

Russell Hochschild, Arlie – Strangers in Their Own Land

The New Press, 2016, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

Ever since the election of Donald Trump there has been a scramble for the liberal intelligentsia to try to understand and explain the events that came as such a complete and utter shock and so profoundly shook their worldview. The lack of understanding largely came from the dichotomy between the coastal and urban US and the middle and rural parts of the country; the country has grown ever more bifurcated the last decades. The liberal, left wing Berkeley sociologist professor had already prior to the 2016 presidential elections embarked on a journey to climb over to the other side of what she calls the empathy wall in a multi-year project to understand the emotional selves of the Tea-party members on the other side. In this particular case, the inhabitants of the areas of Louisiana that had suffered the most polluting effects of the oil industry but still stubbornly voted for politicians who opposed any further governmental regulation of the industry.

As the book progresses we get to follow how the author discusses with and eventually befriends a number of southerners. To some extent the narrative is a bit speculative since ever so often the reader will say “*but you surely must understand that people think in this or that way*” and then in the next chapter that specific angle is often covered. Or at least I hope it is speculative, or else the author started from a hugely naïve position. In chapter nine Russel Hochschild formulates the so-called deep story of the right wing republicans. “*A deep story is a feels-as-if story-it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand and explore the subjective prism through which the party of the other side sees the world.*”

To a large extent I think the author quite impressively nails the deep story and the

character types it produces - I leave the details for the reader to explore. Equipped with this deep story she quite easily understands why people vote as they do. Still, being empathetic towards her newfound friends isn’t entirely enough in my view. First of all, the reader only partially and just at the very end learns of her liberal deep story, thus it is a republican deep story seen through an undisclosed subjective liberal prism that the author unveils. It is as if the liberal deep story is so obviously the norm that it doesn’t even have to be explained or understood by the reader.

Further, as pointed out in the above quote on the deep story, such a story removes judgment and facts. The author’s own deep story is strongly anti-business (and Wall-Street is surely hell on earth) and the appropriateness of this is never really discussed. The view is further reinforced as she on purpose has sought out a small subset of the victims of the potentially nastiest crony capitalism in the US for her study. Unfortunately it leads to a subtle belittlement of her newfound friends. Although they might not be evil Ayn Rand-reading bigots, their emotional deep story - which includes being pro-business - makes them unprotected victims of the corporate oppression they suffer. They are not evil, but they are like ignorant children that need protection from themselves. The book is in this respect equally a sociological study of the author herself. All corporate activities must abide to the law and ensuring this in my view entails a law that is upheld and an uncorrupt police force – not necessarily the big stat she advocates.

Despite my quarrels it’s a book well worth reading since the psychological portrait of the republican voter has seldom been painted. Still, if only to pick one book with this purpose I would chose J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* any day.

Mats Larsson, March 4, 2018