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Relations of Trust and Distrust

Between 1367 and 1393, Franciscan Brother François Borrel, inquisitor of the high Alpine diocese of Embrun in Dauphiné, scourged the Waldensians of his territory. From the Catholic Church's perspective, those primitive Christians qualified as heretics worthy of extermination. After all, they refused to swear oaths, opposed capital punishment, denied the existence of Purgatory, rejected papal authority including the pope's right to canonize saints, and claimed that sacraments administered by sinful priests had no efficacy. In the small, high Dauphinois valley of Vallouise, during three years for which full records exist between 1379 and 1386, the diocese prosecuted at least 300 Waldensians. When church authorities captured the accused heretics, they tried them in ecclesiastical courts, which routinely convicted them.

The church turned condemned heretics over to secular authorities for burning or hanging, then seized their property. The many Waldensians from Vallouise who fled across the border into Piedmont also lost their belongings. During those three years of inquisitorial adventures alone, Vallouise yielded about five thousand florins worth of confiscated property. That amount equaled about 40 percent of the money that the whole of Dauphiné had paid as royal taxes during the prosperous year of 1343 (Paravy 1993: II, 965).

Before the Protestant Reformation, Waldensians never called themselves Waldensians; their enemies used that name. They called themselves variously Brothers, Poor of Christ, or Poor of Lyons (Audisio 1999: 3). The pejorative label adapted the name of the sect's putative founder, a Vaudès or Valdès who belonged to a wealthy Lyonnais merchant family, underwent a religious conversion around 1170, gave up his property, and began a

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ministry among the city's poor. Dominican Stephen of Bourbon later described Valdès' activity in these disdainful terms:

Preaching the Gospels and those things he had learned by heart in the streets and the broad ways, he drew to himself many men and women that they might do the same, and he strengthened them in the Gospels. He also sent out persons of the basest occupations to preach in the nearby villages. And these, men and women alike, unlettered and uneducated, wandering through the villages, going into homes, and preaching in the squares and even in the churches, induced others to do likewise. (Kaelber 1998: 135)

Like the contemporaneous Cathar Perfects of Languedoc and the Pyrenees so vividly evoked by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1975) as well as the Czech Hussites of the early fifteenth century, the Poor of Lyons aspired to recover the simplicity of earliest Christianity. (Indeed, their self-descriptions eventually obscured their twelfth century origins and claimed continuity from Christianity's founding years.) The Church authorities that then governed Lyon expelled them from the city in 1182. Pope Lucius III excommunicated them from the Catholic Church in 1184. Although French, German, and Italian rulers only imposed punitive decrees on them during the thirteenth century, after their exit from Lyon Waldensians started to go underground. The Lyonnais sect fled the city and filtered up Alpine valleys, linking families across Dauphiné and Piedmont through missionaries called *barbes* for their customary beards; by that time, the preachers had become exclusively male.

From Lyon's hinterland, the Waldensians reached far into other parts of Europe. At times, the Brothers sent colonies to the Po Valley, Apulia, Calabria, Burgundy, Provence, Austria, Bohemia, and the Rhineland. Within that diaspora, separate regionally based factions such as the Poor Lombards and a distinctive brand of Bohemian asceticism emerged (Kaelber 1998: 147–151). Their relations extended far enough for Waldensians to translate some Hussite writings into Provençal (MacCulloch 2003: 38). But over four centuries of clandestine existence Waldensians congregated especially in the high Alps.

