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**Oral History Project
Interview Transcript**

**Albert Hirschman
Interviewed by Elliott Shore
April 19, 1994**

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ES This is Elliott Shore¹ interviewing Albert Hirschman² on April 19, 1994 beginning at 1:00 pm. Albert, you first came to the Institute as a member in 1972. Could you describe that experience and how it influenced your subsequent decision to join the faculty?

AOH Well it was a free year that I had after some years of teaching in Harvard and I had a situation, perhaps we talked about that before, was that I originally planned together with my friend Guillermo O'Donnell from Argentina, a political scientist, a research project where a number of Latin Americans whom we had selected from various countries would write chapters for a forthcoming book about policy experiences attempting to make reforms, to carry out reforms in various Latin American countries. A book in a way that would be not modeled after, but would at least take after an earlier book of mine namely *Journeys Toward Progress* which came out in 1963, which was written all by myself but this would be a collective undertaking along similar lines. However, somehow, was not funded by the agency to which we had proposed it and at that point I decided to accept the invitation of Carl Kaysen³, a long standing invitation I think, to come for a year to the Institute and just to work on my own or on anything that would appeal to me and it turned out to be a wonderful fact that this particular funding had been denied to us. Namely, I got involved here in a chapter in the history of ideas which I had carried around with me for some time as a result of various ideas and notes that I had taken over a few years and I started to write, as soon as I came. I sat down and said this is what I am going to do to elaborate some of these ideas and this is what eventually turned into the book *The Passions and the Interests* which was very far removed from the other topic that I had originally planned and was a history of ideas essentially of going back to primarily eighteenth century conception of the relation between capitalism and political impact of capitalism and markets but starting actually perhaps with going as far back as Machiavelli in terms of the history of some of these ideas. So I started working on that and of course I did a lot of reading and it was a very fine atmosphere and I was able to talk with a number of people who had come for that year. I became rather friendly with Bourdieu⁴ who was a fellow that year and a number of others to whom I could buttonhole in various respects. There were some very nice historians also that knew something about the particular eighteenth century period that I was interested in and so on. So I was able to write an outline of what I was going to do during that year. Of course it was not at all complete when I returned to Harvard at the end of the year, but my ideas had

¹ Elliott Shore, Historical Studies-Social Science Library Director, 1985-1997.

² Albert O. Hirschman (1915-2012), Member in the School of Social Science, 1972-1973; Faculty in the School of Social Science, 1974-1985.

³ Carl Kaysen (1920-2010), IAS Director, 1966-1976.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), Member in the School of Social Science, 1972-1973.

taken a certain shape I can say and the fact was that I put this manuscript away for a while because I had to return to teaching and to my usual activities in Harvard so it kept me a little bit unhappy because I was very much involved in what I was doing and when the invitation then came in the course of the next year 1973-1974 to join the Institute, the fact that I had done so well here in terms of writing a first draft of maybe two or three chapters of the book was a very important motive for me to accept.

ES It sounds like the mission of the school as it was first announced to work in a collaborative manner with historians and to focus on social change really worked in the case of your first year membership or at least it sounds like it helped to shape what you were doing here to some extent or did you already have most of these ideas in mind before you came?

AOH Well I had never written about these ideas I had collected. What I really had done at that point was sort of collecting a few quotations from people like Montesquieu and Sir James Stewart that seem to correspond with each other in pursuing those ideas back where did they originate you know and so on. There was obviously some connection with very considerable contemporary concerns about the relation between democracy and the market and that sort of thing but going back in a way that had not been done, it seems to me, before in the history of ideas and so when I came back in 1974 I resumed primarily working on this book and I was able to practically finish the manuscript within another year and a-half perhaps something like that. I think the book came out in 1976 if I remember correctly.

ES I think 1977. It sounds like the Institute was a place for trespassing between history and economics or economics and politics. Did the atmosphere of the Institute in any way, did you feel that it influenced your work in that sense?

