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Review by: John Dunn

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Review Article

John Dunn: **A New Book by Albert Hirschman**

Albert O. Hirschman: *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991, 208 pp., hardback £19.95, paperback £8.75.

Albert Hirschman's wry and engaging new book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, offers an anatomy of three common political arguments, set unflatteringly within the historical development of modern politics, exploring both their persuasive power and their analytical cogency. The three arguments are signalled in the subtitle: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy. Viewed in the historical setting which he assigns to them and in relation to his own political tastes, no one would be likely to suspect *The Rhetoric of Reaction* of political neutrality. By Perversity what Hirschman has in mind is the claim that a particular political, economic or social initiative can be confidently expected to produce exactly the reverse of the effect intended. By Futility he means the claim that such initiatives have no real chance of achieving any substantial effect. By Jeopardy he means the claim that they are likely or certain to imperil other prior social, political or economic goods. It is evident enough that these three claims do feature prominently in the inventory of modern conservative political persuasion, that they can readily be misapplied, and that they may sometimes convey warnings of the greatest practical urgency. Hirschman's initial motive for undertaking the book, still quite salient in his treatment of the historical sequence in which his arguments emerge, seems to have been a combination of resentment at their persuasive power and well-grounded suspicion of the analytical cogency of very many of their recent applications. In the course of working on the book, however, his attitudes towards the structures of argument noticeably alters, leaving a more interesting, if less enjoyable, lesson to the sympathetic reader.

The book's starting-point came from his participation in a panel established in 1985 by the Ford Foundation to provide much-needed advice on American welfare policies and from a powerful opening statement made to this panel by Ralf Dahrendorf, which invoked T. H. Marshall's classic 1949 analysis of the evolution of modern citizenship. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class* presented the trajectory of the Western welfare state as a broadening out from civil rights of personal liberty under the law, through political rights of equality in choosing

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governments and holding them responsible for their performance, to social rights of full enjoyment of the benefits of social membership through the public provision of health, education and economic security.

Perversity, futility and jeopardy are three moments of imaginative (and then rhetorical) resistance to a process which comes out in its own terms, at least in Marshall's mildly Anglocentric rendering, as the natural progress of modern civilization. Perversity is deployed to obstruct the threat of establishing even civil rights of personal liberty, a threat which Hirschman identifies, not altogether convincingly, with the French Revolution. Burke threatens the revolutionaries and their French and foreign admirers with an ignoble and murderous oligarchy, and picks up enough credibility from what happens subsequently for Joseph de Maistre to present the experience of revolution as a well-merited and gratifyingly thorough providential punishment for the folly and depravity of supposedly enlightened attempts to realize liberty and equality through unaided human effort (and a corresponding fillip to Monarchy and Religion). The perversity argument is rhetorically devastating, where credible. But it makes extreme demands on the hearer's capacity to believe and is therefore only likely to prove rhetorically effective, in the case of those who do not already wish to believe it true, where they have received powerful grounds from experience to fear that it may well prove so. Futility is deployed far more slyly, as by cynical Italian social scientists in the late-nineteenth century eager to discredit the view that the coming of democratic rule to Italy was of the least human consequence, in the face of the supposed menace of democracy. It meets this threat by insisting blandly that would-be egalitarian changes in the design of political institutions never have any real effect on immemorial structures of political subordination. Because of the inherent superciliousness of futility, it too can be rhetorically devastating; and it has the additional attraction of making all too little demand on the hearer's credulity. Its principal weakness as a conservative argument is less that it is seldom completely convincing than that, even where it does happen to prove so, its implications are vulnerably negative. It is discouraging to be assured that one's actions cannot have the slightest effect. But the serious conservative looks to arguments not merely for the capacity to sap the morale of ingenuous political opponents, but also for the capacity to deter less ingenuous ones from acting in undesirable ways. The claim that an apparently attractive action will have no important consequences is a far less peremptory reason for not performing it than the assurance that it certainly will have consequences and that these will be acutely disagreeable.

