



Trust: A Pragmatics of Social Life?

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September, 2022



Trust exposes and discloses the social. But the heterogeneity and even excessiveness of meaning in the concept—its overdetermination, its multifariousness and multiformity, its downright *fuzziness*—suggests that “the social” revealed by trust itself varies.

An example: Scholarly investigations of trust often separate interpersonal from institutional trust, or indeed, rehearse a story about the transition from the former to the latter in the production of modernity. The former is typically understood as obtaining in narrow circles of familiar relations, the latter in terms



of the diffuse links among acquaintances and strangers in larger collectives.

Famously, there's Simmel:

“Without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate, for very few relationships are based entirely upon what is known with certainty about another person, and very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as, or stronger than, rational proof or personal observation.”

(Simmel 1978: 179)

We can also point to Anthony Giddens and a host of others arguing, following Simmel, that modernity is marked by a shift from personal to impersonal trust. In the modern world, the story goes, trust is objective and formal, fostered not by face-to-face contact but through abstract systems or principles, from technical expertise to bureaucracy to money.

Similarly, Durkheim's moral account of solidarity—that pre- or non-contractual element of mutual trust that positions trust as a function for cementing social cohesion—offers a foundation for both classic sociological treatments of trust and ethnographic accounts of reciprocal relations. For example, the concept of *confianza* figures prominently in Larissa Adler Lomnitz's exploration of social networks in the peri-urban outskirts of late 1960s/early 1970s Mexico City. For Lomnitz, *confianza* is a kind of interpersonal trust that, while not a “residue of pre-modern societies,” nonetheless acts as a kind of “cement” or “glue” that “produce[s] cohesion” as a result of “a mutual desire and disposition to initiate and maintain a relationship of reciprocal exchange” (Lomnitz 1977: 198, 134).

The point is that you can unfurl a whole theory of society and sociality from trust, which acts as a dense conceptual centre in these tellings, like a tightly folded piece of origami, which can be unfolded and refolded into new shapes.

Another example: More recently, a more cognitive approach to trust has taken hold in the social sciences. This approach treats trust as solution to information



asymmetry. Trust is a kind of choice we make under conditions of uncertainty to evaluate, as rationally as possible, the interests and predictability of other actors' behaviour. Trustworthiness is simply the effect of one's capacity to assess others' motivations with regard to one's own and estimate their future actions. Here, trust becomes probabilistic, a threshold point on a distribution of expectations about others' behaviour under conditions of ignorance or uncertainty.

This approach to trust has other antecedents outside the narrow confines of rational choice theory, most clearly in the work of Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann argues, for example, that trust obtains in situations where different alternatives present themselves, thus presupposing modern notions of risk. For Luhmann, this is in contradistinction to "confidence," an older notion, that captures a more "normal" kind of trust that we take simply being in and navigating through the world: "you are confident that your expectations will not be disappointed: that politicians will try to avoid war, that cars will not break down or suddenly leave the street and hit you on your Sunday afternoon walk" (Luhmann 1988: 97).

Of course, we might also see this mundane, everyday trust as simply a habit, an accrual of expectation over time, "confidence in the iteration of interaction," as Adam Seligman (1997: 7) puts it. And from here one must only scale up to understand how a "crisis" of trust can emerge in the emptying of expectations regarding institutions of all kinds. Fluctuations in interpersonal trust can be correlated with involvement in civic and political life, the credibility of state institutions, and the fragility or robustness of democracy itself.

Both of these conceptions of trust—the sociological and the cognitive—turn on problems of information and epistemology. They treat trust, Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2011: 178) argues, "as an epiphenomenon of social knowledge: what people's relationships look like after the fact of cognitive re-appraisals." Corsín Jiménez criticises the contemporary proliferation of trust discourses, inside the academy and out, for reducing trust to "information infrastructure" and making the immediacy of information a moral and political imperative (181). This "political epistemology" of trust sees relations as "real and robust" only when



“they are transparent, instantaneous, and point to no context but themselves” (192, 179).

