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Stuart Hall's Relational Political Sociology

A Heuristic for Right-Wing Studies

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Abstract: *Since 2016, there has been a flood of research on the US right spanning disciplines and methodologies. This article theorizes a conceptual heuristic drawn from the writing of Stuart Hall to integrate this scholarship. To make the case for what I term Hall's political sociology, I stage a dialogue with Arlie Hochschild, whose 2016 ethnography *Strangers in Their Own Land* has become a classic in the literature. While both Hall and Hochschild stress the importance of documenting the affective nature of political subjectivities, Hochschild's investment in a politics of reconciliation prevents her from scaling analysis up to political elites, a move that would enable her to better contextualize her findings. Hall offers a model for such an approach, as he connects political subjectivities to acts of articulation; these acts to hegemonic projects; and the impact of such projects to the conjuncture. I stylize Hall's four-step conceptual frame as a relational cycle because it reconnects the historicizing work of conjunctural analysis to the felt experience of individual subjectivities. Beyond outlining Hall's political sociology, I illustrate how its use as a heuristic can integrate recent research on the US right. This scheme corrects for an analytic shortcoming driven by Hochschild's politics of reconciliation, namely a view that political progress will emerge from small-scale, cross-partisan dialogue. Though Hall offers no easy answers to the political questions of our time, his relational political sociology provides a tool for interlacing the research we have, thus rendering the massive challenges of the moment visible in all their detail.*

Keywords: Stuart Hall, Arlie Hochschild, right-wing studies, articulation, hegemonic project, conjuncture, political subjectivity

Upon its September 2016 publication, Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* was often compared with J. D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elogy* (2016) by the popular press. The two were positioned as windows onto a neglected social world having its "moment," as a journalist in the *Washington Post* put it (Lozada 2016). Moments, of course, are not meant to last—but the election of Donald Trump that November transformed the significance of Hochschild's ethnographic account of white Tea Party supporters living in Louisiana. Instead of merely serving as an empathetic tour of right-

wing curiosities, its analysis was treated as a map for unsettled times. The importance imparted to *Strangers* by the 2016 election lives on, driven in no small part by the zeal of politicians who amplify and elaborate the tendencies Hochschild studied—a cast that now includes Vance, a Republican US senator elected in 2022.

For a work of sociology, *Strangers* had an immense popular impact—it was shortlisted for a National Book Award and quickly reissued in paperback—but it was also highly influential within the academy. Not to take anything away from its insights, but the academic standing of *Strangers* benefited from the state of US sociological research in 2016, which was weighted heavily toward studies of the left, important exceptions aside (notably work by Kathleen Blee, Amy Binder, Theda Skocpol, and Vanessa Williamson). Since Trump’s election, research on the US right has taken off, both in sociology and beyond. A major component of this agenda is the study of public opinion to probe the motivations behind right-wing voters (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021). A more qualitative and theory-minded thread—and one where sociology is less crowded by other disciplines—has studied the right’s uses of populism (Tuğal 2021), while a historical perspective has undercut any naive sense that the politics of the moment are unprecedented (Hemmer 2022). Because of these efforts, we can see through and beyond the spectacular brutality of an event like the insurrection of January 6, 2021. Research on support for political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022) and the impassioned fusion of Christianity, nationalism, and racism (Gorski and Perry 2022) renders the fatal energy of that day sociologically comprehensible.

For good reason, Hochschild’s account is a classic in this growing literature—her analysis of the “deep story” motivating Louisiana Tea Party supporters provides an accessible and concise portrait of the political subjectivity of right-wing Americans. The Southerners populating *Strangers* imagine themselves playing by the rules and working hard as they patiently wait for the reward of a good life, a dream constantly deferred as “line cutters” cheat their way ahead. These line cutters are enabled by the state, engendering a resentment that draws her subjects toward the party that maligns the government as ineffective, or worse, the enemy. As in her magnificently influential earlier work (Hochschild 1983), *Strangers* highlights the emotional foundation of wider social currents, an insight supported by mountains of studies into status threat and resentment within the GOP’s white base (e.g., Mutz 2018). By narrating this deep story, *Strangers* aims to foster mutual understanding across the partisan “empathy wall” dividing the US—in this way, the politics of the book is a politics of reconciliation. But this approach is undercut by an analytic shortcoming, namely a failure to explore whether the deep story has an author among political elites uninterested in reconciliation. Such a question necessitates a broader political sociology than what Hochschild offers, one that theorizes up from political subjectivities to the political projects that shape subjectivities, projects that operate under historical constraints and in competition.

In this article, I propose such a theoretical approach, one that carries Hochschild’s sensitive insights into a wider frame. To do so, I draw from Stuart Hall’s analyses of Thatcherism and from his jointly authored book, *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Crafting a

political sociology from Hall's writing generates a conceptual tool kit that builds on the strengths of *Strangers* and addresses its shortcomings. By calling this Hall's *political* sociology, I mean to emphasize that I am interested in what we can learn from Hall to understand struggles over democratic processes. By calling it a political *sociology*, I stress how Hall's approach "expands the field of view" past "formal institutions and acts of governing" (Clemens 2016, 1). That being the case, as a heuristic it aims to integrate research cloistered within a range of established disciplines, not just sociology. This feature helps distinguish my contribution from Hall's massive influence, under the banner of cultural studies, on political analysis in the UK. Though Gilbert (2019, 6) characterizes cultural studies as "a species of political sociology," he qualifies that it is one marked by "an analytical emphasis on the study of semiotic practices and a heavy bias towards qualitative modes of analysis." In contrast, the political sociology I construct from Hall's work is methodologically capacious—a necessity for organizing and uniting the diversity of social scientific research on the US right into a field of right-wing studies.¹

The right has grabbed scholarly attention well beyond the US, but because Hall's thought is generally neglected by American social scientists, my narrow focus is an opportunity to shed new light on this national case. Hall's work also has the advantage of resonating with Hochschild. On the surface, the two may seem like an unlikely pair. They are separated by national context, and while Hochschild is as good a candidate as any for living legend status in US sociology, the late Hall has not yet received the field's "disciplinary sainthood" (Hunter 2018, 30). Beneath these surface differences, their intellectual affinities run deep—both sought to highlight the social role of emotions, with Hall, especially later in life, emphasizing a psychoanalytic perspective. In their different ways, both extended Marxism—Hall (2021) detailed the importance and autonomy of the superstructure, while Hochschild (2012) specified the emotional impacts of labor processes and industries that arose in the late twentieth century.

In *Strangers*, this interest appears in the form of industrial polluters who mar the land and waterways of "Cancer Alley"—the commodification of nature run amok. Her story is not one of willful ignorance: her subjects mourn the destruction and carcinomas pollution has wrought, but they refuse to consider the state as an avenue that could remedy their situation. This is the paradox Hochschild addresses, what she calls her "keyhole issue" (11). The brilliance of her analysis is its use of an emotional logic—as opposed to a *logical* logic—to explain her subjects' acquiescence to environmental ruin. As she notes, Thomas Frank's (2004) *What's the Matter with Kansas?* inspired her project, but instead of emphasizing Frank's bait-and-switch—the GOP lacing cultural red meat with free-market policies—Hochschild identifies the real emotional rewards

1 This is not to suggest the concepts I am outlining could only be applied to the US right. They could be applied to other contexts and political movements, but my aim here is to demonstrate how they are well suited to integrating the emerging field of US right-wing studies.

such cultural politics deliver. Hers is an account of affective displacement, with the scars of pollution soothed by the balm of self-righteousness.

