

# Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty and Contemporary Economic Sociology

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## **Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* and contemporary economic sociology**

This essay takes the 50th anniversary of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* as an opportunity to revisit this important book. It asks how *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, a book that came out five decades ago as a contribution to development economics, connects to recent debates in economic sociology and how this can help us think about what economic sociology does not attempt to do anymore.

Keywords: Hirschman; economic sociology; quality; theorizing

### **Misreading as a method**

One of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges's distinctive positions was the role he assigned to reading. In his essay 'Sobre los clásicos,' for instance, Borges argued that a book turns out to be a classic not necessarily in response to its merits but because some books are read by different generations 'with mysterious loyalty' (Borges 2012, p.384). Similarly, he proposed, 'literary genres depend less, perhaps, on the texts than on the way these texts are read' (Borges 1980, p.72, own translation). This position, as Ricardo Piglia another great Argentinian writer explains, entails important consequences. Borges created a form of writing where reading's 'deliberate mistakes,' for instance, 'reading philosophy as if it were science fiction,' (Piglia 2005, p.25, own translation) is a means of creating new literature. Of course, I would not dare to compare what I write, here or anywhere else, to Borges's writing. This short essay, though, could be labelled a 'Borgesian test'— an exploration whose method is a form of deliberate misreading.

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Some time ago, I received a kind email with an invitation to give a talk at a

conference on Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* and economic sociology. I answered that I knew very little about Hirschman's work, but, as the summer holidays were about to begin, I could borrow some of his books from the library and give a definitive answer when I came back from vacation. In the summer, I read *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), *The Passions and the Interests* (Hirschman 1977), and the essays collected in *The Essential Hirschman* (Hirschman 2014) and, when I came back, I wrote to accept the invitation.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, a proper serious scholar should have simply declined. Everyone knows that you should not accept invitations to speak about issues you hardly know about. Why did I accept it then? Well—leaving aside, for now at least, the possibility that I am not a serious proper scholar—I thought that preparing the talk would give me the push I needed to engage with Hirschman's work. In my research, I study issues such as the role of economists in the definition and problematization of collective problems, and I knew that Hirschman was too important and that I would not be able to avoid his work for much longer. Hirschman is one of those few authors that inform so many debates that you cannot simply skip their work. There is also the fact that I come from Chile, and Hirschman is a very important influence on some of the most influential economists in the recent history of the country. Understanding Hirschman better could also help me to understand how these economists conceive their work and public vocation.

Once I accepted that invitation, the problem became how to face such an influential work while being so ignorant about it. In the end, instead of attempting the almost impossible task of becoming an expert in Hirschman—to learn about his work, his context, the intentions behind his writings, and the vast secondary literature discussing his oeuvre—in a few months, I decided that I could turn my ignorance into a

resource. I decided to pursue a ‘deliberate mistake’ and explore the results of reading *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, a book that came out 50 years ago as a contribution to development economics and has provoked a vast secondary literature, as a text I have agreed to review today in terms of its contribution to contemporary economic sociology, my area of research.

But, what position do you adopt when assessing a book’s contribution to economic sociology? I know that there is no one economic sociology. There are economic sociologies (e.g. McFall and Ossandón 2014, Ossandón 2019). For instance, the tradition normally called the ‘new economic sociology’ finds inspiration in the work of people like Granovetter and White and is most likely to come from the US. Also from the US, there is the specific tradition initiated by Viviana Zelizer and continued by an increasing amount of work inspired by her approach, or, in Europe, there is the distinctly deductive style of economic sociology conducted by people like Aspers and Beckert and those inspired by them. In the UK—for example in much of the work published in *The Journal of Cultural Economy*—you will find studies inspired by the perspective developed by Callon and others coming from STS; and in France there is a rich tradition of economic sociology informed by Bourdieu as well as by Boltanski and Thévenot. It is not simply that these are different theories. These are different forms of conducting the practice of the sociological study of economic life, with different methods, heuristics, and ideas of what constitutes an economic actor and the social in the economy, or of how to identify good research.

Where do I place myself, then, when testing *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* as a contribution to economic sociology? I am not writing from any of the positions that are normally accepted as the dominant schools in economic sociology. I write from yet another place. It is the particular position of sociologists that do not belong to any

central site of research. Those who write from Santiago, Buenos Aires, or Warsaw—places where you will find plenty of avid readers of French, German, and North American sociology, but are not recognized as natives in any of the dominant schools. This is the perspective of those who, to borrow the title of Daniel Fridman’s podcast, ‘do sociology with an accent.’<sup>ii</sup> It is a position similar to what Deleuze and Guatarri (1986) called ‘minor literature.’ Someone who writes in a language without being native in it; someone who can read and argue with everyone but will not necessarily be heard or read by those who are discussed. From this particular type of periphery you can get a strange panoramic view without submitting to the specific rules that bind those who are natives in each tradition. From this position, like an enthusiastic amateur, you are also somehow always behind and not specialized enough. It is from this position that I write about contemporary economic sociology here.

