



## Episode 1,727: Do Conservatives Have Important Things to Tell the World?

Guest: Brad Birzer

**WOODS:** As always, before I even read this article about Nisbet's 11 tenets of conservatism – or was it two articles?

**BIRZER:** Actually, he did write it over a couple of different things, and yes, I wrote two different parts to it, really one long article that I broke into two.

**WOODS:** Right, okay. But as soon as I saw this, I thought I'll definitely going to have him on to talk about it.

**BIRZER:** Oh, great.

**WOODS:** Anything with a number in the title, I know we're going to have a nice, focused conversation. There are only 11 possible things that could come up in this conversation. But I think the first thing we should do, though, is tell folks who Robert Nisbet was.

**BIRZER:** Yeah, incredible guy. Historian as well as a sociologist, and one of the good sociologists. In fact, he made some very interesting points on why a conservative or libertarian should be into sociology, why they shouldn't just dismiss it. But he was a fascinating guy. Born in 1913, died in 1996, so lived a very productive life. And during his lifetime, he was probably almost as well-known as figures like Friedrich Hayek. He's been forgotten. There are hardly any students left of Nisbet, but during the 1950s, '60s, '70s, and into the '80s, he was really one of the great public intellectuals, always publishing in *The Washington Post*, in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, was called upon by CBS and other major news affiliates to try and get his views on things. It's amazing that we've forgotten him, because he really was this critical figure for a long time.

Considered himself a conservative, but interestingly enough, Tom, and I kind of hope we'll get into this a little bit, he loved the late 19th-century anarchists, really loved them, all the way up through Albert Jay Nock. Albert Jay Nock was one of his five heroes. So he wrote a piece in 1980 called "Conservatives and Libertarians: Uneasy Cousins," but he is more anti-statist than about any libertarian I know, even though he called himself a conservative. So it'd be fun to get into that, because I think it's a really interesting aspect to his own arguments.

**WOODS:** Well, he had a rather distinguished academic career that I believe included some time at Columbia University.

**BIRZER:** That's right. So he started off his career, he got his BA, his MA, and his PhD all at Berkeley, and he ended up teaching there and became tenured at Berkeley. But then when the UC system expanded and they created UC Riverside, he became the Dean of Arts and Letters there and was a big proponent of Western civilization and not the great book as we know it, but certainly the great ideas, he was a huge proponent of. From there, he went to the University of Arizona for a few years, but then he ended up at Columbia. And he had the highest paid academic chair in the world while he was at Columbia in the 1970s. So yeah, he had a very distinguished academic career.

**WOODS:** He has a book called *The Quest for Community* that I've said is one of the formative books in my own intellectual development, And I've had mixed results when I've recommended it to people. I wouldn't say it's the first book you need to read in your life, But I've had some people say this book is absolute dynamite and I'm glad Woods recommended it, and I've had other people say I find it extremely dense and difficult to get through. So it depends. But it's a terrible title. It's maybe the worst book title for a really great and important book. *The Quest for Community*, who would want to read this book? But I've said it's like a graduate course in political thought.

**BIRZER:** Absolutely, Tom.

**WOODS:** This one book, just tremendous.

**BIRZER:** And the way he was able to pull together Rousseau, of course whom he despises, and pull together Hobbs, also someone he despises, but with people like Edmund Burke and de Tocqueville, whom he respects, it's a great book. But I would not totally disagree with some of your listeners. It is dense. I've had to read it three or four times to get the main argument, but it's been very influential on me, to be sure.

**WOODS:** Let's talk about his 11 tenets of conservatism. Now, where does he lay these out?

**BIRZER:** So this was in a 1952 article he wrote on the history of conservatism in sociology, and it's where he makes the case that sociology arose when it did as a response to the French Revolution. And therefore, so the great French sociologists were these people who despise the French Revolution and really created a kind of science of understanding local community. So everything from Liberty Classroom to our churches to our schools, any of these local communities and associations, that quest for community came out of, at least an exploration of it, a science of it came out in reaction to the French Revolution. So this was a 1952 article that he published in an academic journal, and it's that great kind of article that's as intelligent as any good academic journal, but actually well written, unlike almost every academic article, so it's a nice combination of intelligence and good writing.

