Introduction

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Over the course of 2 days, in the spring of 2012, a group of scholars met in Hong Kong to discuss one of the most penetrating thinkers of twentieth century social enquiry. Participants offered the only kind of tribute that Robert Nisbet (1913–1996)—American sociologist, historian of ideas, political writer—would have deemed serious. Engaging critically with his ideas, speakers plumbed their sources, assessed their plausibility, enquired into their relevance, and weighed alternative models and hypotheses. This special issue of *The American Sociologist* is the fruit of those endeavors. Encompassing both his social and his political ideas it is also the first collection of essays ever published on Nisbet's work. Why might that be? The briefest answer is that while Nisbet's books are still individually cited and respected, their author does not command the stature, the attention, of such thinkers as Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas. Explaining these writers' prestige, and Nisbet's marginality, compels us to recall some of the deepest currents of the social sciences.

For over a century, sociologists in the United States and elsewhere have pursued two recurrent objectives. They have built comprehensive theoretical systems designed to explain the structure, mechanisms and development of modern society. They have invoked an ethic of solidarity, occasionally of emancipation, that urges social scientists to identify with the suffering, to call power to account, to demand justice for the forgotten and mistreated. While a thinker may choose one path instead of the other, or seek to avoid both, these objectives are best considered porous styles of enquiry rather than as walled off camps of people. Admixtures are common because each offers warrant to the other. Without a theoretical scaffold, the solidarity project is open to the objection that it is little more than empty sloganizing. Without a moral purpose, theory construction is vulnerable to the charge of complacent self-indulgence. Between the forceps of scientific exactitude and political redemption no space exists for fate and tragedy in human affairs. There is only ignorance, inequality and domination, and the resolve to bring justice to human beings by explaining and regulating the conditions under which they live.

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It was onto this terrain that Robert Nisbet first ventured in the 1940s when he wrote his earliest published articles on French social thought. The charts he followed displayed landmarks unseen by most of his peers and successors. Convinced of the sheer eventfulness of history, Nisbet recoiled from any comprehensive conceptual system. Persuaded that some of our firmest beliefs are based on the most treacherous of metaphors (“growth,” “development” “stages”), he took distance from the apostles of Progress. Nisbet was also a man of refined paradox: the individualist who documented the loss of community, the tragedian with a ready sense of humor, the radical traditionalist, the agnostic churchgoer. He looked askance at the kind of professionalism that with greater and greater sophistication speaks to fewer and fewer people.

None of Nisbet’s dispositions—conservative “prejudices” he was happy to call them—fits the grid of modern social science. Yet his conservatism must be rightly understood. It has nothing in common with country club, big money Republicanism, the Moral Majority, or, in foreign affairs, American exceptionalism. All were objects of his scorn. Nisbet’s thought drew on Anglo-European sources: notably Burke, Bonald and the aristocratic liberalism of Tocqueville; and the early pluralist doctrines of Gierke, Figgis, and Maitland. Both currents buttressed his critique of natural law and state sovereignty. On Nisbet’s reading, conservatism meant defending the particular against the abstract, the rooted against the dislocated. It means support for local, plural and independent associations—the sinew of the social bond—against the unitary, leveling, voracious state. It meant self-sufficiency and moral and political limits—hierarchy and authority—to impede atomistic fragmentation and the pursuit of desires that are, without limits, insatiable. Conservatism, in Nisbet’s cast, was also a warning against the Promethean impulse of modern people to ceaselessly tear down and refashion what is temporarily inconvenient, to raze boundaries careless of their purpose, so that we may live in a world of our own making, our own image. The brain of this ambition is the intellectuals; its muscle, public administration; its life course, the destruction of tradition.

In his Introduction to *Tradition and Revolt* (1968: 6), Nisbet mischievously asks his readers to imagine an evil witch, defeated and humiliated, uttering a curse on posterity. Envision, further, that the witch is a conservative. What would she say?

You have defeated our hopes for the revival of the old regime. Europe will become, as you have chosen, ever more democratic, equalitarian, affluent, rational, and secular. So be it. But our curse upon posterity is this: However democratic society becomes, it will never seem democratic enough. However broad and popular the base of political power, the sense of relative powerlessness will only spread. No matter how equal men become in rights and opportunity, the sense of relative inequality will grow and fester. Spreading economic affluence will only leave men haunted by the specter of relative poverty. Individualism and secularism, far from buoying up the sense of creative release, will shortly leave many of them with the agonizing sense of estrangement—first from community, then from self. And over the whole wondrous achievement of modern technology and culture will hover ghosts of community, membership, identity, and certainty.

