

14. Polarization and the Limits of Empathy

On Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016)

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1.

In March 2020, as the coronavirus spread throughout the United States, political scientists and commentators began to speculate on the ramifications the pandemic would have for the polarized state of US society.¹ In the past, national crises, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, had tended to rally the nation behind the administration. Public health crises in particular had had the effect of bringing people together across the political divide. “Facing a public health threat,” the *New York Times* summarizes the findings of quantitative scholarship on the issue, “the more anxious Democrats and Republicans became, the more likely they both were to trust expert sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”² Elsewhere, this rule of thumb seemed to apply to the coronavirus as well. Though post-Brexit Britain is politically, socially, and culturally deeply divided, the response to the pandemic was not.³

And in the United States? Pollsters found that through mid-March 2020, the response to the virus differed sharply between Democratic and Republican voters. Echoing the stance of Trump and Trump-loyal media such as Fox News, Republicans expressed significantly less concern about the pandemic than did Democrats. An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, conducted from

1 I am grateful to Martin Stempfhuber for his comments on a draft version of this essay.

2 Emily Badger and Kevin Quealy, “Red vs. Blue on Coronavirus Concern: The Gap Is Still Big but Closing,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/21/upshot/coronavirus-public-opinion.html>.

3 Badger and Quealy, “Red vs. Blue.”

March 11 to 13, found that “68 percent of Democrats are worried that someone in their family could catch the virus, while just 40 percent of Republicans and 45 percent of independents share that concern.”⁴ Apparently, these results were not a mere matter of partisans proudly touting the party line when approached by pollsters. Indeed, it seemed that in response to the coronavirus, Republicans and Democrats *acted* differently. Setting out to study differences in behavior rather than in professed opinion, political scientist Brian Schaffner analyzed Google searches for “hand sanitizer” and found that from March 1 to 12, 2020, “places that were more Republican were much less likely to search for hand sanitizer.”⁵ These polling results seemed to justify claims by some political scientists who have proposed that Republicans and Democrats increasingly live in separate realities, that polarization is no longer a matter merely of politics or social sorting but of epistemology.⁶

Things, however, changed in the second half of March, 2020. As Trump, the Republican Party, and their affiliated media channels began to take the crisis more seriously, the stark partisan differences in the reaction to the crisis diminished. For many political pundits and scientists, this was a sign that polarization was subsiding. In the *L.A. Times*, Kevin Collins, chief research officer of the polling organization Survey 160, stated that “while partisanship continues to structure public opinion, the facts on the ground can ultimately break through when the situation is grave enough.”⁷ On this reading, reality, boosted by the deadly force of the virus, was finally able to cut through and liberate itself from the constructions which partisans had imposed on it.

However, it would seem that this was an unduly hopeful interpretation, given the fact that the change of heart among Republicans did not come in spite of, but following, the swift turnaround of Trump and his media mouthpieces. The convergence of Democrats and Republicans in their responses to the virus may not have been an indicator that the nation was coming to its (nonpartisan) senses but that Republicans are so beholden to their authority

4 Jay J. Van Bavel, “In a pandemic, political polarization could kill people,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/23/coronavirus-polarization-political-exaggeration/>.

5 Badger and Quealy, “Red vs. Blue.”

6 Morgan Marietta and David C. Barker, *One Nation, Two Realities: Dueling Facts in American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

7 Janet Hook, “Even the coronavirus crisis can’t bridge America’s partisan divide,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-03-20/coronavirus-crisis-cant-bridge-partisan-divide>.

figures that they are willing to follow wherever they lead them. One day, the pandemic is a joke, the next day it is an existential crisis. It takes extraordinary commitment and identification with one's political leadership to be able to instantly adjust one's outlook to such drastic changes of perspective. Or, as Paul Krugman put it on March 31, "as far as I know there haven't been any howls of protest from Fox viewers, or Rush Limbaugh listeners, who are now being told something completely different from what they were hearing three weeks ago. Their trust in Fox, their disdain for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and, above all, their faith in Donald Trump are apparently unshaken."⁸

