How to Strangle Democracy While Pretending to Engage in It

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It was early in my senior year of college when I received a comment from a professor, scribbled at the bottom of one of my papers, that would transform how I think and write, how I read books and how I try to read the world. So rare to possess written proof of an epiphany.

Carlos — this is just great! Nice job. You have a fine Hirschmanian mind.

Hirschmanian? I don't recall, at age 20, knowing much about the social scientist Albert O. Hirschman — at least I hope I didn't — but this nudge sent me deep into his writings on economic growth, political change and ideological temptation. Three decades later and almost 10 years after his death, I've yet to come up for air. Hirschman imbued me with skepticism of all-encompassing worldviews, which he dismissed as "shortcuts to the understanding of multifarious reality." He warned against experts peddling self-serving agendas but also displayed "a bias for hope," as one of his book titles has it, a caution against seductive fatalism at the prospect of political renewal. And particularly valuable for a time, like today, when polarization and demagoguery are overtaking American politics, Hirschman bequeathed us a slim and vital book identifying the slippery arguments that pretend to engage in democratic deliberation, even as they strangle it.

Published in 1991, Hirschman's "The Rhetoric of Reaction" may have once read like thoughtful musings on conservative responses to the French Revolution, the Great Society and much in between. (A Times reviewer called it a "handbook for bemused liberals.") Today it is a siren blast for a U.S. political system that has lost the ability to reconcile differences and the desire to even try. Long before America was cleaved into red versus blue, deplorable versus woke or MAGA versus everybody else, Hirschman argued that political factions were cementing into extreme, unyielding stances and that

their arguments, with a nod toward Clausewitz, had become little more than "the continuation of civil war with other means."

Hirschman devoted the bulk of the book to the rhetoric of the right, a prescient choice. When conservatives decry calls for progressive reform, he wrote, they often deploy one of three theses: perversity, futility and jeopardy. The first warns of unintended consequences: You may think a new social welfare program will mitigate economic inequality, for instance, but perversely, it will only entrench disparity. The second is even more pessimistic: Your policy proposal cannot make a dent in the status quo, and your repeated, futile efforts only make me question your motives. The third is most ominous: Your agenda will have devastating effects on many other arenas that you may have not even considered and is therefore too dangerous or foolish to carry out.

Once you have Hirschman's categories in mind, they appear everywhere. The battles over the minimum wage have long featured the perversity argument — that setting an artificial floor for wages will backfire by reducing employment. (Hirschman recalled Milton Friedman's assertion that "minimum wage laws are about as clear a case as one can find of a measure the effects of which are precisely the opposite of those intended.") Debates over the availability of firearms in America include all three arguments: Curtailing lawful access to guns would mean that only criminals will have them and will be freer to wield them (perversity); America is too awash in guns already for restrictions to make much difference (futility); gun control is a threat to the constitutional rights that are vital to the preservation of a free people (jeopardy).

That the three theses can be deployed in illogical combinations — your antipoverty program won't reach those most in need, and it will also destroy their incentive to work! — does little to lessen their appeal. They reflect what Sam Tanenhaus, a dedicated observer of conservatism, has called the right's "unity of certitude," the belief that a liberal agenda necessarily equals an assault on American values. With such an enemy, any mix of arguments will do.

But the German-born Hirschman — who in addition to being an academic economist was a U.S. Army veteran, an antifascist resister, an adviser on the Marshall Plan and a consultant to the Colombian government — was too intellectually honest, or simply had seen too much of the world, to stop with the right. The left displays its own unity of certitude, he suggested in the penultimate chapter of "The Rhetoric of Reaction," and its habit of rationalization is "richer in maneuvers, largely of exaggeration and obfuscation, than it is ordinarily given credit for."

So, credit where it is due. The first progressive argument Hirschman pinpoints is the mutual support thesis: Rather than coming into conflict, new and old progressive reforms will produce a "happy, positive interaction." In this world, the law of unintended consequences delivers only happy surprises. Next is the imminent danger thesis, contending that a particular policy is urgently needed to fend off a looming disaster, whether real or just really scary. Finally, the right-side-of-history thesis, a sort of reverse futility argument, revels in the inevitability of righteous progress, so comforting to politicians, activists and assorted true believers. "People enjoy and feel

empowered by the confidence, however vague, that they 'have history on their side,'" Hirschman wrote.

This right-side-of-history argument, of course, is rarely about history at all. It is a pre-emptive assertion of one side's virtue and another's wickedness; it is not about interpreting the past but about scoring points in the present to shape the future. Hirschman likened this argument to "the earlier assurance, much sought after by all combatants, that God was on their side." The comparison is apt: God on your side will help you win, and history on your side will say that you did.

