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On the Applicability of Albert Hirschman's *Shifting Involvements*
for the Historian:
Notes for a Research Proposal

Of Albert Hirschman's essays on sociopolitical and historical topics – *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), *Shifting Involvements* (1982), and *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991), *Shifting Involvements* has probably received the least attention. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* appeared as the Vietnam War tested many Americans' acceptance of U.S. policies and provoked responses ranging from support to civil disobedience to emigration to Canada. *The Passions and the Interests* challenged some of the hostile reactions to market society that had marked the 1960s and early 1970s. *Shifting Involvements* coincided with no such readily apparent public issues, although it can be seen in retrospect as helping to explain the revival of enthusiasm for neo-liberal economics. And 35 years later, for this historian, its theoretical perspectives may provide insights into epochal change or even a causal framework.¹

i. The argument of the work, which originated as the 1979 Eliot Janeway lectures at Princeton and was published a few years later, is relatively simple: namely that individuals oscillate between seeking satisfaction from private life (affective and emotional but also consumer-oriented) and from public life. "My basic point is easily stated: acts of consumption, as well as acts of participation in public affairs, which are undertaken because they are expected to yield satisfaction, also yield disappointment and dissatisfaction." (p.10) Each objective is pursued in turn, first with anticipation of fresh fulfillment and then with inevitable disappointment. The

¹All page citations provided are to *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

disappointments then lead the subject to turn to the other sphere, from private to public, and from public to private, in a ceaseless oscillation of commitments. One might imagine the syndrome played out in one of the less unpleasant circles of Dante's inferno with Albert as our Virgil, pointing to the perpetually unfulfilled denizens -- not quite so driven as Paolo and Francesca, but partaking of Dante's instincts for infinitely unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) longing. Yet Hirschman implicitly rejects explaining the recurring dissatisfaction by appealing to human nature; he wants rather "to relate it to specific aspects of economic structure and development." (p.12)

Not that economists have analyzed this phenomenon; indeed it undercuts (so Hirschman claims) their fundamental notion that more of a desirable good is always better than less of it. Much of his energy goes to demonstrating how his thesis differs from their axioms:

"Both the economist and the happiness-researching sociologist think in terms of individuals pursuing an array of fixed goals or operating in terms of a set of values known to them. Now this seems to me a mistaken view of the way men and women behave. *The world I am to trying to understand is one in which men think they want one thing and then upon getting it, find out to their dismay they don't want it nearly as much as they thought or don't want it at all and that something else, of which they were hardly aware, is what they really want.*" (p.21, Hirschman's italics)

Let us be frank: like other lapidary observations by Albert Hirschman, the argument might have been set out in an essay, not a book of 140 pages. The pace of the prose, when read in essay form (I did not hear the lectures) is relentlessly calm and measured. But like Albert's other work, it is filled with apposite and charming observations from experience, literature, and philosophy, especially from writers of the 17th or 18th century. We might be reading La Rochefoucauld or Georg Christof Lichtenberg (the latter cited on p.23). Disappointment is not "a mere temporary irritant," (p. 22) but is fundamental to the human condition. "While a life filled with disappointment is a sad affair, a life without disappointment may not be bearable at all. For disappointment is the natural counterpart of man's propensity to entertain magnificent vistas as aspirations." (p.23)

To my mind, the value of the argument lies in observations more specific than these general philosophical reflections on human character. For what Hirschman claims is that we can't overcome satiety with given classes of private goods by pursuing different sorts of private goods – too much time spent at Bergdorf Goodman will not be cured by going to Barnes and Noble, the local Apple store, or even the rugged merchandise of Eastern Mountain Sports. Rather we switch from private goods altogether and pursue public, civic commitments. There follows a brief effort to make the private-public migration fit into the exit-voice framework, which I don't think really advances the argument. As Hirschman suggests, turning toward public action is both voice by definition and simultaneously exit from the disappointments of private consumption. (pp. 62-66) So, too, the author manages to accommodate another subsidiary argument about second-order or meta-preferences. (pp. 66-73) Returning to his major thesis, Hirschman goes on to deny that only people who can't afford many private goods compensate by pursuing public causes. Rather, it is well-off people who are often the principal agents in turning toward public pursuits – identified as reformist political change – which means that disappointment with private goods, not the inability to purchase them, is the major catalyst of action. (pp. 73-76)

