

Introduction

Philip Selznick died in 2010, one of the last of a distinguished cohort of writers and intellectuals originally from New York who began their intellectual formation before World War II and who continued to be influential for decades. They included Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Irving Howe, and others.

Selznick spent a very long life engaged with large questions concerning society, politics, institutions, law, and morals. He contributed to numerous disciplines and subdisciplinary domains and was a major figure in each of the fields he entered and one of few to have been a participant, let alone eminent, in them all. Among these fields are general sociology, the sociology of organizations and institutions, management theory, political science, industrial sociology, the sociology and philosophy of law, political theory, and social philosophy grounded in what he came to call humanist science.

The present book discusses his contributions to these various subjects and domains. But it is haunted, *I* am haunted, by a remark of his former student and sometime collaborator, Philippe Nonet, that “those who look to Philip’s work for contributions to this or that ‘field’—‘sociology of organization,’ ‘industrial sociology,’ ‘sociology of law,’—will doubtless find something, indeed a great deal, but they will miss all that matters.”²¹ The point might be phrased less dramatically; perhaps not *all*, just lots. Still, the observation resonates. This work seeks to vindicate my particular understanding of it, which may or may not be Nonet’s.

I

Selznick's intellectual development began some years before World War II, with an intense period of activity and debate in that strangely fertile womb of intellectual productivity, the New York Trotskyist movement, its parties and party-lets, factions and fractions. Like many of his closest friends from that time, Selznick was intellectually formed, and formed as an *intellectual*, before and beside the academic disciplines he went on to profess. Their thought was spurred by several dramatic, indeed world-historical and world-shattering, events, specifically the Great Depression, the epochal competitions between liberal democracies and Nazism that culminated in World War II, and with communism, both before and after that war. These prompted urgent and large questions about public morality and about the worth of different sorts and arrangements of public institutions. Selznick didn't forget such questions, even as he wrote about many other things.

Out of that engagement came several writings read by a small number of clever would-be revolutionaries, later to become well known in American academic and public life, though rarely for that. Out of it, too, came Selznick's abiding concerns with the significance of institutions and the fate of ideals. These concerns animated all his subsequent work.

In his early political essays, and in *TVA and the Grass Roots*,² his first and classic contribution to organizational and institutional theory, he explored ways in which immanent organizational tendencies tend to undermine even the finest ideals, unless deliberately countered and mastered. He next explored what mastery might require. *The Organizational Weapon*³ examined communist organizational strategy, designed to transform "recruits into deployable agents." *Leadership in Administration*⁴ sought to generalize and systematize lessons learned, among other sources, from these first two works. The examination involved empirical research and sociological explanation, but it also led Selznick to reflect on large questions of normative social and political theory, among them the nature of politics and statesmanship, to an extent uncommon in works of this kind. He also wrote, with Leonard Broom, a major introduction to sociology⁵ that, in seven editions over thirty years, was for a long time the leading sociology text in the United States. These early works had a great influence and probably remain the ones for which he is most widely known.

Thereafter Selznick moved to less populated domains and developed less fashionable preoccupations and commitments. In his second branch

of work, beginning in the early to mid-1950s, he became one of the first, and one of very few, mainstream American sociologists to engage with the study of law; still fewer were engaged with jurisprudence. He published several important essays (particularly “Sociology and Natural Law”⁶) and books: *Law, Society, and Industrial Justice*;⁷ *Law and Society in Transition*.⁸ These works were notable for their explicit and pervasive interweaving of descriptive, analytic, normative, and policy-oriented concerns. Selznick sought to identify the particular character and basic ideals of legal ordering, their range of variation, and the conditions that might allow them to be secured and, beyond that, to flourish.