During the early Reformation, *barbe* Georges Morel wrote Protestant leaders of Basel and Strasbourg to explain the poor folks' virtuous vision of their ministry:

Our people almost always come from herding and agriculture. They are 25 to 30 years old, and have no education at all. We try them out among ourselves for three or four years during the two or three winter months... During that time, we

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teach them to write and read, and to learn by heart the gospels of Matthew and John, chapters of all the canonical Epistles, and a good part of Paul . . . Those who qualify are taken to a certain place where a few women, our sisters, live as virgins. In that place they spend a year or two, actually devoting most of their time to working the earth. After that time the disciples, by the sacrament of the Eucharist and the laying on of hands, are admitted to the ministry of priesthood and preaching, and are sent out two by two to evangelize. The first one of the two admitted always leads in honor, dignity, and authority, and is the master of the second . . . None of us marries, even if to tell the truth we do not always live chastely. Our food and clothing come as alms from the people we teach. (Paravy 1993: II, 1034)

Because of official persecution, both preachers and faithful lived under constant threat of denunciation. Just one defection to the authorities could cost them lives and property. In the face of risk, Waldensians built powerful networks of trust. The stronger those networks, the more they supported the faith, but also the more they sharpened the distinction between people Waldensians could trust and those they should distrust.

Once past their early years of activity in Lyons, the *barbes* did not preach publicly, for justified fear of persecution. Instead their proselytizing passed from household to household, from person to person, in protected secrecy. The young preacher Pierre Griot served as second man on a number of missions, but in 1532 fell into the Inquisition’s hands. Brought before the Dominican inquisitor Jean of Roma in Provence, Griot gave these replies:

So why are they ashamed to preach their doctrine in public
 — he answers that he believes it is out of fear.
 Questioned as to whether their doctrine is good or bad,
 — he says that they believe it is good.
 Questioned, since they think it is good, why they do not preach in public
 — says in reply that it is from fear. (Audisio 1999: 88)

As Protestantism gained public ground during the sixteenth century, most of the Brothers merged into one branch or another of the new religious movement, thus leaving behind both centuries of clandestine life and most of their distinctive practices. During the sixteenth century, for example, Calvin’s Geneva sent out preachers who gradually incorporated many Waldensian congregations of the nearby Alps into the Protestant Church.

From the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dukes of Savoy asserted their anti-Protestant credentials by expulsions and massacres of the remaining Waldensians in their territories. One group of Waldensian refugees from Savoy, indeed, fled to the tolerant Dutch colony of Staten Island, New York (MacCulloch 2003: 672). Despite intermittent persecution, a

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formally organized (and so named) Waldensian Church became the Protestant nucleus in Piedmont. It survives today within a small but vigorous set of congregations across the Western world. But as a distinctive, clandestine, tightly knit network of trust the Poor of Lyons disintegrated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Links among Waldensians qualify not just as an interpersonal network but as a *network of trust* because members' relations to each other put major long-term collective enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of other network members. In the Waldensians' case, the network set lives, property, and faith at risk. A single spy, defector, or weak-kneed victim of the Inquisition could cause the Waldensian network atrocious damage. Trust networks organized around kinship, long-distance trade, or workers' mutual aid rarely face the threats of death and dispossession regularly experienced by Valdès' followers. Yet they, too, stand out from ordinary networks of communication and commerce by the high stakes of belonging and of performing well within the network.

How will we recognize a trust network when we encounter or enter one? First, we will notice a number of people who are connected, directly or indirectly, by similar ties; they form a network. Second, we will see that the sheer existence of such a tie gives one member significant claims on the attention or aid of another; the network consists of strong ties. Third, we will discover that members of the network are collectively carrying on major long-term enterprises such as procreation, long-distance trade, workers' mutual aid or practice of an underground religion. Finally, we will learn that the configuration of ties within the network sets the collective enterprise at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, and failures of individual members.

Waldensians maintained a large trust network. They sometimes suffered persecution and dispossession for their membership in the network. Their turbulent particular history thereby dramatizes a general problem in the history of political regimes. The quality of public politics in one regime or another depends significantly on relations between people's basic trust networks and rulers' strategies of rule. *Public politics*, in this sense, includes all externally visible interactions among constituted political actors and agents of government. Without being rigid about the terminology, I will generally use the term "rulers" for national authorities as actors, "governmental agents" for those who act or speak on behalf of rulers, "governments" for the organizations those agents operate, "political actors" for nongovernmental entities having some sort of name and standing vis à vis a given government,

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and “regime” for regular relations among rulers, governments, and political actors. “Public politics” refers to their visible interactions.

