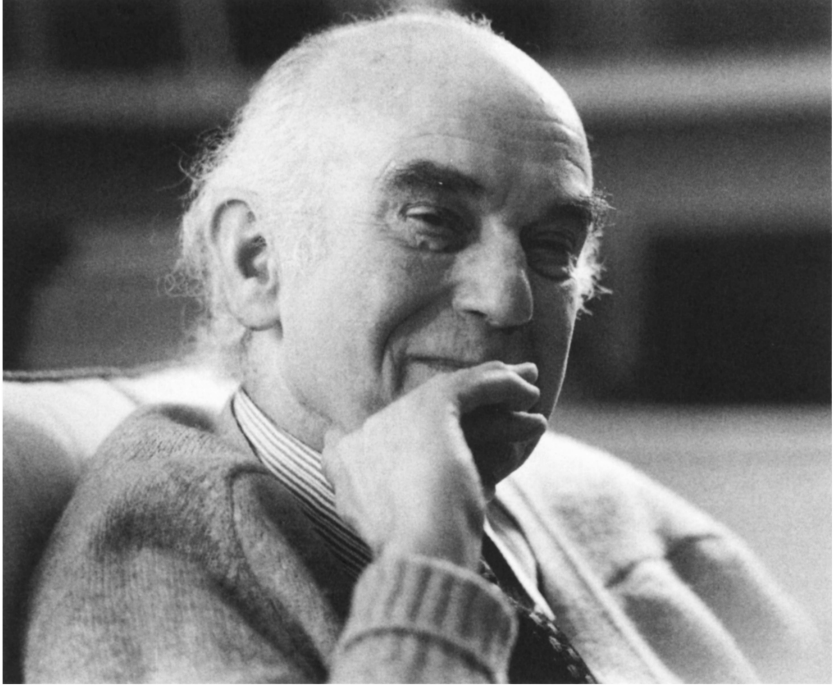
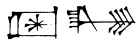

Twilight of Authority



Robert Nisbet

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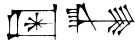
ROBERT NISBET



Liberty Fund

Indianapolis

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First published in 1975 by Oxford University Press
Printed in the United States of America
Frontispiece courtesy of the National Endowment
for the Humanities. Photograph by Nora Stewart.

04 03 02 01 00 C 5 4 3 2 1
04 03 02 01 00 P 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nisbet, Robert A.

Twilight of authority/Robert Nisbet.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-86597-211-7 (hardcover: alk. paper)

ISBN 0-86597-212-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Authority. I. Title.

JC571.N53 2000

303.3'6—dc21

99-34146

Liberty Fund, Inc.

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300

Indianapolis, IN 46250-1684

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Foreword

Born in Los Angeles on 30 September 1913, sociologist and historian Robert Alexander Nisbet completed three degrees (B.A., 1936; M.A., 1937; Ph.D., 1939) at the University of California, Berkeley, and joined the university's faculty in 1939. Except for military service in the Pacific theatre of World War II from 1943 to 1945, Nisbet taught in the Department of Social Institutions (later Sociology) until 1953, when he was appointed Dean of the College of Letters and Science at the new Riverside campus of the University of California system. The additional title of vice chancellor followed in 1960. Nisbet returned to teaching in 1963 and concluded his university career (with emeritus status) in 1978, after four years as Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. He was affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (first as resident scholar, then as an adjunct scholar) between 1978 and 1986. Nisbet authored almost two dozen books and more than 150 essays. He died at his home in Washington, D.C., on 9 September 1996.

Nisbet's first publications, in 1943, were two essays. The first argued that Rousseau's political doctrine had a totalitarian cast, and the second argued that the rise of sociology was linked to the French Revolution. His final publications some fifty years later included "Still Questing," a reflection on the fortunes of his first book, *The Quest for Community* (originally published in 1953), and introductions for new editions of *The Sociological Tradition* (originally published in 1966) and *History of the Idea of Progress* (originally published in 1980). These writings were produced in 1993 and 1994, respectively.

Although Nisbet's intellectual interests were far-reaching, his extensive body of work is distinguished by two dominant themes or objec-

tives. The first is his attempt to redirect the analysis of social change in the social sciences from what he termed a *developmentalistic* approach (conceiving and explaining change in society as development, i.e., as immanent, cumulative, and directional) to a strictly *historical* approach (conceiving major change in society as usually presupposing serious conflict, i.e., as resulting from external, event-borne interferences or “intrusions” precipitating crises). The second theme is found in Nisbet’s effort to identify the mounting perils, to personal liberty and well-being, of the on-going erosion of *intermediary* institutions and associations—i.e., of *civil* society as such—and, simultaneously, the ascendancy of Leviathan, namely, the modern territorial, centralized, bureaucratized, and increasingly all-invasive sovereign state. Nisbet explains that functionally significant and psychologically important *intermediate* structures such as groups, institutions, and associations based in kinship, ethnicity, religion, location or region, work, and private interest or pursuit can act as vital buffers or shields between the solitary individual and the omnipotent political state. In other words, such *corps intermédiaires* can modulate the reach and atomizing impact of the political state on the individual citizen.

