

Scaling the Empathy Wall

Arlie Russell Hochschild has gained the respect not only of her fellow sociologists but also of a larger public with her incisive studies of important real-life problems: how female professionals are expected and obliged to do 'emotion work' (*The Managed Heart*, 1983); how working mothers juggle the demands of family and work (*The Second Shift*, 1989); or how work and family become indistinguishable (*The Time Bind*, 1997). In her latest book, her problem is the link between life world and politics: how middle- and working-class Americans become supporters of the political right, adhering to the Tea Party principles and voting for its candidates.

Tackling this problem has unfortunately turned out to be a most fortunate choice. It would be hard to find a more topical issue. The book covers the developments up to the spring of 2016 when Trump was about to secure the Republican presidential nomination. His election victory later that year has vindicated Hochschild's choice and made the world aware of what is at stake here. In Europe we are faced with our own groups and movements who claim to be strangers in their land, and are willing to support political entrepreneurs who promise to change this: Brexit, Hungary, Poland, the French Front National, the German Alternative für Deutschland, Austria, and the Czech Republic—to give a far from exhaustive list. The AfD made it into the Federal parliament (even though with 'only' 13 % of votes) under the slogan 'We want our country back'.

Hochschild's aim is to get a close-up picture of the attitudes, arguments and emotions of the people who vote for the Right. She does not try to frame this picture in terms of the currently favoured political concepts such as 'populism'. She contends herself instead with describing them, and going beyond, with uncovering

their 'deep story'. She also eschews all attempts at quantifying her phenomenon, opting instead for a type of research that is usually called 'exploratory' and 'hypothesis generating'—in short, a classic ethnographic approach.

The ethnography—related in an appendix—is based on five years of fieldwork in southwest Louisiana. It comprised long stretches of participant observation and interviews with a core group of forty Tea Party supporters as well as twenty others—academics, politicians, administrators, and other experts—who provided context. Of the core group, roughly half were women and half were men. All were white and between 40 and 85 years old.

The book is aimed at a broad audience beyond the academic community. In this it has succeeded admirably: It has received glowing reviews and endorsements, has become a *New York Times* bestseller, and has made it onto several lists of best books of the year. It is easy to see why: Hochschild writes in an authentic and lively authorial voice. She skilfully takes the reader with her on her voyage of exploration through the minds and feelings of her protagonists as she shares experiences and events with them. (The only drawback is the sometimes tedious repetitions and redundancies.)

With regard to documentation, the author finds an excellent solution: The text is unencumbered by explicit footnotes, but those who want more background can turn to 50 pages of endnotes and 20 pages of bibliography. Another feature may be more problematic: There is no reference to formal methods and methodologies with regard to data collection and analysis. The data—not a term that Hochschild uses—is presented in a purely I-driven narrative of encounters and events. We thus have to take her word for it. And indeed, I confess that—in spite of my misgivings about methodology—I am ready to do so. The detailed life-world accounts that we are

given ring true. In some respects, however, this methodological abstinence has its price. We don't get to know, for instance, whether the age and race composition of the sample was the result of conscious selection or of the author's inability to find any younger or black Tea Party supporters. It is true that the Trump vote was skewed towards middle-aged and elderly whites, but it is a pity that we miss out here on the (sizable) Tea Party minorities in the other demographic groups. We would also like to know more about how the author has constructed her 'deep stories'.

Hochschild's original puzzle was about the specific issue of environmental protection. How is it possible that those who suffer most from environmental pollution are the most ardent supporters of politicians who (promise to) do away with government regulation of the environment? This is the 'Great Paradox' that she wanted to resolve and that guided the choice of her field site. Louisiana is not only the second-poorest state in the United States (in terms of GDP per person) but also one of the most polluted. The stretch of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, once a parade of cotton and sugar plantations, is now studded with various kinds of oil and petrochemical plants and is informally known as 'Cancer Alley'. The positive correlation between pollution and voting for the Republicans had already been established at the level of states, and, in a background analysis reported in an appendix, Hochschild has now also established it at the level of counties.

