

Recall This Book 63
Brahmin Left #3
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Arlie Hochschild (AU, JP)

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. Hello, I'm your host John Plotz: and specifically welcome now to our summer series on the Brahmin left past, present and future. I think today we might call this a series of the Brahmin Left, and perhaps the Tea Party Right? Since we're interested, not just in the movement of educated upper middle-class people towards traditional left parties like the democrats, but also in the movement of working class and less educated citizens towards the right and the Republican Party. And so we can really imagine no better guests for that aspect of this series than the renowned sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Hello Arlie.

Arlie Hochschild: Hi.

John Plotz: It's great to have as my co-host for this third of our Brahmin Left series Adaner Usmani, a sociologist at Harvard, whom you've previously heard talking about mass incarceration in Episode 44 and then in episode 51's conversation with Thomas Piketty himself. So hi Adaner.

Adaner Usmani: Hi John, hi Arlie.

John Plotz: So, it was that conversation with Piketty in fact, that inspired this series, because Piketty has in recent years analyzed ways in which European and American left wing parties have increasingly drawn their support from an educated, non-working class political base. So today is the last of three conversations and previous ones were with the American historian Matt Karp, an expert on European populism and Jan Werner Mueller, in which we think with and around that Piketty claim that there's been a "class

dealignment,”. that leaves many highly educated folks, so called PMC, serving as a new core of left parties. So, if Piketty’s facts and figures are right, how do we understand that shift? Is it a tribute to effective strategies among right wing parties, a sign of the decoupling of left political party platforms from the material interests of the poor and working class or some other kind of ominous or potentially reversible, sorry, some other kind of ominous or potentially reversible realignment in the structure of representative politics generally?

Well, when it comes to thinking about this decoupling, or the possibility of a post material politics, our thoughts turned naturally to a pivotal 2016 book that pointed out some frequently overlooked currents in how Americans had shifted their political affiliation and the sorts of emotional investment that accompanied that affiliation. So, Arlie Hochschild’s books, at least 10 by my count (and I’m sure I’ve left some out Arlie) along with countless articles, range from her 1973, *The Unexpected Community* and 1983’s *The Managed Heart* to the 2012 wonderful *The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in the Market*. And to top it all off, she’s also a distinguished professor, I guess Professor emerita now, at UC Berkeley. Still all of her previous honors notwithstanding, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* was a thunderclap of a book way beyond the traditional markers of success for academic sociology. This was not simply because of its timeliness as members of the Brahmin left woke up to the counter-current that swept other voters firmly into the Republican camp, but also because the voices in it rang so true and testified so sincerely to the feelings and the sort of deep story understanding that accompanied that movement. So, Arlie, again, thank you so much for coming on, and we really look forward to this conversation. And Adaner, do you want to just sort of kick it off with an opening question?

Adaner Usmani: Sure, sure, sure, absolutely yeah, thanks Arlie. It’s really exciting to get to speak to you about this. I thought that the

place to start would be kind of with the widest lens to begin with. A sketch of the argument of *Strangers in Their Own Land* for people who haven't read it.

Arlie Hochschild: I spent five years getting to know people in what turns out to be one of the heartland of not only the Tea Party, leaders in the Tea Party, but Donald Trump enthusiasts, so this is in Louisiana. Which is not just the South, which generally is very red region, but the Super South and not only that, but I was focusing on a region that is organized around the petrochemical industry. I was interviewing and getting to know people who were involved in that industry who were white, who were older, who many were extremely religious and so that's about 100 of them, but I focused in. I asked where they were born, what school they went to, we went to the schoolhouse, you know, what road? Did you sit in? Did you like school? Who's your favorite teacher? Where your kin buried, were any of them in the Civil War? No, because you're Cajuns and you were in swampland, avoiding war? OK, so, in the course of this journey I heard a lot and the act of emotional labor for me as a as a researcher would turn my own alarm system off. Really just taking what I'm hearing, I permit myself to get very curious and interested in what I was hearing. What that added up to was not just a bunch of opinions, but a sense of the deepest feelings that the people I came to know felt. And what I did was make up a story metaphor. It's like a dream that I felt expressed those. And then I went back to them. What do you think is this – would you change it? Is there a different one? Does it really speak to you or just a little bit? And I found out it really spoke to them. People said, “you've read my mind! I live your metaphor.” And some people would correct it. But here was the deep story then. Imagine yourself you're a 55-year-old white man and you're waiting in line. Your feet are forward and you're facing, as in a pilgrimage, the American Dream – it's at the top of the hill and you're not at the back of the line, you're not at the front, you feel you're somewhere in the middle.