Hall, too, embraced the importance of political subjectivities, but in *Policing the Crisis*, he and his coauthors show how subjectivities are organized by political actors—what he terms *articulation*, as in the speaking-into-being of a worldview through the linking of interests and identities. The concept of articulation begins the upward elaboration missing in Hochschild. In polemical essays, Hall would go on to describe the strategic content of Tory articulation in the 1980s as “authoritarian populism” ([1980] 2021, 150), a term that characterized the *hegemonic project* of Thatcherism. Building on the work of Gramsci, Hall argued such a project aimed to inflect common sense to serve Thatcherism’s political aims. But Hall did not view politicians as omnipotent puppet masters injecting ideology into the heads of unwitting Britons; instead, their hegemonic projects were limited by the broader *conjuncture*—Hall’s adopted term for the messy and cross-cutting dynamics of the cultural, political, and economic. When a hegemonic project was successful, as neoliberalism eventually became, it could influence the conjuncture by rerouting the political. Hall’s insistence on the periodizing work of conjunctural analysis was an effort to bend the stick against teleological Marxism, wherein the march to capitalism and its demise was a straight line driven by the economic. But keeping with Marxism, Hall’s interest in the intersection of the cultural, political, and economic was focused on crises and instability, namely places where the logic of one plane got caught in the gears of another—for example, the ideological celebration of freedom *culturally* propels neoliberalism, but freedom is incompatible with the *material* precarity that neoliberalism as an economic formation entails. Such contradictions generate anxiety felt on the ground, a feeling that can be organized and articulated into a subjectivity that serves a hegemonic project.

In this way, Hall’s political sociology can be *schematized as a relational cycle* where political subjectivities are shaped by articulation; articulation can scale up into larger hegemonic projects; such projects, over time, can shape the conjuncture; and the conjuncture enflames (or soothes) the subjectivities of individuals, making them ripe for acts of articulation. Hall did not characterize his political sociology as such; instead, my theory building here draws on a range of his polemical and theoretical writing and is informed by critical evaluations of his work. What Hall once wrote about ideology could also be said of theory: “Much murky water has flowed under the bridge provided by this concept” ([1981] 2021, 100). My aim is not to author a “singular logically integrated causal explanation” (Calhoun 1995, 5) but instead a “[web] of concepts that aim at representing their subject area” (Fuhse 2022, 100). In this vein, my ordering of the concepts is not meant to imply a causal chain but rather a heuristic for integrating research at one stage of the cycle with research at other stages. Clearly, the elegance and intimacy of Hochschild’s approach is muddied by Hall—where Hochschild’s analysis points to empathy as the solution to partisan animosity, Hall emphasizes the complexity of the world. But at the cost of elegance, we gain a frame for unifying the diverse field of right-wing studies, which is presently divided by the familiar insularities of disciplines

and methods. As a result, while Hall insists on complexity, his four concepts provide a means to tame that complexity.

To begin, I explain how *Strangers* portrays its subjects' political subjectivities through the deep story, a heuristic that clarifies the affective investments that propel individuals toward politics. Hochschild's account of the right's deep story is well known, but she also describes a left deep story, a move that underscores her commitment to a politics of reconciliation. However, while Hochschild stresses the value of cross-partisan dialogue, *Strangers* implicitly suggests that a compromise between the right and left would be problematic. Further, I argue Hochschild's analysis of the left deep story does not capture the fractured nature of the Democratic bloc. Understanding why the right is more unified than the left requires periodizing deep stories, a move that entails studying how political elites articulate subjectivities into political subjectivities. At this point, I transition to explicating Hall's political sociology. To stress the relational nature of his concepts, I present four sections focused on the movement between concepts: political subjectivity / articulation, articulation / hegemonic project, hegemonic project / conjuncture, and conjuncture / political subjectivity. In each, I discuss how the concepts are deployed by Hall while also showing their capacity for capturing, integrating, and elaborating on recent US contributions. Given my criticism of Hochschild's politics of reconciliation, I end by characterizing Hall's approach as implying a hegemonic politics. Though this is a much taller task than Hochschild's call for dialogue, it embraces the world with as rich an understanding as social science can produce.

Strangers and Its Politics of Reconciliation

In the preface to *Strangers*, Hochschild roots her "big departure" (xi) to political sociology in previous work on questions of family and labor, research that led her "to believe strongly in paid parental leave for working parents" (x). Such a policy is common across the industrialized world but not, she stresses, in the US. In her view, this policy failure stems from a political failure, as the worldview of those on the right is fervently antigovernment and thus hostile to paid leave. To understand this hostility in general, Hochschild strategically shifts her focus from paid leave to the environment. In Louisiana, where sinkholes swallow homes and cancer rates are sky high, the case for government intervention is irresistible. So why does the state, year after year, vote red?

During her time in the south, Hochschild meets white Republicans like Mike Schaff, who had to evacuate his home after Texas Brine collapsed a cavern in an underground salt reserve used to store chemicals like ethylene dichloride. As Hochschild learns, Mike's politics are not anchored by the trauma of his experience as an industrial refugee but in resentment at government redistribution he feels is unjust. The same goes for the Republican diehard Janice Areno, whose sister was debilitated by exposure to phosgene while working for Olin Chemical. Though Democrats push for greater industrial oversight, Janice has three shelves stuffed with decorative elephants—"You can tell I'm a Republican," she tells Hochschild as they inspect the partisan herd (153).

Hochschild's analysis wrangles five years of this ethnographic research into a portrait of her subjects' shared political subjectivity, what she terms their deep story—"a story that *feels as if* it were true" (16, original emphasis). In an oft-cited passage (130), she narrates this deep story as the experience of waiting in line. Her subjects are patient and follow the rules—working hard and living a life within their means. But as they endure the wait, her subjects notice something in the distance, people cutting in:

As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches, and they hold a certain secret place in people's minds, as we see below. Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers—where will it end?

In a prescient later chapter, Hochschild documents the compatibility of this deep story with the political style of then-candidate Trump. Recounting an ecstatic campaign rally staged in an airport hangar, Hochschild argues that Trump's appeal is that his bigotry fingers the line cutters for what her subjects feel them to be, while his business success symbolizes the wealth and success they aspire to. Their deep story values the end of the line—the American dream, something Trump loudly claims he has—leaving scorn for those who get in the way.

The deep story is the most important contribution of *Strangers*—a heuristic for understanding political subjectivities that escapes the temptation to explain political mobilization as purely rational or ideological. By shifting to an emotional logic, Hochschild reveals the lived experience of politics. Unfortunately, the richness of *Strangers* is often missed when it is cited to help answer the most prominent question the election of Trump prompted—did class or culture motivate people to vote for such an atypical candidate? This question not only captivated the academy but also animated popular discourse following the election. For example, an article (Porter 2016) in the *New York Times*—which takes a swipe at Frank's (2004) culture-over-class argument—is entitled "Where Were Trump's Votes? Where the Jobs Weren't." In contrast, most scholars have argued class is less important than culture, a category often operationalized as racism (Jardina 2019) and shown to include a thick social identification with parties (Mason 2018), though there are debates within the culture camp over the importance of, for example, nationalism (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021). *Strangers* is often read as evidence for both culture over economics *and* economics over culture. For example, a recent article in the *Annual Review of Political Science* (Berman 2021) places

Strangers in the culture camp; but a piece in the *Annual Review of Economics* (Rodrik 2021) cites the book as giving primacy to economics.²

The problem with this “either/or” framing, as McQuarrie (2017, S121) argues, is that it “treats the voting public as an agglomeration of disembedded individuals that are primarily knowable in terms of their demographic attributes, which in turn are more or less directly determinative of political attitudes.” By narrating the subjective fusion of cultural identity and class experience, Hochschild’s deep story evades this reductionist tendency. If pressed, Hochschild is more at home in the culture-over-class camp, given her grounding in affect. But the richness of *Strangers* is its subtlety—her subjects *feel* a class experience, one that occludes the advantages granted by their whiteness.

