

***Strangers in Their Own Land:  
Anger and Mourning on the American Right***

**A Summary**

In *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild explores the political and emotional perspectives of conservative voters in Louisiana, particularly those affected by environmental pollution yet who remain deeply skeptical of government regulation.

**"The Deep Story"**

Hochschild introduces the concept of the "deep story", which she describes as a "felt truth"—an emotional and symbolic narrative that explains how people see their world, regardless of factual accuracy. The Deep Story of the American Right (as Hochschild presents it):

Imagine standing in a long line, waiting for the American Dream—a better life, financial security, and recognition for hard work.

This line isn't moving much, despite years of effort and sacrifice.

Suddenly, certain groups—immigrants, minorities, women, and government workers—seem to be cutting in line ahead, often with the help of the government (through affirmative action, welfare, etc.).

Political elites, media, and urban liberals look down on the people in line, dismissing their struggles and calling them racist or ignorant.

The federal government, rather than helping, is perceived as favoring others, regulating industries that provide jobs, and enforcing policies that disrupt traditional ways of life.

A deep sense of loss and resentment grows, not just economically but culturally, leading many to embrace anti-government and pro-business ideologies, even when policies harm their local environment.

**Why The Deep Story Matters**

Hochschild argues that this deep story helps explain the emotional appeal of right-wing populism and Donald Trump's rise. It highlights how identity, perceived fairness, and cultural values often override economic self-interest when people choose their political allegiances. When she presented this deep story to her friends and sources in Louisiana, they enthusiastically confirmed that this was an accurate depiction of how they felt.

## "The Great Paradox"

In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Arlie Russell Hochschild explores what she calls "the Great Paradox", which refers to the contradiction she observes in the lives and political beliefs of many conservative voters, particularly in Louisiana. Hochschild's paradox is this:

The very communities that suffer the most from environmental pollution and economic hardship tend to oppose government regulation and vote for politicians who support deregulation and reduced environmental protections.

Many residents in Louisiana, where Hochschild conducted her research, have experienced firsthand the damage caused by industrial pollution, yet they remain deeply anti-government and anti-environmental regulation.

Instead of blaming corporations that pollute their air and water, they often blame the federal government for interfering in their lives, believing that regulations kill jobs and threaten their way of life.

Examples from the book:

Hochschild interviews people affected by toxic waste, polluted water, and health crises, yet they oppose agencies like the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and support politicians who fight against stricter environmental policies.

Many residents believe that big government hurts more than it helps, seeing environmental regulations as a form of overreach that stifles businesses and job opportunities rather than protecting them.

They also distrust government solutions, often due to personal experiences with inefficient bureaucracy or cultural narratives that portray government assistance as favoring "outsiders" over hard-working, self-reliant Americans.

**Why does this paradox exist?** Hochschild identifies several factors:

**Distrust of Government** – Many conservatives believe that government interference, even when well-intentioned, makes problems worse.

**Economic Dependency on Polluting Industries** – Many communities rely on oil, gas, and chemical companies for jobs, making them reluctant to support regulations that could shut these businesses down.

**Cultural Identity and Political Loyalty** – Opposition to government regulation is often tied to a larger worldview of personal responsibility, small government, and distrust of liberal elites.

The Deep Story – As explained earlier, many conservative voters feel like they are being left behind while others “cut in line,” and environmental policies can feel like another way that the government is favoring other people’s interests over theirs.

**Why is the Great Paradox important?** Hochschild argues that understanding this paradox is key to bridging the political divide. It highlights how political beliefs are not just about economic self-interest but are deeply tied to cultural values, personal identity, and emotional narratives.

There is another critical aspect of the Great Paradox and the Deep Story—the perceived failure of the federal government to actually protect people from pollution, despite imposing regulations.

Many of the Louisiana residents Hochschild interviews don’t see tangible benefits from federal environmental policies. Even with agencies like the EPA in place, toxic waste, polluted water, and environmental disasters continue to harm their communities. This reinforces a deeply ingrained belief that:

Government is ineffective—Regulations exist on paper, but corporations continue polluting, and nothing seems to change.

Government workers are distant and ineffective—People see federal bureaucrats as well-paid outsiders who impose rules but don’t understand or solve local problems.

Regulations seem selective or unfair—They may feel that environmental policies hurt small businesses or local industries while failing to hold big corporations truly accountable.

This feeds the resentment described in the Deep Story: the sense that they are standing in line, working hard, and waiting for the American Dream while government elites not only fail to help but actually make things worse.