Let’s move sideways. There is another approach. In many scholarly stories of trust, we see problems of how to navigate the moral and political dilemmas of everyday social life. Here, trust does not simply deliver information about the future behaviour of others in ways that allow for the *ex nihilo* emergence of solidarity. Instead, trust offers an ideal towards which people strive in and through social difference, conflict, and vulnerability born of layered and morally charged relations of mutual obligation. Here’s where we find work on witchcraft and conspiracy theory, frauds and scams and cons, gendered and racialised suspicion and accusation, as well as one of the sturdiest stalwarts of anthropological theory: the Maussian gift! For the gift is all about trusting in its return and, thus, trusting in others different from ourselves.

To live as social and political beings, we must concede trust. We must, as Carlos Vélaz-Ibañez (2010: 51) so wonderfully puts it, “trust in the trustworthiness of others.” In doing so, interestingly, we might in fact reproduce trust. The obligation we impose on others by our trust in them redounds in our relationships. Diego Gambetta—well-known for analytical examinations of trust based in rational choice, game, and signalling theory—proposes just this. “The concession of trust,” he writes, “can generate the very behaviour which might logically seem to be its precondition” (Gambetta 1988: 234).

What is the understanding of the social here? What kinds of relational forms populate this domain of free association, where obligation and liberty intermingle? I must admit that this approach appeals to me, but I can sometimes get uncomfortable with it, too, because “the social” that falls out of this notion of trust can be, at times, alarmingly thin. It’s too easy to generate a flattened vision of social life as a kind of easy, unmediated, horizontal relationality as captured in the visual grammar of interlocking chains of hands coming together—a collection of peers without an outside, a community without inequality, hierarchy, or rank.



If trust is, as Gambetta famously proposes, “a device for coping with the freedom of others,” then that freedom includes not only the possibility of betraying a relationship, but also the possibility of accepting it, with all the obligations and responsibilities it entailed. The danger of trust, the vulnerability we open ourselves up to in trusting others, is not simply that the trusted other might “disappoint our expectations,” but that the trusted other might *not* disappoint us (Gambetta 1988: 218)—that is, not only that the gift of trust might not be returned but that it might be honoured. Relations of trust embroil people and things in dramas of moral rectitude and lapse, even as they also necessitate the navigation of social identities and allegiances, enmities and hostilities. We can see why one might *want* to refuse the gift and obligation of another’s trust.

So, two sets of assumptions about trust: trust as a problem of knowledge, a way to deal with the unknowability and uncertainty of other people; and trust as a problem of morality, a way to deal with the freedoms and obligations of our relations. My discomfort with the former is that it evinces an abstract and attenuated understanding of knowledge as a matter of checking and tracking expectations against reality. My discomfort with the latter is that it evinces an abstract, attenuated understanding of sociality, as a more-or-less flattened field of apolitical, back-and-forth reciprocal relations.

The contributions in this collection offer us, I think, a way out of the conceptual trap we’ve set for ourselves.

In both of these sets of assumptions about trust, *people are the problem*. More specifically, people as mediators of knowledge and relationships are the problem. The desire for trust—or indeed, as one of the other contributions to this collection suggests, the desire to make trust *unnecessary*—is about a desire for direct and unmediated access to the truth of others.

But the relations and institutions of collective life—and the persistence or durability of those relations and institutions—are neither simply knowledge problems (threatened by the knowledge-eroding power of uncertainty) nor simply



moral problems (threatened by the social-eroding power of distrust). They are also and arguably most importantly *practical* problems. “The social” is a representation of collective life and also what we do in living together.

Ultimately, these essays ask us how specific tools and technologies of trust become ways to navigate and manage fraught relationships in social worlds marked by the trouble of knowing and/or relating with other persons. In this, they offer us trust as a kind of pragmatics of social life. Theories of trust offer windows onto diverse theories of the social. But the specificity of the uses to which trust is put, the ways it is practised, and the stuff people mobilise in the process matters for understanding *and* for acting on and in social life. Indeed, perhaps what distinguishes trust as a practical matter is how much work it takes to make and maintain, and thus how fragile and exhausting it can be.

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Abstract

This essay briefly explores how trust exposes and discloses “the social” in its many diverse guises, from the interpersonal to the institutional, cognitive and epistemological to moral and solidaristic.

Keywords

trust, knowledge, social relations

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