



Albert O. Hirschman

AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

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PREFACE

It ain't necessarily so.

GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN, *PORGY AND BESS*, 1935

Albert O. Hirschman was not, by any standard, a typical scholar. German by birth, by the age of thirty he had fought in two wars and lived in seven different countries on three continents. He spoke and wrote in five languages, used multiple pseudonyms, and could pass as a native Frenchman. He held positions at a dozen elite institutions without having earned an advanced degree. Observed superficially, his scholarly output might first appear to be a hodgepodge of topics and methodologies. Yet he is one of the most important and influential social scientists of the twentieth century.

Decade after decade throughout his long life, Hirschman made groundbreaking contributions to economics and the social sciences. Far from being a series of explorations followed without rhyme or reason, together they mark out an intellectual trajectory of startling imagination and profound coherence. His perspective was so broad that it could encompass all of the social sciences under one disciplinary umbrella, thereby changing their very parameters, so much so that he preferred to speak of *one* interpretive social science. By the end of his scholarly career, Hirschman was one of the most admired thinkers alive—and one of the most difficult to imitate.

Though Hirschman received his share of criticism during his scholarly career, evaluations of his work tend to emphasize its originality, indeed its genius, and downplay its more troubling aspects. I confess I am not

entirely detached as a biographer, but I have nonetheless tried to present my analysis without shying away from the problems in Hirschman's work. Hirschman once described his way of thinking about any given analysis as "it ain't necessarily so."¹ In my way, I have tried to make Hirschman's "it ain't necessarily so" attitude my own, adopting his outlook on the world to look at him without preconceived ideas. In particular, I have tried to assess Hirschman's contribution to coeval literature: how his ideas were discussed, adopted, or rejected by colleagues and policy makers; whether they have resisted the passing of time; and how his relationships with institutions evolved. Because Hirschman was a profoundly original thinker, it is tempting to highlight his uniqueness and inadvertently put him on a pedestal. One of my major preoccupations throughout the book has been to put Hirschman in context—to look at him in a continuous dialogue with his intellectual and political counterparts, framing him not as a unique scholar (though indeed he *was* unique) but rather as a participant in the intellectual and political debates of his times.

Because this is an intellectual biography, a great part of the book deals with Hirschman's scholarly life. A very beautiful and more detailed biography appeared in 2013, *Wordly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman*, by Jeremy Adelman, Princeton historian and personal friend of Albert and Sarah Hirschman.² Adelman's book is an indispensable reference for anyone interested in the life and work of Albert Hirschman. Adelman's book, however, "is not the story of the works; it is rather the story behind them . . . the biographical backstory of a life's ideas."³ By contrast, this book is more about the works *per se*, the debates they sparked, and the questions they tried to address; for this reason, Adelman's book and mine are not so much alternatives as complements. Though we overlap in many respects, there are a number of cases in which we stress different elements. The same can be said about recent analyses by a group of Latin American colleagues and friends who are particularly interested in Hirschman's relationship with their region and, more generally, about a number of post-mortem celebrations of his oeuvre.⁴

It is especially difficult in the case of a thinker like Hirschman to understand his work without taking a holistic approach to his life. Historical events, especially in the first part of Hirschman's life, dominated in the shaping of his worldview. Hirschman's life cannot be divided in an early phase of *vita activa* and a later one of *vita contemplativa*, though he himself

proposes a sort of partition along these lines, introducing his last collection of essays with a reference to "both the adventurous and the speculative sides of my life."⁵ Hirschman's work has always had a strong connection to the real world, and his scholarly output was always occasioned by specific problems to which he hoped to contribute with useful ideas. No ivory tower intellectual, Hirschman was solidly down-to-earth.

In fact, the first half of Hirschman's life was largely peripatetic, and ideas often took shape through action, such as during his participation in the antifascist resistance or when speaking with peasants and city mayors while traveling across Colombia. He was always attentive to history, which deeply influenced his thought, values, and the way he lived within his own time. Hirschman traveled frequently throughout his career, and many of his pieces were occasioned by invitations to participate in workshops around the world. These are also examples of the link between Hirschman's speculative work and his active life, but they are closer to the normal links between these two spheres that often exist in a scholar's life; smuggling pamphlets in a false-bottom suitcase, less so. The first part of this book follows in some detail the work *and* life of Hirschman; from his mid-forties onward, the focus is more exclusively on his work.

Attention to Hirschman's personal life also means that I have decided to respect his numerous changes of name. Born in Berlin as Otto Albert Hirschmann, he was Albert Hermant for several months in 1940 and Albert O. Hirschman from 1941 onward. (There is yet another nom de plume that I don't want to spoil for readers of chapter 1.) Adelman decided to do the same, and I cannot find better words than his to convey this point: "to exemplify the twists and turns of the twentieth century in the most taken-for-granted gesture of everyday life, the name we go by."⁶

The fact that this book is an intellectual biography also means that attention to Hirschman's family life is reduced to a minimum. This is particularly problematic with respect to Hirschman's wife, Sarah Chapiro Hirschman. Sarah was not only the partner of a lifetime and, as Hirschman put it in the dedication of *The Rhetoric of Reactions*, his "first reader and critic for fifty years." She was also a coresearcher on many of the trips that formed the basis of Hirschman's books, writing field notes and actively participating in discussions and interviews. His most important intellectual interlocutor, she introduced Albert to a vast new body of literature, such as the work of anthropologists, that he would use consistently in his writings.

But she was not just a dedicated researcher and empathic partner; Sarah, too, lived in the real world. She founded a program, *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos*, to support reading activities among low-income Spanish-speaking adults. The program became very successful, spreading geographically and branching out into other languages and forms, the better to serve different groups of disadvantaged people. This was grassroots activism at its best, and it became a source of learning for Albert himself. As Adelman notes, when Hirschman wrote *Getting Ahead Collectively* in 1984, the "deep imprint" of Sarah's grassroots activity and her effort to "bridge literacy and orality" is visible both in his approach to the research in the field and in his writing style.⁷

The role of the daughters, Katia and Lisa, is also by necessity sacrificed. The only reference to their relationship with their father is in a letter he wrote to them in 1965, reproduced in chapter 4, in which Hirschman explains in detail some of his most interesting conclusions for the book he was writing. But this provides only a glimpse of a relationship that was full of affection and intellectual exchange, yet another example of the vitality with which Hirschman knitted together his scholarly and personal life.

In writing this book, I have accumulated a number of debts that are a pleasure to acknowledge here. My institutional home, the Department of Political and Social Science at the University of Bologna, and in particular its former and current directors, Fabio Giusberti and Filippo Andreatta, have been very supportive of my research and the frequent trips that it involved. I am also pleased to acknowledge financial support for overseas mobility from my department thanks to the funds provided by the program *Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2018-2022* of the Italian Ministry for University and Research.

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