

INTRODUCTION

Mots Justes

In early April 1933, a spasm of anti-Semitic violence rocked Berlin. Thugs beat Jews in the streets. Shops owned by Jews were looted and burned. Hitler slapped restrictions on Jewish doctors, merchants, and lawyers. For the Hirschmann family, well-to-do assimilated Jewish Berliners, the distress paled beside a more immediate shock. The family huddled in a cemetery as a coffin bearing Carl Hirschmann was lowered into his grave. His wife wept. His children did too. Except one. Otto Albert, known to us by a different name, Albert O. Hirschman, concealed his grief as the family bid their farewells to a father and husband.

This was not the only adieu of the day. Otto Albert, a law student at the University of Berlin and a militant anti-Nazi, was in danger. His friends were being arrested; the university was quickly becoming a hive of intolerance. So he decided to go clandestine and then leave for France. When the funeral was over, the seventeen-year-old Hirschmann announced to his anguished family that he was leaving Germany, promising to return after the passing of the storm surrounding Adolf Hitler's ascent to power. Decades would pass before he did. Thus began an odyssey in the making of a pragmatic idealist that would send our subject across continents and languages on a journey over the frontiers of a century's social science.

Albert O. Hirschman detached himself from his family and city, but he never defined himself against them; neither did he mourn the loss or carry his displacement like a badge, a familiar default for exiles. While he never rejected his forebearers, he did not cling to them. Hirschman balanced a life between the inherited and the acquired: he adapted to and learned from new environments while never losing sight of his heritage; without forgetting his past, he did not yearn for “return.” In this he had no choice; for over a decade, there was no Ithaca, no wife, no son, no title to go back to. Persecution, intolerance, and war had destroyed the cosmopolitan world that many of his generation had fought to defend.

Hirschman’s departure from Germany was the first of many flights. His was a life of repeated departures that began in a Mitteleuropean upheaval, the largest intellectual and cultural exodus the world has ever seen. In France, Spain, and Italy he would toggle between antifascist fights until it was too dangerous to stay, and so he too fled to the United States to contribute to the overhaul of American intellectual life by European émigrés. However, for those in the swelling ranks of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who made a career out of chasing suspects, his track record of political activism tainted him with enough suspicion that he was forced to decamp once more in the heat of the McCarthyite purges. His new destination: South America. There, he would reinvent himself anew—this time as one of the great thinkers of development.

There was a wrinkle in how Hirschman handled his displacements. For someone who meditated over the nuances and tensions between leaving, fighting, and accepting—or as he would later put it, exit, voice, and loyalty—it is fitting that his own exits were hardly clear-cut. Often, he chose to leave as much as he was driven out; he was a willing Odysseus. Hirschman was an unusual exile. Cosmopolitan by choice and chance, he occupied, and to some extent opened, a penumbral space as the insider-outsider—between the establishment and the dissident—to author works that crisscrossed the line separating manifestos from monographs. Uprooting and delocalization placed him outside any single cultural tradition, intellectual genre, or national place—a figure we might consider an antecedent to our more “globalized” intellectual type. Some readers

might regard him as the first truly global intellectual, a term that would probably make him wince. Certainly, *his* version of being a global intellectual never cut him off from the multiple roots of his imagination; he was global not because he stood above them but because he could so artfully combine them.

Choice or chance . . . chance with choice . . . At times, I have often felt that making sense of the mixture of forces that compose a life history, especially one so replete with breaks and ruptures, leaves too much to the author. A tempting solution to the problem is to treat them in the subject's own vocabulary; as it turns out, the role of choosing and chance translate into terms familiar to the republican topoi in which Hirschman was steeped and with which he closely identified, *virtù* and *fortuna*. He would recount how Fortune must have smiled upon him when he made his getaway from the police in Marseilles at the end of 1940 or when a surprise letter invited him to Yale in 1957. But he was never lured into believing that there was anything providential at work; he did, after all, have a hand in his own fate—even if it was not always a visible one. Either way, *virtù* and *fortuna* entwined to yield one of the twentieth century's most remarkable intellectuals, one who devoted a lifetime to thinking about the role of choice and making the best of chance in human affairs.