Hence the greater political salience of the third of Hirschman's triad, jeopardy. The jeopardy argument, as he notes, has been widely used in the face of each of Marshall's second and third stages. In nineteenth-century Britain and Europe (as in ancient Greece) democratic rule was widely held to imperil personal liberty (and especially personal rights to private property, a not inconsiderable personal liberty for those fortunate enough to possess it). The

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social rights of the welfare state are still held by many to imperil both liberty and democracy, principally by their supposedly malign effects on economic productivity, individual or national. It is of some importance to the book that it was in this last setting that Hirschman's interest in the rhetoric of reaction was first keenly engaged. There is every reason to believe that the jeopardy argument has been massively abused in this setting. But no one could seriously maintain that the argument is conceptually irrelevant to it; and taking its measure within this setting requires the mastering of the extraordinarily complicated and unobvious causality of the relations between economy, society and state in any modern country. This last is very much Hirschman's own professional preoccupation and he brings to it, besides a formidable independence of mind and a slightly patrician intellectual self-confidence, a certain quizzical scrupulousness which precludes his reaching conclusions anything like as clear as he might wish.

The historical treatment, as in his much admired *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (1977) is fairly spare. He inspects the past not in order to recapture much of the intellectual experience of its denizens but in the hope of coming upon shapes of argument helpfully detached from the impacted imaginative obviousness of the present, with a view to employing them firmly thereafter to think for himself. Historians of ideas are apt to feel uncomfortable in the face of such a serenely opportunistic exploitation of their cherished preserves (though they are usually mollified by the distinctive personal charm of all Hirschman's writing). There is an element of professional restrictive practice to this response. But its more respectable component is the doubt whether even as deft and penetrating a reader as Hirschman can always be confident of capturing the structures of arguments accurately without a more dutifully monastic exposure to the contexts in which his texts were composed.

In the case of the present book this doubt arises particularly over his location of the perversity argument in relation to the first of Marshall's three stages. Certainly this does not register very adequately what Burke's principal argument against the French Revolution really was. Burke's central claim (as in large measure those of Schiller and even Maistre as Hirschman cites them) was not that the establishment of civil rights of personal liberty in France would produce tyranny and mass murder but that the comprehensive democratic reconstruction of the state, as pioneered in France in 1789, would end in the destruction of existing civil rights and much else besides. In Hirschman's terms it was less a perversity argument against the first of Marshall's stages than a jeopardy argument against the second. Hirschman considers too few of the reasons which led Burke to reach this conclusion to capture quite what his argument was. Even within the purposes set by *The Rhetoric of Reaction* this is of some importance because, as Hirschman's own experience as a development economist has brought out, the jeopardy argument applies far more widely and compellingly in modern political disputes than its perversity associate, and

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because it therefore remains politically imperative to assess its scope and force with some accuracy. In the short term Burke happened to be right. It has been essential in the interim to learn, as best we have been able, how his judgment can be dependably invalidated in the longer run.

But it was not the lessons latent in his historical materials which have given Hirschman's book an outcome different from that which he at first envisaged. Rather, it was the strategy of attending systematically to the structure of a set of arguments widely deployed on behalf of conclusions which he disliked, as a potential means of dissipating their unwelcome power of persuasion. The most effective means for dissipating the plausibility of arguments is to demonstrate either that they are internally fallacious or that they fail to apply as suggested to the subject matter in question, yielding either no conclusions at all or conclusions other than those asserted. The focus on rhetoric serves admirably to sharpen sensitivity to the fallacies of political opponents. But it also serves to broaden sensitivity to the ease with which it is possible for one's political friends (or indeed oneself) to err in the same fashion. Arguments can be deployed instrumentally to secure conviction in a political audience, whether or not their proponent believes them valid. But they can also embody, all too authentically, one's own fonder and less coherent political hopes. 'A general suspicion of the overuse' of a set of political arguments cannot be trusted to come to a polite halt at the boundaries of the suspector's current beliefs. The analysis of Hirschman's reactionary triad is followed in the book by a sixth chapter applying the same approach to a corresponding set of progressive arguments — the perils of immobilism, the mutual reinforcement of old and new, social, political or economic goods, the futility of seeking to impede the march of history. These, too, can convey warnings of the greatest practical urgency; they feature amply in the inventory of progressive political persuasion; and they can very readily be misapplied. What follows from a clearer understanding of the way in which reactionary rhetoric works is a sharpened mistrust of the cogency of conservative political persuasion. But precisely the same follows, *mutatis mutandis*, from a clearer understanding of how progressive rhetoric works. What follows from suspecting both? A short answer might be: the dawning of political intelligence. But Hirschman's own answer is considerably more interesting. For him what follows is a sharpened sense of the vulnerability and indispensability of modern democracy.

