

“¡Finalmente, un manifiesto!”¹

Luca Meldolesi*

Presidente del A Colorni-Hirschman International Institute
lucameldolesi@gmail.com

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Resumen: El artículo analiza el contexto histórico en el que Hirschman escribe *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, contexto signado por la crítica al Estado de Bienestar y el ascenso del neoconservadurismo en EE.UU., y el giro hacia el autoritarismo en muchos países latinoamericanos. Asimismo, muestra la relevancia del texto en el momento de su recepción y en la situación política actual. Al exponer el desarrollo de las ideas y argumentos hirschmanianos se muestra, por un lado, el particular estilo cognitivo “posibilista” del autor, que aboga por la modestia intelectual ante el reconocimiento de la complejidad de la realidad y nuestra limitada capacidad para comprenderla; y, por el otro, su constante compromiso con el fortalecimiento de la democracia en las sociedades de mercado contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: Albert O. Hirschman; *The Rhetoric of Reaction*; democracia; posibilismo

Finally, a manifesto!

Abstract: *The article analyzes the historical context in which Hirschman writes The Rhetoric of Reaction, a context marked by criticism of the Welfare State and the rise of neo-conservatism in the United States, and the turn towards authoritarianism in many Latin American countries. It also shows the relevance of the text at the time of receipt and in the current political situation. In exposing the development of hirschmanian ideas and arguments, on the one hand, the author’s particular “possibilism” cognitive style is shown, which is found by intellectual modesty in recognition of the complexity of reality and our limited ability to understand it; and, on the other hand, its constant commitment to strengthening democracy in contemporary market societies.*

Keywords: *Albert O. Hirschman; The Rhetoric of Reaction; democracy; possibilism*

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I. *The Rhetoric of Reaction* in context

1 – “A tract –properly learned and scholarly, but still a tract– against the then aggressive and would-be triumphant neo-conservative positions on social and economic policy making” (Hirschman, 1995: 46) –as Hirschman later referred to *The Rhetoric of Reaction*². And yet the fact that he used the term “manifesto” in the copy’s inscription of the book that he presented to Nicoletta Stame and me in July 1991³ says a lot, in my opinion, about the significance of the book. This for at least three reasons. First, there is the inevitable analogy with Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi’s pathbreaking Ventotene Manifesto, which Eugenio Colorni had published with his illuminating introduction on 22 January 1944. Then too, because of the obvious political importance that Albert, in his dedication, attributed to *The Rhetoric*. And finally, (in all probability) because Nicoletta and I, long-term teachers and activists, would subsequently be able to put the book to use.

Understandably, having (unwittingly) passed through McCarthyism⁴, Hirschman had always been somewhat evasive (not to say reticent) about his past⁵ –to the extent that in general, the political effects of his writings often appeared implicit. They were very much there—only “under the radar”.

But in the eighties his attitude changed. Primarily written between 1985 and 1989, *The Rhetoric* reflected the concern of Hirschman and his friends⁶ for the growing neo-conservative criticism of social security and the welfare state.

What is more -he added later- I was intensely unhappy about the direction my country [the US] seemed to be taking. The sense of danger and feeling of anger over the neoconservative offensive probably accounts for the tone of the first five chapters of the book. They were written in a combative mood of a kind I had not experienced for some time (Hirschman, 1995: 57).

I can definitely confirm this impression. Under Hirschman’s close supervision, I was at the time writing *Alla scoperta del possibile* [*Discovering the possible*] (1994). Because of this, Nicoletta Stame and I were invited several times to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where we had occasion to assess the situation and discuss it, politics included, with Albert⁷. This was when I realized how important the democratic Rooseveltian federal construction of the United States was for him—it had won the war and then the peace; and how all this had again been called into question by the

Reaganite offensive⁸. Without doubt, the “social question” dominated the scene.

2 – The book’s point of departure is well known.

