

# Trust, Mistrust, and Wellbeing

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**Abstract.** The paper emphasizes the importance of relational aspects of the trust and of the wellbeing. It develops a reflection on the dialectic of interpersonal and systemic trust and mistrust, and it analyzes different semantic nuances of the notion of trust. A society characterized by well-being evidences strong type agency, a society with low levels of wellbeing evidences weak type agency. Trust is a social resource indispensable for sustaining agency, society's self-transformation and well-being. While trust is traditionally thought to contribute to social cohesion, mistrusting the rulers can also be considered a positive countervailing force in contemporary democracies. At the same time, the distrust sedimented in time creates, on the one hand, a saving expectation and on the other, paternalization as a search for a substitute trust.

**Keywords:** Trust, Mistrust, Wellbeing, Social cohesion.

**Riassunto.** Questo articolo enfatizza l'importanza degli aspetti relazionali sia per il tema della fiducia sia per il benessere. Sviluppa, inoltre, una riflessione sulla dialettica tra fiducia e sfiducia interpersonale e sistemica e analizza le diverse sfumature semantiche della nozione di fiducia. Una società caratterizzata dal benessere evidenzia un'agency di tipo forte, una società con bassi livelli di benessere evidenzia un'agency di tipo debole. La fiducia è una risorsa sociale indispensabile per sostenere l'agency, l'autotrasformazione della società e il benessere. Sebbene si ritenga che la fiducia contribuisca tradizionalmente alla coesione sociale, la sfiducia nei governanti può essere considerata una forza positiva di contrasto nelle democrazie contemporanee. Allo stesso tempo, la sfiducia sedimentata nel tempo crea, da un lato, un'aspettativa di salvezza e, dall'altro, una paternalizzazione come ricerca di una fiducia sostitutiva.

**Parole chiave:** Fiducia, Sfiducia, Benessere, Coesione sociale.

## 1. Introduction

For a long period of time, the concept of trust has not been explicitly analyzed by sociologists, or has only been examined sporadically as part of the social relationship topic. Research concerning trust suffered a strong setback when the focus of studies was directed towards a rational choice in the pursuit of interest.

Classic sociology has not offered a significant contribution to the topic. Conversely, in the past decades the topic of trust has been analyzed in depth and not only with a focus on trust in institutions. There is thus a heated debate between the topic and modern society and its reflective ability (Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994), risk society (Beck, 2013), and globalization (Giddens, 1994, 85). Another important branch of studies concerning trust involves cooperation, intended as a pre-condition for development or a product of developed societies. In the following pages, I shall elucidate some of the characteristics of trust related to well-being, but I will also linger on the concept of mistrust in complex societies, meant as a critical basis for change.

## 2. Trust-Mistrust

Studies intertwining research on the individual and on the community place trust as a central topic (Seligman, 1999). This also occurs in studies strictly related to the political context.

The concept of well-being is influenced by very specific social indicators, which refer to that which was called 'the good life' – in an ontological sense – in classic philosophy. Tangible social relationships – which are instead central in contemporary sociology, especially in terms of trust-

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mistrust dialectics and the construction of the concept of identity itself – are instead completely absent or considered very marginally. A's identity is the relationship between A and someone different than A. The concept of trust is central to the state of well-being, whether it is meant from a personal perspective, a system perspective, or an interpersonal perspective, thus at a micro-social or macro-social level. The topic of trust which ties into that of social capital as well (Bourdieu, 1980) – presents numerous issues, both in terms of semantic values of the concept and in terms of the possibility or method of measurement. Such concept also gives rise to a number of theoretical, practical, and methodological questions.

The intention of this paper is to analyze, in particular, the socio-political and macroeconomic repercussions. As far as politics goes, we live in an age of mistrust: mistrust in the establishment, in the judgement of experts, in scientific knowledge, in administrators, and in democratic institutions. We thus face, as citizens, a deep 'affection' crisis, which paves the way for populist forces. While trust is traditionally considered a positive element of social cohesion and community life, one might also interpret mistrust in governors as a precondition for democratic control or a completion of democracy: a counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006) that irrupts as a balancing force for contemporary democracies.

