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An Age of Distrust?

Over the past decade or so trust has become a major worry of many scholars and pundits, very many of whom think trust is in decline in several of the advanced democracies, including Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To say that I trust you in some context is to say that I think you are or will be trustworthy toward me in that context. You might not be trustworthy toward others and you might not be trustworthy toward me in other contexts. If we think trust is declining, therefore, we must suppose that trustworthiness, or at least perceived trustworthiness, is declining. The value of trustworthiness is that it makes social cooperation easier and even possible, so that its decline would entail losses of cooperativeness. Most of the voluminous literature on declining trust sees it as a major problem independently of any account of trustworthiness – but surely if there is a problem here it is with trustworthiness.

This point is commonly ignored by many scholars, who see our problem as a failure of trust rather than of trustworthiness, and who argue for increasing trust – somehow. Of course, we do not simply want to increase trust per se, because we should not trust the untrustworthy. If we attempt to cooperate with you on some matter and you take advantage of our efforts, we should not readily risk cooperating with you again, and we should not trust you on the relevant matter. I want to discuss what it might mean that trustworthiness seems, at

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least superficially and also when examined more carefully, to be in decline. And I want to discuss what it suggests we should do to increase trustworthiness and cooperativeness – if we can or should do anything.

Declining trustworthiness would obviously be problematic at the personal level because it would increase the risks of attempting to cooperate with others. It might even lead us to avoid interactions with most others. It is less clear what follows from perceptions of declining trustworthiness among government officials. Presumably, if they are genuinely less trustworthy than they were four or five decades ago, we should suppose that government has deteriorated and, therefore, life has got worse for us. It is not easy to make a case for a general decline in prosperity, well-being, or many other desirable things that should supposedly correlate with declining governmental trustworthiness. There is a standard quip that things were a lot better back when things were worse. To claim that life in the advanced democracies has become worse for women, African-Americans, and those who are disabled in some way is simply perverse and malign. In the era of international terrorism and chauvinistic responses to it, life probably has become less pleasing to recent immigrants in the United States and perhaps in some nations of Europe. But huge numbers of individuals and several large groups have primarily benefited from the social and political developments of recent times even though levels of distrust in their nations may have risen during that period.

There are, of course, many uses of a term as attractive and seemingly good as trust. It would take us off track to do a deep conceptual analysis of various uses (see Hardin 2002b, ch. 3). But one small bit of linguistic history might be interesting. The word trust in English came into use in the medieval era. It developed with the word *tryst* in Middle English (Skeat [1879–82] 1910: 670; also see the *Oxford English Dictionary*). At that time *tryst* had a very simple meaning as a noun. Our village might mobilize to catch game – especially smaller game such as rabbits. Most of us would gather at one end of a wood or grassy meadow and would drive the game to the other end. At the other end, you might stand *tryst*, meaning you would be prepared to knock the rabbits in the head with a club. In that usage that's all the

word meant. *Tryst* was a role. Forms of that word slowly took on two quite different meanings: the modern words *tryst* and *trust*. It's easy to see why linguistics might have gone those seemingly contrary ways. Standing *tryst* well meant to be trustworthy in the role one agreed to fill. And having a *tryst* with your neighbor's spouse behind the barn also entailed trust between you two misbehavers even while you violated the trust of your neighbor. So even in its linguistic origins, trust was a complicated affair. It still is. At least one person – your neighbor in the *tryst* – might not think trust is always so clearly a good thing. Trusting someone can set you up for cooperating with the other even in vile enterprises, as in the supposed honor among thieves.¹

In the past century, if we'd been able to run surveys in the Soviet Union during the lifetime of Stalin, we would apparently have discovered astonishingly high levels of belief in Stalin's goodness bordering on religious faith. Perhaps no democratic leader has ever enjoyed very high levels of such belief – and certainly Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin have not. Yet, most people who know the history of Stalin would not think he was trustworthy toward the Russian people and would think Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin have been far more trustworthy than Stalin was. It took massive ignorance to believe in Stalin.