The key was to be open to possibilities. More than that, it meant creating them. This is why his exile was not experienced as being severed from home, separating a self from one's past, as Edward Said famously put it.¹ Separation created possibilities for new combinations. Indeed, Hirschman coined a term, *possibilism*, or, perhaps more accurately, adapted it from Søren Kierkegaard's famous aphorism "Pleasure disappoints, possibility never!" to evoke Hirschman's disposition. For someone growing up in the shadow of fascism, war, and intolerance, this upbeat was not an expected point of arrival. In fact, most intellectuals of his generation—and Hannah Arendt, his elder by a few years, comes most readily to mind—worried more than they hoped, saw catastrophe instead of opportunity. But possibilism was more than just a personal disposition; it was also an intellectual stance for his brand of social science. The more familiar search for probabilistic laws based on a list of precondi-

tions for events or outcomes all too often led to the dismaying conclusion that most societies would be unable to solve their problems and break out of vicious cycles on their own. This didn't, in the end, leave much to the imagination and left Hirschman pondering what the point was—ethically as well as intellectually—to being a scholar. He yearned for a social science that reset the imagination of the intellectual to consider combinations that might take anomalous, deviant, or inverted sequences and make them a potential course; to explore combinations that might lay the tracks for different histories of the future.

One way to prevent a life of trouble from becoming one of tragedy was through ironic, humor-laced detachment, a stance that never got in the way of empathy or commitment. Varian Fry, with whom Hirschman worked to get refugees (including Hannah Arendt) out of Marseilles as the Nazis swept across Europe, once recalled how the police finally caught up with Hirschman not because he *had* false papers but because he had *too many good ones*, which made him suspicious. Included in these bogus documents was the certificate that “M. Albert Hermant” was a Frenchman born in Philadelphia and cards testifying that he belonged to a number of associations, including a Club for People without Clubs. His seamless French helped cover his German origins and antifascist tracks. The German sociologist Wolf Lepenies once mused about Hirschman, “We have here a criminal with too many alibis.”² After an unplanned vascular operation while he was visiting Berlin around the time of the fall of the Wall, Hirschman came out of the fog of the anesthetic, turned to his doctor, and asked in German, “Why are bananas bent?” The doctor smiled and shrugged. Hirschman replied, “Because nobody went to the jungle to adjust it and make it straight.”³

This was not the only banana joke. In the 1950s, while the Hirschmans were living in Bogotá, Colombia, they made a habit of sending Christmas cards to their friends around the world. In 1952, a friend of theirs, Peter Aldor, a Hungarian cartoonist who had moved to Colombia to become one of that country's great political satirists, drew a card for them. It featured Albert the economist perched in a banana plant clutching a sheet of graphs and figures. Below are his wife and daughters harvesting the fruit,



A holiday card from the Hirschman family,
drawn by Peter Aldor, c. 1955.

whose production Albert is supposedly planning. The caption reads: “An excellent food is the banana. Let’s eat it today and plan it mañana.” The joke is layered with meanings, one of which was a dig at colleagues who believed in the lofty promises of economic planning.

Humor was central to a literary personality; the form of the argument could not be so easily unraveled from its substance; indeed, late in life he would focus his attention on how people in modern society argue about public affairs. His last major work, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991),

tackled the way intransigent arguments threatened to weaken democracy, precisely because they narrowed options and alternatives. At the core of his argument was an observation about how social scientists played with words that had political and economic consequences.

He should know—he was a master player in his own right. Hirschman amused himself with words, their sounds, and their meanings. Adept as he was at double entendres in German, French, Spanish, Italian, and English, his play with words meant careful attention; language and words were to his craft what the scalpel was to his father, the surgeon. Play with words was often a reminder that in the freedom of language one could find light even in dark times. In June 1932, as National Socialists were broadcasting their bile, Hirschman wrote his elder sister to warn her that a long-delayed letter was still being composed. “Do you know why you haven’t received this one yet?” he asked her. “Because it is awaiting transportation! Oh the poor one, sometimes at night I can hear it whining, awaiting [*barren*] its transportation.”⁴

It was in words that his play came to full fruition. He loved a well-turned phrase, especially when twisting the familiar into the self-mocking. “The dead end that justifies the means! But does the end justify the meanness?” and “I am anxious for criticism as long as you find me seminole” can be found among his jottings. One can find “Metaphors in search of a reality,” a formulation he instantly doubted and then swapped for “metaphors in search referent,” folded into his notes on the problem of freight rates on Nigerian railways.