These themes and views are developed in his writings, of course. But they also molded his institutional initiatives, which were substantial. In 1961, he founded the Center for the Study of Law and Society at UC Berkeley, and later (1977) the Jurisprudence and Social Policy PhD program. The Center has drawn important scholars from several disciplines and faculties and ultimately from many countries. It grew from modest beginnings to become a major site of sociolegal research, which it remains. The JSP was the first interdisciplinary PhD program in law in the United States. It is the largest example of such sociolegal ecumenism, the only one based in a law school, and distinctive among pioneering law and society endeavors in its determination systematically to marry insights from humanist and social science disciplines with each other and with law. 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.”⁹ In relation to all these, he did what he advocated in all his work: meld normative reflection, empirical research, and explanatory inquiry, with an eye to consequences.

His third group of writings, from the 1980s, coincided with his formal but nominal retirement. These works were more reflective than investigative, more wide ranging in scale and scope than much of his earlier work, and explicitly concerned to communicate a large sociologico-philosophical vision. Their centerpiece is his magisterial *The Moral Commonwealth*,¹⁰ a work of expansive range, ambition, erudition, and richness. Its overarching concern is with challenges to and sources of “moral well-being”—of persons, institutions, and communities—in modern times; on the way there are few themes or thinkers left untouched. This was followed by two short books: *The Communitarian Persuasion*,¹¹ which extended the

(liberal-) communitarian directions charted in *The Moral Commonwealth*, and his last work, *A Humanist Science*,¹² published two years before his death at 91, which sought to distill the methodological ecumenism and substantive humanism that had long underlain his thought and that make them available within but also beyond the academy.

II

Pursued through this large and various range of subjects, disciplines, and subdisciplines, Selznick's core themes are quick to state, though he approached them from many directions, and there has been considerable evolution in his ways of answering them. There are two: One is substantive; another, slower to evolve but also of long standing, has to do with the appropriate way to study the questions with which he has been concerned.

I start with substance. Selznick begins his magnum opus, *The Moral Commonwealth*, by recalling that in his "late teens and early 20s [he] went through an intense, fruitful and in some ways extraordinary experience" as an active and prominent young Trotskyist. At the same time he was "an eager student" of sociology and philosophy at City College of New York and then at Columbia University. He comments that "the two parts of my life did not fit very well."¹³ That might be how it felt at the time, but it's not how the situation looks in retrospect. For Selznick already had a particular range of concerns recognizable throughout his varied life's works. As he recalled, "My youthful encounter with revolutionary socialism established a theme that influenced my work over many years . . . the fate of ideals in the course of social practice. Most of my specialized writings in the sociology of organizations and sociology of law have been preoccupied with the conditions and processes that frustrate ideals or, instead, give them life and hope."¹⁴ That was his theme in 1992, but it was also his theme in the 1940s. He had a lot to say about it in the times in between and since.

Selznick wrote on many subjects, not self-evidently connected to each other. Most of his writings focus on large institutions, public and private, and on law, but he also wrote a good deal about persons and communities. All his particular subjects are treated with the "generalizing impulse" that in late-life reflections he saw as characteristic of all his thinking. His writings operate on several planes and exhibit several kinds of concern. They can all be read variously as well. Thus his first work, *TVA*, for example, has been understood primarily as an exposé of one particular organization

and program or of the unanticipated consequences of an organizational strategy he made famous as “co-optation.” These are not misreadings. However, Selznick was concerned both to explore larger theoretical implications of the particular case and to bring larger theoretical perspectives to bear on it. Again, those who read *The Organizational Weapon* as an examination of communist organizational strategy are right to do so, but they might not be aware of the broader implications for the character of organizational development, transformation, and leadership that also lie deep in the work. *Law, Society, and Industrial Justice* has typically been read as a work of analysis and advocacy in the fields of industrial relations, labor, and employment law. It is that, but there are in that work many larger, deeper, and I believe more enduring, things going on as well. *The Moral Commonwealth* teems with themes.