While the line cutters of the right’s deep story are the enduring takeaway from *Strangers*, a less frequently cited passage depicts what Hochschild calls alternatively the liberal or progressive deep story. In this feels-as-if-true account, the polity is standing around a public square rich in museums, libraries, and schools. As the onlookers make room for anyone and everyone, “marauders” dash through to “steal away bricks and concrete chunks from the public buildings” (235). The loot is destined for the private sector, where it enriches individuals at the expense of the public. The inclusion of a left deep story is vital to *Strangers*, as Hochschild’s intent is to conjure cross-partisan empathy by facilitating mutual understanding. In this way, Hochschild offers a solution to the bitter polarization dividing the US, one that works by putting individuals on the right and left in dialogue—this is her politics of reconciliation. In talks and interviews since the publication of *Strangers*, Hochschild has repeatedly emphasized this point, citing living room conversations with Republicans and Democrats as a method to move the nation forward through compromise (Hochschild 2017, 2018b).

Hochschild’s politics of reconciliation lives on in a particularly well-funded corner of the literature, namely depolarization. Often employing experiments, this research evaluates methods for cooling partisan animosity. In Hochschild’s conceptual array, depolarization is an effort to poke holes in the empathy wall. Such work has quickly become institutionalized at, for example, Duke’s Polarization Lab and Stanford’s Polarization and Social Change Lab. The latter recently produced an immensely impressive “megastudy” of twenty-five interventions to reduce partisan animosity (Voelkel et al., 2022). Just as Hochschild focuses on the healing work of living room conversations, this study investigates how individuals can be induced to warm to the other side through such microinterventions as “portraying positive outparty exemplars” and “arguing that depolarization has positive consequences” (7).

2 More problematically, *Strangers* is often misread as being about the views of the (objectively located) white working class, when in fact the right’s deep story narrates the experience of the white middle class looking down the class ladder (see p. 144).

Healing divisions through dialogue has an intrinsic appeal, but the politics of reconciliation is undercut by a close reading of *Strangers*.³ Hochschild identifies the height of the empathy wall as her villain, but the clean environment she seeks would implicitly bring the liberal deep story to life. As Ray (2017, 130) notes, “Hochschild’s analysis is ultimately one that assumes that [her subjects] have false consciousness (indeed the appendix of the book corrects their mistaken assumptions about welfare, race and state regulation).” Hochschild avoids reference to the term false consciousness, and she attempts to dismiss a related charge by insisting that, “as an explanation for why any of us believe what we do, duping—and the presumption of gullibility—is too simple an idea” (14).⁴ Her analysis is deeply humanizing, but listening to the voices in *Strangers* does not lead one to view a compromise between the left and the right as a good solution, but rather a less bad one. As her appendix B notes, “the higher the exposure to environmental pollution, the less worried the individual was about it—and the more likely that person was to define him- or herself as a ‘strong Republican’” (253). I am not suggesting that dialogue across the empathy wall is useless, only that, per Hochschild’s account, “practical cooperation” (233) between partisans would not lead to a clean environment. Scaling the empathy wall could be the first step in a transformative politics, but reading Hochschild against Hochschild, it would need to be a scouting mission. Instead of enabling compromise, dialogue should inform efforts to advance the left’s deep story through interest alignment and movement building.

Even if Hochschild were to say the solution is to convert her subjects to the left’s deep story, her characterization of this good government-based political subjectivity

3 There is also an external issue, namely that Hochschild’s politics of reconciliation reproduces what Mitchell (1991) calls the state effect. This is the impression of the state as something distinct from the market—a misrecognition that generates an ideology conducive to capitalism. *Strangers* exudes optimism that the economy could be more just if only the state had better leadership, a view that misses the interdependence of the state and market. Hochschild (2016, 232) does make the vital observation that the relative cleanliness of California compared with Louisiana depends on a relationship—California uses and relies upon the chemicals Louisiana produces. But she does not follow this analysis to the conclusion that the Democratic Party, not just the Republican Party, is also complicit in the creation of Cancer Alley. This shortcoming further pries open the divergence between Hochschild and Hall. Hall’s recognition that the state and market are interconnected led him to reflect on the tradeoffs involved in the left’s embrace of the state ([1984b] 2017).

4 In a much earlier essay, Hochschild wrote of the US, “Here among the dispossessed the emotional aspect of ‘false-consciousness’—*feeling* content with an unjustly dealt fate—is more the rule than the exception” ([1975] 2003, 85). Containing a seed of the argument she would make four decades later, the essay discusses the tendency to identify up and direct “disdain” down the social hierarchy. In a speech hosted by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s Marx 200 celebration, Hochschild (2018a) directly addressed the question of her *Strangers* subjects’ false consciousness. In that speech, she concedes there is an aspect of false consciousness at work, but she characterizes it as a “mixed story.” On one hand, the belief that their misfortune is caused by women and Blacks receiving an unfair advantage points to false consciousness; but on the other, she notes her subjects rightly resent the global elites running large corporations. As an alternative term, she suggests “circumstantial consciousness.”

is unconvincing. Research on political mobilization finds that Democrats have a more diverse range of factors pushing and pulling them to the polls than Republicans (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), suggesting that, for example, the “liberal” and “progressive” deep story may in fact be two distinct stories. Why is this so? On one hand, based on commonsense notions of identity like race, ethnicity, and religion, the Democratic coalition is more diverse than the Republican coalition, which makes the construction of an inclusive deep story tricky. On the other, the Democratic Party has done a less effective job at *creating a shared identity*. As Tuğal (2017, 140, original emphasis) argues in a reflection on *Strangers*, “The Left is so expert- and professional-dominated that it is trying to do its best to render *its* metanarrative as *fact-* and *judgement-*based as possible.” Such an approach drains the left deep story of feeling and power, an argument that, as we will see, mirrors Hall’s analysis of the Labour Party’s failure to engage in hegemonic politics.

Pressing on the validity of a singular left deep story begins to open up the divergence between Hochschild and Hall, as it reveals the importance of understanding the connection between ground-level political subjectivities and efforts by elites to create and coax such subjectivities—what Hall calls articulation. This is not to say Hochschild treats the deep story as lacking a genealogy—in fact, just as Hall links the conjuncture to political subjectivities, Hochschild sources the emotional depth of the deep story to historical developments that are both material and symbolic. In *Strangers*, the material experience, what she calls the structural squeeze, is the evisceration of decent jobs by a corporate sector that “had gone global, automated, moved plants to cheaper workers or moved cheaper workers in” (215). This economic precarity sent people looking for a cause of their suffering, and as Hochschild narrates, a shift on the cultural plane offered up the line cutters. Hochschild argues the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s fell into the “emotional grooves” (207) cut by the 1860s, when the Civil War and Reconstruction stripped poor whites of their standing (given how swiftly Jim Crow reinstated what W. E. B. Du Bois [1935] called their psychological wage, it is important to stress that deep stories are not histories). As the conflict of the more recent ’60s became elaborated into feminism, gay rights, and other identity movements, Hochschild’s white subjects found themselves caught in an honor squeeze tightened not only by civil rights legislation but a culture that appeared to direct “the finger of blame at the entitled white male” (212). In a provocative turn of phrase, she calls this situation an “undeclared class war” (151) because material suffering was resisted on the right through the deep story’s resentment of the honor squeeze instead of a reckoning with the structural squeeze (figure 1).

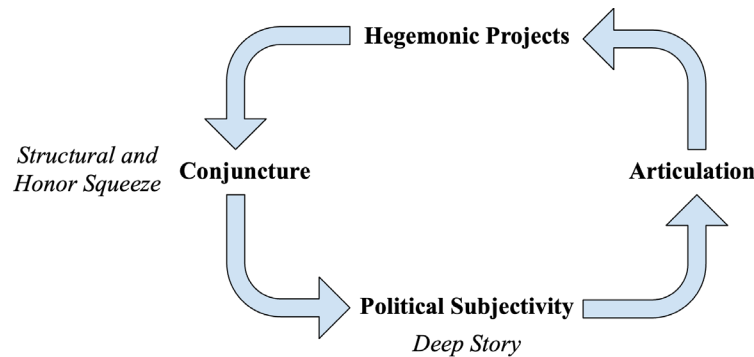


Figure 1. Arlie Hochschild read via Stuart Hall. Source: author's construction.