To sense the authority of this judgment it is necessary to know a little about his own remarkable life. Born in Berlin in 1915, he left Germany in 1933, took his doctorate in the University of Trieste in 1938 and served first in the French army and then in the United States army during the Second World War. Between 1946 and 1952 he worked with the Federal Reserve Board in the post-war economic reconstruction of Western Europe. In 1952 he moved to Bogota for four years, on the recommendation of the World Bank, to work at first for Colombia's National Planning Council, an experience reflected in his most

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influential work, *The Strategy of Economic Development*.[1] Since 1956 he has worked at a succession of America's most distinguished universities (Yale, Columbia, Harvard) and now for many years at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. When he moved to Colombia in 1952 he had intimate personal knowledge of two enormously important economic experiences: the pre-war German economic dominance of Eastern and South-eastern Europe reflected in his *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (1945) and the implementation of the Marshall Plan. In Colombia he developed a distinctive vision of the process of economic development and of the political problems of economic policy-making. It was a vision which emphasized the reality of opportunities in societies which were already changing dynamically: the importance of backward and forward linkages ('how one thing leads to another in economic development' — or fails to do so), the potential advantages of unbalanced growth and of beginning with advanced capital-intensive techniques of production rather than simpler labour-intensive ones. It also emphasized the merit of troubling to find out what the country's inhabitants were already doing (on the assumption that much of it might well make good sense), before volunteering to replace it comprehensively with some novel and mathematically potent technique which only the foreign economist had the knowledge to deploy. This was already an appreciably more modest, cunning, and politically aware conception of the role of expatriate economic adviser than was common at the time. But even it, as Hirschman points out in an assessment of the lessons of his own career,[2] severely underestimated the importance of paying close attention to the political implications of the theories of economic development which such advisers propound. The relevance of the jeopardy argument to the politics of Latin America over the last three decades has become very difficult to miss.

One of Hirschman's essay collections about Latin America is aptly titled *A Bias for Hope* (1971). Only the most rampant bigot could mistake him for anything other than a partisan of progress, a steady and determined protagonist of the values of the Enlightenment. But he is a progressive who has lived through a great deal and gone on thinking about the implications of his experiences. As a personality trait a bias for hope is a winning quality and in a personal acquaintance or a political ally it can perhaps be a legitimate source of encouragement for others. But in itself it is no more of a cognitive merit than a bias for despair would be. In this respect it is a real achievement that *The Rhetoric of Reaction* should come out distinctly less biassed for hope than the casual purchaser might reasonably anticipate. Certainly it is far from commending despair (a condition to be endured where it obtains but scarcely one to be commended by any sane and decent human being). But both at the beginning

[1] Yale, 1958.

[2] In Gerald M. Meier and Dudley Seers (eds), *Pioneers of Development*, Oxford University Press, 1984.

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and at the end it stresses quite emphatically the real jeopardy in which modern democracies continue to stand. If Hirschman's initial purpose was, as he says, to focus more coolly on the surface characteristics of the views of his then victorious political opponents in the hope that this would be less immediately inflammatory and hence more promising of eventual mutual illumination, then this purpose has been largely fulfilled. His eventual conclusion *is* 'more even-handed' and it might well 'ultimately serve a more ambitious purpose'. That purpose, as he now sees it, is to disrupt the tendency for modern democracies to fragment into relatively self-enclosed communities of belief, struggling fiercely and self-righteously with one another to control the power of the state.

In his thinking about economic policy (*Pioneers of Development*) Hirschman compares the art of moving society forward in a democracy to sailing zig-zag against the wind and insists that this pattern is virtually ensured by the operations of a genuinely competitive representative democracy. But in the domestic politics of one's own country this degree of structural detachment is very hard to sustain (especially for anyone with even the mildest bias for hope). It is scarcely surprising that it should not have been Hirschman's first response to the impact of the Reagan administration on American welfare policy. *The Rhetoric of Reaction* starts off somewhere else and in a fundamentally less eirenic register. But it ends up in much the same place, and by a very different route. What can link the angry and self-righteous combat groups that make up a modern demos in a reasonably pacific and instructive political process is not the enticing prospect of sudden and permanent triumph of one's friends over one's enemies or the unstoppable progress of enlightenment (our own ideas). Instead, it can only be a painfully learnt awareness of the inherent treacherousness of political arguments, a greater recognition of the need to think more clearly and on the basis of less capriciously ingested 'information', and a deeper respect for the reality of other people, individually and in groups. It will never be an easy lesson. But there is no better way.

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