These layers of concern and significance are not piled on one another by accident. It doesn’t take much reading into Selznick’s works before one senses a strong and unifying temper—or better, perhaps, because the concept plays a significant role in the works, a coherent intellectual and moral *character*. That is revealed partly in enduring themes, arguments, exemplars, commitments. However, it also involves a distinctive if evolving sensibility, which is not merely a matter of emotional temperament but of moral and intellectual posture as well. Those who have read him on one subject or another, who know him in one period or from one classic contribution, might not immediately feel the general scope and force of this character, the extent to which his analysis of one thing is of a piece with, or a development of or from, his analysis of others and is driven and informed by continuing basic concerns. However, they are not far to seek.

These aspects of temper, character, and sensibility are not changeless. On the contrary, the scope of his interests, the focus of his passions, his particular judgments, and I believe his public mood and posture changed considerably over the years. His subjects are complex, as is his thought, and they have a complex coherence, too, not that of someone with just one thing to say. Still, I would stress that the continuities and coherence of which I speak are real, pervasive, and sustained. The fate of values and ideals in the world is his central theme.

Over time, his views about how one should go about exploring these questions also evolved. His earliest academic works largely conform to the disciplinary patterns of sociology of that era. However, he became restless over time, seeking a more encompassing (*ecumenical* is his term) way of doing social science. The terms he gave the mode of study to which he aspired

have varied: *normative theory*, *normative science*, and the term on which he finally settled, *humanist science*. The key to humanist science (which many humanists and social scientists might consider a contradiction in terms, but Selznick regards as inescapable complements) stems from his substantive conviction that central to social understanding is the need to develop an appreciation of the role and play of values and ideals in the world: What are they, what do they do, what are they worth, what threatens them, what protects and sustains them, what enables them to flourish? These need to be acknowledged as proper objects of study, rather than mere epiphenomena of whatever is thought really to matter. This also requires identification of the values at stake in particular social processes, practices, and institutions; clarification of their nature; understanding what threatens them; exploring the conditions in which they might thrive.

Given this centrality of values, a social scientist should be informed by traditions of philosophical thought less chary of dealing with them than is typical of some of the more positivistic conceptions of behavioral (and legal) sciences. Moral philosophy is key here. On the other hand, because 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 anchoring in these matters of fact, contingency, and variety—and so social sciences. And because Selznick's concern is not with values applied to just anything but always ultimately as they affect human persons, the learning with which a normative theorist needs to be familiar—in aid of “genuine understanding of human frailty, suffering, and potentiality”¹⁵—will be informed by and contribute to 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, understood as at once latent in and threatened by the vagaries of social life.”¹⁶

These expansive ambitions are exemplified in the work. Selznick brings to whatever he writes, in whatever field, a distinctive combination of explanatory theory, empirical research, philosophical awareness, and normative engagement. Even the most fine-grained empirical analysis is not done merely for its own sake but to answer large questions of explanation and evaluation, and his normative reflection has always been anchored in sociologically derived observation and theory about the ways of the world.

His determination to blend 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. That is not the way most

social scientists have been trained, or think, today. Relatively few share his ecumenical 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, 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.

III

There are many ways to write about thinkers and their thoughts. Common in the social sciences is piecemeal, discipline-centered citation. How an idea fits within a particular field is likelier to determine the interest it arouses than will its place in the development or illumination of its author's thoughts. If a particular contribution is fixed on in a particular literature, a writer will be associated with that contribution and literature. Contributions in other literatures tend to recede beyond the vision, even peripheral, of most disciplinarians. Members of specialized professions often have in mind highly specialized audiences, and no one else reads them. Sometimes that is a good idea.

Selznick moved more easily between subjects, disciplines, and literatures than do many who might have encountered him in one place and therefore not in another. He did so not because he was easily bored, but because he agreed with John Dewey that scholars should "learn how to think about ideas *in a practical way*, to be guided in . . . thinking by problems of life and practice, not academic disputes or disciplinary methods."¹⁷ It is not surprising, nor is it simply a mistake, that his name is attached today to a particular work or idea as received in a professional academic domain, for his contributions to several such domains have been valuable. But recall Nonet's remark.

