Getting Something for Nothing: Trump, Fraud, and the Tea Party

By David Bordelon

In her recent portrait of Tea Party America, Strangers in Their Own Land, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild sifts through four years of interviews with conservatives to find the answer to what she calls “the great paradox:” why people vote for politicians whose policies hurt them. She nods to Thomas Frank’s similar exploration in What’s the Matter With Kansas, but shifts from the polemic of that book to a more reflective tone, inspired in part by her focus on “why” instead of “what” and by her source material—over 4,000 pages of interviews.1

Interested in deep research instead of a surface sampling, she focused on one area of the country, Louisiana, because it exemplified the paradox of a citizenry which hated the federal government yet ranked 49th “on life expectancy, school enrollment, educational degree attainment, and median personal earnings,” and last on “overall health,” all factors that an embrace of federal programs could improve.2

Hochschild sketches out the red staters’ self-portrait: a belief that they are hard-working citizens who have played by the rules and patiently waited in line for their piece of the American pie. The problem now is that the line isn’t moving forward—in fact it feels like it’s moving backward. And, by and large, that part of the self-portrait is true. Household

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incomes for the top one percent have skyrocketed since 1980. For the 99 percent it’s more of a fizzle. Where the self-portrait starts to look more Salvador Dali than Norman Rockwell is their view of what’s kept them in line for so long.

According to most Tea Partiers, the main problem is that the federal government has been giving their hard earned money to assorted welfare queens, moochers, and layabouts. Representative of this view is Lee Sherman, a staunch Tea Partier who told Hochschild that those on welfare “lazed around days and partied at night.” In other words, that they were getting something for nothing.

That’s the story these people tell themselves, and it is a story fed by constant exposure to their favorite—and in some cases only—information source, FOX News, which sends out regular doses of reports on welfare abuse designed to feed Sherman’s habit. In fact, if you’re jonesing for a hit of misdirection, they have a web page devoted to uncovering stories like “Minnesota Couple Who Lived on Yacht Accused of Welfare Fraud” and “Refugee Kids Get Food Stamps at Higher Rates than U.S. Born Kids.” This regular stream of anti-government propaganda leads Hochschild to conclude that for red staters, “at the heart of the deep story . . . is the local welfare office and the mailbox where undeserved disability checks and SNAP stamps arrive.” Key is “undeserved.” The definition for that?

Whoever isn’t you.

Exhibit A is Jackie Tabor, who tells Hochschild that her poor Irish-Catholic mother, “had to get on welfare to support us,” after being abandoned by their father. She was the deserving poor. Tabor “had worked hard. She had waited in line. She’d seen others ‘cut ahead,’ and this had galled her and estranged her from the government.” The “others”? Let’s just say they stand out in a White crowd.

In case you’re ready to dismiss this as a lost Southern cause, consider...
John Gaguzis, of Ambridge, Pennsylvania, who voted for Trump because “We’ve got to get rid of the Democrats that support people that don’t want to work.” And then there’s Iowa resident Jackie Furman, who complained to a New York Times reporter that “The welfare system needs to be reorganized,” because “Chicago people’ were moving to Burlington to receive higher benefits and bringing crime.” Ignoring the race baiting of “Chicago people,” let’s focus instead on the larger myth of a system rife with corruption. Hochschild reports that “When I asked one couple what proportion of people on welfare were gaming the system” one person guessed 30 percent and another 80 percent. The facts show the opposite. SNAP (the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as food stamps), the most common welfare benefit, had an error rate (which includes fraud) of 3.42 percent in 2012—and most of this was due to caseworker error.

And what about the classic image of the loafer sitting on the couch while the welfare checks roll in? Hochschild notes that in 2011, for the bottom 20 percent, welfare accounted for 37 percent of their income. The remaining 63 percent? Work. That means that a majority of people receiving government assistance are already working—just at a job which doesn’t supply a living wage. What about the big one—that so much of our tax dollars are “wasted” on welfare? Again, Hochschild comes to the rescue, showing that income-needs based benefits accounted for eight percent of the 2014 budget. Health care? 26 percent. Defense? 22 percent. Pensions? 24 percent.

The problem here is that while the Tea Partiers readily recognize personal welfare, they miss the elephant in the room: corporate welfare. In 2013, it’s estimated that Americans paid $6,000 each in “taxes” that went, not to the government, but to corporations in the form of grants and subsidies, according to a statistic from a Cato Institute fellow—a libertarian organization that’s not exactly a friend of big government.
Then there’s the orange elephant, Trump. At every turn he has cheated his way to the head of the line. In fact, Trump’s net worth is based in no small part on bankruptcy laws, the most unequal form of welfare that favors the wealthy. This inequality can be illustrated by two scenarios.