This conjunctural analysis is a moment where Hochschild and Hall converge—both are sensitive to the ability of long-term changes to cause psychic pain, what Hall and his coauthors call social anxiety in *Policing the Crisis*. But Hall's political sociology would insist that such social anxiety could provide affective fuel for any number of political commitments, a point driven home by the fact that there are white Democrats caught in both the structural and honor squeeze. To understand why Republicans channel their pain into the particular deep story Hochschild outlines, Hall would link political subjectivities to articulation and hegemonic projects, concepts that operate at a smaller timescale than the century and half-century conjunctural moves Hochschild makes. In short, the more recent history behind the deep story is occluded by Hochschild, a history well documented in work on, for example, the “long” Southern strategy (Maxwell and Shields 2019), Newt Gingrich's transformation of political norms (Hemmer 2022), and elite coordination with the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Conjunctural dynamics motivate affective investment in the deep story, but as this research demonstrates, the plot of the story has authors occupied with on-going revisions.

Hall's Relational Political Sociology

What I call Hall's relational political sociology is built around four concepts. As illustrated by Hochschild, political subjectivity refers to the way affective energies are organized toward political ends. Articulation is the term for techniques that achieve this organization—it is not only the speaking-into-being (articulation) of a group, but the linking (articulation) of previously diverse identities and interests. A hegemonic project is the accumulation of articulating efforts to the point that they shift common sense toward a political end. When successful, a hegemonic project can impact the conjuncture, Hall's term for the interconnection of the political, economic, and cultural. A conjuncture is defined not just by the arrangement of these three planes but the contradictions they generate. These contradictions have consequences for individuals caught between their logics, which is where conjunctural analysis returns to political

subjectivity. By outlining these concepts as a relational cycle, I am illustrating how analysis can move up and down in scale, a heuristic intended to facilitate the integration of diverse research (figure 2). The cyclical arrangement is not strictly causal, meaning I am not insisting that one should avoid combining hegemonic projects with political subjectivities, or articulation with conjunctural thinking—any combination could be fruitful.

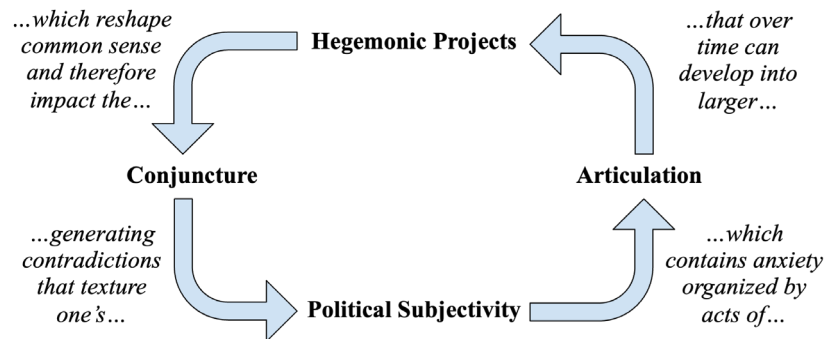


Figure 2. Stuart Hall's analytic heuristic. Source: author's construction.

There are several currents working against my efforts at outlining Hall's political sociology. For one, Hall never authored a programmatic statement delineating his conceptual tools. Beside *Policing*, much of his political writing was published outside the traditional channels of academia, such as in *Marxism Today*, where the focus was squarely on contemporary developments. Hall ([1980] 2021,153) admits his use of concepts was "rough and ready," designed to confront politics as they were happening. Further, what I call Hall's political sociology is deeply syncretic, drawing terms and insights from Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Karl Marx, and, most importantly, Antonio Gramsci. Some of these thinkers attach distinct meanings to the terms I am employing—addressing those differences is outside the scope of this article, but it has been explored elsewhere, including by Hall himself (see Hall 2021).

These difficulties aside, Hall's political sociology has the advantage of honoring the richness of political subjectivities while also connecting their content with the efforts of elites and the tectonic shifts of conjunctures. By placing subjectivities in context, Hall's analytic perspective casts doubt on Hochschild's politics of reconciliation for asking nothing of elites. In Hall's view, living room dialogue is wholly inadequate to move politics. This is not because individuals are powerless but because individuals are more powerful when operating together on a massive scale, a perspective that emphasizes the importance of hegemonic politics.

A second advantage of Hall's political sociology is that by moving between four distinct levels of analysis, its relational nature offers openings for different disciplines and methodologies to contribute to a collective understanding of the present. As

Strangers is a demonstration of the usefulness of ethnographic methods for studying political subjectivities, so media studies is at home on the level of articulation. Likewise, public opinion is a useful lens for characterizing a hegemonic project, and historical analysis is the natural approach to conjunctural study. Integrating these perspectives into a whole is the trick Hall's perspective pulls off.

To outline Hall's political sociology, I discuss each stage of the relational cycle below, focusing on the movement from one concept to the next. Throughout, I demonstrate how the concepts appeared in Hall's own writing, while also comparing his approach with *Strangers*. To demonstrate the capaciousness of Hall's framework, I apply it to recent research on the US right. My aim is not to offer a complete analysis of the US right but rather to clarify Hall's political sociology and make its integrative abilities clear.

Political Subjectivity / Articulation

Hochschild's account of the deep story is an illustration of a political subjectivity, but where did the story come from? In her take, the deep story precedes politics—she writes, “When we listen to a political leader, we don't simply hear words; we listen *predisposed* to want to feel certain things” (15, emphasis added). Hall would agree that individuals receive politics through an emotional groove, and that to be successful, politicians should walk within the groove. But where Hochschild and Hall differ is that Hall insists these grooves can also be stomped into shape to serve a defined political end. There are limits, but a heavy boot can do a lot of work.

The familiarity of the deep story enables Hochschild to evade this concern. The idea of an American dream arrived at through hard work is well documented—Hochschild owes us no explanation for that motif. But where the plot gets lost, and where Hall comes in, is the scripting of line cutters—“Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans” (Hochschild 2016, 139). Some of these characters have had a centuries-long role in the national drama (Blacks, women, immigrants) while others are more recent (refugees) and regional (brown pelicans). But what is key to the deep story is not only who they are but what they are doing, namely benefitting from the state at the expense of everyone else. The felt veracity of this plot point has a history, and articulation is the concept Hall employs to study how the affective grooves of individuals are shifted by the maneuvering of political elites.

The concept of articulation has recently reentered political sociology, though scholars have emphasized Gramsci and not his elaboration by Hall. In the introduction to an edited volume built around the concept, de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015, 2) define “political articulation as the process by which parties ‘suture’ together coherent blocs and cleavages from a disparate set of constituencies and individuals, who, even by virtue of sharing circumstances, may not necessarily share the same political identity.” While Hall often dissected the articulating power of discursive claims-making, recent work has emphasized nondiscursive articulation, such as policies that fund industries and, in

the process, cement the bond between a governing party and beneficiary groups (Eidlin 2016).⁵

This focus on nondiscursive articulation crucially centers parties and the state, but it also reflects sociology's disciplinary biases—namely an emphasis on formal politics over the media (Pooley and Katz 2008). Bringing Hall into conversation with the recent articulation scholarship demonstrates how the efforts of parties and the state are refracted through the professional culture of journalism—this is true even of ostensibly nondiscursive articulation, assuming the effort attracts media attention. In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall and his coauthors stress that the articulating effects of political actions are structured by professional reporting norms. In their view, understanding articulation requires specifying how news values and genre practices privilege elites and thus shape which acts of articulation reach the masses (and which acts are habitually excluded from publication). As a result, the study of articulation implies the study of the means of communication.

