

ALBERT O. HIRSCHMAN'S METHODS.
REVIEW OF M. ALACEVICH, A.O. HIRSCHMAN.
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WORLDLY PHILOSOPHER: THE ODYSSEY OF ALBERT O. HIRSCHMAN,
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ABSTRACT

Concentrating on Hirschman's preferred methods of inquiry and theory construction, this review takes a synthesising critical account of Adelman's (2013) and Alacevich's (2021) biographies of the famous economist.

Keywords: Hirschman, Methods, History of Ideas, Development Economics, Participant Observation, Ethnography.
JEL Codes: B1, B4.

INTRODUCTION

As we already know from Jeremy Adelman's detailed biography (2013), Hirschman's cosmopolitan and politically engaged life was underpinned by his strong motivation to defend democracy, liberal freedoms and social justice. That is why, as a young refugee from Nazi Germany, he was active in the Italian resistance in the early 1930s, fought fascism during the Spanish Civil War and, as a member of the French resistance in Varian Fry's rescue operation (Fry 1945) in Marseille during the Second World War, helped organise the escape of more than 2,000 refugees including: Marc Chagall, Arthur Koestler and Hannah Arendt. Then, after he had to flee

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to the USA himself, he returned to Europe as a soldier in the US Army to fight fascism yet again. While Adelman's biography demonstrates how the different stages in Hirschman's life are intertwined with his political engagement and research inquiries, the new biography written by Michele Alacevich (2021) concentrates on how Hirschman's democratic values and his engagement for social justice translate into his principles for scholarly and research work. Alacevich's biography is clearly focussed on illuminating and explaining Hirschman's multifaceted, complex and quite original methods of inquiry.

Each section of the book presents a brilliant, meticulously researched, detailed, yet succinctly summarised, overview of the critical and affirmative responses by other social scientists to Hirschman's work, ideas and particular policy proposals. Moreover, both Adelman and Alacevich show how these ideas and policy proposals emerged for Hirschman from his interaction with likeminded supporting and contrarian opposing colleagues and how his concepts fit into the context of political events and intellectual debates at the particular historical time period. Alacevich's book is organised along seven chapters covering well defined phases of Hirschman's intellectual and academic development and on the particular research topics that preoccupied him during the period of his life covered in the particular chapter. For the sake of brevity and consistency in this review, I have distilled three key areas of Hirschman's research programme from the seven chapters of the book. They are: "Power in the international political economy"; "Development economics" and "Interdisciplinary history of ideas of democratic market societies". The concluding chapter of Alacevich's book entitled "The Legacy of Albert Hirschman" draws together and highlights Hirschman's particular epistemological position and the manifold methodological contributions following from this position.

In addition, I will draw on Adelman's biography *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman* which is founded on meticulous archival research where Alacevich's book is mainly focussed on Hirschman's publications and the critical response to and reception of it, Adelman's very detailed tomb also offers a plethora of insight on Hirschman's method. In my somewhat selective synthesising review of the two books¹ I concentrate on this methodological aspect and will start with a particular conceptual influence stressed in Adelman's book.

¹ An important theoretical influence highlighted in Adelman's book, but neglected in this review is for instance Hirschman's friend Thomas Schelling.

1. HAYEK'S INFLUENCE ON HIRSCHMAN?

While Alacevich presents Hirschman's normative foundation consistently as socialist or at least social democratic, the repeated emphasis by Adelman on the influence of Hayek on Hirschman's thinking presents an interesting contrast. This formative while ambivalent influence started when Hirschman arrived to study at the LSE in London in 1935 where he attended Abba Lerner's course on economic theory which laid the foundation for his understanding of economic principles. As Alacevich reminds us: "Hirschman it should be remembered, did not arrive in London with a strong preparation in economics. As a consequence, he did not view the work of LSE economists such as Lionel Robbins and Friedrich Hayek as an old and well-known orthodoxy torn down by Keynes's 'revolution'. [...] instead of taking sides in the debate over the *General Theory*, Hirschman absorbed new perspectives, amalgamating them in his own eclectic way" (2021: 12-13). In this intellectual environment, Hirschman began to question the Marxist political economy tradition championed in his youth.² Adelman writes: "Indeed, Hirschman took Hayek, in particular, seriously and appreciated the rigorous individualism after his previous diet of 'lumpy' collective categories like social class" (2013: 123) and he adds: "The injunction to pay attention to individuals' psychologies and preferences was a lasting influence, but Hirschman was not so keen to depose the idea of a composite society larger than a mere sum of parts capable of bearing its own ontological weight" (*ibid.*: 124). So, the influence of Hayek on Hirschman was important, but he did not just leave the collectivism of Marxism behind to embrace methodological individualism or move on to Keynesian economics. Moreover, during his time in London, Hirschman spend an afternoon in deep conversation with Piero Sraffa in the Italian economist's office at Trinity College Cambridge. Sraffa, a cousin of Hirschman's close friend and brother-in-law philosopher Eugenio Colorni was one of the fiercest critics of Hayek's Austrian economics and provided pens and paper for the incarcerated Marxist Antonio Gramsci (*ibid.*: 125). So, this chat probably provided an ideological counterweigh to Austrian economics.