Consider a college student who works hard, does well at school, graduates with student debt, but has trouble finding a job. Can he shrug his shoulders, say “sorry” to the banks, and walk away from his financial obligations, leaving all the people touched by that debt in the lurch?

Of course not, that would be unfair—and illegal. He has to work it off until it is paid, even if it means garnishing his Social Security.¹⁴

Now consider a wealthy real estate developer who overpays for a property, lacks a clear business plan, and thus ends up $916 million in the hole.¹⁵ Can he shrug his shoulders, say “sorry” to the banks and walk away from his financial obligations leaving all the people touched by that debt in the lurch?

Of course. He can even become president.

While Trump shrugs off bankruptcies as “us[ing] the laws of this country,” he ignores the harmful ripple effect such practices have when contracts are ignored and small businesses end up with pennies on the dollar.¹⁶ But his shabby treatment of people extends beyond the pages of Chapter 11 rulings; this man of the people just flat-out stiffs workers and small business owners—the same people that form the backbone of the Tea Party. People like Philadelphia cabinet maker Edward Friel Jr., whose small business went bankrupt after Trump refused payment.¹⁷ Other workers? Dishwashers, bartenders, glass workers, carpenters. . . name the profession and you’ll find a representative stiffed by Trump. USA Today found more than 3,500 lawsuits against Trump for failure to compensate for completed work.¹⁸

And what about the red state outrage over fraud? Two words: Trump University. Trump agreed to pay $25 million in November 2016 to settle
class action lawsuits from one of his many failed business ventures, which again preyed on the very people waiting in line for the American Dream.\(^\text{19}\) Where’s the red state outrage over that? Where’s the calls to lock him up? Instead the “mad as hell” line at his rallies—“Everybody is ripping us off”—was a cheer machine.\(^\text{20}\) Unfortunately, his adoring crowds never realized that the “everybody” engaged in fraud included himself.
These examples all lead to my paradox. How could people like Lee Sherman, Jackie Tabor, John Gaguzis, and Jackie Furman, who hate moochers and cheaters, elect Trump—the king of getting something for nothing?

How, for instance, could Jackie Tabor, who believed Jesus was the sole provider of her good fortune, ignore her own reliance on the federal government she felt so estranged from? It was the feds who provided funding for the loans and grants, to the tune of $76 billion (about three times the state’s annual budget), that enabled Louisiana to rebuild after Katrina. This, in turn, helped finance the construction which her contractor husband turned into a tidy profit that lifted her family to comfortable upper middle-class existence. It is clear that Tea Party Louisiana welcomed tax dollars from liberal America. This conforms with the long established finding that blue states redistribute more of their federal taxes to red states . . . the very states which profess a hatred of all things federal and all things taxes.

Like the majority of Americans who voted to keep Trump out of office, I’m left confused by the Tea Party’s inability to recognize fraud in the orange-tinted flesh. I can only hope that my confusion will be shared—and change to anger—when the Tea Party realizes the man they elected has more in common with their archetypal welfare cheat than a working class hero.

Until then, we’re all getting nothing from something.

END NOTES
2. Ibid. p. 9.
4. Hochschild, op cit., p. 35.
5. See Fox News Insider, “Minnesota Couple Who Lived on Yacht Accused of Welfare Fraud” and “Report: Refugee Children Get Food Stamps at Higher Rate Than U.S.-Born Kids.”
7. Gabriel, “A Pennsylvania Town in Decline and Despair Looks to Donald Trump.”
8. Gabriel, “In Iowa, Trump Voters Are Unfazed by Controversies.”
10. Kertscher, “On Average, 20 to 25 cents of Every $1 Spent on Four Government Assistance Programs is Lost to Fraud, Sen. Ron Johnson says.”
14. Lobosco, “When Unpaid Student Debt Leads to a Smaller Social Security Check.”
15. Barstow et al., “Donald Trump Tax Records Show He Could Have Avoided Taxes for Nearly Two Decades, the Times Found.”
18. Ibid.
22. Albert, “$120 Billion in Katrina Federal Relief Wasn’t Always Assured.”
24. Leonhardt, “Clinton’s Substantial Popular-Vote Win.”

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