Henri Bergson once observed that a true great thinker says but one thing in his life because he has but one point of contact with the real. By this Bergson meant that although a great thinker may have a variety of interests, he typically embraces one great truth that animates each of his pursuits and serves as a guide to lesser truths. Whether or not this holds generally, it is true of Robert Nisbet, who passed away on September 9, 1996, three weeks short of his eighty-third birthday. In each of his thirteen books, beginning with The Quest for Community (1953), and in virtually every one of his numerous articles, including “Still Questing” (Fall, 1993), his last contribution to The Intercollegiate Review, Professor Nisbet asserted that the modern preoccupation with community is a manifestation of the decline of natural communities—family, religious association, and local community—created by the structure of the Western political state. He announced this great truth when treating topics ranging from the idea of progress, to the degradation of academic dogma, to the “alienation” of post-war Americans. His luminous writings make Nisbet one of the most important American conservative intellectuals of the last forty-five years.

A Californian by birth, Nisbet attended public schools in Maricopa and San Luis Obispo before enrolling at Berkeley in 1932. With the exception of the period between 1943-1945, when Dr. Nisbet served in the army, he remained at Berkeley for the next twenty-one years, first as an undergraduate, then as a graduate student, and finally as an assistant professor. By his own account, his Berkeley years were extraordinary. As an undergraduate, he came under the spell of Fredrick J. Teggart, an unorthodox cultural historian. In his autobiographical introduction to The Making of Modern Society (1986), Nisbet describes himself as “smitten” by Teggart, a man who “was almost evangelical when he was describing, say, the advantages of comparative history over orthodox, unilinear, narrative history or, in a different tenor, the built-in conflict between family and state in the history of mankind.” So impressed was the young Nisbet by Teggart that he decided to pursue his Ph.D. in the Department of Social Institutions under Teggart’s direction. While in graduate school, he took a course in Roman law from Max Radin that sustained and supplemented Teggart’s observations concerning the perpetual tension between the family and the state, and he immersed himself in Otto von Gierke’s study of intermediate associations.
in the Middle Ages. His dissertation was on the “Reactionary Enlightenment,” chiefly the thinking of Bonald, Chateaubriand, and de Maistre.

These profoundly important intellectual resources were augmented, when Nisbet returned to Berkeley after the war, by the writings of Burke and Tocqueville whose rediscovery in American thought, Nisbet reports, “started to really flower” in the late forties and early fifties. With the addition of Burke and Tocqueville, each of the main fonts from which Nisbet drew in his greatest work, The Quest of Community, was in place. The book was published in 1953, the year Nisbet was appointed Professor of Sociology and Dean of the Faculty at the newly established University of California at Riverside. He remained at Riverside until 1972. After two years at the University of Arizona, he assumed the Schweitzer professorship at Columbia University. He was made Professor Emeritus by Columbia when he retired from teaching in 1978, at which time he moved to Washington, D.C. and took the post of Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a position he held until his death.

Dr. Nisbet enjoyed enormous success as both an administrator and teacher. The joy he might otherwise have had was diminished, however, by the unfortunate revolutionary changes he observed in the postwar American university, as chronicled in The Degradation of Academic Dogma (1971). Before the war, the reigning dogma of the university encouraged faith in reason, the quest for truth, and acknowledged both a hierarchy of knowledge and a natural hierarchy among those providing and those seeking knowledge. This dogma was transformed and degraded after the war, according to Professor Nisbet, due to the large increases in the numbers of students and especially to the infusion of government funds. From this context arose a “new breed” of professors who were less teachers than money- and power-seeking entrepreneurs, mostly of the political left. This new breed took a “perpetual adversarial stance” against traditional and natural forms of authority while seeking to bureaucratize and politicize campuses.

The artificial power of the state and the natural authority of communities are different and at odds, according to Nisbet. Whereas power is coercive and external, authority is internal in the sense that those following it believe in its legitimacy. As Dr. Nisbet observes, “Community is the product of people working together on problems, of autonomous and collective fulfillment of internal objectives, and of the experience of living under codes which are set in large degree by the persons involved.”