As in sociology broadly, Hochschild downplays the role of the media. Fox News is often on in the background of *Strangers*, referenced as an amplifier of political anxiety but not something deeply considered. And in the spirit of the politics of reconciliation, it is equated to MSNBC (7, 12). In one short section (126–8), Hochschild emphasizes the omnipresence of Fox in the lives of her subjects and notes the extreme language it used to vilify Obama's administration. However, citing some of the Manichean language she heard on the station, she writes, "Yet the words *tyranny*, *apparatus*, *terrorist*, and *strangler* did not come up in my talks with Tea Party embracers in Louisiana." As further reassurance, she adds, "We all intuitively filter the news ourselves" (128). While it is no doubt true that Fox, like any media source, fails to exercise complete control over its audience—this is the point of Hall's well-known "encoding/decoding" ([1973] 2019) essay—there is a literature on the power of Fox News to meaningfully shift the political behavior of its audience (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007).

Given the documented power of Fox—and elite influence more generally (Lenz 2012)—it is vital to closely consider how the media shapes political subjectivities. One example of such work is Peck's (2019) study of Fox, which analyzes how the channel articulates a bloc that aligns its audience with big business through the performance of "entrepreneurial producerism" (158). This mode of articulation works by portraying the business class as job creators whose efforts are hampered by the state—thus positioning big business among the "us" in a populist us-versus-them frame. In an interesting moment that underscores the power of elites, Peck (19) notes the articulation of Thatcherism

5 Bob Jessop and others critiqued Hall for overplaying the ideological effect of discursive articulation; they argue this shortcoming led Hall to overstate the hegemonic accomplishments of Thatcherism (for a review of this debate, see Gallas 2015). Despite springing from Hall's writing, the heuristic I am outlining is inclusive of both discursive and nondiscursive articulation. The heart of the articulation concept is the uniting of individuals into a cause, but this can be accomplished by a variety of means—speeches, census categories, tax brackets, and far more.

studied by Hall in the 1980s was carried out by, among others, British tabloids owned by Rupert Murdoch, who controlled Fox News at the time of Hochschild's research.

By exploring the professional values and routines of journalism, Hall's approach is deeply sociological in mode if not topic. But moving away from sociology, Hall also pays attention to the polysemous nature of symbolic communication, which is where he draws nearest to the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).⁶ Central to his thinking is the insistence that rhetorical styles and motifs do not contain an inherent class or political meaning, so that, for example, the idea of the American dream can justify free enterprise *and* redistribution, Hochschild's right deep story *and* her left deep story. Though the creativity of articulation is dependent upon polysemy, it is not a free-for-all. Instead, articulation is most powerful when connected to a preexisting groove in one's subjectivity. The conjunctural-level contradictions of any moment are felt, such as Hochschild's honor and structural squeezes. This subjective experience engenders a discomfort that begs for a solution, creating an opportunity for acts of articulation to fashion a prism through which discomfort can be explained. When this is done for political purposes, a subjectivity is articulated into a political subjectivity.

The importance of this connection between articulation and the subjective experience on the ground is another point where Hall is instructive for recent revivals of articulation. In their contribution, de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015) are interested in pushing against reflection theories of politics, wherein politicians adjust their actions to match the demands of constituents. Hall is no advocate of reflection theory, but he is deeply attuned to the need for acts of articulation to respond to the already existing subjectivities alive in the world, a move that places a limit from below on the actions of political elites above. What is more, acts of articulation are not just limited by subjectively felt discomfort but also the inheritance of common sense from eras past. This is why, in Hochschild's account, the familiar metaphor of waiting in line for the American dream is so central—the idea that there is an American dream, and that hard work can grant one access to that dream, is part of the national common sense.

This is surely complex terrain. To turn a subjectivity into a political subjectivity, articulation must respond to the affective grooves of individual psyches and the existing commonsense interpretation of the world, the latter of which is sure to already have political implications. Muddying the waters further, polysemy ensures that the intended effect of a political statement may miss the mark. How are scholars to follow this lesson? While it lacks any individual portraits as intimate as those offered by *Strangers*, *Policing the Crisis* offers a model. The book argues that in the 1960s and 1970s the decline of industry, labor unrest, and the rise of youth subcultures unmoored the lifeworld of the UK's working class and petty bourgeoisie. This process engendered a sense of "social anxiety" (162) that was ripe for excitement aroused through media coverage of street

6 For a discussion of their underappreciated differences, see Colpani (2022).

crime. The key moment is the articulation (as in joining) of preexisting anxiety over social change and economic decline with fear of Black street crime organized under the novel term “mugging.” Discursive acts carried through the media—whose norms guaranteed publicity for political and state elites—effected this articulation of generalized unease with Black crime, setting in motion a law-and-order politics that divided the working class by race and underpinned what was soon to be known as Thatcherism.

In an essay published around the same time as *Policing*, Hall ([1978] 2017, 150) writes, “Race is the prism through which the British people are called upon to live through, then to understand, and then to deal with, the growing crisis.” The point is not that racist imaginaries “unravel the complex tissue of political and economic forces which have created and sustained the poverty of inner-urban working-class districts” (156), but rather that *they create the impression* of doing so. Articulation “solves” the experienced crisis through a sleight of hand, in this case displacing a structural crisis by rerouting anxiety into blame hung on an out-group. In line with Hochschild, a key point is that there is a subjective basis for the act of articulation to build on; but, contra Hochschild, articulation can steer that basis toward a defined political end.

Articulation / Hegemonic Project

In the case of Margaret Thatcher, the political end was “authoritarian populism”—one of Hall’s ([1980] 2021) most widely known concepts. The term is still in use today and has been retrieved within the post-2016 study of the right. For example, Trumpism has been described as a form of authoritarian populism by scholars (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019) and by think tanks ranging from the Center for American Progress (2018) to the Cato Institute (Palmer 2019). Authoritarian populism is Hall’s characterization of Thatcherism’s *hegemonic project*, namely the strategic effort to redefine common sense—Gramsci’s war of position—toward some larger aim. This is the conceptual level at which individual acts of articulation can pile up into a larger ideological project that, in turn, operates through politics on culture and the economy.

What the deep story offers is an analysis of the mobilizing effects of such a project. The emotional experience of waiting in a line bedeviled by cheats is shared across Hochschild’s subjects precisely because it has ascended to the level of common sense. The advantage of complementing this perspective with a consideration of hegemonic projects as a mass political strategy is that it pushes analysts to historicize politics. While noting that the Tea Party was not the first antigovernment movement in the US, Hochschild writes, “[N]one before the Tea Party have so forcefully taken up the twin causes of reversing progressive reform and dismantling the federal government—a movement in response to the deep story” (2016, 207). Leaving aside the undoing of Reconstruction, this would seem to miss the antistate accomplishments of the 1980s and 1990s—from the Reagan Revolution to Bill Clinton’s cutting of welfare—which Hall often referenced as he tracked the maturation of Thatcherism into British neoliberalism.

In both the UK and US, the hegemonic accomplishment of conservative politics was the centering of the market as the organizing principal of social life. But to achieve this, Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did not simply promote the virtue of the market. Instead, these figures directed the experience of economic decline toward a view of the welfare state as intrusive, irresponsible, and naive to the manipulations of immigrants, people of color, and others, thus turning the state into an antagonist. Accomplished through individual acts of articulation, such a project seeded a common sense that Hochschild encountered in appended form as the deep story. In *Policing the Crisis*, well before Thatcher was on the scene, we see the early moves of this articulation via figures like Enoch Powell. But over the next decade and more, writing in outlets like *Marxism Today*, Hall used the benefit of historical distance to theorize these efforts as hegemonic due to their rewiring of common sense. At a greater level of specificity, he characterized the content of this shift in common sense as authoritarian populism because popular will was piqued toward raising the repressive hand of the state against the social democratic hand.

