of modernism they identified it; and in their rather absurd love of traditionalism they identified it, too. This was their bequest to posterity.”*⁴⁴

Early in life Nisbet assimilated a Southern white perspective on the central state. That state had imposed its power on the South during the Civil War, the occupation that followed, then the Civil Rights era, as a champion of human equality. Throughout his life Nisbet criticized the use of federal power to abrogate “freedoms of association” and launch liberal schemes of “equalization.” Resentment of federal encroachment upon traditional society and its authorities remains strong in a white South successfully courted by neoconservatives, and Nisbet spoke to it.

His writings deliver sustained defensive retorts to two wounds. The first was received by way of identification with a caste-ridden, pre-Civil Rights white South, defeated in his grandfather’s generation and subjected to renewed assault in the sixties. (Nisbet noted that his paternal grandfather and namesake fought in the Civil War—“as a Confederate, of course.”)⁴⁵ His continuation of a tradition established by Burke, and reasserted by Mencken, of ascribing positive value to the word “Prejudice,” writing of its “necessity” and “indwelling wisdom” is telling.⁴⁶ In critical treatments of Rousseau as founder of the totalitarian ideal, he highlights Rousseau’s attack on the “prejudices of the father.”⁴⁷ Nisbet’s unqualified positive usage of the word “prejudice” shows his determination to make words, and traditions, mean what he wants them to mean. A quick consultation of any dictionary reveals a uniformly negative meaning of the word: prejudgement; an unfavourable opinion formed without due examination; opinions and attitudes of a hostile nature regarding racial or other groups. Synonyms include antipathy and, ominously, injustice.

The word ‘prejudice’ has evolved together with the word ‘liberal’—by the fourteenth century synonymous with “generous” and during the Enlightenment with “freedom from prejudice.” In the United States “liberal” came to connote favourability to government action to effect social

⁴³ Nisbet, R (1979) *The Octopus Revisited*. *Social Research* 46(3): 487–516.

⁴⁴ Nisbet, R (1969) *Sociology as an Idea System*. *American Behavioral Scientist* 12: 34–37.

⁴⁵ *Teachers and Scholars*, p.3.

⁴⁶ Nisbet, R (1952) *Conservatism and Sociology*. *American Journal of Sociology* 58(2): 170, 175; *The New Despotism*, p.33; *Prejudices*.

⁴⁷ *Rousseau and Totalitarianism*, p. 108; *The New Despotism*, p.38.

change. But its dominant meaning, throughout the nineteenth century, was freedom from prejudice in favour of traditional opinion and established institutions. Nisbet used the word “liberal” in a non-pejorative sense only in his earliest writings.⁴⁸ In his later works it is used only as an epithet. “Liberalism was everywhere, in all spheres and walks, and at all levels, of American life throughout the 1950s,” he complains.⁴⁹

If one of the wounds indicated by Nisbet’s retorts was sustained in identification with a national minority culture of the white South, the other was sustained as professor and university administrator during the sixties. Campus sit-ins, militant demands for open admissions and affirmative action, disciplinary cleavages along lines of gender, ethnicity, sexual preference and ideology, were experienced by many professors and administrators as assaults on their persons as well as their institutions.⁵⁰ Recalling this period years later Nisbet writes, “What happened at...colleges and universities in this country from about 1965 to 1972 was a new experience...most poignantly to university administrations and faculties...the New Left seemed to aim with special fervor at prominent liberals and old-line socialists, in its demolition of reputations, curricula, and academic freedom”. It is telling that Nisbet modified Irving Krystol’s quip that a neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality, inserting the word ‘academic’. “Now, amid the turmoil and devastation generated by the New Left I was taking foremost place among the emerging Neo-conservatives—mostly ex-liberals, academic souls, as Irving Kristol observed, mugged by academic reality.”⁵¹

At his best, Nisbet reminds us that advances of individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism, owing much to the expansion of the central state at the expense of competing institutions, extract a price. Taking it as axiomatic that social bonds are inherently and necessarily unequal, Nisbet regards the drive for equality, not only as corrosive of liberty, but as anti-social: destructive of relationships, institutions and communities. This makes for a sobering perspective, but also raises questions Nisbet never asks since he approaches the state (as he once wisely cautioned others not to approach Communism) as a homogeneous power—at the same time writing of “free enterprise” and the “conservative faith” with the zeal he professed to dislike in political theologians and theological politicians.

Nisbet consistently claims that the best protection against totalitarianism lies not in an effort to secure individual rights but in support for groups capable of buffering state power: families, religious groups, voluntary associations, business

enterprises. Yet, while arguing in general terms for protecting the claims of these institutions upon individuals, he never asks in what matters the state legitimately limits them: i.e., circumscribing the authority of the church, in matters of child abuse, or of the family, in matters of child labor, arranged marriages of minors, resistance to compulsory schooling, violent assault. Certainly his blanket assertion that there is a “very substantial difference between the coercions of, say, family, school, and local community and those of the centralized bureaucratic state”⁵² begs many questions, some of which are beginning to be addressed by a new generation of admirers.⁵³ Nisbet’s suspicion of the self-aggrandizing central bureaucratic state leads him to simplistic binary oppositions, precluding questions of whether group claims over individuals, to be effective, might even require backing by state authority (as in the enforcement of legal obligations to support children or, in some countries, aged parents); or whether the survival of some forms of traditional authority, i.e., in the family, might not in fact hinge upon income redistribution schemes. He certainly avoids asking whether the groups he favours as alternatives to the welfare state are capable of meeting individual needs for protection and assistance in illness, unemployment, care of dependents, old age.

