

Profile Of a Progressive Gun Enthusiast

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I was returning with other volunteers in our fire department's SUV after our community training course. This was last autumn, not long after the Republican Party convention. Not unreasonably, our conversation during the long drive home turned to Donald Trump. Frank, usually rather taciturn, turned to a younger member of our crew with uncharacteristic passion: "They'll take all our guns away. Wait and see," he declared. Frank was not applauding Trump as much as he was cursing a generic government which he sees threatening his right to own guns. Frank proceeded determinedly to declare how the US government is encroaching on our lives- not his life, ours- with its excessive regulations: "Look around us here, look at this beautiful country! They want to control it. Just leave the land alone", he pleaded.

Frank hunts deer and turkeys in season and is a proud owner of several guns. But I wouldn't describe Frank as right-wing or violent. He volunteers his time to the local fire department, he opposes fracking (oil and gas drilling technology that has aroused much debate and warnings from environmentalists), and his simple dream is to buy land in the next county to build a small farm. Despite his support for Trump's candidacy, I felt Frank was neither attacking Democrats nor hailing Republicans. (He is dissatisfied, or fearful- doubtless partly due to his bleak job outlook.) I suspect that he championed the Republican front-runner as someone who offers him better odds that his prospects will improve.

I first met Frank at our community fire hall. He was stretched out under one of the fire engines attaching a trailer hitch to the chassis. He happily spent several hours there, wrench in hand, shirt soiled, grunting and chuckling. As a volunteer first-responder, Frank is provided with accident insurance, but only if injured on a call. Neither he nor his wife—she works as a waitress for minimum wage at a local café- nor their son has family health protection.

As a part-time house painter with a local contractor, Frank's income is low. He left New Jersey for upstate New York two years ago because, at forty-five, he had back problems and had to quit his previous job stacking cement blocks. Notwithstanding his affection for guns—I think it's the mechanics of guns that he enjoys, similar to his fondness for his old truck and his motorbike- Frank holds values which people identifying as 'liberal' would consider progressive. He's an organic food enthusiast, for example. And what he can't grow in the back garden (of his rented house), he willingly pays premium prices for at organic markets. The family's eggs come from hens he feeds with organic fodder. Not unreasonably, he prides himself on his discerning tastes: he prepares sushi and sashimi, his favorite food. And he drinks only 'craft beer', a new industry popular with young liberals. With his wife, Frank visits nearby towns to compare local brews- a favorite evening pastime for them.

Although Frank highlights gun ownership in his politics, I doubt if guns are what really draws him to Trump. In fact many people I know in our town who are keen hunters are actually Democrats. (N.Y.'s Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, like Bernie Sanders, endorses the sport and thereby supports gun ownership.) It's complicated, as they say.

Americans residing outside metropolises are not as simplistic and monocultural—nor are they 'racist'—as news articles purport. Gun owners like Frank who live in rural areas (Trump Country?) really do not fit the one-dimensional mould others with different hobbies cast them in. I see no evidence that Frank and fellow beer aficionados are more ignorant, bigoted, intolerant, or racist than anyone else.

This corresponds to what the prolific sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild concludes from her experience in Louisiana. Her fine new book, Strangers in Their Own Land, is based on [her comprehensive five-year study of Lake Charles](https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062300546/hillbilly-elegy), an "arch-conservative Louisiana bayou" community. A timely project employing anthropology research methods, Hochschild's work was published just as America's deep cultural fault lines were exposed during the recent presidential campaign. Hochschild's story of "anger and mourning in the American right" portrays a community unlike what outsiders have ever seen and known: their members are kind, religious, and not at all intolerant. (This picture is reinforced by another recent release, the memoir Hillbilly Elegy

<https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062300546/hillbilly-elegy>.)

Indeed, they reject accusations of racism from our 'liberal press'. And they can argue convincingly for their conservative positions. Their stories, recorded by Hochschild in extensive and vivid biographies, expose ambiguities and differences among people impacted by industrial pollution and low employment prospects. The wider public and journalists in particular would do well to make note of the detailed picture this highly skilled scholar provides.

Still I would caution that we not accept Hochschild's portrait as exclusive to this 'far-right' (Trump Country) corner of America. Conditions she describes, I would argue, are not confined to a depressed, industry-exploited region. There's a danger that we assume Lake Charles, Louisiana, represents an alien and unworthy hinterland of the American south. (Examining election statistics for New York, we'd be shocked to learn that in this proudly 'liberal state', only 19.7 % of registered voters cast ballots during recent presidential primaries, a record that is second worst in the country to—guess where? Louisiana.)

What most disturbs me is not the character of these communities, or Frank's mixed values. More troubling is how putative 'liberals' view fellow Americans who are Republican Party supporters as personally and culturally deficient. (Did you notice the distinction pre-election pollsters made of non-college educated and college graduates?)

In October, at Democratic Party candidates' field offices in my district, I overheard shockingly derisive comments from volunteer canvassers about Republican opponents (comments overlooked by the presiding field officer). If uttered by 'conservatives', there'd be accusations (from 'liberals') of bigotry and racism.

Had I not known about Frank's fondness for Japanese sushi, seen his pride that his 14-year-old son forgoes cafeteria meals at school for the organic sandwiches prepared by his father, and had I not witnessed Frank's commitment to our fire department and his care for his

garden, I might have assigned him to 'Trump Country' and kept my distance.

Maybe because I'm an anthropologist and journalist, I'm curious to know Frank; I can easily approach him to learn about his life and his ideals. Most Americans who consider themselves 'liberal' would remain aloof from Frank, if not out of some irrational fear, then due to a perceived class or occupational divide. This is worrisome. And I'm not the first observer now questioning the real nature (perhaps the myth) of 'liberal' America. It's evident that this sector of our citizenry is less well informed than it believes it is, more driven by emotion and prejudice than it realizes. And it harbors dangerous biases. Perhaps it is itself guilty of racism. The November 8th election results exposed 'liberals' imprudence of being better educated and more qualified for leadership as misguided. As one Marxist Nepali critic I recently spoke to observed of Clinton's much heralded pre-election rally in Pennsylvania with music celebrities: "They went to the concert to see the stars, not her."

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