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A Question of Trust

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1 'Without trust we cannot stand'

Confucius told his disciple Tzu-kung that three things are needed for government: weapons, food and trust.[1] If a ruler can't hold on to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: without trust we cannot stand. Confucius' thought still convinces. Weapons did not help the Taliban when their foot soldiers lost trust and deserted. Food shortages need not topple governments when they and their rationing systems are trusted, as we know from the Second World War.

It isn't only rulers and governments who prize and need trust. Each of us and every profession and every

1 Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), xii, 7, p. 164.

institution needs trust. We need it because we have to be able to rely on others acting as they say that they will, and because we need others to accept that we will act as we say we will. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann was right that 'A complete absence of trust would prevent [one] even getting up in the morning.'[2]

2 The crisis of trust

We may need trust, but trusting often seems hard and risky. Every day we read of untrustworthy action by politicians and officials, by hospitals and exam boards, by companies and schools. We supposedly face a deepening crisis of trust. Every day we also read of aspirations and attempts to make business and professionals, public servants and politicians more accountable in more ways to more stakeholders. But can a revolution in accountability remedy our 'crisis of trust'?

In these five chapters I shall discuss both the

2 Niklas Luhmann, *Trust* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 4.

supposed crisis and its supposed remedies. I do so as an outsider. The experts and exponents of the crisis of trust are mainly sociologists and journalists: they've tried to find out whom we do and don't trust, in particular whom we *say* we do and don't trust. They have produced lots of dispiriting evidence. Remedies are proposed on all sides: politicians and campaigning groups, academics and journalists advocate greater respect for human rights, higher standards of accountability and greater transparency. If these are remedies for our 'crisis of trust', we should surely be seeing results by now. On the contrary, the accusations mount.

I shall look at trust from a more philosophical but also (I hope) more practical standpoint: these (I believe) go together quite naturally. What does it take for us to place trust in others? What evidence do we need to place it well? Are human rights and democracy the basis for a society in which trust can be placed, or does trust need other conditions? Does the revolution in accountability support or undermine trust?

The common ground from which I begin is that we

cannot have guarantees that everybody will keep trust. Elaborate measures to ensure that people keep agreements and do not betray trust must, in the end, be backed by – trust. At some point we just have to trust. There is no *complete* answer to the old question: 'who will guard the guardians?' On the contrary, trust is needed precisely because all guarantees are incomplete. Guarantees are useless unless they lead to a trusted source, and a regress of guarantees is no better for being longer unless it ends in a trusted source. So trust cannot presuppose or require a watertight guarantee of others' performance, and cannot rationally be withheld just because we lack guarantees. Where we have guarantees or proofs, placing trust is redundant. We don't need to take it on trust that $5 \times 11 = 55$, or that we are alive, or that each of us was born of a human mother or that the sun rose this morning.

Since trust has to be placed without guarantees, it is inevitably sometimes misplaced: others let us down and we let others down. When this happens, trust and relationships based on trust are both damaged. Trust, it is constantly observed, is hard earned and easily

dissipated. It is valuable social capital and not to be squandered.

If there are no guarantees to be had, we need to place trust with care. This can be hard. The little shepherd boy who shouted 'Wolf! Wolf!' eventually lost his sheep, but not before his false alarms had deceived others time and again. Deception and betrayal often work. Traitors and terrorists, embezzlers and con artists, forgers and plagiarists, false promisers and free riders cultivate then breach others' trust. They often get away with it. Breach of trust has been around since the Garden of Eden – although it did not quite work out there. Now it is more varied and ingenious, and often successful.

Although we cannot curse those who breach trust, let alone expel them from paradise, we take elaborate steps to deter and prevent deception and fraud: we set and enforce high standards. Human rights requirements are imposed on the law, on institutions, on all of us. Contracts clarify and formalise agreements and undertakings with ever-greater precision. Professional codes define professional responsibilities with ever-greater precision.

Huge efforts also go into ensuring trustworthy performance. Auditors scrutinise accounts (but are they trustworthy?). Examiners control and mark examinees (but are they trustworthy?). The police investigate crimes (but are they trustworthy?). Increasingly sophisticated technologies are deployed to prevent and detect breaches of trust, ranging from locks and safes, passwords and identity cards, to CCTV cameras and elaborate encryption. The efforts to prevent abuse of trust are gigantic, relentless and expensive; their results are always less than perfect.

Have these countermeasures begun to restore trust, or to reduce suspicion? Sociologists and journalists report few signs. They claim that we are in the grip of a deepening crisis of public trust that is directed even at our most familiar institutions and office-holders. Mistrust, it seems, is now directed not just at those clearly in breach of law and accepted standards, not just at crooks and wide boys. Mistrust and suspicion have spread across all areas of life, and supposedly with good reason. Citizens, it is said, no longer trust governments, or politicians, or ministers, the police, or the courts, or the prison service.

