

# Taking a bet with ourselves Can we put trust in trust?

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**Kurzgefasst:** Soziales und politisches Vertrauen geben den Sozialwissenschaftlichen Rätseln auf. Wir wissen, dass es unabdingbar für ein glückliches, erfolgreiches und stabiles Zusammenleben ist, aber niemand weiß, wie man Vertrauen herstellt. Die aktuelle Forschung stellt überkommene Theorien über den Ursprung von Vertrauen in Frage, und es wird heftig debattiert: Lernt man Vertrauen als Kind? Können staatliche und gesellschaftliche Institutionen es erzeugen – etwa die Polizei, die Gerichte, die Rechtsordnung? Eines steht fest: Vertrauen ist ein zartes Pflänzchen, und die Furcht ist weit verbreitet, Regierungen könnten eine Politik betreiben, die Vertrauen untergräbt.

**Summary:** Social and political trust are big puzzle for social scientists. We know that trust is an essential ingredient of a happy, successful and stable society, but no one knows how to produce it. Modern research casts doubt on age old theories of its origins, and there is a debate about whether it is learned at an early age and is an integral part of the core personality, or whether it is generated externally by the institutions of state and society – notably the police, courts, and the rule of law. One thing is sure, however: trust is a delicate flower that is easily destroyed and many fear that governments are enacting policies that undermine it.

Trust has been described as “the chicken soup of social life”, meaning that it seems to be something that cures and prevents all kinds of social problems, just as mum made chicken soup when we went down with a cold or flu, or any other illness for that matter. This is not a new idea. Confucius claimed that trust, food and weapons are the essentials of successful government – food because a well fed population is unlikely to be a revolutionary one, trust because when there is a shortage of food, there is less likely to be revolution if citizens trust the government to solve the problem, and weapons for the government in case both food and trust are exhausted.

Since Confucius many social thinkers have given trust a prime importance in their theories. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke wrote about its importance for a civilised democratic society. Adam Smith said it was essential for efficient economic transactions. Alexis de Tocqueville believed that trust, and the voluntary organisations that helped to create it, was the basis of a stable democracy, an idea passed on by John Stuart Mill, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber to modern social science. Now economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and psychologists are all busy writing and researching the topic.

There is indeed a lot of evidence that trust, in both its social and political forms, has a surprisingly wide and unexpected variety of roles in our lives. Research suggests that the trusting live longer and are healthier, happier and more successful. Trusting societies are more economically advanced, have less corruption, and are more democratic. The citizens of high trust states are more likely to pay their taxes and to get better and more efficient public services in return. Trusting communities have lower crime rates and better school results. Trusting individuals are more likely to help others and, as a result it seems, are more likely to be happy and satisfied with their own lives. Trust is no magic cure for all the ailments of modern life, but it seems to be associated with all sorts of good things and it seems to present some sort of protection against all sorts of bad things.

If so, then we might be able to improve the common lot enormously by increasing levels of trust. But how are we to set about doing this? One problem is that trust involves risk. To trust others we have to take a bet with ourselves that they will not betray our trust. This makes trust a calculated risk based on our knowledge and experience of the world, which is why small children trust until they learn differently. Another problem is that we do not know how trust is created. We can easily see that in small tribal society and in small and closed local communities trust can be built on close personal knowledge and experience of others. Similarly in modern society most people tend to trust their family, close neighbours, friends, and (sometimes) their colleagues at work. But the cities of modern large scale societies such as Germany, the USA and Japan have been described as “societies of strangers” and they involve constant interaction with large numbers of unknown or little known others. Why should we trust the people we pass in a dark street late at night, or those who might short-change you in a shop, or business contacts who might go back on their word? When we get on a plane we have to trust the pilot, the maintenance men and the safety crew, and when we drive on the *autobahn* we have to trust that other drivers are not drunk or reckless in charge of their lethal weapon.

How can we instill trust in society? One argument is that we can best do it in the way recommended by de Tocqueville by building up voluntary associations of

people who built up confidence in each other by close interaction in pursuit of their common interests. Voluntary associations like choirs, football teams, community associations, and bird-watching societies are said to create the “habits of the heart” of mutual understanding and co-operation. The difficulty here, however, is that a huge amount of research has produced rather little robust evidence that voluntary activity does much for social trust. It seems as likely that trusting people are more likely than distrusting ones to join associations, than associations generate trust between their members. However, it may not be all voluntary associations that generate trust but a special type, the “bridging associations” that bring people of different religion, class, language and ethnicity. One could imagine that they might well produce the empathy and understanding for others that facilitate trust between different social types. But the further problem here is that most voluntary associations are highly segmented in terms of social and economic differences. Churches are often stratified by class, language, nationality and, of course, by religion. Choirs are usually composed (for-give the pun) of middle class educated people. Sport is also stratified by class – think horse riding and darts, rowing and snooker, archery and ten pin-bowling. Local football teams are made up of young and middle aged males who live in the same area and have the same social background. In any case, voluntary associations take up comparatively little time and attention compared with schools, work and the home, and have accordingly less influence on how we think and behave.

