

Foreword

PHILIP SELZNICK'S life's work is distinctive in character and distinguished in quality. That is equally true of this new book, *A Humanist Science*, both in its own right and for the underlying themes and implications of that larger body of work and thought, which it discloses, distills, and extends.

Selznick has been an eminent and influential thinker in a wide range of social scientific disciplines, among them organization theory, general sociology, sociology of law, and social philosophy. He has written on many subjects, and his ideas have undergone cumulative refinement and development. Nevertheless, his thought has a deep and sustained coherence. It is, however, a complex coherence, not that of someone with just one thing to say.

One aspect of this coherence lies in Selznick's evolving views of the proper character of social inquiry and of its proper focus. *A Humanist Science* is above all, and almost literally, a distillation of these views. The word "distillation" is important here. I doubt that many people reading his early work would have realized the extent to which many of the themes central to this one were already animating the particular discussions there. I'm not even sure that Selznick always knew it. Sometimes, however, reading a writer's works backward is revealing. Doing so today, one is struck by the remarkable extent to which Selznick's oeuvre continually plays on and develops a coherent range of deep themes.

The first stage of Selznick's intellectual development began shortly before the Second World War, with an intense period of political

engagement in that improbably fertile womb of academic (and literary) productivity, the New York Trotskyist movement, its parties and party-lets, factions and fractions. From that engagement came several writings read by a small number of clever would-be, soon would-have-been, and then never-wanted-to-be revolutionaries. Out of it, too, came Selznick's lifelong concern with "the conditions and processes that frustrate ideals or, instead, give them life and hope."¹ Some of his erstwhile colleagues abandoned such concerns when they ceased to be Trotskyists. Selznick never did. In one way and another, they animated all his subsequent scholarly work, which began at the same time and, after the war, developed into classic contributions to the sociological theory of organizations and institutions (*TVA and the Grass Roots* [1947], *The Organizational Weapon* [1954], *Leadership in Administration* [1957]), and general sociology (*Sociology*, with Leonard Broom, seven editions).

In his second period, beginning in the mid-1950s, Selznick became a founding and prominent member of the law and society movement, and founder of the Law and Society Center (1961) and later the Jurisprudence and Social Policy (JSP) Program (1978) at the University of California at Berkeley. The JSP was the first Ph.D. program in an American law school and remains one of the very few. It was also distinctive among pioneering law and society endeavors in its determination systematically to marry philosophical and sociological insights with each other and apply them to matters of practical policy consequence. As Selznick put it at the time, its "stress on humanist scholarship distinguishes what we are about from recent precursors of JSP, including the law and society movement. . . . I believe we can and should have a larger aspiration—the clarification of fundamental values. For this, we must rely heavily on philosophical, cultural, and historical modes of inquiry."² In this period Selznick also published several important essays (particularly "Sociology and Natural Law" [1961]), and books (*Law, Society, and Industrial Justice* [1969] and *Law and Society in Transition: Towards Responsive Law* [1978, reprint 2001]), notable, among other things, for their explicit and pervasive interweaving of descriptive, analytic, normative, and policy-oriented concerns.

His third period, which includes the present volume, has been more reflective than investigative, and more wide-ranging in scale and scope than his earlier work. It began with his magisterial *The Moral Commonwealth* (1992), a work of social philosophy (or philosophical sociology) of extraordinary range, ambition, erudition, and richness, concerned to explore the sources of “moral competence” in persons, institutions, and communities. It is a remarkable feat of intellectual architecture, both in its internal combination of clarity and complexity, scholarship and originality, and as a kind of elaborate piece of intellectual bridge building, which spans and connects many topics and fields, in positive and normative sociology, political and moral philosophy, and much else.

Having finished that major work, Selznick felt there remained loose ends to be tied up: one more specific and substantive in concerns and the other more general and in part methodological, though method and substance are rarely far apart in his thinking. Some new substantive themes had begun to emerge during the writing of *The Moral Commonwealth* (though they were prefigured much earlier), having to do with the communitarian turn of his thought. He wanted to communicate these themes as much to a larger educated audience as to his peers. *The Communitarian Persuasion* (2002) was the result. And distinct from, though closely connected with, his views about the substance of social and political philosophy, Selznick also had long practiced and advocated an approach to thinking about social, political, legal, and moral matters that blended philosophy, particularly moral philosophy, and social thought in a way that came to form what he called “humanist science.” The JSP was an example of this, but his canvas was always larger than law. The present work represents an attempt to distill the elements of that larger aspiration, exemplify it, sketch where it might lead, and recommend it. Again he has had in mind an audience of intelligent readers, going beyond academic specialists but including them as well.

AS ONE WOULD EXPECT from a sociologist of Selznick’s eminence, all of his work is unmistakably sociological in provenance, perspective, and sensibility, but in all of it one sees signs—and over the last forty years

those signs have become unambiguous and programmatic—that he has “an ecumenical view of that discipline,”³ one that includes political, legal, and moral theory, with blurred boundaries not rigorously policed, which we are encouraged to cross.