John Plotz: I love your thoughts about the genealogy from a class-based model of political parties. Like if we think about the Democrats traditionally as a party of the working class versus the Republicans as a party, let's say of bankers or property owners, that's so different from the deep story you're telling here, like class—you know the word class doesn't even enter into that deep story, right? So, what are your thoughts about that? Is it sort of more like oh the whole conception of class is gone? Or do you see a sort of genealogical transformation where the logic of class-based politics is still here but you know the markers have changed, you know, is it a completely brave new world or can we see what the connection is?

Arlie Hochschild: Here's what makes sense to me, and I would give primacy to therefore, a story that begins like this: In the 1970s, we saw the beginning of a real thrust toward capital flight, basically globalization, so that companies said, as William Grieder argues, in *One World, Ready or Not*, that it untied its feet to the United States and sought cheaper labor pools around the world. And it therefore, invested elsewhere, divested from American workers so that the 1950s-60s deal of, you know, Henry Ford, "Look, I'll give you a well-paid job because I want you to have the money to buy what I have to, and other capitalists, have to sell". Our interests are blind in this regard that... the flight of capital is a big, big deal and I attach a series of social logics to that fact. So, we're looking at intended consequences and unintended consequences. The first consequence, is, that capitalism is a bunch of companies that compete with each other and if you're moving offshore to cheaper labor and from the North to the South of the US, from the South to Mexico, from Mexico to China. If one company is doing it, the other has to, to stay competitive. So, it's a system and within it there's built in competition, so it has a momentum. But the flight of capital has weakened some institutions and strengthened others. So, we're talking about primary resulting effects of that flight and who it's weakened—and this has been argued by Bob Kuttner in *Everything for Sale*,

it's a wonderful book—what it's weakened are the two institutions that used to be a brake on capitalism, one is labor unions (totally undercut) and the other is the federal government itself. It lost power too, so the two brakes on capitalism are weakened, they haven't gone away, but they're weakened and that sets off a chain of secondary effects, both for the government and for labor unions.

John Plotz: The whole story you're telling here is a story of people creating ideological responses to these big structural shifts and that really ties into this is--I won't say it's a fight that Adaner and I have been having--but a discussion we've been having about the relationship between those mental gymnastics and the kind of structural material changes that we see. You know that you're describing. The accumulation of wealth, the weakening of the unions, and I guess, a way to phrase this is the deep story you're telling in your book is, do you see it as, mainly post facto mental gymnastics? In other words, this is the story that people have to tell themselves to account for a structure that willy-nilly is doing this to them, or is the mental gymnastics itself also an agent of change? Like, do the ideas that people have about what's happening to them themselves produce economic and material impacts, or do they just register the fact that those things are happening willy-nilly to people?

Arlie Hochschild: Right, well let me add a point to our understanding of mental gymnastics,

John Plotz: Yeah,

Arlie Hochschild: And that is that actually you don't have to do a lot in order to understand enthusiasm for Donald Trump. For example, I talked to a man who said, "Trump's coming to town," this was before the primary rally in 2020, "and he's so exciting. He's lightning in a jar, lightning in a jar." I said, "Well, tell me about that but how does that? Why?" And his first answer was not mental gymnastics. His first answer was very pragmatic. He said, "He's the only one of the two

parties, of the candidates, that's trying to bring, trying to fulfill my wish," and his wish was having those good old blue collar jobs brought back to American soil. That made complete sense to him. That's the "again," "great again," it's a wish, it's a powerful wish.