If trust or confidence in anyone can be so bad or so misguided, why do we typically think of it as a good thing? Largely because I am likely to trust you when you have given some evidence of being trustworthy. And if you are trustworthy, I can cooperate with you to our mutual benefit. Of course, as in the case of those who thought Stalin was trustworthy, I could be wrong in my assessment of you. But let us assume, what is probably true for most of us, that we are reasonably good at judging who is trustworthy or likely to be trustworthy in a particular standard context, especially after we have interacted with them for a while. Reference to a standard context is important here because in standard, recurring contexts we will learn from experience, so that we will be better judges than we will be in novel and unfamiliar contexts. Con artists take advantage of this simple fact by putting us into unfamiliar situations in which we supposedly would gain but in which we might far more likely lose.

Why Trust Now?

One may wonder: Why is trust suddenly an issue now? What has changed that makes us think distrust and untrustworthiness are on the rise? The political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) has written a large book on the topic of declining trust, although over the years in which he wrote he slowly changed his focus to speak of declining confidence, rather than trust, in government (Dalton, Pharr, and Putnam 2000). His book is mostly about what he characterizes as declining social capital. He says that the resources people, neighborhoods, and large communities once had to organize themselves to deal with problems have gone into steady decline in the US, beginning some time in the mid-1960s. (The notion of social capital is discussed more extensively in chapter 4.) During that period activities that isolate us from each other have steadily increased. For example, we watch television at home rather than playing cards at a neighbor's home. We drive our individual cars rather than taking public transportation. We live in scattered locations away from our places of work, so that our neighbors are not our fellow workers. We migrate far from our own families and friends. The community of Marcel Proust lived near enough to each other to call on each other to leave their cards on calling days. It is hard to imagine that practice today, although it was common in many communities a century ago.

Putnam's thesis is roughly that these two trends – rising distrust and declining social participation – are caused by the same things. The title of his book, *Bowling Alone*, is a metaphor for the general trend. We used to bowl in bowling leagues with others. Now we bowl more nearly alone without any particular organization of the activity. When Putnam first used the bowling metaphor, someone quipped that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols had hatched their plan for blowing up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City while bowling together. Putnam could have answered, see, they developed the social capital that enabled them to do that awful thing. Of course, his general thesis is that social capital is typically a good thing, and he did not use such an argument.

The most precise and compelling of Putnam's reasons for the changes in social behavior is about the people he calls the "civic generation" – those people in the United States who came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War. In the year Putnam's book was published, 2000, the youngest surviving members of that generation were about 76 years old – the oldest were about 92. That generation has stronger civic commitments than the generations that preceded them and than the generations that followed them. They are all too quickly passing from the scene.

When there is such a demographic pattern, we should consider two major possibilities. Either there have been demographic shifts in the overall population, or there has been a change in political circumstances. Because the American decline in overall civic mindedness begins in the 1960s, many people immediately think to explain the change as a result of Vietnam and the loss of credibility that the US government suffered then. Senator Trent Lott infamously might wish to explain it as the result of the end of legal segregation.² Some – including Putnam in part – have explained it at least partly as the rise of television to dominate our free time.

I wish to discuss two other changes that fit the pattern. One, discussed in chapter 8, is the increasing difficulty of formulating effective public policies to deal with complex issues such as poverty and crime. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program arose and already showed signs of failure in the 1960s. The other is a pervasive change in the demographic conditions of our lives in comparison to those of earlier generations. Americans and Europeans typically lived in relatively homogeneous, often small communities in the early twentieth century and before. Few of them live in such communities today.

It Took a Village

Consider the recent demographic changes in the advanced democracies. There are two separate large demographic changes: the introduction of new groups in the advanced democratic societies; and changes in the way these societies

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live, with urbanization and suburbanization displacing small communities. Very few Americans or Europeans experience life in small communities today, although most Americans and Europeans came from such communities not long ago. Let us consider small communities and then turn to new groups in the society.