In Selznick’s hands, social theory is an integrative pursuit, committed to both the explanation and the evaluation of social phenomena. This inclusive aspiration is key, in opposition (“revolt” would be too harsh a word for Selznick’s temperament but not too strong for his conviction) to the “academic myopia” that he attributes in large part to the “rampant multiculturalism in academic life.”⁴ Much as he admires academic disciplines, and clear though it is that he is by formation and intellectual character a sociologist, he laments that

the disciplines to which many of us have devoted our lives, into which we have socialized our students, have unfortunately become intellectual islands. These islands have their own jargon, their own culture, their own paradigms, their own ways of thinking. These self-reproducing disciplines have often stood in the way of serious engagement with major issues.

Of course, as Selznick is well aware, not everyone agrees. This is not news. When in 1969 he published *Law, Society, and Industrial Justice*, his first extended monograph on law, the legal sociologist Donald Black responded with an extended review, protesting that while this was splendid “sociological jurisprudence,” “undoubtedly the most erudite and imaginative example of the natural-law approach to appear,” it was not sociology of law, not science.⁵ Selznick’s response was one that the old common law might have called “confession and avoidance,” and it is typical of his impatience with academic border patrols. Yes, he mixes sociology with jurisprudence, and with other normative disciplines as well, but why not? “It seems late in the day, after so much waywardness and so much sterility, to insist upon a full divorce of the theoretical and the practical. In social science, as elsewhere, we place our bets on the enterprise of self-correction, not on a claim to complete objectivity.”⁶ There is no evidence that his views on these matters have changed. Humanist science, and its offspring normative social theory, are not oxymorons but

inescapable complements, often rejected, not much practiced, hard to do, but pregnant with possibility.

The key to “humanist science” is Selznick’s long-adhered-to conviction that appreciation of the role and play of values and ideals in the world is central to social understanding: what they are, what they do, what threatens them, what protects and sustains them, what enables them to flourish. That means acknowledging them as proper objects of study, rather than mere epiphenomena of whatever is thought really to matter. It also requires identification of the values at stake in particular social processes, practices, and institutions; clarification of the nature of these values; understanding of what endangers them; and exploration of the conditions in which they might thrive.

Since concern with values is omnipresent in this conception of social science, a social scientist should be informed by traditions of philosophical thought less chary of dealing with values than is typical of some of the more positivistic conceptions of behavioral (and legal) sciences. On the other hand, since so much that is important about the play of values in the world is subject to variation and refracted through particular contexts, philosophical speculation needs to be anchored in an understanding of these matters of fact, contingency, and variety. And so social sciences.

And since Selznick’s concern is not with values applied to just anything, but always ultimately as they affect human persons, the learning with which a social scientist needs to be familiar—in aid of “genuine understanding of human frailty, suffering, and potentiality”—will center upon those of the traditions of humanism, broadly conceived. The distinctive aim of humanist science, blending insights from these various sources so often separated, is “analytical and empirical study of ideals and virtues, understood as at once latent in and threatened by the vagaries of social life.” It must be alive to “the wholeness and the complexity of human persons and the contributions that social inquiry can make to human well-being.”

PART 1 of *A Humanist Science* fleshes out central elements of “the humanist imagination” and both characterizes and exemplifies what Selznick takes to be its preoccupations and spirit. Selznick draws attention to some

classic contributions to the emergence and development of that imagination, to its complex character and multiple incarnations, and to distinctive concerns and insights to be found and generated there. At the same time that he reports some of the central themes and claims of humanist writings, he characterizes the “grain” of a style of thought, what those drawn to it are inclined to value and consider important to understand.

These broad-brush historical reflections draw with ease, eloquence, and confidence on a life of reading and thought. What is emphasized is not paraded for its own sake or just for the record but to illustrate the development and to exemplify the particular character of humanist concerns, viewpoints, and sensibilities that are also Selznick’s own. They are called upon and fashioned to show how they have been and may be wedded to social investigation that is amply *scientific* without being reductively *scientistic*, and whose “chief concerns are (1) to identify distinctive or animating ideals and (2) to learn what conditions affect their realization.”

In Part 2, “Realms of Value,” this mode of investigation, “social science as moral inquiry,” is then brought to bear on a range of “major topics in social science”—social order and moral order, humanist virtues, the morality of governance, rationality and responsibility, the quality of culture, law and justice—to show how these large topics might be illuminated by humanist science. More general implications for moral philosophy, social science, and public philosophy are explored in Part 3.