Adaner Usmani: What would it have taken for the history of the last 30-40 years to have unfolded differently in your view Arlie? So, because there's one version of the argument, which is, let's call it the more structural version of the argument, which is suggesting, as you're as you so masterfully outlined, there are these broad changes in the nature of American capitalism, which kind of make it rational for someone in the middle of the line to believe the things that they believe and to want the things that they want. But conceivably I hope we'd have to think we, it could have been possible, maybe, and certainly Piketty believes this for someone to come along and tell alternative deep story about the changes in American capitalism. Which might be similar to the kinds of things that you were outlining and point the finger, not at the people who are cutting in line, but point the finger at the fat cats who are taking enormous shares of the GDP and building McMansions and things like this. And so, I feel like one of the questions here has to be: where was that alternative deep story and why wasn't it successful? And maybe to take us to the left, why does it seem to be most successful with those people who are college educated and coastal residents rather than the people that you spoke to? What is, why is our deep story such a failure? I think one of the answers that you potentially might give is the answer that was in your narrative, which was that ultimately it is unions which were responsible for this alternative deep story. And these unions no longer exist. But now we live in a world without unions, like what can be done to traffic a different kind of deep story? Why isn't our deep story more compelling? I guess this is the kind of question, like is there a universe in which this could have gone differently in

which we told a different deep story? Or were we always doomed to live these 30 years?

Arlie Hochschild: Right, wonderful question. I just love this line of questioning. And they're not deep stories or deep questions. I am, I've, two things come to mind about to answer how it could have gone differently. One is a kind of critique, and here I would go back to the idea that the left itself has become a little detached from the blue-collar class. That is, the Democratic Party. And here we see with Thomas Frank, for example, *Listen Liberal*, which is kind of a screed and kind of angry: "Look, you guys have been conservative." Clinton's a Democrat, but he opened the doors to climate change. He locked down the black working-class male, he was conservative, so in a way the party itself became Brahmin and the left was a little bit hung out to dry as a movement so that in a way, the Democratic Party sold the blue-collar class out. It failed. It really failed. It became, you know, there were democratic lobbyists who rolled from their job as representatives into lucrative industry jobs and where were their interests? Were they representing the people? No, in fact – (John Interrupts)

John Plotz: Or can I just jump in with a footnote that this is? I really apologize for interrupting your flow, but the footnote would be that you can see exactly the same process with Tony Blair and the Labour government, exactly analogous to Clinton, and that parallel seems important in terms of thinking about the evidence because those are two pretty different socioeconomic climates, but the pattern of a theoretically left party that actually veered towards the center and arguably governed right repeats itself in both of these big economies, so that's – (Adaner interrupts)

Adaner Usmani: And you know, to make that point even more forcefully, it's kind of, at least in Piketty's view, the story of the entire advanced capitalist world. It's the story of what happened to social democracy, social Democratic parties in Europe as well, right? Which to me is only more

depressing. I was hoping, I was hoping that the second point you were going to make, Arlie, was going to give us – so it's partly what the Democrats did you were saying, but then is there a source also for maybe more optimism or more hope?

Arlie Hochschild: Sure, I see some possibility for substituting for unions. In other words, here I see two other possibilities. One is getting a political movement up and of people who are in alliance with locally based blue-collar workers.

John Plotz: Do you see hope elsewhere in the world for that kind of strategy that you're describing, that could potentially work in America as well? Yeah.