To begin, let's go back to life in a French village in the tenth century – over a thousand years ago. The Swedish economist Axel Leijonhufvud (1995; see further, Hardin 1999a) has described the life of Bodo, who lived in the parish of the church of St Germain, which kept substantial records of the lives of the parish. Today one would say that parish is in the center of Paris, but in Bodo's time it was a rural parish distant enough from Paris that many of its inhabitants may never have seen Paris. Virtually everything Bodo and his family consumed was produced by about 80 people, whom he presumably knew quite well. Moreover he knew them well over their entire lifetimes together. He probably knew almost all of them – those in his family and those not – better than we today know any but a very few people.

Most of what Bodo consumed was most likely produced by his own family. If anyone other than the 80 people of his small community touched anything he consumed, it was salt, which would have come from the ocean and would have passed through many hands on the way to St Germain.

Suppose we are in Bodo's village. There would be fewer than 80 of us alive at any one time. These would be all of the adults most of us would ever know or deal with. What a bore. Morality in such a society must be a compound of religious values and a form of quasi-reciprocity that is sometimes called social reciprocity or generalized reciprocity (Yamagishi and Cook 1993). When you have a serious problem, such as an illness or death in the family, the rest of us help out, each in our own way. I might bring you food or tend your garden or take care of your children. There may never be a time when you literally reciprocate by helping me. But whenever anyone else has a problem in our village, you reciprocate socially. We have to rely on each other to some extent and if I fail to be reliable everyone in the village will know and they may all

sanction me, or even shun me. We have a communal norm of reciprocity (Cook and Hardin 2001).

This is a striking feature of Bodo's morality: that it is enforceable by the community. An enormous part of the debate about morality in the modern world – in philosophy, sociology, and psychology – is about how individuals can be motivated to act morally. That question is answered easily for Bodo's world. His community spontaneously enforced its morality as a set of compulsory norms. This did not guarantee perfect compliance, but it exacted a toll for noncompliance. Any of us who are utterly unreliable are likely to become pariahs to everyone else. At the extreme a cheater might have to leave the community and find another place to live. John Locke thinks that atheists cannot be moral and cannot be trusted to keep their promises because they don't face the threat of punishment in an afterlife. People in Bodo's village did not need that threat because they faced immediate sanctions in their lifetimes in this world.

Life for most people in Europe and the US two centuries ago was not so different from Bodo's. Peter Riesenberg (1992: 269) writes that

in 1776 the overwhelming majority of Americans still lived in the kind of small-scaled community whose life and values . . . were essentially stable since the Greeks. In terms of law, social theory, and reality, and the relationship of secular and religious authority, Concord [Massachusetts], for example, resembled an English village of the late Middle Ages, or, indeed, ancient Sparta [in] the size of its population, its acceptance of community values and the community's regulation of public, economic, and personal life, in its constant search for the basis of harmony in the making of corporate decisions, its need for unity and homogeneity in religious affairs, its dependence upon shame to assure conformity, its intolerance of novelty and idiosyncrasy . . .

Life in these communities could be grim and oppressive (Wall 1990). As in Bodo's village, there was no need to worry about enforcement of morality as the townspeople saw it. They could humiliate and crush anyone who violated the local norms.

A Network Society

We are not in Bodo's village. As Leijonhufvud notes, the typical French citizen walking the streets of Bodo's St Germain today interacts indirectly with millions of people, not merely with 80. If you have a car, it includes parts from a dozen or more nations produced by perhaps thousands of people. We face relationships with vast numbers of other people, with whom we cannot expect to be in a rich enough network of broader relations to be able to ground enforcement of any norms. Relationships that can be organized by norms that are locally, spontaneously enforced are no longer part of many, if any, important aspects of our lives. We can't even expect that any norms we might hold dear would be shared by even the restricted set of all of those with whom we regularly deal. Our lives are radically different from Bodo's – not least in this respect.

