

# Editorial: Worrying about Trust

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In the last few decades, the subject of trust has become one of the central research topics in sociology and political science. Various theoretical approaches have crystallized, and an immense amount of empirical data has been collected. The focus on trust is for two kinds of reasons. One has to do with immanent developments in the social sciences. We have witnessed a turn from almost exclusive preoccupation with the macro-social level, that is the organizational, systemic or structuralist images of society, toward the micro-foundations of social life; that is, everyday actions and interactions, including their ‘soft’ dimensions, mental and cultural intangibles and imponderables. Another set of reasons has to do with the changing quality of social structures and social processes in the late-modern period. The ascendancy of democracy means that the role of human agency is growing, and more depends on what common people think and do, how they feel toward others and toward their rulers and how they choose to participate and cooperate. The process of globalization means that more and more of the factors impinging on everyday life of people are non-transparent, unfamiliar and distant, demanding new type of attitudes. The expansion of risk means that people have to act more often than before in conditions of uncertainty. The traumas of rapid, comprehensive and often unexpected social change produce disorientation and a loss of existential security. If the ambition of sociology to become the reflexive awareness of society is to be realized, then the current interest in trust seems to be wholly warranted. In our time, the issue of trust cannot any longer be taken for granted, it has become a problematic and pressing concern of common people and sociologists alike.

One important line of research on trust has focused on so-called ‘vertical trust’, ‘political trust’ or ‘public trust’, meaning trust toward government and other institutions of the state (as opposed to ‘horizontal trust’, among common people). Increasing evidence indicates that ‘vertical trust’ in rulers and institutions of rule has been consistently decaying and turning to indifference and active distrust. Strangely enough, this is parallel to the expansion and consolidation of democratic regimes across the world. This puzzle, and the empirical data supporting it, has pushed the interest of sociologists toward the dark, reverse face of trust – the

phenomenon of distrust. It has stopped being treated as a residual category in the dominating concern with trust, but has become recognized as a problem in its own right.

The recent collection of articles edited by the eminent French political scientist and sociologist Mattei Dogan, *Political Mistrust and Discrediting of Politicians* (London and Boston: Brill, 2005) provides ample support for the claim indicated by its title. The volume is comparative. On the basis of the World Value Survey and European Value Study, the editor discusses the levels of distrust in 30 European democracies, and then pays special attention to Britain and Italy. In several places in the argument Dogan mentions the special case of post-communist societies, pervaded with particularly acute distrust. Then, in the following chapters, the various configurations of trust–distrust are presented by other contributors for Latin America, Southeast Asia, and selected countries from the two ends of the spectrum: Norway and Nigeria, with France lying somewhere in between. The last part of the book includes two case studies, which trace the process through which the decay of trust may lead to the crisis of legitimacy. One describes the rejection of the political class in Argentina following the experiences of military rule, and another, a set of contingent events that prevented the outright civil war in France during the wave of protest in 1968.

While focusing on empirical data, the authors do not hesitate to propose possible explanations. The relative deprivation hypothesis points to rising popular aspirations contrasting with stagnating socio-economic performance. When this is blamed – rightly or wrongly – on the inefficiency of the government or the incompetence of the whole political class, political distrust is the likely result. A related observation emphasizes the importance of growing social distances, and their visibility and conspicuousness, for the emergence of distrust. The moral decay hypothesis points to the political class and its falling standards of conduct.

The corruption hypothesis claims that the spreading of corruption, unravelled by repeated political scandals, leads to ‘moral panics’ (over-generalization of the single cases of crime, deviance or pathology in social awareness) and results in the withdrawal of trust. The value-change hypothesis involves the uncertainty, or ‘anomie’ resulting from the change of regime (as in East-Central Europe), or the clash of values due to accelerated inter-generational change (as in leading West European societies). The social capital hypothesis links distrust with the erosion of the civic community, falling membership in associations and reduction of interpersonal networks. The mass-media hypothesis points to the negative bias in presentation of political events and political leaders, overemphasizing incompetence or immoral conduct, at the expense of success and honesty. The accountability hypothesis looks for the reasons of distrust in the inefficiency of institutions intended to monitor and control governmental abuses, and to enforce standards of politics (the judiciary, constitutional courts, arbitration tribunals,

auditing agencies etc). Finally, the secularization hypothesis is based on a similar argument, namely that, with the decay of belief and practice of religion, political leaders do not feel responsible before God, the ultimate (even if only imagined) agency of accountability.

This list has all the flavor of ad-hoc explanations and shows that we are still far from any consistent and confirmed theory of distrust. Some hypotheses may also raise doubts. For example, one can argue that corruption is not a cause of distrust, but rather its effect. When one does not expect beneficial decisions or policies from an institution, the remaining way to satisfy one's interests may be to purchase them with bribes or by 'connections'. Similarly, one can argue that the link of distrust with the condition of 'civic community' is not simple. Public distrust may lead to the escape of the people towards a private domain of associations, clubs, friendship circles, spontaneous initiatives, social movements, 'vigilantism', and in this way to the strengthening of civic community. Perhaps in both cases there appears this typical quality of social life, the circularity or dialectic loops in social processes. In the case of corruption it may well be that it arises as a functional substitute for trust, a response to widespread distrust. But then it independently influences even deeper distrust, when the awareness of corruption is generalized and turns into a moral panic. This would be an example of a vicious circle. In the case of civic community, once it is strengthened as the escape from, or defense against, widespread public distrust, it may start to rebuild trust from below. This would be an example of a benign loop.

An interesting puzzle, which is not faced by the author of this book, is the parallel decay of trust both in the old, established democracies and in the new, post-authoritarian democracies. Different as they may be in so many respects they nevertheless show almost identical trends with respect to trust. Perhaps one more hypothesis could be considered: the common underlying factor could be a pervasive and comprehensive process of globalization. One could argue that generalized trust emerges in the conditions of stability, transparency of the structures and mechanisms of society, clarity and coherence of the rules of social life, familiarity of the social milieu, and efficient operation of institutions of accountability enforcing and sanctioning trustworthiness. Globalization seems to undermine all these conditions. The world is like a speeding 'juggernaut' (Anthony Giddens), the transnational flows and supranational institutions create 'global complexity' (John Urry) often completely opaque to common people; normative chaos or anomie is the result of mixing and clashing of cultures, people feel estranged from the environment of their life. The supranational agencies of accountability are only at the early phase of institutionalization and the resulting uncertainty, disorientation and anxiety breeds generalized distrust.

It is an interesting aspect of the social sciences and humanities that the very act of thinking and discussing problems may help to solve them. The current

debate on trust may hopefully contribute to the turning of the tide and initiating slow repair of the decaying moral tissue of modern society.

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