

## Robert Nisbet: Art, History, and the Anti-Rationalism of Sociological Methodology

By Luke C. Sheahan  
Duquesne University

The American sociologist Robert Nisbet is most famous for his critique of political power in the modern state for its devastating effects upon social groups, especially families, local communities, and other institutions that provide communal value to individuals.<sup>1</sup> But he also wrote extensively on the nature of sociology as a discipline, specifically, a scientific discipline. In this aspect of his work, he demonstrated a nuanced approach to the methodology of the social sciences that demonstrated his appreciation for the non-rationalist nature of scientific research and he was highly critical of the reduction of sociological methodology to technique. Nisbet saw and praised in the development of sociology an explicitly anti-rationalist discipline, one that arose in reaction against the rationalism of its age embodied in the democratic and industrial revolutions.

Central to Nisbet's approach to the study of sociology is his argument that science and art share a lot in their approach to the study of reality. Nisbet did not dismiss the use of quantitative methods in social science research, but he argued that sociology would never have arisen as a discipline if those methods had held a place of prominence when the great founders of sociology began their work. The perspectives and insights of Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim originated not from the exercise of a quantitative technique, but from creative activity and thinking normally associated with the artist rather than the scientist. Former Nisbet student and sociologist Robert Perrin writes, "Nisbet shows that deep insight and spontaneous intuition, not sterile analysis and obsession with method, lead to real discovery and creative breakthrough in both science and art."<sup>2</sup> The physical sciences, just as much as the social sciences and the arts, draw from these "artistic" creative processes.

Nisbet addresses the methodology and history of sociology principally in three of his books, *The Sociological Tradition* (1966), *The Social Bond* (1970), and *Sociology as an Art Form* (1976). The latter was one of Nisbet's favorite books among those he had written, although it did not garner as much recognition as *The Quest for Community*, *Twilight of Authority*, and some of his other works.<sup>3</sup> Nisbet presented the thesis first as an article titled "Sociology as an Art Form" in the *Pacific Sociological Review* in 1962,<sup>4</sup> arguing that the discovery process in the social sciences, and the physical sciences for that matter, bore a striking resemblance to the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the main argument of his most famous book Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press. Republished in 1962 by Galaxy Book, New York under new title: *Community and Power*. Reissued in 1969 under original title: *The Quest for Community*. Reprinted by Institute for Contemporary Studies, San Francisco with a new preface in 1990, and by ISI Books, Wilmington with a new introduction in 2010.) All quotations from latest edition.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Perrin, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition," in *Tradition and Revolt* by Robert Nisbet, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gottfried, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition," in Robert Nisbet, *Sociology as an Art Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). from an article published under the same title in *The Pacific Sociological Review* 5 (2) 1962:67-74., xi.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Nisbet, "Sociology as an Art Form," *Pacific Sociological Review* (Fall 1962), 67-74. This article began as his presidential address at the Pacific Sociological Association. Nisbet was not the first or the only person to make the argument about the link between art and sociology or the social sciences more broadly. See Judith Adler, "Sociology as an Art Form: One Facet of the Conservative Sociology of Robert Nisbet," *The American Sociologist* (2014) 45: 11-13, 15.

creative processes of artists. He expressed concern that the discipline of sociology was becoming too enamored of quantitative *techniques* at the expense of sociological *method*, which encompassed a process of discovery shared by all creative endeavors and a process of demonstration only partially unique to the sociological discipline. Nisbet's textbooks on sociology, *The Social Bond* and *The Sociological Tradition*, were published between the article and book versions of *Sociology as an Art Form*. Even while discussing the methodology of sociology as a social science, he is thinking and reflecting on what the discipline fundamentally shares with strictly artistic creative endeavors.

This chapter begins with Nisbet's discussion of the acts of discovery and explanation. Both art and science share in the creative acts of discovery while often differing in their techniques of explaining their discoveries. Then it turns to a discussion of the content and origins of Nisbet's "unit-ideas," the particular methodological approach to the study of sociology he advocates. Finally, this chapter explores how sociology's unit-ideas, the very substance of the sociological method, arose as a rejection of the eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalism used to justify the social disruptions of the democratic and industrial revolutions.