AOH It was simply the freedom. What happened at the Institute was that I was no longer tied to teaching in a certain area even though I was very much interested in and very much fascinated by that area, Latin American development. I had always been able to do certain other things on the side in Harvard like for instance I had written not so long ago at that point *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* and that book continued to have a considerable sort of repercussion on the part of various people who wrote about it and I to reply and to respond to what they were saying, I was already at that point I think writing, there was a conference on the book and I had to write a special article for the conference so I was doing also other things. But what was really fabulous for me was that I could now practically give full time or three quarters of my time to this field which was entirely new for me where I could not claim a considerable expertise and would not have been able really to teach this because I felt that continuously I was skating on rather thin ice.

ES Did the experience as a faculty member which doesn't sound like its that much different at least in terms of your work than it was as a member, the freedom of the Institute that was granted to you as well as a faculty member or did you have more responsibilities in terms of institutional politics or institutional government?

AOH Oh I didn't have too much work, I mean of course I did participate in running the principal seminar immediately and in shaping the next year when the time came to look at various applications or to think about people to invite, we still did invite people to come. Fairly soon I got to shape a year with an emphasis on economics for instance on new thinking in economics, that sort of thing. But that was not sufficiently time consuming to deflect me from my principal research duties.

ES You did come in that period, I think, that people called the time of the Institute troubles, and you in fact were appointed right in the middle of that time of controversy; even the announcement of your election by the faculty was leaked to the New York Times, I believe, in February 1974. Did this affect you in any way? I understand that the relationship between some of the schools were strained at the time. Can you cast your mind back to that period and tell us a little bit about it?

AOH I realized of course all of what happened because I was here during that year of maximum crisis and lived through this period. I realized that there was a situation in terms of the relations between the social scientists and a number of the other faculty was not the best. I was made a member of a committee that was trying to revise the statues in order to prevent this sort of thing from recurring and so on. I took an active part in the deliberations of that committee. If I remember correctly I even came up with some kind of formula that represented a compromise of the various factions. I had a rather good personal relationship with Borel⁵ who was also a member of the committee, perhaps because we communicated in French rather than in English, so I was involved in that. But again it didn't prevent me from giving my primary attention to what I really was worrying about or caring about.

ES Can you tell us a little bit about Carl Kaysen who was the Director then and also I understand a member of your faculty for the first year or so?

AOH Yes Kaysen was of course a social scientist, he was originally an economist who had become more interested in political economy as a result of his experience in the Kennedy administration but who maintained an active professional interest in his own field which was industrial policy, industrial organization and I of course had a particularly close relationship with him because of a similarity in professional interests and outlook.

⁵ Armand Borel (1923-2003), Member in the School of Mathematics, 1952-1954; Professor, 1957-1993; Emeritus Professor, 1993-2003.

- ES So you would characterize him and his work in the school as well as
- AOH Oh yes, well he talked about how to build up the school in other respects quite a bit. I had a good relationship with him, of course he wore the scars of this battle to a certain extent, there were certain things that he felt strongly about, and since I had not lived through those battles I could not quite understand the vehemence of certain ideas or certain sympathies or antipathies, but as far as I could tell he was doing a fine job as a Director. He had some very good qualities, he took part in our seminars always quite actively.
- ES Maybe one last question on this area, have you noticed any lasting effects at the Institute of this controversy surrounding Borel and Kaysen in that period. Did it have any lasting effect on the School of Social Science or the relationship between the School and the rest of the Institute?
- AOH Well I guess there is a memory of these things that persists and some people have been more bruised than others in the course of that but one very fine thing at that point was that John Elliott⁶ was a great friend of ours. He was a very eminent and respected member of the School of Historical Studies and always brought people here with whom we could discuss, people who really had an interest in social science and participated in our seminars, talked generally in the seminars and that was a very considerable element of strength of the school in those years as long as John Elliott was around and which unfortunately is no longer the case.
- ES Your life when you came here to the Institute, did it change perceptively in terms of being in Princeton rather than being in Cambridge, a small town as opposed to I guess an American sort of metropolis?
- AOH Yes of course I mean this is a very great change. Cambridge is a very fascinating place which is more of a community place where you have many friends that you run into all the time and so on. One of the reasons I came here, was not unhappy to come here, was that I felt it was perhaps a little bit too conscious of itself and of its value. The faculty seminars that took place in Harvard, LIT Harvard seminars, just the fact of opening your mouth at the seminars meant that you were practically making intellectual history and this kind of rather pompous self-importance of the people who you often find in this area got a little bit under my skin. Also it was simply perhaps there were too many things that you felt you really wanted to participate in and this cut into your available time. I always said that at the end of the year when I was teaching and participating in seminars and so on in this life, this intensive intellectual life, it goes on. I could count on the fingers of my hand the number of times that I really went to work in the library for instance.