This short essay, then, shares the results of an imaginary test. It asks: what if we read Hirschman’s *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* as a contribution to contemporary sociology? The results are divided in positive and negative.

### **The positive results**

There are at least two different aspects that make *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* an important contribution to economic sociology today: the first has to do with the book’s subject matter and the second with its style. To put it differently, if I had to design a course on economic sociology today, I would give *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* an important role in at least two different areas—in a discussion on the sociology of quality, and in a class about theorizing in economic sociology.

### ***Exit, Voice, and Loyalty as a contribution to the sociology of quality***

As its subheading indicates, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*’s main objects of interest are

‘responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states.’ It is about the consequences of reductions in quality. With time, a course you have taught many times can get worse, a restaurant that used to be good is not good anymore, or a hospital that was very reliable is not as reliable now. Organizations, firms, and states do not simply remain good at what they do; their quality, or the quality of their products and services, might decrease over time.

The book, in this sense, could be related to research in economic sociology interested in the role of quality in the economy. One relevant tradition, here, began with White’s 1981 paper (and continued in work relying on social network analysis (e.g. White (2004) and Podolny (2001))). White theorized how producers deal with the uncertainty of their activity by looking at each other, and how they situate themselves in regards to the quality that consumers and other producers recognize in their products. Quality is an outcome, a social construction that plays a crucial role in the emergence of new markets or market niches. A second tradition is the large amount of work coming from France (see Musselin and Paradeise (2005) for an early review) interested in the comparative analysis of the techniques and devices involved in qualifying products and services. For example, Karpik (2010) inspected the different ‘judgement devices’ required to make singular goods comparable, for instance movie reviews in films or restaurant guides in dining, and convention school scholars (Favereau *et al.* 2002) compare markets where the quality of goods depends on technical standards with markets where quality results from attaching goods to a unique terrain.

Like White, Hirschman’s book’s simple but important starting point is that quality is not a constant, but a variable. Like sociologists coming from France, he is interested in comparing situations where quality plays different roles.<sup>iii</sup> *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* adds an emphasis on what happens after shifts in quality.

While relying on Hirschman's previous research and experience, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* is not a book that works like a research report. It is an essay that proposes a series of mechanisms to explain how changes in quality can lead to very different consequences. In short, quality reductions trigger different outcomes depending on exit, voice, and the role of loyalty. Sometimes, members, customers, or citizens will simply *exit*: they will stop buying a product, use a service provided by a different a company, or move to a different country. Other times, they will use their *voice* and 'express their dissatisfaction to management or some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen' (Hirschman 1970, p.4). Voice and exit, in turn, interact with loyalty, which refers to how users, members, or citizens might feel in relation to different institutions and that might cause them to raise their voice or exit.

Hirschman uses a variety of examples to show how the interactions of voice and exit can be surprising. For instance, in opposition to a common assumption among economists, he shows that adding competition to a situation with a public monopoly service does not necessarily increase the service's quality. Private provision might have the effect of an exit of those users that are most entitled to complain about the quality of the product. As an example, Hirschman discusses the transport of goods and the national Nigerian railways, where the addition of private truck cargo negatively affected the ability of the train company to react to worsening quality. Similarly, Hirschman proposes, this is the expected effect that adding private schools might have in public education. Competition does not necessarily push public schools to improve the quality of their service but might push those parents who are more entitled to raise concerns about the school quality to exit, leaving the institutions with a less effective feedback mechanism about the quality of their own work.



## **Exit, Voice, and Loyalty as an exemplar of theorizing**

As several scholars have pointed out in recent years, notably Swedberg (e.g. Swedberg (2016)), sociologists pay too much attention to theories and not enough attention to theorizing. Vaughan summarizes the problem succinctly:

A graduate student once said to me, ‘we learn theories, but we don’t learn how people theorize.’ Theorizing is the process of building an explanation: theory is the product.

We read the polished final products, but the process of theorizing remains private, the undiscussed backstage of our craft.(Vaughan 2014: 61)

We either discuss methods or theories but we do not think much about what constitutes good or bad theorizing. Sociologists are not trained enough in the practice of constructing original explanations, and a growing literature is trying to begin to fill this gap, for instance by inspecting the role of analogies (Vaughan 2014), visualization (Swedberg 2016b), puzzling (Mears 2017), or reading (Ossandón 2020) in the formulation of new theories. Hirschman, as the essays collected in *The Essential Hirschman* attests, could be seen as an early contributor to this discussion. Hirschman’s reflection in his essays can also help us to describe *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* as an exemplar of theorizing.