What's more, even as Trump's about-face temporarily lined up his view of the crisis with that of experts (and with Democratic politicians and their followers), Trump made sure not to let the coronavirus crisis go to waste. As the *New York Times* reported, on March 29, Trump "repeated a complaint that Democratic governors had insulted him and said he would delegate calls with those officials to other people in the White House ... 'Because when they disrespect me, they're disrespecting our government,' he said."⁹ Indeed, Trump, barred from holding rallies, found a new forum in his daily televised coronavirus briefings. Not only did the epidemic provide his broadcasts with urgency. The epidemic provided material ideally suited for his signature style made up of praise, insult, insinuation, and speculation. Polarization doesn't run out of steam just because there is general agreement on an issue. As long as that issue offers room for voicing grievances and threats, as long as agreement leaves the grammar of resentment intact, polarization—it seems at the time I'm writing this piece in early April 2020—will not loosen its grip on the United States just because tens of thousands of people are dying from a virus.

Polarization has been on the upswing in America for a long time now. Historians and political scientists trace it back to the break-up of the New Deal coalition in response to the Democratic Party's embrace of the Civil Rights

8 Paul Krugman, Opinion Newsletter, *New York Times*, March 31, 2020, https://message-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?uri=nyt://newsletter/79cb9e21-0e7e-478e-bcec-f726db9d36e5&productCode=PK&te=1&n=paul-krugman&emc=edit_pk_20200411

9 Michael D. Shear, "Trump Extends Social Distancing Guidelines Through End of April," *New York Times*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-guidelines.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Movement in the 1960s.¹⁰ Apparently, the lack of polarization during the extended New Deal era had something to do with the New Deal consensus about the desirability of economic redistribution and the welfare state. But the fact that the New Deal coalition broke apart over the Civil Rights Movement makes the story more complicated and should warn us against idealizations of a pre-polarized past. In the United States, nonpartisanship came at the price of across-the-board acceptance of systematic Jim Crow racism. Alas, in the United States everything is tainted by racism, even the very thing a European observer might be inclined to embrace whole-heartedly: the New Deal.

But neither is it quite right to say that the United States has been polarized since the late 1960s. Polarization is a development that has continued to grow increasingly severe and encompassing.¹¹ By now, polarization is no longer simply a matter of stark political disagreement. It is a matter of overarching identities—conservative versus liberal, Republican versus Democrat—that inflect entire ways of life, value systems, ideologies, aesthetic sensibilities, and vocabularies of affective expressivity. Not since before the Civil War have Americans experienced a divide this intense and unforgiving. Not only do they perceive those who think differently as strangers, or, indeed, as enemies. They have effectively reduced a complex and pluralistic society into two identity camps. Any aspect of life, from the most banal (do you prefer a Prius or a Pick-Up?) to the existential (isn't the coronavirus just another attempt get rid of Trump?), has the potential of serving as a shibboleth in the Manichean reordering of life.¹²

It almost goes without saying (though political and social scientists say it over and over again, and now—you are my witness—they are joined by colleagues from cultural and literary studies) that with the presidential election of 2016, polarization of US society reached a new level. Trump's whole approach to politics is built on the conflictual surplus that he extracts from

10 Sam Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

11 See James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

12 See Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018); Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Readers Press, 2020).

an us-versus-them logic. His electoral college success did not just catapult a populist to the White House who understands how to elicit and absorb a resentment mix generated by economic inequality, deep-seated racism, and empire-in-decline anxieties. His ascent to the presidency also cemented the polarization of the social world by effectively imposing it on those who voted for him and those who did not. Trump literally polarizes by forcing you to take sides.

What has been less often remarked on is that the rise of Trump, in pushing polarization to the next level, also raised the awareness of polarization, as well as the desire to overcome it. Americans are not only more divided than before. They are also more preoccupied with—and more concerned about—that divide. Strictly speaking, registering new levels of polarization as a problem, and wanting to solve that problem, are two separate issues. In practice, these two issues tend to blend together. What I want to call “the concern with polarization” has a dual meaning—the awareness of increasing polarization and the desire to undo it. No single book exemplifies this twofold concern more strikingly than Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, which appeared just a few weeks before the 2016 presidential elections.¹³ It is this twofold concern to which Hochschild’s book owes its remarkable success. It is the conflation of the two dimensions of *concern* that blunts its analytical force. It is the blind spot of the dual concern that makes the book end up as a symptom rather than an analysis of polarization in America. And finally, it is the earnestness of the concern that allows us to see clearer why it is so difficult to find a way out of polarization.