In the archives, Adelman finds further evidence for an effect of Hayekian thinking when Hirschman comments on *The Road to Serfdom*: "Reading this book is very useful for someone like me who grew up in a 'collectivist' climate – it makes you rethink many things and has shown me in how

² As a teenager living in Berlin, Hirschman was a member of the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei – a left leaning split off from the SPD which tried to re-unite the political left (SPD and KPD) to strengthen the fight against the rising fascist right.

many important points I have moved away from the beliefs I had when I was 18 years old” (Hirschman in a letter to his wife Sarah on September 30, 1945, cited in Adelman 2013: 237). Adelman writes: “Hayek’s vision of spontaneous, unguided, and hidden forces at work presumed an inscrutability about life that Hirschman shared, in which its ironies, paradoxes, and the possibilities of unintended consequences provided the underlying engines of change” (*ibid.*: 238). Moreover, according to Adelman, engaging with Hayek’s work supported Hirschman’s scepticism of government planning and about perfect knowledge and his conviction that personal liberties trump collectivism. And there is more speculation on Hayek’s influence in Adelman’s book (*ibid.*: 304, 323 and 515) and two more archival evidence-based accounts (*ibid.*: 339 and 589). Hayek’s ideas about knowledge and spontaneous order certainly left a lasting impression on Hirschman. However, he distinctly distances himself from Hayek’s Austrian economics while criticising Hayek’s reactionary rhetoric to undermine the welfare state as unfounded and misdirected in *Rhetoric of Reaction* (Hirschman 1991: 110-121).

2. POWER IN THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY – HISTORY OF EVENTS AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

In his first academic project, Hirschman investigated the mechanisms which made possible the German aggression culminating in two world wars. As Alacevich shows, the historical investigation which led to Hirschman’s first monograph *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (1945) was inspired by Alexander Gerschenkron’s thesis of internal reasons (1943): “... the German Junkers, the aristocracy owning large agricultural estates in the territories east of the Elbe river, were responsible for the collapse of democracy in their country and Germany’s aggression against its neighbors” (Alacevich 2021: 37). In opposition to his friend’s account and influenced by another close colleague of his (John Condliffe), Hirschman explored the inextricable external economic and political mechanisms which enabled Germany’s aggression. In contrast to Gerschenkron, he focussed on geography as an explanatory factor for foreign trade and the manipulation of terms of trade as a political instrument of domination. Hirschman asked: “How can we escape from a process of causation leading directly from one war to another?” (*ibid.*: 42) and his historical analysis of real world macroeconomic imbalances led him to the conclusion that the benefits and virtues of free trade were “not simply unrealistic but entirely fantastic” (*ibid.*). Hirschman observed that in international relations “situations of dependence are generally cumulative: dependency creates fur-

ther and deeper dependency” (*ibid.*). Moreover, Alacevich shows how these early developed concepts relate to Hirschman’s later contributions to and critique of dependency theory in development economics and the theme of *Doux Commerce* in his book *The Passions and the Interests* (Hirschman 1977).

Alacevich finds his subject’s peculiar curiosity and idiosyncratic epistemological position already in this very early work: “... Hirschman’s conviction that there was value in exploring perhaps improbable, yet possible processes of social change instead of focussing only on the analysis of what is probable” (Alacevich 2021: 49). To further underpin this – Adelman notes an early influence of existentialism: “Kierkegaard, whom Hirschman was reading during his many idle hours, had coined the expression ‘passion for the possible’” (Adelman 2013: 236). An example for Hirschman’s possibilism is the supranational authority – a European federation he proposed as a solution to the question of how to prevent future wars. This idea was not completely out of touch with the debates at the time as indicated by developments and discussions around the foundation of the Bretton Woods institutions at the end of the second World War. Moreover, as Alacevich highlights, Hirschman’s professional position in the Federal Reserve during the years after the Second World War allowed him to promote a European Payments Union and to push for and help implement the Marshall Plan which overall gave him a platform to work towards his federalist vision of Europe and laid the foundation for Hirschman’s later work: “In sum, in these reports Hirschman was anticipating many themes that would become famous ten years later in his work as a development economist” (Alacevich 2021: 58).

3. DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS – PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND PETITES IDÉES

However, Hirschman’s methodological approach broadened from statistical and historical analysis of European economies to a more inductive ethnographic approach of participant observation when he and his family moved to Columbia for four years from 1952 to 1956. “Columbia was seen as a laboratory for the definition of development policies” (Alacevich 2021: 65) and Hirschman worked quite independently ‘as a private economic and financial adviser, working with banks, firms, and publicly owned utilities interested in obtaining public funding’ (*ibid.*: 69). ‘His observations during his stay in Columbia’, he wrote in the 1980s, ‘remained key elements of the conceptual structure that I erected three years or so later in *Strategy* [...] and he prepared a research project to study specific cases of successful industrial, agricultural, and financial ventures in order to ‘derive some gene-

ral lessons for developmental policy' in less developed countries" (*ibid.*: 73, the direct quotes in this citation are Hirschman's own words referenced by Alacevich). Adelman quotes Hirschman's methodological statement from his time in Columbia: "I looked at 'reality' without theoretical preconceptions of any kind" (Adelman 2013: 297) and describes his anthropological method as: "The art of learning from doing and then watching closely, [...]" (*ibid.*: 297).

Alacevich shows how Hirschman's bottom up approach to development and stress on specific local conditions and knowledge proposed in his *The Strategy of Economic Development* (1958) was further extended in his other works on economic development (see for instance: Hirschman 1963, 1967, 1971 and 1984) and how it was at odds with the conventional wisdom of external grand planning and external aid programmes. Moreover, he observed how the implementation of these master plans often implied the brutality of authoritarian regimes to enforce them or the futility of chaotically imposed 'shock therapies'. Alacevich summarises: "Hirschman's goal was to broaden the space and sharpen the analytical instruments for a third way, an intermediate and deeply reformist agenda between these two extremes, by discussing the possible mechanism through which the process of change could advance – sometimes through inverted, nonlinear, and otherwise unorthodox sequences" (Alacevich 2021: 87). One of these inverted sequences is Hirschman's proposal of 'forward linkages'. The idea behind this unconventional proposal is that instead of building heavy industry (steelworks etc.) first and consumer industry (car factories) second, the sequence can be reversed starting with the production of consumer products (cars) to trigger the necessary production activities (steel and rubber) upstream in the value chain.

In the last chapter of this section: *Remaking Development Economics*, Alacevich provides an extensive and in-depth overview of critique and affirmative responses by a number of scholars to Hirschman's books *Journey Towards Progress* (1963, henceforth referred as JTP) and *Development Projects Observed* (1967, henceforth referred as DPO). A large part of JTP is based on the detailed historical reconstruction "... of how three specific economic policy problems in three different countries evolved over a long period of time" (Alacevich 2021: 101). Hirschman finds in these case studies an often rudimentary and ineffectual communication between the public and government and a distinct role of ideology in shaping the political debate around policy: "In his opinion, many projects had encountered huge difficulties during their implementation because of too cursory an analysis of their political and social context. Regional, tribal, or center-periphery antagonisms, and the political power of specific interest groups, are important elements that affect the success or failure of a specific project" (*ibid.*: 117).

Moreover, due to the unpredictable, the uncertain, and the unexpected, the analysis of these cases demonstrates that comprehensive plans appear rigid and pointless. Nonetheless, the lessons learned in JTP are presented as a 'reformmonger's manual' by Hirschman. As Alacevich points out, he was criticised not only for his narrative style, but also for the randomly chosen and small sample. However: "Mancur Olson considered *Journeys* probably the best book published in several years on the topic of the two-way relationship between economic development and political processes" (*ibid.*: 109).

Though field notes played already some role in constructing the case material for JTP, the anthropological method really came to the fore in Hirschman's next book DPO. Alacevich elaborates how he uses the method of dense and detailed case description to critique the inadequacy of an undemocratic and technocratic cost-benefit analysis for the evaluation of projects by development agencies. JTP, DPO and the later book *Getting Ahead Collectively* (1984) could not have been written without Hirschman and his wife Sarah traveling extensively in Latin American countries: "... the Hirschmans' goal was to extract insights from the specific set of projects they visited and their practice of 'thick observations' (as on previous trips, Sarah accompanied Albert, participated in the interviews, and wrote the field notes)" (*ibid.*: 220). The value of this ethnographic method is later further confirmed by Hirschman's friendship with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton: "The accent on language and understood complexity does, however, reveal the influence of Clifford Geertz, the traces of which are hard to pinpoint because so much of their relationship unfolded in conversation" (Adelman 2013: 536). Hirschman used the method of participant field work for the last time in his life while staying in Berlin and observing the unfolding of German unification (*ibid.*: 621). Adelman also highlights Hirschman's general preference for narrative analysis over formal mathematical equations (*ibid.*: 371) and points to the methodological congruence of participant observation with listening to voices of the past – the close reading of the history of ideas used by Hirschman to uncover new ideas. This method takes centre stage in the next section.

4. INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS OF DEMOCRATIC MARKET SOCIETIES – THE HISTORY OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS AND EVENTS

Interestingly, the dismantling of disciplinary divisions between economics and political science becomes even more programmatically addressed in Hirschman's best known book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970) which also

marks his transition from the anthropological case study method to the discovery of meta-theory in the history of ideas. However, the theoretical argument in the later books is often also underpinned by numerous case studies. In Alacevich's words: "The volume marked Hirschman's transformation from political economist to all-round deeply interdisciplinary social scientist" (Alacevich 2021: 135). The core problem of poor performance of commercial, public and other organisations which the book tackles is traced back by Alacevich to Hirschman's work on development economics, for instance his work on ineffectiveness of foreign aid. He also shows how Hirschman's reformist and social democratic vision was influenced by social psychology and how it clashed with Schumpeterian notions of 'creative destruction' and the public choice economics of Gordon Tullock or Mancur Olson. Given their rational choice foundation, public choice theorists simply could not allow for a concept of social bonding like *loyalty* motivating social public mobilisation or for a deliberative democratic mechanism like *voice* resolving conflicts and thus, overriding or replacing individual calculated interests expressed in competitive markets.

Probably this ideological clash and hiatus inspired Hirschman to trace the origin of the idea of rationally calculated interest as the dominant or fundamental element of behaviour in capitalism back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in his next book – *The Passions and the Interests* (Hirschman 1977). Moreover, he continues to pursue and highlight the twists and turns of the interpretation of this core behavioural pattern in capitalism in later centuries (Hirschman 1982a): from *doux commerce* – the appeasing effect of trade; to *self-destruction* of capitalism – through the violence induced by profit seeking; to *feudal-shackles* – the idea of violence in capitalism as an overhang of feudalism; to the opposite argument of *feudal-blessings* – the explanation of the brutality of capitalism in the US compared to a moderate social democratic one in Europe by a lack of feudal traditions in the US. Alacevich summarises the method adopted in this book and the follow-up article: "Hirschman paid great attention to the specific language used by the authors he studies. He was not parsimonious with direct quotations, and he built his analysis on the semantic transformations of words as fundamental indicators of the transformation of mentalities and political theories throughout the first three centuries of the modern era" (Alacevich 2021: 193). In showing Hirschman's careful interpretation of *Capital* and uncovering certain gaps in Marx's understanding and use of Hegel's work, Adelman shows that Hirschman had started using this method already before he joined the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton: "Reading had become like detective work; following the clues revealed the early oversights and missed possibilities of predecessors" (Adelman 2013: 479). In a section of his book (*ibid.*: 505-521) Adelman demonstrates

that in adopting this endogenous approach to intellectual history, Hirschman was influenced by the Cambridge School of the History of Ideas³ – corresponding with John G.A. Pocock and talking with Donald Winch and Quentin Skinner while they were visiting the Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton: “Forever quietly taking insights from his milieu, his conversations with Skinner and Winch over lunch or a seminar would send him back to his office to read and write” (*ibid.*: 507). Alacevich highlights that Hirschman was criticised for not considering enough “... the social context of the scholars examined, or the political institutional, and economic developments of the period under consideration” (Alacevich 2021: 191). However, as Alacevich uncovers from Hirschman’s correspondence with Skinner and others, he deliberately choose this endogenous perspective to tease out the ‘tacit dimension’⁴ of a set of assumptions about trade and industry developed throughout modern preindustrial centuries and was well aware of the advantages as well as of the limits of this particular method. Moreover, as Alacevich points out, to understand the evolution of legitimating beliefs of the market society, Hirschman took inspiration from Max Weber’s method. Reading Hirschman’s notebooks in the archive, Adelman is able to investigate this influence in detail: “The summer of 1973 had him wrestling with Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*” (Adelman 2013: 503). Weber also demonstrates self-critical awareness of the weaknesses of his endogenous ideological approach – especially in the endnotes of the book (Weber 2001 [1905]). However, Hirschman and Weber both insists that this is nonetheless the appropriate method to show how ideas are expressed, transformed and how new ones emerge in public debate.

