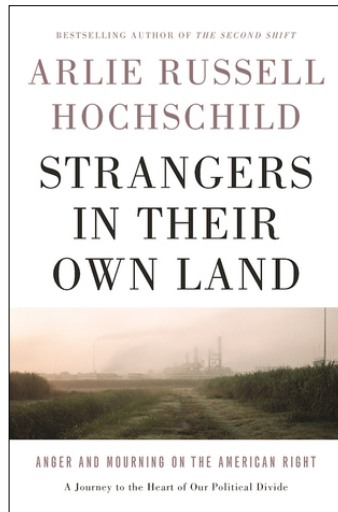


Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right (2016)

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By Arlie Russell Hochschild

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Donald Trump's surprise electoral success in 2016 has puzzled many political pundits and sparked vibrant public debates. Consequently, many (especially liberals) started asking similar questions; who voted for Trump? What do they do want and why? In responding to this, the New York Times recommended six books that could help to explain Trump's victory.⁹ These works discuss the changes of the social and political structure in the U.S. over the last decade which have had significant impacts on people's political outlook. Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016) is one of these six. Hochschild's book is also a New York Times best seller and a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award for Non-fiction. In short, the book is essentially

⁹ "6 Books to Help Understand Trump's Win," 9 November 2016, Accessed on 24 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html>.

about Hochschild's quest to answer a very important question, as the New York Times correctly put it, "why do people who need help from the government hate it so much?"¹⁰

Hochschild is not the only one who has attempted to answer this question. In *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Thomas Frank (2004) argues that the rich used social issues to get poor conservatives to support their economic policies which would negatively affect their lives. Issues, such as abortion and gun rights, are being used as bait to redirect their frustration toward the liberal elites. In *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Nancy Isenberg (2016) points out that class politics has been the foundation of American politics since the beginning. Poverty among white people is not a coincidence, but it has rather been an important part of the American social structure. For these poor whites, the federal government is partially to be blamed for the fading American Dream. These are only a few pioneer writings of the rapidly emerging 'Trump literature,' which has dominated the academic debate on U.S. politics since the election.

What is interesting about this book is not just the research question, but also the author herself. Hochschild is a liberal sociologist from a liberal university, who set a quest to understand people who live in Louisiana, one of the most conservative states in the U.S. Ideological and political differences could have stood in her way of understanding her subjects, but they did not. She was able to go over what she calls an 'empathy wall' and explored their social and political views. For her, "[an] empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances" (p.5). Hochschild spent five years conducting hundreds of in-depth interviews with forty Tea Party supporters and twenty other people with different backgrounds. With their permission, she also followed her subjects home, to work and to political gatherings (p.18).

The book is divided into three main parts: finding the problems, understanding the situation, and comprehending the anger. In the first part, the author gives the details of the environmental problems that the people in the community have endured over the years. Hochschild covers the life stories of many conservatives, who nicely represent profiles of Tea Party advocates. Lee Sherman, for example, was an employee in a chemical plant, who carried out the order to illegally drain toxic waste into the bayou. Since Sherman was exposed to the chemicals, he became ill and then was fired from his job. Being a victim of the environmental disaster drove Sherman to become an environmentalist. But unlike a typical environmentalist with liberal leaning tendency, Sherman is also a Tea Party supporter and hates big government. Sherman understandably distrusts chemical companies, but he distrusts the federal government even more. For him, the companies may have caused serious environmental damages, but at least, they created jobs for locals. The government, on the contrary, collects money from the people in the form of taxes, but did almost nothing to

¹⁰ "Why Do People Who Need Help from the Government Hate It So Much?" 19 September 2016, Accessed on 24 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html>.

protect the environment. Moreover, the government also wastes his tax dollars helping those who “lazed around days and partied at night” (p.35).

Ironically, Sherman, an environmentalist, volunteered for candidates who wanted to cut funding for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), whose main tasks are to protect the environment.