### **Sociology as a Science: Discovery and Demonstration**

The subject matter of the sciences and the arts is reality, social and material. Whether through painting, novel, ethnography, or chemistry experiment, every art and science is attempting to depict some part of reality in its own way. Physical scientists are studying the same reality as are painters and sculptors, even if the forms of the inquiries vary drastically. Sociology and art overlap in that both examine the same features of the social world and often in the same conceptual way even if, like the physical sciences, they differ in the forms of their explanation.

Nisbet divides the investigation of reality into two parts, discovery and explanation, "the two great interpenetrating, interacting realms of science."<sup>5</sup> Sociology discovers and explains data related to social behavior, just as politics discovers and explains data related to political behavior and chemistry explains data related to the behavior of chemical compounds. "To *discover* the essential data of social behavior and the connections among the data is the first objective of sociology. To *explain* the data and the connections is the second and larger objective. Science makes its advances in terms of both of these objectives."<sup>6</sup> The discovery process is concerned with making novel connections or unique observations of the empirical data with which the particular science is concerned.

The explanation or demonstration process for the social scientist aims to be empirical and causal. This involves more than simple description through data and mathematical technique. "[D]ata gathering, data counting, and data describing" are only the "first step" in the process of scientific explanation. "Until we have accounted for the problem at hand, explained it causally by referring the data to some principle or generalization already established, or to some new principle or generalization, we have not explained anything."<sup>7</sup> Quantitative technique is not explanation; it is not the core of social science. There must be an underlying vision that connects the data and makes sense of it, even if the data gathering and sifting is a necessary component of the explanation.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Nisbet, *The Social Bond* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 5

<sup>7</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 6.

Nisbet points to a famous example from the history of sociology to demonstrate his point: Emile Durkheim's groundbreaking research on suicide.<sup>8</sup> The social scientist sees that suicide incidents vary between population groups, "From people to people, nation to nation, and, within a given people or nation, from one ethnic, professional, or residential group to another."<sup>9</sup> This is discovery. The sociologist realizes there is a problem, a puzzle, and phrases it as a question: why is it that different groups of people, similar in some ways but different in others, commit suicides at different rates? Looking at this problem, the sociologist will do what Durkheim did: *explain* the rate in empirically based social terms. Durkheim argued that individuals' rates of suicide were negatively associated with "the degree of social and moral cohesion of the groups of which the individuals are parts."<sup>10</sup> Other sociologists were aware of correlations in the data, but none had explained them in terms of social factors in the manner of Durkheim. Furthermore, other social scientists could (and did) verify the data Durkheim used to advance his thesis on the social basis of suicide. Durkheim was operating here as the consummate scientist concerned at the explanation stage with demonstrable and verifiable reasons through processes that are repeatable by other scientists. Technique in the uses of statistics, mathematical models, surveys, data mining, and the like plays an important role in explanation.

However, explanation is not discovery. *How* a scientist makes his discovery is not necessarily related to his ability to demonstrate it empirically. The explanation process is *not* the same as whatever produces the original discovery and the explanation process itself must be guided by a vision that is not reducible to data and research techniques. This is the key to the Nisbet's contention of the similarity between art and the science of sociology. Great works of art and great works of science have a similar phase of discovery, a great insight that comes to the artist or the scientist in a moment or a process of illumination that casts light upon some aspect of reality.<sup>11</sup> Science depends upon verifiability of the *explanation*, where art does not, but the scientist's initial illumination, his initial *discovery*, is one with the artist's instinct. Nisbet writes, [H]owever rational and logical a given scientific formulation may be in the presentation, its actual psychological roots may lie anywhere—in fantasy, in reverie, in sheer unstructured imagination. But irrespective of source or conditioning influence, what gives identity to the scientific statement in the long run is its verifiability by others.<sup>12</sup>