Within public politics, *contentious politics* includes all discontinuous, collective making of claims among constituted political actors, including governmental agents and rulers (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Trust networks, segments of trust networks, and members of trust networks sometimes get involved in contentious politics as makers of claims, objects of claims, and as third parties to claim making. Although sixteenth century Waldensians stayed out of public politics as much as possible, during their times of persecution they became crucial objects of ecclesiastical and governmental claims. Unwillingly and often disastrously, they entered public politics, in the confrontations of collective claims and counterclaims we call contentious politics.

Noncontentious politics still makes up the bulk of all political interaction, since it includes tax collection, census taking, military service, diffusion of political information, processing of government-mediated benefits, internal organizational activity of constituted political actors, and related processes that go on most of the time without discontinuous, public, collective claim making. Trust networks and their segments get involved in noncontentious politics more regularly – and usually more consequentially – than in contentious politics. By going underground, Waldensians managed mostly to stay out of public politics, contentious or noncontentious, for four centuries after their exit from Lyon. But their survival, therefore, depended more heavily on effective operation of their trust networks and on the networks’ effective insulation from public politics.

Networks reach into every corner of social life (Watts 2003, 2004). Social networks include any set of similar connections among three or more social sites. Connections include communication, mutual recognition, shared participation in some activity, flows of goods or services, transmission of diseases, and other forms of consequential interaction. Network sites may be individuals, but they can also be organizations, localities, or social positions. A network of connections among people you don’t know and who mostly don’t know each other brings you your morning newspaper. Another transmits political information. Still others lend invisible structure to flows of money, disease, and linguistic innovation.

Although segments of such networks may overlap with or even constitute trust networks, taken as wholes they do not qualify as trust networks. They do not qualify because their participants do not generally place their major valued collective enterprises at risk to malfeasance, mistakes, or failures by

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other members of the same networks. In that precise sense, members do not trust each other. Most or all members of trust networks, in contrast, place major valued collective enterprises such as the preservation of their faith, placement of their children, provision for their old age, and protection of personal secrets at risk to fellow members' malfeasance, mistakes, or failures. Accordingly, trust networks constitute only a tiny subset of all networks.

Over thousands of years, nevertheless, ordinary people have committed their major energies and most precious resources to trust networks – not only clandestine religious sects, to be sure, but also more public religious solidarities, lineages, trade diasporas, patron-client chains, credit networks, societies of mutual aid, age grades, and some kinds of local communities. But trust networks often compete with rulers for the same resources, for example such basics as money, land, and labor power. Rulers have usually coveted the resources embedded in such networks, have often treated them as obstacles to effective rule, yet have never succeeded in annihilating them and have usually worked out accommodations producing enough resources and compliance to sustain their regimes. The Waldensians show us a trust network whose members sustained their relations under adverse conditions for centuries. But their moments of most serious persecution also show us rulers using mighty resources to break up clandestine trust networks and seize the resources embedded in them.

We participants in kinship and other trust networks usually take them for granted. But they pose important mysteries: how do they maintain cohesion, control and, yes, trust when their members spread out into worlds rich with other opportunities and commitments? Their limiting cases, isolated communes and religious communities, seem easier to explain because their very insulation from the world facilitates continuous monitoring, mutual aid, reciprocity, trust, and barriers to exit. But geographically dispersed trust networks somehow manage to produce similar effects, if not usually at the emotional intensities of isolated communities. Maintaining the boundary between “us” and “them” clearly plays an important part in trust networks' continued operation (Tilly 2004c, 2005). That fact alone helps explain why over most of history participants have avoided exposure to rulers and public politics as much as possible.