Arlie Hochschild: Well, I don't have an answer to that. I've been pretty limited on this thing, but it's a great question to ask, and let's keep it there. But going back to the US. An interesting thing happened to me. The telephone rang and at the other end was a Democratic congressman named Ro Khanna. California, he represents Silicon Valley, and he says, "Look half my constituencies are immigrants from other, you know, other countries. I represent Facebook and Microsoft, yeah, a lot of Silicon Valley," and he said, "But I made an alliance of with Hal Rogers of Paintsville, Kentucky. They've got all these unemployed coal miners. And, they don't have another job. You're all voting Republican and me, I'm Democrat. Over here we've got jobs, but we outsourced them to Bangalore. Why don't we outsource them to Paintsville? and Hal Rogers said. Yeah, Silicon holler. Let's." I actually wrote an op-ed for the times on this experiment and went to look at the coding training program, which is in Louisville and interviewed some of the transformed lives of blue-collar, desperate lives - people whose lives have been completely transformed, by this internal outsourcing. So that is something that could be built up, it could be a part of a strategy, of a redirection of this whole thing of investing, divesting, invest more.

John Plotz: Well, I was thinking about as you were describing the government and the unions as the two sectors that have suffered the most. I was wondering about this new push towards a global minimum tax as potentially being something that can boost both of those sectors since unions need people to be doing jobs domestically in order to have a base to (Adaner interrupts)

Adaner Usmani: Well, but I think, I mean, not to sound a dour note, I think here, though, we run into the problem that I think Piketty runs into as well, because Piketty's book is also full of these ambitious Social Democratic global proposals. The trouble is, I think if, Arlie, we take your narrative to be correct, which I think I was very compelled by about the structural transformations of American capitalism. There's a problem of power, I think, lurking in the background, which is: how do you force companies which are so powerful (as your book demonstrates, as you were saying) how do you force companies without any kind of social force like unions or something like this? How do you force them to bend to the vision of a Social Democratic utopia, one in which they'd be paying higher taxes and redistributing? I just think you can't so many of these proposals. I worry try and try to do an end run around the big problem of power which makes me a little, not pessimistic, but just a little, you know, thinking that maybe we need to, maybe there's a step that we're missing. Which is first we have to think about before we think about proposals, but I think we also need to think about how are we going to build up the kind of Social Force, the kind of counter power that can allow us to push these sorts of policies.

Arlie Hochschild: Right?

John Plotz: Chicken meet egg.

(laughter)

Arlie Hochschild: Yeah, you know, excellent point, excellent stone in the road we need to focus on but power also goes with a search for legitimacy. And I think you can erode power by eroding the legitimacy of it.

John Plotz: I really appreciate you using the word legitimacy in that context. I think that's a word that Adaner and I haven't used and we need to think it through more because it's both speaks to the kind of empathetic and emotional orientation, that is, people have to feel buy-in, but it has a kind of structural meaning too, like, you have legitimacy as a party when you speak to or for your constituents, but you also have to have, like, you also have to connect to them as well, and I think legitimacy speaks to that way that you're both solving structural material questions, and you're also figuring out what is the common language we have.

Arlie Hochschild: The power of Donald Trump is centrally the stealing of legitimacy. I mean, legitimacy isn't a minor afterthought here. That is his power, that is, he, he's taken it to the grassroots. You've lost you guys; Hillary is just talking about oh the American dream. You can get there just work hard. No, she's wrong, you've lost something, something has been stolen. That's there now. And different narratives based on loss and stealing. He has won legitimacy. Now he doesn't have power, but he does have legitimacy and that's his lightning in a jar. So, we're wrong to think, oh that's the same thing. Oh, that's soft cultural stuff. Well, no, you know. That's not true at all. Trump's hugely powerful in just this way.

John Plotz: I really hear that, but then the question might become can you make the claim of illegitimacy, which is fundamentally what he founds his power on, the basis of your legitimacy? Like in other words, is that a sustainable kind of legitimacy?