One thing is beginning to emerge from the research, however, is that particular trust is not incompatible with general trust. Particular trust is trust in known others (friends, family, neighbours) and general trust, of greater importance for modern society, is trust in unknown others (other religion, class, language, ethnicity or culture). For a long time many writers have claimed that particular or in-group trust is incompatible with general or outgroup trust – the more we trust people like us the less we trust those unlike us. This turns out, according to the most recent surveys, not to be true. On the contrary, particular trust in a small circle of known others seems to be the basis of general trust in a wide circle of unknown others. And both of these, in turn, are the basis of trust in political leaders and in government institutions such as parliament, cabinets, courts, and public bureaucracies. The good news is that there seems to a fairly close but complex relationship between particular and general social trust, and between these two and political trust. They do not go hand in hand, but they do have some close connections.

Another thing emerging from research is that trust is as much a top-down feature of society as a bottom-up one. We tend to think of trust in individual terms, as a psychological feature of the core personality in which some people are trusting and others not. Perhaps we learn to trust at our mother’s knee in a secure, loving and optimistic relationship that marks us for life and which we carry around with us from one situation to another and from one personal relationship to another. Others less fortunate in their choice of parents and life experiences may be more suspicious, pessimistic and distrustful throughout life in a wide variety of different situations. There is likely to be more than a little truth in these suggestions but they do not rule out another diagnosis.

Some of the more important institutions in modern society are designed to prevent or punish untrustworthy behaviour, most notably the police and the courts. It seems that the rule of law, and all the institutional mechanisms designed to protect it, are a powerful influence on trust levels in society. Not only that, but there are many other features of the social system that try to do the same. The *autobahns* are patrolled by police and monitored by speed traps and cameras to ensure civilised driving. The airlines are controlled by public agencies to ensure that pilots are properly trained professionals and that safety and maintenance crews do their job properly. Hence we are more likely to trust our lives to Lufthansa, KLM, and Swiss Air than we are to Air Crash or Air Vomit headquartered in some remote banana republic. In the western world, where trust levels are high, our doctors, lawyers, businessmen, teachers, social workers, professors, bridge builders, architects, and manufacturers of household consumer goods and producers of food are regulated and monitored by public agen-



(Foto: David Ausserhofer)

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cies that are designed to maintain the trustworthiness and reliability of the providers of goods and services on which we rely. How trusting would we be if we lived in a society where people spied on each other, the police were corrupt, and public officials exercised a full range of prejudices? And how trusting can we afford to be in our own very different society?

Imagine climbing into a taxi outside Copenhagen airport late at night. Would you trust the taxi driver? Now imagine climbing into a taxi driven by exactly the same person late at night in Bogotá, one of the most crime ridden cities in the world. Would you trust the same driver in Bogotá as much as in Copenhagen? Probably not and the difference is the set of public institutions that regulate trustworthiness in the two countries and bring sanctions to bear on those who betray trust. This leads one to wonder about the consequences of further government deregulation of society. Will it be similar to the consequences of the deregulation of the banking industry in the 1990s and 2000s? Apart from anything else, deregulation in the western world has created greater income inequality, and trust is a first cousin to income equality.

This brings us to a last point. We know rather little about what promotes general social trust, apart from the close association with some general considerations such as democracy, good government, economic development, equality and the rule of law. But we do know something about what destroys trust and it seems to be comparatively easy to destroy trust and difficult to build it. Trust is low, as one would expect, in crime ridden and corrupt societies. It is also low in poor and economically unequal societies. The greater the gap between the rich and the poor the more people are likely to distrust each other. Trust is low in undemocratic countries, where the rule of law is weak. One has only to reflect on the experience of totalitarian political systems, where citizens rights are not protected and everyone has good reason to be suspicious of other, to realise how the political system determines a climate of social and political distrust.

It is extremely difficult to say what is cause and what is effect in this tangled set of intermingled associations. Are societies trustful because they are economically egalitarian, or are they equal because citizens trust each other and, therefore, more willing to pay taxes for mutual support and more willing to trust politicians and bureaucrats to make good use of their tax money? Does democracy help us to build trust, or is it the other way round because trust is an essential pre-requisite for democracy? We may never be able to sort out which comes first in a very satisfactory way, but one thing is sure: social and political trust are deeply embedded in a set of characteristics that help to make civilized life satisfactory and pleasurable. Trust goes hand in hand with democracy, equality, good government, the rule of law, happiness, health, optimism, and an ability to co-operate with others. Trusting societies are peaceful, happy, co-operative, and well integrated and stable. Their citizens have a sense of the common good and community interest and they are prepared to work together for mutual interests. Without trust it would be too dangerous to get out of bed in the morning, and that makes it worth a very careful study indeed.

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