In our more complex lives, we have many relationships that are about relatively specific things. Bodo's relationships were almost total. I know some people in one context and very different people in another context. I am part of many networks that are focused on some small range of matters and that have very little overlap in membership. In those networks, I become reliable at direct reciprocity. You do things for me and I return the favor. Or I might do something for you, you do something for Maria, and Maria does something for me. That may sound complicated but it is not that hard.

How do we regulate our relations in such networks? Basically, we develop trust relations with those with whom we deal reciprocally. I do something for you because I trust you to reciprocate. And you do reciprocate – in large part because you want to maintain your relationship *with me*. Because you want to maintain that relationship, you have an interest in fulfilling my trust in you; you *encapsulate* my interest in your own. (This is the encapsulated interest model of trust, which will be spelled out along with other models in chapter 2.) At least with respect to the matters covered by our network, we are trustworthy to each other. Anyone in our network who cheats anybody else in that network is likely soon to be excluded from the network. Because our network is a very

small part of our lives, exclusion from it is not devastating, as exclusion from Bodo's community might have been.

Life in Bodo's village could be very nearly completely characterized without any mention of networks. All were connected to all on virtually every issue that went beyond family, and maybe even those external to Bodo's family tended to play roles within his family. Hence, there could be no specific network focused on a narrow matter from which Bodo could be excluded to sanction him for any minor infraction.

Peasant Life

Long after Bodo, but while agricultural production was still at the center of life for most people in the entire world, Marx ([1852] 1963: 123–4; cf. Hardin 1995: 39–42, 55) describes the peasants of France as so many homologous masses, like potatoes in a sack. In his account, it would be exaggerating to say that these peasants lived in communities. They were each involved with their own family members in subsistence farming for their own personal survival from day to day. They had little or no sustained interactions with others, because there was no return from cooperation or joint endeavors in their lives.

At the beginning of the industrial revolution, workers in factories were forced into cooperative endeavors daily, and they were given extensive opportunity to reflect collectively on the nature of their lives and, as Marx thinks, the extent of their exploitation by owners of their factories (Hardin 1995: 55). The workers therefore developed class consciousness, while the peasants, who did not daily and continuously discuss their common plight with each other, failed to understand their own interests. They therefore stupidly voted against their own interests in supporting Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in the presidential election of 1848³ (and in a plebiscite making him emperor, Napoleon III, at the constitutional end of his presidency in 1852). One can imagine that there is similarly restricted learning of interests in many other cases, more or less for Marx's reasons.

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The condition of the peasantry as Marx describes it is not intermediate between Bodo and our society of networks because it was arguably less communal than Bodo's small society and it had almost no networks of economic significance. The peasant society is intermediate only in historical time. It is very nearly at the extreme of the possibilities for anomic organization – or disorganization – of life. The anomic disorganization of peasants may have been an important stage on the passage from virtual serfdom to independent individualism, but if so it was a grim transitional development. One might imagine that peasant society was deeply distrustful, because there was little possibility for mutually beneficial interactions, except within families. At its extreme, Edward Banfield (1958; see Hardin 2002b, 98–100) describes the moral basis of a backward society of subsistence farmers in his anonymously named Montegrano in the south of Italy in the 1950s. The farmers live in virtual isolation one family from all others. They share in no tasks and they never learn to cooperate on anything.

Terrorism and Ethnic Distrust

Unfortunately, there is a distressing part of Bodo's village story that still plays a role in our lives. If a stranger came from the outside into Bodo's village, the villagers would have been very wary and careful in their dealings with that person. The problem is not just unfamiliarity. It is that this new person is not embedded in the local norms and controls. Shunning the newcomer for any bad act would clearly not be an effective device because he can just leave – he is not tied to the village as the locals are. They are therefore at the newcomer's mercy to some extent, so they watch out.

