09 Stepping Out of the Bubble of Views: Arlie Hochschild and Rosa Brooks

The Buddha teaches that the tendency of our minds to grasp or cling to things that we experience as pleasant, or to push away things that we experience as unpleasant, is a key conditioning factor that traps us on a treadmill and prevents us making progress on the path to enlightenment.

The Buddha identifies sensual pleasures, rules and observances, and a fixed view of self, as three of the things that we can grasp on to. But there is a fourth category that is subject to clinging or grasping. That fourth category picked out by the Buddha is *views*.

Reviewing several teachings on grasping given by the Buddha in the Pali Canon, Bhikkhu Analayo points out that it is attachment to one's own views that makes it so hard to let go of them. He summarises the Buddha's teaching in this way:

"The cause for unending quarrelling is none other than high esteem for one's own view and the tendency to consequently look down on any other view ...

The problem caused by grasping at views is that 'the dogmatist wishes to safeguard his view at whatever cost, because the refutation of his views means to him defeat and self-degradation' ...

Thus it is precisely grasping in the form of identification with a particular view that leads to dogmatic adherence and various measures to protect the view, to unwillingness to let go of it even when faced with compelling evidence ...

Since to hold any view dogmatically will inevitably lead to conflict with those who have different views, the only real solution is to let go of grasping at views."

Anālayo, Bhikkhu. Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses (pp. 28-30). Pariyatti Publishing. Kindle Edition.

It was a particular concern of the Buddha that the tendency to grasp at views was especially present amongst many of his fellow spiritual seekers and led to bitter disputes.

For me, and I suspect for many others, the greatest present-day concern about grasping at views relates to political views. The world today seems

gripped in a fever of tribalism, of 'us' and 'them', of 'we' and 'the enemy', with an insurmountable barrier between the groups.

This is very evident in the United States of America, particularly in two areas of antagonism between: (a) so-called 'progressive Democrats' and 'right-wing Republicans'; and (b) between Black Lives Matters supporters and supporters of the police. We can see these tendencies reflected in other countries too.

People take safety in their own group or 'bubble', with precious little metta or empathy towards the enemy in their opposing bubble. There's little interest in people as individuals, or in trying to understand what their true feelings and motivations might be. Once people are labelled as belonging to this or that tribe or group that's all you need to know.

To step outside of your own bubble and engage with the enemy as individuals takes courage and time.

The two subjects of my talk today did have the courage to step outside of their bubble and engage with the enemy, to deal with people as individuals.

In her book "*Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*", published in 2016 immediately before the election of Donald Trump as President, sociologist Arlie Hochschild sought to understand the social, cultural, and emotional forces driving right-wing republican views.

A professor at UC Berkeley, seen as a centre of left-wing activism, Hochschild took the step outside of her liberal, progressive bubble to try to understand the world as American conservatives see it.

In her book "*Tangled Up In Blue: Policing The American City*" Rosa Brooks, a law professor, and self-confessed left-winger, describes how she took time out to train up and work as a part-time, reserve police officer with the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington D.C.

She stepped out of her bubble because, as a critic of the police, she thought that if you want to change something, you need to understand it first. And what better way to do that, she thought, than work on the inside.

Let's start with Arlie Hochschild.

Reviewing Anne Case and Angus Deaton's book "Deaths of Despair" in the New York Times in 2020, Arlie Hochschild raised an uncomfortable split in the way liberals and progressives can see people:

"Faced with a coal miner suffering black lung disease, or a laid-off factory hand, liberals feel compassion. Faced, on the other hand, with a man in cowboy boots and red MAGA [Make America Great Again] hat, arms defiantly folded, who dismisses climate science and insults overeducated "snowflakes," many see — and hate — "the enemy."

Yet what if these are one and the same man? Or almost the same man? What if the man in the red MAGA hat has a brother or high school classmate who died of a heroin overdose? What if his buddy on the road crew drove drunk off an embankment at night and no one called it suicide? What if he fears it's too late or too expensive to go to college? If we could ask the men in this book, before they swallowed their last pill or swig of whiskey, or fired their last shot, whom it was they would have voted for in 2016, chances are it would have been for that dogged and aggressive great salesman of hope, Donald Trump."

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/books/review/deaths-of-despair-and-the-future-of-capitalism-anne-case-angus-deaton.html?smid=nytcore-android-share

Leaping to label and dismiss the man as the enemy because of his red MAGA hat, progressives fail to see beyond the label to a story of human suffering. They cannot see beyond an empathy wall built by their own views.

Because of this, Hochschild would argue, progressives and liberals fail to understand that though Donald Trump's policies may not help his voters economically, Trump is connecting at a deeper level, meeting their emotional needs. They feel heard.

Collecting materials for her book Hochschild spent years speaking with and getting to know individual conservative Republicans – so-called Tea Party supporters - living around Lake Charles in southwestern Louisiana. This is an area with historically rich and vibrant cultural traditions.

She wanted to move past the partisan divide, and approach politics by empathically engaging with those on the right.

She set out to inhabit the emotional world of these right-wing Republicans, to try to gain insight into *why* these voters believed what they believed.

And, crucially, to discover why those beliefs might make sense given these voters' experiences.

Hochschild was intrigued by what she calls the Great Paradox.

By this she meant the seemingly contradictory practice among Lake Charles residents of seeing the government as the primary enemy, whilst being surrounded by the noticeable negative impact private industry, especially oil companies and petrochemical plants, has inflicted on Louisiana.