So, rather than blaming corporate polluters, they often turn their frustration toward federal agencies and liberal politicians, who they see as ineffective, wasteful, or even corrupt. This reinforces their preference for small government, deregulation, and free-market solutions, even when those policies may not directly improve their situation.

### **How the Great Paradox Influences Voting Behavior and Economic Policy**

Hochschild’s Great Paradox helps explain why many working-class conservatives in environmentally damaged areas continue to vote for politicians who favor deregulation, tax cuts, and free-market policies, even when those policies may seem to work against their own material interests.

**1. Voting Behavior: Why Support Anti-Regulation Politicians?** Despite experiencing the consequences of pollution firsthand, many residents in Hochschild’s study continue to vote for Republican politicians who oppose environmental regulations. This happens for several reasons:

Regulations Haven't Helped in the Past – If government agencies like the EPA haven't been able to prevent pollution despite existing laws, why trust them to do better with more regulations?

Fear of Job Loss – Many residents depend on oil, gas, and chemical industries for employment. They worry that more regulations will shut down their towns' biggest employers, even if those industries are causing harm.

Cultural and Political Identity – Many voters see liberal environmentalists as outsiders who don't understand their way of life. They resent being told what to do by urban elites or coastal progressives who prioritize nature over jobs.

Distrust of Government in General – The belief that federal agencies are inefficient, corrupt, or biased makes residents less likely to support candidates who promise more government intervention.

Religious and Moral Values – Some residents frame pollution and hardship through a religious lens, believing that suffering is part of life, and solutions should come from community and faith, not government.

**2. Economic Policy: Why Favor Free Markets Over Government Intervention?** Instead of supporting government-led solutions, many conservatives in Hochschild's study embrace free-market solutions, believing that:

Business, not government, creates prosperity – Government regulations slow down growth, while private businesses create jobs and wealth.

Trickle-down economics will help them – Many believe that reducing taxes and regulations will lead to more investment, job creation, and overall economic prosperity, even if the benefits take time to reach them.

Personal responsibility over welfare – Some see government aid and intervention as a form of dependency, preferring policies that reward hard work and self-reliance.

Regulations favor others – There's a belief that environmental regulations don't help them directly, but instead help environmental activists, government employees, or people in urban areas who don't share their struggles.

**3. The Political Trap: Reinforcing the Status Quo:** Ironically, this cycle reinforces itself:

People vote for anti-regulation candidates → These candidates weaken environmental protections → Pollution gets worse → Government looks even less effective → People become even more distrustful of government → They vote for even more anti-regulation candidates.

This creates a feedback loop, where frustration with government failure leads to less support for government intervention, rather than more.

## **How Political Messaging Shapes the Great Paradox**

One of the most powerful forces maintaining the Great Paradox is political messaging—the way politicians, media, and interest groups frame issues like regulation, economic policy, and environmental protection. These narratives influence how voters perceive problems and solutions, often reinforcing distrust in government rather than encouraging new perspectives.

**How Conservatives Frame Environmental and Economic Issues.** Republican and conservative messaging has been highly effective at shaping the way many right-leaning voters think about government regulation, corporate accountability, and economic policy. Here's how:

### **“Regulations Kill Jobs” (vs. “Regulations Protect You”)**

Conservative politicians and business leaders argue that environmental regulations hurt the economy, stifle innovation, and kill jobs.

The phrase "job-killing regulations" is repeated often in conservative media.

Instead of blaming corporations for pollution, this messaging shifts the blame to the government, making it seem like environmentalists and regulators are the enemy of working people.

**Impact:** Even if pollution is harming their community, voters associate more regulations with economic decline, making them resist stronger environmental laws.

### **“Big Government is the Real Enemy” (vs. “Corporations Are Polluting”)**

Many conservatives have more trust in businesses than in government, even when corporations harm their communities.

Politicians frame the issue as a choice:

Do you want more government control and red tape?

Or do you want free enterprise and personal freedom?

By emphasizing the failures of government agencies like the EPA, conservatives reinforce the idea that government can't be trusted to fix problems, only free markets can.

**Impact:** Voters oppose new environmental policies, even if pollution affects them, because they believe bureaucrats don't care about them and government action always backfires.

### **“Elites Look Down on You” (vs. “We’re Trying to Help”)**

Many conservatives feel disrespected by coastal elites, urban progressives, and liberal academics.

When liberals push environmental policies without listening to local concerns, it reinforces the idea that city-dwelling, college-educated elites are out of touch with working-class Americans.

Terms like “climate change agenda,” “woke environmentalism,” and “green new deal socialism” are used to make even reasonable policies sound radical.

**Impact:** Even if a policy could benefit them, voters resist it because it feels like another example of elites telling them what to do.