

The Politics of Estrangement

Nonna Mayer

► **To cite this version:**

Nonna Mayer. The Politics of Estrangement. *European Journal of Sociology*, 2017, 58 (3), pp.563 - 566. hal-02402249

HAL Id: hal-02402249

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02402249>

Submitted on 10 Dec 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The politics of estrangement

Arlie Russell HOCHSCHILD, *Strangers in their Own Land. Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York/London, The New Press, 2016)

Nonna Mayer, Centre d'études européennes de Sciences Po - nonna.mayer@sciencespo.fr

European Journal of Sociology, 58, 3 (2017), pp. 563–566
doi: 10.1017/S0003975617000388

Arlie Hochschild started *Strangers in their own land* six years ago, long before Donald Trump burst onto the political scene. Yet her book is by far extremely useful in understanding his surprise victory in 2016.

Hochschild's idea was to explore politics on the right: at a time when the Tea Party movement was booming, she wanted to investigate the deepening political divide in American politics. How could it be that in the 1960s, hardly 5 percent of American adults said they would be disturbed if their child married a member of another political party, while in 2010 the proportions were up to one-third among Democrats and 40 percent among Republicans? Her choice of Louisiana as a research field was the result of pure chance. She told a visiting former student that she needed to go South for this project, into the geographic heart of the right and away from Berkeley. The student's wife suggested that Hochschild should visit her mother, who lived in Lake Charles (Louisiana) and was progressive, but had a close friend who supported the Tea Party. Her visit marked the beginning of a five-year journey to a "red" (Republican) state, where only 14 percent of the white population voted Obama in 2012, some 25 percentage points below the national white average.

Hochschild's research puzzle, her "Great Paradox," was inspired by Thomas Frank's book *What's the matter with Texas?* (2004)¹. Why were the poorer states, the less educated, the less healthy—at first sight those most in need of federal support—those who were the most against it and those to vote red? Louisiana offered a good illustration of this paradox. It then ranked 49th out of 50 on *The Measure of America* human development scale, and it was plagued by environmental problems (land subsidence, wetland loss, industrial pollution). Yet according to a 2011 poll, half of all Louisianans supported the Tea Party and its anti government platform. For Hochschild, the missing key to understanding their support is to be found at the emotional level, in the way people feel about politics: their "hopes, fears, pride,

¹ Frank Thomas, 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives won the Heart of America* (New York, Metropolitan Press).

shame, resentment and anxiety” [135]. Her book tells the “deep story,” the “subjective prism” through which her Tea Partiers see the world. Environmental pollution is her angle of attack, her “keyhole issue,”—a problem that a priori deeply affects all voters of Lake Charles.

Her ethnographic approach is described at length (Appendix A), and is the same she used in previous works such as *The Second Shift* (1989), *The Time Bind* (1997) or *The Managed Heart* (1979).² It combines immersion in the field, participant observation, in-depth interviews and informal conversations. From 2011 to 2015, Hochschild made 10 trips to Lake Rivers, conducted 4 focus groups (2 with liberal women, 2 with Tea Party women), spoke to 60 people of which 40 Tea Party members, and accumulated 4,690 pages of interviews transcripts. She followed public rallies on the environment, congressional campaigns, one of Donald Trump’s meetings, and numerous social events throughout the state (a re-enactment of a Civil war militia skirmish, the Junior Miss Black Pride contest, after church luncheons, etc.).

The “feel as if” story of her respondents, at the heart of her book (chapter 9), is summed up in a metaphor. You are in the middle of a long line, patiently waiting for your turn, in the sun, walking uphill towards the American dream awaiting you at the top, worth your effort and your hard work. But suddenly you see people cutting the line ahead of you, pushing you back to the bottom. Blacks, women, public sector workers, immigrants, refugees, even brown pelicans are passing you now, given preference in the name of affirmative action or defence of threatened species. They don’t respect you, they reject your values, they call you white trash, morons, red necks. But there is somebody monitoring the line, look, it’s Obama, it’s the President of the United States, he should restore order. No, he does not, he is helping them. He is their president, not yours. “In fact, the president and his wife are line cutters themselves” [140]. You feel angry, betrayed. You’ve become a minority, too. You feel a stranger in your own land.