Environmental pollution is indeed a recurrent theme for all of the Tea Party supporters that we encounter in the book. But along the way, other themes arise as well: taxes, the size of government, the welfare state, open borders. Their common denominator is the big question that now haunts the Democrats (and their counterparts in Europe): Why do the people who

would seem to benefit most from 'liberal' government intervention reject the politicians that stand for it? Louisiana is again an exemplary case, with 44% of its 2016 budget coming from the Federal government and a twice-elected governor from the Republican right who slashed taxes, cut public education and other services, sold public property, and handed out enormous subsidies to industries.

The answer to the big question is presented in a multi-layered analysis of the field. Part One, entitled 'The Great Paradox', starts with an exposition of the author's approach on the backdrop of the current political and sociological literature. It then goes on to describe the phenomenon through vignettes of some of her respondents. Part Two covers the 'social terrain' of industry, the state, the church, and the media. Part Three turns to the 'deep story', a concept that Hochschild borrows from and equates with George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's discussion of metaphors (*Metaphors We Live By*, 2003). It is 'deep' in the sense that it organises all manifest actions and attitudes and includes not only cognitions but also emotions. One could say that it is a reconstruction of what motivates people's thoughts and feelings at their most basic level. It is set out here through portraits of four respondents: the team player, the worshipper, the cowboy, and the rebel. Finally, Part Four takes the argument back into history and up to the national level.

The 'deep story' comprises various elements. One is that the American Dream of prosperity and of feeling rightfully proud to live in the world's best country has become ever more elusive. People wait patiently in line to achieve it, but instead of moving forward with the queue they see others cutting in ahead of them—blacks, migrants, women, homosexuals. Honest work and family values do not count any more. Good people live decent lives, obey the scriptures, and help those in need as

long as they remain responsible; instead the government takes money from the workers and gives it to the idle. This figure of thought is well known from welfare state research as that of the deserving vs the undeserving poor. For Hochschild's respondents, even as they stress that they are not racists, black seems to be synonymous with 'undeserving' (and Muslim with enemy and terrorist). The government is in the hands of elites who look down on Southern whites as backward bigots, and thus challenge their pride and deprive them of the honour and recognition that is due to them. Environmental pollution is unfortunate, but it is the price one has to pay for getting jobs and decent wages. In fact, enduring environmental (and other) hardship is a mark of a person's character and worth.

How these elements fit together is not spelled out, and neither is their relative weight in the overarching story. The way they are presented suggests that different elements may take precedence for different people. If there is a common thread, it is not economic self-interest but cultural and emotional self-interest, in other words, status, honour and belonging. With this result, the book draws a compelling picture of the thoughts and feelings of (this part of) the American right. However, the puzzle persists. Why does cultural and emotional self-interest take the form of white nationalism and not of resistance against exploitative industries and tax breaks for the rich? Hochschild is well aware of this question: 'For the left, the flashpoint is up the class ladder (between the very top and the rest); for the right, it is down between the middle class and the poor. For the left, the flashpoint is centered in the private sector; for the right, in the public sector.' (p. 149) But the answer to why the right is

winning is missing. Hochschild acknowledges and documents that the deep story of the right is reinforced by their preferred media and by big campaign money. A fuller answer would require a comparative analysis that includes the middle- and working-class left.

Beyond her sociological interest, Hochschild has a clear political and moral agenda: She wants to scale the 'empathy wall' separating her own political world—that of the Berkeley liberals—from that of the Tea Party supporters, and thus to build a bridge across this deepening political divide that is tearing apart American politics, and may even create 'a new kind of civil war' (Robin Wright in the *New Yorker*, 14 August 2017). This is certainly a worthy mission. Hochschild shows respect for her respondents and even befriends some of them, her empathy turning into sympathy. She thus walks the tightrope between observing and 'going native'. I am reminded of the saying attributed to Mme de Staël: to understand everything is to forgive everything. This is sometimes hard to swallow, especially now that we have to cope with the results of the mindset that is so lovingly described here—the presidential election and its aftermath. To be fair, Hochschild does provide the counterpoints, most succinctly, in an appendix of fact-checking with regard to such commonly held myths as 'everyone who's poor gets a handout', 'public sector workers are way overpaid', or 'the economy always does better under a Republican president'. Still, reading her book can be an irritating experience.

Martin Kohli
Bremen International Graduate School
of Social Sciences and European
University Institute (em.)
Martin.Kohli@eui.eu