Word play was not idle play. The paradoxical, backward, inverted developments one finds in his favorite images and aphorisms mirror the style he brought to bear in his outlook on the world. Like baguettes (with which he became a self-proclaimed world-expert sandwich-maker) that get soft, not hard, as they go stale, Hirschman enjoyed finding meaning from the way History defied “universal laws.” Out of the inversions and “wrong-way-around” sequences, came possibilities for things to be different—like the life that springs from what appear to be dead tree branches at the end of each winter. This impression, too, came to him as he gazed out his kitchen window at home in Princeton. As Hirschman

joked to Clifford Geertz many years later, too many of their colleagues fell prey to “Law No. 1 of the Social Sciences. Whenever a phenomenon in the social world is fully explained, it ceases to operate.”⁵

It was in palindromes that his fascination was realized, and one can detect in his public writings from the 1960s onward a sharp eye for the right phrase: “exit, voice, and loyalty,” “the tunnel effect,” “the passions and the interests.” These were his Flaubertian *mots justes*. Perhaps his best palindrome—certainly his fondest—was “Senile Lines,” composed in a collage of tongues around 1971. It starts like this:

I,
REVOLT LOVER,
FOE OF
PARTY TRAP
EVIL IGNITING I LIVE.
NAOMI, MOAN!
MAORI, ROAM!
HARASS SELFLESS SARAH!
DIE, ID!
NEIN SEIN!
RÊVE: NADA, NEVER.

A world of ideas wrapped in carefully chosen words.

Behind his great books was a clandestine life—not of espionage (though Hirschman did have a brief career as a member of the antifascist underground, and he was once a member of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency) nor of secret lovers or double lives. As Hirschman became one of the world’s foremost social scientists, he launched a sideline in 1972. With a group of fellow palindrome aficionados, he founded the 4W Club (Where We Went Wrong) to bombard a fictive Dr. Awkward with a letter campaign. It was one of the few international organizations that he was actually glad to direct. Albert’s favorite correspondent was the Guatemalan Augusto Monterroso, with whom he shared some *tesoros*. “AMO IDIOMA!” he exclaimed to the famous poet.⁶

Words were to Hirschman what equations were for other economists. Indeed, by the standards of economics, Hirschman was an exceedingly wordy economist. Many in the profession, without knowing that he was once fairly handy with statistics and enjoyed its possibilities, disavowed him as a colleague for it. As Hirschman became a mature scholar, the charge of practicing a social science that did not lend itself to formal, theory-testing rigors or mathematical modeling was a common one. He felt compelled to explain himself to his friend from his Harvard days, Daniel Bell. “The model builders sometimes criticize me,” Hirschman explained, “for not putting my thoughts into mathematical models. My reply to them is that mathematics has not quite caught up with metaphor or language—both are more inventive!”⁷ To many, this may seem a self-serving defense. But it is true that Hirschman’s skill with words always eclipsed his dexterity with numbers, and as the economics profession abandoned the former to pursue the latter, Hirschman was out of step.

Why so much about words? For one thing, they were a sanctuary, a refuge for a man with no country. In the summer of 1944, as he waited anxiously and increasingly depressed in North Africa to join the American Army in Europe, he found solace in words. Despair began to overwhelm him as he thought about the number of people who had suffered on account of the war “or worse, the prisoners in concentration camps.” Anguished, he happened upon a verse by Jean Wahl, “*Merci mon corps, tu fais bien ton métier de corps.*” Writing to his pregnant wife (Sarah) in New York, he exclaimed, “Isn’t this well said? And so simple! Good poetry produces the effect of great inventions. It is so simple but one must think about it.” Characteristically, he concluded with more words inspired by those words: these are “themes to be developed.” Behind him, Albert Hirschman left diaries, letters, and marginalia in books filled with “ideas,” “themes,” and “questions” to mark the trails of his thoughts, verbal routes into his mind’s eye.⁸

Language, especially its written form, was a dwelling place for mind and soul. That someone with so many languages should think of its practice as a kind of home may seem strange to us. But it was precisely his Odyssean life, so long unsettled that a physical home was almost an arbitrary

one, that enhanced the dominion of words. He was above all a writer, and as Joseph Brodsky once noted, “for a writer only one form of patriotism exists: his attitude toward language.”