The usefulness of the term authoritarian populism for analysis of the US right is clear. To take just one example, consider GOP efforts to stir mass support for restrictions on the teaching of racial history in public schools. Nonetheless, the more general term, hegemonic project, needs to be centered in Hall's political sociology. Authoritarian populism is an analysis of the rhetorical content of articulation (populism) and its policy effects (authoritarian). But this strategy was powerful because of its hegemonic aspirations—it strove to rewrite common sense and sway the population toward a new vision of life. In a dialogue with critics of the term authoritarian populism, Hall ([1980] 2021, 150) insisted that “it would be ludicrous to assume [Thatcherism] could be ‘explained’ along one dimension of analysis only.” Such is the nature of hegemonic projects—they operate at a depth that exceeds the purchase of any one pithy concept. It follows that he coined additional terms to describe Thatcherism, such as “regressive modernization” ([1987] 2021, 164). Whereas authoritarian populism highlighted the irony of generating mass support for a repressive state, with this second term, Hall underscored how the radicalism (modernization) of Thatcherism's market views were advanced through appeals to traditional (regressive) values.

It is clear Hall intended authoritarian populism as a particular characterization among many, but there are further analytical reasons to stress the more general concept of hegemonic project. From Hall's perspective, the hegemonic character of the right is what distinguished it from the left—the term hegemonic necessitates such a comparison since, for a project to achieve hegemony, any opposition project must be routed. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hall critiqued Labour for failing to scale up its efforts at articulation into a counter-hegemonic project. Left parties can be hegemonic—as we know from Laclau and Mouffe (1985)—but from Hall's perspective, Labour never was during his adult life. In an important essay entitled “The Crisis of Labourism” ([1984a] 2017, 219), Hall laments that Labour “shows less and less capacity to connect with popular feelings and sentiments, let alone transform them or articulate them to

the left.” The problem was that while the Tories spoke of Englishness and God, the evil in the streets and virtues at home, Labour campaigned within “a formal definition of the ‘political’” (219) that stressed policies and assumed interests. This is precisely the point Tuğal (2017) makes in his criticism of Hochschild’s left deep story—namely that the Democratic Party is too rhetorically technical to author a hegemonic appeal. In Hall’s lifetime, instead of articulating interests into a counter-hegemonic bloc, Labour slid into what Gramsci called transformism (Hall [2003] 2017) by adopting neoliberal logic veiled beneath leftist talking points. This was embodied in the UK by Tony Blair and New Labour, whereas in the US, Clinton’s “third way” orations limned the market in an aspirational light. As should be clear, Hall’s political sociology is not only suited for the right. More importantly—and perhaps in tension with the project of “right-wing studies”—employing the concept of hegemonic project *requires* chalking off the competitive arena of politics, so that at some point, any study of the right will entail notice of the left.

Another advantage of emphasizing the more general term hegemonic project over authoritarian populism is that it discourages the academic tendency of trying to pin down the essence of mass politics in a single concept, what Hall derisively called “conceptual gunfire” ([1980] 2021, 159). Much of the post-2016 research attempts to identify and measure the *most important* ideological ingredient of Trumpism—is it sexism, racism, or economics (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018)? Or anti-immigrant attitudes (Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019)? A hegemonic project requires a range of themes to be linked together, and no mass political movement is likely to operate through one vector alone. Understanding the ideological makeup of political movements is vital, but precisely weighing each component in search of *the* component risks missing the forest for the trees. Even more, acts of articulation can shift the salience of themes and introduce new ingredients. For example, the phrase “critical race theory” was virtually unknown among GOP voters in 2016, but the immense attention it presently commands does not imply a fundamental break.

While far from discarding an interest in the ideological content of politics, Hall’s political sociology refocuses attention on the mechanisms and strategies bundling individual acts of articulation into a hegemonic project. It matters whether the critical race theory moral panic influenced GOP voters, but given how much we already know about their racial attitudes, Hall would prioritize asking *how* the panic was ignited. A rich area in the post-2016 literature compatible with Hall’s sociology is the study of mis- and disinformation, especially works that stress emergent digital strategies. On the Internet, wildly unusual conspiracy theories sprout up—like Pizzagate and QAnon—but their novelty does not fracture the GOP bloc. Rather, they are articulated into the hegemonic project of the right. How does this happen?

An example implicitly in line with Hall’s approach is Tripodi’s (2022) ethnographic study of right-wing activists in Virginia. To understand how the right maintains control over the circulation of information, Tripodi documents how elites inculcate activists with an “ideological dialect” (17) that shapes the search terms they use to “do their own

research.” The activists are under the illusion of trawling the whole Internet for answers, when instead the terms they have learned to use—for example, “alien” instead of “undocumented”—keep them within the circuit of Trumpist sites like the Daily Caller and PragerU. Another example of this literature, and one written to invite a popular audience, is *Meme Wars* (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022), which describes how digital propaganda works to radicalize audiences. Though the pop culture imagery of memes may suggest humor or frivolity, the book documents how such tools can sharpen extreme political commitments, including those that led individuals to storm the Capitol on January 6.

Hegemonic Project / Conjunction

When a hegemonic project is successful at shifting common sense, it is capable of influencing the conjuncture, Hall’s borrowed term for the interconnected arrangement of the economic, political, and cultural.⁷ The term prompts analysts to broadly historicize their work *and* consider the relationship between these three planes, which are so often kept separate at the cost of seeing the social formation as a totality. A specific conjuncture is characterized by a set of contradictions that arise from the arrangement of these planes—the two signal conjunctures in Hall’s thought are the post-World War II conjuncture of social democracy and the subsequent neoliberal conjuncture embodied by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. In their British form, the two conjunctures are separated by the instability of the 1960s and 1970s, when an economic crisis (stagflation and industrial decline) converged with a political crisis (the retreat of the social democratic state) and cultural crises (youth movements on the left and reactionary backlash on the right).⁸ Hall is clear that the shift to neoliberalism was too deep and organic a process to be attributed to authoritarian populism alone, but he also argues the hegemonic ambitions of Thatcherism accelerated and secured the transition.

The massive scale of conjunctural thinking requires analytic humility, but such a gambit is what enables Hall’s fine-grained approach to the articulating work of

7 In addition to its use within the Marxist tradition, the term was employed in a similar vein by the *Annales* school.

8 This transition is documented in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), what Gilbert calls the “definitive example of a ‘conjunctural analysis’” (2019, 9). *Policing* displays a characteristic typical of cultural studies, namely an analytic movement from a cultural form to its conjunctural conditions of possibility. In this case, the movement is from a mugging panic up to the crisis of the state. The breadth of *Policing’s* analysis is instructive—the text moves from press coverage of street crime to the organization of the judiciary, policing techniques, political discourse, strike activity, Mick Jagger, the shifting membership of political blocs, and the class function of the education system, among other themes. As a how-to guide, the breadth of *Policing* can be intimidating, but it is also an invitation to recognize how many ingredients can contribute to conjunctural analysis. That being the case, the focus on a conjuncture’s contradictions is key as they generate the social anxiety that political elites articulate in the service of a hegemonic project.

hegemonic strategies to stand within a historical frame. Without the periodizing overlay of the conjuncture, it would be tempting to cast the political as truly autonomous. Instead, for Hall, the contradictions of a conjuncture are felt as social anxiety—an echo of Gramsci's (1971, 328) kernel of “good sense”—and it is this subjective experience that is articulated by hegemonic projects. The contradictions of neoliberalism are numerous, but much commentary has focused on those driven by its economic logic, especially how speculative financial techniques are self-defeating economically and, increasingly, ecologically. To take an example from Hochschild, the contemporary scale of petrochemical production necessitates industrial byproducts incompatible with human flourishing—we see this in the sinkholes and cancer diagnoses that haunt the subjects of *Strangers*. The social anxiety this generates motivates the fervency of the deep story following, per Hall, the intermediary work of articulation. The line cutters are not the cause of environmental ruin—in fact, they are among its victims—but because the deep story so convincingly casts government redistribution as a villain, the social anxiety generated by neoliberalism is absorbed by resentment against the state.