In 1985 -Hirschman wrote- not long after the reelection of Ronald Reagan, the Ford Foundation launched an ambitious enterprise [... It] decided to bring together a group of citizens who, after due deliberation and inspection of the best available research, would adopt an authoritative statement on the issues that were currently discussed under the label “The Crisis of the Welfare State”⁹. In a magisterial opening statement, Ralf Dahrendorf (a member, like myself, of the group that had been assembled) placed the topic that was to be the subject of our discussions in its historical context by recalling a famous 1949 lecture by the English sociologist T. H. Marshall on the ‘development of citizenship’ in the West¹⁰ (Hirschman 1991: 1).

Thus it was that the object of contention in this discussion group was suddenly extended—in both space (from the United States to the West) and time.

Marshall -Hirschman continued- had distinguished between the civil, political and social dimensions of citizenship and then had proceeded to explain, very much in the spirit of the Whig interpretation of history, how the more enlightened human societies had successfully tackled one of these dimensions after the other¹¹ (Hirschman, 1991: 1).

Hence, “the magnificent and confident canvas of staged progress” (Hirschman, 1991: 2) painted by Marshall covering three centuries of history in the West.

Hence, the criticism of Dahrendorf who, in the context of the situation of the time, held that the English sociologist had been too optimistic when it came to the social and economic phases¹².

And hence Hirschman’s observation that Dahrendorf’s criticism of Marshall had not gone far enough because it referred to the third phase of the battle for citizens’ rights and not to the previous two¹³.

And hence, finally, the visual angle that sparked the origin of the book. This was Hirschman’s focus on the reactions that followed the three great progressive thrusts; the identification of the three main reactive-reactionary theses—those of perversity, futility and being put in jeopardy—which make

up as many chapters and which are then compared and combined with each other in Chapter 5.

3 – A brief note like this one cannot possibly do justice to the extraordinary “excavation” into the history of ideas that permitted Albert to write such chapters. The regular Hirschman reader will naturally think, first and foremost, of *The Passions and the Interests* (1977). In its inspiration, however, and in a significant proportion of its allusions, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* is anything but a follow-up to the earlier book. Rather, besides the (almost boundless) culture it displays, what is impressive is what I would call his surgical ability to progressively unearth appropriate quotes for its exposition—as some of Albert's friends who had been “stunned” when they read the book emphasized privately in personal letters that I had the good fortune to consult at Princeton's Mudd Library.

On the other hand, the anxiety and unhappiness of the time (Reagan-Bush Sr.), mentioned above—although undoubtedly providing the trigger—were not the book's only wellspring. Albert Hirschman's entire working life (and long-term wandering on three continents) is emphatically echoed in its pages. These reflect the fact that he had liberal and progressive democracy constantly at heart throughout his many activities—starting from his intellectual and political youth, through his work as a professional civil servant at the time of the Marshall Plan, continuing with his long and almost exclusive interest in development economics and Latin America, right through to the stage that followed, mainly devoted to democratic market-economy societies¹⁴.

In this regard, I think it is useful to remember that *The Rhetoric* also represents the endpoint of a Latin-American debate initially brought on in the 1970s by a turn toward authoritarianism in various countries¹⁵, followed by the rapid unraveling of this process in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in the early 80s—which naturally included an interest in consolidating this re-democratization. It is in a brief text of Hirschman's from 1985¹⁶, in fact, that the sort of references regarding the sound functioning of liberal democracies begin to appear which would subsequently take center stage in the conclusions of *The Rhetoric*.

It is also true that “books have their fates”. Which is to say that when Albert wrote “Finally, a manifesto!” certain important political events had taken place (and/or were taking place) that would inevitably influence the way the book was read—such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of

Fernando Henrique Cardoso's progressive politics in Brazil, and of course the Clinton presidency in the United States. In other words, it is not only useful to understand *The Rhetoric* in the context of its time of writing, but also of the time of its reception—the surprising years of Western “readjustment”, in which democratic prospects seemed suddenly to gain new impetus (but also generated illusory expectations).

At the same time, I cannot forget that I am writing during the era of Donald Trump. At the end of a long and closely argued review of *Why Liberalism Failed* by Patrick Deneen¹⁷, for example, the noted political journalist Robert Kuttner wrote,

It is troubling enough that autocracy is gaining ground in practice, but even more alarming that anti-liberalism is once again becoming reputable as theory. There is no good substitute for liberal democracy. All of the alternatives are more corrosive of human dignity and personal virtue. Liberal democracy may indeed be under siege; but if we are to constrain the tyranny of dictators on one flank and the rule of overweening global corporations on the other, democracy is all we have (Kuttner, 2019: 38).

