

# THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY



ROBERT NISBET

introduction by ROSS DOUTHAT

# THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY

A STUDY IN THE ETHICS OF ORDER AND FREEDOM

*Robert Nisbet*

*with an Introduction by Ross Douthat*



WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

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## BACKGROUND

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## *Introduction to the Background Edition*

ROSS DOUTHAT

The intellectual conservatism that flowered unexpectedly, like a burst of tulips from a desert, in the aftermath of the Second World War was preoccupied above all else with revising the story that modernity told about itself. Twenty years of totalitarianism, genocide, and total war had delivered hammer blows to the Whig interpretation of history: after Hitler, and in Stalin's shadow, it was no longer possible to be confident that the modern age represented a long, unstoppable march from the medieval darkness into the light. Instead, there was a sudden demand for writers who could explain what had gone wrong, and why—and just how deep the rot really ran.

Postwar conservative thought derived much of its energy from this project. From émigré philosophers like Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin to native-born figures like Richard Weaver, the central thinkers of the emerging American Right labored to explain how “progress” and “enlightenment” had produced the gas chamber and the gulag. In the process, they often ended up reinterpreting the whole sweep of Western intellectual history,

emphasizing unusual inflection points (Machiavelli, William of Ockham) and fingering unusual suspects (gnosticism, nominalism) along the way.

All of these efforts looked backward and forward at once, explaining the Western past to illuminate the dilemmas of the future. But few of them did so more persuasively than Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*. No prophet or futurist could have anticipated all the twists and turns that American political life has taken since 1953, when the forty-year-old Nisbet published his "Study in the Ethics and Order of Freedom." But his Eisenhower-era analysis of the modern political predicament looks as prescient as it's possible for any individual writer to be.

This prescience notwithstanding, Nisbet's classic has probably had fewer readers than it deserves, even in the rarefied, slightly eccentric circles where conservative intellectuals pass for celebrities. He lacked Strauss's philosophical ambitions—and his flair for cultivating disciples. He never coined a phrase as quotable as Voegelin's "immanentize the eschaton" or Weaver's "ideas have consequences." Though a contributor to *National Review*, he was geographically and personally distant from the fractious intellectual coterie that gathered around William F. Buckley Jr., and he played a strictly secondary role in the major ideological debates that shaped "movement conservatism" as we know it. While he eventually migrated from the University of California to the American Enterprise Institute, he spent his Washington years in what he described as "self-imposed isolation from political intrigue." And his occasional sallies had a plague-on-every-house quality—now criticizing libertarians, now attacking foreign-policy hawks, now griping about religious conservatives.

None of this should be surprising, given the difficulties involved in translating Nisbet's central insight into a practical conservative politics—or at least a practical politics for the late-twentieth-century United States. But these difficulties are precisely what makes his thesis so important.

What was Nisbet's insight? Simply put, that what seems like the great tension of modernity—the concurrent rise of individualism and collectivism, and the struggle between the two for mastery—is really no tension at all. It *seemed* contradictory that the heroic age of nineteenth-century laissez faire, in which free men, free minds, and free markets were suppos-

edly liberated from the chains imposed by throne and altar, had given way so easily to the tyrannies of Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. But it was only a contradiction, Nisbet argued, if you ignored the human impulse toward community that made totalitarianism seem desirable—the yearning for a feeling of participation, for a sense of belonging, for a cause larger than one’s own individual purposes and a group to call one’s own.

In pre-modern society, this yearning was fulfilled by a multiplicity of human-scale associations: guilds and churches and universities, manors and villages and monasteries, and of course the primal community of family. In this landscape, Nisbet writes, “the reality of the separate, autonomous individual was as indistinct as that of centralized political power.”

But from the Protestant Reformation onward, individualism and centralization would advance together, while intermediate powers and communities either fell away or were dissolved. As social institutions, these associations would be attacked as inhumane, irrational, patriarchal, and tyrannical; as sources of political and economic power, they would be dismissed as outdated, fissiparous, and inefficient. In place of a web of overlapping communities and competing authorities, the liberal West set out to build a society of self-sufficient, liberated individuals, overseen by an unitary, rational, and technocratic government.

The assumption, indeed, was that the emancipated individual *required* a strong state, to cut through the constraining tissue of intermediate associations. “Only with an absolute sovereign,” Nisbet writes, describing the views of Thomas Hobbes, “could any effective environment of individualism be possible.”

But all that constraining tissue served a purpose. Man is a social being, and his desire for community will not be denied. The liberated individual is just as likely to become the alienated individual, the paranoid individual, the lonely and desperately-seeking-community individual. And if he can’t find that community on a human scale, then he’ll look for it on an inhuman scale—in the total community of the totalizing state.