As mentioned, Karpik introduced the term ‘judgement devices’ to name the tools that help people make singular goods comparable. We could say that, for Hirschman, theory has to work as a ‘device for judgment.’ Articles or books do not simply convince readers about a particular explanation, but have to make readers think about a particular set of problems differently. It is theory that ‘promotes understanding’ (Hirschman 2014). Another issue that runs through Hirschman’s essays is a sense that social science has to be case research. Researchers cannot assume that social research will develop explanations that are neat, parsimonious, and universally applicable. It

must be able to be surprised by the empirical material. These aspects characterize Hirschman's stance in relation to social scientific theorization generally, and what he does in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* in particular. There is however one last aspect that makes this book an excellent illustration of what sociological theorizing can do.

An issue that has bothered sociologists for over a century is the problem of the right distance between concepts and models and the empirical phenomena they try to explain. Of course, the classic formulation here is Merton's (1968) discussion of what he termed 'theories of the middle range.' The 'middle range,' however, is not Merton's monopoly; it is already present in Weber's methodological considerations, and, in different forms, it can be found in the lineage that goes from Simmel's formal sociology to the work developed in Chicago, for instance by Hughes, or more recently, in the influential economic sociology developed by Zelizer. What all these authors share is not a dislike of theory—they are all brilliant theorists—but a concern with theorizing at the right level. One of the key difficulties of theorizing in sociology is to find the right balance. To construct a sociological problem involves constructing an analytical position that makes different social situations comparable, while, at the same time, avoiding an explanation of everything that would lose contact with the empirical situation and its complexity. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* can be placed in this lineage too.

*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* could be compared with Simmel's 'Sociology of Competition.' Simmel (2008) wanted to identify what makes competition a particular social form. In doing that, Simmel, surprisingly, did not compare competition with social situations where confrontation is avoided (for instance, market exchange and gift, as will become common in economic anthropology). Simmel theorized the particularity of competition by comparing it with other forms of social struggles. In his famous formulation: competition is a non-violent struggle, which can be thought in terms of a

triadic dynamic. Competition happens when A does not fight directly with B, like in physical struggle or war, but when they compete for the attention of C. Hirschman, likewise, theorizes by comparing surprising pairs. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* successfully constructs a position from which two mechanisms normally seen as realms of different social sciences, exit—normally associated with consumer choice and market competition (e.g. you express your discontent by ceasing to purchase something)—and voice—usually seen as a problem of politics (e.g. you complain and demonstrate when you are disappointed) can be analysed together.

What makes *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* a masterful theorizing contribution is the fact that it manages to do all these things together: it is informed and surprised by case studies, it makes us think differently, and it finds the right level of abstraction to produce a problem of analysis that both allows comparing disparate empirical problems while keeping a strong connection with the complexity of the situations this theory tries to understand better. I would offer this book as a case study to those interested in learning how to theorize in economic sociology.

### **The negative results**

The previous sections showed the positive results, this section presents the negative side, what makes *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* strange or problematic if we read it as contemporary economic sociology. As will become clear, this does not mean these aspects are deficient, it is simply that they do not work well when the book is read from the context of economic sociology today.

### ***Economic sociology does not speak to economists***

Like Gary Becker or Milton Friedman, Hirschman was interested in the intersection of matters that concern economists and other social scientists. Unlike them, however,

Hirschman does not think that other areas can be simply colonized with concepts and methods from economics. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* shows a genuine interest in reading research coming from the most varied areas. This is a type of work that, informed by developments in different disciplines, expects to modify strong assumptions in mainstream economics. For example, as mentioned already, Hirschman contests the assumption that more competition will necessarily push organizations to increase the quality of what they do.

Some years ago,<sup>iv</sup> I interviewed Richard Swedberg and asked him about his book of interviews with famous economists and economic sociologists (Swedberg 1990). His view was sombre. He spoke about how economic sociologists at the time—referring to sociologists that were part of the movement then known as the ‘new economic sociology’ in the US—attempted to initiate a dialogue across disciplines with economics. The dialogue, however, never really succeeded. Instead, economists developed their own sort of sociology—their own explanations to deal with issues like norms, trust, and so on—and, sociologists stopped expecting economists to learn from what economic sociology had to say.