When Hochschild tries out the story on every one of her Tea Party interviewees, they all agree. “You’ve read my mind,” says one; “I live your analogy” says another, adding: “After a while the people who

² Hochschild A.R., 2012[1989], *The Second Shift. Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York, Penguin Books).
Hochschild A.R., 2000[1997], *The Time Bind. When Work Becomes Home and Home*

Becomes Work (New York, Metropolitan Press).
Hochschild A.R., 1979, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

were waiting have had it and they get in their *own* line” [145]. That is exactly what propelled the Tea Party and then Trump: “the scene has been set for Trump’s rise like kindling before a match is lit” [221]. The rally of the rising Republican candidate she attended in New Orleans (chapter 15) shows him in total synch with the Tea Partiers she interviewed, speaking their words and giving them hope: “As if magically lifted, they are no more strangers in their own land” [225].

This is ethnography at its best, avoiding its pitfalls at a time when this kind of approach is under fire³. Hochschild’s research is “exploratory” and “hypothesis generating” [247]. It builds on the literature analysing the rise of the Tea Party, going beyond it precisely because she is unsatisfied with existing explanations of the “Great Paradox,” for example, MacGillis’ “two notches up” answer in terms of self interest (the poor in red states favour welfare but do not vote, the affluent who do not need welfare vote against it) [Mac Gillis 2015]⁴ or Frank’s hypothesis that voters are led to vote against their own economic interests by making moral, religious or security issues more salient [Frank 2004]. Her monograph is based on a thorough contextualization via statistical data and opinion polls (Appendix B), showing what precisely makes Louisiana similar to or different from other states, and what allows her to generalize from her case study. Climbing the “empathy wall” that separates Hochschild, a liberal Berkeley academic, from her Tea Party interviewees does not make her take their words for granted. She is fully aware that “my new friends and I lived not only in different regions but in different truths” [255], when it comes to the actual budget spent on welfare, the number of children black women have, the wages of the public sector (Appendix C “Fact checking common impressions”) or to what extent oil brings jobs (chapter 5). She does not stop at the “deep story”; she is interested in what lies *behind*. There are race, gender and class conflicts—the latter opposing not the rich 1 percent to the other 99 percent, but middle and working classes to welfare recipients—ultimately leading them to a visceral hate of the federal government and a glorification of the free market. And she traces the roots of these divides back to the 1860s Civil War and the social movements of the

³ See for instance the heated debate that followed the publication of *On the Run* by Alice Goffman, an ethnography of a poor black neighborhood in West Philadelphia: Goffman A., 2014, *On the Run. Fugitive Life*

in an American City (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

⁴ MacGillis Alec, 2015. “Who Turned My Blue State Red?”, *New York Times* (November 20).

1960s, which both had a specific and stronger impact in the South (chapter 14).

The book of course leaves certain questions unanswered. Hochschild tells us about the “deep story” embraced by “white, middle aged and older, Christian, married, blue and white collar Louisianans” [221] leaning towards the Tea Party. But what about the other side, the “line crossers” at whom they point an accusing finger? One-third of Louisiana’s population in Louisiana is black, and some 20 percent is under the poverty line—a proportion that rises above one-third among black families. How do they feel? Who do they support? What is their story? Among whites, what are the divides? What about those who do not sympathize with the Tea Party and who do not support Trump? What is their deep story, living in the same state and facing the same problems as those who vote red? Last, what is the big story behind the stories of Hochschild’s interviewees? What are the causes driving these deepening divides around race, gender and class issues, precipitating the rise of a movement like the Tea Party, followed by the success of a Donald Trump? When did it all start? And will it last?

In the profusion of studies devoted to the Trump phenomenon, *Strangers in their own land* stands apart because it foresaw that very rise⁵. It explores, from the inside, the world vision of ordinary Southern white Tea Party supporters. It illustrates the essential part played by feelings and emotions in politics. At the same time it could also be a first step in pulling down the walls, as shown by Hochschild’s two imaginary letters, one addressed to a friend on the liberal left, the other to her Louisiana friends, imploring them to see the good things the two sides have in common and reminding them that many feel “strangers in their own land” in America today [233-236].

N O N N A M A Y E R