Words thereby gave solace. But they are also our clues to an intellectual imagination. Words, sentences, prose, and poetry—in effect, literature—were more than embellishments or ornaments to hang on existing social scientific classifications. Hirschman’s work represents an effort to practice social science *as* literature. It is what makes him appear so original in style and content now that the bonds between literature and social science have increasingly been severed. Hirschman, and the cultural milieu of assimilated bourgeois Jews of Berlin, sank a taproot deep into the classics, from Kafka the modernist to the *Odyssey*, long portions of which Hirschman could recite from the time he was a child. It is why Flaubert’s interiority gives insight into psychology, and it is why La Rochefoucauld plumbs the cunning of self-interest. Good literature, to Hirschman, summons the power of small details and anomalies to uncover something new about the whole. As Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a close friend, collaborator, and future president of Brazil once told me, Hirschman was like a Dutch painter, revealing in the small new ways of seeing the whole. An economist to the end, he was forever conjugating genres, styles, and divisions of the human sciences. As the cursus of his life slowly closed with the century, he made of his style a kind of rampart from which to warn us, without giving up on humor, of the perils of overspecialization, of a narrowing of vision, and of the temptation to fall in love with the image of one’s own technical prowess and vocabulary and lose sight of the vitality of moving back and forth between proving and preaching. Appreciating this is crucial for understanding his stance toward evidence and argumentation, why to him rhetoric mattered. He exemplifies at once a disposition that is much broader than the estuary of our social sciences; perhaps for this reason he represents a humanism of social science that may be slowly drying up.

But this would be far too gloomy a reading—and Hirschman would be the first to object to this portrait of his own work. Thank goodness, he would no doubt say, that Fortuna has plenty of tricks up her sleeve.

The affection for writing is what draws our attention to Hirschman; it is his books and articles that have captivated generations of readers and make him unique in the human sciences. But this story is not the story of the works; it is rather the story behind them. By this I do not mean that Hirschman's books and essays should speak for themselves, though their lucidity often left me paraphrasing what was rendered much better in the original. Upon rereading one of Hirschman's essays, the great historian of ideas Quentin Skinner felt compelled to confess that he had been pressing it upon his Cambridge graduate students, "but I find on re-reading it that the points I try to make to them about it are in fact in the essay itself. An unconscious application of a form of dishonesty common, I suppose, among teachers, especially of the harried kind."⁹ I agree with Skinner. This study does not seek to explain arguments that are told well enough by the original author, but rather, by illuminating the drama, complexity, tension—and downright hard work of the intellectual labor process—to invite readers to have their own reading experience by telling the biographical backstory of a life's ideas.

But which backstory? These days, biography, especially of the "popular" sort, has become a synonym for private revelation, culled from a stash of secret letters, a hidden diary, or a confession. The presumption seems to be that what is most private is also most revealing, as if the *real* truth about someone is that which is least known, what Louis Menand called "the Rosebud assumption."¹⁰ Leave aside the naïveté of this genre—as if people don't lie in their letters, distort in their diaries, and concoct in their confessions. Hirschman himself was not above melodramatizing the moment. There is also the matter of what is always inscrutable about a life history. In trying to render a vivid sense of the person's likeness from letters, personal notes, manuscripts, and archives from several continents, not to mention the conversations with him and others, I became aware of the multiplying gaps, the unprovable stories, the maddening lack of evidence. Some are the gaps that we know of, such as the death of his dear colleague and close friend, Clifford Geertz, before I could arrange formal interviews with him. The absence of Geertz's testimony will be a lasting fault, and readers should be aware of the absence of his voice here.