Thus liberalism can beget totalitarianism. The great liberal project, “the progressive emancipation of the individual from the tyrannous and irrational statuses handed down from the past,” risks producing emanci-

pated individuals eager for the embrace of a far more tyrannical authority than church or class or family. The politics of rational self-interest promoted by Hobbes and Locke creates a void, a yearning for community, that Rousseau and Marx rush in to fill. The age of Jeremy Bentham and Manchester School economics leaves Europe ripe for *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*, and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

“The extraordinary accomplishments of totalitarianism in the twentieth century would be inexplicable,” Nisbet concludes, “were it not for the immense, burning appeal it exerts upon masses of individuals who have lost, or had taken away, their accustomed roots of membership and belief.”

But this is not the only possible modern story, he is careful to insist. The mass community offered by totalitarianism may be more attractive than no community at all, but it remains a deeply unnatural form of human association. And it’s possible for both liberal government and liberal economics to flourish without descending into tyranny, so long as they allow, encourage, and depend upon more natural forms of community, rather than trying to tear them up root and branch.

Possible, and necessary. “The whole conscious liberal heritage,” Nisbet writes, depends for its survival on “the subtle, infinitely complex lines of habit, tradition, and social relationship.” The individual and the state can maintain an appropriate relationship only so long as a flourishing civil society mediates between them. Political freedom requires competing sources of authority to sustain itself, and economic freedom requires the same: capitalism “has prospered, and continues to prosper, only in spheres and areas where it has been joined to a flourishing associational life.” Thus Nisbet quotes Proudhon: “Multiply your associations and be free.”

This multiplication was, of course, the great achievement of the young United States, with its constitutional and geographical limits to centralization, and its astonishingly active associational life. (Nisbet’s debt to “the brilliant Tocqueville” is obvious and frequently acknowledged.) Preserving and sustaining this achievement is, or ought to be, the central project of American conservatism.

But the nature of the project must be understood correctly, Nisbet’s

work suggests. It is not simply the defense of the individual against the power of the state, since to promote unfettered individualism is to risk destroying the very institutions that provide an effective brake on statism. (In that sense, Whittaker Chambers had it right when he scented the whiff of Hitlerism around the works of Ayn Rand.) It must be the defense of the individual and his group—his family, his church, his neighborhood, his civic organization, and his trade union. If *The Quest for Community* teaches any lesson, it is this: You cannot oppose the inexorable growth of state power by championing individualism alone. You can only oppose it by championing community.



This is easier to state in theory, though, than to actually apply to modern politics. Many politicians and pundits have grasped (or half-grasped) Robert Nisbet's insight. Fewer have successfully put it into practice.

In the two decades following *The Quest for Community's* publication, the statist-individualist symbiosis arguably reached a zenith. Never before had there been so much emphasis on personal liberation; never before had the welfare state (and the military-industrial complex, until the debacle in Vietnam) enjoyed so much influence over American life. Lyndon Johnson set out to create the Great Society from Washington; meanwhile, the country's local societies began a slow eclipse. Civic organizations declined, churches emptied, neighborhoods were bulldozed in the name of progress—and all the while, the state spent and regulated more and more and more.

Above all, it was the family—the backbone, from Tocqueville's day to our own, of American localism and independence—that was pulled apart from both directions, as bureaucrats supplanted parents in poor neighborhoods and middle-class marriages dissolved in the solvent of self-actualization. From the vantage point of the family-centric 1950s, this should have been surprising, but Nisbet saw it coming. Indeed, perhaps the most prophetic section of *The Quest for Community* is his discussion of the inherent weakness of mid-century marriage as an institution—a weakness rooted in “the sharp discrepancy between the family's actual

contributions to the present political and economic order and the set of spiritual images inherited from the past.”

Anticipating the upheavals of the Sexual Revolution, Nisbet warned that “we are attempting to make [the family] perform psychological and symbolic functions with a structure that has become fragile and an institutional importance that is almost totally unrelated to the economic and political realities of our society.” Despite the ministrations of “pamphlets, clinics, and high-school courses on courtship and marriage,” he wrote, “no social group will long survive the disappearance of its chief reason for being, and these reasons are not, primarily, biological but institutional.” And so it was: Just twenty years after these words appeared, the divorce rate had more than doubled, and the rate of out-of-wedlock births had begun its steady upward climb.

Other depressing social indicators were likewise climbing by that point, and Americans remained Tocquevillian enough to recoil, temporarily at least, from some of the excesses of the statist-individualist synthesis. It wasn’t just conservatives who set out looking for an alternative approach to the state-society relationship: like another right-wing communitarian, J. R. R. Tolkien, Nisbet had a considerable fan base in the leftist counterculture, and his critique of centralized power was echoed in many New Left arguments, from the early-’60s attacks on the corporate university to the protests against the war in Vietnam.