2.

Strangers in their Own Land is a piece of fieldwork sociology written expressly for the general reader. Hochschild, a self-proclaimed progressive from Berkeley, spent five years (roughly from 2010 and 2015) with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana in order to gain an understanding of their outlook on the world. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, her book promised to provide an answer to the question haunting liberal America: who were these people that voted Trump into the White House—against nearly all predictions?

13 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

Hochschild's book wasn't the only 2016 offering that liberal readers turned to for answers. A whole number of authors—most, but not all of them, academic—published non-fiction bestsellers that made credible bids in the contest for the most plausible account of what had been going on under the radar of the pollsters. Strikingly, most of them stressed the centrality of class. What needed to be explained, it seemed, was how there had emerged a new identity group—“the white working class”—that was particularly receptive to the appeal of a right-wing populist, and that had made the difference in the unexpected electoral outcome. Perhaps closest to the explanation offered by Hochschild came Katherine Cramer's book, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*.¹⁴ Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, did not, however, appeal to a broader public in the same way as Hochschild. To be sure, this was a matter of language (Cramer stays clear of jargon but doesn't make use of narrative), but also of focus. Like Hochschild, Cramer conducted interviews with rural conservatives. But whereas Hochschild aimed to offer an insight into conservatives' *emotions* by climbing what she called the “empathy wall” separating conservatives from liberals, Cramer instead tried to capture the “rural *consciousness*” of her Wisconsin subjects (her title is a bit misleading: the book does not offer any conceptual, phenomenological, or sociological discussion of the *feeling* of resentment). Telling a story about her subject's feelings and telling a story about how she felt about their feelings—this is the textual formula of Hochschild's narrative sociology that is thrown into relief when her book is compared to Cramer's.

The emphasis on first-person narrative put Hochschild's book in the vicinity of long-form reportage, but in the book market of 2016, it also made *Strangers in Their Own Land* resonate with J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, a Kentucky-Ohio family memoir that offered a first-person glimpse into rust-belt consciousness.¹⁵ Vance's book presented the reader with the feelings of inferiority that beset the protagonist as he moved up from his rural working-class family background to the high-earning, cosmopolitan world of business consulting. *Hillbilly Elegy* faintly recalls Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (which appeared in English translation in 2013), not only because it presents

14 Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

15 J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

a first-person account of the challenges posed by social climbing, but also because Vance tried to articulate sociological explanations of his subjective experiences.¹⁶ And yet, Vance's book is equally distant from *Returning to Reims* as it is from *Strangers in their Own Land* because it demonstrates—rather painfully—just how much training is required to be able to credibly don the sociologist's hat. Vance aimed to turn this shortcoming into an asset by venting his discontentment with any scholarly approach to his hillbilly life: “No single book, or expert, or field could fully explain the problems of hillbillies in modern America,” he insisted. “Our elegy is a sociological one, yes, but it is also about psychology and community and culture and faith.”¹⁷ Vance's insistence that he could only open the hillbilly world to the reader by shining a light on those dimensions of existence that purportedly lie outside of sociological analysis—psychology, community, culture, and faith—makes sense as a memoirist's pitch. But his anti-sociological stance also took away from the larger explanatory value of his story. Particularly regarding the concern with polarization, *Hillbilly Elegy* has little to offer.

3.

Hochschild, on the other hand, addresses polarization head on in the very first sentence of her preface.

When I began this research five years ago, I was becoming alarmed at the increasingly hostile split in our nation between two political camps. ... I had some understanding of the liberal left camp, I thought, but what was happening on the right? Most people who ask this question come at it from a political perspective. And while I have my views too, as a sociologist I had a keen interest in how life *feels* to people on the right—that is, in the emotion that underlies politics. To understand their emotions, I had to imagine myself into their shoes. Trying this, I came upon their “deep story,” a narrative *as felt*. (ix, emphasis in original)

To reconstruct this “deep story,” Hochschild met with forty Tea Party supporters from Lake Charles, Louisiana, and “accumulated over four thousand pages

16 Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucey (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), [2009] 2013).