Both of Nisbet’s lifelong interests—rejecting developmentalism in the study of social change and championing pluralism in the face of an encroaching Leviathan-state—can be traced to his student days at Berkeley. Indeed, the Berkeley experience was decisive. First, Nisbet inherited his view of history and social change from his mentor at Berkeley, the redoubtable Frederick J. Teggart. For example, Nisbet’s *Social Change and History* (1969) was the acknowledged heir and sequel to Teggart’s ground-breaking *Theory and Processes of History* (1941, itself combining two earlier works of 1918 and 1925). Second, the doctoral dissertation that Nisbet completed under Teggart’s direction (published in 1980 as *The Social Group in French Thought*) revealed how the influence of the French conservatives of the nineteenth century (including Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, Félicité Robert de Lamennais, and François René Chateaubriand) penetrated sociology, inspiring, in fact, its very creation in France and giving to sociology some of its most dis-

tinctive concepts—community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation. From this early experience and his subsequent discovery of the writings of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, Nisbet came fully to appreciate what is now called “the problem of community”—that is, the decline and loss of emotionally satisfying and socially significant human groups and associations, and, *pari passu*, the rise of a centralized state that cannot replace the sense of community, solidarity, and social purpose that it necessarily weakens as it usurps function after function from smaller social and political bodies.

Nisbet’s early interest in *intermediate* social structures and their critical place in both nourishing and protecting individual liberty was heightened by his later study of political centralization in the United States during World War I and, especially, during and ever after the presidential administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. To Nisbet, these years were characterized by the ceaseless politicization of social life. Nisbet observed that an essentially decentralized union of sovereign states was—through the agency of almost constant war or preparation for war—transformed into a unitary or monolithic state, that is, into a political Leviathan. The sterilizing hand of the central state now intruded upon virtually every circumstance of human life. *Sanctums* (private places and situations, i.e., spheres of human action free from political trespass) came progressively to be redefined as public domain in which political prerogative trumps private judgment and freedom of choice.

Through a career of more than fifty years, Nisbet studied the consequences—which he deemed dangerous—of an expanding state and declining civil society. He measured the loss of community by the rising numbers of loosely attached or alienated individuals, that is, people lacking moral compass and thus any purpose or sense of direction beyond that provided by cash nexuses. For Nisbet, individuals whose lives are devoid of vibrant social bonds are individuals whose lives are emotionally insecure and spiritually empty. As such, they are in danger of losing their freedom to the allurements of a paternalistic state. As Tocqueville suggested in *La Démocratie en Amérique* (1835–1840), the tendency of the centralizing state as it is found in democracies is to make permanent chil-

dren of its citizens, that is, they are never allowed to grow out of their dependency. Nisbet's political writings—principally, *The Quest for Community* (1953), *Twilight of Authority* (1975), and *The Present Age* (1988)—arose from these longtime concerns with the circumstances of individual liberty, the irreplaceable role of strong communities or intermediary structures (*societas in parvo*) in a free society, and the growing menace of the consolidated political state to man and his traditional groups and sanctuaries.

The materials composing *Twilight of Authority* first appeared in a number of periodicals between 1969 and 1974. The book itself was published on 16 October 1975. Its immediate political and historical context included the unanticipated—and, to Nisbet, ever-worsening—social and economic consequences of the welfare state expanded by Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programs, the deepening disillusionment and final debacle of the protracted American war in Vietnam, and, finally, the Watergate scandal and ignominious collapse of the Nixon administration. Those years constituted, in Nisbet's judgment, one of the worst of times.

ROBERT G. PERRIN

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Preface

Periodically in Western history twilight ages make their appearance. Processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development. Something like a vacuum obtains in the moral order for large numbers of people. Human loyalties, uprooted from accustomed soil, can be seen tumbling across the landscape with no scheme of larger purpose to fix them. Individualism reveals itself less as achievement and enterprise than as egoism and mere performance. Retreat from the major to the minor, from the noble to the trivial, the communal to the personal, and from the objective to the subjective is commonplace. There is a widely expressed sense of degradation of values and of corruption of culture. The sense of estrangement from community is strong.

