

## **Understanding the American Right\***

**Jayati Ghosh**

A visit to the USA at the height of the Presidential election season, in a nation obsessed with polls that are just a few weeks away, creates simultaneous sensations of fascination, dismay and even horror. Even from a distance, the entire world has been watching this hugely significant election turn into an ever more sordid and distressing spectacle, with vitriolic lows in the campaign discussion that are perhaps unparalleled in any other election through time and across countries. The personal failings of both candidates are now only too well known, and are effectively blocking out all serious consideration of the policies they propose, so that in its final days this election campaign is dominated in the media by these issues of personality and “fitness” to be US President.

Of course this raises questions about the nature of democracy in what remains the most powerful nation on earth. It may be no surprise that authoritarian regimes across the world are currently pointing to the goings on in the United States as a telling example of the many failings of electoral democracy.

But to an outside visitor, the more significant question is a deeper one: how could someone like Donald Trump could actually have got so far, still remain a viable candidate and now stand as one of the only two possible winners of this crucial election? Surely, at any other time, such a person would have been eliminated long ago from what was originally a very crowded field. It is not just his controversial policy proposals like deporting all Muslims and building a wall to stop immigration from Mexico. His history of crony-based shady business deals and, personal aggrandisement regardless of the wider impact, his obsessive publicity-seeking at all costs, the evidence even during the campaign of bullying, racism and sexism and so on, are now only too well-known. The recent flurry of revelations and accusations about his predatory sexual behaviour have reinforced attributes that have been evident throughout his campaign, such as his tendency to mock and insult women, minorities, immigrants and persons with disabilities.

Despite all this, according to the various (admittedly flawed) opinion polls, he continues to retain significant support, anywhere between 35 and 44 per cent of the electorate. This obviously means that somehow he has managed – despite all these unattractive and even alarming qualities – to capture the attention, imagination and support of a significant number of US citizens, who continue to root for him despite the currently bad press he is receiving. Many of these are working class people, dominantly (but not only) White, whose rage and frustration he has been able to channel into what is clearly a howl of protest.

Some of these Trump supporters are remnants of the Tea Party that became a powerful caucus in the Republican Party. Trump appeals to mostly white male voters who have suffered from economic changes of the past decade and more, ended up on the wrong side of the tracks or failed to improve their conditions as the “American Dream” has promised them. Even so, it is remarkable that a billionaire with a dodgy financial record, self-declared successful tax avoidance and problematic treatment of employees and tenants, who has promised to cut income and inheritance taxes on the

wealthy, has been able to find resonance among those who would normally be seen as his victims.

It has been argued that this is because he has put his finger on some of the policies and processes of the past decade – associated with globalisation – that are most blamed for the more precarious existence that many US citizens now experience. So his strong arguments against trade agreements and against immigration, as well as his ability to play on the fears of terrorism supposedly stemming only from Muslims, find a ready audience among them. In addition, he has (remarkably) been able to present himself as anti-establishment, whereas his rival Hillary Clinton personifies the establishment and therefore is seen as part of the problem rather than the solution.

But this begs a deeper question, which is not answered by these now commonplace explanations. Why is there such anger, to the point of potentially violent fury, against the government establishment, among a category of the US population that is not by any means the most deprived or even the worst affected over the past decades? Why is the anger not directed at the “1 per cent” who appears to have got so much richer over this period, those who are in fact the target of the Occupy movement? Why is so much of the anger instead directed at people weaker than themselves, such as blacks or immigrants?

Some of these questions are answered in an insightful new book by the Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (*Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right- A journey to the heart of our political divide*, The New Press, New York, 2016), who spent several years interacting with and studying a set of small communities in the Lake Charles area of Louisiana. This is an area that has provided significant support for the Tea Party, with people now enthusiastically supporting Donald Trump.

Hochschild is concerned with what she calls the great paradox: Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the United States, one of the worst affected by environmental pollution delivered by poorly regulated industries (mostly oil and shale, which have replaced the plantations of yore as the main source of economic activity) and with very poor social indicators that have actually been made worse by significant cuts in public health and education spending. Yet the people she met were all for reducing both taxes and federal funds, and against environmental regulations and controls on polluting companies.

One reason is the continued faith in industry among this group, in the hope that industries (even capital intensive ones like oil that employ relatively few people, many of them not from the region) will bring jobs and prosperity. This is why Bobby Jindal, in his eight-year tenure as Governor of the state, could cut public spending on school, hospitals and other essential social services by more than 40 per cent, in order to provide \$1.6 billion of incentives to private companies, also giving them the benefit of very light environmental controls. Another is an almost visceral dislike of the federal government, which is seen as distant, corrupt and unaware of the problems they face, in addition to generating other forms of perceived injustice. A third is an almost philosophical acceptance of the hazards of pollution – which has caused severe illnesses and destroyed many lives among these communities, despoiled the nature that they love and made some places unliveable – as the price to be paid for

capitalism, which is seen to bring progress. And finally there is the ethic of being as self-reliant and strong as possible, of working hard and bearing up under difficulty, of despising those who take “handouts” rather than struggling through on their own and dealing with whatever life deals you.

The church provides both social and emotional worlds. The proliferation of churches meets many needs: frequent social interaction in “a collective, supportive arena”, activities for children and elders, effectively some kind of social therapy that allows people to cope with their increasingly distressing circumstances. For all this they pay tithes of 10 per cent of their income, but unlike taxes that they begrudge, they give willingly to their churches. And so some churches are richer, others (with mostly black congregations) are poorer. Concerns with the wider world are limited: Hochschild notes that words from the pulpits seem to “focus more on a person’s moral strength to endure than on the will to change the circumstances that called on that strength.”