17 Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 145.

of transcribed interviews” (248). She asked them about their political views, about specific policies, about how they coped with the ecological devastation around them, and, most crucially, she inquired into their moral imagination. Having immersed herself in their world, she tried to come up with a narrative, structured around a single metaphor—people waiting in line—that aimed to capture how they experienced their lives. In the next step, she tested out the deep story with her interviewees. Lo and behold, they all attested that she had really nailed it. This was their story.

Here are its opening paragraphs:

You are patiently standing in a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. You are situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not.

Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line. Many in the back of the line are people of color—poor, young and old, mainly without college degrees. It’s scary to look back; there are so many behind you, and in principle you wish them well. Still, you’ve waited a long time, worked hard, and the line is barely moving. You deserve to move forward a little faster. You’re patient but weary. You focus ahead, especially on those at the very top of the hill. (136)

Hochschild’s rendition of her Tea Party subjects’ deep story mixes the sociologically specific (“white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not” versus “people of color—poor, young and old, mainly without college degrees”) with the mythically sedimented. The myth she invokes (by name) is none other than the American Dream, which in this case refers to an economic success story according to which your self-reliant and self-disciplined efforts will eventually be rewarded. The American Dream myth has always been most powerful when brought up as a reminder of how things should be, but are not. So it is in this case: the deep story Hochschild constructs is one of frustration and resentment. It accentuates the disappointment and anger elicited by the feeling that the rewards you were promised for all your good, hard work are being withheld. Frustration, anger, resentment, betrayal: the deep story assembles the emotional underside of the American Dream, the ensemble of affects awaiting those who realize that a dream is just a dream.

The ingenuity of the metaphor of “waiting in line” lies in the way it opens up a plurality of causes for being stuck. There are at least three responses

you might develop while ruminating on why the line isn't getting any shorter, only one of which crops up in Hochschild's rendition. You might begin to wonder, firstly, whether perhaps someone is responsible for keeping the line from moving ahead. There might be gatekeepers up ahead, beyond the hill, that do not let enough people through. Or perhaps it isn't the gatekeepers themselves who are the problem; maybe there simply aren't enough gates. Put differently, there might be a systemic problem with access to the rewards deserved by the righteous and hard-working.

Secondly, you might begin to wonder whether the problem lies in the very act of waiting in line. Perhaps rather than worry about access, you begin to worry about your decision to get in line in the first place. Maybe you begin to see that waiting in line isn't worth it, that the ideal you are after isn't as glamorous as you thought. The dream you are waiting in line to realize might begin to appear bankrupt. Maybe, you realize while waiting, the vision of the good life conveyed by the American myth of success doesn't seem all that good anymore. Maybe you begin to imagine a different structure of society, built on more communal, less competitive and less materialistic values.

The third option, however, sees the cause of the problem neither in a broken system, nor in broken ideals, but rather in individualized villains who keep you from getting what you deserve. This is the explanation that features in Hochschild's resentment story. As a metaphor, she introduces "the line cutters."

Look! You see people *cutting in line ahead of you!* You're following the rules. They aren't. As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches, and they hold a certain secret place in people's minds, as we see below. Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers— where will it end? ... It's not fair.

And President Obama: how did he rise so high? The biracial son of a low-income single mother becomes president of the most powerful country in the world; you didn't see that coming. And if he's there, what kind of a slouch does his rise make you feel like, you who are supposed to be so much more privileged? (137)

For Hochschild's "Tea Party friends," as she calls them, the only thing that comes to mind while being stuck in line is that someone else is moving past them. Sure, any reader with even a minimal capacity for empathy can understand that this is an experience that feels unjust, and that it will make you want to cry out in anger and frustration. We have all been children at some point, after all. To develop an even deeper empathy—to begin to believe that this story gets the problem right, that there is indeed no other way of responding, yes, that this response is justified—requires the willful negation of responses one and two. Which is probably the reason why they have no place in Hochschild's book.

And yet, Hochschild herself is ultimately at odds with herself about how to treat the deep story, and in particular the portion about line-cutters. Reading the above paragraph out loud, it remains unclear whether Hochschild is really buying into her goal of adopting the perspective of her Louisiana subjects—or whether she is in fact making fun of them. Adopting a second-person free indirect discourse, she conveys characters full of petty resentment. The whining tone ("it's not fair"), the obtuseness ("you didn't see that coming"), the openly expressed envy ("how did *he* rise so high?")—none of this appears to achieve what Hochschild sets out to do: to see the world through the eyes of those who are on the other side of the partisan divide; to muster enough empathy to grant their perspective an inner moral logic and coherence. It's not that Hochschild isn't sincerely trying. It's rather that there is a fundamental logical flaw in trying to gain an understanding of polarization and at the same time work against polarization—all with the help of empathy. In passages such as the above, the contradictions of her project come to the fore.

