11 Sensemaking, Empathy, and Democracy

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11.1 The Great Paradox

In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild introduces readers to a man called Mike Schaff, who exemplifies what she describes as the Great Paradox.[1] Schaff was a victim of a vast environmental disaster in Louisiana, the appearance of a sinkhole that stretched over thirty-seven acres and devoured everything in its wake. A lightly regulated drilling company was to blame. Still, Schaff "hailed government deregulation of all sorts, as well as drastic cuts in government spending – including that for environmental protection" (2018: 5). This is the essence of the Great Paradox: "great pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters" (2018: 21). How could victims of environmental pollution *not* favor ecological protection? How can the poor oppose more government help for the poor? How can a state that was "one of the most vulnerable to volatile weather be a center of climate denial" (2018: 23)? Hochschild spent years in Louisiana, listening to people like Schaff and empathizing with them in search of answers.

From Hochschild's liberal standpoint, and presumably that of many of her readers, the Great Paradox is also a great surprise. Her project is, therefore, an exercise in what others have called *sensemaking*, "the making of sense" (Weick 1995: 4).[2] We find efforts at sensemaking "whenever the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005: 414). Schaff's is one such world. One would expect victims of environmental disasters resulting from weak environmental regulation to favor stronger regulation. This is not what Hochschild found. How is this to be explained? What would a satisfactory explanation look like? Is it necessary to empathize with people like Schaff to understand them? These are among the questions to be addressed below.

Many of Hochschild's subjects voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. Liberals, surprised by his victory, tried to explain it and work out what it meant. This was another exercise in sensemaking. In these cases, there is an event E, and the objective is to make sense of E after the event. Sensemaking is retrospective.[3] It is not about predicting

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the future but understanding the past. It is not confined to making sense of *events*, as making sense of an event like Trump's win requires one to make sense of the *attitudes* that led many who would not benefit economically from a Trump presidency to vote for him. Because sensemaking is a response to a surprise, and what is surprising to one person might not be surprising to another, there may be different views about when sensemaking is called for. Conservatives who expected Trump to win and people like Schaff to vote for him saw no need for sensemaking. Completely different events and different attitudes elicit their sensemaking.

Hochschild sees empathy as the key to sensemaking. Explaining the Great Paradox requires understanding "how life *feels* to people on the right – that is, the emotion that underlies politics" (2018: xi). To understand people on the right, she had to imagine herself in their shoes, that is, to empathize. To "know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes," it is necessary to "cross the empathy wall" (2018: 5). The ultimate objective was not just to better understand her subjects but to see if it was possible to "make common cause on some issues" (2018: xiii). Empathy, as Hochschild understands it, is an antidote to polarization. Empathetic understanding of other people is also seen as vital for democracy.[4] However, there are many different accounts of empathy.[5] On one view, it is "the activity of imaginatively adopting another person's perspective in a way that somehow engages the emotions of the one doing the imaginative work" (Bailey 2022: 52). Others represent it as a bloodless exercise in reading the mind of another. The former is sometimes called "emotional empathy," while the latter is described as "cognitive empathy."[6]

It is open to question whether emotional empathy is necessary for sensemaking. On the face of it, it is possible to understand why Hochschild's subjects see the world as they do without imaginatively adopting their perspective in Bailey's sense. For example, Marxists may regard the Great Paradox as illustrating the power of ideology or as a compelling illustration of the phenomenon of false consciousness, a mode of consciousness that misrepresents socio-economic reality while also being determined by that reality.[7] This socio-structural explanation of the Great Paradox does not require emotional empathy with people like Mike Schaff. Indeed, for all her talk of empathy, it is not obvious that Hochschild's insights result from emotional empathy with her subjects.[8]

What explains the appeal of the idea that empathy is required for sensemaking and the key to a healthy democracy? Aside from the hope that emotional empathy might be an antidote to polarization, there is also the suggestion that the objective of sensemaking is *personal understanding* and that personal understanding requires empathy. On this view, sensemaking involves understanding people in a distinctive manner. Specifically, it involves relating to other people as individuals and engaging with their subjectivity. Because socio-structural responses to the Great Paradox fail to do this, they do not deliver personal understanding or Verstehen,

as it is sometimes called, of individuals like Schaff. However, it is unclear that a particular form of empathetic personal understanding is required to resolve the Great Paradox. The fact that some victims of pollution are against greater regulation of polluters reflects their ideology, but we do not need empathy to understand their ideologies or the emotions to which they give rise. We have their words and deeds to go on.