The second half of the book focuses on the sorts of disappointment that come once the actor has turned toward public participation. At this point (pp. 92-93) our author states that he will not seek to discriminate between the satisfactions and disappointments yielded by different sorts of public causes, whether, say, the PTA or Occupy Wall Street, since the payoffs from these different activities are hard to measure (although should they be harder to measure than, say, the difference between owning a Cezanne and building Mar-a-Lago?). Rather he focuses on the disappointment that comes from public commitments in general. He says this comes more slowly than disappointment with a consumer good: we do not abandon the Republican Party, say, as easily as we give up on a restaurant that has turned mediocre. But, as Bernard Shaw quipped, socialism claims too many evenings: the time commitment is often greater than envisaged in advance. And more

fundamental, the compromises of principle that partisan activity can require may also prove distasteful. (pp. 96-102)

I won't follow the long discussion of the paradoxes of voting and disappointments of electoral and representative democracy (pp.103-20), after which Hirschman turns to the reversion to private life. He warns us against thinking that such a return is automatic; nevertheless ultimately the pull of private life takes hold again. The private sphere can accommodate some public concerns – it exerts a less totalizing claim than the public sphere. “Moreover, once public man reels under the accusation of hypocrisy – the charge, that is, that public action is essentially self-serving – the turn to the private life can be viewed as a move toward reality, sincerity, and even humility.” “Total immersion in the private life suddenly is felt as a liberating experience not only for oneself, but for all of society.” (p.129)

At the end, Hirschman expresses some concern about the pendulum-like swings from private to public and back again. Some movement back and forth “can be wholesome for individuals as well as for society as a whole. But such oscillations can obviously be overdone. That this is the case in our societies is the moralizing claim implicit in my story. Western societies appear to be condemned to long periods of privatization during which they live through an impoverishing ‘atrophy of public meanings,’ followed by spasmodic outbursts of ‘publicness’ that are hardly likely to be constructive. What is to be done about this atrophy and subsequent spasm?” he asks, citing Charles Taylor. “How can we reintroduce more steady concern with public affairs as well as ‘genuine public celebrations’ into our everyday lives?” (p.132) But this is a problem he defers addressing, although he suggests in passing that workplace reforms which can make labor less instrumental may help overcome the dichotomy. (p.133)

Hirschman closes by allowing himself a measure of contentment with his analysis, concluding not with the limits of his inquiry but its potential. Disappointment, he allows, can imply prior mistaken choices “and my story is, in a sense, the unfolding of successive, rather large-scale mistakes with no assurance that a disappointment-free state will ever be reached.” There is no rational actor in the story. But the human types who are his protagonists are superior to the rational

actor “inasmuch as they can conceive of *various* states of happiness, are able to transcend one in order to achieve the other, and thus escape from the boredom of permanently operating on the basis of a single, stable set of preferences.” (p. 134) We are a species apparently that can enjoy (and tire of) both the dross of the Gilded Age and the excitement of the Spanish Civil War.

ii. For the historian or the political analyst, there is an immediate problem to this work. The discussion is resolutely atomistic. Although Hirschman must have had large-scale public swings of mood in mind, he discusses individual choice throughout, except for the last few pages of the book. Obviously it is the great swings of history that prompt the inquiry, but how are we to go from individual oscillations between private and public to the collective swings that constitute historical change? If the mechanism depended solely on individual satiety and disappointment, first with the private and then with the public sphere, we should expect that in any large enough group these swings would cancel each other out and no great pattern would be discerned. Of course, it might be that since half of the people all of the time (though not the same half) would be seeking to impose their public utopia, the other half would be passive victims of the activists. In that case those who wanted just to cultivate their garden must hope that those engaged in building the New Jerusalem would overlook their niche or enclave. But in any case, *Shifting Involvements* takes for granted the aggregation of cyclical behavior. For the historian, however, it is the aggregation that must be explained; the individual’s scurrying back and forth is only half the story.

