

# The actuality of Albert O. Hirschman

*"[T]he fundamental propensity of my writings has been to broaden the limits of what is or is considered possible, even at the expense of reducing our ability, real or imagined, to discern the probable"*<sup>1</sup>.

It would be difficult to give an account in a few lines of the intellectual height, the life experience, the commitment to reality and the contributions for the social sciences in general, and for the economy in particular, of Albert O. Hirschman (1915-2012). Perhaps the most appropriate thing to remember are the words of Amartya Sen, who, in the foreword to the twenty-year commemorative edition of *The Passions and the Interests*, refers to Hirschman as "one of the great intellectuals of our time", and in relation to his works, he affirms: "they transformed our understanding of economic development, social institutions, human behavior and nature and the implications of our identities, loyalties and commitments"<sup>2</sup>. Equally significant is the characterization of Dani Rodrik, describing him as "one of the most creative minds in economics"<sup>3</sup>.

Based on these references, it may seem strange that both Hirschman's figure and integral thought are relatively little considered within the conventional fields of discussion and training in economics. Indeed, in these spheres his name is usually associated almost exclusively with the concepts of "unbalanced growth" and "linkages", worked on in the 1958 book that gave him international recognition, *The Strategy of Economic Development*. However, such a narrow approach can easily become reductive with respect to the entire Hirschmanian work and lose sight of the spirit that animates the letter and its very particular intellectual dynamics, which never ceases to amaze, captivate and provoke.

That intellectual dynamic was nurtured from his youth in the heat of his opposition to the Nazi regime in his native Germany, his training in economics in France and England, his participation in the republican army in the Spanish Civil War and his confrontation with fascism in Italy hand in hand with Eugenio Colorni. Having to flee to the USA, he participated in the Marshall Plan as European expert. Subsequently, he carried out a long stay in Colombia - first as an envoy of the World Bank, then as a private advisor - a situation that would connect him to the reality

of Latin America as a truly transformative experience, even after his return to the USA.

In light of such a life story, Hirschman developed a way of approaching economic, social and political problems that could be characterized by, at least, four fundamental aspects. In the first place, a strongly critical position regarding the dominant systems of thought and, in this sense, respect for the multiple edges, sequentialities and singularities of reality, which he himself synthesizes in the term *possibilism*. Secondly, the tendency to transfer (*trespassing*) disciplinary boundaries to study phenomena from a more comprehensive perspective, which resulted in a network of concepts as complex as original and fruitful. Third, the constant revision of his own ideas to correct, complete, expand or reinforce arguments, that is, a “tendency to self-subversion”. Lastly, a firm commitment to the development of peoples, maintaining respect for their idiosyncrasies and advocating for the strengthening of democracies. In this sense, the volume that we present here is not only intended to invite a re-reading of Hirschman’s work to identify these aspects, but also to show how some of its multiple contributions acquire special relevance for the understanding of diverse and intricate current problems.

Precisely from the perspective of the commitment to reality and the extraordinary circumstances that we are going through worldwide, the article by Jimena Hurtado invites us to reflect on the potential of Hirschmanian ideas for theoretical understanding and practical action in the pandemic’s context of Covid-19. In this sense, it highlights the need for an openness to public debate that makes it possible to give space to the voice, as a fundamental instrument of collective action, and to accept the risks of facing creative solutions in uncertain and particularly complex environments such as those found in Latin American societies.

Thinking also from the background of the global health crisis, but particularly focused on issues related to management, Gabriel Suárez’s essay focuses on the peculiar characteristic of the Hirschmanian approach to social problems, reluctant to the great closed theoretical syntheses and concerned for discovering certain social “principles” and “mechanisms”, in an interactive dynamic that gives rise to singularities, exceptionalities and surprising sequences. In this way, it warns about the importance of “induction” and “recovery” mechanisms, and of the principles of “the hiding hand” and of “conservation and mutation of

social energy”, when it comes to joining and channeling capacities of various social sectors in and through decision processes that generate social change.

Gonzalo Carrión’s article returns to the principle of conservation and mutation of social energy, but, in this case, to point out its theoretical fruitfulness in the framework of the evolution of Hirschmanian thought itself. Thus, the focus is on the process of formation of expectations of the agents and the volitional and emotional factors embedded in the movements of social change. Starting from the notion of “images of change” present in *The Strategy of Economic Development*, and the dialectic of imagination and disappointment analyzed in *Shifting Involvements*, the core principle of *Getting Ahead Collectively* is interpreted in its potentialities to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of human action -personal and collective- and, from that perspective, broaden the analytical spectrum of conventional economics.

Undoubtedly, the contribution of Luca Meldolesi, who worked and wove a great friendship with Hirschman, is the author of inescapable works of reference on the author, and currently chairs the *A. Colorni-Hirschman International Institute*, the most important initiative worldwide to the study and dissemination of the thinking of both authors, particularly through the achievements of the *Conference on Hirschman Legacy*. In his work, Meldolesi reconstructs, as a privileged observer, the process of elaboration of *The Rhetoric of Reaction* in a broad historical context. Along these lines, he highlights not only some of the central characteristics of Hirschman’s possibility approach, but also the author’s concern with theorizing towards the strengthening of contemporary democracies in the face of the conflicts present in market societies.

The texts gathered here highlight the multiplicity of facets of both the high interests and the depth of Albert O. Hirschman’s reflections. We hope that, as they delve into its pages, readers familiar with the author’s work will rediscover his legacy through the novelty of conceptual relationships, historical contextualizations, and practical derivations proposed here. Likewise, for those who are just entering Hirschman’s thinking, these papers can serve as an invitation and guide to undertake an intellectual journey full of surprises, creativity and commitment to reality. Hardly can an attentive reader remain indifferent to Hirschman’s interpellations!

By way of conclusion, and insisting on the importance of the Hirschman's legacy both to understand the main current social, political and economic questions, and to find appropriate practical answers according to the specific historical circumstances, it is worth recalling the following words of the author: "What is actually required to advance when facing the new problems that a society encounters on its way is an enterprising political impetus, imagination, patience here, impatience there, and other variants of *virtù* and *fortuna*"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hirschman, A. O. [1971] (1973). *Desarrollo y América Latina. Obstinación por la esperanza*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Sen, A. (1997). Foreword. En Hirschman, A. O. *The Passions and the Interests*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Rodrik, D. (2016). *Las leyes de la economía. Aciertos y errores de una ciencia en entredicho*. Barcelona: Deusto, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Hirschman, A. O. [1995] (1996). *Tendencias autosubversivas. Ensayos*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. 282.