

# Hochschild, Arlie Russel (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, The New Press, New York, Ny

Review by Jennifer M. Silva

In the opening pages of renowned sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, we meet Lee Sherman, an 82-year-old environmental activist who lives deep in the heart of rightwing Louisiana. A former NASCAR driver, Lee made his living as a pipefitter for Pittsburgh Plate Glass. Although he suffered from chemical burns and inhaled dangerous toxins, Lee always did his job – even when the company asked him to illegally dump toxic waste, under the cover of darkness and in secret, into the nearby marsh. When he grew ill from constant exposure to toxic chemicals, the company fired him for absenteeism – they did not want to pay his medical disability. And yet this man, a victim of corporations that exploited his labor power, broke his body, and poisoned the land - and then threw him away when he was no longer profitable – is an ardent Tea Party supporter. He staunchly opposes the federal government, the idea of regulation, the social safety net, and, most of all, paying taxes.

There is nothing more perplexing to educated liberals than white working-class conservatives who appear to vote against their own interests. Why do the victims of pollution fight against federal environmental regulation? How can someone who has been exploited by big business vote to protect its profits? Hochschild calls this enduring puzzle the Great Paradox. For many liberals, to even try to empathize with the other side is unthinkable. But for Hochschild, it is urgent that we scale the 'empathy wall' – the obstacle to understanding that leaves us feeling indifferent or even hostile to them, 'We, on both sides, wrongly imagine that empathy with the 'other' side brings an end to clearheaded analysis', she reflects. But 'in truth, it's on the other side of that bridge that the most important analysis can begin'. Hochschild immersed herself for five years in a Tea Party stronghold in Louisiana. She cleverly focuses on one issue that encapsulates the Great Paradox – severe environmental damage, the desire for clean air, water, streams, and food; yet the utter rejection of government regulation.

Hochschild conducted 60 in-depth interviews with rightwing conservatives and then honed in on a subset of six people with whom she built close and lasting relationships. She drank sweet tea, ate fast food burgers, attended mega-churches and political rallies, and simply listened to people tell their stories. These hours of conversations, and thousands of pages of interview transcripts, unveiled how the single issue of environmental regulation in fact dovetails with many others that enliven conservative politics – from economic issues like taxes or wages, to deeper, more fundamental ones like the human needs for dignity, belonging, and honor.

Hochschild provides an inspiring model for reflexivity, for thinking about how her own identity and preconceptions shaped her research. Throughout the book, we follow her journey of challenging her own biases as she consciously involves her research subjects in her analytical process, trying out her ideas on them to know if she is getting it right. In elegantly written, highly accessible, and deeply personal prose, Hochschild provides us with crucial conceptual tools for grasping the emotions and identities that underlie rightwing politics.

What emerged from her ethnography was a conservative deep story – a *feels-as-if* story – that illuminates why people living in a region with strikingly poor economic, educational and health indicators rally to support politicians who promise to reject federal help in precisely those areas. The deep story unfolds as follows: you are standing in a long line, ‘patient but weary’, awaiting the American Dream you’ve worked so hard for, and others are cutting in front of you – blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, even the brown pelican with its ‘long, oil-drenched wings’. You are enraged, but you do not complain. You are resentful of the line cutters, not only because they take more than their fair share, but because of how they demand you *feel*, ‘...happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of the Syrian refugee, unresentful about paying taxes’. While Hochschild’s respondents were reluctant to talk about race, they nonetheless connect whiteness to deservingness: white people made America great through generations of hard work and sacrifice, while others try to use their race to unfairly get ahead

This deep story is animated by decades of lived experiences of distrust and betrayal. Lee Sherman felt bewildered and cheated by the IRS and was left scrambling to make ends meet. The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources gave out drilling permits even when they knew of the risks. State authorities issued statements about how to trim the fat and skin on fish to ‘reduce the amount of contaminants in the fish and shellfish’. When the government is believed to be manipulative, obscure, and ineffective, why would you trust them in the first place?

And so the Tea Partyers choose to make a virtue out of loyalty and hard work: they choose to endure in a system that requires the sacrifice of health and land and labor – capitalism – and they attach honor to that enduring. Hochschild creates a typology of characters - The Team Players, the Worshippers, the Cowboys – each of whom, in their own way, meaningfully sacrifices their health and safety for job creation, finds honor in giving up their wants and needs, and equates taking risks with having human freedom. Uniting these archetypes is the human need for emotional fulfillment – not economic self-interest – and the yearning to protect themselves from shame in a larger economic and cultural system that routinely robs them of dignity.

What makes Hochschild’s analysis so profound is that it is not only applicable to working-class conservatives, but rather to a broad range of people across the political spectrum who face the threat of downward mobility as the middle class contracts. Janice, for example, is a college-educated accountant who worked her way up to the middle class and lives by a ‘hard-nosed’ code of personal reliance. She declares memorably: ‘...if people refuse to

work, we should let them starve'. Hochschild prompts us to ask: In a nation where secure jobs with good benefits are scarce, where we are all fighting for a piece of the rapidly dwindling pie, how do we keep ourselves from turning on others with bitterness and resentment? As long as we embrace individual achievement and meritocracy on a leveled playing field over collective economic rights and security, will Janice live in all of us?

There is one tension in the book that remains difficult to resolve: namely, that working-class conservatism is an obstacle to overcome. As Hochschild explains, in the liberal deep story, '...people stand around a large public square inside of which are creative science museums for kids, public art and theater programs, libraries, schools – a state of the art infrastructure available to all' that they are fiercely proud of. But for readers from working-class families, who are the first in our families to attend college, who have felt like unwelcome strangers in liberal-minded elite institutions, and who have been wounded by the symbolic violence in museums and schools – it is less convincing that this deep story has all the answers. Liberals must interrogate their own deep story for the ways in which it perpetuates, or even requires, the loss of honor. Nonetheless, *Strangers in our Own Land* takes us a critical step forward in tearing down the empathy wall and weaving a deep story that unites us all.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Jennifer M. Silva is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bucknell University. Her first book, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oxford, 2013), examines the transition to adulthood among working-class youth. Her current book project, *Pain and Politics in the Heart of America*, examines working-class people's political beliefs and behaviors in the coal region of Northeastern Pennsylvania.