The apparent hostility of small, close communities to outsiders might derive in large part from the fact that such communities cannot readily enforce their norms for behavior or their moral principles on outsiders who pass through. One might even expect a local community to hold outsiders not merely as strange but also as immoral. *The transition from such communities to larger, more diverse societies requires a*

transition in the basis of morality away from communally enforceable norms to ingrained, more or less abstract principles and to legal constraints.

Apart from the nearly 3,000 lives lost and the increasing militarization of the US and the UK and much of the rest of the world, the worst ongoing effect of the terrorist actions of September 11 is perhaps the heightened distrust toward certain groups in the society – toward anyone who looks Arabic or South Asian. When we don't know someone, we often make an initial guess about them by fitting them to some stereotype. In some contexts stereotyping is wrong or illegal – for good reasons. But we do it all the time in ordinary contexts. If I see someone dressed like a woman, I'm likely to assume the person is a woman; I do that instantly without thinking it through. I might be wrong, especially where I live, in the Village in New York, but most of the time I will be right. Statistically, it's a good bet.

Now we face the possibility of a new version of discriminatory stereotyping that might be at least statistically justified. That is, the odds are that the most grievous terrorist attacks that Americans face will come from Arab and Islamist fanatics, although, as we know all too well, right-wing Caucasian Americans such as Timothy McVeigh are the next most likely source. In the United Kingdom, Spain, and some other democratic nations, the greatest threats may be domestic minority groups, not foreigners who import their terrorism. Part of the source of popular fear of Islamist fanatics is that they isolate themselves in exclusionary communities where we cannot know them and, perhaps more importantly, they cannot know us. They can sustain beliefs in such communities that would seem lunatic for anyone in the larger society, and their behavior might be governed by narrow communal norms. Their isolation coupled with suspicions about their actual beliefs and motivations may provoke a form of generalized or probabilistic distrust of everyone from their general background, the vast majority of whom are never going to be terrorists (see further, chapter 6). Note that what happens is individuals begin to distrust other individuals. In particular, non-Arabs are wary of people who look Arabic. People begin to think that Islam is a vicious and violent religion, although the blood shed by people in the

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name of Christianity must rival that shed by people in the name of other religions.

Concluding Remarks

Note that most of the changes mentioned earlier about why there has been a decline in civic mindedness are trends over which we have little control – generational change, television, demographic changes. So if these are the reasons for our supposed troubles, we are not likely to affect them. The one point on which we might be able to change things substantially is in our capacity to develop effective public policies for the hardest of our contemporary issues: education, race, terrorism, poverty, crime, drugs, immigration. A government that is competent enough to handle these well enough will seem trustworthy.

Even if we resolve these major policy issues, however, we are still in a world very different from that of our parents and grandparents. It is changed primarily, though not only, by technology, although technology has enabled us to leave the farm and go to cities, it has enabled us to make our own lives with less dependence on a particular local community, and it has also enabled us to craft our own individual lives in diverse ways, so diverse that we cannot expect government to be directly concerned with our welfare as, say, farmers once could.

Putnam and others, especially those who argue for deliberative democracy (for example, Gutmann and Thompson 2004, Skocpol 2003) or community (Etzioni 1993), describe our move from public to private involvement. They want us to restore the civic mindedness, the group activities, and the communal life that they think we have abandoned over the past 40 years. The economist Albert Hirschman (1982: 121) argues convincingly that moving from public to private involvements is very easy because any single individual can do it alone. Moving from private to public involvements is far harder, because we first have to mobilize a lot of people to construct the public sphere. Hirschman argues further that the shift from public to private was a liberating movement in

the early days of the economic revolution that produced the wealth of recent centuries.