How did Durkheim make his great discovery about suicide? Nisbet writes, "We may be sure of one thing: he did not get it, as the stork story of science might have it, from the preliminary examination of the vital registers of Europe, any more than Darwin got the idea of natural selection from his observations during the voyage of the *Beagle*. The idea, the plot, and the conclusion of *Suicide* were well in his mind before he examined the registers."<sup>13</sup> We do not know and really cannot know where Durkheim received the inspiration for his discovery. Nisbet continues, "He might have got it from reading Tocqueville... Or, it could have come from

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<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> This bears a resemblance to Michael Polanyi's understanding of scientific discovery. Lowney II, Charles W., "Michael Polanyi: A Scientist Against Scientism, in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, ed. by Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 139-58.

<sup>12</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Nisbet, "Sociology as an Art Form," 155.

personal experience—from a remembered fragment of the Talmud, from an intuition born of personal loneliness and marginality, a scrap of experience in Paris. Who can be sure?”<sup>14</sup>

In making discoveries, the scientist is more like the artist than the scientist described in methodology textbooks. The scientist receives, somehow, an image in his mind of how the data fits together. Then he proceeds to study, to explain, the founding image in his mind. “[N]o major scientist ever has proceeded in his work along either Baconian or Cartesian lines, any more than has any major artist.”<sup>15</sup> Artists like Michaelangelo begin with an image. The artist’s job, his act of explanation, is to bring that image into being. But the same is true of the great scientists. “Michaelangelo began with an image in creating his *Pieta*, but so did Faraday in developing his dynamo and electromagnetic induction, and so did Einstein in developing his theory of relativity.”<sup>16</sup> Nisbet writes,

The sources of the creativity that finds expression in the discoveries and explanations of science are, in strictly psychological terms, much the same for the scientist and the artist. Nothing in the way of mere technique or procedure can ever take the place of imagination, insight, sustained vision, and sheer intellectual comprehension. These are intellectual qualities as vital to the artist and scholar as they are to the scientist.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, Nisbet takes issue with the emphasis on a narrow understanding of methodology within the sociological discipline, by which he means limiting methodology to the general use of statistics, analysis of case studies, and survey techniques. “The method is emphatically not something that can be reduced to simple and sequential steps derived from a manual. Least of all is method in the social sciences identical with any one or another of the numerous techniques by which observation, discovery, and explanation are aided.”<sup>18</sup> Nisbet believes that whatever value these techniques have, they will not lead to great discoveries. Explanation must follow discovery, not the other way around. Statistical work is indispensable to demonstrating the relationship between points of data, to giving adequate explanation of one’s discoveries. These techniques help to arrange the data in a way that makes sense of empirical observations, but sociological method is not reducible to these techniques. Explanation must relate data and observation to larger principles of generality that explain that data.

Nisbet describes his opposition to the reduction of method to technique as opposition to *scientism*, “which is science with the spirit of discovery and creation left out.”<sup>19</sup> Essentially, it is science reduced to technique.<sup>20</sup> The problem is that such a reduction crushes the imaginative development of young minds. The great minds of sociology never would have made their great achievements if they were “ever caught in the crippling fetters placed by curriculum upon so many youthful minds at the present time.”<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that the great minds of sociology were not disciplined. They were disciplined by the necessity of empirical grounding for their

<sup>14</sup> Nisbet, “Sociology as an Art Form,” 155.

<sup>15</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Nisbet, *The Social Bond*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Nisbet, *The Social Bond*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> This is a narrower conception of scientism that found in the writings of others thinkers. CS Lewis, for example, sees scientism as a materialistic ideology. See Michael D. Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man: C.S. Lewis and the Case against Scientism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983) and Luke Sheahan, “The Intellectual Kinship of Irving Babbitt and C.S. Lewis: Will and Imagination in *That Hideous Strength*,” *Humanitas* 29, nos. 1&2 (2016). This is related to what Nisbet has to say, but Nisbet’s concept is much narrower, focusing really only on the reduction of scientific inquiry to technique.

<sup>21</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 16.

explanations, not by a methodology that hampered their creative ability to make discoveries in the first place.