THIS IS AN IMPORTANT and intriguing work, from at least three points of view. The first is as evidence of a highly individual and uncommon mind and cast of mind at work, and reflecting on the product of a life of thought. The book not only commends but exhibits a distinctive intellectual and moral sensibility, as much as it develops arguments or garners evidence. That sensibility warrants attention, even apart from the observations and arguments it generates. At any time, Selznick’s ways of thinking, refined and developed through a long life of sustained investigation, scholarship, erudition, and reflection, would be distinctive and of interest. They are all the more so today, since in many ways they run

counter to the “spirit of the age.” Selznick is no raging iconoclast, but *A Humanist Science* represents a style of enterprise that few modern thinkers would be able or willing to attempt. Implicit in Selznick’s measured and ecumenical prose is a critique of much that is done by modern social scientists, on the one hand, and by philosophers, on the other. The work itself conforms to none of the hyper-specializations of late modernity, though it is not without respect for their achievements. With its roots in John Dewey’s thought, and enriched by Selznick’s own deep and long familiarity with an extremely rich range of thinkers from sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy, law, theology—the labels don’t matter much to him—there are represented in these reflections a continuity and character of thought that have few parallels in the modern academy. Selznick is a thinker of significance, and such a distillation of some of his major commitments is to be welcomed, particularly since it is expressed with eloquence and grace.

A second virtue has to do with how we, not merely he, should go about thinking about the social, human world. For what Selznick represents is a point of view in modern social thought that deserves serious consideration in its own right. Many people admire the power of modern specializations, the skill involved, and the intellectual rewards to be gained. But, as some will acknowledge, all this cleverness comes at a price in terms of, among other things, intellectual and moral spaciousness, and largeness of concerns. I believe Selznick’s book will remind most readers of some of the virtues of such spaciousness and reach, and also of what is lost when they are (as they often are) systematically, even proudly, reduced, and when methods replace problems as agenda-setters. Perhaps “remind” is too optimistic a word here. Social scientists under a certain age may well not have even encountered such virtues, let alone imagined that a card-carrying social scientist might hazard to exhibit them, and still less believe that they are central to his and their common vocation.

Selznick does believe this, and he argues for it, not as some plotless call for “interdisciplinarity” or “cross-disciplinarity” or even “transdisciplinarity” but rather as a demand that what we draw upon intellectually match the character and complexity of what we are trying to understand.

At a time when interdisciplinary research receives a good deal of lip service, and when there is danger (often realized) of sliding into undisciplined mush, Selznick's work is a reminder of what can be gained from such boundary-crossings and even blurrings, when they are sensitively and intelligently undertaken. This interdisciplinarity is partly just a necessary outgrowth of the largeness of Selznick's concerns, but it is also a product of considered reflection on what is necessary for us to understand and usefully affect complex social processes.

His determination to mix the concerns of social research and moral philosophy is rare among empirical social scientists, and the depth of his philosophical knowledge and insight is rarer still. It is not the way most social scientists have been trained, or think, today. Relatively few share his large view of the discipline or would know what to do with it. On the other hand, Selznick is a great sociologist and he is concerned with bringing to bear on normative, philosophical questions a close examination of social realities and a disciplined understanding of the way that complex and large social and political institutions work, and vary, in the world. Modern philosophers are commonly innocent of such matters.

Third, the book delineates for humanist science a subject with which we are all concerned but by which value-free social scientists are too often merely embarrassed. We are invited to treat as central the fate of values in the world and to learn to be alert—scientifically alert—to “recurrent sources of vitality and decay. This is an agenda for a humanist science of social life.” The book is full of wise and thoughtful appraisals of what matters in social life, what leads to social flourishing, what sorts of conditions allow humans to thrive and what sorts diminish our chances. In all this, there is no shyness about exploring the *qualitative* differences among human experiences, differences that Selznick laments are of somewhat less concern in many of our ordinary social sciences than they are in most of our ordinary lives. Within a humanist science, this combination of facts and values, appraisals and recommendations, is in no way an embarrassment, as it is in so much behavioral science, where it commonly occurs anyway but coyly, *sotto voce*, even clandestinely. And there is a great deal here that would speak to an intelligent non-specialist

more directly, insightfully, and helpfully than does standard-issue academic work.

Some readers will be impatient with this message, with this style of book, and indeed with the enterprise as a whole: not “cutting edge,” not parading novelty, not advancing some revelatory new method or methodology, too vague, cloudy, hortatory, and so on. There is something in this sort of criticism, and perhaps it is why books of this sort are rarer than they once were. But it is not an accident that a great deal of modern social science deals with topics smaller in every sense than Selznick’s, some so small as to be hardly visible. There is a great deal to be gained when a scholar of distinction chances his arm and extends his reach in the way that is done here. My own view is that any loss of “bite” or “rigor,” in the modern behaviorist senses of these terms, is more than compensated for by the largeness, fineness, and richness of the enterprise.

As might be expected of someone who has been writing for well over sixty years, there is an autumnal tone to this book. It is not an attempt to plough new fields but rather to harvest what has been cultivated, and what might still and again bear fruit. It is not “original research” in the modern sense, nor indeed as most of Selznick’s own earlier works were. This book is truly a distillation. But the particular distillation is new, clear, eloquent, fine—and frequently a delight to read. And, as always with Selznick, one senses that one is in the hands of a wise, humane, erudite, sane, and deeply reflective guide. His concerns may not always be our own, we needn’t follow him everywhere, but it is hard not to learn from him. *A Humanist Science* is an elegant coda to a distinguished life of thought and a statement of an important intellectual position, today too rarely heard.

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