

Robert Nisbet: Communitarian Traditionalist

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“Everything vital in history reduces itself ultimately to ideas,” wrote seminal mid-century conservative thinker Robert Nisbet, the subject of this commendably concise and articulate intellectual biography. Nisbet, who died in 1996 at the age of eighty-three, was a distinguished academic and prolific author who began his career at Berkeley, taught at Princeton and Columbia (among others), and became the Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in 1979, just on the cusp of the Reaganite triumph whose values he had done so much to shape.

Early on, he chose to concentrate on the problem of “alienation” in the strict sociological usage, i.e., the dissolution of historical ideas of community into a fragmented individualism about which he could be eloquently scathing: “This modern age of self-spelunking, ego-diving and awareness intoxication.” Contrasting the political monism of traditional group identifications—to a guild, a city, a nation—with the social pluralism of modern democratic society, he built upon the ideas of Hume, Burke, Tocqueville, and Durkheim, among others, and in turn laid a philosophical foundation for the likes of Francis Fukuyama and Amitai Etzioni. His circle of friends included such figures as Thomas Merton, Jacques Barzun, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz, and as the cover photograph makes clear, his imposing countenance befitted his status as an influential intellectual champion of the right.

Biographer Stone, a sociologist at Oglethorpe University, traces the development of Nisbet’s thought, in the process offering readers a succinct chronicle of the age-old debate about the individual’s relationship to society and the state. Stone’s prose style is straightforward and accessible to the thoughtful general reader, although the book will be of most interest to sociologists and other scholars who will best appreciate its finer points.

While he finds a few points of difference, suggesting for example that Nisbet fails to give sufficient weight to the classically liberal concept of human nature itself as a powerful source of pluralism, Stone is plain in his admiration, describing Nisbet’s work as “an excellent place to start when persons are serious about the truths of our social world and when they seek guidance as to how they might better it.”

Stone presents only the barest of personal details and makes no attempt to portray Nisbet the man; this is intellectual biography in the pure sense, confining itself to the arena of the mind. Taken on its own terms, however, it succeeds as a clear, well-presented account of Nisbet’s crucial contribution to an important strain of modern American thought.

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PEYTON MOSS (July / August 2000)

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