Even here, Nisbet presents caveats. This inherently scientific process of verification was not so important that the creative process should halt if an idea fails to be fully verified every step of the way.<sup>22</sup> Nisbet complains, “We find some sociologists declaring in effect that until we have refined and polished our concepts, made them epistemologically pure and logically faultless, we cannot proceed with our real mission, which is the study of social behavior.”<sup>23</sup> But such epistemological purity and logical faultlessness is not only impossible, but would have hamstrung the great breakthroughs in all of the sciences, not least the physical sciences.

Had Galileo and Newton and the other pioneering figures in modern physics been too much preoccupied with the epistemological purity of their concepts of gravitation and energy instead of going ahead in a pragmatically naïve and happily undisturbed way, physics would never have become a science. To which may be added the statement that zoology, botany and geology did not start out as sciences with correct and adequate definitions of plants and animals.<sup>24</sup>

Such precision of definition takes time and is not required at the outset of the scientific enterprise.

Nisbet’s critique of the reduction of method to statistical analysis and mathematical technique is similar to that of Michael Oakeshott in his famous critique of rationalism. Oakeshott writes,

The natural scientist will certainly make use of the rules of observation and verification that belong to his technique, but these rules remain only one of the components of his knowledge; advance in scientific discovery was never achieved merely by following the rules.<sup>25</sup>

The technique used in the process of explanation, while an essential part of any science, is not the whole of it.

In the same way, no one could call a sociologist a sociologist merely because he followed proper sociological techniques. The difference here is between the two steps of the scientific process: discovery and explanation. Echoing Oakeshott, Nisbet writes,

The second is properly subject to rules and prescriptions; the first isn’t. Of all sins against the Muse, however, the greatest is the assertion, or strong implication, in textbooks on methodology and theory construction that the first (and utterly vital) logic can somehow be summoned by obeying the rules of the second. Only intellectual drouth and barrenness can result from that misconception.<sup>26</sup>

The essential works of sociology, the great discoveries of that social science, were not the result of training in the technical side of the discipline, but of creative imagination. Nisbet, writes,

Scientists Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel were without question. But they were also artists, and had they not been artists, had they contented themselves with demonstrating solely what had been arrived at through aseptic problem design, through meticulous verification, and through constructions of theory which would pass muster in

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<sup>22</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen and Co., 1962), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 5.

a graduate course in methodology of sociology today, the entire world of thought would be much poorer.<sup>27</sup>

The techniques of the rationalist are too meager to make any great discoveries, even if they help to demonstrate the veracity of those discoveries. Nisbet explains, “This error is... the belief that techniques peculiar to mere *demonstration* of something can be utilized also in the *discovery* of something. Deeply rooted in all such works is the delusion that the creative imagination works logically, or should work logically, with everything neat and tidy.”<sup>28</sup> As Oakeshott writes, “the error of the Rationalist is of a simple sort—the error of mistaking a part for the whole, of endowing a part with the qualities of the whole.”<sup>29</sup> Surely, certain techniques have an essential role to play for the sociologist. But rationalist sociology makes a grave mistake when it takes those techniques for the method of sociology.

### Unit-Ideas as the Substance of Sociology

What is Nisbet’s understanding of the method of sociology? For Nisbet, every science is built around the pursuit of particular concepts through which that science studies the world. A science of physics is about the pursuit of ideas related to “energy, mass, quantum, and the like.”<sup>30</sup> It is impossible to talk about physics without reference to these concepts. They are the windows through which physicists view the world they study. Sociology focuses upon human social behavior and it has developed concepts that serve as a perspective through which to view that behavior. They are the substance of sociology’s method; the windows through which sociologists view the social world they study.<sup>31</sup> Nisbet’s argument about unit-ideas forming the substance of the sociological method begins with their historical conception in explicit rejection of the rationalist justifications for intrusions and dislocations in the social order. Out of this fundamentally conservative reaction, Nisbet argues, sociology as a discipline arose as various thinkers turned their gaze to the study of the social realm as distinct from the political or economic realm.

