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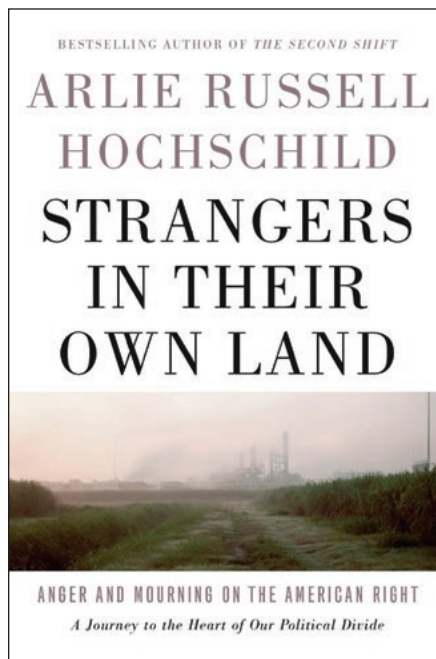
Can We Bridge America's Political Divide?

Jason Edwards

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

Since the election of Donald Trump, pundits, policymakers, and politicians have been attempting to ascertain what his election means for America. In particular, Democratic Party politicians have been wringing their hands about how they can reconnect with a constituency—white, male, blue-collar voters—that was once part of their base. Why did they vote for him? What, if anything, can be done to bring those kind of voters back into the Democratic fold?

In the book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, Arlie Russell Hochschild provides part of that answer. Hers is not a study of Donald Trump voters per se. Her fieldwork was not even conducted in the primary states—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—where the new president gathered enough support to drive him to victory in the 2016 election. Rather, Hochschild traveled to the heart of arch-conservative Louisiana bayou country to listen, and to understand what people actually believe. Her work is fascinating because the region was in the midst of an environmental disaster primarily caused by big corporations. It was, one would think, fertile ground for liberals and environmentalists to find support. To her surprise, the result was exactly opposite. Hochschild's analysis of this slice of America has important implications for the rest of the country.



Hochschild spent five years (2011–16) doing fieldwork, talking to people of different political stripes at church services, gumbo cook-offs, Trump rallies, political party groups, and kitchen tables. Her book's first part presents its central problem, "The Great Paradox."

Here, Hochschild attempts to unpack an apparent incongruity. Large parts of the Louisiana bayou have become an environmental calamity because of chemicals dumped into the water and soil by large corporations. This environment degradation threatens dozens of wildlife species, the livelihoods of thousands, and the very lives of tens of thousands more. People's homes have literally been swallowed up by the earth caving underneath them. Logic would suggest these Louisianans would want *greater* environmental regulation to solve these issues, but the reality is the exact opposite. Deeply conservative, they are vehemently opposed to government regulation. People in this part of the United States, where some of the lowest standards of living in the country prevail, refuse most assistance from the government. For Hochschild, this denial of self-interest is the "great paradox" that lies at the heart of the divide between left and right in this country.

Underpinning the great paradox is what Hochschild calls "The Deep Story" of the Louisiana bayou country, one of many communities in the United States that are predominantly poor and white and whose people feel left behind. Hochschild wants readers to picture themselves at the foot of a hill, in a line of people waiting to get over it. Over the hill is the American dream, which all should be able to access if they work hard, pull themselves up by their boot straps and take the opportunities provided by this country. However, the line they are in is not moving. In fact, it is going backwards. Even though they have worked hard and paid their dues, they cannot get ahead. Additionally, they see other people ahead of them cutting in line. These people seem not to have worked as hard, but because of their ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, and educational background, they are getting ahead. They must be getting help:

welfare programs, affirmative action, special accommodations for education, and other places. Hard work is not paying off; the American dream has been derailed.

When Hochschild communicates this deep story to her conservative friends in Louisiana, all of them agree with the basic outline. Lee Sherman, one of the central characters in the book, states “you’ve read my mind” (145). Janice Areno argues “you have it right, but you’ve left out the fact that the people being cut in on are *paying taxes* that go to the people cutting in line!” (145). Others point out that it is not just about monetary success, but about “feeling proud to be an American, and to say ‘under God’ when you salute the flag, and feel good about that” (145). In other words, the deep story for many in the United States is one of betrayal by the federal government—a government that favors some groups over others. It is a story about a country that has lost its way, financially and morally.

Hochschild spends much of her book mining the depths of that deep story, relating the stories of people she has met through her fieldwork, and explaining how these trends have become national. For example, in Chapter 14 entitled “The Fires of History: The 1860s and the 1960s,” the author identifies these two time periods as pivotal moments in history, when “movements rose up against secularism, modernity, racial integration, and a culture of experts” (207). She unpacks how the 1860s and 1960s laid the larger groundwork for the deep story that now pervades the culture in many communities across America.

Hochschild’s book is a timely one that offers many lessons about the political divisions in the United States today. Her conclusions about Louisiana have relevance for the rest of the nation. Certainly, there are differences among

communities in the Louisiana bayou and upstate Michigan and western Pennsylvania coal country, but the general outlines of the great paradox and the deep story feel familiar everywhere. They explain, in part, the motivations and feelings of a lot of Donald Trump voters. The great question that emerges from Hochschild’s work is: what do we do with it? What does it mean for politics in America going forward?

While Hochschild’s work feels new, the divide that she speaks of is not. For example, historian Richard Hofstadter’s work “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (*Harper’s Magazine*, 1964)

have elements of betrayal and suspicion. This is not the first time we have seen it and it probably will not be the last.

Can this political divide—the great paradox—be bridged? That’s a difficult question to answer. Today, there is a massive gulf between left and right, north and south, rural and urban, one that seems too wide to cross. But it is not necessarily new; it just manifests itself in different ways. Understanding more about this political divide is the first step to addressing it, and Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* is a great trigger to begin the conversation.

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argued that this sort of discourse is an old and recurrent phenomenon. The paranoid spokesman believes that people are out to get him and the country at large. He communicates this anxiety through tales of conspiracy. In these tales of conspiracy, there can be no compromise with the enemy; it must be destroyed, lest it destroy the country. Though Hochschild’s deep story found in the Louisiana bayou cannot be labelled as wholly “paranoid,” it does



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