Nisbet famously argued that sociology's origins, and its core concepts, lie in the conservative response to revolutionary, equalitarian radicalism. He argued, further, that while the early conservatives' hatred of modern ways was extreme, its opposition identified problems and questions that liberals and socialists ignored. Conservatism was thus an organon of thought as much as it was a militant politics. For that reason, conservative *sociology* was possible.

Be that as it may, sociology for at least a century has aligned itself with a transformational, progressivist view of history, while its politics lean leftwards. It follows that no recommendation of Nisbet's work can credibly assert its centrality to sociology and the social sciences as they are typically practiced. Instead, one must claim the opposite: that Nisbet's importance consists precisely in his departure from well trod pathways. Nisbet offers theories on particular topics not regional or global Theory, let alone epistemology. He furnishes specific explanations rather than models or tool kits to be used here, there, everywhere. Readers who value an angular mind, and who are weary of political platitudes, will find good company in Robert Nisbet. So will those who believe that sociology calls on its practitioners to explore big topics: for instance, the impact of war on democratic societies; the social costs of intrusive public administration; the ongoing battle between liberty and equality; the problems besetting the research university; the framing of knowledge as art and science; the meaning of "progress" and "development". All were areas that Nisbet brilliantly illuminated. His thought demonstrates what sociology can be like—animated by history, inspired by literature, and counseled by moderation.

Robert Alexander Nisbet was born in Los Angeles on September 30, 1913, but spent his earliest years in Maricopa, an oil town whose harsh desert landscape drove the young Nisbet into the verdant world of books. When his parents relocated, Nisbet continued his schooling in the coastal town of San Luis Obispo. Each of these Californian locales offered well-stocked public libraries and excellent public schools. Their curricula aimed not to redeem students, or psychologically adjust them, but to provide them with a substantial education. High school in Obispo, which Nisbet joined in 1927, offered 4 years of Latin, four of mathematics, and a steady diet of English, history, chemistry and physics. Intelligent parents who subscribed to what was then the best non-local paper, *The Christian Science Monitor*, cultivated a life of the mind whose shoots would blossom in university.

California remained Nisbet's habitat for almost 60 years. He was an undergraduate and graduate student at Berkeley before joining its faculty in 1939. Following war service in the Pacific, Nisbet returned to Berkeley in 1946 to witness the Department of Social Institutions he had left (the one man band founded by his mentor and doctoral supervisor, the historian Frederick J. Teggart) transmogrify into the Department of Sociology. In 1954 Nisbet became founding Dean, then Vice Chancellor, at the new Riverside campus of the California university system, before returning in 1963 to a purely academic capacity as teacher, scholar and writer. The Riverside era was punctuated by a year (1955) in Bologna where Nisbet took a leave of absence to concentrate on writing and avail himself of trips to major Italian cities, continental Europe and England. His last strictly academic post—prefaced, between 1972 and 1974, by a sojourn to the University of Arizona—was at Columbia. There, thanks largely to the intervention of Robert Merton, Nisbet assumed the Albert Schweitzer Professorship of the Humanities (1974–1978); he taught in both the History and the Sociology

departments, delivering per term once course in each. After retirement from Columbia, Nisbet took up a post as a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington D. C. The freewheeling, academically cosseted Nisbet was aghast when he learned that scholars at the AEI were typically supposed to bring their own money; he didn't. It didn't matter. He enjoyed the privacy that AEI allowed him to pursue his own projects and the light responsibilities it required—principally to attend conferences that he was happy to attend for their own sake. Still, Nisbet stayed only for a couple of years, while retaining adjunct status at the AEI till 1986.

If the previous sketch of his career shows Nisbet to be the university man par excellence, it bears emphasis that he took a studied interest in political affairs. A conservative intellectual whose views were often discordant with other conservatives, Nisbet wrote for *Commentary*, *The Public Interest*, and *Encounter* among other periodicals. In turn, his books were reviewed extensively in US newspapers both by mandarin publications—among them the New York Times and the New York Review of Books, *The Nation* and *Foreign Affairs*—and by more provincial outlets such as The Orange County Register and The Bee. One of his last studies, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (1988), was a searing indictment of the United States that built on a lifetime's sociological study. Nisbet lacerated the gargantuan military establishment, the expansionist state under both Republican but especially Democratic administrations, and the society of “loose individuals—people bereft of stable communities, common bonds, and a respect for moral and other restraints. In 1988, Nisbet delivered the core ideas of this book as the Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment of the Humanities on the invitation, reputedly, of Ronald Reagan himself. With increasing frequency, Nisbet's interventions departed from sociology to trespass on other intellectual domains and to address other audiences. Mutual alienation was the result. One illustration suffices: When Nisbet's publisher, Regnery, asked for names of people to whom complimentary copies of *Roosevelt and Stalin: The Failed Courtship* (1990) should be sent, Nisbet included, from the US, Robert Dallek (a historian at UCLA), Keith Eubank (a historian at Rutgers), George Kennan, (then at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton), General Albert Wedemeyer, Irving Kristol, Arthur Schlesinger, Jean Kirkpatrick; and, from the UK, General David Fraser, Michael Howard, Martin Gilbert, Paul Johnson, and Timothy Garton Ash (who was then Foreign Editor of *The Spectator*, a conservative magazine). No sociologist appears on Nisbet's list and, fittingly, no sociological journal reviewed his book.