Sociology is a relatively young science. It is certainly younger than politics, economics, anthropology, and history. Nisbet locates the origins of sociology, defined as the study of social institutions and social behavior apart from human behavior in its political, economic, historical or anthropological context, in the nineteenth century in the social thought of French counter-revolutionary conservatives. Concerned about the destruction wrought in the social realm by the industrial and democratic revolutions and the rationalism that justified their intrusions, these conservatives defended the social realm and, in the process, articulated a place for the study of society apart from politics or economics.<sup>32</sup> “That [these revolts have] produced some of the crowning moral virtues of our civilization is plain. That the same revolt and conflict have also produced cankers—vast power, social dislocation, anomie—is equally plain.”<sup>33</sup>

The conservatives understood those “cankers” and, more than their radical and liberal contemporaries, developed perspectives on the study of society that described the impact of these intrusions into the social realm. These social perspectives developed by conservatives formed the

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<sup>27</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 16. “The distinctive method of sociology is, in sum, inseparable from the fundamental concepts that give it content.”

<sup>32</sup> Robert Nisbet, “Introduction,” *Tradition and Revolt*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Nisbet, “Introduction,” 4.

substance of the methodology of sociology. Nisbet formulates this methodology into a series of five fundamental concepts that he calls “unit-ideas.”<sup>34</sup> These ideas are *community*, *authority*, *status*, *sacred*, and *alienation*. Nisbet writes that each of these concepts is an “idea[] in the full sense,” by which he means that each idea is “a *perspective*, a framework, a category (in the Kantian sense) within which vision and fact unite.”<sup>35</sup> As ideas, they serve as “a searchlight...[to] light up a part of the landscape.”<sup>36</sup> Each of these ideas forms a perspective on the social order through which the sociologist may view social problems. To serve as a lever to explain these ideas, Nisbet outlines them in terms of their moral opposites.<sup>37</sup>

*Community* is composed of “the social bonds characterized by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity, and fullness.”<sup>38</sup> Against *community*, he posits *society*. Where community is personal and small, society is impersonal, large-scale, and based on contractual ties.<sup>39</sup> *Authority* is the “inner order of an association...given legitimacy by its roots in social function, tradition, or allegiance.” Against *authority*, is *power*. Power is political or military force and administrative bureaucracy. Since it is not rooted in the functions and traditions of a group, power has a problem of social legitimacy. *Status* is the individual’s “position in the hierarchy” of the community. It includes notions of prestige and influence within the social group. Against *status*, is the concept of *class*, which is a more specialized and collective concept than status.

*Sacred* is the non-rational mores that guide social conduct. They often include “religious and ritualistic ways of behavior” that are valued above and beyond their material utility. Against *sacred*, is the *profane*. This is a fundamental distinction in all human societies. All distinguish between the sacred, however defined, and that which is utilitarian and materialistic. Sociologists can use this concept as a window into a particular society. How a society makes this distinction tells us a lot about its values. *Alienation* is the “historical perspective within which man is seen as estranged, anomic, and rootless when cut off from the ties of community and moral purpose.”<sup>40</sup> *Alienation* is the inversion of *progress*. All of the developments of the modern world that are hailed as progress, such as industrialization, secularization, equality, popular democracy, and so on, alienate individuals from their communal bonds. Rather than moral progress, the sociologist studies the moral regression resulting from these developments.<sup>41</sup> Durkheim’s work on suicide is a classic example of this theme. These ideas are much older than the nineteenth century, but they form the “rich themes in nineteenth-century thought. Considered as linked antitheses, they form the very warp of the sociological tradition.”<sup>42</sup>

The conservative concern with the social realm emerged in response to the upheaval of the democratic and industrial revolutions and the rationalism that justified the destruction of social institutions wrought in their wake.<sup>43</sup> The democratic revolution merged the concepts of state and society in a way that left non-state social institutions in an ambiguous relationship with

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<sup>34</sup> A term and concept he gets from Arthur O. Lovejoy. See Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966. Reissued by Transaction, New Brunswick N.J., 1993 with a new introduction by the author), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 5.”