The discussion below will proceed as follow: Section 11.2 will argue that emotional empathy has little to contribute to sensemaking in the political domain. Others have written about the barriers to emotional empathy in general, but the political realm is one in which these barriers are especially challenging to overcome. It is easy to exaggerate the role of empathy in listening exercises such as Hochschild's. On the face of it, it is possible to listen to someone without empathizing with them. Section 11.3 will criticize arguments for the view that empathy is vital for democracy. Section 11.4 will discuss the relative merits of empathy and socio-structural approaches to political understanding. A case will be made for downplaying the role of empathy and avoiding empathy fetishism. There are problems with the notion of false consciousness, but it remains illuminating when explaining the Great Paradox.

11.2 Sensemaking and Empathy

We can understand the notion of empathy in many different ways. It will be understood here as made up of two components identified by Olivia Bailey. First, empathizing is a form of imaginative perspective-taking: it "necessarily involves using one's imagination to 'transport' oneself, such that one considers the other's situation as though one were occupying the other's position. So, for instance, when we try to imagine how things are for a recent widower empathetically, we might imagine having just lost a spouse or other loved one" (2022: 52). The second feature of empathy is that it is *emotionally charged* imaginative perspective-taking:

> In certain critical respects, the emotional experience of the one who empathizes closely resembles the emotional experience of the target of empathy. An admittedly metaphorical but apt way of thinking about how the emotions are implicated in empathy is to conceive of the empathizer as encountering their imaginative recreation of the other's situation through the same emotional lens as the target of empathy. The widower apprehends his loss through the lens of grief. We as the widower's empathizers also allow our thoughts to be directed in ways characteristic of grief. The isomorphism between this empathetic experience and the original grief of the widower strongly recommends the conclusion that when we empathize, we do not merely imagine feeling some emotion. Instead, we do not merely imagine *that* we are feeling some emotion.
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> (Bailey 2022: 53)

The two components of empathy are separable. Emotionally charged perspective-taking is emotional empathy. Affectless perspective-taking is cognitive empathy.[9] It is quite possible to imagine being in the shoes of a recently bereaved widower and understand the grief that that position entails without experiencing the same type of emotion as the widower. In these cases, the widower's emotion is intelligible but not mirrored by the empathizer.

Emotionally charged perspective-taking is essential in many personal relationships, including relationships with close friends and family. Empathizing with a person is a way of engaging with them emotionally. This is much easier to achieve with people with whom one has a close personal relationship than with casual acquaintances or total strangers. Emotional empathy is psychologically demanding, and there are psychological limits to the number of people with whom a person can empathize.[10] Empathizing with someone means engaging with their subjectivity. In the widower's case, one engages with the subjectivity of a unique individual rather than with recently bereaved widowers in general. As Gregory Currie puts it, "we think of empathy as an intimate, feeling-based understanding of another's inner life" (2011: 82). A person without such an understanding of anyone else's inner life is seriously impoverished. A person who has, or even claims to have, a feeling-based understanding of the inner lives of scores of people is a freak or a charlatan.

What is the role of emotional empathy in political sensemaking? When the current state of political reality is different from its expected state, for example, when someone like Trump is elected President, there is sensemaking to be done. Thus, one might ask how so many white working-class voters could come out in favor of such an unlikely candidate. This is a question for political science, sociology, and other disciplines but the accounts that these disciplines offer are impersonal. They are not, and cannot be, based on emotionally charged perspective-taking or a feeling-based understanding of the inner lives of millions. It is tempting to think this difficulty can be circumvented by a selective emotional engagement with representative citizens whose perspectives can be generalized. This is a way to think about Hochschild's investigation. She formed relationships, even friendships, with individuals in Louisiana who exemplified the Great Paradox. By getting into these individuals' heads, she extracted valuable insights about what would otherwise be an extremely puzzling phenomenon. On reflection, however, it is unclear that she needed emotional empathy; she could have arrived at the same conclusions without empathy for her interlocutors.

One of her interlocutors spoke of her aversion to regulation and learning to live without it. She wanted clean air and water, but "sometimes you had to do without what you wanted. You couldn't have both the oil industry *and* clean lakes, she thought, and if you had to choose, you had

to choose oil" (2018: 177). You had to choose oil for economic and political reasons. Regulation was seen as being at odds with capitalism and the American Dream, and several of Hochschild's subjects were explicit in their commitment to both. One told her that she was "so for capitalism and free enterprise" and that the "environmentalists want to stop the American Dream to protect the endangered toad" (2018: 122). Regulation puts power in the hands of the federal government, but "the federal government was taking money from the workers and giving it to the idle. It was taking from people of good character and giving to people of bad character" (2018: 144). It has no business regulating people's lives, especially if climate change, to which environmental regulation is supposed to be a response, is a "bunch of hooey" (2018: 48).

