

# Donald Trump loves conspiracy theories. So do his supporters.

They are a way of life for many of the Louisiana Republicans I met.

By **Arlie Russell Hochschild**

Arlie Russell Hochschild's book, "Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right," is a finalist for the National Book Award.

November 7, 2016 at 3:02 a.m. PST

During five years of research in southwest Louisiana for my book "Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right," I came to know many white, older tea party enthusiasts. Nearly all now support Donald Trump.

It was *because of* his penchant for conspiracies, not in spite of it.

Many of the people I met lived in a busy rumor-sphere. One woman told me of a fellow churchgoer who believes the federal government mandated compact fluorescent lightbulbs because the light makes us easier to control. "*Personally*, I don't believe that," she added, "but about [President] Obama being born outside the U.S., everyone I know believes that." When I asked another woman what she thought about Obama's birthplace, after the long-form birth certificate appeared proving his American citizenry, she shifted the topic: "Yes but why was his father forced to leave Harvard for Kenya?" as if shuffling beliefs around to guard space in her mind for doubt.

Others spoke of the New World Order (a secret cult of world power brokers) or the Bilderberg Boys (a theory that liberal leaders intent on building a new world order first convene at the Netherlands-based Bilderberg Hotel), tying these ideas to Obama and Hillary Clinton. The Democratic leaders, they told me, are national puppets assigned to do the evil bidding of international conspirators.

Still other rumors focused on local disasters (Was Homeland Security behind the Boston marathon bombing?) or fearsome trends. "A lot of Muslims are crossing the border disguised as Mexicans," I was told. "They're buying up gas stations. What if they won't deliver gas? How could we drive to work?" Some rumors were offered solemnly, others lightly. Referring to the New World Order, one man concluded "anyhow, that's my little conspiracy theory."

However international in scope, such rumors served to bind the small abiding communities in which they rapidly circulated. It was something else they shared as well as fear — the anxiety of feeling far from the center of power.

What predisposes people to believe such rumors? Political scientists J. Eric Oliver of the University of Chicago and Thomas J. Wood of Ohio State University conducted a series of national surveys on this question between 2006 and 2011. They found that those who accepted "conspiratorial narratives" were likely to be less educated and to work in jobs with lower prestige and income. Another scholar found believers to be more likely than others to feel unsafe walking home at night in their own neighborhoods, and to live, generally speaking, with more fear.

These characteristics described many of the people I met. Many in the white working and middle class I came to know live with the fear of *falling* from circumstances in which they could count on secure, well-paid jobs, and, therefore, earn dignity in the eyes of friends, family and society. American men working full time, year round, earned, when corrected for inflation, less in 2014 than their counterparts in 1973, and the trend is more marked in low-wage states such as Louisiana. In addition, under former governor Bobby Jindal (R), 30,000 public employees — from schoolteachers to nurses at public hospitals — were fired. And the petrochemical plants now expanding around Lake Charles, a community on which I focused, are highly automated, and offer few new permanent jobs. Some such jobs will go to PhD chemists and others to imported Filipino pipe fitters. As elsewhere, automation, offshoring and the importation of skilled workers, have cut into opportunities for blue-collar workers. For many such workers and their families, the paranoid style of thinking may offer a form of magical worry beads that stave off fears of an uncertain future.

Many also seemed in mourning for a lost sense of honor. They lived in a once proud South, now disparaged as “backward.” Deeply devout parishioners felt criticized as marginalized “Bible-thumpers.” (“You can’t say ‘Merry Christmas,’ anymore; it has to be ‘Happy Holidays,’ or just ‘Happy...’”) Nearly everyone I came to know felt burdened by a hail of liberal epithets as “redneck,” homophobic, sexist, racist — and many insisted they were not racist — while feeling like a minority group themselves.

And one more thing. The paranoid locates the cause of problems outside himself; *it’s not me, it’s them*. For Donald Trump, the “them” is raping Mexicans, disloyal Muslims, accusing women, biased reporters. One possible strange, hidden appeal of the ever-external targets of his dartlike blame is that it counters the extreme individualism of the far right — for whom nearly all credit and blame for life’s events belong strictly with the individual: “*it’s not them, it’s me*.” “My parents taught me it was up to *me* to succeed. If I didn’t, it was my own fault,” one man told me. “But I’m 50, worked steady and hard since I was 18. I support my wife and our two grandchildren, and I can barely make payments on our house. My wife asks me where we went wrong.”

Trump is a master at reversing the arrow of blame. He has accused Hillary Clinton of meeting with “a global financial elite to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty.” He has claimed that news media coverage of his campaign and the debates were “rigged.” He has suggested that — if he doesn’t win — the election itself will have been “rigged.” Trump’s accusations add to still others made by hosts and guests of Fox News in recent years, attempting to legitimize the truther conspiracy (which holds that the government caused 9/11), the birther conspiracy, (that Obama is not American-born or Christian) and the BP conspiracy (that Obama purposely let the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill turn catastrophic so that he could shut down offshore drilling). If Trump adds to Fox News a media empire of his own, as some speculate he may do, we are likely to see yet more of what the historian Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style in American politics.”

If Trump loses the election, some talk of open revolution against a “rigged election.” More likely, I believe, would be an extension of the current dark, paranoid, right-wing fantasies about Clinton, liberals and Washington, D.C. For those I came to know, the birther fantasy took root around when Obama became president. If he represented the terror from without, Chicago-born Clinton may come to represent the terror from within. The circulation of such fantasies come at a terrible cost

to the precious legitimacy and proud tradition of American democracy. And we can't blame it all on Trump; he's just its messenger. Our deeper, far more challenging task is to address the sources of the real anxiety to which his dark message appeals.

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