



# *Worldly Philosopher*

*The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman*

JEREMY ADELMAN

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Summary: "Worldly Philosopher chronicles the times and writings of Albert O. Hirschman, one of the twentieth century's most original and provocative thinkers. In this gripping biography, Jeremy Adelman tells the story of a man shaped by modern horrors and hopes, a worldly intellectual who fought for and wrote in defense of the values of tolerance and change. Born in Berlin in 1915, Hirschman grew up amid the promise and turmoil of the Weimar era, but fled Germany when the Nazis seized power in 1933. Amid hardship and personal tragedy, he volunteered to fight against the fascists in Spain and helped many of Europe's leading artists and intellectuals escape to America after France fell to Hitler. His intellectual career led him to Paris, London, and Trieste, and to academic appointments at Columbia, Harvard, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He was an influential adviser to governments in the United States, Latin America, and Europe, as well as major foundations and the World Bank. Along the way, he wrote some of the most innovative and important books in economics, the social sciences, and the history of ideas. Throughout, he remained committed to his belief that reform is possible, even in the darkest of times. This is the first major account of Hirschman's remarkable life, and a tale of the twentieth century as seen through the story of an astute and passionate observer. Adelman's riveting narrative traces how Hirschman's personal experiences shaped his unique intellectual perspective, and how his enduring legacy is one of hope, open-mindedness, and practical idealism"— Provided by publisher.

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*Worldly Philosopher*

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*For my children—Sammy, Jojo, and Sadie*

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*Even when our trust is heavily placed in them, reasoning and education cannot easily prove powerful enough to bring us actually to do anything, unless in addition we train to form our Soul by experience for the course on which we would set her; if we do not, when the time comes for action she will undoubtedly find herself impeded.*

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Albert O. Hirschman has accompanied me my whole adult life. As a teenager growing up in Toronto, I spied a small green-covered volume on my father's bookshelf behind his big oak desk. I would look at it while talking with him, intrigued by the title, *The Passions and the Interests*. Following a long tradition of teenage sons, I borrowed it. Permanently. That book now rests on my shelf behind my desk. My children, too, will grow up with Hirschman, though they, unlike me, have no choice in the matter. It is to them that this volume is dedicated because people without choice, especially young ones, deserve to be acknowledged for everything they tolerate when no one asks if they mind.

Writing a life history, I have learned, has meant living with a person for days, months, and years. But there is more: in the moments of maximum intensity, it requires seeing the world through the eyes of one's subject, becoming increasingly aware of what one does not and may never know, for the tacit barriers erected during a lifetime are part of the world-experience itself. To help me piece through this maze over the course of a decade of research and writing, I heard many different Hirschman stories, which of course raises the inevitable question: how does what he seemed to others figure into the tale? The life history has to accommodate the views of those people as well. Some are cited in my notes; some have gone uncited but were illuminating nonetheless in helping me reconstruct the

man and his moments. In alphabetical order, the list includes Michele Alacevich, Martin and Daniel Andler, Sheldon Annis, Kenneth Arrow, Paul Audi, Jorge Balan, Carlos Bazdresch, Scott Berg, Samuel Bowles, Peter Bell, Richard Bird, Glen Bowersock, Colin Bradford, David Cannadine, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Miguel Centeno, Douglas Chalmers, Annie Cot, Robert Darnton, Angus Deaton, Mitchell Denburg, Sir John Elliott, Maria Feijoo, Osvaldo Feinstein, Alejandro Foxley, Alan Furst, Carol Gilligan, Herbert Gintis, Louis Goodman, Peter Gourevitch, Francisco Gutiérrez, Peter Hakim, Stanley Hoffmann, Thomas Horst, Sheila Isenberg, Peter Kenen, Stephen Krasner, Susan James, Elizabeth Jelin, the late Michael Jiménez, Salomón Kalmanovitz, Robert Kaufman, James Kurth, Wolf Lepenies, Kirsten von Lingen, Abraham Lowenthal, Emmanuelle Loyer, Eric Maskin, Anthony Marx, Michael McPherson, Patricio Meller, Mary Morgan, Philip Nord, Sabine Offe, Claus Offe, Gilles Pecout, Jeffrey Puryear, Henry Rosovsky, Emma Rothschild, Michael Rothschild, Jeffrey Rubin, Charles Sabel, Alain Salomon, Thomas Schelling, Philippe Schmitter, Roberto Schwarz, Joan Scott, Rebecca Scott, Amartya Sen, José Serra, Rajiv Sethi, William Sewell, Quentin Skinner, Mark Snyder, Christine Stansell, Paul Streeten, Frank Sutton, Judith Tandler, Miguel Urrutia, Maurizio Viroli, Ignacio Walker, Donald Winch, and Philip Zimbardo. I was fortunate to have been able to interview some before their passing, notably Carl Kaysen and Alexander Stevenson. Others, such as Guillermo O'Donnell and Clifford Geertz, were gone before I could arrange formal interviews. I am grateful to Andrea and Carlo Ginzburg for a very long lunch in Bologna—which did so much to help me understand the multiple Italian influences on Hirschman. Thank you to Eva Monteforte, Albert's younger sister, with whom I spent a wonderful week in Rome going over her memories, letters, and photographs. Katia Salomon, Albert's daughter, was always willing to set aside precious time from visiting aging parents to speak with me and share her father's letters. I appreciate her trust and friendship.

