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Circles of trust: reciprocity, community and multilateralism

In 2001, even before the terrible events of 9/11, a term once reserved for arcane discussions among academics began to seep into the public discourse – unilateralism. This was the characterization of a number of high-profile actions taken by the new Republican administration such as the “unsigned” of the International Criminal Court statute and a lack of serious engagement on the issue of climate change. Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the Bush administration decided to fight the war in Afghanistan largely alone, refusing an offer of NATO help. Then, of course, came Iraq. The American government, unable to garner the international community’s endorsement of its aim of permanently disarming Saddam Hussein’s regime by force, proceeded without the sanction of the United Nations. The government’s unilateralism, it has been consistently maintained, marked a departure from the post-WWII tradition of American multilateral engagement and has attracted widespread disappointment and scorn on the part of American allies.

Even as the Bush administration was castigated for being unilateral, however, scholars and pundits alike failed to interrogate the term and its logical opposite – multilateralism. What are unilateralism and multilateralism and what are their sources? A convenient answer is that unilateralism is the desire to go it alone, one that simply emerges when a state’s interests are out of line with those of other countries. Why, after all, would the United States seek to constrain itself multilaterally in the United Nations when other countries were not as threatened by the possibility of weapons of mass destruction falling into terrorists’ hands?

Yet it seems there was something deeper at work in the Bush administration’s preference for unilateralism, something ideological in nature, what psychological scholars would call a dispositional explanation. Unilateralism is not just the case-by-case resort of those whose interests do not match with others in particular instances. It is a general

inclination not to cooperate with others and not to restrain oneself in institutions. It is, in keeping with the term itself, an ‘ism’ in its own right.

That unilateralism is dispositional and ideological rather than structurally determined is given credence by the fact that unilateralism does not mark the views of the entire political spectrum in the United States. The preference for unilateral as opposed to multilateral action has become increasingly partisan in recent years, reflecting growing ideological divergence between the Republicans and the Democrats not only on foreign policy but also on domestic political questions. The result has, some maintain, been a shattering of the bipartisan consensus on projecting American power through the framework of international institutions that has marked American foreign policy since WWII.

Yet still we are left with the questions, Why is it that some are more inclined to cooperate than others in the same circumstances? What are the precursors of unilateralism and multilateralism? Why did the Bush administration depart from it? Why are political parties divided on the subject? To answer these questions I return to the origins of American multilateralism, its efforts to establish international security organizations in the wake of two wars – WWI and WWII – and in the early moments of another, different kind of conflict – the Cold War. In doing so, I find some surprising answers that overturn both theoretical and historical conventional wisdom concerning the factors promoting cooperation and institution building in international relations in general and the sources of American multilateralism in particular.

I argue that multilateralism is the expression of trust. In the context of strategic interdependence, trust is belief that cooperation will be reciprocated. Unilateralists resist collective solutions to common problems because they believe that others are not trustworthy. Multilateralism places one’s interests in the hands of others in an effort to reach greater gains through cooperation. It requires trust. Those who do not trust will prefer unilateralism.

Trust has attracted considerable attention recently in the international relations literature, particularly on the part of rational institutionalists. Rationalism relies on a particular notion of trust, the “strategic” variety (Uslaner 2002). In this conceptualization, trust emerges when individuals have information that leads them to believe that specific others have a self-interest in reciprocating cooperation rather than violating their commitments (Hardin 2006). International

organizations can help provide this information, reduce uncertainty and alter the situation so that potential cooperators' interests "encapsulate" one another. Distrust comes first, then the institution, and then trust (Keohane 1984). States act rationally to design institutions in such a way that they can secure their goals by calculating the likely alignments of interests among other parties and choosing the organizational form that suits them best. Scholars in the "rational design" school have sought to demonstrate that the greater the problems of distrust, the more authoritative and hierarchical the institutions fashioned to solve them (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; 2004).

The type of trust I am describing is different. It is "generalized" in nature, based on a broad belief that others are largely trustworthy (Uslaner 2002). Generalized trusters are more optimistic that others will live up to their agreements and that they do not wish them harm. Given the scope of such a belief, generalized trust must be moralistic, based not on an assessment of others' interests but on their character and honesty. It is ideological in nature, rooted in a broader worldview about the nature of social relations.

