



IN MEMORIAM

Philip Selznick
Professor of Law and Sociology, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1919 – 2010

Philip Selznick, professor emeritus of law and sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and a leading expert in the sociology of both law and organizations, died at his Berkeley home after a long period of illness on June 12, 2010. He was 91.

“The Berkeley community lost one of its post-war academic giants, whose scholarship and leadership helped shape the theory and sociology of organizations and transform the social study of law,” said David Lieberman, professor at UC Berkeley’s School of Law (Berkeley Law) and a close colleague of Selznick’s.

Selznick was considered a founder of the institutional perspective in organization theory. “He showed that organizations are living institutions imbued with cultural and informal characteristics that can constrain and also enhance rationality,” said Lauren Edelman, associate dean of Berkeley Law’s Jurisprudence and Social Policy (JSP) Program and a professor of law and sociology.

Selznick is credited with helping transform the social study of law by developing a new scholarly approach, one that combined elements of traditional jurisprudence concerning the aims and nature of law with social science understandings of organizational dynamics and constraints. “The resulting mixture of institutional realism, social theory and normative inquiry offered a novel approach to the understanding of legality and the rule of law while making a decisive contribution to the developing field of law and society,” added Lieberman.

Born on January 8, 1919, in Newark, New Jersey, Selznick earned his undergraduate degree from City College of New York in 1938. In college, he joined and sometimes led a radical Trotskyite youth organization and met such future luminaries as Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, and his first wife, Gertrude Jaeger.

After he received a master’s degree in sociology from Columbia University in 1942, Selznick’s academic training was interrupted by military service in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1946, when he served as a research analyst in the Philippines and Japan during World War II.

After the war, Selznick returned to Columbia, where he earned a Ph.D. in sociology in 1947. Two years later, he published *TVA and the Grass Roots*, a renowned sociological study of the Tennessee Valley Authority. In this work, Selznick found that a formal organization “is an adaptive social structure” facing problems independent of its creation. He noted that such organizations are shaped by forces separate from their stated structure and goals, and that individuals in the organization function as a “whole” with actions and alliances separate from the organization.

TVA and the Grass Roots launched Selznick’s academic career, and he later characterized that book, and the later volumes, *The Organizational Weapon* (1952) and *Leadership in Administration* (1957), as investigations “preoccupied with the conditions and processes that frustrate ideals, or, instead, give them life and hope.”

After teaching for one year at the University of Minnesota and for five years at the University of California, Los Angeles, Selznick joined UC Berkeley’s faculty in 1952 as an assistant professor of sociology. He chaired the Department of Sociology from 1963 to 1967 amid heated debates and political tensions generated by the Free Speech Movement. Though Selznick rejected later student militancy on campus, in 1965 his strong defense of student free speech and protest appeared in *Commentary* magazine as a pointed exchange with fellow sociology professor Nathan Glazer, who viewed the protestors as extremists.

The Center for the Study of Law and Society, where Selznick served as founding director from 1961 to 1972, became a top “think tank” and international scholarly destination for interdisciplinary research on law and legal practices.

In 1977, Selznick joined the Berkeley Law faculty, and in 1978 he became founding chair of its doctoral program in jurisprudence and social policy, the first and for many years the only Ph.D. program based in a major U.S. law school. The program maintains a graduate fellowship program named in his honor, and each year two or three admitted students receive special funding support as Selznick Fellows.

Former Berkeley Law dean and professor emeritus Sanford Kadish credited Selznick for making a “major impact” on the school by helping to establish the JSP Program. “He was the principal theoretician,” said Kadish, “and through it the law school was enabled to augment its interdisciplinary program with an academic Ph.D. program, the addition of philosophers, economists, sociologists and historians to its faculty, and an undergraduate program with a legal studies major.”

According to Edelman, Selznick emphasized law as a realm of moral values that necessarily shape the character of private as well as public governance. “His legacy is even greater,” she said, “because with Dean Kadish he created the JSP Program and undergraduate legal studies major, which have been emulated by major universities all over the globe.”

Selznick was married to Jaeger from 1939 until 1979, when she died of cancer. They shared mutual interests in philosophy and social theory, and in 1964 they coauthored an article, “A Normative Theory of Culture,” in the journal *American Sociological Review*. Jaeger joined UC Berkeley in 1959 as a research associate at the Survey Research Center. She became a lecturer in sociology in 1967 and a professor in 1972.

Over the course of his career, Selznick was a faculty research fellow at the Social Science Research Council, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a fellow at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the Woodrow Wilson International Center. He won the UC Berkeley Academic Senate’s Clark Kerr Award in 1996, and lifetime achievement awards from the Law and Society Association in 2003 and the American Sociological Association’s Sociology of Law Section in 2009.

Despite retiring from UC Berkeley’s sociology and law departments in 1984, Selznick remained active in his scholarship and authored the books *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (1992), *The Communitarian Persuasion* (2002), and *A Humanist Science: Values and Ideals in Social Inquiry* (2008).

Lieberman said Selznick’s nine frequently republished books “helped shape two major subfields in the social sciences, the theory and sociology of organizations, and the sociology of law, which his scholarship helped reshape and redefine as the ‘law and society’ field.”

Selznick is survived by his second wife, Doris Fine, whom he married in 1982. He also leaves behind his daughter, Margaret Ledwith of Dallas, as well as three grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Andrew
Cohen
2010