**WOODS:** Let's go through some of these. Now, if we try to do all 11, we're going to shortchange them, so I might –

**BIRZER:** Some of them overlap.

**WOODS:** Yeah, a few of them overlap, and you've got it right in front of you.

**BIRZER:** I do. That's right.

**WOODS:** Let's start with the very first one, I think we do have to cover, and I'm just going to read your paragraph on it:

"First, the conservative must deal directly with the very nature of society. Society is legitimate and constituted, never created. No two men came together and said through a social contract, let us construct society. They do that within society all the time, but they do not do this the beginning of all society. Rather, society 'is an organic entity with internal laws of development and with infinitely subtle personal and institutional relationships.' The individual will cannot create society, but it can pervert and distort it, mocking its very being."

All right, let's take this apart. This is an Aristotelian approach to society, and it stands in contrast to a couple of alternatives. One would be a totalitarian view of society, where society is constructed by certain individual men who then impose certain relationships on everybody, like when the Soviet Union kind of imposed identities on people. *You are now a member of an entity that didn't exist before, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, things like that. But even that wasn't a creation of society. We have the social contract ideas going from anybody from Rousseau even to as harmless as John Locke, where Locke views society as indeed being something that people rationally recognize the benefits of and agreed on.

So I always wondered – I know a lot of conservatives, really, really traditional conservatives who look at Locke's view that society does really come about through man's contrivance, and they say, ah, these stupid liberals, they don't understand Aristotle's insight. Well, I guess my question is, what's the practical effect of whether I believe in Locke's view or Nisbet's view about the origin of society? Why does that even matter? Is that just an intellectual dispute, or does it have real consequences?

**BIRZER:** I think it does have real consequences. If we truly think that society is just created by an individual or two individuals or even three coming together, that changes things in terms of the subtlety of our relationships. Just as you said a little bit ago, Tom, imagine if something is imposed upon us and we suddenly become a part of a definition of something that is much, much, much greater than we are. The way that Nisbet looks at this is it's definitely from the ground up.

So what matters, your friendship with me, Tom, my friendship with you, these are not things that are just accidental or things that maybe have something to do with society. This is really the essence of society for someone like Nisbet. The fact that I'm married to my wife and specifically to Deidre, the fact that we have children, these are not minor moments within society, these are the very backbones of society.

And nobody came together and said, "Tom, you and Brad are going to be friends," right? We met in a strange set of circumstances and came together, and suddenly we recognize we liked each other. And that's the foundation of society. But we didn't create a government. We created a friendship, and from that friendship, we developed certain things. I work for Liberty Classroom, and we're doing this podcast. These are the kinds of things that Nisbet says matter, because they happen organically and they happen spontaneously.

And it's the culmination of all of those things that makes society, so even if we look at some ones like the founding fathers, they had relationships, they had ideas. They didn't go into 1776 with blank slates. They had all kinds of ideas about Roman society, they had ideas about English society, they knew all of this. And it was out of their friendships and their desire to

create associations with one another and to allow those associations to flourish that really created what America is, and they couldn't have done it without prior things. They couldn't have done it without the Magna Carta. They couldn't have done it without the Mayflower Compact. All of those things become important. But so too just the friendships, the fact that they're willing to pledge their sacred honor and their fortunes to one another and to do that, this is an act of friendship in many ways.

And that's different than just coming together, shaking hands, and creating something whole cloth that Locke doesn't quite – that's too simplistic for Locke. Locke's more complicated than that, but he's not a lot more complicated [laughing]. And that's the argument that Nisbet is making.

And Tom, I don't want to go on too long about this, but the other thing that matters is, for Nisbet, this is the distinction between a libertarian and a conservative, how you believe this. Now, I think Nisbet takes that a little bit too far. I think we can be more nuanced about it than this. But he does believe that this is the key difference between someone who believes in a libertarian government and someone who believes in a more conservative government. That's why he calls them uneasy cousins.

**WOODS:** I think there are extremes that you can go to in both directions. One extreme would be to say that society precedes any – there is no, as we've said, moment where we all agree that we're going to exist in society, so society comes temporarily before any of us.