4.

This brings us to the problem of the dual concern of polarization—the desire to understand and simultaneously to undo it. Not only do these two goals turn out to be incompatible. Like a ping pong player who tries to hit two balls and ends up hitting neither, the sociologist who banks on empathy to explain and help undo polarization will miss both marks at once.

Let's take these targets one at a time. If the goal is to make us understand why people who are economically suffering from the Republican Party's anti-government policies support a political movement that wants to minimize government even further, then comprehending the story these people

tell themselves is certainly helpful. The story that Hochschild's Louisiana Tea Partiers recognize as their own is suggestive of how they perceive themselves and the world around them. But what people tell themselves about their views and behavior is not a sufficient explanation of their behavior, nor of the adequacy of their views. A rather old-fashioned term comes to mind here. By exploring a deep story people claim as their own, one may in fact be doing no more than bring to light their false consciousness.

Hochschild is not entirely unaware of this problem. While she wants to avoid explaining her subjects' mindset as false consciousness, she notes that the deep story she reconstructs from the many, many interviews she has led is also the story told day in and day out by Fox News: "Fox commentators reflect your feelings, for your deep story is also the Fox News deep story" (139). But if the deep story is in fact the ideological narrative disseminated by partisan media, then how can Hochschild benefit from feeling her way into her subjects' point of view? Indeed, she would have most likely come up with a similar rendition of the deep story had she skipped the laborious work of interviewing forty Tea Party supporters and had she only worked from the scripts of Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. In which case it would become obvious that the task at hand has nothing to do with empathy, but merely with recording—and decoding—an ideological framework designed to produce nothing if not false consciousness.

One of the books Hochschild briefly discusses in a sort of literature review early on in *Strangers in Their Own Land* is Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* from 2004. Though Hochschild doesn't acknowledge this, Frank starts out by proposing what amounts to various deep stories. He doesn't do any field research to assemble them but simply picks up ideological narratives floating around in the mediasphere. Here are some of the differently accentuated—but interconnected—deep stories offered by Frank.

Or perhaps you are one of those many, many millions of average-income Americans who see nothing deranged about this at all [the insistence on a conservatism based on free market policies and conservative values]. For you this picture of hard-times conservatism makes perfect sense, and it is the opposite phenomenon—working-class people who insist on voting for liberals—that strikes you as an indecipherable puzzlement. ... Maybe you were one of those who stood up for America way back in 1968, sick of hearing those rich kids in beads badmouth the country every night on TV. Maybe you knew

exactly what Richard Nixon meant when he talked about the “silent majority,” the people whose hard work was rewarded with constant insults from the network news, the Hollywood movies, and the know-it-all college professors, none of them interested in anything you had to say. Or maybe it was the liberal judges who got you mad as hell, casually rewriting the laws of your state according to some daft idea they had picked up at a cocktail party, or ordering your town to shoulder some billion-dollar desegregation scheme that they had dreamed up on their own, or turning criminals loose to prey on the hardworking and the industrious. Or perhaps it was the drive for gun control, which was obviously directed toward the same end of disarming and ultimately disempowering people like you.¹⁸

Frank’s hypothetical stories are immediately related to Hochschild’s deep story. Indeed, the phrase “hard work was rewarded with constant insults from the network news” could be lifted directly from *Strangers in Their Own Land*. All the various versions assembled by Frank in this paragraph emphasize cultural reasons for “converting” to conservatism, and indeed, it is his argument that the answer to what Hochschild calls “the great paradox”—why do middle- and working-class people embrace economic policies that are opposed to their interests?—lies in the strategic use which economic elites make of conservative cultural politics. By offering them cultural conservatism, Frank argues, these elites hoodwink middle- and working-class Americans into agreeing to economic policies that hurt them.