For almost half a century, social psychologists have demonstrated (and international relations scholars have largely ignored) the importance of generalized trust for cooperation. It helps states initiate cooperation in the absence of adequate or telling information about the trustworthiness of others. Generalized trust begins a *reciprocity circle* of trust, cooperation and enhanced trust. And it helps sustain cooperation when the exchange of benefits is not consistent or frequent over time. When generalized trust is present, the reciprocity circle can be more open-ended. This variety of trust also allows states to cooperate with new partners. It broadens the *community circle*, extending trust to others. With generalized trust, this circle is left open. Without it, states are forced into isolation or cooperation only with those about whom they have specific information or relationships, potentially forgoing larger gains with others.

Generalized trust also leaves an impact on the design of international organizations. To reach more collectively optimal outcomes, organizations often require that states cede some of their sovereignty, at least formally, through commitments made in international agreements. What Ruggie (1992) calls "qualitative" multilateralism allows states to harness the collective weight of a number of states to reach outcomes they could not unilaterally by establishing general rules of

conduct that do not depend on the particular case. For instance, states agree that an attack on one is an attack on all, or that they will submit all their disputes to third-party mediation. This is a reciprocal exchange in which states tie their hands on some unknown issue in the future on the condition that others do the same.

Qualitative multilateralism, however, comes with the risk of opportunism because it places one's fate in the hands of others. States might not hold up their end of the reciprocal bargain and might abandon others by not submitting their disputes or not coming to the aid of a state in need. A binding security guarantee risks entrapment and free riding on defense spending. Conflict resolution mechanisms in which states allow international organizations to settle their disputes threaten exploitation and interference by others. Multilateralism is a double-edged sword. And this danger increases as the number of states participating grows, what Ruggie calls "quantitative" multilateralism. Whereas smaller organizations might more easily run on the basis of overlapping interests or specific reciprocity, qualitatively multilateral institutions with many members require diffuse reciprocity to function. This is particularly true of security organizations.

Because they rely exclusively on the strategic variety of trust, rationalists believe that states will find it hard to cooperate in these highly uncertain situations. But generalized trust can help states resolve these dilemmas in favor of cooperation. By lessening concerns about opportunism, generalized trust allows states to place their fate in the hands of others and create institutions with more binding commitments among more members. It generates the belief in diffuse reciprocity necessary for qualitative and quantitative multilateralism to operate. Rationalists systematically understate the possibilities for cooperation.

In short, where generalized trust is present, it serves as a form of what I call, by crossing the terms popularized by Hedley Bull (1977) and Robert Putnam (1993), *anarchical social capital* to create a basic system of rules and order in international relations. Because it rests on a judgment about the inherent trustworthiness of others, generalized trust allows for the transfer of trust beyond specific instances in which interests are thought to align. This type of trust is in a sense trust in international cooperation itself, a theme captured in the title of this book. It is a general belief that collaborating with others will yield joint benefits. Individuals or states do not cooperate for cooperation's sake. Trust in and of itself does not explain cooperation. But it facilitates

collaboration if there is the possibility of mutual gain based on some complementary interests. In this book, the motivations are security and peace.

Looking at cooperation and institutional creation from this angle leads us to invert, or least significantly qualify, the rational institutionalist conclusions regarding international organizations that emerged with Robert Keohane's *After Hegemony* (1984). According to this view, the formation of international organizations is driven by distrust among states. Rationalist arguments have a certain intuitive appeal yet they lead to some counterintuitive results. For instance, following rationalist logic, we might conclude that distrust is higher amongst the members of the European Union, the most authoritative set of supranational institutions in the world, than among other countries in the world when the exact opposite seems to be true. Rationalist arguments beg the question of how states are able to come together to build institutions to solve problems of distrust without some reservoir of good faith in the first place. A focus on generalized as opposed to strategic trust leads to a directly opposite conclusion that helps answer this question. Trust rather than distrust leads states to create international institutions. It is a cause, not the effect, of international organizations.

Just as Keohane did, I import fresh insights from another discipline to upend certain conventional wisdoms regarding international cooperation and organizations. Strategic trust is situational in nature, a product of the particular constellation of interests in play at any particular time. Generalized trust, in contrast, is dispositional in nature, a trait of particular individuals but not necessarily of others. This points the way towards a uniquely *psychological* theory of international cooperation and international organization. The literature on "social orientation" in social psychology demonstrates that individuals in the same structural circumstances show remarkably different propensities to cooperate based on their different expectations of how others will behave (Kuhlman and Marshello 1975; Kuhlman and Wimberley 1976). "Cooperators" are generalized trusters who believe that cooperation, even in prisoner's dilemma situations, will be reciprocated. "Competitors," in contrast, lack generalized trust and consistently defect, even in assurance games. Rationalism, with its focus on the situational factors affecting cooperation, cannot explain the effect of social orientation.