Hochschild wonders why Tea Party supporters blame the government for the problems they encounter rather than seeing the government as a potential solution.

In seeking to understand the Great Paradox, the author focuses on what she calls a "deep story" that explains why they stick with an ideology that seems to run counter to their own interests. It's a story that *feels* as if it were true.

One reviewer of Hochschild's book summarises the 'deep story' in this way. It's based on the metaphor of waiting in line.

"America is a harsh country, but it eventually offers rewards to those who are patient, disciplined and determined.

In that sense, the American dream is like waiting in line: It isn't just a free lunch, but takes respect, self-control and resilience.

Yet for all manner of reasons, to do with welfare, immigration, globalisation and identity politics, the rules of waiting in line no longer seem to be properly upheld, at least from the perspective of these poor rural Louisianans.

Some people are cutting in, sometimes the line seems to be moving backwards, and those overseeing the line (the federal government) don't seem to have any recollection of how long some people have been waiting nor any respect for their powers of self-discipline.

Liberals seem to feel far more sympathy for the person who can't wait, than they do for the one who can. Worst of all, they make it obligatory for everyone else to share that sympathy ('political correctness')."

There's a bitterness born of real suffering that lies beneath their views.

In 2022 Hochschild wrote how a man in his 40s from the state of Kentucky complained to her that people like him are blamed for their own problems, but, he exclaimed, "they don't see all the things we've lost — good jobs, closeness to family, community trust, a debt-free life, pride."

There's a great danger in this situation, concludes Arlie Hochschild, "because a loss has for too long gone unrecognized, and because a lie that ties itself to this loss can feel more compelling to some than a truth that ignores it."

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/13/books/review/luke-mogelson-storm-is-here.html?smid=nytcore-android-share

Now on to Rosa Brooks, author of "Tangled Up In Blue. Policing The American City".

In the book she describes what she experienced after joining the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington D.C. as a part-time reserve officer.

A professor of law, she is the daughter of a famous American left-wing activist and writer Barbara Ehrenreich who died in 2022.

When she heard that her daughter was joining police force, Barbara Ehrenreich was horrified. "The police are the enemy," she declared.

She told her daughter that she ought to be out organizing for social change rather than serving as a part-time cop.
It was a particularly tense time of Black Lives Matter, accusations of police racism, and calls to defund the police. For a left-winger seemingly to become one of the enemy was unthinkable.
But, in the end, pleased by her daughter's findings and recommendations for police training reforms, some of which led to official implementation, Ehrenreich essentially tells her daughter proudly that she *done good*.
So, what did Rosa Brooks find?

In the book she brings out the many different factors that all feed into the interactions between police officers and members of the community.

Yes, there are racists and bigots, and yes, the police unions resist progressive reform, and yes, structural racism explains a great deal including the deprivation and behaviour patterns in particular neighbourhoods, but she explains:

"The title of the book, from the famous Bob Dylan song—not only did that seem to aptly summarize my own sense of having become entangled in this complicated world of policing, but my sense that in the world of policing, *the brutality and the racism are all tangled up with compassion and courage.*"

She focuses on the lack of appropriate training, as when she highlights the lack of proper training in awareness of the social and racial history of particular neighbourhoods.

Moreover, her argument is that a lot of the time when the police overreact and pull out a gun, it's because they're scared and they don't feel physically prepared to handle a threat without a gun—and so they reach for that gun.

She recounts this incident:

"Everyone you meet here would be happy to kill you," Officer Murphy told me, "That's what you have to remember."

It was my first night as a patrol officer, and Murphy was showing me the ropes.

"Everyone? You think even the little old ladies here want to kill me?" I asked.

Murphy gave me a tight smile. "All right, *almost* everyone. But you have to watch out for some of these old ladies."

She goes on:

"It wasn't the first time I had heard this sentiment. When I joined the Reserve Corps of Washington, D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department, I went through the same police academy training as full-time career officers, and it often seemed that the primary lesson of our training was

the same one Murphy tried to drive home on my first post-academy patrol shift: *Anyone can kill you at any time.*"

She argues that if you simultaneously give people more training in de-escalation and communication skills and more physical self-confidence, they're going to be a whole lot less likely to reach for that gun. They feel like, "I can handle this. I can afford to stand here and chat and see if we can sort this out, because I know that I can take care of myself without having to shoot somebody." That's an example, she says, of the kind of training program that she thinks more cities and states should be adopting.

https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-21/police-academy-danger-violence

There's much more detail of the complexity of policing in the book but Rosa Brooks, I think, illustrates the value of not being bound in advance by your views.

To conclude, when we practice the metta bhavana meditation and engage in the fourth stage with the difficult person , or the enemy, we are encouraged to try to get beyond the label, to imagine them as human beings like us, subject to suffering.

We are trying to weaken the empathy wall that exists between us and engage with openness and kindness.

Rosa Brooks and Arlie Hochschild are to be admired for daring to step outside of their bubbles and engage with the enemy. They teach us the importance of taking the methods we are taught to use in meditation and applying them in everyday life. They remind us of the Buddha's stress on the need to let go of grasping on to views.

Link to recording:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/812w3z7xfgzxyryq7hmeb/09-English-only-Hochschild-and-Brooks.MP3?rlkey=00ojsdxf63tfhfa8k9hr1zxz6&dl=0