

A public intellectual

ROBERT A. NISBET




Note:

This presentation is based on the theory of Robert A. Nisbet as presented in books listed in the bibliography. A summary of this and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on Nisbet, please write me at felwell@rsu.edu and put Nisbet.pdf in the subject line.



A Short Biography


Robert Alexander Nisbet was born on September 30, 1913 in Los Angeles, the oldest of three boys born to Henry and Cynthia Nisbet. He began at the University of California at Berkeley in 1932.





A Short Biography


His association with Berkeley proved both long and fruitful. He completed his Bachelor's degree in 1936, his M.A. in 1937, and his Ph.D. in 1939.





A Short Biography


Upon obtaining his Ph.D. he accepted an instructor's position at Berkeley, subsequently rising through the ranks to full professor there in 1953.





A Short Biography


Nisbet served in World War II, enlisting in the Army in 1943 and serving in the Pacific eventually achieving the rank of staff sergeant.





A Short Biography

In 1953 he left Berkeley to become the founding dean of the College of Letters and Science at the new Riverside campus of the University of California, later becoming vice chancellor there in 1960.






A Short Biography

In 1963 he left academic administration, believing that “administrative work, sufficiently prolonged, has a sterilizing effect upon the creative or the scholarly mind.”



A Short Biography


After 30 years, Nisbet retired from the University of California in 1972, first accepting a position at the University of Arizona, and then moving on to the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Columbia University in 1974 working with Robert K. Merton. While at Columbia, Nisbet taught both history and sociology.





A Short Biography


At the age of 65 he retired from university teaching. Moving to Washington in 1978, he became affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute until 1986.





A Short Biography


Even after full retirement from university and think tank, Nisbet continued to write until his death from prostate cancer on September 9, 1996, just 21 days shy of his eighty-third birthday.





A Short Biography


His scholarship included over twenty books and more than 150 articles, book chapters, and review essays. More than a serious academic, Nisbet was a public intellectual, writing for a broad general audience.





Leviathan


Robert A. Nisbet is primarily a follower of Emile Durkheim. This influence can be seen in his basic understanding of modern sociocultural systems and their drift.





Leviathan


It is his contention that society is increasingly dominated by large-scale administrative systems that have severely weakened traditional groups and organizations.





Leviathan


This concentration and centralization of social and political power and the consequent weakening of institutions that formerly mediated between the individual and centralized power has had devastating effects upon democracy, freedom, and human welfare.





Leviathan


Initially, his primary concern was parallel to Durkheim's: the impact that this weakening of primary group ties had on the normative structure of society, and the consequent lack of integration of individuals into the social order.





Leviathan


But over the years he began to focus more upon the impact that this shift had on representative government and individual liberty.





Leviathan


Nisbet argued that the present structure of the State began to gain overwhelming dominance in the West with the French Revolution, and since that time it has taken over more and more functions from traditional organizations and groups such as the extended family, neighborhood, class, and regional authority.





Leviathan


This is a disaster, he argues, in that it is in these primary groups that the individual has roots, is formed, and internalizes the norms, values, ideologies, and outlook of the society.





Leviathan


According to Nesbit, social disorganization—the decline of family, community, and other traditional primary groups—is more properly thought of as the wearing away of these authorities caused by the “absorption” of their functions by the State.





Leviathan

It is the enlargement and centralization of State bureaucratic power that has had dramatic effect on all other forms of social organization. The social fabric becomes frayed. "Threads are loosened by the tightening of power at the center."





Leviathan

Without common bond, individuals increasingly take advantage of one another; relationships become commodified, increasingly relying upon contract and cash rather than loyalty and commitment. “As the blood rushes to the head of society,” Nisbet says, “it leaves anemic the local and regional extremities.”



Leviathan


This enlargement and centralization of State power, he argues, is the root cause of the loss of authority and function of these intermediate institutions and this has two principle effects:

- the weakening of local and regional checks on further centralization; and
- the isolation and alienation of the individual and their consequent powerlessness.



Leviathan


Further this centralization of power, a power that is external to both local groups and the individual, makes it difficult to establish true community. People gather together in lasting groups and associations to accomplish things they cannot do alone, Nisbet explains.





Leviathan


When centralized power relieves local groups of these functions, it undermines the foundation for community, leaving local groups without function or authority, “what else but the social horde and alienation can be the result?”





Leviathan

This centralization and enlargement of power has been pushed by an ideology of bureaucracy, an ideology that promotes centralization, formal hierarchy, written rules of conduct and authority, and impersonal administration based on military models of human organization.





Leviathan


Government bureaucracy has come from two main sources, Nisbet argues: mass war and the creation of the welfare state.





Leviathan


Nisbet's initial focus is upon the political State as a unified "Leviathan." It is his belief that the political State has rapidly absorbed military, economic, political, and social power in the process transforming all social organization in the West.





Leviathan


In later writings he details the interrelationships between State, economic, and military power in language highly reminiscent of Mills, recognizing that State power is often intimately involved in economic activities and has been since the rise of capitalism itself.





Leviathan


Beginning only with military power, it is the State's subsequent absorption of political, economic, kinship, and religious functions as well as the State's dislocation or outright destruction of traditional authority structures that has led to the decline of community, freedom, and democracy.






Leviathan

The modern individual has been freed from traditional hierarchies of class, religion, locality, and kinship, but this freedom has brought with it insecurity, disenchantment, and alienation. It has also subjected the individual directly to the control and manipulation of the State.





Selected Bibliography by Nisbet:

- *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America*. New York: Harper Row, 1989.
 - *The Social Bond*. New York: Knopf, 1977.
 - *Twilight of Authority*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
 - *The Sociological Tradition*. New York: Basic Books, 1967.
 - *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
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A short presentation from
the pages of...

*Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural
Systems* by Frank W. Elwell. The Edwin
Mellen Press, 2009.