There are also gaps of a less accidental kind; Hirschman, though pressed, did not want to revisit his memories of fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. I have often wondered whether his brand of hopefulness and his faith in reform, his possibilism, required covering the tracks of terrible memories. If they did, it is important to know that some details are sometimes more relevant and saddening in their absence because the gap was there for a reason.

Mercifully, biographical uncertainty is something that can now be admitted. It points to something that Hermione Lee has thoughtfully discussed: how a biography amalgamates what is known and what is not known, the present and the absent,—and how it includes the welter of alternatives, accidents, might-have-beens, in a word, the *possibilities* of a life, only some of which can be reconstructed.¹¹ It is perhaps fitting that Hirschman himself would accent life's possibilities, not just in the way he lived but also for History, and that any social theory worth its weight had to reckon with it. At the core of his possibilism was the idea that people had a right to what he called a “non-projected future.” From a biographer's point of view, one might say the same of the past, especially one that traces a subject's uncanny ability to get out of a jam and find reasons for hope and space for reform even when they seem most implausible. It was not an accident that one of Hirschman's favored words was *débrouillard*, from the Old French root, *brouiller* (to mix up), which alludes to artful ways to wiggle out of a convoluted, intractable, or bad situation.

Words met ideas and ideas found their expression in a quest. One might see Hirschman as a latter-day Don Quixote, striving in his books and essays to produce possibilities that can only be dimly seen. Cervantes was, in fact, a favorite of Hirschman's and a source of some of his selected quotes. The very idea of Quixote's *Librillo de memoria*, his book of memories, inspired the kind of note taking and observation that provide grist for the narrative of this book. It was only after several years of research that Hirschman's wife, muse, and, in decisive moments, his life intellectual partner shared with me Hirschman's little brown diaries, in which he jotted some of his most personal notes. Understandably, it had taken time to build confidence in her husband's biographer. These as well as other

sources help paint a portrait of an errant knight, a figure often noted for being disconnected from reality. But this is only one mode of reading the character, a mode that became commonplace during the English Civil War, which has warped how we think of dreamers. In Hirschman we find a dreamer—Fry would complain about his invaluable coconspirator that he was too often *dans la lune*—who was most certainly connected to his worlds, connected and committed to the extent that he was willing to lay his life on the line for his cause.

The quest is evident across the writings that would span seven decades. But there is no single idea or topic at work; Hirschman's attention moved along with History. The subjects vary from the economic causes of imperialism and war, the subject of his near-forgotten first book, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (1945), to his searing indictment of modern habits of political discourse in *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991). One can read any single Hirschman oeuvre as a window onto a moment, and together they make up a kind of intellectual glossary of a century. Certainly, many of his works now rank among classics of the social sciences—one thinks of *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (1970) or *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (1977). To see them as testimonies and products of moments in time and place, to give these books their own history, is one aspiration of this book.

And yet, there are some common traits in this glossary. One trait was style. It can be read at first blush as literary. Hirschman would become one of the greatest *authors* in the social sciences, a division of intellectual life admittedly short on writerly credentials. Many have delighted in his vivid metaphors, memorable images, and poetic turns. But the great prose was in the service of a disposition that urged wariness about big claims, grand theories, and encompassing plans and the certainties that were required to scaffold them—required because social scientists increasingly sought quarry in models, theories, and laws that were meant to be true across time, and thus outside History. Hirschman was a skeptic who preferred anomalies, surprises, and the power of unintended effects, forces that were sometimes easier to see in literature. Whatever prevailed as the

orthodoxy—fixing the dollar gap in Europe with austerity, faith in planning in the 1950s, exuberance about foreign aid in the 1960s, Latin American defeatism, and the triumph of free-market ideologies in the 1980s—Hirschman positioned himself as a contrarian. This was because he always feared that orthodoxy and certainty excluded the creative possibilities of doubt, of learning from surprises.