A book like *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* could be read as an example of what could have happened if the new economic sociology did not fail in its attempt to create a real inter-disciplinary conversation. But today all this seems like a parallel reality. Contemporary economic sociology is no longer oriented toward persuading or arguing against economists. Instead, it is oriented toward different kinds of intellectual counterparts.<sup>v</sup> In the business school, for example, sociologists collaborate with experts in strategy and organization theory; in the UK, the ‘cultural economy’ movement has created a space where sociologists work in collaboration with anthropologists and geographers interested in economic problems; and the development of the

‘performativity’ tradition has made it increasingly common that sociologists, instead of arguing with economists, take them as objects of analysis. What these developments share is that there is no real expectation to convince mainstream economists with sociological insights or to frame economic sociology as an engagement with economics. In this sense, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* reads like what economic sociology does not attempt to do anymore.

### ***Current economic sociology does not write about development***

As mentioned, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* aims to make readers think differently. But who is the expected reader? As with many books, when you read it, you get the sense that Hirschman is writing to two kind of addressees—his academic audience, as well as a particular type of practitioner. This becomes especially clear by the end of the book.

The title of the last chapter is ‘The Elusive Optimal Mix of Exit and Voice.’ In Hirschman’s words:

The approach to the improvement of institutional design that is advocated here widens the spectrum of policy choices that are usually considered and it avoids the strong opposite biases in favour of either exit or voice which come almost naturally to the economist and political scientist, respectively. (Hirschman 1970, pp.123-124)

This quotation illustrates important aspects of this book. First, as the footnote—referring to Friedman—that accompanies the quote in the book highlights, Hirschman is trying to counteract what is usually seen as ‘economic imperialism,’ both in the sense of assuming one discipline can deal with all social concerns, but also in the sense of assuming that one single mechanism—for instance market competition—could be expected to solve all types of problems. But the quotation, and the chapter more generally, also shows something else. The book constructs a position from which the

reader can think the right combination of exit and voice as a problem of institutional design. The type of puzzle the book aims for readers to think about is: under which conditions will reductions of quality trigger a process in which either exit, voice, or a combination of both help push an institution to improve its quality? It expects to help those whose work is economic development to think about their decisions differently.

Economic development continues to be important, of course. In the context of the exercise posed here, though, the question is whether this is an area that contemporary economic sociology takes up. Certainly, it has. Development was one of the main concerns of sociology in its professionalization in many countries. Hirschman himself developed a close relationship with people like Fernando Henrique Cardoso—a sociologist and one of the developers of ‘dependence theory’ who later became President of Brazil. Hirschman’s collaborations in Chile were not only with economists, but social scientists at large. The question of development was, at the time, seen as a complex societal problem that required the collaboration of experts from different disciplines. As Madariaga and González (2018) recently note, sociologists that studied economic life at the time successfully convinced other experts that they were a necessary part of that conversation. Sociologists expected their work to influence decision-making about economic development.

Since then, in Latin America but also more generally, sociology has been excluded from these types of policy discussions. The question of development became the question of growth, and economics became the main scientific discipline expected to contribute to economic institutional design and modernization. A characteristic shared by the different traditions of contemporary economic sociology mentioned here is that they do not attempt to influence policy anymore.<sup>vi</sup> Economic sociologists do not write as if they were expected to give advice about how to organize the economy in ways that

enhance economic development.<sup>vii</sup> They do not assume that their addressees are those who will make development decisions. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, in this sense, does not read like a book of contemporary economic sociology.

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This short essay presented the results of a deliberated misreading. It explores what happens if we read Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* as if it were a contribution to contemporary economic sociology. Of course, time will tell how economic sociology will change and whether this books will be read with mysterious loyalty by different generations in a different way.

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<sup>ii</sup> <https://queenspodcastlab.org/acento/>

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, if we leave this text’s premise, it could be argued that the connection with the French tradition is not that surprising because some of this work, in fact, has been influenced by Hirschman, in particular by *The Passions and the interests* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 20).



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<https://estudiosdelaeconomia.com/2012/04/16/economies-in-search-of-a-theorist-an-interview-with-richard-swedberg/>

<sup>v</sup> An exception here is work in the tradition of Aspers and Beckert. As a reader, you get the sensation that a book like *Imagined futures* (Beckert 2016) is written assuming orthodox economists will be among their readers.

<sup>vi</sup> Of course, this does not consider the international political economy literature in which scholars more commonly assume informing institutional design a part of their work.

<sup>vii</sup> An exception here is some of Callon's work. For instance his 'Civilizing Market' (2009), reads as if his expected addressees were in a position where they could devise the right institutional design to deal with such crucial global concerns.