The media exposure that people receive tends to reinforce existing prejudices and add to anxieties about the future. Hochschild notes that “Fox News stands next to industry, state government, church and the regular media as an extra pillar of political culture all its own”, a powerful influence over the views of the people, telling them what to feel afraid, angry and anxious about. One woman says “Fox is like family” – and as with family, the interaction is constant, through radio, television and internet. Other sources of news and information are distrusted, such as the New York Times (“too liberal”) or simply unheard of, so that investigative reports about environmental pollution in their own backyard in left-leaning magazines like Mother Jones simply pass them by.

These features of the stereotypical new Right, along with the fact that they tend to be less well-educated and mostly engaged in occupations that have become more fragile and less remunerative, are well known. But Hochschild delves deeper, into what she calls “the deep story”, which is the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols, without judgement or fact. All of us have our deep stories, which determine our political views and much else. She constructs the deep story of these mostly white communities through this metaphor that deserves quoting at some length because it so effectively explains the latent rage that now seems to have caught fire:

“You are patiently standing in a long line leading up a hill... 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 (of individual progress), the goal of everyone waiting in line. Many in the back of the line are people of colour – poor, young and old, mainly without college degrees... in principle you wish them well. Still, you’ve waited a long time, worked hard, but the line is barely moving.

You focus ahead, especially on those at the very top of the hill... You’ve suffered long hours, layoffs and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and receive reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this...

The sun is hot and the line unmoving. In fact, is it moving backward? You haven't gotten a raise in years, and there is no talk of one. Actually, if you are short a high school diploma or even a BA, your income has dropped over the last twenty years... You've taken the bad news in your stride because you're a positive person. You're not a complainer. But this line isn't moving. And after all your intense effort, all your sacrifice, you're beginning to feel stuck...

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... Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being preference... Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers – where will it end? Your money is running through a liberal sympathy sieve you don't control or agree with. These are opportunities you'd have loved to have in your day... 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 slouch does his rise make you feel like, you who are supposed to be so much more privileged? Or did Obama get there fairly?

Women: Another group is cutting ahead of you in line, if you are a man: women demanding the right to men's jobs. Your dad didn't have to compete with women for scarce positions at the office. Also jumping in line ahead of you are overpaid public sector employees – and a majority of them are women and minorities. It also seems to you that they work shorter hours in more secure and overpaid jobs... Immigrants: And now Filipinos, Mexicans, Arabs, Indians and Chinese on special visas or green cards are ahead of you in line. Or maybe they snuck in....

Refugees: President Obama accepted 10,000 of them (Syrian refugees) two-thirds women and children, to settle in the United States. But word has it that 90 per cent of the refugees are young men, possibly ISIS terrorists, poised to get in line ahead of you and get their hands on your tax money. And what about you? You've suffered floods, oil spills and chemical leaks. There are days when you feel like a refugee yourself...

But it's people like you who have made this country great. You feel uneasy... the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness. You resent them, and you feel it's right to do so. So do your friends. Fox commentators reflect your feelings. You're a compassionate person. But now you've been asked to extend your sympathy to all the people who have cut in front of you...

Then you become suspicious, if people are cutting in line ahead of you, someone must be helping them... President Barack Hussein Obama is helping them... He's on their side. He's telling you that these line cutters deserve special treatment, that they've had a harder time than you've had... but from what you can see or hear on Fox news, the real story doesn't correspond to his story about the line cutters... It's not fair. In fact the president and his wife are line cutters themselves.

You feel betrayed. The president is their president, not your president... So the great pride you feel in being American cannot be conveyed through him... Obama's story seems "fishy"... If you can no longer feel pride in the United States through its

president, you'll have to feel American in some new way – by bonding with others who feel as strangers in their own land.”

This extended metaphor aptly describes the fertile ground on which Donald Trump sowed his seeds by declaring that he would “make America great again”. But there is another reason for the solid, even intense support that he commands – his complete disdain for political correctness, which appears exhilarating and liberating to such people who have felt suppressed for so long. Many observers of his rallies have spoken of the extraordinary energy, even rapture, of the crowd as he delivers his aggressive message with wild generalisations that go well beyond the limits that have been set by what can be openly stated in public discourse. Emile Durkheim described “collective effervescence” as the state of emotional excitation felt by those who join with others they take to be fellow members of a moral or biological tribe. In this case, the excitement delivers an even greater high because of heady sense of being free to state one’s prejudices and perceptions openly, in a group that can disregard the scorn and contempt of liberals.

Hochschild notes that “the desire to hold on to this elation became a matter of emotional self-interest.” This points to the limitations of those of us who have focussed too narrowly on economic self-interest in trying to understand these political phenomena. As Hochschild finally observes, “while economic self-interest is never entirely absent, what I discovered was the profound importance of emotional self-interest – a giddy release from the feeling of being a stranger in one’s own land.”

This is an extraordinarily perceptive analysis of the American Right – but it also has resonance in many other countries. We can recognise shades of it in the far right movements in Europe and Britain, in the Hindutva forces in India, in emerging political attitudes in Turkey and Egypt and Thailand and many other places. The forces of globalisation seem to have created a global similarity in response, understandable but still unpleasant.

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