

Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press. 351 pages.

Scholars in the world of Political Science who study elections and ideology as well as practitioners of American politics owe it to themselves to read the latest piece of scholarship from sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. Published in late 2016, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* is among the most illuminating studies of political attitudes, partisan affiliation, and personal narratives of the conservative rank-and-file published to date. Rather than simply pontificating about what drives the modern Republican Party's political base or reviewing the reams of existing public opinion data, Hochschild takes leave of the liberal confines of Berkeley, California for a five-year tour through Louisiana, a hotbed of conservative politics.

Hochschild makes a meaningful contribution to our understanding of Tea Party conservatism through humanizing the people within this movement and learning and telling the "deep stories" of her subjects. Often it seems as if individuals living in the traditionally liberal-leaning areas along the coasts or in large cities speak of the Tea Party movement or conservative politics in general as an amorphous entity packed with angry, pitchfork wielding "hicks" (to borrow a term used by Louisiana's fictitious governor Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*). Hochschild's research paints a picture that is far more nuanced and complex than the now-notorious images of activists with tea bags stapled to their hats demanding to see President Obama's birth certificate.

Throughout Hochschild's travels we learn of the challenges facing ordinary, rank-and-file activists and conservative voters such as several families of Tea Party adherents who lost their homes due to man-made environmental disasters, and yet are torn between the clear need for sharpening environmental protections and their ideological commitments to the free market. Hochschild develops the

narrative of a retired chemical plant worker who blew the whistle on an employer that was polluting local waterways, yet remains committed to defending big business by volunteering for the campaigns of pro-deregulation candidates. Readers also learn about a woman who rose from being a lower level worker to management at a local firm and put herself through college, yet appears to be genuinely unable to understand why a person would need to rely on government support through loans and grants for education or assistance in times of distress.

By crafting these comprehensive deep stories, Hochschild scales what she calls “the empathy wall” to understand why these individuals believe as they do while simultaneously coming to terms with how and when their worldviews were shaped. As a long-time practitioner of politics, this approach was particularly fascinating to me as I have learned through my own work in the field that we are often inclined to delegitimize positions we find incorrect or politically revolting rather than trying to empathize with one another to understand the values and views of our fellow citizens. While Hochschild is not defending the views of the conservative rank-and-file she comes to know personally, she presents a convincing argument for something that is largely absent in our contemporary politics: a willingness to listen.

Perhaps the most important lesson gleaned from Hochschild’s research is her explication of the duality of self-interest. Democratic Party leaders, journalists such as Thomas Frank, author of *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, and some academicians have argued for decades that working, middle, and lower-middle class voters vote against their own economic interests by choosing candidates for office who fail to support policies that help families like their own. By scaling the empathy wall and carefully chronically the lives of her subjects, Hochschild learns that while many of these individuals may be voting against their *economic* self-interest; instead, they are voting to advance their *emotional* self-interest. She contends that this crucial point is often left unexamined in our analysis of American politics.

According to this theory, the messages offered to voters by conservative candidates in places like Louisiana and by national

candidates like Donald Trump aren't necessarily designed to fool people into voting for economic policies that fail to help their plight. Instead, they are making emotive appeals to concepts such as the free market, the value of hard work, and tradition to win over and keep these voters on their side. Hochschild also conveys that her subjects expressed a strong antipathy towards the notion of "cutting in line," with many older, white voters in the middle or working classes sensing that they have worked hard during their lifetimes only to see the federal government allowing others who aren't perceived to have earned a place in line be granted the right to step in front of them. This leads to a rejection of the federal government and an overarching suspicion towards Democratic candidates and elected officials who are viewed as being empathetic to the "line cutters" who have not earned their place.

Hochschild's research resulted in 60 interviews, 40 of which were conducted with Louisiana's Tea Party conservatives, helping to produce over 4,000 pages of transcripts. Although the bulk of her research was done prior to the 2016 election, she makes a very strong case for Trump success at reaching voters during both the primary and general elections in places like Louisiana. Among her conclusions is that the messaging from the Trump campaign was uniquely designed to capture the emotional interests of these voters, push back against the notion of "line-cutting," and make them feel as if they were not strangers in their own land, but rather the embattled majority under attack from the politically correct and non-empathetic federal government. Such themes could be detected in the Trump campaign rhetoric, especially the constant appeals to "the silent majority" and the repetitive message about how the country needs to begin "winning" once again.

Despite the myriad strengths of this research, there was one conundrum raised repeatedly throughout the book that is desperately in need solving. Hochschild recognized—as would any of us who have Tea Party or Trumpian friends and relatives on social media—that most of her interview subjects rely upon astonishingly inaccurate information in shaping their perspectives about politics and policies. For example, Hochschild notes that several subjects cited that 40 percent or more of American workers are employed by the federal

government. She helps correct this erroneous statistic—and many others—with a helpful appendix called “Fact-Checking Common Impressions.” As it turns out, just under two percent of Americans were civilian employees as of 2014 with an additional one percent serving in the military (257).

As a scholar, I am profoundly troubled by the grotesque level of misinformation and the apparent inability of some individuals to acknowledge plain facts. As a practitioner of politics, I am concerned with this because it is extremely difficult to educate many individuals within the electorate as to what are *legitimate* facts as opposed to pseudo-facts that they *feel* to be correct. Given that this unwillingness to acknowledge legitimate facts was a common undercurrent throughout the book, I sense that readers would have benefitted from some recommendations by the author regarding strategies for how to best communicate legitimate facts in opposition to facts people *feel* are true, such as the “fact” repeated by numerous subjects about how environmental protections lead to massive job losses.

Arlie Russell Hochschild has produced an enlightening, yet sobering study of a critical phenomenon in American politics at a time of great partisan and ideological turmoil. I look forward to utilizing this work in several upcoming courses. *Strangers in Their Own Land* would be a suitable addition to any class on American political ideology, political parties, campaigns and elections, or political marketing. Likewise, because of her participant observation, immersion, and interview-driven methodology I personally intend to utilize her work in my research methods course so that students may gain a clearer understanding of the value of such robust qualitative inquiry.

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