It is difficult to imagine a more self-consciously ideological explanation of the Great Paradox. Hochschild's subjects are victims of pollution who are resistant to regulating polluters because doing so would conflict with their ideological commitments. The latter are matters of principle; they see pollution as a price worth paying for capitalism and the American Dream. In other words, Hochschild's subjects value keeping the government out of their affairs more than they value clean air and water. When ideologically committed victims of pollution oppose greater regulation of polluters, they are simply being ideologically consistent.

Furthermore, there is no need for empathy to grasp their ideological commitments and values, and their implications for environmental regulation. It is enough to listen to what they say about their reasons and motives. No imaginative adoption of their perspective is required. One simply needs to take them at their word, as Hochschild does.

Many questions remain unanswered. One might wonder why Hochschild's subjects are so hostile to the federal government and why their values are as they are. When they talk about the federal government giving money to people of bad character, who do they have in mind? What is the role of race in their thinking about these matters? People's reasons for their political beliefs and preferences may be rationalizations rather than their actual motives. Empathizing with them will not reveal whether they are rationalizing or speaking in code when they object to welfare payments going to people of bad character.[11] If one is mystified by another person's political beliefs and tries to make sense of them by empathy, one is unlikely to succeed. Fully empathizing with someone else means envisaging oneself in their situation with *their* beliefs and other psychological characteristics rather than one's own. Thus, the fact that one is mystified by their beliefs might make it impossible for one fully to empathize with them. Tasked with empathizing with a racist or someone else with alien values, one may have no idea how to begin.[12]

However, this is not the end of the story. Hochschild is not merely concerned with her subjects' political *beliefs* but with "how life *feels* to people on the right" (2018: xi). Perhaps the point at which empathy comes into its

own concerning the Great Paradox is the point at which, to understand her subjects, she needs to understand their *emotions*. She sees herself as trying to understand "the hopes, fear, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety" (2018: 135) in the lives of those she talked with. Their emotions include resentment about the liberal perception of people like them as backward, racist, sexist, homophobic, and overweight. This is one factor that makes them feel like strangers in their own land. Another source of resentment is the feeling of being held back while immigrants, black people, and refugees cut in line ahead of them with the federal government's help. Without emotional empathy, how can their emotions make sense to an outsider?

In Bailey's example, empathizing with the widower's grief by imagining the loss of a loved one presents no great challenge for anyone capable of experiencing the normal range of human emotions. The *imagined* loss of a loved one, like the actual loss of a loved one, "may be felt as a tightness in the throat or hollowness in the stomach" (2022: 53). This isomorphism between the empathetic experience and the grief of the widower is the basis of the notion that when we empathize, we do not merely imagine that we are feeling some emotion but *experience* it. Empathizing with Hochschild's subjects is a different matter. One might be incapable of viewing help for minorities through the lens of resentment if one can only see such support in a positive light. Someone repelled by racism cannot experience resentment about federal government help for people of bad character if they suspect that "person of bad character" is a covert racial epithet. Isomorphism between the putative empathetic experience and the original resentment of Hochschild's subjects might be unattainable because of a fundamental difference in political outlook and values. The difficulty is that the emotions in these cases are *political* emotions and that empathizing with someone else's political emotions requires what might be called *political* empathy rather than plain human sympathy.[13] Unlike the widower's grief, political emotions are ones whose source is ideological and take as their object abstract matters of political principle, such as the relative merits of capitalism and regulation. Empathizing with such emotions requires the imaginative adoption of the *political* perspective that underpins them, but such political empathy may prove impossible for those who find the perspective in question wrong-headed and repellent.[14]

For example, a committed environmentalist might be able to understand, in the abstract, why someone who is in love with free market capitalism would resent government regulation of the environment. Still, it would be unsurprising that the environmentalist cannot *feel* any such emotion. Their emotional experience cannot resemble that of the person who resents environmentalists because they are killing the American Dream to save the toad. However, the environmentalist's lack of empathy for Hochschild's subjects need not prevent them from understanding

the latter's perspective on regulation. Since their perspective flows from their ideological commitments, how they feel about environmental regulation and the federal government is not a mystery. It is not empathy but *dialogue* that reveals the political outlook of Hochschild's subjects and removes any sense that their opposition to environmental legislation is paradoxical. It is possible to make sense of them without feeling what they feel, even if some form of cognitive empathy is required.[15]

Knowing how someone feels about something by inference from their politics is different from knowing how they feel by *feeling* what they feel. Environmentalists may lack an intimate, feeling-based understanding of the inner lives of Hochschild's subjects. In this sense, they lack an essential form of personal understanding of these subjects, but no such understanding is required for political sensemaking. Unsurprisingly, the latter requires political rather than personal understanding. There is more about the distinction between political and personal understanding in Section 11.4, but one obvious reason for not making political understanding depend on personal understanding is that it is only possible to have a unique understanding of, or emotional empathy with, people one knows personally and knows well. The number of such people is tiny when compared to the number of people of whom one seeks, and perhaps achieves, political understanding. This makes it unlikely that personal understanding is the key to political understanding.

