Book Reviews: Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action

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Book Reviews

Back in 1982, Albert Hirschman offered us with Shifting Involvements yet another radically original little volume: a theory of disappointment aiming to explain why contemporary societies seem to oscillate between periods of intense preoccupation with public issues and of almost total concentration on private consumption. The curious world Hirschman set out to understand was one "in which men think they want one thing and then upon getting it, find out to their dismay that they don't want it nearly as much as they thought ... and that something else, of which they were hardly aware, is what they really want" (21). Princeton University Press has now refocused our attention to these ideas by publishing this new edition with a new foreword by Robert Frank. When an ambitious text by a celebrated author receives a celebratory twentieth-anniversary edition, this is also a moment to put the champagne aside and reassess its remaining relevance.

Like its message, the book is organized following a cyclical pattern. The first two chapters investigate the role of disappointment in explaining changes in preferences for private goods. The author argues that items that are durable, valuable, and infrequently purchased have a much higher disappointment potential than do those that are non-durable, low-value, and frequently consumed. The idea has some intuitive plausibility.
When a recently acquired kitchen or car somehow frustrates our prior expectations, their continued "hanging around" serves as a constant reminder and source of frustration. By contrast, buying a meal at a new restaurant or an issue of a fancy magazine can be easily repeated the next day or week if pleasurable, or given up for good if disappointing. As Hirschman points out, goods such as food may well be especially disappointment-resistant since they vanish in the very act of consumption and are thus a constant, since constantly renewable, source of pleasure.

The third chapter makes a brief but interesting historical detour, reviewing the various and often contradictory arguments that have been made to caution against new wealth and new consumer goods. This caution not infrequently bordered on derision, as exemplified by the coining of expressive terms like colifichets (Rousseau), trinkets and baubles (Smith) and chétives marchandises (Robespierre). Historically, new goods were often demonized because they allegedly had too grave consequences, for instance because they threatened the social order or entailed undesired side-effects. Yet at other times, the same goods were dismissed for having too shallow consequences, as when they were believed to require efforts disproportionate to the happiness they brought, or to be subject to perverse positional effects.

The next two chapters then shift to what is the book's most important argument. The very disappointment which is, often inevitably, generated by people's private concerns leads them to participate massively in public actions. Such disappointment, Hirschman speculates, must often pass a threshold before it is consciously avowed: people have a tendency to deny bad choices or just stick to them for a while. But when they do finally admit to their disappointment, there will be a rebound effect. That is, the reverse shift into the public sphere will be all the more radical for it. Stronger still: the author submits that "a good portion of the so-called puzzle of collective action and participation in public affairs disappears when the rebound effect is taken into account" (81).

In a paragraph rather grandly entitled "why free rides are spurned," Hirschman goes on to argue that, at least during such cycles of strong public-spiritedness, the very act of participating in collective action, because it is fun or intoxicating or morally gratifying, will actually convey benefits to individuals rather than costing them time, money, and energy, as rational choice theorists commonly assume. In other words, says Hirschman, the total benefits from collective action in this case should be modeled not as the difference between but as the sum of the action's final results and the action's procedural costs (which, "really," are benefits). Moreover, the former depend on the efforts of many group members while the latter depend only on the individual's own participation. Hence a seemingly surprising result follows: the only way in which an individual can raise his own benefit from the collective action is by stepping up his own input. Out goes the collective action paradox, which, in one form or other, has occupied scores of social scientists for nearly four decades.

The last three chapters look into why people may then shift out of the public and into the private sphere again. Hirschman suggests that political engagement, however idealistic at first, is bound to generate its own disappointment by leaving an unexpected bad taste in the mouth. In some ways, public involvement will prove "too much." To be effective, participating in politics often requires betrayal and alliances with strange bedfellows, and it tends to take up much more time than originally planned. In other ways, it will prove "too little." For instance, the one-man-one-vote device, while watering down potential revolutionary fervors, severely limits the expression of intense preferences, thus making individual participation in politics legal but inconsequential.

How convincing are these arguments today? Unfortunately, the book's most important point has proved least resistant to the test of time. As a number of analysts have been quick to note, if public action is not
efficacious in producing real results, any expressive benefits that might have been produced in the process will quickly be overshadowed by the hard material costs incurred-unless one is a moral or ideological die-hard, or a Don Quixote-type weirdo. Undoubtedly, such types of actors do exist. And in some periods and contexts (according to Hirschman, every twenty years or so), public-spiritedness does seem at first sight to be more widespread than at other times. But disappointingly for a theory that aims to endogenize public-to-private cycles, the book offers little specific discussion of the contexts, the actor types (and their incidence and distribution within and across populations), and the micro-to-macro transitions that are likely to produce such shifting involvements. 

Hirschman basically underestimates the fact that, in most cases, organizing collective action around serious issues is hard labor that requires instrumental thinking and material sacrifice. An explanation of public action participation based on process benefits may well apply to a handful of events in some periods and to an armful in other periods. University student protests and signature collection campaigns are a case in point; certain forms of identity-based group actions another. But the theory does not work on the large social scale it is meant to work on. Nor do in-process benefits seem to be of much help in explaining participation in the watershed social movements that have changed the American political landscape during the Great Depression (e.g., those that gave rise to the Workers' Alliance of America and the Congress of Industrial Organizations) and the postwar period (e.g., the southern civil rights movement and the national welfare rights movement). Lastly, even discarding the fact that in-process benefits may essentially be by-products that cannot be obtained for their own sake, such benefits are likely to be significant-and positive-only if public action turns out to be successful. 

In other respects, however, the book is still supremely relevant. Much of its overt criticisms of the standard economic approach to consumption behavior still stand unanswered today, while the narrow self-interest model which it implicitly criticizes remains the dominant paradigm in political science and economics. Certain hardnosed rational choice adherents notwithstanding, social scientists across various disciplines will agree that disappointment is a central psychological phenomenon with potentially important social consequences-perhaps indeed it is "the natural counterpart of man's propensity to entertain magnificent vistas and aspirations" (23). Yet few subsequent theories have treated this phenomenon in an equally wide-ranging and counterintuitive fashion. And importantly, with this pudding, the pleasure, if not always the proof, is also in the eating. Hirschman essentially takes his readers on a cultured walking tour of ideas, providing them with a loose but imaginative road map to guide them on society's journey from the trinkets and baubles that form the focus of much private consumption, to the frustrated ideals and dirty hands that often accompany public action, and back again-with a vengeance. Even when critical of its thesis on public-spirited action, one must acknowledge that reading the book does paradoxically produce no small amount of procedural benefits. Twenty years on, Shifting Involvements therefore remains a rich source of intellectual stimulation, and a course book in hypothesis formation.