

On Albert Hirschman

Notes for Presentation, October 7, 2017

Unexpected linkages and social energy in collective action

When I received the invitation for this event, I knew immediately that I wanted to be here. When I looked at the themes, I realized it would be very hard for me to fit into any of them. My ties to Albert Hirschman could not be placed in any of the categories: I did not know him as a teacher; his influence on myself is not related specifically to any of his books, writings or ideas.

My relationship was with both, Albert and Sarah, and it was a combination of links and feelings. So I came to know Albert as a scholar, as a person, as a thinker, as a philosopher and advisor, even as a friend. ((*I first met them in the early seventies, in Brazil. From then on, we met many times, in their visits in Argentina, in Princeton and elsewhere.*)) Yet I want to restrain from a purely testimonial presentation about encounters and anecdotes.¹

For this Conference, I decided to re-read the book *Getting ahead collectively. Grassroots experiences in Latin America*, prepared by AH in 1983, when he (and in part Sarah) spent some four months visiting grassroots projects financed by the IAF in several LA countries. It is not one of his major books; rather, it is a kind of travel log with comments and, as I will pick up later on, a very good example of AH's methodology of life and work.

The context:

- Political and economic: dictatorships in several countries, with some resistance, social mobilization and hopes for democratization, poverty and emphasis on self-reliance and self-help.
- Personal/family: Sarah's program *Gente y cuentos* expanding into Latin America and its impact on Albert (*expand*).

The formats of the many projects visited varied, yet in general some kind of cooperative endeavor was in place, geared towards improvement (betterment) of the life conditions of those involved, with the "help" of outsiders /IAF funding, intermediate organizations or leadership.

Although the path for their journey was very well designed and timings were set out in detail ahead of time, actual field visits and interviews had—as could have been predicted—their own nuances, disorders and novelties. Though carefully planned and organized in an "integrated manner", the experience went in a slightly different direction, following AH's own paradigm—the one that stresses unexpected linkages, search for unanticipated roots and consequences of action.

¹ In the last couple of years, there were two public instances where I came back to AH: a review of Jeremy Adelman's book for *Prismas*, and participating in a round table—in the Faculty of Economics at UBA—commemorating his 100th birthday, in 2015.

The book that was published soon after the field trip was a combination of eyewitness reporting on some of the more interesting situations they encountered and on project histories, seen through the eye of some Hirschmanian analytical categories that could help in understanding the dynamics of these projects.

First, something about field visits in general: Hirschman's ideas about linkages, nonlinear patterns, the productive role of disequilibria, and so on, could not be a desk exercise. Contact with social reality would provide the fuel for his thoughts on development –the dialogue with books, ideas of great thinkers, can only be done with empirical “data”, in this case, micro data. The book does not deal with macro conditions –it is devoid of political contexts (mostly dictatorships, economic crises, “bad” fare states (*estados de malestar rather than bienestar*), except for some minor discussions in the concluding chapter. Perhaps because of the sponsor (a US Congress foundation) or perhaps in order to draw sharper micro images, there is no context to the stories in this travellog.

I want to take up a couple of issues.

1. The concern with linkages and sequences. In reviewing cases and projects, AH looked always dynamically, with an emphasis on linkages and consequences, expecting the unexpected, trajectories that do not fit necessary, predictable or linear sequences. Once again, he stressed disequilibria, disorderly processes, unintended consequences, or, in his own words, going both “against one thing at a time” (the title of his talk when receiving a honorary degree at the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1989. DE 1989, “Contra la noción de una cosa por vez”) and against the paralysis caused when the attempt is to develop an “integrated program”. He systematically refused to accept that there is only one “correct path”. And even if there are chaotic situations, they **create problems** that have to be solved, and that is a good thing. In the most abject and desolate conditions, AH was searching for the humane capacity, for the “hope” that can become the fuel for action, for trying to solve problems, for taking advantage of opportunities.

Getting ahead collectively brings out **inverted sequences**: are land titles necessary for people to build solid brick houses instead of shacks? This may be common sense among urban developers, planners, well meaning NGO's and the like. Yet he presents the case where land invasion in a city is done with a clear organization of the terrain and where building “decent” structures may become very important, “not only for the sake of the health and comfort of those who live in the structures, but for the survival and prosperity of the community as a whole. The more solidly and respectably built the houses are, the less likely it is that the authorities will send bulldozers to demolish the whole new settlement, and the more likely does it become that titles to the land will eventually be forthcoming” (p. 6).

He finds other disorderly sequences –against common sense and usual bureaucratic agencies. In one of them, the starting point of a project is developing some kind of economic activity for subsistence, out of which grew a demand for education. Rather than seeing education

as a precondition for development, it turned out to be a by-product, the unplanned result induced by development.

Several other micro or local cases show the “unexpected” linkages that emerge throughout social processes: for instance, mechanisms designed to protect a lending agency against default by individual borrowers end up having largely unanticipated effects in terms of group solidarity; economically based joint activities end up in public advocacy and participation. Educational projects for young people affect individual and family life.

Although such dynamic processes are known to exist and operate, development agencies usually measure and evaluate projects on the basis of the declared explicit objectives, with no concern for these other—at times even more significant—effects.

2. Social Energy. AH was concerned with success and failure, and worried a lot about what he called “fracasomanía” or the failure complex. In this adventure, he found many instances and stories of past failures, and what interested him the most is how the energy devoted to the failed project can transform itself into something else. He called this **The Principle of Conservation and Mutation of Social Energy**, i.e., seeing that “the social energies that were aroused in the course of that movement did not pass from the scene even though the movement itself did.” (55-56). Such energies then became available and were mobilized to fuel other movements. Failures of organized demands for agrarian reform, for instance, may involve positive experiences of community and solidarity, and these may outweigh the impact of failure, which would ordinarily make for withdrawal from collective action. And then they can be channeled to other collective or shared initiatives (perhaps not in such grand scale, as has happened with many radical or revolutionary militants engaging in local development projects).