We treat the writings of certain authors differently: not retail, but wholesale; not primarily as framed by a particular academic discipline, but at large. Particular works and ideas are read in the light of an oeuvre, instances of a larger whole worthy of exploration. Interest comes to be focused on the writer's ideas taken in the round, and particular works are treated as outgrowths and evidence of those ideas. In such treatments, basic lines are clarified, connections and developments traced, informing values and underpinning commitments and ideas exposed. What is understood from one work is reassessed in the light of others. For we are as

interested in the *way* a writer thought, in the flow, style, and pattern of argument, as much as in any specific detachable conclusion. “Classical” authors are often treated this way, and modish ones too.

Many authors, even of major works, will not repay holistic renditions, at least not with interest. Their best works are the ones we should read, and for the reasons one typically reads them: for what they say about their subjects. Reading all their works together one might learn more, without going deeper. One might find nothing much larger in the whole than appears in particular parts. One might even find less. They might not add up.

On the other hand, some authors not usually read holistically or by various publics deserve to be. One understands individual works better when one sees them in connection, and one gains insights from acquaintance with an overall cast of mind, sensibility, and point of view that can be missed if works are read on their own and for themselves or their disciplinary contributions alone. One learns not merely what a thinker thought about, or even what he or she thought, but what is involved in thinking that way. There are also matters of depth and complexity. There is the experience of discovering something new when you reread certain, but not just any, authors. Perhaps this is why such authors are read holistically and from different perspectives, in the search for clues to deeper themes and levels of meaning and significance.

I believe Selznick’s thought requires and repays holistic treatment, though it has rarely received it. As might be surmised, his name is well known in and across a number of disciplines, through his books, through the work of his students, through the institutions he has generated and that flourish today. And yet his writings have retained neither the attention nor the influence they seem to me to warrant, nor have they been seen to form the cumulative and wide-ranging corpus that I believe they do. He is today likelier to be cited or recalled only in that truncated snapshot mode that diminishes the significance of his thought and misconstrues it.

There is no book-length treatment of Selznick’s ideas taken in the round,¹⁸ no monograph, no study of a distinctive mind at work, generating a sustained and cumulative body of writings developing over most of a century. The work is more respected than emulated and today more known about, I suspect, than known; cited rather than read. That seems to me a pity and, perhaps, to paraphrase Talleyrand, worse than a pity—a mistake.

For beyond his many particular insights into the nature and quality of institutional, legal, and social life and development, there is his cast of

mind; *ways* of thinking, animating concerns and values, and a distinctive sensibility, that fuse humanist and scientific concerns, analytic and normative ones, without either embarrassment or false showmanship. These ways of thinking, concerns, values, and sensibility, this cast of mind, are the primary subjects of this book.

Because the explicit subjects on which he worked for the most part developed chronologically, this book generally deals with his writings in order of publication. Ultimately, however, my concern is less to summarize and locate Selznick's particular contributions on particular questions in particular disciplines and more, with Nonet's caution in mind, to convey his manner and style of thinking, what might be called, somewhat elusively but it's the best I can do, his moral-intellectual sensibility. The focus is on the character of his thought, as much as on what he chose to think about and what he thought about it. These characteristics of a mind at work, if that mind is distinguished, can have an importance that reaches beyond their specific "products," narrowly understood. They are easily passed over, however, in the hyperspecialized and discipline-generated and -framed orientations of many modern social scientists.