Though this take is focused on the economic, contradictions cut across the social formation and the social anxiety they generate should not be seen as exclusively emerging from the economic base. For example, neoliberalism's cultural prizing of individual freedom and autonomy both justifies marketization and clashes with the colossal wealth disparities created by the market—a conjunctural dynamic that feeds the deep story centered on a never-ending wait in line. Such analysis can lead away from studies that take right-wing politics as their object, but Hall insists this historicization is vital for understanding affective investments in politics.

In his time, Hall traced the emergence of neoliberalism—his essays from the 1980s analyze how Thatcherism secured the new conjuncture by suturing together disparate constituencies into a bloc. In contrast, scholars today debate whether neoliberalism still defines the present conjuncture. This debate turns on a range of questions, including whether the contemporary right-wing project is hegemonic in scope. Another key concern is discerning whether the project's means and ends swim with or against neoliberal logic. Hochschild engages in conjunctural analysis through her invocation of the structural (economic) and honor (cultural) squeezes, but she never names the conjuncture as such—in fact, the term neoliberal never appears in *Strangers*.⁹ If the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism was marked by a series of crises, recent history offers no shortage of crises that could signal another fundamental break. Hall lived to see one such candidate, namely the recession of 2008. According to Hall, conjunctures break apart when there is a synchronicity of crises so that “the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of

9 Hochschild uses the term elsewhere (e.g., 2018a). In *The Outsourced Self* (2012), her analysis of commercial language seeping into everyday life suggests a characterization of neoliberalism as a hegemonic project.

social relations” (Hall and Schwarz [1985] 2021, 96).¹⁰ Writing as the Great Recession turned into economic recovery, Hall ([2011] 2017, 335) noted that “new and old contradictions still haunt the edifice,” but neoliberalism nonetheless continued on. Writing in agreement, his collaborator Massey (2017, 88, original emphasis) specified that, by 2011, “it was evident that though there had been a massive economic crisis, there had been *no* serious unsettling of political and ideological hegemony.”

Since Hall’s death in 2014, there has been further debate about whether neoliberalism holds, much of it driven by perceived challenges to neoliberal logic by right-wing politics in the US and UK. While Hall stressed the continuity of neoliberalism from the 1980s into the twenty-first century (Gilbert 2019), Fraser (2017) argues that neoliberalism mutated into “progressive neoliberalism” by the 1990s, a formation that combined free-market distribution with an inclusive and meritocratic system of recognition. Trump’s economic posturing in the 2016 campaign appeared to signal a shift toward populist distribution and, consequently, a possible challenge to neoliberalism. Instead, according to Fraser, his four years in office cemented the winner-takes-all distributive logic that marks the neoliberal conjuncture. Trump did, however, inaugurate a “hyper-reactionary politics of recognition” (Fraser 2017), a challenge to the hegemony of progressive neoliberalism but too unstable a project to constitute a true counter-hegemonic effort. Writing on Britain—where conjunctural analysis is a thriving tradition—Gilbert (2019, 16) cites “the very strong evidence for the breakdown of neoliberal hegemony,” a dissolution marked by youth commitments tending left, an emboldened English nationalism housed within the Conservative Party, and neoliberal elites who combine a beguiling mix of staying power and impotence. The task here is not to agree with Fraser and Gilbert over Hall, or vice versa, but rather to outline the stakes and scale of the questions raised by the concepts of hegemonic project and conjuncture.

Hall’s political sociology invites grand introspection, but this is not to suggest political analysis needs to be weighed down by such considerations. Given the scale of conjunctural analysis, it is not likely we will be able to analyze whether a conjuncture has ended until after the dust has settled. The important lesson for right-wing studies is that analysis of politics should be grounded in long-term cultural, political, and economic dynamics as far as we know them. In the US, that means recognizing the role of the racial order in politics, as Hochschild’s honor squeeze demonstrates. And as with her structural squeeze, it also means recognizing the economic condition of twinned mass precarity and corporate wealth. It matters whether we call this neoliberalism, late neoliberalism, or something else, but it is not central to every question worth asking.

The structural squeeze and the honor squeeze have been part of the present conjuncture since its inception. They are also deeply connected—the GOP “nationalized southern white identity” (Maxwell and Shields 2019, 336) at the same time as it embraced free-

10 This text is a concise demonstration of Hall’s approach to conjunctural analysis. For an influential conjunctural analysis of the US, see Grossberg (2015)

market policies during the 1960s and 1970s. However, a third interrelated trend is reaching a state of longevity that warrants inclusion in conjunctural analysis—political polarization. According to political scientists Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022), polarization has matured into what they term the calcification of politics. In the US, polarization denotes a state where the two parties are clearly differentiated *and* internally united. But in calcification, among partisans, there is “less willingness to defect from their party” (6), so that even dramatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic are unable to shuffle sides. The emergence of calcification has coincided with strategic parity, so that national elections are decided by narrower margins than in years past, when a route like Reagan’s 1984 victory over Walter Mondale was possible.

Polarization must be central to any contemporary use of Hall’s political sociology because its effects reach beyond the ballot box to culture—where partisan identity correlates with a slew of ostensibly nonpolitical preferences—and to the economy—where partisan gamesmanship may lead the US over a fiscal cliff. Beyond its conjunctural impacts, however, polarization generates productive tension with the concept of hegemonic project. There are two tempting and competing perspectives. First, because polarization is arranged around a racial cleavage, one could argue such conflict cements neoliberalism by diverting political conflict away from economic distribution and toward social recognition, a view compatible with Fraser’s take above. Second, and in contrast, one could argue the calcification of difference between two increasingly cohesive parties speaks to an abandonment of hegemonic projects.¹¹ Instead of seeking to rewrite common sense writ large, the parties are focused on the construction of distinct political hegemonies limited to their partisan camps.¹² In this view, the threat to political stability is so great that economic stability is threatened—and thus the conjuncture, too. Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck highlight a related dynamic, namely that the parity of calcification leads parties to seek victory not through persuasion—an aspect of hegemonic politics—but by altering election rules. For the GOP, this has entailed passing restrictive voting laws and inserting partisan actors into electoral bureaucracies. The term hegemonic carries a negative valence, but framed as a foil to the politics of our times, Hall’s political sociology illustrates how hegemonic projects are also an effort at unity. Sussing out what polarization means at the conceptual level where hegemonic politics meet the conjuncture is a vital task for right-wing studies.

11 De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2015) raise a similar distinction through the concepts of integral and traditional parties, with the former referring to parties that aspire to transform society.

12 As scholars have argued (e.g., Hunter 1991), the right’s hegemonic camp is motivated by “culture war” fears that the left is about to achieve, or has achieved, hegemony.

Conjuncture / Political Subjectivity

What makes Hall's political sociology a relational cycle is that he insists on connecting the tectonic movements of conjunctures with subjective experiences on the ground. This movement from history to individuals returns us to the terrain of *Strangers*, where the two squeezes produce experientially what Hall ([1984a] 2017, 212) calls "the contradictory raw materials" on which efforts at political articulation work. Hochschild takes us into this dynamic by documenting the economic and cultural experiences of her subjects and connecting them to historical currents reaching back to the 1960s and 1860s. As *Strangers* demonstrates, ethnographic analysis is a powerful lens for the study of the connections between conjunctural contradictions and political subjectivities.¹³ Since 2016, there has been a slew of outstanding studies that attempt to trace conjunctural-level developments down into the workings of particular worldviews, including Silva's (2019) ethnographic study of a struggling coal town, which focuses on the structural and honor squeezes; and Elcioglu's (2020) work on political activism along the US southern border, which spotlights polarization.