There may be good reasons for Hochschild to reject Frank’s argument. In fact, her study gives us the valuable insight that the policies of deregulation detrimental to middle- and working-class Americans aren’t sold to them by diverting their attention away from economics to cultural issues, but that free-market, pro-corporate economic policies are themselves perceived—and embraced—as cultural issues. But the reason I bring up Frank’s book is not to show how his argument differs from Hochschild’s, but to point to a methodological problem of the deep story. I would venture to say that Hochschild’s subjects would have reacted just as approvingly had she come back to them with the paragraph composed by Frank. Here, too, they would have likely cried out, like one of the Tea Partiers of her book, “You’ve read my mind” (145). The

18 Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 2–3.

fact that Frank can come up with a comparable version of the deep story simply by reproducing widespread cultural narratives of the American right poses the question what precisely Hochschild has actually achieved by spending five years with her “Tea Party friends.”

In one of the most trenchant reviews of Hochschild’s book, sociologist Harel Shapira contrasts Hochschild’s method with Clifford Geertz’s “thick description”:

Geertz does something that Hochschild fails to do: he objectifies his research subjects; he turns them into an object of analysis. In so doing, Geertz establishes an important and necessary epistemological gap between himself and the people he writes about. It is not an empathy gap; it is a gap in what it means to understand, in what it is that the researcher understands and what it is that people we write about understand.¹⁹

The knowledge gap between the sociologist (or anthropologist) and the subject studied by the sociologist hinges on the status of the deep story as ideology. For the sociologist, reconstructing an ideological narrative is a first, necessary step. But resting there would mean falsely elevating ideology to sociological insight. Suddenly, the Fox News narrative is claimed to be something more—something deeper—than what it is, although the narrative itself stays exactly what it was before. It’s a magic trick that allows Hochschild to produce effects of epiphany for her interviewees, herself, and a good many of her readers. To move from magic trick to insight, empathy becomes an obstacle. As Shapira puts it: “While empathy can help us understand our informants’ truth, it is important to distinguish our informants’ truth from sociological truth—a truth that asks us to make visible the social forces that others are often blind to.”²⁰

Hochschild, I take it, both is and is not conscious of the pitfalls that come with her call for empathy as a sociological method. In its almost parodic tone, the language she uses in her rendition of the line-cutters portion of the deep story (quoted above) signals that she is putting herself at a distance from her subjects, that she cannot make their resentment her own. But rather than own

19 Harel Shapira, “Who Cares What They Think? Going About the Right the Wrong Way,” review of *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, by Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Contemporary Sociology* 46, no.5 (September 2017): 512–517, here 515.

20 Shapira, “Who Cares,” 516–517.

the distance as an epistemological necessity for reaching sociological truth, she reprimands herself for her moral failure of not living up to her own empathy imperative. “[T]he empathy wall was higher than I’d imagined,” she admits repeatedly. “I could see what they couldn’t see, but not—as Yogi Berra might say—what I couldn’t see. I still felt blind to what they saw and honored” (82). It is as if her analysis were not trying to establish sociological insights about her subjects—seeing what they can’t see, for her, isn’t of any use—but insights that ultimately relate to herself.

But what kind of insights are these? It is not that she is really writing a sociological account of a Berkeley progressive as she purportedly offers an account of Louisiana Tea Party supporters. Rather, she seems to be subjecting herself to an experiment, the goal of which is to immerse herself so deeply in her subjects’ worldviews that she throws overboard all of her excess knowledge and becomes like them. It is an experiment that smacks of controlled spiritual conversion. She calls it “getting in the spirit of things.” Thus, as she is pondering the contradictions of industrial expansion in light of radical environmental devastation in the Lake Charles area, she reports on her thought process: “As I was trying to climb this slippery empathy wall, a subversive thought occurred to me: do we need all the new plastic the American Chemical Association is promising us? ... We’ll throw away more plastic bottles, buy more, and further expand the market for plastic, the production of which pollutes water. But I was straying from my goal, getting into the spirit of things” (91-92). It is a true dilemma in which Hochschild finds herself. Not only does the empathy wall remain slippery; so do the sociological insights her book promises to yield. Put differently, empathy is keeping her from gaining the distance from her subjects that she would need to decode their deep story, while the ethnographic starting point of her study—she may have found new friends in Louisiana, but she remains a visitor from California—bars her from fulfilling her goal of total empathetic immersion.

5.