**BIRZER:** Sure.

**WOODS:** And so you can imagine somebody saying, well, individuals exist for society, that you owe society something. Society is what makes your life possible, so you need to do this for the sake of society. And so you could imagine somebody taking this to extremes and saying, well, why shouldn't we have a national service program? You owe something to society. And then the libertarian will say, but society is just an aggregate of individuals. On the other hand, I could see a libertarian going to an extreme, where yes, I get that there's no separate entity called society, and I get that society really is nothing but a composition of individuals. But at the same time, I do, when possible, want to try to help my fellow man and not to gratuitously frustrate his ends by acting as if I live in isolation. So even though there shouldn't be any legal compulsion for me not to be a jerk, I should still not be a jerk for the sake of society. So I could see people going to the extreme: one fetishizing society, and the other pretending there's no such thing.

**BIRZER:** Exactly. And I think you're absolutely right, Tom, and that's where I think Nisbet needs to be a little bit more subtle and nuanced on this, rather than being so blunt in saying you're either one or the other. Because there are similarities. And take someone like Hayek. Hayek gave that great speech in December of 1945, "Individualism: True and False." Clearly, we would put Hayek in the libertarian camp, but he believed very strongly in association. He believed very strongly in us coming together in small groups. So yeah, there I think is an example where Nisbet kind of missed the boat.

**WOODS:** Well, then we'll go quickly over the second point, because he says that "conservatives understand that society" – well, this is your paraphrase – "society is superior to the individual in the sense that the individual cannot be understood except within the

realm of the relational. The abstract individual does not exist, nor ever can exist. Instead, the person – that is, the individual in relationship – does."

Well, that's clear because you come into this world somebody's son or daughter.

**BIRZER:** That's right.

**WOODS:** You come into this world belonging to some particular plot of land. You have some attachments, whether you like it or not.

**BIRZER:** Right. Right, I mean all of it. Speaking a certain language. We're born into a religion or lack thereof, right? We're born into a culture, all of that. So those relations do matter.

**WOODS:** Now, here's where it gets interesting, number three. And again, these are paraphrases with some quotations:

"Nisbet believed, following from the first two points, conservatives recognize that 'the irreducible unit of society is and must be itself a manifestation of society, a relationship, something that is social.'"

So in other words, the fundamental unit of society is not the individual person. And this reminds me of, this is a somewhat obscure reference, but there was a Dutch 17th-century figure, theorist named Althusius who argued, contrary to the liberal tradition, which often did look at the individual as the building block of society, that the family or the household is the building block. And so already, you have within the building block relationship at the heart of it. Not isolated individuals, but relationship at the heart of society. And society is the symbiotic relationship of these households, which come together to form villages, which come together to form provinces, but they all can be broken back down into households.

**BIRZER:** I think that maybe – I don't think Nisbet would go quite that far, and I maybe didn't word it as well as I could have, Tom. But I do think that yes, when we're talking about who we are as people, Nisbet thinks it matters, for example, that I'm at Hillsdale. I mean, in some way, I am defined by the institution that I've given 21 years to. And I'm defined not just by that, but by the fact that I live in this community, I'm defined by my family, I'm defined by my friendships. So this is where I think maybe – and I probably could have worded it better, Tom, but I think that Nisbet is more or less repeating the second point with this third point. I think he could have brought those two things together and basically said, look, there are individuals, but we understand are individuals through relationships. I think that may have been a better way to put it.

**WOODS:** I want to skip ahead, if I may.

**BIRZER:** Of course.

**WOODS:** And we can all skip around, but I want to get to one that will sound shocking to people at first. And you know, if *The Tom Woods Show* doesn't shock, I'm not doing my job.

**BIRZER:** [laughing] Tom, never. Never. Come on.

**WOODS:** So number nine, you say:

"The real conservative insists 'upon the indispensable value of the sacred, non-rational, non-utilitarian elements of human existence,'" and that "no reasonable person believes that man can 'live by reason alone.'"