Did Hochschild offer us a definitive take on the emotional grooves of the present, or are there others to consider, especially given the rise of polarization as a conjunctural force? Public opinion scholars have begun to investigate a rising dynamic, one less amenable to ethnographic observation and Hochschild's politics of reconciliation—radicalism and political violence. In the study of domestic mass politics, violence is a topic political science has long ignored (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, 3), instead emphasizing the relatively tame theme of affective polarization. Such a construct is typically measured through feeling thermometers, which quiz respondents on how cold or warm they feel about partisan others (Iyengar et al. 2019).

As the political scientists Kalmoe and Mason argue, such questions fail to capture the depth of political radicalism. The pair began fielding surveys in 2017 that focused on two features of radical partisanship—moral disengagement and violence. Moral disengagement is the vilification or othering of partisan adversaries, a mental move that "rationalize[s] harming opponents" (2022, 42). Measures for this include questions concerning whether a partisan other is "evil" or "fully human." To measure violence, the scholars asked if, in support of one's politics, a respondent approves of threatening messages, harassment, or the use of violence.

Moral disengagement was widespread across their study. In November 2017, around 40 percent of Republicans agreed that Democrats are "evil," a number that increased to just under 70 percent by early 2021, a peak reached after Trump lost the White House. A similar trend is visible in their survey data on beliefs that Democrats are not "fully human," which climbed from 20 to just over 40 percent. Characterizing violence as "justified" was more muted but still meaningful, rising from a bit under 10 percent to

13 Such a move is consistent with sociology's extended case method tradition (Burawoy 1998).

20 percent. A more specific question, fielded only in early 2021, asked, “How much do you feel it is justified for [Republicans] to kill opposing political leaders to advance their political goals these days?” Twelve percent of Republicans called such assassinations “at least ‘a little bit’ justified.” As the authors emphasize, generalizing out suggests millions “endorse assassinating US leaders” (Kalmoe and Mason 2022, 69).

Theorizing these findings within Hall’s political sociology requires reckoning with his entire relational cycle. Because these feelings are targeted at partisan others, Kalmoe and Mason are measuring a facet of political subjectivity that has already been articulated. Though not explicitly using the language of Hall, they note the role of elites in this process, writing that as moral disengagement climbed through the Trump years, “[the president] and Republican media outlet Fox News publicly rationalized right-wing violence—including murders—encouraging their Republican followers to see the violence as not just excusable, but necessary” (62). They also stress the longer-running hegemonic project of the GOP, which they argue began forging a bloc of white Christians after the Civil Rights Movement splintered Democrats.¹⁴ The mass effects of this project are, in part, polarization arranged around racial identity and views on racial others, a conjunctural-level development generating radical partisanship. And while the study was of opinions and not actions, in a threat assessment, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS 2020) wrote that from 2018 through 2019 half of the sixteen deadly domestic terror attacks and thirty-nine of forty-eight resultant deaths were attributed to white supremacists.

Despite right-wing violence far exceeding left-wing violence, Kalmoe and Mason emphasize that until Trump’s election loss, measures for moral disengagement and violence were quite similar across the two parties. This may suggest parallel deep stories—perhaps plotted around opposing trenches rather than a wait in line—but they emphasize that the causes of radical partisanship are opposed. Both parties may vilify their opponents via moral disengagement, but “white Republicans are doing so largely in defense of a racist system that they refuse to acknowledge, while white Democrats vilify more when they recognize racism’s role in holding Black Americans back” (81).¹⁵

After cycling through articulation, hegemonic projects, the conjuncture, and back down to political subjectivities stamped by radicalism, it is clear Hochschild’s empathy wall may be too tall to climb. A politics of reconciliation is strategically ill suited for political subjectivities articulated into radical subjectivities that deny the humanity

14 This racial cleavage has even deeper roots in the history of US settler colonialism and slavery, a point Kalmoe and Mason make by reviewing the centrality of racism to national political conflict beginning in 1607. Their historical analysis underscores how domestic political questions are never insulated from global histories. Hall’s analysis of British politics stressed the importance of the nation’s imperial projects, especially how the colonial other shaped ideas of Englishness (e.g., Hall et al. 1978, 147).

15 For Republicans, Kalmoe and Mason also found that sexism was associated with greater moral disengagement.

of political opponents. Despite the gloom of their findings, Kalmoe and Mason offer an optimistic observation pertaining to Democrats: “At no other time in American history has there been a major political party recognizing that racism, religious bigotry, *and* sexism are systemic problems requiring government intervention to ensure equal protection” (167, original emphasis). Blocking this emancipatory political project, of course, is the right. Even if Hochschild’s politics of reconciliation could temper mutual dehumanization, what would cooperation between antiracism and racism achieve?

Conclusion

In this article, I outlined a vision of Hall’s political sociology and applied its relational scheme to the study of the US right. To show off the strengths of Hall’s approach, I contrasted it with Hochschild’s *Strangers*, an early classic in the field. While *Strangers* eloquently portrays the political subjectivities of Southern Tea Party supporters, it fails to reckon with how these views are articulated by political elites, a key concern for Hall. This interest in moving from the ground up in Hall’s political sociology continues toward consideration of hegemonic projects, namely long-running efforts at articulation that shift common sense toward a political end. But far from granting political actors absolute power, Hall’s approach also recognizes that hegemonic efforts must wrestle with the conjuncture, namely the interlocking dynamics of the political, economic, and cultural. Here, Hall’s political sociology crashes back to the ground, as the tectonic movements of conjunctures are defined by contradictions experienced by individuals, stamping their subjectivities with affective grooves that bound the efficacy of articulation.

Through her detailed parsing of political subjectivities, Hochschild succeeds at revealing how policy preferences and identities are felt as much as they are thought. However, this analytic focus on affect also leads her toward a politics of reconciliation, where the antidote to our acrimonious—and violent—political present is conversation-enabled compromise. Such an approach has taken hold in an unusually well-funded corner of sociology, but it fails to reckon with the scale and radical content of hegemonic projects driven by political elites.

Does Hall have a solution of his own, or is he simply a critic content to poke holes in the ideas of others? Though hardly comforting, the analytic spirit of Hall’s sociology is to embrace complexity. For this reason, while he would agree with Kalmoe and Mason that the Democratic Party’s drift to antiracism is a good thing, he would not see a politics of progressive recognition as sufficient. So long as neoliberal distribution holds at the conjunctural level, there will be pain on the ground that is ripe for articulation. It may not be inevitable that this social anxiety is funneled into racism, but history tells us it has happened countless times before. Hall’s embrace of complexity offers no easy answers for what to do, but his relational sociology does provide a heuristic for linking insights from ethnography, institutional analysis, public opinion, history, and more.

What does this say about Hall's politics? If Hochschild stresses reconciliation and compromise, Hall seeks conversion. The only thing that can overcome the maelstrom of our political present is a hegemonic effort that is antiracist by virtue of being broadly anti-neoliberal. Racism fuels radicalism, but opposing neoliberalism is a means to calm the social anxiety rooted in precarity that right-wing politicians articulate with racism. Such a solution is monstrously more difficult than hosting a living room conversation, but it is a conclusion born of the full weight of the insights gleaned by right-wing studies. It is also more easily theorized than done—but there are promising visions. The late Erik Olin Wright (2019) proposed anchoring such a politics in values. The US right is sutured together by an ascriptive racial identity; while this closes off membership, values leave the door open at the same time as they create a focal point for unifying the diverse coalition comprising the US left. Hall's political sociology is attuned to the risks—how an act of articulation can slip into unintended meanings, perhaps tilting a value into service of the right—but it also underlines the cost of inaction.

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