Accompanying the decline of institutions and the decay of values in such ages is the cultivation of power that becomes increasingly military, or paramilitary, in shape. Such power exists in almost exact proportion to the decline of traditional social and moral authority. Representative and liberal institutions of government slip into patterns ever more imperial in character. Military symbols and constraints loom where civil values reigned before. The centralization and, increasingly, individualization of power is matched in the social and cultural spheres by a combined hedonism and egalitarianism, each in its way a reflection of the destructive impact of power on the hierarchy that is native to the social bond.

Over everything hangs the specter of war. Such war may be civil or foreign or both. War invariably has its expressed political, diplomatic, or economic objects, but no one can miss the degree to which it becomes increasingly an anodyne for internal torments and frustrations. As the

way out of economic crisis, political division, and intolerable social disintegration, war, despite its consecration of force and violence, its raw disciplines, and its heavy blanket of regimentation upon a social order, becomes attractive to enlarging numbers.

A number of major twilight ages can be seen in the two and a half millennia of Western history. The post-Peloponnesian Athens in which the young Plato grew up is one; so is the period in the Greek world which just precedes the rise of Christianity; and Rome of the first century B.C. and again in the age of St. Augustine surely qualifies. In modern European history the period so inaccurately and widely referred to as the Renaissance—one so much better described, it seems to me, by Huizinga's phrase "the waning of the Middle Ages"—is surely one of the West's notable twilight epochs. All of the major stigmata—cultural and social decay, celebration of war and power, and intense, often morbid, subjectivism—are present in the Italy so brilliantly described by Burckhardt and a few of his greater successors.

So, I believe, is the twentieth century in the West a twilight age. That is largely what this book is about. It is not a study in comparative history, though I do not hesitate to draw from other ages in occasional stress of a point. My objective is that of seeking to light up the present, chiefly the American present, in the historical perspective of twilight. It is hard to think of any other useful perspective in which to set the combined phenomena of sense of cultural decay, erosion of institutions, progressive inflation of values in all spheres, economic included, and constantly increasing centralization—and militarization—of power. If there were no other indicator, the impact of war and of the military on the West, especially since about 1940, would be sufficient—that and the cognate spread of the kind of social equalitarianism which is bred less by the moral value of equality than by centralized power's leveling effects upon the natural hierarchies of all social institutions.

In the final chapter I seek to identify the essential social elements of an alternative to the twilight age we live in now. It is possible, as I suggest, that certain countervailing forces are already in evidence, leading at once to diminution of the state's power and to a greater degree of vital-

ity in our social organization. What is clear is that the two processes, whenever and wherever they are to be found, are indissolubly linked. I know of no principle in history more often validated than that which tells us that social health and political power are inversely related. If, as this book suggests, social anemia is the necessary consequence of political hypertrophy, it is evident that renewal of strength in the social order demands a fundamental change in present uses of political power.

R.N.

New York

May 1975

Acknowledgments

Parts of this book have appeared, in very different forms and contexts, during the past half-dozen years in *The Public Interest*, *Commentary*, *Encounter*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Change*, *The New York Times*, and *The Montreal Star*. Needless to say, I am grateful to these journals for the opportunities provided for earliest formulation of some of the book's ideas. It is a pleasure to record here my gratitude to Joseph Epstein, editor of *The American Scholar*, for original encouragement to develop these ideas into a book. To Sheldon Meyer, vice president of Oxford University Press and friend of many years, I gladly acknowledge not only needed personal support but suggestions of content and style which have added greatly to whatever merit may lie in the book. Stephanie Golden, assistant editor at Oxford University Press, has provided detailed, often necessarily critical, invariably helpful advice that is embodied in literally every page. I thank her most warmly. Finally, to my wife Caroline I express loving appreciation of all that she has once again managed to do to make a book possible.

Twilight of Authority

I. The Political Community at Bay

I believe the single most remarkable fact at the present time in the West is neither technological nor economic, but political: the waning of the historic political community, the widening sense of the obsolescence of politics as a civilized pursuit, even as a habit of mind. By political community I mean more than the legal state. I have in mind the whole fabric of rights, liberties, participations, and protections that has been, even above industrialism, I think, the dominant element of modernity in the West. To an astonishing degree modern Western society has been *political* society, and this has been made possible only by the growing sense of the state in modern times as being more than a structure of power, as being a cherished form of community.