⁶ John Huxtable Elliott (1930-), Professor in the School of Historical Studies, 1973-1990.

ES And you found that less true here?

AOH That is much less true here.

ES Let's change gears a little bit and focus a little more on your work. I read somewhere that something about you, quote not being a Marxist but refusing to systemize and theorize might of made you and I think Clifford Geertz⁷ a good team in the School of Social Science, although in a most recent essay that you showed me you said to some extent you don't like this characterization of not being a theorist you believe that you are and have discovered several, more than several economic and social science principles. But what about this characterization of the school is that fair as a place where theory is important but it comes out of practice not of exact description of societies and social change?

AOH Well I think that it very difficult to say anything very precise about this, I don't think that our school can be considered un-theoretical or theoretical. I think anyone of us is happy if he can formulate a theory, you know like writing a good poem. I also think there is perhaps a common conviction here that the time for the sort of comprehensive and compassing theories of societies has passed and this is not something that one should have a nostalgia for.

ES Is that what you looked for in colleagues later on after you came? Michael Walzer⁸ was selected in 1980 and Joan Scott⁹ in 1985 and you were involved in both of those selections.

AOH Right, I think we were looking for people who have, if you wish, a theoretical mind in the sense that they are able to see larger structures of ideas, how things hang together. Who precisely perhaps have a skeptical view of either themselves or anyone else being able to come to the sort of explanations that pretend to be single explanations of a very large scale that has characterized some sort of theories not only Marxism but quite a few others.

ES One of the persons we haven't talked about yet and we should is Clifford Geertz, the first professor in the school and I guess perhaps the classic example of what you are describing. Someone who is not looking for global theories of social change. Could you talk about him as a colleague and friend and scholar?

AOH I can talk about him and Michael Walzer who are my immediate colleagues and Joan Scott also of course. I think that when one looks from the outside one can probably see certain common properties, common qualities, common defects, or

⁷ Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), Professor in the School of Social Science, 1970-2000; Emeritus Professor, 2000-2006.

⁸ Michael Walzer (1935-), Professor in the School of Social Science, 1980-2007; Emeritus Professor, 2007- .

⁹ Joan Wallach Scott (1941-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1978-1979; Professor, 1985-2014; Emeritus Professor, 2014- .

whatever we share but we do not really in that way. It seems to just happened that we work in a somewhat similar tonality and I mean Cliff, no doubt his writing is very powerful and very influential. Naturally some of his writing has influenced probably not only some of the way I think but sometimes even the way I write although we have very different styles, his style is very unique and remarkably effective. I cannot say that there is really an extremely intensive dialogue between us, that is not the case. In fact I am sometimes slightly unhappy about that because I think to some extent we are perhaps all of us too busy simply to communicate too much and to be writing things. I can say that I have had more intellectual contact with some of the fellows particularly long-time fellows like Quentin Skinner¹⁰ and Bill Sewell¹¹ that we had first period when I was here. They were extremely important in terms of rereading my drafts, I also sometimes show my draft to Cliff; he plays his closer to the chest than I tend to do. I like to get some feedback or whatever you call it, some reactions. But I also generally do not show, what I do show is usually already fairly well worked out and I am looking for specific criticism rather than for overall criticism. The basic ideas often are not up for discussion let's say.

ES That's what I wanted to ask about next. You have been characterized as having "strong interest in other people's work"; you've been able to have a marvelous group of scholars here for the last twenty years and have worked with them. I'm sure it works both ways, you show them some of your work as a more finished material. How does it work when every year there is a new group of people here some of whom I assume would like a lot of your time, how do you sort of work this out? It must be difficult also, I am sure, when you make scholarly friendships and those people go away after a year as opposed to being in a university.