As such, his narrative style summoned readers to question whether History really had to unfold a given way. Schooled as an adolescent in Marxism in one of its hotbeds, Berlin, he came to reject anything that smacked of teleology or historical laws. His early battles with Communist orthodoxy would have a lifelong effect. Sometimes the way out of a jam could come from being more modest, accepting one's limitations, and pursuing strategies that lay before one's nose, if only one could shed the temptation to presume that bigger is better or grander is greater. Other times, it was precisely exaggeration and ambition that was required. Being open to many possibilities meant accepting uncertainty and embracing the fact that one could learn from experience in the world by forfeiting presumptions that one could not know it all. Some of the options included the most counter-intuitive. As he would note in *Strategy of Economic Development* (1958), it is where one faces the most resistance that one should press one's pursuits. For this reason, some of his critics have noted that Hirschman had more fondness for understanding complexity in the social sciences than searching for strong predictions. They are right, and they are right to point to his affection for the powerful image over the perfect equation. But there are reasons for this preference that this biography aims to illuminate.

If style was one of the traits, it was connected to the content of his thinking. And the content was deeply rooted in a sense of being in the world. Hirschman's century was one of bad situations, and he found himself repeatedly—indeed, placed himself—at their junctions. Often painted as a hundred years of revolution, war, and genocide, the twentieth century ended with the general consensus that humanity did not dignify itself but rather displayed an ability to perform vast horrors. It is for this reason that Eric Hobsbawm once depicted the long history of the short century as an “age of extremes.” The extremes had their intellectuals.

Many intellectuals. And many of these intellectuals worked in the service of the extremes. Just as we are accustomed to see the twentieth century as the age of extremes, we have tended to be more interested in its extremist apostles, from the revolutionaries to the reactionaries.

But between revolution and counterrevolution, empire and nationalism, communism and capitalism, there was also another domain, that of reform. Often beleaguered, beaten, and overshadowed by utopian Titans, this was a realm of purposive and often nonconsensual, and therefore conflictive, change whose pursuit aimed not to perfect humanity, but only to improve it. The pursuit of flawless perfection all too often led to some horrific outcomes—Hirschman would lose family and friends to the century's butchery at the hands of ideologues of the immaculate. What if humans had dared to dream less of humans as perfectible beings than as improvable ones? To Hirschman, it was a shame that the imagination gave so much allure to the former and treated the latter as second-best or simply—and disparagingly—as “acceptable.” How boring and undesirable! This was materiel for his struggle with utopians and fatalists from Berkeley to Berlin, who preferred all-or-nothing arguments that invariably left societies delirious with impossible expectations or despondent about their failures.

This book is about someone who thought hard about and dwelled in the neglected, ravaged space between the romance of revolution and the firmament of reaction. It is a personal and intellectual story of a middle ground seen through the eyes of someone firmly committed to its place in the world, partly as a counterpoint to the great ideas that gave rise to grand utopian experiments. But he was not just responding to the charisma of grand schemes; his life was a twisting and gradually developing search for concepts to understand social change with their own integrity, complexity, and one might even say “theory,” though this word caused deep ambivalence for Hirschman. Hirschman's life was a personal history of the twentieth century, its epic told through the life of one man who coursed through its most terrible and hopeful moments but never gave up on the ability to imagine life differently, better. Indeed, he would often tell his readers that a

solution to the world's problems lay not so much in some technical discovery as in the power of the imagination.

The ensuing story charts a personal history of the world and a global history of an intellectual life.

As we consider the life of Albert O. Hirschman, we might reflect on this place of reform as something more than a residual, a mere afterthought to the loftier utopias that dominate the pages of his century's other thinkers. After all, Hirschman was an intellectual. His lifework represented a commitment to reform, which ranged from rebuilding war-torn Europe, to development in the Third World, and to defending a capitalism made humane by accepting the necessity of being reformable.

Nowadays, we think of reform as fixing, mending what has been broken, but to Hirschman, it was more than a technical exercise in remediation. It was not what we do when we can't imagine doing our best. Perhaps in retracing his life we can begin to piece together a biography of reform itself: the story of Albert O. Hirschman might be read as a collective memory in the form of a personal tale, a reencounter with a social science that finds hope in disappointment, solutions in tension, and liberty in uncertainty, a style of regarding the social world as a source of possibilities that the intellectual can help summon with a different combination of humility and daring.