Consumers, it is said, no longer trust business, and especially big business, or their products. *None of us*, it is said, trusts banks, or insurers – or pension providers. Patients, it is said, no longer trust doctors (think of Dr Shipman!), and in particular no longer trust hospitals or hospital consultants. 'Loss of trust' has become a cliché of our times.

How good is the evidence for this crisis of trust? A lot of the most systematic evidence for the UK can be found in public opinion polls and analogous academic surveys. The pollsters ask carefully controlled cross-sections of the public whether they trust certain professions or office-holders. The questions aren't easy to answer. Most of us would want to say that we trust *some* but not *other* professionals, *some* but not *other* office-holders, in *some* matters but not in *others*. I might trust a schoolteacher to teach my child arithmetic but not citizenship. I might trust my GP to diagnose and prescribe for a sore throat, but not for a heart attack. I might trust my bank with my current account, but not with my life savings. In answering the pollsters we suppress the complexity of our real judgements, smooth out distinctions we

draw between different individuals and institutions, and average our judgements about their trustworthiness in different activities.

We depend on journalists for our knowledge of the results of these polls and the levels of reported public trust. There is some irony in this, since these polls repeatedly show that no profession is less trusted in the UK than journalism. Journalists – at least newspaper journalists – are typically less trusted than politicians and ministers, much less trusted than scientists and civil servants, and dramatically less trusted than judges, or ministers of religion or doctors. Of course, the public also draws distinctions within these categories. Nurses and GPs are more trusted than hospital consultants; university scientists are more trusted than industry scientists; television news presenters are more trusted than newspaper journalists. Often newspaper reports of public opinion highlight the most dramatic statistic, typically the one that suggests the most extreme mistrust. They seldom comment on the ambiguities of the questions or the categories, or linger on cases where trust is average or high.

3 Active trust

The polls supposedly show that in the UK public trust in office-holders and professionals of many sorts is low and declining. They certainly reveal a mood of suspicion. But do they show anything more? Are the opinions we divulge to pollsters backed up by the ways in which we *actively* place our trust in others, and specifically by the ways that we place it, or refuse to place it, in public servants, professionals and institutions?

Much of the evidence of the way we actively place our trust seems to me to point in quite different directions. We constantly place trust in others, in members of professions and in institutions. Nearly all of us drink water provided by water companies and eat food sold in supermarkets and produced by ordinary farming practices. Nearly all of us use the roads (and, even more rationally, the trains!). Nearly all of us listen to the news and buy newspapers. Even if we have some misgivings, we go on placing trust in medicines produced by the pharmaceutical industry, in operations performed in NHS hospitals, in the

delivery of letters by the Post Office, and in roads shared with many notably imperfect drivers. We constantly place active trust in many others.

Does action speak louder than words? Are the ways we actually place our trust a more accurate gauge of trust than our comments to pollsters? If we were really as mistrusting as some of us tell the pollsters, would we behave like this? We might do so if we had no options. Perhaps the fact of the matter is that we simply have to *rely* on institutions and persons although we *don't really trust them.* In many of these examples, it may seem, we have little choice. How can we avoid tap water, even if we mistrust the water companies, since it is the only ready source of supply? How can we avoid conventional medicines, even if we mistrust the pharmaceutical industry, since there are no effective and affordable alternatives? How can we avoid the news as (mis)represented, if we have no other sources?

But are these thoughts really convincing? Those who *seriously* mistrust producers and suppliers of consumer goods *can* and *do* refuse to rely on them. Those who *really* mistrust the tap water drink bottled

water, or boil it, or use water purification tablets: where water supplies are *seriously* questionable, people do so. Those who *really* mistrust the pharmaceutical industry and its products can refuse them and choose to rely on alternative, more natural, remedies. Those who *really* mistrust the newspapers can stop buying them – although this may not put them wholly beyond the reach of the opinions, 'stories' and attitudes that journalists purvey. Those who *really* mistrust the standards of food safety of conventional agriculture, food processing, shops and restaurants can eat organically grown food: it may cost more, but is less expensive than convenience foods and eating out. Where people have options we can tell whether they *really* mistrust by seeing whether they put their money where they put their mouths. The evidence suggests that we still constantly place trust in many of the institutions and professions we profess not to trust.

Evidence for trust or mistrust is less clear when opting out is hard or impossible. There is no way of opting out of public goods – or public harms. We have to breathe the ambient air we share – even if we

don't trust standards for monitoring air pollution. We can't help relying on the police to protect us, since they have a monopoly of law enforcement – even if we are suspicious of them. We cannot opt out of government, or the legal system or the currency, even if we have misgivings. What should we think when people say they do not trust the providers and suppliers of public goods and services on which they have to rely? It seems to me that where people have no choice, their action provides *poor* evidence that they trust – or that they mistrust.