"The Rhetoric of Reaction" emerged in part from lectures and essays Hirschman gave and wrote during the mid- to late 1980s. At the time, he saw the perversity thesis as the most common argument on the right and the imminent danger thesis as the most powerful on the left. Today, though, two others seem ubiquitous: the jeopardy thesis and the right-side-of-history argument. So much so, in fact, that they've broken free of the ideological silos Hirschman assigned to them. On virtually any debate, every side now proclaims dire jeopardy from their opponents while basking in history's certain vindication.

With disagreements involving historical commemoration, the position has a certain logic, as when, in June 2020, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators urged Donald Trump to "stand on the right side of history" and support the renaming of Army installations named after Confederate officers. But frequently history is enlisted to defend more ambiguous and partisan terrain. Would a federal abortion ban starting at 20 weeks of pregnancy place America on the "right side of history," as Senator Lindsey Graham declared when reintroducing the proposal last year? If so, why has Graham, in a post-Dobbs world, called for a ban after 15 weeks instead? (History must be losing patience.)

Jeopardy and history recur in the arguments over the fate of American democracy. Recall how, in his speech outside the White House on Jan. 6, 2021, Trump warned of the greatest jeopardy a nation-state can face. "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," he said. He proffered the same line in a rally last month: If the Democrats prevail in the midterm elections, "you won't have a country left." The former president proposed to fight "left-wing sickos" by restoring patriotism to the nation's schools, thus ensuring that future generations would "honor our history." President Biden embraced the jeopardy thesis in a speech in Philadelphia last month, warning that "the MAGA Republicans represent an extremism that threatens the very foundations of our Republic." He expressed confidence that "together, we can choose a different path," because, as he explained, "I know our history." We all know, of course, where history stands.

These positions are not equivalent in their moral aspirations, in their reliance on truth or in the risks they pose. They are nevertheless rhetorically similar, staking out immovable and irreconcilable positions. "You are extreme and destructive; I have history on my side." Their use renders dialogue not just impossible but unfathomable. Perhaps that is where the country already stands. In a recent poll, the same high

proportion of Democrats and Republicans (69 percent) considered American democracy to be verging on collapse, while identifying entirely different culprits (namely, the opposition) for that danger.

Even in 1991, Hirschman seemed to anticipate a both-sides-ism critique of his book. "My purpose is not to cast 'a plague on both your houses,'" he assured readers. I mostly believe him. It is no accident that the book focuses overwhelmingly on right-wing transgressions. But even if he did not intend to cast a plague on both houses, he understood that both houses can help spread one. Hirschman examined rhetoric across a range of political beliefs because he longed "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.'"

That "friendly" is not squishy; Hirschman was not merely wishing for a more civil public square. He viewed democratic pluralism as a shaky bargain, based not on a consensus over shared values but on a recognition by competing sides that none could achieve political dominance. "Tolerance and acceptance of pluralism resulted eventually from a standoff between bitterly hostile opposing groups," Hirschman wrote. Democracy is not what partisans prefer; it is what they settle for.

When one group feels it can dominate by disregarding the terms of that democratic bargain, as many Republicans do today, what will compel them to remain a party to it? When those on the left see their opponents becoming incoherent and dangerous, what prevents them from developing the self-enclosed self-assurance that their way is the only way, that any complicating critique is simply bad faith and therefore easily disregarded, that they are not just history's participants but ultimately its masters?

Chroniclers of the American story love to describe the country's democratic system as an experiment, a term often uttered with the pride of the exceptional, with that last-best-hope swagger. But experiments can falter, and that confidence has morphed into anxiety and, in some quarters, indifference. Hirschman's book identifies one reason. Democracy's legitimacy and durability depend on dialogue and deliberation — on process as much as on outcomes — but the arguments commonly invoked on various sides "are in effect contraptions specifically designed to make dialogue and deliberation impossible." He did not despair of this fact, though he foresaw a "long and difficult road" to a less facile public debate.

To call my mind "Hirschmanian" was undeserved praise, in college and certainly now. Experiencing Hirschman's mind is more than enough. "The Rhetoric of Reaction" has been described as the most characteristic of his books, with its "delight in paradox" and "insistence on the creative power of doubt," as Cass Sunstein put it in The New York Review of Books. I read it as a good faith examination of bad faith and, with my own bias for hope, as an affirmation that even if the American experiment can go wrong, there is no reason to stop experimenting with America.