It may ultimately be beside the point, however, to criticize Hochschild for failing to produce any deep sociological knowledge about her subjects. After all, it is reasonable to suggest that Hochschild’s dual concern with polarization is not so much directed at sociologically decoding the worldview of the right, but at finding a way of engaging with people on the other side of the

divide. The task of public sociology, from this view, prioritizes the public over sociology. *Strangers in their Own Land* would have to be seen as an exercise in civility, as practical guide to revitalize a democratic public in the stranglehold of polarization.

In her response to a review by William Davies, Hochschild indeed seems to measure the success of her book by its effect on bipartisan discourse: “Given the split between sectors and classes, it is all the more important to try to heal the political breach, especially given a president who has shown himself to be both divisive and volatile. ... Almost as if in answer to all this, a grassroots nationwide movement is on the rise.”²¹ The task of her book, we may infer, is to provide material for this new grassroots movement that is trying to heal the nation. In fact, she characterizes the strategy of the bipartisan movement in the very terms she used for explaining the rationale of her book. In the Preface to *Strangers*, she writes, “I have lived most of my life in the progressive camp but in recent years I began to want to better understand those on the right. How did they come to hold their views? Could we make common cause on some issues?” (xi). That same hope to come together on shared issues, she claims, mobilizes the new anti-polarization movement she has made out: “Deep political differences remain, of course, but efforts in this nationwide, grassroots movement to heal the rift have revealed a series of specific ‘cross-over’ issues—the reduction of prison populations, the importance of clean energy, peace.”²²

While Hochschild, writing in 2017, puts her hope in an allegedly emerging non-partisan movement, the majority of recent studies by political scientists point out that the United States continues to become more intensely polarized.²³ As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, not even the coronavirus epidemic seems to be able to fundamentally change this. The question I wish to pose, however, is not whether the grassroots movement in which Hochschild puts her hope, and to which she clearly wants to belong, has gained any discernible traction or not. The question is rather whether Hochschild’s idea of how to overcome polarization can work. The answer hinges on our understanding of contemporary polarization.

21 Arlie Russel Hochschild, “A Response to William Davies’ ‘A Review of Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 30 (2017): 421–423, here 422.

22 Hochschild, “Response,” 423.

23 For a good overview of the scholarship, see Klein, *Why We’re Polarized*.

No doubt, Hochschild is very earnest in her hopes that by learning to understand the other side, Americans will be able to rekindle bi-partisan conversations. With enough empathy, they will feel how the other sides sees and experiences the world. Without empathizing away all disagreement, their new understanding and appreciation of the people in the other camp will allow them to come together on issues that they are equally invested in. They will, Hochschild hopes, form coalitions in fighting for fewer prison inmates, less pollution, and peace.

Ultimately, Hochschild seems right to suggest that any way out of polarization will have to involve a rekindling of the democratic public sphere. Overcoming the partisan splits that endanger US democracy will have to involve that people begin to re-learn how to talk to one another. In that sense, the grassroots movement on whose burgeoning she insists (whether rightly or wrongly) cannot be entirely on the wrong track. And yet, I'm afraid that the path on which Hochschild has set out to reach a democratic rebirth will prove a dead end. This is the case because she gets wrong what is currently driving polarization, and how empathy reinforces rather than offsets this dynamic.

Political scientists such as Bill Bishop, Matthew Levendusky, and Lilliana Mason have shown that polarization in the United States has turned all politics into identity politics.²⁴ Not the type of identity politics that pushes for the recognition of marginalized groups, but one in which taking sides in political struggles is a matter of your identity as a liberal or conservative, or better: Democrat or Republican. In this process, what political scientists call "ideology"—the set of policy positions held by voters—becomes subservient to party identification. As Levendusky puts it, "voters typically shift their ideology to fit with their party identification."²⁵

As they turn politics into identity politics, Americans begin to reduce the complexity of a highly differentiated and pluralized society into exactly two camps. As Mason observes: "Across the electorate, Americans have been dividing with increasing distinction into two partisan teams. Emerging research has shown that members of both parties negatively stereotype members of the opposing party, and the extent of this partisan stereotyping has increased

24 See Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.

25 Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort*, 3.