AOH Yes, there are some people that have been here with whom I then have a continuing relationship. It is interesting that you ask that because now I am thinking of some people who have really been important for me in terms of my sending them work of mine and then having continuing discussions after they have left. Two that come into my mind immediately are Stephen Holmes¹² who is now in Chicago and the other, Bernard Manin¹³ who was here for one year and with whom I have a continuing quite intensive intellectual friendship. Quentin Skinner continues to be also a person to whom I occasionally send things and get comments from. I continually try to read what he does because I esteem his mind very very highly. So there are a number of people like that with whom it

¹⁰ Quentin Skinner (1940-), Member in the School of Historical Studies, 1974-1975; Member in the School of Social Science, 1976-1979.

¹¹ William H. Sewell, Jr. (1940-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1971-1972, 1975-1980, 2002-2003.

¹² Stephen Taylor Holmes, Member in the School of Social Science, 1978-1979.

¹³ Bernard Manin (1951-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1985-1986.

turns out during the year that we do discuss things. It does not happen terribly often and I mention these two who are quite outstanding but there are others whom I could probably think of. I find there are always some people in the group we select with whom I have a close relationship.

ES Not necessarily always economists?

AOH No, no, no.

ES Mostly, or?

AOH Mostly, not economists, no not economists very often. During the first two or three years when I was on the faculty I brought quite a few economists here. That was when I arranged and was able to shape and invite people for the focus of the year. But after all it was only a period of eleven years altogether, I came here at age fifty-nine and at age seventy I retired so during those eleven years I think it was three times that I had some kind of economics focus. We had some very interesting characters here from Leijonhufvud¹⁴, Leibenstein¹⁵, Kornai¹⁶, with whom I continue to have contact, and quite a few others.

ES How did it work, did you select a core group to invite and then invite applications from others or did it change over the years, how did the application and invitation process work?

AOH At the beginning we did either directly invite or suggest to people to apply with the idea that if they did so they would probably get in. They all had to apply but sometimes it was really pretty much pro forma because they knew in advance that they would get in if they applied. The balance between invitations and normal simple applications and response on our part changed over the years. At the beginning for most of the funds that we had available there was no particular insistence on a competitive examination kind of situation.

ES Maybe the way in the case of NEH?

AOH NEH and I guess we had to become more formal in our procedures. The situation has changed quite a bit from the earlier years and in the period in which we are now there are relatively few, sometimes there are no people at all being told in advance that they would be welcome to apply.

ES Is this mostly a change with the times, is this something that has also been forced from the outside like from funding agencies?

¹⁴ Axel Leijonhufvud (1933-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1983-1984.

¹⁵ Harvey Leibenstein (1922-1994), Member in the School of Social Science, 1978-1979.

¹⁶ Janos Kornai (1928-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1983-1984.

- AOH Funding agencies I think encouraged that sort of change but we felt that with the maturing of the school it was a desirable change.
- ES So is there a difference in the kinds of people who have been coming in the last years than in the earlier years?
- AOH I think there is some change in a sense perhaps as a result of this. with the procedures we followed in the earlier years we tended to have perhaps more of a group where there were always three or four fairly eminent people in their professions. More recently probably a younger group and a group that was more even in terms of their professional reputation and eminence.
- ES Is there a difference in the quality of discussion, or difference in the seminars, or the very important lunches that we have at the institute?
- AOH Well it doesn't change, I don't think there has been very much of a change because as it turns out in some years there are people who are more articulate and somehow have more to say or think they have more to say.
- ES How about the school, I wanted to ask you about the invention of its own tradition. The school seems to be still in spite of this change fairly much an informal assembly without having meetings in which minutes are normally kept. How did this informality begin, was there some reason for it, why does it continue, how do you get any work done if there are no minutes?
- AOH Well in the first place we have very few meetings. There are only so many things not too many administrative matters to be decided upon. I mean there is the work of getting grants which always takes some time. In fact I remember that at one point we were able to deflect some of this work toward the longer term members whom we had at the time like Bill Sewell and perhaps Quentin Skinner was also involved. Bill Sewell was extremely good at taking on some of these jobs and the only other matters we had to decide upon was essentially the selection of fellows for the next year otherwise everything was more-or-less set.
- ES The Thursday Seminar is an interesting example of a blend of informality and formality, the paper is not given out beforehand.
- AOH That was rather an evolution because when I came the schoolwide seminar to which other people were also invited took place in the afternoon and papers were circulated, so there was a considerable amount of discussion, people already had comments or ideas when they assembled. But for some reason I think at that point it was felt that perhaps the seminars were taking on too much of an antagonistic aspect and had too much character and it would be better not to read the papers in advance. You could have specialized seminars but the general seminar it was decided might work better if we had it in conjunction with a meal, like the luncheon and then also not to have papers circulated in advance. So that this was a reaction to some kind of a problem, trouble, etc., that was sensed about the way the seminars were run during the first years. Then of