Such findings wreak havoc with the premises of rational design theorists who claim that international institutions are efficient and functional responses to the particular objective strategic dilemma states face. Multilateralism might be less useful in helping states cope with prisoner's dilemma situations, but decision-makers will act on the basis of their subjective understanding of their country's position, something which varies even in the same structural conditions. Therefore, multilateralism is not just an institutional structure that all will embrace when it serves the national interest; it is an individual trait of some but not others. Psychology puts the "ism" in multilateralism and unilateralism. Generalized trusters are cooperators with a multilateral disposition more likely to frame a strategic situation in assurance terms. Non-trusters are competitors with a unilateral disposition who frame the same situation in prisoner's dilemma terms.

Placed in the same circumstances, generalized trusters are more likely to cooperate and more likely to construct institutions of a particular kind – those with more binding commitments, more members and less flexibility. Non-trusters want to retain more of their unilateral prerogatives such as vetoes, opt-out clauses and withdrawal provisions. They will limit the terms of their agreements and include fewer members.

Variation in inclinations to cooperate in the same structural circumstances points us towards an evaluation of domestic politics. Social orientation research suggests that divisions over multilateralism and unilateralism will become a contentious domestic political issue to the extent that generalized trust varies within countries. A cleavage between trusters and non-trusters might have its origins in any number of factors. However, the newly emerging consensus in political psychology is that the left is more trusting than the right. The notion that the left has a more benign view of human nature and sees the world as a less threatening place than the right is a longstanding observation, one for which there is increasing evidence both in social psychology and studies of elite and mass public opinion. Generalized trust and its absence find expression in both the domestic and the foreign policy positions of the left and right. They structure political attitudes. This leads us to expect significant partisan differences between left and right in countries on the issue of international cooperation and the design of international organizations as parties are the primary vehicle for ideological contestation.

I apply this argument about multilateralism to the cases that first come to mind when we think of the term – the American role in the construction of the League of Nations, the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The standard account is that after 1945, the United States embarked upon a new internationalist strategy of engagement that broke with its previous grand strategy of political–military isolation, a course most evident in its policies concerning the creation of international organizations. Whereas the US declined to enter the League of Nations, it joined the United Nations and a few short years later signed and ratified the North Atlantic Treaty. Structuralists argue that the changing nature of military technology, the US’s unprecedented power, and the growing threat of the Soviet Union combined to put politicians of all stripes on a more internationalist and multilateralist path after WWII (Lake 1999; Leffler 1979). Given its hegemonic position, the United States was willing to provide public goods despite free-riding opportunism by its partners (Keohane 1984). Ikenberry (2001) claims that American multilateralists were preoccupied mainly with making sure that US hegemony was acceptable to others by binding itself down in multilateral institutions.

I take issue with this conventional wisdom as well. Keohane’s initial problématique was how the American-sponsored multilateral institutional order might nevertheless persist “after hegemony” as the United States began to decline in the 1970s and 1980s. However, at the time of the creation of the League and the United Nations, the United States was not yet hegemonic. Even when it was, as in the smaller Western bloc of states which formed NATO, the United States was decidedly ambivalent about long-term institutionalized cooperation. For their part, America’s partners were not at all concerned about American exploitation. Multilateralism was a mechanism for them not to hold the United States “down” but rather to keep them “in,” as Lord Ismay’s famous aphorism about NATO has long told us. The real puzzle is therefore why the United States was willing to make this commitment at all, not how it was able to solicit international support for it. This was cooperation after victory but *before* hegemony.

The key to the postwar American commitment to multilateralism both after WWI and WWII was trust of others, not how to make others trust the United States. Binding security institutions might have had the effect of constraining American power over time, but it was

not the original motivation. The United States was not willing to allow unlimited free riding as a hegemon might. Even in the case of the North Atlantic Treaty, where the United States did possess overwhelming power among its partners, American multilateralists were not inclined to provide security without the expectation of European reciprocity.

Rationalists claim that the power of structure in propelling post-WWII multilateralism was evident in the overwhelming bipartisan support in the Senate for these agreements, which contrasted with the polarizing partisan politics and division during the debate on the League of Nations Covenant (Busby and Monten 2008; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007). However, in the aftermath of WWII, American political elites again vigorously debated the wisdom of significant cooperation with other nations in the framework of international security institutions, first in the form of the United Nations and later in the North Atlantic Treaty. Even in the early post-WWII era, shown empirically to be the most bipartisan period in American foreign policy in the twentieth century, there was no ideological consensus. Structural circumstances did not dictate a unique solution to America's security problems after WWII any more than after WWI. There was no decisive break or new bipartisan consensus.