Now, I want to mention this because, okay, people who are religious might see the value of that statement, but I want to suggest that everybody on some level acknowledges this. So let's just think about, I think about during the French Revolution and thereafter when they took the existing internal borderlines within France and decided, well, this is all irrational. It's a crazy quilt of borders. Let's just make it a giant grid. Well, what if I came to your hometown – which probably has some meaning for you, right? You root for the local football team or whatever, it has some meaning to you – and I said we're going to slice – because it's just misshapen. We're going to slice  $\frac{3}{7}$ ths of it off to make it a perfect square, and those  $\frac{3}{7}$ ths now, we officially declare that you must love these things over here, and now the new flower that you're supposed to like is this one, and the team you're supposed to root for – We would think this is – what? Even though, strictly speaking, rationally, it's more efficient for your town to be a perfect square, but this just goes against everything that makes the human heart respond the way it does.

**BIRZER:** Tom, also, it's not just the French Revolution, and this is exactly what Woodrow Wilson did with the League of Nations. And after World War I, this is what the Allies did. They carved up Europe into bizarre things that we're still living with and still suffering from. So I think this is the kind of thing – I don't want to suggest that Nisbet is promoting the irrational, but he's saying exactly what you just said. There are certain kinds of patriotisms and loyalties that we have that we are not able to explain rationally, but they're there and they do matter at some level.

**WOODS:** Right, right. And of course, I think it would be a misunderstanding of the Romantics to say that they didn't value reason. I'm sure they understood that when they're hungry, they should eat, and they understood the rational connection between those things.

**BIRZER:** That's right.

**WOODS:** Their point was that reason doesn't belong everywhere. For example, if you're writing a love letter, you don't write it the way Dr. Spock would write it. You don't say I love you for seven reasons that I've broken down into three sub categories and with five corollaries for each one.

**BIRZER:** It sounds like a high school debate.

**WOODS:** Exactly. You wouldn't get very far, okay? That's the point.

**BIRZER:** Yes, exactly. And, well, I always like Cicero on this. We have the rationality of our head, we have the reason of our soul, and we have the passions of the stomach. And I think there is something to that. When we procreate, we're not really reasonable about it. That's not what's going on in the moment. But afterwards, it is. When we start planning, oh my gosh, kid's coming, what's going to happen? Well, then we do have to be reasonable. We do have to

understand there has to be a logic to it. And I think that it has to be a balance of those three things: the mind, the soul, and the stomach in some way.

**WOODS:** There's something very austere about a symphony by Haydn, and there were many of them. I think he had over 100 symphonies. Very austere. I mean, not to say they're not pleasurable, but compare that to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, where he takes his passion for Harriet Smithson and writes it into every single one of the five movements he's got in that thing, where you hear that theme repeated.

**BIRZER:** That's a great point, Tom.

**WOODS:** Yeah, and so instead of just thinking, well, there's a formula I'm supposed to follow and I have to follow these steps, he just said to heck with that. I'm going to write a story. I'm going to include the story. I'm going to tell people what the story is so they can't miss it, and the story will be told through these five movements, and my passion will be displayed in the story. So again, it's not like Berlioz doesn't believe in reason. He's just saying that man doesn't live by reason alone. That's all.

**BIRZER:** And Tom, I don't want to embarrass you, but think about one of the reasons that you have been so effective. You have been effective, because you are extremely passionate about reason. And that matters. Really, if you were totally reasonable about reason, I would guess that your audience wouldn't be quite as large. You've got a romantic streak in the way that you go after things and the way you defend things. I think that matters in many ways.

**WOODS:** That's very kind of you to say. Now, you see how beautifully I, without realizing it, am straddling both reason and passion together?

**BIRZER:** There you go. They're in communion. And imagination.

**WOODS:** Yes, right, that's right. All right, well, speaking of imagination, let's get back to your column at [TheImaginativeConservative.org](http://TheImaginativeConservative.org).

**BIRZER:** Sure.

**WOODS:** Okay, at this point, you pick one out and let's talk about it.

**BIRZER:** Well, I could probably talk a little bit more about the reason and the rational. I like that very much.

**WOODS:** Sure.

**BIRZER:** But one of the things I liked and I thought goes along with this, and this is where I think Nisbet could have probably put these together, I like number eight, where he says that what we have to do is understand that there is also a reality of social disorganization. And I like that, because society's messy. History is messy. People are messy. We do stupid things. And this is where we're not always rational. We do very stupid things. We go out – and I don't mean you are me, Tom, but society at large does – we see that right now. We commit suicide by trying to stop a virus that really isn't as powerful as we've been told. We get those CDC numbers, 6%, right? This is stunning, and yet we stopped the economy basically around March

17th, and we haven't gotten out of that. We do crazy things. And we do irrational things. And we act out of fear.