So are we in an age of distrust, and if so what does it mean for us? Yes, we are in an age of distrust if what that means is that we have more interactions with people whom we do not trust, and maybe even distrust, than we have with those we do trust. We do have more such interactions – but primarily because we have far, far more interactions of all kinds. We are not like Bodo – and we would not want to be. Many people say they prefer life in small towns and they dislike large cities. But far more people have chosen to live in large cities and, in the US, even more have chosen to live in the relatively large suburbs around large cities. Partly it is economic opportunity that drives people to cities. But for whatever reason, we overwhelmingly choose cities and their suburbs. Small towns are an anachronism in our lives and they should be treated as an anachronism in the work of social theorists, who should no longer argue that our lives are somehow wrong because they are not like those of people in small communities. We are the people who left those communities and we are not going back. The social theorists who praise small communities do so from academic pulpits at Harvard, George Washington, and other world-class universities. Along with most of the rest of us, they have left the communities that they praise. They are academic, not practicing communitarians.

We actively want to know more people than the 80 people Bodo knew. And we cannot imagine spending our entire lives within walking distance of the Paris of the Iles – even the Paris of a thousand years ago – and yet never going there. In our richer lives, we need trust relationships as Bodo did not. And we have trust relationships. In such relationships, we take risks on others, and when we take risks sometimes it doesn't go well and we wind up being cheated by someone and thereafter distrusting them and maybe similar others. To complain that rising distrust is bad, however, is to miss the point that if we are to have the possibility of interacting with – and trusting – more people, *we must have the other side of the coin: distrusting more people.*

The solution of our problem is not to try to return to or mimic the former world of very limited opportunities for both

trust and distrust, but to learn how to live in our world. The world that is idealized by many social theorists was itself an unusual state of affairs. Two centuries ago, more than 80 percent of Americans and Europeans were farmers. Most of them were subsistence farmers. Their lives were hard and short and they did not generally live in communities like those that the social theorists like and praise.⁴ The rise of small communities of moderately to very prosperous people was a strictly transitional phenomenon, and it cannot likely be recovered or recreated. All of this is a lot of change in our lives. The way to live with such change is to change ourselves or our behavior. In our world, we need networks of diverse people, not merely small communities – which all too often are exclusionary, closed communities. We create and live through manifold, relatively open networks and not through exclusionary groups and small communities.

Many of us would sooner live through such networks than in exclusionary groups. Of course, any one of our many networks is less rich than a community in various ways. But, taken together, these networks offer us much richer lives than a single community could do. In many ways our lives are far richer than those of our grandparents, and that greater richness has come from the evaporation of the kinds of community that many contemporary social theorists idealize.

An Overview of the Book

Chapter 2 lays out conceptual and theoretical issues in the nature of trust, especially in larger social and political contexts. It lays out the encapsulated interest conception of trust and relates that conception to the other two standard conceptions in the current literature. Chapter 3 takes up contemporary research on trust. That research has mostly been via experimental games and survey research. Game experiments primarily purport to address interpersonal trust issues. Surveys primarily address trust in government and trust in the general other person. The nature and role of social capital are taken up in chapter 4. Some of the debate on the supposedly rising levels of distrust in government and our fellow

citizens has been framed (especially by Putnam 2000) as an issue in the decline of social capital.

Chapter 5 takes up the possibilities and difficulties of trust on the internet, which constitutes a new and remarkable form of social capital. The internet provides an extraordinary experiment in its own right in how well trust relations can be made to work in a relatively spare context that, however, has the basic element of standard trust theories: ongoing relationships. Chapter 6 addresses the way in which terrorism has provoked intergroup distrust, and the ways in which potential terrorists construct trusting relationships that enable them to hive off from the larger society and to cooperate in attacking it.

Chapter 7 addresses the nearly forgotten origins of liberal political theory, with its justification for distrust of government. We generally argue about distrust of government at the margin today, whereas the early proponents of liberalism were concerned with the core elements of a liberal society, which include fundamental distrust of government. Finally, chapter 8 addresses the current state of democratic theory and practice and the perhaps new turn back toward the position of liberal distrust in government.