But the left-wing hostility to almost every form of cultural conservatism placed a sharp limit on these communitarian and localist impulses. The debate over segregation had poisoned the well, producing a deep—and, to some extent, understandable—assumption on the Left that local associations were inevitably fonts of bigotry and discrimination. As a result, the Nisbetian tendencies visible in documents like the Port Huron Statement never congealed into a plausible decentralist politics. (Hippie communes were not, in the end, a sustainable form of association for most people.)

Left-wing communitarianism persisted in various forms after the ’60s. Figures like Robert Bellah and Michael Sandel criticized their fellow liberals for downplaying the importance of civil society, and communitarianism enjoyed a temporary vogue in the Clinton era, when Rob-

ert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni found readers in the White House. But as Brad Lowell Stone, Nisbet's intellectual biographer, has pointed out, the left-wing quest for community never escaped the gravitational pull of state power. The most important community was always the national community: local associations were championed as the building blocks of national association, not as ends unto themselves. The result was a more touchy-feely form of statism, rather than a true alternative.

For a choice, rather than an echo, Americans had to look to the New Right, where the echt-individualism of Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign was tempered, as movement conservatism came of age, by an ever-increasing emphasis on the importance of mediating institutions and associational life. By the 1970s, a Republican Party that had once opposed the welfare state on largely libertarian grounds was taking a much more Nisbetian approach, and championing the local community—families and churches, local governments and school boards—against the aggressions of the administrative state.

Thus Ronald Reagan's 1976 invocation of "an end to giantism, for a return to . . . the scale of the local fraternal lodge, the church organization, the block club, the farm bureau." Thus his constant return to the themes of "family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom." Thus George H. W. Bush's famous vision of a "thousand points of light," rather than a single glowing governmental torch. And thus the younger Bush's vision of a "compassionate conservatism," in which local churches and civic organizations, rather than a tentacled bureaucracy, would take the lead in fighting poverty.

All of this won votes, and enough political victories to curb, for a time, the expansion of the state. But of course the bureaucracy was still there, and still multitentacled. And what George W. Bush was really proposing, like many Republican politicians before him, was a partnership between state power and private initiative. Was this Nisbetian? Was it conservative? Could the state actually help rebuild—or, more aptly, build—the kind of associational life that state power had gradually usurped?

This is the problem that the Right has confronted not only in the Bush era, but across the past three decades—and it hasn't been resolved

yet. Once the bonds of community have frayed, is it enough to merely withdraw the power of the state, and watch communities reknit themselves? Will the two-parent family revive, for instance, if antipoverty programs are pared away? Are there countless versions of, say, the Mormon Church's welfare network waiting to spring up, if only the heavy hand of the state relaxes itself? Or is it possible that once community has frayed sufficiently, the state cannot simply withdraw itself without risking disintegration—but must, perforce, play an active role in the revival of civil society, by seeking to reduce the demand for government before it reduces the supply?

Nisbet anticipated these dilemmas, but he did not solve them. He allowed a role for wise administration in the restoration of community, without specifying how large that role should be. "What we need at the present time," he wrote in the closing pages of *The Quest for Community*, "is the knowledge and administrative skill to create a *laissez faire* in which the basic unit will be the group." But the specifics of what this meant were left—appropriately, if frustratingly—to policymakers to explore.

The most successful conservative politicians have tried to strike a balance—now trying to straightforwardly cut spending, now attempting (as in the 1990s welfare reform, or George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind bill) to turn existing programs to conservative, community-building ends. Both approaches have won victories, but neither has met with anything like unqualified success. Public opinion has recoiled, again and again, from even modest attempts to curb entitlements, and many conservative politicians have been better friends to big business—ignoring Nisbet's warning that "decentralization is just as necessary in the operation of the other great associations of modern society"—than they have been foes of big government. At the same time, attempts to use the welfare state for conservative purposes have enjoyed mixed results at best. (Some of the Bush administration's attempts at marriage promotion, for instance, resembled nothing so much as the "pamphlets, clinics, and high-school courses" that Nisbet rightly disdained.)

In his introduction to the 1990 edition of this book, William Schambra struck an optimistic note: "American politics," he wrote, "is no longer

merely the party of the state versus the party of the individual. There is a new politics, characterized by the reaction against the national community and the intrusive, centralized state—and equally against raw, self-interested individualism.” More importantly, he suggested, this new politics was only part of a broader renaissance of community in America, extending from classrooms to neighborhood associations, from churches to police departments.

Two decades later, a dose of pessimism seems to be in order. There were significant gains associated with the “new politics” that Schambra descried, and the broader post–Sexual Revolution trend in social life that Tom Wolfe memorably characterized as “The Great Relearning”—declining crime rates, a more streamlined welfare system with fewer perverse incentives, a halt to the seemingly inexorable expansion of hard drugs and STDs, and a broad recognition, absent during the 1970s, of the importance of family and community life to human flourishing.