In a very real sense the political community in the West has been the successor, certainly since the eighteenth century, of the church as the major arena of man's hopes, devotions, and aspirations. One would have to go to religion to find anything comparable to modern Western man's willingness to make sacrifices, of property and life when necessary, in the name of political patriotism. Patriotism through most of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth exercised every bit of the hold upon man's relation to state that piety for so long had to church. Looking back, and reflecting on the innumerable centuries earlier when political government was the object of fear and distrust in so many areas, symbolized in popular consciousness by the policeman, soldier, or tax collector, it is one of history's miracles that from the end of the eighteenth century on in the West populations were willing to entrust so much of their economic, social, and moral life to the supervision of the political sphere. Without question, the political—meaning not merely government and state but a whole way of life, participation, and

thought—has had man's trust to a degree no other institution in modern times has had.

It no longer has. A variety of evidences, most of them by now obvious to the layman, suggest that confidence and trust have been replaced by opposite sentiments, that government, from being the protector of the lives of its citizens, has become the greatest single source of exploitation in the minds of a growing number of people. Once political government in the United States signified some degree of austerity of life, of commitment to the public weal, of a willingness to forego most of life's luxuries in the name of service that was for a long time closely akin to what one found in the ranks of clergy and teachers. Today, as scores of surveys and polls reveal, government is perceived by large numbers of citizens as the domain of economic luxury, great personal power, high social status, all symbolized perfectly by the pomp and grandeur of public architecture. It is also perceived, we learn from the same surveys and polls, as being possessed of a degree of arrogance that no corporation could today get away with in the business world, that was once regarded as the privilege of hereditary aristocracy.

A clerisy of power exists that in size and complexity is without precedent since the height of the Roman Empire. This clerisy has deep roots in modern European history, but never before, not even in the post-Renaissance absolute monarchies, has it known the intellectual and economic affluence it knows at the present time. It is composed not only of those who occupy the top elective or appointive positions in our political society, and by their aides and subordinates, all alike preoccupied by the attributes of power, but also, and far from least, by the greater part of the intellectual, especially academic, class. For this class the political state has a sacredness that the church once possessed for its own clerisy. I shall have more to say about the clerisy of power later. Suffice it here to say that it is as vivid a reality in modern democracy as it ever was in any Renaissance monarchy: as vivid, and vastly larger.

We are nevertheless witnessing, as I write, a gathering revolt against this same political clerisy and against the whole structure of wealth, privilege, and power that the contemporary democratic state has come to

represent. What we are also witnessing, and this tragically, is rising opposition to the central values of the political community as we have known them for the better part of the past two centuries: freedom, rights, due process, privacy, and welfare.

I say “tragically” advisedly. I find it hard to think that very much of the extraordinary burst of economic, social, and cultural growth we have known during the last two hundred years would have been possible apart from the structure of liberties and rights which were guaranteed by the political community. To lose, as I believe we are losing, this structure of values is surely among the more desolating facts in the present decline of the West. Nevertheless, looked at in historical terms, it would be remarkable if the present combination of political Leviathan and sense of helplessness and impotence in citizenry were not attended by disenchantment and rising hatred.

It would be comforting if the revolt were simply the result of Viet Nam and Watergate. But it cannot be so seen. In the first place the roots of revolt are deeper and older in this country. In the second place, precisely the same kind of revolt is to be seen in other Western countries, those which have known neither Viet Nam nor Watergate. In West Germany, Italy, France, the Scandinavian countries, Holland, Belgium, and even—now especially—England, the reports of citizen unrest, citizen indifference, citizen alienation, and citizen hostility to government do not differ appreciably from what we are given in the United States.

Clearly, we are at the beginning of a new Reformation, this time, however, one that has the political state rather than the church as the central object of its force; a force that ranges from the slow drip of apathy to the more hurricane-like intensities of violence and terror. The first great Reformation, that of the sixteenth century, was also a period of twilight of authority in the West. It was terminated by the rise of the national state and the gradual retreat of church, kinship, guild, and hereditary class. Today we are present, I believe, at the commencement of the retreat of the state as we have known this institution for some five centuries, though what the consequences will be no one can be certain.

The new Reformation, it has to be said, was predicted clearly enough

in the nineteenth century and also in the early part of our own century. True, little if any attention was paid these predictions at the time, or indeed in the decades following for the most part until just after World War II. But the predictions are there and remain fertile sources of insight into our present crisis. I have reference to those such as Burke, Lamennais, Tocqueville, Proudhon, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche, a wide enough variety surely, who early became aware of the potentialities for self-destruction which lay in the modernity that the new democratic state, above any other single institution, was generating. What these minds could see well in advance was the increasing massiveness of sheer political-military power coexisting with the crumbling of the pre-democratic strata of values and institutions which alone made political freedom possible, leaving in the end the centralized state of the masses.