The need to investigate on the topic of trust is enrooted in the deep crisis and erosion of the social foundations of cooperation and civil life, along with a major identity crisis experienced by Western societies. Therefore, the search of a sense or reason at the basis of social integration represent a strong basis for analysis of trust and its possible new articulations. In an atmosphere of instability and uncertainty – at first in post-industrial society, and currently in a globalized, post-modern society – the topic of trust acquires new relevance (Misztal, 2013: 25).

Surveys, 'our daily bread', report a general mistrust that is not well defined in its expressions and at times struggles to have a specific logic. A confidence deficit is recorded at both the macro-social and micro-social levels (Ritter, 2013). We are living the mistrust heritage deriving from democratic societies, and this makes our path – imbued with rising, seeping, or triumphant populisms – arduous. On the other hand, there is the concept of trust, certified by an abundance of studies and analyses that have decorated it with the status of fundamental concept in social science, at the crux between psychology, anthropology, and political science. One of the most fertile research currents is the one contemplating a synthesis of collective solidarity and individual self-fulfillment. It is agreed in contemporary literature concerning trust that the latter is important to social life and social/personal well-being, but the concept of trust in itself is more debated. Certainly, an initial distinction shall be made between studies referring to self-trust – self-perception imbued with trust – and systematic trust. I shall keep these two levels well separated, although they certainly have a reciprocal influence on one another and an extremely strong correlation. It is a given fact that trust is the key to positive human relationships and cooperation, thus life in general, thus its importance is also given. Nevertheless, the conditions making it come about or perish are less assumed.

The contemporary sociology context boasts such a large number of empirical researches that we may nearly go as far as to say that the quantity of studies is greater than the real-life expression. There are in fact criticalities related to the concept's polysemy in common use. We ask the interviewed their degree of trust without asking them to specify what they mean by trust, which causes a confusion of the system level and the personal level in such studies.

As mentioned at the start of the paper, the concept of trust is complex and polysemic, thus we may speak of trusts in the plural form rather than trust in the singular form. A comparison between common use of the concept and the paradigms deriving from tradition gives the research an added value.

This idea is often conceptualized, especially by Sztompka (1999, pp. 69 ff.), within the theoretical framework of social becoming. Society is a constant process of self-transformation, and this transformation changes structures, personal beliefs, and thus even future practices.

The potential for action is the result of a specific fusion of structural conditions and the authority of human actors. As Sartre would put it, we may say that we are able to be, within a given set of

conditions: I am that which I can become, we decide that which we are to a limited extent, but the space for freedom has a fundamental value.

A well-being society avails itself of strong level of action, whilst a poorly developed bad-being society has a weak level of action.

The strength of an action has to do with a society's infra-structure and resources, some of which are tangible: capital, natural resources, the geopolitical aspect, etc. Yet there are other interesting forces that are intangible: atmosphere, identity, recognition, and – very importantly – trust. Beck (2013, pp. 7-8) underlined how the importance which has been assigned to trust as an intangible resource of social action; he claimed that when trust fails, societies waver or even collapse. Gambetta – with his relevant research on the Italian mafia system and trust – claims that when there is total mistrust, cooperation between autonomous social actors will disappear. Such concept applies perfectly to the mafia, which tends to create a spiral of mistrust among citizens and mistrust towards institutions in order to impose its own system. Even Eisenstadt and Roniger (Eisenstadt, Roniger, 1999, p. 19 ff.) describe trust as a necessary value and basis for the construction of social relationships. This idea was reiterated by Luhmann (2002, p. 5) who states that without any form of trust we could not even be able to get out of bed in the morning. We may thus consider trust some sort of indispensable social resource favouring action as well as a self-transformation and well-being process within a society.

### **3. Trust and risk**

Trust is an important resource required to think, design, and imagine the future, or – put more simply – to face it.

We act in view of future events: we study in view of an exam; I trust I will pass it; otherwise I would not perform the action of studying for it. To return to our initial discussion, our actions work in prediction of future events within the limits of given conditions: natural conditions and social conditions.