On the final page of her book, Hochschild speaks of the need to find new ways to "get acquainted across our differences" (2018: 266).[16] She recommends, among other things, high school domestic exchange programs for which "students could prepare by learning active listening and epistemology" (2018: 266) as well as history and civics. This reference to active listening reveals more about Hochschild's methodology than talk of empathy. Active listening is attentive, compassionate, unhurried, nonjudgmental, and unaggressive. Active listeners use respectful questioning and non-verbal cues to demonstrate their interest in what the speaker is saying. They do not interrupt and they verify their understanding through paraphrasing the speaker's message.

This is a fair summary of how Hochschild proceeds. Her emphasis on the "deep story" of her interlocutors is particularly compelling. Their deep story focuses on relationships between social groups in America. Like any conscientious active listener, Hochschild reconstructs her subjects' deep stories and tests them "to see if they thought it fit their experiences" (2018: 135). They did. According to one of her subjects, she had succeeded in reading his mind. Active listening is sometimes described as empathetic, but this sense of "empathy" has little to do with emotionally charged perspective-taking. Political sensemaking requires one to be a good active listener but does not require the imaginative adoption of the speaker's perspective. When it comes to active listening and sensemaking, we should resist the temptation to exaggerate the role of empathy.

11.3 Empathy and Democracy

Why would anyone think that empathy is vital for democracy? Two arguments in favor of this view are the *argument from democratic legitimacy* and the *argument from polarization*. Jason Stanley proposes a version of the first argument in *How Propaganda Works*.[17] It is based on Du Bois's account of the political system of the American South during the period after the Civil War.[18] According to Du Bois, as Stanley reads him, the South's laws lacked democratic legitimacy for two reasons. The obvious one is that Blacks were not allowed to participate in the making of laws that applied to them. A less apparent reason is that "those who created the laws did not have *empathy* for some of those subject to them, namely, their Black fellow citizens" (2015: 101). This meant that "the laws were crafted in such a way that did not reflect *respect* for the viewpoints of Black citizens" (2015: 101). Lacking respect, the laws also lacked democratic legitimacy.

Stanley understands empathy as *cognitive* empathy, the capacity to imagine oneself "as *someone* in the situation of the other" (2015: 102). This mental capacity "underlies the capacity to give the perspectives of our fellow citizens equal weight" (ibid.). By implication, it is a precondition of democratic legitimacy. A democratic culture is "one in which everyone has a say in the policies and laws that apply to them" (2015: 16). It is also one in which, when proposing a policy, policymakers "imagine *being* someone subject to that policy" (2015: 102). The "someone" in this formulation implies an impartial stance. This is different from Bailey's conception of empathy since it does not involve imagining oneself in the shoes of a *specific* other and is not a piece of emotionally charged perspective-taking. Nevertheless, it is empathy as Stanley understands it.

Stanley's argument fails. Democratic legitimacy requires that policymakers appreciate the impact of their policies on their fellow citizens, especially their negative impact on specific groups of citizens. It also requires that policymakers are not indifferent to such effects and properly consider them in formulating their proposals. However, as Stanley notes, "to gain an appreciation of the fact that others would be negatively affected by a policy I support, I do not need to be able to occupy their perspective, even in an impartial manner" (2015: 103).[19] For example, a childless minister might be incapable of imagining being someone with a child, but this does not prevent them from appreciating the impact on low-income families with children of a policy to reduce levels of child support.

Much depends on what counts as "appreciating" the fact that others would be negatively impacted by a policy one supports. It might seem that without empathy, the childless minister can only have an intellectual appreciation of what his policy means for people with children rather than a "real" appreciation. The minister might understand that some

people will end up worse off because of his policies but also be indifferent. Empathizing with those affected makes it harder not to care. Indeed, there is the view that empathy is "itself a way of caring" (Bailey 2022: 51). Furthermore, the form of empathy that is most likely to make vivid the impact of a policy to cut child support is not the relatively bloodless and impartial empathy that Stanley describes but full-blown emotional empathy that enables the minister to feel the economic pain of those affected by his policies.

The picture of a government minister who is indifferent to the impact of his policies on sections of the population is not attractive, and it is not implausible that policies that display such indifference lack democratic legitimacy. However, the necessary remedy is not empathy. Even if empathizing with affected groups is not feasible, as it might not be, it is reasonable to expect lawmakers to show compassion for people affected by their decisions and to be willing to listen to them. As Bloom points out, compassion and empathy are not the same things. Compassion is "simply caring for people, wanting them to thrive" (2018: 50). It is "more diffuse than empathy" (2018: 40) and does require one to mirror anyone else's feelings: "it is weird to talk about having empathy for the millions of victims of malaria, say, but perfectly normal to say that you are concerned about them or feel compassion for them" (2018: 40–41). Compassion, rather than empathy, is the antidote to indifference.

