



Albert Hirschman - A Life of Courage and Creativity in the Service of Progressive Possibility

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“Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” – the characteristically memorable title of one of Albert Hirschman’s best known books – encapsulates the ways people react to the failures of the societies or institutions in which they are involved. Hirschman knew whereof he spoke, for he practiced all three in his long and remarkable life, stretching almost a century from his birth in Berlin, Germany, on April 7, 1915 to his death in Princeton, New Jersey, on December 10, 2012.

The son of Social Democratic German Jews, Hirschman twice exited supreme danger – fleeing the Nazis first as an eighteen year old who departed for France, where he took part in Resistance efforts to ferry persecuted people to safety over the Pyrenees, and again when he barely escaped by the same route after discovery by the Gestapo. Always loyal to democracy, Hirschman fought for the Spanish Republic and again for the United States in World War II. Thereafter, he gave voice to creative ideas in the service of progressive change, during a decades-long scholarly career at major universities and at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Hirschman came to be known and honored not only in Europe and the United States, but also in Latin America, where he lived for a time and whose trials and tribulations in economic and social development were the focus of some of his most innovative studies.

A Wide Ranging Intellectual – And a Pragmatist

An economist by training, Albert Hirschman quickly escaped disciplinary dogmas to theorize and write with pungent clarity, while considering evidence from the entire range of human experience. He had a genius for conceptual creativity that few social scientists have ever matched. As we see in titles like “The Passions and the Interests” and “A Bias for Hope” as well as “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty,” his ability to transform concrete historical experience into concepts that capture the collective imagination was unparalleled. Yet despite his love for reflecting on a range of debates going back to Montesquieu, Hirschman had eminently practical goals. He had a “passion for the possible” as he once put it, a determination to figure out how progressive change can happen in a world that is, as he had no trouble acknowledging, stacked against reformers.

The historical experiences of progressive change under adverse conditions that Hirschman analyzed came, above all, from Latin America. From the late fifties through the 1980s when he did most of his writing, Hirschman illuminated hopeful possibilities for a region in which progressive change often seemed checkmated. Now, when Europe and North America are as much in need of a bias for hope as Latin America was then, it is a good time to look again at Hirschman’s strategic insights.

Analyzing Possibilities for Development

Hirschman started from the conviction that public problem-solving rather than inherited disadvantages or endowments should be the focus of those committed to improving the human condition. Hirschman took it for granted that reformers always face powerful resistance and must work within political institutions that are in some way defective – otherwise problems would already have been solved! His analysis of policy-making focused on the importance of “reform-mongering,” the capacity of people committed to furthering change to frame problems and build alliances in ways that enabled them to tackle seemingly impossible challenges.

Reform-mongering starts out looking naïve, Hirschman acknowledged, as reformers appear to underestimate the extent of the opposition and the degree of institutional dysfunction. But effective reformers learn what parts of their heterogeneous opposition can be outwitted or won over, and which parts are hopelessly intransigent and must be simply overcome or outmaneuvered. Hirschman’s admiration for effective reform-mongers arises from their tenacity as well as their ability to perceive possibilities where others miss them. He highlighted the great value in the “discovery of paths, however narrow, leading to an outcome that appears to be foreclosed on the basis of probabilistic reasoning alone.”

Hirschman used the same modes of strategic analysis that he applied to national or international initiatives to look at problem-solving within particular projects and organizations. The immediate experience of actors on the ground was his starting point. From the careful observation of a diverse set of concrete examples he extracted insights that, although never proclaimed as universal generalizations, were always broadly provocative and useful.

Consider the “principal of conservation and mutation of social energy” that Hirschman drew from several months of looking at local grassroots organizations in six Latin American countries. Although he recognized that people often respond to failed collective action by becoming discouraged or retreating into private life, Hirschman noted that a surprising number of the successful grassroots projects he observed had roots in prior shared failures. For example, a fishing co-op in Colombia had its roots in the ejection of a group of peasants who had tried to use a land invasion to expand their livelihoods. After their expulsion the peasants remained in touch with one another, and a few years later came up with the idea of taking advantage of the coastal location of their village: “As long as we cannot take the land, why not take the sea?” The result was a successful fishing co-op. From this and other examples, Hirschman observed that “some experience in dispelling isolation and mutual distrust” may be as important as any conventional economic asset in generating successful cooperatives.

Lessons that Endure

Hirschman’s work is certain to endure because it is filled with illuminating insights, even though he never offers grand blueprints for change or fixed formulas for success. He alerts us to look for the possibilities to neutralize or outflank obstacles impeding constructive change, and he encourages us to take risks, avoid discouragement, and learn from failures. Without offering any false promise of inevitability, Hirschman’s scholarship and his remarkable life remind us of the enduring value of focusing on ameliorative possibility – and acting to achieve it.

This brief draws upon research found in Jeremy Adelman, *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman* (Princeton University Press, 2013).