Both parties were composed, both after WWI and after WWII, almost entirely of internationalists, but there were two competing internationalisms at work. Democrats and Republicans differed over the relative merits of multilateralism and unilateralism, that is, whether security was best served by combining resources with others or going it alone. Even where there was a more compelling security logic, as was true in the NATO case, the United States still faced a choice between a cooperative and a unilateral solution to the threat. Democrats were again more ideologically inclined towards multilateral solutions to collective problems than Republicans in the same structural situation because of their different social orientations, their different levels of generalized trust. Cooperators expected reciprocity, whereas competitors anticipated free-riding, entrapment, exploitation and abandonment. This led them to support different visions for the design of these organizations.

The post-WWII period was different than the post-WWI period not in the absence of ideological differences, but in that the Democratic administration, learning from the mistakes of Woodrow Wilson, solicited Republican input behind the scenes during the negotiation of

these two treaties so as to bridge differences before they were publicly debated in the ratification process. Any solution to the dilemma of post-war engagement had to reflect a compromise between the mainstream tendencies in both parties given the need for two-thirds Senate support for any treaty. Ideological divisions were pronounced, but unlike after WWI they were hidden from public view and resolved in private. The subsequent overwhelming consensus in the Senate and the lack of any significant political opposition has facilitated the development of a certain myth of “bipartisan consensus,” giving a false impression of ideological convergence when what actually emerged was a carefully constructed compromise in which both sides received something in the deal.

This tells us much about the domestic politics of multilateralism in the United States today. There has always been contestation in the United States over whether and how to cooperate with others. Much of this was muffled during the Cold War. After NATO was created, hardening divisions between West and East papered over domestic ideological differences over the precise design of the alliance. And the United Nations was constructed so as not to significantly threaten American sovereignty in the first place. Therefore generic support for multilateralism did not elicit different responses from liberals and conservatives, as it asked little of the United States. After the Cold War ended, however, these tendencies, present from the beginning, reasserted themselves. And they worsened still after 9/11. Ideological differences between the parties have certainly become much more polarized in recent years. But they were always present.

In sum, generalized trust was an essential ingredient in America’s tortuous movement from isolation to engagement over the course of the twentieth century and therefore for the creation of the post-WWII multilateral order. Generalized trust provided a source of social capital for cooperators, predominantly in the Democratic Party, without which the American multilateral security order might never have come into existence or at least would have looked very different. Given American power and its historical reluctance to engage internationally, the United States had great bargaining leverage in the creation and design of the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty. The form these organizations took was largely the result of American planning. However, the final shape of these institutions resulted from a domestic political compromise of cooperators

and competitors, something that explains key features of the three organizations.

In the remainder of this chapter, I lay out an encompassing definition of trust and describe its relationship with related concepts such as reciprocity and cooperation. Defining two dimensions of trust provides the groundwork for drawing out the different varieties of trust. Strategic trust is first. I note its implicit use in rationalist institutional theories and explain how the conclusions they reach as regards the causal relationship between trust and IOs derive from this particular choice of trust. This generates a number of different puzzles and anomalies for rationalism. In Chapter 2, I introduce generalized trust, comparing it to the strategic variant and demonstrating how it resolves many of the difficulties the latter has in explaining multilateral cooperation. Generalized trust is a dispositional trait, one evident in the literature on social orientation reviewed next. From this point, after a brief consideration of constructivist approaches to trust and cooperation, it is possible to generate a number of distinct hypotheses for each approach. Finally I take up issues of case selection and measurement.

The dimensions of trust: reciprocity and community

Trust is the belief that one will not be harmed when his or her fate is placed in the hands of others. It entails a combination of uncertainty and vulnerability (Hardin 2006: 29; Hoffman 2006: 17; Kramer, Brewer and Hanna 1996: 25; Larson 1997: 19; Sztompka 1999). Trust always leaves the truster exposed to potential opportunism. Trusters put themselves in a vulnerable position because they do not expect harm to come of it. Yet if trust is involved, they do not know for sure.

In the context of cooperation, trust is the belief that others will cooperate when one cooperates, that they will not exploit one's vulnerability but rather respond in kind. Kydd (2005) has put it in game theoretic terms. Trust is the belief that another has assurance game rather than prisoner's dilemma game preferences, that he or she prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting and suckering others (Kydd 2005: 6–7). Whether to trust involves an assessment of the likelihood that another has cooperative intentions (Kydd 2005: 4–6). Trust is not altruism but rather the expectation of reciprocity (Ostrom and Walker