Listening matters because, in a democracy, people who will be affected by a law or policy deserve a hearing. This was Du Bois's point about the South. As he puts it: "it is pitiable that frantic efforts must be made at critical times to get lawmakers in some States even to listen to the respectful presentation of the black man's side of a current controversy" (1994: 89). The listening that is at issue here is active. Active listeners *engage* with the arguments presented to them. They take them, and the people who put forward these arguments, seriously rather than dismissively. However, as argued above, active listening does not require empathy. The active listener tries to make sense of opposing points of view, especially when they are surprised by them. They are, in this sense, engaged in sensemaking. It is compassionate sensemaking on the part of policymakers rather than empathy that is needed for democratic legitimacy.

The argument from polarization has a different take on the link between democracy and empathy. The idea is that excessive polarization threatens democracy and that the antidote is empathy. The notion that polarization is a threat to democracy is a familiar one. In polarized societies, neither side in political disputes sees their political opponents' views as legitimate. Political adversaries "often regard each other as immoral, stupid, lazy, and even threats to each other's way of life" (Hannon 2020: 597). As people become more polarized, they become more antagonistic and less willing to compromise. Eventually, democratic institutions such as elections and an independent judiciary are threatened as the process

accelerates. Polarization in the US-led Donald Trump's supporters to use force to attempt to overturn the result of the 2020 Presidential election. In the United Kingdom, bitter arguments about Brexit led some sections of the British press to employ the Nazi tactic of representing uncompliant judges as the enemy within. This sort of behavior is no basis for a healthy democracy.

In response to this concern, Hannon outlines a version of deliberative democracy that is "partly grounded in *empathetic understanding*" (2020: 592). Deliberative democrats take the exchange of reasons for preferring specific outcomes or believing certain facts to be central to decision-making. The exchange of reasons is only possible if people understand each other, and the relevant form of understanding is what Hannon calls "empathetic understanding" (2020: 597). This requires a willingness to listen to other people, including one's political adversaries. More than this, "it requires the ability to 'take up' another person's perspective. We must be able to see the other person's point of view" (2020: 598). We must be able to "reenact or imitate the thought processes of others" (2020: 598). Only if we do that are we likely to find common ground with our fellow citizens and a basis for compromise. That is why democracies should "encourage citizens to understand others empathetically" (2020: 602). Democracies that fail to do this risk falling apart under the pressure of polarization.

This argument suffers from some of the same defects as those put forward by Stanley and Hochschild. One theme that unifies these arguments is the transition from calls for people to *listen* to their political adversaries to calls for people to *empathize* with their adversaries. It is possible to listen without empathizing, and empathy is in many cases neither necessary nor possible. As noted above, it is difficult to empathize with people whose views are repellent, but this does not mean that it is not possible to understand their views. Understanding does not have to be empathetic. For example, many people who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021 believed that the 2020 election had been stolen and had a story about how the so-called steal had happened. It is perfectly straightforward to listen to these views and understand them without empathizing with them, or the people whose views they are. Empathizing with the rioters requires a sympathetic identification that many would find impossible and unnecessary. Sympathetic identification with a recently bereaved widower is one thing. Sympathetic identification with the Capitol rioters is another.

Its emphasis on the need for mutual understanding, and the role of empathy in securing such understanding, raises another question about the argument from polarization: how far is political polarization the result of a lack of understanding? Liberals in America understood the motives and beliefs of the Capitol rioters only too well. There was no lack of understanding to be remedied by empathy. The problem was that there were deep and irreconcilable differences between the two sides. As Amos

Oz observes concerning the Israeli/Palestinian dispute, "some conflicts are real" and "much worse than a misunderstanding" (2012: 8). Even if it were possible for the Capitol rioters to use their imagination to take up the perspective of their liberal critics, it is wishful thinking to suppose that this would have made them more likely to arrive at a compromise with them. In the same way, liberals who empathize with rioters enough to see their point of view may feel more rather than less hostile to them due to this exercise. Empathic understanding could end up exacerbating polarization.[20]

It might seem that the position at which we have arrived is an uncomfortable one. On the one hand, polarization has been represented as a threat to democracy. On the other hand, many democracies are becoming more polarized. How, in that case, is democracy in these countries possible? How is democracy in America possible? Three responses suggest themselves. The first is to question the idea that polarization is incompatible with democracy. The second is to accept this idea but argue that the degree of polarization in America has not yet reached a critical level and is still compatible with democracy. The third would be to question the assumption that countries like America are democracies. Thus, one might agree with Stanley that America is a democracy in name only and that the language of democracy is used to mask a thoroughly undemocratic reality.[21] The extent of polarization is not the only basis for this view. A democratic culture is one in which all citizens have an equal say in the policies and laws that apply to them. It would be difficult to argue that this is true in a country like America, where voter suppression is rife, and a person's wealth determines access to political power. These are problems to which empathy is not the solution.