Thus Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, wrote of “a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe,” and referred prophetically to “the hollow murmuring underground; a confused movement . . . that threatens a general earthquake in the political world.” Nor did Burke fail to see the nature of the crisis that lay ahead: one compounded of atomized masses of citizens ruled by increasingly despotic, ever more militarized forms of government, all of them rooted in and consecrated to the masses.

Tocqueville thought that only in the occasional rise of a Napoleonic figure was future Western society likely to survive against the forces of bureaucracy, leveling, and endemic egoism which were being spawned by modernity. Of Napoleon he wrote: “The maintenance of order, the regular application of laws, the abolition of all unnecessary cruelty, even a certain taste for justice were characteristic of his government. Yet his suppression of free thought, the destruction of social responsibility together with the exaltation of martial courage were the main principles of that government.” In our own time more and more people find themselves looking for precisely that kind of political figure.

A whole line of thinkers in the nineteenth century, one we have only really come to know in recent years, chiefly after World War II, took its envisagement of present and future from those observations by Tocque-

ville. Burckhardt, whose famous study of the Italian Renaissance had been constructed essentially around a fusion of the elements of hedonistic subjectivism, the arts of power, and novel uses of military despotism in the cultivation of welfare and the arts, wrote of the future:

“For a long time I have been aware that we are driving toward the alternative of complete democracy or absolute despotism without law or right. This despotic regime will not be practiced any longer by dynasties. They are too soft and kind-hearted. The new tyrannies will be in the hands of military commandos who will call themselves republican.”

Among the greater sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Tönnies, Weber, Simmel, Durkheim foremost—there was common recognition of an accelerating atomization of morality and social order, with the ties of money and contract proving increasingly impotent in the maintenance of solidarity, and in the offing the prospect of a political power ever more centralized, bureaucratized, and leveling in its effects upon culture.

What Spengler called *The Decline of the West*—a work written before World War I, though not published until after—was only a restatement of the kinds of diagnosis and prophecy that had been present, though rarely recognized, in European writing since Tocqueville. Spengler, however, converted this diagnosis and prophecy into a law of history, one set forth in cyclical form and made applicable to each of the great civilizations of the past. Our Western civilization, Spengler wrote, like each of its forerunners in time, will succumb, has already begun to succumb, to the combined forces of loss of social authority and hierarchy, consequent creation of the faceless mass, and, rising above and giving domination to this mass, a new, harsh, and fundamentally barbaric military class that will govern with the rhetoric of humanitarian democracy. With Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Weber, and others before him, Spengler could see the early demise of genuinely democratic or republican forms of government, their place taken by a society so inherently atomized and unstable that military force alone would be able to give it cohesion and expression—through a constantly rising incidence of global warfare.

Has the West, in each of its nations, reached by now the condition

prophesied by these and other minds of the past? There is much reason to believe so, and it would require a totally closed mind to be insensitive to the increase at the present time in forebodings of the future. Overwhelmingly these are political in character, anchored in the seeming incapacity of the political order any longer to sustain the lives and hopes of its citizens.

Strange specters hover over the land, none of them foreseen by any of us as recently as the 1930s in the United States or, for that matter, in any Western country.

There is the whole, spreading wave of unreason to be seen in both popular and philosophical writing, a recurrence of that “failure of nerve” Sir Gilbert Murray found in another of history’s twilight ages, the age of social disintegration and militarism that followed the Peloponnesian Wars in ancient Greece and the consequent breakdown of the Athenian *polis*. Today, as then, the scene is filled with eruptions of the occult, the superstitious, and the antirational, of faith in blind fortune and chance, and of generalized retreat into the subjective recesses of consciousness. Salvation of the ego bids fair to replace the concern with the human community that was in a sense the mainspring of the birth of liberal democracy in the late eighteenth century.

There are other ways of perceiving the revolt against politics and the political community at the present time: no one of them crucial by itself but given extraordinary meaning by its association with other, related, phenomena. There is the all-too evident success of fundamentalist, pentecostal forms of religion, whose obvious impact—very destructive impact—upon the liberal and modernist forms of religions which had in so many instances forsaken religious for political creed should not blind us to the equally destructive impact these pentecostal forms of community have, or can easily have, upon the political habit of mind. For the war of these militant faiths is against all forms of belief which find in the political state or any other external structure of social order the possibility of redemption or salvation. The kinds of large audiences political orators attracted only a few decades ago in America are attracted today by the religious orators, revivalist and other, and there is much