Most of all, it was Albert's late wife, Sarah, who guided me through memories of a life she shared with a remarkable, complicated man, opening their personal letters and diaries for my curious eyes. In many ways,



I have come to see Hirschman through his wife's eyes—itself a challenge to consider. Yet, a biographer could only dream of such companionship; I only hope that it in some way helped her recover forgotten aspects of a life as Albert grew ill and spectral and was increasingly unable to follow the course of our conversations. We made a deal at one point that I would finish this book before she died; it was, I fear, a bit of a one-sided pact, for Sarah read not just one rough draft, but also a second one as cancer was killing her. She died in January 2012, before I could commit final touches to a work she had such a hand and voice in crafting. That she did not live to see this published is more than sad—but it is not a tragedy. While it was not easy to juggle the roles we played for each other, she was to me an invaluable source, a thoughtful reader, and a dear, dear friend.

A book that sprawls across so many continents, archives, languages, and pages in the end required support from Alexander Bevilacqua, Gretchen Boger, Franziska Exeler, Margarita Fajardo, Brooke Fitzgerald, Jeffrey Gonda, Judy Hanson, Debbie Impresa, Sharon Kulik, Joseph Kroll, Allison Lee, Erwin Levold, Daniel Linke, Molly Loberg, Alison MacDonald, Debbie Macy, Anthony Maloney, Martín Marimon, Olga Negrini, Yehudi Pelosi, Elizabeth Schwall, Andrew Tuozzolo, and Bertha Wilson.

Most of this book was written in Paris. I am grateful to my hosts at the Institut d'études politiques for the space and comradeship. Princeton University has been enormously supportive from the start, and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation bought me some much needed breathing room from the duties of departmental chair.

I received so many constructive suggestions along the way that I cannot do justice to what became a collective effort to study a singular person. Thanks go to friends in Cambridge—England and Massachusetts—Paris, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, New York, and of course Princeton, where bits and pieces of this book were presented. A few valued colleagues and friends went through the daunting manuscript. These include Daniel Rodgers, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, who introduced me to Albert and with whom I shared many treasured lunches thinking about life history together, Emma Rothschild, and Charles Maier. Each in their own way

helped me to see Albert anew, perhaps through their eyes, in large and, importantly, small ways. And how to thank a dream editor, Brigitta van Rheinberg? I keep her red-lined 800-page manuscript as a monument to dedication and amity.

It is tempting to offer to the reader a long list of caveats. But I won't. The seams and speculations that invariably make up a life history I have tried to indicate in the text itself. Just one note of clarification: as Hirschman's name changed several times over the course of the first half of his life, I have used the names according to time and place—in part to exemplify the twists and turns of the twentieth century in the most taken-for-granted gesture of everyday life, the name we go by.

The title of this book evokes Robert Heilbroner's best seller, *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*, first published in 1953. A perceptive set of vignettes from Adam Smith to John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter, it ends with challenges of depression and war. It is adapted here to denote a worldly figure in at least three senses. Hirschman was uniquely *of* the world, living and working in Europe, the United States, and Latin America and closely observing events around the globe. He was also committed to formulating thoughts *about* the world. His insights about the economy, philosophy, literature, and politics were never forged in the remove of the ivory tower. Indeed, Hirschman would harbor a life-long ambivalence about the professionalizing trend of the American university, and it was by complex good fortune and maneuvering that he climbed the ranks of academia without ever really belonging to it. In this sense, he represented a diminishing species of intellectual.

Never intended as purely theoretical ruminations, Hirschman's ideas were meant as contributions *to* the world. Karl Marx, whom Hirschman studied from the time he was in school, famously noted in his "Theses on Feuerbach" that "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Meant as a critique of German idealism (in which Hirschman was also schooled), Marx sought to illuminate a practical, empirical, political model of the production of knowledge, theories derived from observations of how historical development

actually unfolded. This was, broadly speaking, Hirschman's spirit, though in many respects he imagined himself a dialectical counterpoint to Marx and Marxists and carried the traits of Hegelian influences from the time he was a young man—most especially that world history was the product of opaque and discrete forces, the cunning of reason, whose laws and mechanics one could only imperfectly understand. He was, in contrast to either Hegel or Marx, a kind of pragmatic idealist.

It is the making and life of this pragmatic idealist that is the subject of this book. But as the reader of *Worldly Philosopher* will learn, books themselves have stories and biographies born of ideas. So, too, with this book. *Worldly Philosopher* was my wife's idea. Thank you for starting me on this journey and being my company throughout.

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*Worldly Philosopher*

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *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.<sup>1</sup> 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-