All the more reason, in my mind, to truly take on board Albert Hirschman's political message—to learn and follow his democratic-progressive lessons even over the long term¹⁸.

II. Self-subversion: developing arguments

4 – With three quarters of the book written, Hirschman realized that the reactionary argument of jeopardizing could easily be inverted so as to shed light on its rhetorical-progressive counterpart. This is a case of the “propensity to self-subversion” manifesting itself during the actual drafting of a monograph (rather than later, as had happened to Hirschman on other occasions).

Thus, after reviewing several types of progressive rhetoric—such as The Synergy Illusion, the Imminent-Danger Thesis, “Having History on One's Side”, and Counterparts of the Perversity Thesis¹⁹ —Albert arrived at a general reference framework in which each conservative rhetorical thesis is set in opposition to an inverse rhetorical-progressive thesis²⁰.

Two years later, in the essay mentioned above, Hirschman commented in detail on the reasons for his work-in-progress “change of heart”: “fun”, “duty”, and “benefit” (mainly to the book's conclusions)²¹. He also

maintained that the peculiar temporal sequence of his research helped him prevent triggering the self-censorship inherent in cognitive consistency—which often clipped the wings of his ideas' unintended consequences²².

But I think that more than anything else, this analytical evolution seemed natural to Hirschman because of the cognitive style he had developed over time (and whose roots were in the teachings of Eugenio Colorni), and because of his recognition that since reality is generally much more complex than we can grasp, we need an attitude of intellectual modesty that opens our mind to any doubts, facts and arguments (our own and others') that close inspection shows to be well-founded, and which we therefore need to be ready to incorporate in our own work.

Having thus fine -tuned the rhetorical- progressive side of the issue,

it became clear to me -he later wrote- that the nature of my message had changed. [...] My treatment had become more even-handed and consequently I suggested to my publisher a new title that would reflect this change: *The Rhetoric (or Rhetorics) of Intransigence*, a phrase that had actually come under my pen in the course of writing the concluding chapter [...]. But my publisher [Harvard Univ. Press] objected to having 'Intransigence' in the title (Hirschman, 1995: 60).

on the grounds that it was on the whole unknown to the average American. So the title *Rhetorics of Intransigence* "emigrated" to the Italian, Brazilian, and Mexican editions.

5 – All this points in the end to the book's conclusions. A preview (abbreviated) of the chapter on perversity that had appeared in the *Atlantic* led Hirschman to what he later called "the somewhat gratuitous advice to the practitioners of reactionary rhetoric to 'plead their cause with greater originality, sophistication and restraint'" (Hirschman, 1995: 59). In contrast,

the new chapter on progressive rhetoric would permit a more ambitious conclusion: [...] I would be able to show how discussions between reactionaries and progressives—each with their own brand of intransigent arguments—are 'dialogues of the deaf' and contraptions to avoid that genuine deliberation and communication between contending groups that is supposed to be characteristic of democracy (Hirschman, 1995: 59-60)

This is what he did in "Beyond Intransigence", the concluding chapter of the book.

But it wasn't the end of the story. The progressive camp was drawn to an exploration of some of the possible uses of *The Rhetoric's* reasoning. This interest developed during the course of a conference on "Social justice and inequalities" organized by the French government's Commissariat du Plan in November of 1992²³. "In the light of the critique addressed in my book to both reactionary and progressive rhetoric", Hirschman asked, "how should a reform agenda be formulated?" (Hirschman, 1995: 62).

His answer came in two parts.

- a) "*Awareness of the Reactionary Arguments*. Obviously, reformers would do well to be prepared for the attacks likely to be leveled against their proposals. They also should look out for the real dangers of these proposals, for which their adversaries will of course have a particularly sharp eye"²⁴ (Hirschman, 1995: 62).
- b) "*Self-Restraint in the Use of Progressive Rhetoric* [...] The message of Chapter 6 to reformers is essentially to ask them for self-restraint: I implicitly plead that they should refrain from using – or that they should use with moderation – [...the intransigent rhetorical arguments reformers often use] in the advocacy of their programs and policies, no matter how effective and persuasive they may be or may seem to be"²⁵ (Hirschman, 1995: 64-65).