course during the time before I came, up to the point when I remember, maybe there were a number of prima donnas here and they got into each other's hair a lot and so the decision to change was made as a result of the experience of those seminars. Perhaps Carl Kaysen also was the kind of person who enjoyed some of the kind of theater that took place, but a lot of people didn't enjoy it so much.

- ES You mention Carl Kaysen again with the seminars, how about other faculty members in other schools, you mentioned also John Elliott was an interested member of the School of Historical Studies and came to many of the seminars. Were there other members, and you also mentioned Armand Borel as someone you could at least speak French with here. How about this community of scholars, this connection between all of the four schools does that really exist here at the Institute, does it exist at some level between members or faculty members?
- AOH I think the connections between the schools are not very many, neither by way of quantity nor by way of quality I would say. There is the great exception I suppose, John Elliott with whom I particularly had a very close relationship because he had an interest not only in Spain but also in the Spanish speaking world and my interest was in Latin America. So we had actually some projects to work on together which didn't quite come about but at least I talked about some of these things with some of the fellows that he brought here. Otherwise I happen to have a considerable interest in the history of art and so I go often, have been going quite a bit, to the seminars organized by the Art Historians here and at the University. But that's kind of a personal situation I think.
- ES How about the director, the various directors who have been here during your tenure? You started with Carl Kaysen and then Harry Woolf¹⁷. We haven't talked about him, he came right after you became a faculty member and I guess was a director all through your tenure here as an active member of the faculty. Was there a change in tone at the Institute, was there any kind of perceptible difference from your point of view, from the point of view of the school?
- AOH Certainly, well Carl Kaysen was really a social scientist of considerable interest and knowledge. He had tried to broaden out and was remarkable in terms of absorbing the problems of other sciences and also in being able, at least to have some kind of a smattering of these. But in Social Science he did have opinions and that was not the case of Harry Woolf who was a very amiable pleasant type but the depths of his intellectual interests were not the same.
- ES At a previous discussion we had you talked about one of the most interesting problems of being here at the Institute is the question of dealing with the freedom that it allows, the freedom from teaching, the freedom to have the time to

¹⁷ Harry Woolf (1923-2003), IAS Director, 1976-1987; Professor-At-Large, 1987-1994; Emeritus Professor, 1994-2003.

concentrate on whatever you need to concentrate on. How have you dealt with that here and maybe you can go on and talk about how difficult it may be for people to deal with that kind of situation?

AOH It is difficult to really say anything very specific about that. In my case it was very good that I came at a somewhat advanced age already I was fifty-nine when I came here so I knew I had a very limited time and I wanted to get into a few things. I had this new interest in the intellectual history that I spelled out with my book *The Passions and the Interests* but I had continuing interests in a number of other areas, Latin American development and economic development, political relations between politics and economics. One thing I was able to do here at that point was also to concentrate. There was one particular venture originally started by the Social Science Research Council this was a period of authoritarian regimes in Latin America that had taken over in some of the most important countries, Brazil, Chile, Argentina and others. We had a working group that was funded by the Social Science Research Council on this problem of the new authoritarian regimes in Latin America and its economic determinance, economic consequences and such. I was able to bring from Latin America some people who were working, like José Serra¹⁸ was one of the major authors of one of the papers and also Fernando Henrique Cardoso¹⁹, the famous Brazilian sociologist who is now running for the presidency of Brazil. These were all exiles from Brazil, Chile, and so on. This was a very active period from the point of view of this particular collaboration which resulted in a book that was much esteemed at the time and widely read in science classes. The editor was David Collier,²⁰ the title was *The New Authoritarians in Latin America*, articles by Serra, Cardoso, myself, and others. So this was a fine intellectual experience which was made possible by this flexibility that we had here, in occasionally inviting people or simply holding meetings here and so on.