Yet from time to time regimes emerge in which many citizens actually put their lives and assets extensively at risk to bad political performance. They use legal tender, buy governmental securities, pay taxes, rely

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on government-backed pensions, yield their children to military service, appeal to courts, contribute to public services, and rely on publicly recognized political actors for help in communicating their grievances or aspirations. At least to that extent, they integrate their trust networks into public politics. At least to that extent, the people who currently run their governments – their rulers – gain access to precious resources that historically have stayed sequestered within trust networks, well protected from public use. Rulers gain access to previously hoarded wealth, credit, labor power, information, and sometimes even loyalty.

Integration of trust networks into public politics varies from indirect to direct. *Indirect* integration occurs when trust networks extend into politically engaged actors such as local organizations, churches, or labor unions that in turn bargain with each other and with governments over the allocation of politically mediated costs and benefits. *Direct* integration occurs when trust networks extend into government itself, for example through the incorporation of kin group members into national armed forces, establishment of state churches exercising monopolies over political participation, or government creation of social security systems tying the futures of workers to governmental performance and the reliability of government-employed providers of services. Obviously many intermediate locations open up along the continuum, for example privileged or disadvantaged communities enjoying connections with governmental agencies committed to their protection.

Enter Adam Smith

Adam Smith never used the term “trust network.” Smith did, however, make a relevant argument: solidarity of the sort that appears in trust networks grows from sympathy bred by long-term familiarity, and thus forms stronger bonds within households than across kin groups or neighborhoods. Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759, also portrayed sheer necessity as driving members of solitary groups together in most political circumstances:

In pastoral countries, and in all countries where the authority of law is not alone sufficient to give perfect security to every member of the state, all the different branches of the same family commonly choose to live in the neighbourhood of one another. Their association is frequently necessary for their common defence. They are all, from the highest to the lowest, of more or less importance to one another.

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Their concord strengthens their necessary association – their discord always weakens, and might destroy it. They have more intercourse with one another than with the members of any other tribe. The remotest members of the same tribe claim some connexion with one another; and, where all other circumstances are equal, expect to be treated with more distinguished attention than is due to those who have no such pretensions. It is not many years ago that, in the Highlands of Scotland, the chieftain used to consider the poorest man of his clan as his cousin and relation. The same extensive regard to kindred is said to take place among the Tartars, the Arabs, the Turkomans, and, I believe, among all other nations who are nearly in the same state of society in which the Scots Highlanders were about the beginning of the present century. (Smith 2000: 326–327)

Habitual sympathy and collective self-defense, in Smith's account, converged in promoting kin-based solidarity across most political circumstances. Only those political systems guaranteeing individual security escaped that necessity.

Adam Smith's 1759 essay states a fundamental problem, but falls short of identifying the problem's solution. Under what conditions, how, and why do people rely on kin connections for their major enterprises? Institutional economists have picked up the Smithian problem, and proposed an ingenious solution: although markets and firms provide more efficient substitutes for kin-based trading in developed economies, where uncertain enforcement of contracts and high information costs prevail, naturally formed trust networks actually offer superior efficiency to reliance on impersonal economic transactions. In Janet Tai Landa's work,

Questionnaire surveys of and interviews with Chinese middlemen engaged in the marketing of smallholders' rubber in Singapore and West Malaysia in 1969 revealed that (a) the marketing of smallholders' rubber – through the various levels of the vertical marketing structure – was dominated by a middleman group with a tightly knit kinship structure from the Hokkien-Chinese ethnic group; (b) that mutual trust and mutual aid formed the basis of the particularization of exchange relations among Chinese middlemen; and (c) that within the Chinese economy transactions among middlemen were based on credit, while Chinese middlemen used cash transactions with indigenous smallholders to reduce contract uncertainty. (Landa 1994: 101)

According to Landa, the networks activated invisible ethical codes in a "low cost clublike institutional arrangement," which economized on contract enforcement and information costs (Landa 1994: 102). In harmony with other institutional economists, Landa emphasizes the importance of social arrangements that reinforce or substitute for firms and markets by reducing transaction costs and stabilizing economic outcomes (Haber, Razo, and Maurer 2003, North 1990, 1997).