So Hirschman is suggesting that progressive legislators improve their performance on both fronts—on the one hand they should focus on the actual consequences of their proposals and prevent weaknesses from emerging; on the other hand, they need to clarify the real reasons favoring their approval. It is a lesson in concreteness that aims to put aside preconceived rhetorical reasoning and thus improve the decision-making process.

Yet, even this third conclusion turned out to be in a sense transient. At the end of "Social Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Market Societies" (1994a) Albert in fact wrote,

The literature on the positive effects of conflict and crisis turns out to be quite rich. But I must criticize it, including my own contributions, in one respect. It tends to be so conscious of staging a perilous attack on orthodoxy that it often limits itself to accomplishing that daring feat and does not proceed to a careful examination of the conditions that permit the paradox of conflict and crisis to generate progress. The reproach seems to be aimed

(primarily) at the conclusions of *The Rhetoric*, which ought therefore to be “amended” (Now in Hirschman, 1995: 239).

Indeed, if you go back and read them in the light of Hirschman's ambitious and brilliant essay, it is not difficult to identify an ulterior thread in the great democratic skein that he was gradually “untangling”. Albert in fact states that his purpose is

to move public discourse beyond extreme, intransigent postures of either kind, with the hope that in the process our debates will become more ‘democracy friendly’. This is a large topic and I cannot deal with it adequately here. A concluding thought must suffice. Recent reflections on democracy have yielded two valuable insights, a historical one on the origins of pluralistic democracies and a theoretical one on the long-run conditions for stability and legitimacy of such regimes (Hirschman, 1991: 168).

The respective references are (on the one hand) to the work of Bernard Crick and Dankwart Rustow, and (on the other) to that of Bernard Manin²⁶.

According to the latter, political deliberation is considered to be a process in which

the participants should not have fully or definitively formed opinions at the outset; they are expected to engage in meaningful discussions, which means that they should be ready to modify initially held opinions in the light of arguments of other participants and also as a result of new information [...] If this is what it takes for the democratic process to become self-sustaining and to acquire long-run stability and legitimacy -Hirschman comments-, then the gulf that separates such a state from democratic-pluralistic regimes as they emerge historically from strife and civil war is uncomfortably and perilously wide (Hirschman, 1991: 169).

Yes, no doubt—a reader of “Social Conflicts” might interject at this point—but we also need to take into account (as we have just seen) concrete conditions that allow for the paradoxical situation in which conflict and crisis generate progress, conditions which therefore (we should add) sometimes push the warring parties, in the day-to-day fluctuations of politics, to react by reducing (or accentuating)—perhaps temporarily—the abyss that separates them.

Which is to say that beyond the need to be theoretical, it is essential to relive the problem from within its own concrete process of evolution, as we actually perceive it, *hinc et nunc*. Or rather—starting with the often hobbled

situation of our pluralist market-economy democracies²⁷ we need to try and improve the way they function through the resolution of crises and conflicts (starting with those of the “more or less” variety), in this way perhaps trying to get interactive virtuous circles to “mesh”.

Indeed, when Albert maintains in this key text that in their very functioning, market-economy democracies produce “a *steady diet of conflicts* that need to be addressed and that the society learns to manage”²⁸ (Hirschman, 1995: 243), he also indicates (more or less explicitly), in my opinion, a way of mastering our collective evolution that could lead to more ‘democracy friendly’ conditions—even (I might suggest) in a world in perpetual turmoil like the one that increasingly surrounds us. Should this not be a key objective of our short- and long-term “possibilism”?²⁹

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¹ Written in preparation for the *Fourth Conference on Albert Hirschman's Legacy* due to be convened in Bogotá (Colombia).