But I suspect this ‘prophet of the past’ did not ask because he already knew. For on occasion he admitted that the reason conservatism is “not destined for a long life lies in the sheer mass of the liberal provider-state...Almost everything favours this kind of state...for people at all levels have interests and desires and there is no surer way of gratifying these than through the provider state.”⁵⁴

“How Does Conservatism Feel?”

Noting that the conservatism of his time was diverging from the conservative intellectual tradition he worked to define and revered, Nisbet never modified his ideal type. Though he once wrote that the “rise of fundamentalism” offered hope for the future of conservatism, and welcomed a turn to religion as an alternative to politicized culture,⁵⁵ he disliked political theologians and theological politicians. Like Marxists who continued to write about communism without reference to its practice, Nisbet continued to invoke a “conservative tradition” unqualified by the manner in which the self-styled conservative movement of his time was developing—as if he believed

⁵² Conservatives and Libertarians: Uneasy Cousins, p.7.

⁵³ Douthat, R (2010) introduction to Nisbet, R [1953] *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom*. Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

⁵⁴ (1978) The Dilemma of Conservatives in a Populist Society. *Policy Review* 4: 98–99; *Prejudices*, pp.60–61.

⁵⁵ The Dilemma of Conservatives in a Populist Society, p.101; (1979) Progress and Providence. *Society* Nov/Dec.: 4–7.

⁴⁸ Rousseau and Totalitarianism, p.112; De Bonald and the Concept of the Social Group.

⁴⁹ The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p.131.

⁵⁰ Nisbet, R (1973) The Future of Tenure. *Change* 5(2): 28.

⁵¹ The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p.135; *The Making of Modern Society*, pp.16–17.

that this word too could be made to mean what he said it meant rather than taking its meaning from the way in which it was being used.

“If ideologies can feel,” he wrote, “how does conservatism feel after 4 years of seeing its name taken in vain?”⁵⁶ But ideologies cannot feel. Nor does Nisbet reveal what an intellectual feels when a cherished ideal type and object of intense personal identification is undermined by reality. Like others, Fascist or Marxist, who found that the social movements in which they had enlisted were diverging from the ideals to which they were attached, Nisbet noted the lack of ‘fit’ between the tradition he spent a lifetime burnishing and the conservative movement of his time, but did not dwell upon it. Sociologists take warning: when this thinker labored to supply a “lustrous lineage” for a social movement to which he turned in “quest of community,” reality, no longer loved best, slipped from his purview.

Sociological Art and Equalization

Reflecting upon Nisbet’s writings, and taking up the question of intellectual history that first pre-occupied him (“What gives lasting life to a body of work?”) I find myself contemplating great and lasting works in other arts. Marked by the contingencies of unique, individual experience, they move us precisely by their success in speaking across vast differences of social position, time and place. In arcs of visible transcendence they create moments of trans-historical community. And it is in part precisely this *social* creation that moves us. Vermeer paints the archaic buttons, hairstyles, and foot warmers of his time and, standing before his seventeenth century lights, our jaws drop in re-cognition. Shakespeare’s characters speak an English we have never heard, yet all over the world lives are shared in echoes of his words. The best sociological art is known by the same feat. Burke, an Anglo-Irish peer of England, writing of the French revolution (while haunted by the Irish Rebellion of 1641), and Tocqueville, a Frenchman bearing a ‘de’ before his surname and writing of

America while pre-occupied by Restoration France, moved Nisbet, grandson of a Confederate soldier, son of the foreman of a Maricopa lumberyard, and career administrator in an academic bureaucracy, to life-long identification. As Nisbet well knew, such feats are not attributable to artists’ success in doffing the particularities of their experience to reach for abstract universals. Rather, by diving deeply, *yet* (through discerning detachment) selflessly, into them, they give voice to perceptions and ideas in *inclusive* ways, expanding the space/time of human community itself.

Ultimately, the measure of Nisbet’s sociology as an art will be gauged by determining, over time, if some part of the work of this white, male, South-identified American conservative speaks, long after his death, to “bored housewives” going back to school, to students from families he did not recognize as families, to descendants of black South Africans whose struggle for the vote he foretold could lead only to a “nightmare.” My hunch is that, as with every artist—every human being attempting to communicate with another—the outcome will depend upon the extent to which his communications were informed by his fears, losses, and longings, or merely shaped as a defense of, or against, them. At its best, sociology is an art of receptive perception, suspending pre-judgment (pre-judice.) And as such, its fate is ineluctably implicated in Modernist demands for equality whose episodic ferocity, and power to upend every social bond, institution and tradition, Nisbet calls to our attention. Holding that “inequality is the essence of the social bond,” Nisbet pronounces the dynamic of equalization “anti-social.”⁵⁷ A provocative, astute, yet incomplete insight. For it is also profoundly social.

Judith Adler teaches sociology at Memorial University, in St. John’s Newfoundland. This paper is greatly indebted to the initiative and effective encouragement of Peter Baehr, who organized the international conference on Robert Nisbet that led me to contemplate his legacy.

⁵⁶ The Conservative Renaissance in Perspective, p.139.

⁵⁷ The New Despotism, pp.35, 38; *Twilight of Authority*, pp.201, 217.