Arlie Hochschild: I worry honestly, I think, we're in a fight, really. It's very, it's, I don't think he's going to fade, you know? I don't think

he's going to fade. He's a charismatic leader. If we need Max favor of the characteristics of charismatics you have, you are the source of all knowledge yourself. It's 1,2,3,4. All the characteristics we see in Trump. And if it weren't him, another. We now know the lightning in the jar – (John interrupts)

John Plotz: The playbook, yeah?

Arlie Hochschild: That lightning has to do with emotional (here's where the sociology of emotions comes in) it's fundamental to the building or dismantling of legitimacy, which is not incidental to power. So, if we think of power as, in some denuded way, we're barking up the wrong tree. I think what we have to understand, theorize, focus on, get is how you get somebody's emotions. That's why I, this, you know, am still now trying to look at that lightning in the jar because it, his holds the Republican vote. That's power, right? Yeah, legitimacy and power are not separable. And that's what's holding all these Republicans to the votes they are taking.

Adaner Usmani: I just wanted to ask you what you thought about the possibility that when you say that we're in a fight and we need in some ways, I think, to go back to the terms of your argument, what you're saying we need is an alternative, compelling deep story to tell that speaks to people, emotions. But I wonder whether, you know, so, to take it to the efforts that you were describing to link high schoolers from different areas and to really breakdown the empathy wall in the terms of argument. I wonder whether what is maybe missing, but could easily be added, is deep story and maybe this is the version of the liberal deep story that you were saying that we work with? But I wonder whether, you know, if we just think of the characters of the deep story, that the right tells which is the people who've been waiting in line, the line cutters, the federal government. You know, what it seems to me easy to add to that deep story (and maybe render in kind of a left way) is to say yes you have been waiting in line for a long time, and yes you are

competing with certain people who are also working class not doing very well themselves for the crumbs of the American dream, but there is this fraction of elites who are making off incredibly well (as you were saying yourself over the last 30-40 years). And so maybe what, you know, maybe it's a case of trying to unite those two characters against someone else. Maybe that's where the emotion and the anger can come from. 'Cause I just worry you can't have a deep story without a certain enemy or a certain kind of anger or something – a focus, a focus of your, yeah, focus. I mean, and then I was wondering whether you've tried that kind of deep story with your interlocutors, with the people that you interviewed and whether with any success?

Arlie Hochschild: I haven't no, but tell you what, here are many clues that you're really right and one (and in a sec I'm gonna have to get off too) but one is that I often heard when about Bernie Sanders, oh, Bernie Sanders, he's a socialist and we're not socialist. But Uncle Bernie. Uncle Bernie. And they love him. So why do they love him? There is a legitimacy to him. There is an honor to him. They, OK, he's not speaking, he doesn't have all the tunes on the piano of this ideological piano that can be heard by them, but he has major chords. Major chords, they're already there, but they're untapped by the Brahmins, but they are there by Bernie Sanders himself, so I'm hopeful.

Adaner Usmani: Yeah, well I like that that answer. Yeah, I love that metaphor of the piano.

John Plotz: Wow, well, so on that musical metaphor we'll just say thank you so much, Arlie. This is great.

Arlie Hochschild: Really fun, great questions! I love the project.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's great and I'm just going to say real quick that Recall this Book is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing by Naomi Cohen. Website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English

department. Adaner and I are really eager to hear your comments, criticisms and thoughts on today's discussion and on the notion of the Brahmin left generally. And we will be back in a couple of weeks with a wrap-up episode where we can discuss all three of our conversations. So please write a review or rate us on iTunes or stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts, and if you enjoyed today's show, please check out our earlier Brahmin Left conversations with Matt Karp and Jan Werner Mueller. You might also check out our conversation with David Cunningham on White Suprematism and the FBI and our conversation with Piketti himself on proprietarian ideologies. So, from all of us here at Recall this Book, thank you so much, Arlie, and thank you all for listening.