² As was often the case with his most innovative books, the intellectual “trail” that *The Rhetoric* followed was (sometimes) as important as the text. To explain himself (and thus offer a number of additional clarifications, as a whole a sort of “authentic interpretation” of some of the key points), Hirschman published in 1993 “The Rhetoric of Reaction - Two Years Later” (later included, as chapter 2 in the collection *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (1995), which I will refer to). To justify this fine-tuning, Albert then resorted to an amusing stratagem—he argued that one of the reasons for returning so soon to his book might be that the author “suffers from an acute case of what the French call *esprit de l’escalier*—thinking of the brilliant remarks one might have made during the conversation only as one walks down the stairs after leaving the party”.

³ “Finally, a manifesto!” was in fact Albert’s dedication “To Luca and Nicoletta” (in Italian). The idea of considering the book a manifesto probably came from an editorial in the “Nouvel Observateur” of 25 April 1991 written by Jean Daniel which, referred to *The Rhetoric*, as an “antio-conservative manifesto” (Hirschman 1995: 57).

⁴ Even though he had arrived in the United States late in 1940, enlisted in the American armed forces in 1942 and become an American citizen, it is likely that Hirschman “guessed” that the FBI had opened a file on him (Adelman 2013, Ch. 9). He also knew that Eugenio Curiel (once a friend of Eugenio Colorni’s), in his effusive deposition to the Fascist police, had accused him of being a Trotskyite—a baseless claim which, however, would have interested the American intelligence authorities (as well as being dangerous to say the least... among the communists).

⁵ As is known, he spoke of his involvement with the Marshall Plan as a prelude to his extended interest in development economics only in his well-known 1984 essay “A Dissenter’s Confession”. Moreover, he lifted the veil on his life before and during the Second World War only in a series of brief texts written (often on the occasion of his receiving honorary degrees) starting in the second half of the 1980s and then (partially) collected in the second part of *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (1995) (On the other hand, the cover of this book shows the false identity card in the name Hermant Albert that he managed to obtain from a family friend after the 1940 defeat of the French army [in which he had enlisted]—a peculiar and inspired event that has now been reconstructed in detail by a great-granddaughter of Mme. Cabouat, who signed the card— (Meldolesi & Stame, 2020).

⁶ I remember, for example, having involuntarily witnessed a long and friendly (and for me surprising) telephone conversation on politics between Hirschman and Robert Solow who, from a scientific point of view, could not exactly have been considered Hirschman’s next-door neighbor...

⁷ Albert spoke to me at the time of the many ways in which the public sector had supported underprivileged sections of the population, starting with the streets and the careful, area by area, subsidized renovation of houses. Furthermore, Sarah Hirschman was particularly concerned with public health and the difficulty of accessing essential services, even those of a simple dentist...

⁸ Parts of this dialogue may be found in the article I wrote at the time, “America, America...”, 1985.

⁹ Later published: Executive Panel 1989.

¹⁰ Marshall, 1949.

¹¹ “According to Marshall’s scheme”, he continued (p. 1-2), “[...] the eighteenth century witnessed the major battles for the institution of *civil* citizenship – from freedom of speech, thought, and religion to the right to even-handed justice and other aspects of individual freedom [...]. In the course of the nineteenth century, it was the *political* aspect of citizenship, that is, the right of citizens to participate in the exercise of political power, that made major strides as the right to vote was extended to ever-larger groups. Finally, the rise of the Welfare State in the twentieth century extended the concept of citizenship to the *social and economic* sphere, by recognizing that minimal conditions of education, health, economic well-being, and security are basic to the life of a civilized being as well as the meaningful exercise of the civil and political attributes of citizenship”.

¹² So that “the notion of the socio-economic dimension of citizenship as a natural and desirable complement of the civil and political dimensions had run into considerable difficulty and opposition and now stood in need of substantial rethinking” (Hirschman 1991: 2).

¹³ “Is it not true,” Hirschman wrote (1991: 3) “that not just the last but each and every one of Marshall’s three progressive thrusts had been followed by ideological counterthrusts of extraordinary force? And have not these counterthrusts been at the origin of convulsive social and political struggles often leading to setbacks for the intended progressive programs as well as to much human suffering and misery?”

¹⁴ It is important to keep in mind, in my opinion, that this latter phase had the previous ones behind it in such a way that its results can be linked to the themes that preceded it—as several authoritative Latin American interlocutors, Guillermo O’Donnell, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Pedro Malan, for example, have spontaneously done on a number of occasions.