My own research and life experience can add many examples from other fields: attempts to erect memorials that fail through vandalism and opposition. Destruction does not lead to apathy but rather to reinforce and devote more energy to the project. Yet, once accomplished, people may “rest” and the project may fade, languish or wilt.

Of course, social energies can develop and mutate without an utter sense of failure. In such cases, one talks about learning, about collective action taking advantage of new opportunities, and the like. Some grassroots women’s projects, for instance, involve leaving the isolation of family and household to meet with other women in order to achieve something (that may be seen as an improvement for family life—a crèche, running water, a health center). The new experience, developed for such objectives, involves meeting others and learning new ways of action, that will then be applied to other objectives, or that could become an end in themselves (*women getting out of the private realm demanding some neighborhood facility—a crèche—but not going back to their private family realm once attained. Avoiding isolation becomes the end itself*).

A detour on social energy. I searched other AH’s writings to see if he developed further this high-sounding or even grandiloquent Principle. I did not find anything in that direction. Does anybody know anything about it? *Social energy in art history—Greenblatt- and the parallels to Hirschman.*

3. The meaning of the book. The book has a sense of naiveté or candor, a sense of celebration of small local accomplishments, with not much room for generalizing, theorizing, drawing big lessons, or extrapolating to the macro level. Perhaps there is a degree of romanticizing the experiences, with little concern with a view that prevails in local development since: that of “sustainability”. Yet Hirschman’s interest in the unexpected and in the dynamic turn of events, I think, would imply that a notion of sustainability where the emphasis is on “more of the same” would not be his major concern.

The last chapter of the book is again a typical Hirschmanian product: “why not be satisfied with ‘saving souls’, that is, with rejoicing over whatever advances in human welfare, solidarity and hope are being achieved, without attempting the impossible task ... of comparing the resulting ‘total’ to some equally nebulous concept such as the General Economic welfare or the Prospects for democracy?”

- Grassroots development refuses to be judged by these standards. Activity is valuable in itself without regard to its overall impact.
- Politically, the same holds. GD is not a panacea for political change. It may lead young middle-class professionals to open their careers as *promotores sociales*. And it may have some effects on collective action for other goals, beyond the specific explicit one.
- What about the movements themselves? Dense networks of such movements are bound to change society, insofar as social relations become more caring and less private (vs. demobilization of authoritarianism). They might become movements for political openings, reinforcing pluralist politics, involve new voices, mutual learning and the like.
- Are they a road towards recognition of rights? At the time, social activism was moving into a vacuum left by the decay of other political institutions. The incipient language of rights, of recognition and of struggle may eventually help to overcome distance between actual conditions of life and formal rights.

I think the exercise was aimed at several targets –some conjunctural; others longer-lasting:

- fracasomanía in the region
- praising collective endeavors at times of dictatorship and constraints to collective action in many places
- internal politics of the IAF and its links to the US government and Congress
- a true belief in micro-foundations of macro processes
- a gusto for small ideas, petit idées.

And this brings me to the last point I want to make:

4. On small ideas. Albert Hirschman opposed great schemes, models or theories, in the personal, in the intellectual and in the academic fields. This propensity is crucial (and difficult, challenging) in his biography (and a difficulty for his biographer): the centrality of “small ideas”,

the affirmation of the productivity of doubt, the emphasis on imbalance and even failure as engines of change, the analysis of unintended consequences, his criticism of models that speak of "one thing at a time", the delight of paradoxes. Even his greatest contribution to development theory lies in showing that great theories do not serve and tend to be wrong.

Taking the world and his daily experiences as fieldwork exercises was part of Hirschman's way of life: he paid attention and recorded the observations of everyday life. He urged to stay away from abstract theories and to practice the art of observation permanently. "*Petites idées*, the little ideas of everyday life recorded on small pieces of paper and notebooks, were not records connected with ideologies or worldviews, but rather occasional annotations of what attracted attention, and often served to subvert general statements. "As these little ideas are everywhere, like tree leaves, the skill lay in how to put them together and transform them into a great idea," (Adelman, p. 115), Adelman tells us in his biography. In fact, some of these observations were the germ and were transformed into his great books.

In a sense, fieldwork was life itself. Life experiences would provide the raw materials for systematic study, analysis and reanalysis, also for doubt and for subverting and self-subverting convictions and certainties. Again quoting Adelman,

What he wanted was not so much a theory with predictive powers, but a way to think about societies and economies ... Excursions into real life ... were never digressions for H; they were built into the purpose of observing the world to derive greater insight, and from insights invent concepts that could in turn be tested, molded, refashioned and even discarded by the course of time. ...

Underneath it all, H had a sense that human actions and choices were the engine of social possibilities and that any history of possible futures ... starts its life as an observation of the human by another human (Adelman, p. 655-656).

It was the observation and engagement with life –personal, family, political, economic— that fueled his thoughts. It was literature that provided the elegance and aesthetics pleasure in his writings and especially, his titles. Once we asked him how he got to the amazing remarkable titles. His answer: "I read and re-read Flaubert".

"Hirschman's odyssey can be read as a journey with no particular end", says Adelman. And this reminds me of Antonio Machado's poem,

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino,
sino estelas en la mar.