Hirschman’s next book *Shifting Involvements* (1982b) deals with the disappointment and dissatisfaction that can arise from voicing discontent by engaging in public or political action. Based on psychological mechanisms like cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), this kind of frustration of expectations in the public sphere can induce the citizen-consumer to withdraw into the private realm of consumption. The results of Adelman’s extensive archival work provide further evidence for the influence of Frankfurt School social philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm’s work and psychology in general on Hirschman’s theorising: “He read numerous books on psychoanalytic concepts and took extensive notes, more than from any other set of reading” (Adelman 2013: 341). Moreover, Hirschman

³ The influence of the Cambridge School is also apparent in HIRSCHMAN’s later books (1982b and 1991) as ADELMAN records (2013: 550 and 630).

⁴ A concept famously developed by Michael Polanyi.

took Tibor Scitovsky's analysis in *The Joyless Economy* (1976) on board which assembles a catalogue of potential consumer disappointment. This type of frustration in the private sphere can in turn lead the citizen-consumer back to express lack of satisfaction publicly and to translate frustration into political action. Hirschman shows that this swinging back and forth between private withdrawal and public engagement goes beyond private individual decision making. Instead these waves of public engagement tend to emerge grow and ebb off in the context of social movements and in alternating historical epochs translating Kondratieff's theory of the long business cycle into a politico-economic cycle. Alacevich writes: "In any case, two basic mechanisms are at work here: overcommitment and underinvolvement" (Alacevich 2021: 214) and highlights that Hirschman's theoretical social-psychological explanation of long waves is taking into account to what extent expectations are realistic at the outset and whether they are fulfilled or not. Probably due to its very idiosyncratic interdisciplinary methodological mix, firmly rooted in social embeddedness and because it presents a "cogent critique of the usual assumptions of economic theory about stable and transitive individual preferences" as Guillermo O'Donnell emphasised (cited by Alacevich 2021: 215), this book drew a lot of criticism from colleagues carefully assembled and reviewed by Alacevich. Some complained that the theoretical explanation of the endogenous behavioural mechanism behind the swings from involvement to withdrawal and back was incomplete and not detailed enough, others who welcomed Hirschman's approach in principle criticised his essay as "stubbornly grounded in methodological individualism" (C.S. Maier, cited by Alacevich 2021: 216). Moreover, there is a lack of carefully assembled and scrutinised historical data to provide convincing evidence for the oscillations over time. Hirschman merely presents illustrative anecdotal cases to illustrate his theory.

Hirschman's last book *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991) returns to the concept of voice and starts from the premise that there is fundamental and unavoidable uncertainty underlying the exercise of voice to influence and steer democratic policy making in a system characterised by free public expression of opinions and pluralist elections. Moreover, he tries to defend the principle that: "a truly democratic process of decision-making entails that ideas are formed through the deliberative process itself" (Alacevich 2021: 230). Hirschman shows in this book how conservatives use certain rhetorical figures to undermine the efforts of progressive reformers. These figures are meant to convince the public that the intended reform will be in vain or will have perverse or destructive consequences. "In a sense, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* is an essay on the political misuses of a fundamental concept in the social sciences – the unintended consequences of social action" (*ibid.*: 233). Moreover, Alacevich points out that this is probably

Hirschman's most accessible book and that it bears a lot of methodological resemblance with *The Passions and the Interests*: "Both center on the history of ideas and a literature strongly rooted in modern European thought; even though they appeared fifteen years apart, they are strongly related and appeal to readers with many different interests" (*ibid.*: 235). In his characteristic *Propensity to Self-Subversion* Hirschman shows that progressives also have a tendency to unduly use rhetorical figures to push for social change (Hirschman 1995: 45-68).

At the end of the book Alacevich discusses Hirschman's legacy and provides a very clear and insightful summery of the epistemological principles and variety of methods employed by this eminent social scientist which in my view is a 'must read' for every political economist.

CONCLUSION

While I separated the three main areas of his work, Alacevich carefully links and interweaves all of Hirschman's theories and policy proposals and so does Adelman. An example is for instance, how Hirschman's last book *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991) applying the history of the history of ideas to distil typical rhetorical figures used by reactionaries to refute social reforms is motivated by his experience as a development economist working in South American countries which were dominated by authoritarian regimes.

Alacevich's book is extremely well written, informative and simply a pleasure to read. There still is no Hirschmanian school of economics, but this book combined with Adelman's biography and his edited collection of Hirschman's work *The Essential Hirschman* (Adelman 2013) may be instrumental for founding such a group of likeminded economists. At least both books provide admirers of Hirschman's work with a brilliant overview of his research methods and equips them with the appropriate epistemological attitude as a guide to follow in his footsteps.

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