ES Did you see where the freedom of being away from the university but by being in such an intense intellectual environment might also be a problem for some, either members of the faculty or even visiting members who come for the year?

AOH I don't think for visiting members because they know that have only one year, which is really a short period where they generally want to accomplish something. They always complain that they don't accomplish enough not nearly as much as they had hoped. But it conceivably could be a problem for someone who stays here or comes here at a very early age, let's say someone appointed here at age forty because he is quite a prominent person but perhaps runs out of ideas or perhaps accepts doing things which he shouldn't have accepted simply

¹⁸ José Serra (1942-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1976-1978; Director's Visitor, 2003.

¹⁹ Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1931-), Member in the School of Social Science, 1975, 1976, 1978. Cardoso was President of Brazil from January 1, 1995 until January 1, 2003.

²⁰ David Collier (1942-), Visitor in the School of Social Science, 1975-1976.

for fear of not being fully occupied or something like that. It's very easy to imagine that people could perhaps dry out here but I have not seen it because it seems to me that we have appointed people who simply were sufficiently self-propelled and self-paced and that they have done quite well here. I am sure that some people have really blossomed forth here, perhaps in a way that is a surprise to themselves. I know that Michael Walzer today really has achieved a kind of intellectual preeminence for instance from a number of European countries, like Germany, Italy, and even France, that must come as a surprise to him. The same for Joan Scott I think. Somehow one gains certain visibility by being here and also you can bring people here that are somehow looking up to you already a little bit as a intellectual point of light, this puts a certain burden on you but also at the same time is helpful in making you a little more daring than you might otherwise be.

ES I have also seen the opposite reaction sometimes with the members that they seem to defend their positions more than they are willing to engage in an intellectual exchange, that sometimes people come with ideas that they fought hard to develop in their own intellectual lives and then are faced with other ideas, other personalities and sometimes it seems to me the opposite happens, does it?

AOH Yes I think that can happen. I can think of some people here perhaps who have shut up progressively as they went on through the year because they were a little bit upset by the fact people weren't all *feuer flamme*²¹ you know, for what they had to contribute.

ES Let me ask you one last question, maybe it won't be the last question but I think it might be. I remember you once telling me when we were standing in line in the cafeteria that the big difference between being retired at the Institute and not was that at the end of month you would get a bill instead of a check. And now you have been "retired" almost as long as you were a member of the school, eight or so years now and you were a faculty member for about eleven years.

AOH Nine years now.

ES Nine years, is there a difference being retired and not retired, do you seem to be producing as much or more than ever before?

AOH Well from that point of view it depends, certainly the pressures to participate and to produce are the same or more than before because it is a kind of cumulative process and of course some people maybe do not call on you anymore because they are surprised that you are still alive, but there is really very little of that. When I came here at age fifty-nine I did not realize that one of the great benefits of the Institute is that there is a life during retirement not only from the material

²¹ When reviewing this transcript, Katia Salomon commented here: "My father used a German expression which I think is *feuer flamme* which is the same as the French expression *tout feu tout flamme* meaning 'extremely enthusiastic' - (English literal translation would be 'all fire, all flame')."

point of view, you keep your office, a secretary, and various other privileges, free mail, etc., but also you continue to be a real member, an active member of the intellectual community. Not only participation of seminars but I mean being able to have lunch and so on with the people who come here for a year, so you are really a member. The only problem could be is if you really decide that maybe you have had enough of the kind of thing you have been doing so far and want to go into a totally different direction. I mean if you want to start writing novels for instance in your old age, maybe there is a little bit of a pressure for these people to remain the kind of scholar that you have been rather than go off into totally new directions.

ES Thank you.