Nisbet was a prolific writer. Between 1953 and 1992, he authored 15 books—18 if one counts collections of his essays and his doctoral thesis—90 journal articles and five dozen reviews. Two of these books, possibly four, are modern classics. We know that by the kind of pressure they exert on us—even before we have read them. The test of a book's significance, as distinct from its accuracy or plausibility, is whether we feel compelled to address it, at some point and in some way, once we encroach on a region it has mapped. Is our topic the city or the sociological imagination or power or moral pollution or nationalism? Then, minimally, we must address the writing of Robert Park, C. Wright Mills, Steven Lukes, Mary Douglas and Liah Greenfeld. Does our investigation center on the loss of community, the idea of progress, the sociological tradition, or the travails of the research university? Then Nisbet can hardly be avoided if we claim to be informed about these areas. His books remain potent markers, robust intellectual interventions.

A single journal issue cannot do justice to the nuances of Nisbet's oeuvre. We must restrict ourselves to aspects of its core. Judith Adler's opening article examines his treatment of sociology as an art form. She observes that while Nisbet was neither the first nor the last writer to stress the common qualities of artistic and scientific creativity, he was among its most acute analysts. Portraits, landscapes, styles, visions, moods, genres, panoramas and dioramas abound in his interpretation of sociology as an art form that displays both classic and romantic dimensions. Charles Turner tackles another storied aspect of Nisbet's view of sociology, his contention that the discipline amounts to a single intellectual tradition. Nisbet saw no progressive trajectory in sociology, more a continual refinement of themes that first emerged as a response to Enlightenment secularism, revolutionary radicalism, and early industrialism. Charles Turner suggests that sociology has many traditions, not just one; and that Nisbet's inattentiveness to problems of method in the history of ideas simplifies a more complex and opaque intellectual heritage.

Nisbet composed his work on sociology as an art form and as a tradition during his years teaching at the Riverside campus of the University of California. Ronald Schwartz, then a student, recalls the themes of Nisbet's lectures on community (the medieval world loomed large in the teacher's reflections) and on the history of sociology. Although Nisbet had only recently relinquished his administrative positions at Riverside, and returned full time to the academic faculty, his experience of university life afforded a unique angle from which to view it. That perspective is addressed in Daniel Gordon's chapter. It locates Nisbet's critique of the modern research university by plotting it at the extreme end of a spectrum that spans the ambivalence of Clark Kerr—whose pride at Berkeley's achievements as a "multiversity" was tempered by his worries about the increasing detachment of research faculty from teaching undergraduates—and the enthusiastic endorsement of Talcott Parsons for whom research, not teaching, was the core function of the university and the chief means by which students were inducted into rational cognition.

The last two articles examine Nisbet's reflections on community and the state. Bryan Turner reconstructs Nisbet's argument about community and then, in part, dissents from it. Communities are today reemerging in new forms, molded by Internet social media, while also expressing their darker side in criminal sub-cultures and Islamist terror organizations. Society is not, as some claim, dissolving as globalization reconfigures time and space. It is rather bifurcating into, on the one hand, cosmopolitan, web-like "elastic" societies and, on the other, "sticky" societies that are inclusive, demand loyalty and severely punish infractions of it. Concluding the special issue, Peter Baehr turns to Nisbet's portrait of the United States by examining his analysis of Woodrow Wilson's wartime transformation of America into the first twentieth century experiment in totalitarianism. Evaluating this claim, and believing it problematic, Baehr invokes Hannah Arendt's sharper, restricted delineation of totalitarian regimes.

Any authentic work of art, the British critic Rebecca West once observed, starts an argument between the artist and the audience. That argument occurs because the work of art abridges an experience that the audience deems exciting, troubling, important. Once the experience and argument subside, the work of art fades from human interest, losing its earlier powers to arouse curiosity and engagement. It is no different with a truly vital work of sociology. To survive beyond a generation an author's texts must elicit dispute. They must be worth confronting because the experiences they record

remain significant. Nisbet's ideas, we suggest in this book, still speak to significant experiences of modern times but with a cadence that is rarely found in sociology today. To urge readers to reconsider Robert Nisbet is not to champion his conclusions. It is to keep the questions he raises, and the perspectives his work affords, active in the repertoire of social enquiry.

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