<sup>36</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Nisbet devotes a full chapter to unpacking each of these ideas. See Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, Ch. 3-7.

<sup>38</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 23. These themes were “either invented during this period or—which is the same thing—modified to their present meanings.”

the new democratic governments and the industrial revolution dislocated many individuals from their previously secure economic and social arrangements. Each of the unit-ideas developed in response to these disruptions and dislocations.

Nisbet discusses five ways in which the industrial revolution was destructive to traditional society.<sup>44</sup> First, the condition of labor. The new industrial world had created unique historical conditions for the working class and these new conditions for the first time had become a moral and social concern because, unlike rural agricultural work, factory work abstracted workers from their social context and placed them in a precarious position, unprotected by guild, town, or manor.<sup>45</sup> Second, the transformation of property. Property, previously the basis for most social institutions, including the family and the church, was transformed through land reform laws. The new impersonality of property would fail to garner allegiance, contributing to the process of atomization of society, breaking down the social ties that sheltered and anchored individuals.

Third, the rise of the industrial city. The hectic pace and enormous size of the new urban centers forbade the development of real communities and contributed to an egotism that further atomized the populace against a vision of a rural, idealized communal past. Fourth and fifth, technology and the factory system. Both contributed to the individualization of the populace by dangerously liberating the individual from his social context.<sup>46</sup> Conservatives worried that the new technologies and the accompanying social reorganization through mechanisms like the division of labor would bereave the worker of autonomy and creativity in his work.<sup>47</sup>

The democratic revolution was the “first great ideological revolution in Western history”<sup>48</sup> finding its greatest expression in the French revolution. Sociology, historiography, jurisprudence, moral philosophy, and political science all had to articulate their disciplinary perspectives within the context of a post-French Revolution world. Eight themes emerged from this political and social upheaval: *corporations, associations, the family, property, education, religion, rationalism, and power*. Primary among these is the theme of power, the ability of the new democratic government to intrude into existing social institutions and alter or abolish them at its will.

The French National Assembly abolished corporations such as the guilds and trade associations in 1791. Napoleon similarly forbade associations of any type from forming. These developments drew directly from Rousseau’s antipathy for “partial associations.” What had been philosophical venting became legislative reality. The family was similarly altered via legislative diktat following the revolution. Laws declared marriage a civil contract and legalized divorce, changed inheritance requirements, abolished family property, and dictated the terms of children’s education. The social effect of such changes were enormous. Nisbet writes, “The legislators held that within the family, as elsewhere, the ideal of equality and individual rights must prevail.”<sup>49</sup> The family was a republic, not a monarchy, and the democratic government had a duty to enforce that conception. Church property was confiscated, bishops and priests were made subject to elections, and church officials were required to accept government stipends and to take oaths to the state.<sup>50</sup> Rather than an independent source of authority with its own independent institutional

<sup>44</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 39.



foundation, it was made subservient to the state. Church officials became, in effect, civil servants and the church as an institution was made a department of the state.

Democratic reforms based on strict equalitarianism, each citizen being morally the same as every other citizen, necessitated a policy dictated by geometrical rationalism. “A passion for geometrical unity and symmetry in the minds of the Revolutionary legislators drove them beyond such relatively minor matters as reform of the currency system and standardization of weights and measure to the more exciting task of rationalization of the units of space and time within which men lived.”<sup>51</sup> Provincial reforms, calendar reforms, and the like all reflected this geometric rationalism. At the heart of all of these effects was the power of the newly minted democratic government. The result was purportedly a fraternity of free and equal citizens, rationally related to each other in a manner designed to annihilate as much as possible any other strictly social relationships. Nisbet writes of the pure intrusive power of the French National Assembly, “At a stroke, democratic assemblies were thus able to present a magnitude of power that had eluded the efforts of supposedly absolute kings.”<sup>52</sup>