This complex scenario is what Hochschild calls the Great Paradox. She is perplexed as she writes:

“If they call for smaller federal government, how do they propose to fix the problems that form part of the Great Paradox that has brought me to Louisiana? I ask myself, again, how people in a poor state with the worst health in the nation can look askance at a federal government that provides 44 percent of its state budget, and how such a polluted state can take a dim view of government regulation of polluters” (p.56).

This leads to the second part of the book, the Social Terrain. In order to understand the Great Paradox, Hochschild believes that she needs “to enter the social terrain that surrounded and influenced them” (p.82). In this part, the author explores the surrounding factors that drive people like Lee Sherman to take a stance against their own economic and health interests. The author goes into details of the incompetency of the government in dealing with environmental disasters. The book extensively discusses the case of Bayou Corne Sinkhole, which was caused by the collapse of land resulting from the extraction of sodium chloride by a Houston-based drilling company, Texas Brine. Hundreds of people had to leave their homes as a consequence of this disaster. According to the author, the residents of course blamed Texas Brine for their reckless practice, but they blamed the government more for giving a drilling permit to a company that had integrity problems. To sum up why a local resident had this anger towards the government, the author observes, “I count all the reasons Mike disdained government. It displaced community. It took away individual freedom. It didn’t protect the citizenry. Its officials didn’t live like nuns. And the federal government was a more powerful, distant, untrustworthy version of the state government” (p.114). The federal government is, for the right, never to be trusted.

Moving to the final part, the author takes the readers to the ‘deep story’ behind the thoughts and feelings of those living in these poor neighborhoods. The deep story, according to Hochschild, is that people on the right feel anger because they are being cheated. The author employs a metaphor of waiting in line to illustrate this point. In the American society, they believe that everyone can achieve the American Dream if they are patient and work hard enough. But as they are patiently waiting for their turn, other people (immigrants and minorities) just show up and cut in line. More importantly, the federal government, which supposedly oversees the line, allows this to happen and ignores those who have been waiting. It is not just a matter of losing power, but it is also a sense of being disrespected. Their hard-earned money is spent by the government to help these minorities. The liberals have far more sympathy for these line cutters than for those who wait patiently in line.

To make it worse, they feel that the liberals and the mainstream media try to impose their ‘liberal feeling rule’ on them by saying it is unacceptable to express their anger towards the minorities because it is not politically correct. It is understandable why many of these Tea Party advocates show firm support for Donald Trump and his non-politically correct rhetoric. Fox News, which provides its audience with anti-liberal and pro-white sentiment, has also become their primary source of news as a result.

Hochschild’s book has a significant contribution to the analysis of the Trump supporters. First of all, the book helps the reader draw a better picture of Tea Party advocates. These poor conservatives are often portrayed by the media as poorly educated, religious radicals, and right-wing fanatics. Not many academics would try to be ‘in their shoes’ as seriously as Hochschild did. In this book, the author provides great detail about their backgrounds, aspirations, beliefs, and their goals. This detailed information is quite useful in helping the readers to climb over the ‘empathy wall’ and understand the source of their anger towards the government. Moreover, unlike Frank (2004), Hochschild does not draw a clear-cut line to separate cultural issues from economic ones. This task is much more complex than a simple binary explanation. It could be debated whether the poor conservatives’ disdain for the government is a wise decision, but it cannot certainly be simplified as just a ‘cultural war’ as many think. The book shows that their political decisions are also a result from careful economic consideration.

Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right is an essential book for serious observers of American politics and society. The book is well structured and carefully written. Although the author makes great effort trying to be impartial, she does show some disagreements with the Tea Party supporters. But I still believe a conservative reader could still appreciate the book. Also, it is more useful for readers to connect what is written in the book with the rise of the right elsewhere in the west in the recent years. These are hardly separate phenomena. It is a similar story of the people from the lower classes who got crushed by neoliberal economic policies, frightened by the influx of cheap non-native laborers, and alienated by the increasingly dominant liberal culture. They felt they were strangers in their own land. They wanted changes, and then they got Brexit, Donald Trump and so on. Only time can tell how this part of history will unfold.

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