Hirschman might retort that his psychological theory is as applicable to history as *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, and that my objection is a capricious one since the mechanism is so obviously observable. But “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” were metaphors that could serve to label choices made at any degree of aggregation, whereas the oscillation in *Shifting Involvements* is not a mere label but an endogenous mechanism. Hirschman does refer to exogenous events that might crystallize the preference shifts but he does not develop this argument.

Nonetheless, faced with the evident mass swings between periods of relative political tranquility and those agitated by public causes or between eras of frantic reform and those of supposed stagnation, there is an intuitive appeal to Hirschman's schema. His essay can be placed among the long series of histories that depend upon cyclical movements in contrast to those that presuppose a more monotonic movement, often described in terms of progress. In the West, we associate cyclical history or theories of politics with a Mediterranean mentality, sometimes suffused with world weariness. Thucydides saw recurrent patterns of class conflict and war in 400 BC; Ibn Khaldun described recurrent cycles of state vigor and decay in 1400 CE; Machiavelli likewise a century later. These perspectives do not exclude meaningful historical change or even progress, but insofar as change is unilinear the metaphor is not the simple ascent but perhaps the spiral staircase.

iii. My personal attraction to Hirschman's book derives less from finding a general theory of historical behavior than in seeking to explain what I (and others, too) believe is a major inflection point of Western, if not global history, from the late 1960s through the decade of the 1970s. As historians and social commentators look around the current institutional landscape – the accession of would-be authoritarian bullies to power (Trump, Erdogan, Modi, Orban, et al.; the steady encroachment of neo-liberal social policies whether instituted by the Right (Reagan and Thatcher) or celebrated rather blindly by the center-left (Blair and Clinton) and intensified rather continuously; the exaltation of privatization, etc. – more and more see the 1970s as a point in which the curve of history, so to speak, changed its second if not its first derivative. What has characterized the era since these years, I would suggest, is the failure of institutions to retain the loyalties and binding force that they exerted for a long period before. Whether the mass political party, hierarchical church structures, exclusive nationalities, the encompassing discipline of collective public causes has weakened. This does not mean that people are less political, but politics expresses itself in terms of conflictuality and adversarial confrontation, not in institution building. Churches are important but they are evangelical and not episcopal.

Let me suggest a historical description –at least for Europe and the United States, but probably elsewhere as well --that is not yet an explanation and not yet a theory: For much of the era since the early twentieth century, our societies mobilized their populations in great collective efforts – fighting the world wars, combatting the Great Depression, hunkering down for the Cold War – these were massive psychosocial contests that demanded an intense degree of public involvement. The late 1960s and 1970s released the tensions in many respects: prosperity returned, a new generation of young adults acceded to higher education and could practice a less disciplined romantic life; the cold war and the arms race reached a point of evident irrationality to many; the United States role in organizing the capitalist West weakened with its involvement in Vietnam and its abandonment of Breton Woods, etc., etc. In effect the overstretched bowstring of public discipline snapped, and the sort of reversion to private pursuits that Hirschman describes intervened and intensified.

This narrative is undoubtedly far too simple, and as a historian I do not yet know how to discipline and substantiate it. What appeals about Hirschman’s book – despite its failure to explain aggregate behavior – is its reliance on endogenous mood shifts. I might not use the term “disappointment” as he does and would think in terms of over-exertion and over-commitment. Nonetheless, the great movement from public mobilization and institutional engagement to the search, if not exactly for private satisfactions, but those that draw on personal loyalties, unconstrained emotional expression, and material acquisition seems striking and the great transformation that must be explained. *Shifting Involvements* helps provoke that inquiry.