¹⁵ Hirschman, 1979; now in 1981, Chapter 5.

¹⁶ Hirschman, 1985; now in 1986, Chapter 9.

¹⁷ Deneen P. J. (2018). This book seems—not surprisingly—to want to turn back the hands of history by three centuries. Of course, I do not intend to jump, rhetorically, “from the frying pan into the fire” (that is, from conservative to progressive, which I will mention later), by suggesting the prospect of a possible general inversion of the great “verdicts.” I just want to point out that the ultra-conservative reaction now orchestrated by the Trump administration tends to assail—and actually erode—all three areas of rights that we too optimistically consider already acquired.

¹⁸ Which is also made easier by the very structure of the book which, referring to the reactions to three centuries of progressive thrusts, implicitly suggests that it is necessary to prepare (wherever and however possible, anywhere in the world) for long-lasting battles.

¹⁹ These are in fact the section titles of the famous chapter 6.

²⁰ Hirschman 1991: 167. “The contemplated action will bring disastrous consequence” vs. “not to take the contemplated action will bring disastrous consequence”; “the new reform will jeopardize the older one” vs. “the new and the old reforms will mutually reinforce each other”; “the contemplated action attempts to change permanent structural characteristics (‘laws’) of the social order; it is therefore bound to be wholly ineffective, futile” vs. “the contemplated action is backed by powerful historical forces that are already ‘on the march’: opposing them would be utterly futile”. “Once the existence of these pairs of arguments is demonstrated,” he commented, “the reactionary theses are downgraded, [and] along with their progressive counterparts, become simply extreme statements in a series of imaginary, highly polarized debates. In this manner they stand effectively exposed as *limiting cases*, badly in need, under most circumstances of being qualified, mitigated, or otherwise amended.”

²¹ This led to the inspiration to put together his *A Propensity to Self-Subversion*.

²² Hirschman 1995: 58-61.

²³ And not, as Hirschman initially would have preferred, by the Clinton administration. “Clearly - he pointed out (1995: 62) - the organizers of the [Paris] conference were interested in hearing from me, in greater detail than I had done in the book, about the kind of ‘intransigent rhetoric’ they should avoid if and when they should be ready to present policy proposals arising out of their current work on the theme of the conference”.

²⁴ Ivi. “For both reasons, - he continues - reformers should know about the principal reactionary arguments and take them seriously. I believe that my chapters on the perversity, futility, and jeopardy theses will be useful to reformers on both these counts, as they provide them with a conceptual guide to the principal counter arguments as well as to the several actual pitfalls any proposed reform may face.” Finally, reformers must in any case avoid undue caution, Hirschman advises (1995: 64) quoting two lines from Racine: “... tant de prudence entraine trop de soin / Je ne sais point prévoir les malheurs de si loin” [So much prudence requires too much care / I am unable to foresee misfortunes from so far].

²⁵ “Impending disaster” or “impending revolution” blackmail: “as Gunnar Myrdal argued long ago, progressives can and should make a convincing case for the policies they advocate on the ground that they are right and just, rather than by alleging that they are needed to stage off some imaginary disaster”.

²⁶ Crick, 1964; Rustow, 1970; Manin, 1987.

²⁷ “I am trying to show”, Hirschman wrote (1963: 6) in a famous passage that opens *Journeys*, a key text of ‘possibilism,’ “how a society can begin to move forward *as it is, in spite of what it is, and because what it is*”.

²⁸ And that we therefore need to teach it to manage. Hirschman’s reasoning, as we see, tends here to spread from government to the whole of society.

²⁹ Obviously this does not in any way contradict *The Rhetoric's* conclusion (1991: 170) that “there remains then a long and difficult road to be traveled from the traditional internecine, intransigent discourse to a more ‘democracy friendly’ kind of dialogue”. It simply suggests not losing sight of this little by little in everyday activities. In fact, “for those wishing to undertake that expedition there should be value in knowing about a few danger signals, such arguments that are in fact contraptions specifically designed to make dialogue and deliberation impossible”.