As will become clear, I admire Selznick's ambitions and his achievements, for reasons both intellectual and moral. Indeed, this book is an *appreciation* of his thought, in both senses of that word. According to one definition, to appreciate is "to estimate aright, to perceive the full force of." That, of course, is the primary task. But I have come to believe that appreciation is warranted in another sense as well: "to recognize as valuable or excellent; to find worth or excellence in."¹⁹ That is another reason for writing this book. His thought warrants more appreciation, in either sense, than it now receives. Still, there are difficulties and risks attached to his singular enterprise, and he did not always surmount or evade them. There are also controversies over some of his commitments that find favor with me but not with everyone. I discuss several of these difficulties and controversies through the book, particularly in Chapters Five, Eight, Nine, and Twelve.

IV

As context for what follows, I should perhaps declare a personal reason for my now long engagement, and this particular sort of engagement, with Selznick's thought. It is a subtext of this book,²⁰ if largely subliminal

in these pages. It has above all to do with what I have called his moral-intellectual sensibility.

I was born precisely thirty years after Selznick. My parents, his precise contemporaries, were politically engaged refugees from Nazism and Communism who had, largely fortuitously and wholly fortunately, ended up in a relatively sane and decent liberal democracy, Australia. I absorbed by inheritance political and moral concerns that Selznick's and my parents' generation confronted directly. In particular, concerns about the gulf between radically evil regimes, those we called totalitarian, and relatively benign ones. Those concerns went deep, and in my case had two relevant consequences.

First, confronted by hostile criticisms of liberal democracy, say from the student movement in the 1960s or critical legal studies in the 1970s and 1980s, I thought them insufferably light minded, frivolous, in light of the really existing alternatives on offer. My first question was always "compared to what?"—not a bad question, I still believe, but less of a conversation stopper than I once assumed. Secondly, my intellectual and moral formation had been one of sharp dichotomies: democracy and dictatorship, good and evil, friends and enemies, fears and hopes. One *chose*.

In Selznick I found a thinker who was light minded about nothing, well knew the comparisons that so concerned me, shared many of the same concerns, and didn't trivialize any of them. However I also learned a new language and way of speaking, as well as new thoughts and ways of thinking. These rejected the often polarized ways of thought that I had shared with both allies and opponents.

Selznick recognized evil and the importance of resisting it. However, he refused to let that realism douse idealism: A forced choice between the two, he insisted, was commonly a false choice. It was possible—it was right—both to acknowledge that things could be worse while at the same time seeking to make them better. Security against the first was crucial; aspirations for the latter equally so.

These are simple points to state but harder to appreciate and internalize, to *live*. They pull in different directions and typically appeal to people of different temperament. Selznick came to live them. He was that rare but distinguished type: a Hobbesian idealist, temperamentally and intellectually alert both to threat and to promise. For me his sustained combination of realism with idealism was a revelation: not so much a point in an argument as an outlook on the world. It went with his determination to accommodate complexity, his tolerance of ambiguity, suspicion of all-or-nothing

choices, attention to variation and differences of degree, the interpretive charity he extended to arguments of so many thinkers with whom he disagreed—they might, he insisted, yet have something important to say. These matters, as much of sensibility as of argument, of style of thinking as much as particular thoughts, are central to what I have found lastingly attractive about Selznick's mind and have sought to convey.

There are thus many things this book is not, at least in its primary purpose. It is not a biography, not even an intellectual one. Nor is it an attempt to explain Selznick's thought sociologically, psychologically, or in any other way, except perhaps intellectually. Nor is its aim to estimate his influence in the academic fields to which he contributed. I say a fair deal about all these matters, and such books will be welcome, but it has not been my aim to write them. My primary goal has been to portray the character and workings of a distinguished mind, *cast* of mind, and way of thinking, as they emerge in Selznick's published writings; to expound the patterns and interrelationships among the ideas and ways of thought developed there; to explore and examine them; to make some claims for their significance; and to criticize them where that seems apt. Perhaps I am just trying to clarify for myself, as much as for whoever reads this book, why Selznick seems to me a thinker of real and abiding significance. I have satisfied my first audience. I now invite the opinion of a second.