by 50 percent between 1960 and 2010. They view the other party as more extreme than their own, while they view their own party as not at all extreme.”²⁶ The dynamic in which people behave when their identity comes up against the other camp’s identity takes on characteristics that are difficult to square with the requirements of a democratic public. As they create enmity with the other team—which is partially imaginary but by no means illusory since its effects are all too real—Americans begin to succumb to a zero-sum logic of conflict, in which victory becomes the greatest aspiration and defeat the greatest fear. “Group victory is a powerful prize, and American partisans have increasingly seen that goal as more important than the practical matters of governing a nation,” writes Mason.²⁷ As she points out, Trump is particularly adept at cashing in on the currency of group victory. Not for nothing did he promise crowds early on during his campaign in 2015, “We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with the winning.”²⁸

With politics having become a matter of identity, political allegiance not only predetermines a whole package of increasingly polarized policy positions any given individual is likely to buy into; political identity also becomes a matter of a whole way of life, seeping into where you do your grocery shopping, what car you drive, how you comport yourself, etc. In other words, in the type of polarized society exemplified and spearheaded by the United States, political identity becomes cultural identity.

Another useful way of understanding this is to describe cultural identity as an overarching “mega-identity,” as Mason calls it. She distinguishes between political identity—defined by the question, which party do you belong to?—and social identities, such as religion, race, class, etc. In the current process of polarization, it isn’t just that political identities move further apart. They also begin to snowball, attaching to themselves those social identities that initially had to be considered separate from political identities.

Religion and race, as well as class, geography, and culture, are dividing the parties in such a way that the effect of party identity is magnified. The competition is no longer between Democrats and Republicans. A single vote can now indicate a person’s partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store. This is no longer

26 Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, 3.

27 Mason, 4.

28 Mason, 2.

a single social identity. Partisanship can now be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies.²⁹

To be sure, social identity components were always attached to political identities. For instance, for many decades, class identity was clearly aligned with political identity. What has changed today is that to each political identity is attached a whole assortment of social identities. While throughout American history it was common to have many voters with cross-cutting identities—those who mixed and matched from the range of social identity components—such cross-cutting has become an exceedingly rare phenomenon.

The conclusion that Mason draws from her analysis is only logical. In order to revitalize a democratic public—to make it possible for Americans to come into contact with members of the other team, and to find compromises with them—the aggregations of social identity clusters into “mega-identities” need to be loosened. Only when political identity no longer determines the whole set of a person’s social identity components will it be possible for people to reach across the aisle. For under these conditions, the aisle will merely be a political aisle that has already been crossed on a regular basis in many other dimensions of everyday life. Psychologically, this disaggregation will make it easier to interact and deliberate with people from the other team since what is at stake—what is potentially threatened in a confrontation—is no longer the totality of a person’s identity, but only the position on a given issue.

At first glance, it might seem as if Hochschild could agree with this assessment. As she writes, “should the grievous day arrive when President Trump declares progressive and liberal citizens as ‘enemies of the American people,’ let it fall on the deaf ears of those who have already broken bread with them.”³⁰ The grassroots movement she cheers on could be seen as driving a wedge into identity blocks compactly opposing one another.

At the same time, however, Hochschild’s investment in empathy works against the centrifugal forces that might break open the identity clusters that compose the polarized camps. “Getting in the spirit of things,” “coming to see the world through their eyes”: approaches such as these are prone to reify overarching mega-identities, rather than break them open. Instead of contributing to making politics less a matter of culture, she ends up furthering the culturalization of politics. Instead of working towards a disidentification

29 Mason, 14.

30 Hochschild, “Response,” 423

of politics, she pursues as cultural politics of recognition, on the basis of which she hopes to mount a new democratic culture. Tellingly, even her best hope for such a democratic revival remains identity-bound. Rather than envisioning a public sphere in which people come to find compromise through debate, she hopes to bring people from opposite camps into coalitions over issues about which they in truth already agree. Democracy, for her, isn't about conflict, deliberation, and compromise, but about communities of agreement. Hoping to climb the empathy wall in order to undo polarization thus turns out to be an ill-fated effort. The goal is not to climb the empathy wall. The goal is to tear it down by dispersing the identity you could empathize with.

The best hope to overcome polarization, then, would be a politics of disidentification, in which the bundle of sorted identity components becomes disaggregated. The task may be herculean, but it does not require going to Louisiana to see how the other half feels. One might instead begin by driving a couple of wedges into one's own sense of self.