11.4 Political Understanding

In his *General Psychopathology*, Karl Jaspers distinguishes between explanation and understanding. By *explanation*, he means causal explanation: "We find by repeated experience that a number of phenomena are regularly linked together, and on this basis *we explain causally*" (1997: 301). Based on the observation of events, experiments, and the collection of examples, "we attempt to formulate *rules*. At a higher level, we establish *laws*, and in physics and chemistry, we have to a certain extent reached the ideal, which is the expression of causal laws in mathematical equations" (1997: 302). *Understanding* is different since it pertains to what Jaspers calls "meaningful psychic connections" (1997: 301). In this context, "psychic" means "psychological." Understanding is personal. When we attempt to understand another person, we immerse ourselves in their psychology and try to "*understand genetically by empathy* how one psychic event emerges from another" (1997: 301). For example, we understand by empathy, rather than by experiment, that "attacked

people become angry and spring to the defense, cheated persons grow suspicious" (1997: 302).

Jaspers subscribes to a form of what Christoph Hoerl calls *epistemic particularism* about understanding.[22] This is the view that understanding "is achieved (if it is achieved) directly upon confrontation with a particular case" (Hoerl 2013: 108). Understanding "is not achieved by bringing certain facts under general laws established through repeated observation" (2013: 108). The role of understanding is to make something "visible to our experience" (Jaspers 1997: 312). It can only play this role "because it deals specifically with connections between elements of a person's *conscious* life" (2013: 109). It is possible to immerse oneself in another person's psychic situation because "there is *something it is like* to be in that situation" (2013: 109). Thus, understanding is particularist, it is directed at the mental life of another person, and it engages with the subjectivity of the other by empathy rather than through the application of general laws.

Given the distinction between explanation and understanding, one way to approach the Great Paradox is to look for an *explanation*. This is the approach of theorists who view the paradox through the lens of false consciousness, a mode of consciousness that misrepresents socio-economic reality while also being determined by that reality. In capitalist societies, the socio-economic reality that this form of consciousness misrepresents includes the reality that the socio-economic *status quo* serves the political and economic interests of the ruling class but not the working class. For the latter to acquiesce in such a system, they need to misperceive their interests and identify with capitalism and free enterprise.[23] Their identification with capitalism is manifested by, for example, their pro-capitalist ideology. This ideology masks key features of the socio-economic reality by which it is "determined."

Whether or not Hochschild's subjects are "working class," there is little doubt that many people in Louisiana, including some who spoke to her, do not do well economically or socially. According to her data, Louisiana ranked forty-ninth out of fifty states in human development and last in overall health. Only eight out of ten Louisianans have graduated from high school, and only 7 percent have graduate or professional degrees.[24] Yet many of these people describe themselves as "so for capitalism and free enterprise." From a false consciousness perspective, this is a classic case of the disenfranchised and marginalized being blind to their interests. Their blindness is not a mystery since it is explained by a generalization about highly unequal societies: what keeps them on an even keel is their ability to induce large numbers of socially and economically disadvantaged people to believe that the *status quo* works for them. The basis of this generalization is not empathy but a historical observation. Paraphrasing Jaspers rather than Marx, we find by repeated experience that gross inequality and working-class loyalty to the system often go

together. Those who have the least to gain from the established order are among its most enthusiastic defenders. This *explains* the Great Paradox in general terms by referring to the law about how unequal societies work.

Hochschild objects to this explanation because it lacks a complete understanding of the role of emotion in politics:

> Many liberal analysts …. have tended to focus on *economic self-interest*. It was a focus on this that led me …. to carry the Great Paradox like a suitcase on my journey through Louisiana. Why, I'd repeatedly asked myself, with so many problems, was there so much disdain for federal money to alleviate them? These were questions that spoke heavily to economic self-interest. And 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.
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> (2018: 228)

False consciousness explanations suppose that people who do not act in accordance with their own economic interests must be misperceiving them. However, someone can see clearly that taxes to fund higher welfare payments would be economically beneficial to them personally and still be against this policy because they hate big government or resent welfare payments going to the idle and undeserving.[25] Such a person does not fail to grasp their economic interests. It is just that other things matter to them more. To understand what those other things are and why they matter to them, we need to understand their emotions and engage with their subjectivity as individuals rather than resort to a generalization about unequal societies. Political understanding, an understanding of people's political choices, is ultimately a form of personal understanding. On this account, the challenge is to *understand* the Great Paradox and explain it. To understand it, we need to understand individual *people*, where the relevant notion of understanding is the one described by Jaspers.