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Avner Greif approaches a similar problem when he compares “individualist” Genoese merchants with “collectivist” Jewish merchants of the Maghreb. He sets up the comparison as a pair of principal-agent problems: under what conditions will principal merchants entrust precious transactions and goods to distant agents? In the individualist case, the principal will pay the agent a sufficiently high commission to forestall cheating by making the gain from cheating a single time less than the expected gain from long-term honesty; the principal will pay the agent an efficiency wage. In the collectivist case, on the contrary, the principal will rely on the network’s connectedness to assure that a cheater faces shunning by all network members:

Suppose, for example, that every Maghribi expects everyone else to consider a specific behavior as “improper” and punishable in the same manner as cheating in agency relations. This punishment is self-enforcing for the same reasons as the self-enforcing collective punishment in agency relations and is feasible because there is a network for information transmission. (Greif 1994: 936)

In the collective society, by Greif’s account, customs, oral tradition, and similar informal mechanisms produce agreement about improper behavior, hence common readiness to punish infractions wherever they occur throughout the network.

So far, so good – but not good enough. First, Smith’s argument and its neo-Smithian elaborations offer no explanation of the claims exercised by distant kin with whom persons have had little or no contact. How does it happen that, as Adam Smith noticed, “the remotest members of the same tribe claim some connexion with one another,” and exercise rights based on that “connexion”? Is it plausible that each such kin connection belongs to a collectivist society in which custom and oral tradition have produced connectedness, shared beliefs, and a consequent readiness to punish infractions of common norms? Second, Smithian arguments do not explain how groups linked primarily not by kinship but by religion, political commitment, or trade actually acquire and maintain kinlike solidarity; both Landa and Greif, for example, assume solidarity’s prior existence. Third, they underestimate the predatory approach of rulers to trust networks on which they can get their hands. Finally, they offer no account of the process by which the trust networks of what Smith calls “commercial countries” become integrated into public politics.

Smith himself argued that kin-based relations simply shrivel as civilization advances (Smith 2000: 327–328). But observers of today’s rich capitalist countries repeatedly find kin relations organizing a wide range

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Table 1.1. *Signs of Trust Networks' Integration into Public Politics*

In the contemporary world, we would be observing integration of trust networks into public politics if we saw many people in a given regime doing a number of the following things:

- creating publicly recognized associations, mutual aid societies, parties, unions, congregations, and communities, or seeking recognition for similar organizations that have existed underground
- pursuing friendship, kinship, shared belief, security, and high-risk enterprises within such organizations
- permitting family members to serve in national military and police forces
- promoting careers of family members in public service, including government office
- seeking (or at least tolerating) government registration of vital events such as births, deaths, and marriages, then using the registration to validate legal transactions
- providing private information to public organizations and authorities through censuses, surveys, and applications for services
- entrusting private contracts to governmental enforcement
- asking government agents to punish or prevent malfeasance by members of their own kin groups, religious sects, or economic networks
- using government-issued legal tender for interpersonal transactions and savings
- purchasing government securities with funds (e.g., dowry) committed to maintenance of interpersonal ties
- relying on political actors and/or government agencies for vital services and long-term security

of social activity (DiMaggio and Louch 1998, Lye 1996, Stark 1995, Yinger 1985). Clearly we must move beyond Adam Smith, while recognizing with Smith and his heirs a dual problem of explanation: 1) independence and importance of trust networks across long stretches of history and 2) transformation and possible withering of trust networks in the world's "commercial countries."

How might we recognize the political integration of trust networks? For our own time, Table 1.1 lists likely clues of that integration, ranging from indirect (creation of politically active associations containing or based on trust networks) to quite direct (promoting careers of trust network members in governmental service). Over the long historical run, such commitments of trust networks to public politics have rarely developed. Even in today's democratic countries, they have only become common during the last century or so. In addition to being consequential for individual lives and interpersonal relations, they greatly increase the stakes of network members in the proper conduct of public politics.