So, Nisbet here is not celebrating this, but he is recognizing it, and that's something that I think in your example that you brought up was so good, the example of French Revolution. Let's straighten all this out, or let's be like Cambodia in 1975, and we'll put impose an absolutely strict view on the way that relations work, and we'll break families apart and we'll create new social units. This is this idea that I think bad liberals have and progressives have of perfectibility. And Nisbet is reminding us: look, this isn't going to happen. And if your society doesn't take into account that there are going to be mistakes and people are going to do stupid things, you're going to do even worse things because you're going to misunderstand the very nature of humanity.

**WOODS:** In this point, you have the phrase "social cohesion can easily break apart." So there is this sense in Nisbet of the precariousness of our existence, and its runs — now look, I never read Francis Fukuyama, so for all I know I'm absolutely butchering his idea.

**BIRZER:** Oh, I did.

**WOODS:** Did you?

**BIRZER:** I did, several times. For Liberty Fund, I read him.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay. Sure, sure. But my understanding of his view of the end of history was simply that, now that we've reached, let's say, the state of democratic capitalism, more or less like the system we have in the US and to some degree in the Western world, that's really it. We're not going to have violent upheavals anymore. We're going to have reforms within the system, and history in terms of these dramatic stories, from that point of view, has come to an end. And just my superficial sense of this is that Nisbet wouldn't have been so sure, because I don't think he thinks the human process is quite so neat and tidy as that.

**BIRZER:** No, it's complicated for Nisbet. It's extremely complicated. And he's always fascinated with those nuances, because I think it's the nuances that add a kind of mystery and variety to life for him. So yeah, definitely not as rational as we might — he's certainly no Bentham. He's no John Stuart Mills on this.

**WOODS:** There's so many interesting points in this piece, and we've gotten to some of them. The frustrating part, let's say, and probably the frustrating part for somebody who is, let's say, a rationalist, who just wants a plan of action — just tell me the seven things we need to do — you're going to be frustrated if you read Russell Kirk or Robert Nisbet looking for the seven things you're supposed to do. But the difficulty that maybe a libertarian might have would be to say that, at least with libertarianism, I know what we're supposed to do, at least what we're not supposed to do, which is aggress against people.

**BIRZER:** Sure.

**WOODS:** The rest of it is up to you. We leave you alone to live your life. Here, it's not immediately obvious — there's no program here. There's no *this is what the legislators should*

*do*. So how do we respond to the claim that conservatism is some nice-sounding platitudes, but it doesn't guide you? Is that wrong?

**BIRZER:** Tom, even as someone who straddles libertarianism and conservatism, I don't disagree with that. I think there is something fundamentally flawed in conservatism in the sense that it always ends up being kind of romantic and subjective in the way that Kirk and Nisbet and others put it. And they're not alone in that. You do get some conservatives, especially the neoconservatives, who do have a plan of action. They always have a plan of action. Always. And I admire that to a certain degree. And I also admire within libertarianism, especially the Tom Woods variety of libertarianism, I admire the nonaggression principle. I think there's something vital to that. I think it's really, really important, and I want to be able to move forward with something.

And I do find that in a lot of conservatism, especially traditional conservatism, these guys are the best critics you will ever find. You're never going to find a better critic than Kirk or Nisbet. They understand how things work and understand how things don't work. But they don't give us a good sense of what tomorrow will bring. And I think that is a flaw. I think it's a deep flaw. And it's one that I've tried, at least in my own career, to kind of figure out how to get around it. And I end up in the end, I come back to the nonaggression principle, I come back to Hayek, and I think there are certain things where, yeah, I'm glad that the founders didn't just bash the English system. I'm glad they came up with the Constitution. Even if that Constitution's flawed, it's better than not having one, so I like that.

**WOODS:** What do you think Nisbet would think about 2020 America? Forget about the lockdowns and stuff. Other than that, what do you think he'd think about our present state?