Nisbet believed that the central fact in the twentieth-century West is the progressive weakening of natural authority and community resulting from the penetration of state power into one context after another. The revolution on college campuses was far from isolated. Thus, for example, “the alleged disorganization of the modern family is, in fact, simply an erosion of its natural authority, the consequence, in considerable part, of the absorption of its functions by other bodies, chiefly the state.”

Different as they may be, power has come to resemble community in the minds of many, according to Professor Nisbet. This is especially true among those who, because of the loss of genuine community, are “Loose Individuals,” preoccupied with personal identity and social meaning. The melancholy fate of our age seems to be, therefore, that as natural communities wane, the evermore restless quest for community combines with the apparatus of political power—further eroding the natural communities that mediate between the individual and the state. In Nisbet’s view, as in Tocqueville’s, “individualism” and the con-
centration of state power are not at odds; they inevitably complement and feed each other.

Professor Nisbet was convinced that the intermediate associations constituting the social world are essential to providing individuals with identity and bearings and as hedges against the state. In Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary (1982), he notes that the very concept of the social is a coinage of the early nineteenth century, in which an old word was given new meaning. "Social, as a word, meant family, village, parish, town, voluntary association and class, not the state," and the nineteenth-century advocates of social science sought knowledge that would "make it possible for the social order to be largely autonomous, free of the constricting bureaucratic control of the kind of state the French Revolution yielded." Nonetheless, the "social" has been transformed along with so much else in the post-war West, and it has been "social scientists" who have been most directly responsible for this transformation. For as odd as it may seem to the uninitiated, the very large majority of social scientists have simply come to hate the objects of their study. Typically, almost uniformly, contemporary "social scientists" are materialists and strict determinists for whom the pluralistic social world is a contemptible source of inequality, parochial fears of cosmopolitan rationality and unsavory prejudice. Just as typically, for contemporary "social scientists," the solution to the problems of the social world are political solutions. As Nisbet observes, "Today, given the extent to which all of the social sciences have become monopolized by political values and aspirations, it would be more correct if they were called political sciences."

In The Idea of Progress (1980), Nisbet records the consequences of this politicization. Despite the high expectations once held for the social sciences, their contributions have been minimal when not counterproductive, and they have usually been counterproductive. Nisbet suggests that the "projects of social reconstruction designed by social scientists for government execution" have simply done "more harm than good." Regarding social scientists themselves, Nisbet observes that as "direct social action" replaces social observation as the purpose of the social sciences, it combines with the "widespread retreat to all the diverse forms of subjectivism which hold up preoccupation with and study of one's self as the beginning of true wisdom."

To these observations one must immediately add that numerous academics, public intellectuals, and even politicians have recently rhapsodized over the virtues of community and bemoaned their decline. We are all witnesses to a most impressive display of Gemeinschaft envy. In certain respects this is an encouraging sign, and Nisbet anticipated forty years ago much of what is currently being said by so-called "civil society" theorists and "communitarians." Still, we should not lose sight of the fact that Nisbet had the prescience to first proclaim his great truth when this truth was acknowledged by few others and when it was still possible to arrest certain trends. Today one may sometimes hear very sensible things being said about the relationship between community and state but this talk is often evidence of the owl of Minerva's flight. The human wreckage caused by the decline of family, neighborhoods, and local communities, and by the trivialization/politicization of religion, is at this point too obvious to be denied. Certainly I would not counsel despair, and I would agree with Nisbet's belief that the restoration of functions to natural communities would begin the healing process. Nonetheless, there is also wisdom with which I am certain Nisbet agreed in John Gray's observation that
attempting to repair damaged traditions is like trying to mend a broken spiderweb with one's bare hands. Our well-being depends upon our not breaking communities in the first place.