The unit-ideas of sociology and their antitheses emerged from the reactions of conservatives to these political intrusions and economic dislocations. The new economic/political order conceived society opposed to community, asserted political power against social authority, elevated political citizenship at the expense of social status, inverted the sacred and the profane, and alienated the populace in the name of progress. Nineteenth century conservatives following Burke indicted the industrial and democratic revolutions precisely on these terms, a defense of community, social authority, social status, and the sacred, the abandonment of which subjected the people to alienation. Where the liberal and radical rationalists defended the political intrusion into social institutions on the basis of the “natural” order, the order revealed by pure reason,” conservatives defended actually existing social institutions, such as church, family, guild, town, and the like. Where the rationalists argued that they could “look upon society as they did upon physical landscape, as something on which inventive faculties could tinker endlessly, remaking, refashioning as impulse suggested,”<sup>53</sup> conservatives argued that traditional authority and social institutions were the best bases of humane order and could not be deconstructed without great human cost.

The founders of sociology followed these conservatives in their attention paid to the social realm and its actually existing social institutions against the intrusive rationalism often used to justify the dislocations and intrusions of the revolutions. These is true even where the sociological thinkers’ personal ideologies were rationalist and liberal. Nisbet writes,

Saint-Simon and Comte were to lavish in praise of what the latter called ‘the retrograde school.’ This ‘immortal group, under the leadership of Maistre,’ wrote Comte, ‘will long deserve the gratitude of Positivists.’ Saint-Simon attributed to Bonald the inspiration of his interest in ‘critical’ and ‘organic’ periods of history and also in the beginnings of his proposals for ‘stabilizing’ industrialism and democracy. Le Play, a generation later, was but giving scientific expression, in his *European Working Classes*, to Bonald’s early, polemical work on the family. Of the influence of conservatism on Tocqueville’s mind there can be no question; it is the immediate source of his troubled and oblique appreciation of democracy. And, at the end of the century, in the writings of the non-religious and politically liberal Durkheim we find ideas of French conservatism

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<sup>51</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition*, 13.

converted into some of the essential theories of his systemic sociology: the collective conscience, the functional character of institutions and ideas, intermediate associations, as well as his whole attack on individualism.<sup>54</sup>

Nisbet's praise of sociology is largely on the grounds that it rejected the rationalist pretensions that had absorbed the other disciplines. Nisbet writes,

Economics, political science, psychology, and anthropology long remained in the nineteenth century faithful to the precepts and perspectives of eighteenth-century rationalism. Sociology, however, from the very beginning, borrowed heavily from the insights into the society that such men as Burke, Bonald, and Hegel had supplied.<sup>55</sup>

Sociology almost alone among the disciplines was constituted by a perspective that appreciated the social side of man and rejected the rationalist attempt to control the social realm at the expense of organic relationships and community.<sup>56</sup> Nisbet writes, "the basic insights and assumptions of philosophical conservatism became translated into an empirical study of human relationships"<sup>57</sup> in what we know today to be the discipline of sociology.

### **Conclusion: The Paradox of Sociology**

The methodology of sociology transcends a narrow understanding of sociological technique, focusing upon ideas that were developed in reaction to the democratic and industrial revolutions. Nisbet writes, "[N]one of the great themes which have provided continuing challenge and also theoretical foundation for sociologists during the last century was ever reached through anything resembling what we are today fond of identifying as 'scientific method.'" His concern is that the quantitative methodology such as "statistical analysis, problem design, hypothesis, verification, replication, and theory construction," that is considered the basis of research in every textbook on sociological methodology would have never produced the great insights that founded the discipline in the first place.<sup>58</sup> Comte, Le Play, and Durkheim worked with the mainstream of social science techniques, but they worked with ideas that were conservative, even reactionary. This Nisbet calls the "paradox of sociology," that the discipline falls, in its objectives and in the political and scientific values of its principal figures, in the mainstream of modernism, its essential concepts and its implicit perspectives place it much closer, generally speaking, to philosophical conservatism."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology," 84.

<sup>56</sup> Nisbet, *Social Bond*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology," 86.

<sup>58</sup> Nisbet, *Art Form*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 17.