There is something right about this, but it calls for the false consciousness approach to the Great Paradox to be modified rather than abandoned. It is undoubtedly a mistake to suppose that people who do not benefit economically from capitalism are always unaware of this fact or blind to their economic interests. However, most are not as clear-eyed as Hochschild's ideologically driven subjects, who understand that they must choose between oil interests and clean lakes or between having more money and having low taxes for the rich. As for those who *are* clear-eyed about these matters, it is not enough to point out that they have strong feelings about the size of the government or taxes. The question is: *why* do they feel the way they do? *Why* is their loyalty to the oil industry stronger than their desire for clean lakes or their hatred of the government stronger than their commitment to their financial well-being? These

emotions and preferences express their ideology, but the obvious question is: why do they have such an ideology?

One would not be asking these questions if their political emotions and preferences made perfect sense. These questions are pressing precisely to the extent that, from an "objective" standpoint, the marginalized ought not to care more about the interests of large corporations than about the gradual destruction of the physical environment in which they and their children will be living. By implication, this way of putting things distinguishes a person's *real* interests from their actual preferences or emotions. Large corporations have a real interest in minimal regulation, but Hochschild's subjects do not. Their real interest lies elsewhere. This is not merely an issue of economic self-interest but of overall well-being. Whatever their feelings, it is, *in fact*, worse for people to be living in a highly polluted but unregulated environment than in a regulated but unpolluted environment. If they fail to see this, the most plausible explanation is one in terms of their false consciousness. Similarly, if false consciousness has a socio-structural explanation, so does the Great Paradox.

Liberal critics will almost certainly object to talking about people's "real" interests, as distinct from their preferences.[26] Some may feel that there is no "objective" standpoint from which we can distinguish real interests from actual preferences, but this is a mistake. The issues are far too complex to be satisfactorily dealt with here. Still, one way to allow actual preferences and real interests to come apart is to insist that there is such a thing as the human good or a good life for a human being and that a person's real interests are at least partly a reflection of the human good.[27] Living in an environment that is not dreadfully polluted is part of a good life for a human being. Whether they realize it or not, Hochschild's subjects have a genuine interest in living in such an environment. They are victims of false consciousness if they fail to realize it and care more about protecting oil interests. Their consciousness is not false because they misrepresent socio-economic reality but because their priorities are skewed relative to a plausible vision of the human good.

It is striking how little empathy reveals about these fundamental matters. Empathizing with Hochschild's subjects, or understanding them in Jaspers' sense, will reveal their priorities but not that their priorities are skewed. Confrontation with a particular case might reveal a specific individual's worldview and the sources of that worldview in their life story. Still, it will not connect their worldview with that of others in the same situation. It will not explain how their view comes to be shared by many people in the same social position or the role of socio-structural factors in manufacturing consent to pollution or inequality. The particularist orientation of understanding is attractive on a human level but too narrowly focused to be a practical exercise in sensemaking on a macro level. As noted above, the number of people in whose mental life one can immerse oneself is far lower than the number whose views and preferences need

to be understood. These considerations all point to the need for a more general or generalist approach to the Paradox. In Jaspers' terminology, they point to the need for an *explanation*.

The thesis that the best explanation is one in terms of false consciousness has not been defended here. It has only been put forward as a *potentially* satisfactory explanatory approach to sensemaking. Whether it is actually a satisfactory approach cannot be settled here. However, the shape of the approach is more important for present purposes than its details. In contrast with epistemic particularism, with its emphasis on empathy and confrontation with particular cases, the false consciousness approach to the Great Paradox is based on observation rather than empathy. It is generalist rather than particularist in its orientation. Rather than focusing on individuals, it focuses on groups or classes of people, defined by reference to their social location. These are the basic units of explanation, and the mode of explanation is functional or causal. When people in the same situation have the same perverse preferences, the perversity of their priorities is explained by reference to their function of maintaining the *status quo*.

A response to this line of thinking would be to say that there is no need to choose between empathy and understanding or between false consciousness and emotional empathy as tools for dissolving the Great Paradox. Why can't empathizers do their thing while social scientists analyze the paradox in terms of general laws? The short answer is that there is nothing wrong with the two approaches running in parallel, but there is a deeper issue about the nature of political understanding. Hochschild offers a new model of political understanding, which says that the best way to make sense of the coexistence of significant pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters is to empathize with the emotions of people like Mike Schaff. The attractions of this approach are apparent, but so, now, are its limitations. The political, as distinct from personal, understanding that it delivers is relatively shallow. We should not fetishize empathy when making sense of people's political preferences. Individual psychology is no substitute for social science.