**BIRZER:** He actually thought that what was happening during the 1960s – and he was an extremely astute observer of the revolution of 1964 to '69, the student revolution in particular. Of course, he was an academic at the time and wrote very openly about this. He actually thought something broke in America with that revolution. He was very clear that the students, as he thought, had no real right to rebel. In fact, what they were doing was not rebelling as much as throwing a temper tantrum. But the fact that so many people kowtowed to the students, he thought was an extremely dangerous sign in society, that we'd lost a certain kind of conviction or will to do what was right in our own individual lives, and therefore in society, because remember, society comes from these relationships.

However, he was quite sympathetic to the black revolution of the same time, and he thought that probably black Americans had every right to be rebelling because of the way they had been treated. And he was not shocked by that. But he did seem to think that the student rebellion harbored something broken, that the middle class in America had really lost its will and really was only living for comfort and not much more than that.

So I've wondered about this too, Tom, and I don't think this is a definitive answer. I have to give this some more thought. But I don't think he would be entirely surprised that when we look at what's going on with Black Lives Matter, most of the violent protests we're seeing have nothing to do with blacks. They have everything to do with rich white kids who are bored right now. He thought that this element of boredom had really crept into society, and he was worried about that.

**WOODS:** What are you working on these days? You're on sabbatical right now, which is a great time to be on sabbatical, by the way.

**BIRZER:** Yeah, actually, especially after the chaos of last school year. And Hillsdale is going full strength right now. We don't have a single case of COVID. Classes are in session. Things are going well. There hasn't been a problem at all. So I hear this from my colleagues. I'm obviously not in the classroom right now.

But I'm actually working on a biography. I'm spending the year writing a biography of Nisbet, and really I'm focusing on part of what we've talked about, but I'm extremely interested in his anti-statism. He wrote a number of articles — and I'm writing on more than this, but the thrust of my book is really to look at the more libertarian aspects of Nisbet. He wrote a series of articles in the early 1980s during Reagan's first administration. He was very disillusioned that Reagan didn't take the government down more than he wanted. But he has a whole series. They're hilarious articles because they're so brilliant and they're witty.

But he writes this, you know, where is America going? Even with someone like Reagan, we're not breaking down the state. In fact, all we're doing is adding to the federal budget. And he has a number of articles where he says that the entire history of the state, starting with the earliest aspects in Western civilization of the state from Hammurabi on forward, the state has always been about euphemism. It's always euphemism.

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**BIRZER:** And one of the reasons that we went from kind of a god king, to a king, to a social contract, these are all just con jobs by those in power to try and conform us to what they want. He got really radical. In fact, I've made the argument before in print that he is more anti-statist than any anti-statist I know, with the exception of Rothbard. I mean, this guy is amazing when he's talking about the history of the state. He pulls no punches at all.

**WOODS:** Well, I'm glad you're doing this, because I have appreciated him for so long, and I know that the work you bring to it will be one of a sympathizer who's got a critical eye, but who will treat the material with the respect it deserves. So this is all good stuff.

**BIRZER:** Thanks, Tom. Yeah, and I've already got a publisher, so it's all set.

**WOODS:** Oh, tremendous.

**BIRZER:** Yeah, yeah, University of Notre Dame Press has accepted it, so yeah, I'm excited about that.

**WOODS:** Wonderful, wonderful. Well, congratulations on that. That is wonderful.

**BIRZER:** Thanks, Tom. It's always so great talking to you. And yeah, your enthusiasm always makes me more enthusiastic, so thank you.

**WOODS:** Well, I appreciate that. One of these times we've got to talk about music again. I don't care if you ungrateful listeners out there don't want the Brad and Tom music episode [laughing].

**BIRZER:** We've got to have a prog episode coming up soon.

**WOODS:** I mean after all the things I do for you people listening to this thing, producing something five days a week for almost seven years now, once in a while, I want you to do something in return. Listen to my music episode [laughing].

**BIRZER:** [laughing] Cranky old Tom. There we go. Love it.

**WOODS:** Oh, man. I have this new sponsor, they have the most delicious coffee I've ever had. I didn't have any this morning, so I'm in this mood to just get on everybody's case about things [laughing].

**BIRZER:** There you go. You need your coffee. I had three cups this morning.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay, fine, fine, fine. All right, well, thanks again, Brad. Great talking to you.

**BIRZER:** Oh, it's great, Tom. Thanks for having me.