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**Book Reviews**

Scott Barclay, Editor

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*A Humanist Science: Values and Ideals in Social Inquiry.* By Philip Selznick. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. Pp. 176. \$39.95 cloth.

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Philip Selznick provides, in *A Humanist Science*, a remarkable capstone to a long and outstanding lifetime of scholarly work. Although the themes of this book are touched upon in his previous major tomes, only here do they come into full relief. The book extends Selznick's influence beyond the major fields he previously greatly enriched, such as organizational sociology (for instance his *TVA and the Grass Roots* [1949] and *The Organizational Weapon* [1979]) and communitarianism (his outstanding *The Moral Commonwealth* [1994] and his follow-up, shorter, and very valuable *The Communitarian Persuasion* [2002]).

Selznick's major thesis, in my words, is that the dichotomy between facts and values, between science-as-is and science-as-ought, is not merely a false one but also a damaging one. The interplay between the social sciences and the humanities, especially philosophy and history, can enrich both. Social sciences can provide a shot of reality-testing for ideas and ideals explored by the humanities, and the humanities can help ensure that social sciences explore that which can be and not limit themselves to studying that which is. Hence Selznick calls for a "humanist science."

At various points throughout this stimulating and challenging book, Selznick provides examples of core values that the kind of social science he envisions can be centered around—for instance, rationality in the study of organization, democracy in the study of government, and impartiality in the study of justice. These are indeed telling cases in point in which one can readily discern that (1) social science studies can illuminate which factors enhance, weaken, or distort key social values, and (2) hence ipso facto provide what might be called critical and action tools to those who seek not merely to understand the social phenomena but also to mobilize social forces to better the human condition.

As others pick up Selznick's call for reducing the barriers between social science and the humanities, for these two realms to enrich one another, two questions remain to be answered. First, is

the list of values Selznick highlights merely illustrative, or does it provide the main elements of a definitive catalogue of the values to be studied? And second, how can social sciences be protected from abuse when they are employed by those who champion values diametrically opposed to those Selznick—forever the optimistic and positive scholar and person he is—treats as self-evident truths?

Selznick argues that the social sciences are rigid, with each locked into its own discipline, using a distinct vocabulary and methodology, and separate sets of assumptions. He hence favors a sort of unified humanist science that will break down these disciplinary barriers. As I see it, first, Selznick is undoubtedly correct in pointing to the separate constructions advanced by various social science disciplines and to the need for a much more comprehensive approach. He does not, in this book, examine the thesis that social sciences are increasingly using two meta-languages that do cut across disciplines. On the one side is the neoclassical language, most advanced by mainstream American economics, but also followed by significant segments of political scientists, sociologists, and even psychologists and anthropologists. They find a parallel in libertarian thinking, although the individual scholars involved are often not affiliated or even necessarily fully aware of the normative implications of their social science positions. A second meta-language is much less consolidated, and draws on macro-specific, cultural, and historical analysis and is also adopted by major segments of the same disciplines as the first meta-language. I strongly suspect that Selznick, if he had turned to this subject, would have found the second meta-language more in line with the humanist science his volume advocates. That is, major segments of the social sciences may already exhibit several of the elements of what Selznick calls a humanist science, although they are not using that particular term to characterize their work.

Above all, the publication of this seminal work provides an occasion to celebrate an outstanding long life of scholarship, public philosophy, and engagement of a towering social scientist, a powerful beacon of humanist science.

## References

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