But the trials of the Bush era suggest the limits of these victories. The post-9/11 period showcased modern conservatism’s statist side—its willingness to out-liberal liberalism when it comes to building new bureaucracies, empowering central authorities, and invoking the mystical bonds of the national community, so long as national security is deemed to be at stake. The financial crisis of 2008 represented the failure of both conservative approaches to community-building: a deregulated marketplace proved incapable of generating the moral capital necessary to police itself, while the attempt to build an “ownership society” through policies that encouraged home buying ended in disaster. Meanwhile, the cultish enthusiasm associated with the rise of Barack Obama revealed that Americans remain immensely vulnerable to a Rousseauian romance of centralized authority, in which national politics is the highest form of community, and perhaps the only kind of community worth pursuing.

Worse still, since Obama’s elevation to the presidency, America seems once more divided between “the party of the state” and “the party of the individual.” Conservatives are cracking open *Atlas Shrugged* and shouting about socialism, but they seem to have lost the appetite for thinking through the problem of community in an individualistic age—which

is, of course, precisely the problem that make socialism so appealing in the first place.

One hopes that this is temporary; one hopes that, eventually, the American Right will return to the problem of community, however vexing it has proven itself to be. Indeed, it is precisely because the problem will never admit of an obvious or permanent solution that it provides an appropriate organizing principle for a conservative politics—since conservatives, after all, are bound to disbelieve in permanent solutions as firmly as they disbelieve in the perfectibility of man.

This is the spirit in which *The Quest for Community* was written, and it's the spirit in which it should be approached—not as a policy manifesto for a movement or a party, but as a thoughtful, elegant, and persuasive statement about human nature, and the kind of politics that's best suited to the cultivation of our common life.

With that in mind, it seems appropriate to leave the last word to Nisbet himself, reflecting on his own work's relevance for contemporary politics in a 1993 essay entitled “Still Questing”:

Let me repeat, and conclude here, that a conservative party (or other group) has a double task confronting it. 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 various groups that 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 should we all.

Ross Douthat is an op-ed columnist for the New York Times. He is the author of *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* (Hyperion, 2005) and, with Reihan Salam, of *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (Doubleday, 2008).

## PREFACE

This book deals with political power—more specifically, with the impact of certain conceptions of political power upon social organization in modern Western society. It begins with what I have called the loss of community, for of all symptoms of the impact of power upon human personality in the contemporary Western world the most revealing seems to me to be the preoccupation, in so many spheres of thought and action, with community—community lost and community to be gained. I do not doubt that behind this preoccupation there lie many historical changes and dislocations—economic, religious, and moral. But I have chosen to deal with the *political* causes of the manifold alienations that lie behind the contemporary quest for community. Moral securities and allegiances always have a close and continuing connection with the centers and diffusions of authority in any age or culture. Fundamental changes in culture cannot help but be reflected in even the most primary of social relationships and psychological identifications. Put in these terms, we cannot possibly miss the revolutionary importance, in modern Western

society, of the political State and of idea systems which have made the State preeminent. With all regard for the important social and psychological changes that have been induced by technological, economic, and religious forces in modern society, I believe that the greatest single influence upon social organization in the modern West has been the developing concentration of function and power of the sovereign political State. To regard the State as simply a legal relationship, as a mere superstructure of power, is profoundly delusive. The real significance of the modern State is inseparable from its successive penetrations of man's economic, religious, kinship, and local allegiances, and its revolutionary dislocations of established centers of function and authority. These, I believe, are the penetrations and dislocations that form the most illuminating perspective for the twentieth-century's obsessive quest for moral certainty and social community and that make so difficult present-day problems of freedom and democracy. These are the essential subject matter of this book.

Sections of this book have appeared in *The American Journal of Sociology*, *The Journal of Politics*, *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, and in the book, *Studies in Leadership*, edited by Alvin Gouldner and published by Harper and Brothers. Permission to republish these sections in slightly revised form is gratefully acknowledged.

References in the book have been held to a bare minimum, and they can do no more than suggest the extent of my indebtedness to the many minds that have dealt with various aspects of my subject. To all of them I gladly record here an appreciation not the less genuine for its necessary generality. There are certain individuals to whom I owe thanks of a special kind. The first is the late Frederick J. Teggart, for many years Professor of Social Institutions at the University of California at Berkeley. The second is George P. Adams, Mills Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity at the same university. It is unnecessary to attempt to indicate the precise nature of my debt to each; suffice it to say that apart from interests and insights gained originally from both of these men it is difficult for me to imagine any part of this book's coming into existence. I desire to express appreciation also to Robert M. MacIver whose learned and perceptive writings on the nature of association and authority were