Moreover, in addition to the occasional sensible comments on community one may hear, the recent communitarian revival has produced many statements that express what Nisbet feared most—the combination of the quest for community with the state apparatus of power. In these cases the rhetoric of community is employed to sanctify the state, as Bruce Frohnen demonstrates in The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism. Frohnen shows that “communitarians” such as Charles Taylor, Amitai Etzioni, Garry Wills, and Robert Bellah reject as too confining the appreciation for tradition and transcendent standards that is central to Nisbet’s vision. The new communitarians believe that virtue is identical with political virtue, that individuals need a tutelary state, and that while families, parishes, and voluntary associations are useful in generating a concern for the wider community, such communities must be condemned if their exclusivity threatens their tolerance or if their natural hierarchies of authority undermine equality. Real communities are deemed worthwhile if, and to the extent that, they serve the unrivaled object of new communitarian loyalty—the nation-state.

According to Nisbet’s The Social Philosophers (1973), the intellectual ground for views such as those of the new communitarians was prepared long ago by Hobbes and by Rousseau, the “prime catalytic” agents in modern political thinking. Hobbes denied that humans are naturally communal beings; he believed the natural human condition was one of perpetual war; and he maintained that the artificial political order is the solution to our natural condition. For his part, Rousseau believed that the vile nature Hobbes attributed to humans is not natural but the product of society, as initiated by the violent and unnatural institution of private property. Hobbesian man is, in fact, the man of commerce, artificial social distinctions, and social dependency, in Rousseau’s eyes. Thus, although Hobbes proposed his great Leviathan as a solution to the problem of base natural propensities and Rousseau proposed his ideal state in The Social Contract as a solution to the problem of society, the resulting visions are essentially the same: a commonwealth containing individuals and the state, without communities or intermediate institutions to mediate between them.

Early in his career, Nisbet called Rousseau “the real demon of the modern mind.” He says, “Rousseau is the first of the modern philosophers to see the State as a means of resolving the conflicts not merely of institutions but within the individual himself.” Naturally, Rousseau claims in Emile, humans possess self-love, amour de soi, which is “always good and always in conformity with order.” With the emergence of society, however, reason, imagination, and the “sentiment of his connections” with others create within man the possibility of a transformed and perverted form of self-love that depends upon social comparison—amour
propre. For Rousseau, amore-propre fosters the desire for recognition and praise, creating perversities in the human heart—jealousy, envy, imperiousness, vindictiveness, competitiveness, and deceit. What was whole and satisfied becomes divided and vicious. Yet for Rousseau there is redemption. The state can resolve individual conflicts by resolving the institutional conflicts at their source. In Nisbet’s words, for Rousseau “the State is the means by which the individual can be freed of the restrictive tyrannies that compose society.” In Rousseau’s own words, “Each citizen would then be completely independent of his fellow men, and absolutely dependent upon the state: which operation is always brought by the same means; for it is only by the force of the state that the liberty of its members can be secured.”

Rousseau’s preoccupation with the dilemmas of psychological man, his disdain for society, and his belief in the power of the state to create national community have become commonplace in our time. Rousseau may have first used the term “civil religion” but today many worship at its altar. As Nisbet observes in “Still Questing,” “More and more we are hearing from Federal government and from the clerisy of power that hangs onto Washington the magic words ‘National Community.’” He continues by saying that it should be the “primebusiness” of any conservative group or party “to expose the fraudulence” of this phrase. Consequently, he says in conclusion, any serious conservative group in America confronts a double task. “The first is to work tirelessly toward the diminution of the centralized, omnicompetent, and unitary state with its ever-soaring debt and deficit. The second and equally important task is that of protecting, reinforcing, nurturing where necessary the varied groups and associations which form the true building blocks of the social order. To these two ends I am bound to believe in the continuing relevance of The Quest for Community.”

So am I. Yet this double task seems more daunting than it did before Nisbet’s death. Robert Nisbet was blessed with a generous character, an extraordinary historical-consciousness, a great passion for his work, and great eloquence. Others may recognize and announce Nisbet’s great truth but no one is likely to be as effective a truth-bearer.

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