Notes

1. Hochschild (2018).
2. On sensemaking as a response to a surprise, see Louis (1980).
3. The retrospective nature of sensemaking is emphasized in Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005).
4. See Hannon (2020).
5. Coplan lists no fewer than seven mental processes, or states described as empathy. See Coplan (2011): 4.
6. See Bloom (2018: 17) for more on the distinction between cognitive and emotional empathy.
7. See Marx and Engels (1970) and Meyerson (1991) for a valuable account of the Marxist theory of false consciousness.

8. I leave it open whether Hochschild's project or socio-structural explanations of the Great Paradox require cognitive empathy. Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, by "empathy," I mean emotional empathy. Thanks to Hana Samaržija for urging me to be more explicit about this.
9. "In claiming that empathy (in my sense) involves both emotion and perspective-taking, I do not mean to deny that *some* forms of perspective-taking are affectless" (Bailey 2022: 52, n. 6).
10. See Hannon (2020: 604).
11. Could "people of bad character" be a coded racial epithet, like "welfare recipient"? There is more about such epithets in Gilens (1996).
12. One could try to "bracket" one's own beliefs and attitudes, as Hannon recommends (2020: 598), but some attitudes are impossible to bracket without undermining one's identity. As Bailey notes (2022: 52), there is a difference between imagining being in someone else's position with one's character, history, and physical features intact and imagining being in their shoes with *their* character, history, and physical characteristics. I cannot imagine being in the shoes of a virulent racist with *his* character and values. Imagining being in his position with *my* character and values is unlikely to cast much light on the racist's inner life. In this case, it seems that empathy is either impossible or useless.
13. As Martha Nussbaum notes, "all societies are full of emotions" (2013: 1). While some of these emotions have little to do with political principles or public culture, "others are different: they take as their object the nation, the nation's goals, its institutions and leaders, its geography, and one's fellow citizens as fellow inhabitants of a common public space" (2013: 2). These are examples of *political* emotions.
14 As Sharon Krause points out, "there is nothing in perspective-taking, construed as a purely intellectual act, that effectively moves us to think beyond the limits of our personal convictions" (1998: 162). The same goes for emotionally charged perspective-taking.
15. See below on whether even cognitive empathy is required.
16. This is her response to a magazine article by Frank Rich in which he writes that for all Hochschild's "fond acceptance of her new Louisiana pals, and for all her generosity in viewing them as virtually untainted by racism, it's not clear what such noble efforts yielded beyond a book, many happy memories of cultural tourism, and confirmation that nothing will change any time soon. Her Louisianans will keep voting for candidates who will sabotage their health and their children's education; they will not be deterred by an empathic Berkeley visitor, let alone Democratic politicians" (Rich 2017). Rich is right.
17. Stanley (2015, chapter 3).
18. Du Bois (1994).
19. Stanley credits Sharon Krause with this insight. See Krause (1998: 162–165). Another consideration is that it might not be possible "to imaginatively place oneself in the situation of others who have had dramatically different life experiences" (Stanley 2015: 103). See Paul (2015).
20. As Hannon concedes. See Hannon (2020: 599).
21. Stanley (2015: 13).
22. Hoerl (2013).
23. This is one of Meyerson's two dimensions of false consciousness. She describes "twin states of mind" as involving false consciousness: "first, the rationalizations of members of the ruling class, their inaccurate conception

of their motives, and, second, the blindness of the workers to their interests, their identification with the capitalist system …. It is the rulers who benefit from both mistakes" (1991: 8).

24. Hochschild (2018: 9).
25. Naturally, such people do not think of themselves as undeserving. It is only other people who are freeloaders.
26. According to Isaiah Berlin, "it is one thing to say that I know what is good for X, while he himself does not; and even to ignore his wishes for its – and his – sake; and a very different one to say that he has *eo ipso* chosen it" (1969: 133). From a false consciousness perspective, there is no question of Hochschild's subjects somehow choosing stricter environmental regulation, despite their protestations to the contrary. The critical point, which Berlin does not deny, is that people do not always know what is good for them.
27. Inspired by Aristotle, Philippa Foot remarks that "the idea of the human good is deeply problematic" but that "for all the diversities of human life, it is possible to give some quite general account of human necessities, that is, of what is quite generally needed for human good" (Foot 2001: 43). These human necessities include clean air and clean water but, whatever Hochschild's subjects might think, *not* unregulated oil production. The idea of basing an account of false consciousness on an Aristotle-inspired account of the human good deserves more detailed consideration than it can be given here.

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