Where we have no choice, the only evidence of mistrust is what people say. But we know from cases where they have choice that this can be unreliable evidence. If what we say is unreliable evidence when we have choices, why should we think it reliable evidence when we have no choices? Expressions of mistrust that are divorced from action come cheap: we can assert and rescind, flaunt or change, defend or drop attitudes and expressions of mistrust without changing the way we live. This may show something about attitudes of suspicion, but little or nothing about where we place trust.

4 Trust and risk

So is there other evidence for a crisis of trust? Do we trust less today, or are we just more inclined to spread suspicion? Are current levels of mistrust greater than those of the past? Adequate evidence for a new crisis of trust must do more than point to *some* untrustworthy doctors and scientists, *some* untrustworthy companies and politicians, *some* untrustworthy fraudsters and colleagues. There have always been breaches of trust, and examples alone can't show we are living amid a new or deeper crisis of trust.

Some sociologists have suggested that the crisis of trust is real and new because we now live in a *risk society*. We live among highly complex institutions and practices whose effects we cannot control or understand, and supposedly see ourselves as subject to hidden and incomprehensible sources of risk. *Individuals* can do little or nothing to avert environmental risks, or nuclear accidents or terrorist attacks.

This is true, but not new. The harms and hazards modern societies impose differ from those in traditional societies. But there is nothing new about

inability to reduce risk, about ignorance of its sources, or about not being able to opt out. Those who saw their children die of tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, those who could do nothing to avert swarming locusts or galloping infectious disease, and those who struggled with sporadic food shortage and fuel poverty through history might be astonished to discover that anyone thinks that ours rather than theirs is a risk society. So might those in the developing world who live with chronic food scarcity or drought, endemic corruption or lack of security. If the developed world is the paradigm of a 'risk society', risk societies must be characterised simply by their *perceptions of* and *attitudes to* risk, and not by the seriousness of the hazards to which people are exposed, or the likelihood that those hazards will harm them.

So is the current supposed crisis of trust just a public mood or attitude of suspicion, rather than a proper and justified response to growing untrustworthiness? Those who speak and write of a 'crisis of trust' generally assume that *we* have justifiably stopped trusting because *they* are less trustworthy. I hope I have shown that the evidence for this claim is

pretty mixed. Of course, today as always, there are plenty of examples of untrustworthy individuals, officials, professionals and politicians. But examples do not show that there is *on balance* more untrustworthy behaviour today than there was in the past. Nothing follows from *examples* of sporadic untrustworthiness, however flamboyant, except the sober truth that today – as always – not everybody is wholly trustworthy and trust must be placed with care. Without the full range of evidence – including full evidence of trustworthy action – we cannot draw sound conclusions about a new or deepening crisis of trust. Unless we take account of the good news of trustworthiness as well as the bad news of untrustworthiness, we won't know whether we have a crisis of trust or only a culture of suspicion. In my view it isn't surprising that if we persist in viewing good news as no news at all, we end up viewing no news at all as good news. The crisis of trust may be an article of faith: but where is our evidence for it?

5 Some new suspicions

We may not have evidence for a crisis of trust; but we have massive evidence of a culture of suspicion. Let me briefly join that culture of suspicion, and finish by voicing some suspicions of my own that I shall trace in the next four chapters. My first suspicion falls on one of our most sacred cows: the human rights movement. We fantasise irresponsibly that we can promulgate rights without thinking carefully about the counterpart obligations, and without checking whether the rights we favour are consistent, let alone set feasible demands on those who have to secure them for others. My suspicions fall secondly on our new conceptions of accountability, which superimpose managerial targets on bureaucratic process, burdening and even paralysing those who have to comply. My suspicions fall thirdly on the new ideal of the information age: transparency, which has marginalised the more basic obligation not to deceive. My suspicion falls finally on our public culture, which is so often credulous about its own standards of communication and suspicious of

everyone else's. We need *genuine* rights, *genuine* accountability, *genuine* efforts to reduce deception, and *genuine* communication. We are pursuing distorted versions of each of them.

Perhaps claims about a crisis of trust are mainly evidence of an unrealistic hankering for a world in which safety and compliance are total, and breaches of trust are totally eliminated. Perhaps the culture of accountability that we are relentlessly building for ourselves actually damages trust rather than supporting it. Plants don't flourish when we pull them up too often to check how their roots are growing: political, institutional and professional life too may not flourish if we constantly uproot it to demonstrate that everything is transparent and trustworthy.