The risk we are exposed to implies an adaptation to hazardous or threatening conditions. Therefore, the future of society according to Luhmann's idea has to do with complexity and uncertainty. From this perspective, trust is an attempt to reduce complexity and diminish uncertainty (Luhmann, 2002: 37): I take certain aspects of the future for granted, thus I live as if reality were simple and safe; or in any case, by giving trust, I simplify a reality that, if well-known in all its aspects, would not help me, but rather would overtake me; besides, I do not have the power to control everything.

Luhmann explains the essence of trust by means of its ability to generate positive effects: «Where there is trust there are increased possibilities for experience and action, there is an increase in the complexity of the social system and also in the number of possibilities which can be reconciled with its structure, because trust constitutes a more effective form of complexity reduction» (Luhmann, 2017, p. 9). Its function is to provide the feeling of increased understanding and reduced complexity, which is a central issue in that the individual cannot have a sufficient level of knowledge to not rely upon other individuals involved in the specific fields. Since they are unable to perform certain duties or services on their own, common people are growingly reliant upon experts (Beck, 2013: 20).

Nevertheless, according to Luhmann the act of trusting is not based upon universalistic and general value choices – as Parsons claimed (Parsons, 1963:37ff) – but on answers to the social system and environment of a selective and contingent nature.

What are the prerequisites of trust and under what conditions may they be preserved? Roniger introduced a fundamental distinction – also reiterated by Sztompka – between generalized and focalized trust. Such distinction intersected that between trust in institutions and interpersonal trust. Generalized trust is, above all, that which we think of when reflecting deeply on the things allowing us to act on the free market (Durkheimian precontractual solidarity), as well as that which allows us to ride a bus without thinking it will stop in the middle of the road, Giddens would define this trust in expert systems. Therefore, it is a generalized trust in institutions. But the fact that one doesn't think someone may assault them at any moment of their life is also an expression of generalized trust in people, in their capacity as strangers. Generalized trust is anonymous; it is not directed towards

someone in particular or someone you know, and Sztompka clearly highlights how it may fail to exist or be deeply tarnished by the behavior of institution representatives.

In any case, such type of trust is the product of modern and complex societies. It is the result of widespread approval of democratic society and the related well-being; this is what is normally meant when one talks about trust. When referring to professions, Roniger spoke of focalized, category-based trust.

Trust networks, as well as networks of friends and family members have well-defined limits. They normally do not extend beyond a certain number of network nodes and connections. Roniger's intuition was that the topic of trust owes its importance to the fact that there is a convergence of reflections concerning developed countries and less developed or emerging countries.

In the former, it is recorded that the idea of generalized trust is at risk – a crisis of trust in democratic systems (Warren, 1999, pp. 310-316) – while in the latter, it is recorded that focalized risk with its strength and pervasiveness somehow compensates the inexistence of generalized trust, and at the same time contributes to making it impossible. Perhaps this dichotomy is not extremely helpful to distinguishing the systems, and sometimes the permanence of friend, professional, and family networks is not necessarily a remainder of the past or a lack of modernization. The true theoretical issue is to understand whether focalized, selective, and local trust systems may amalgamate and give life to generalized trust systems, and also how generalized trust conditions tend to degenerate into restricted and focalized conditions. Sztompka analyzed Eastern European countries with a great degree of pessimism, but did not describe the functioning mechanism and the incidence of a history of focalized trust in detail. Customized trust relationships were very popular, especially in the economic context that was subject to the bureaucracy of the single party. As for Italy, the most fitting example is what is defined as clientelism, namely the set of reciprocal favors that are more common than the trust we consider normal or generalized.

Another question arises concerning the shift to generalized trust in Western countries. Here, we may witness episodes such as the rebirth of ethnic movements boasting selective trust, thus an intra-community trust in the members of the specific group. Another phenomenon features trust turning into a good on the market; not in the financial context, but in the online context. Indeed, 'likes' have a precise economic value. Trust is promoted just as a product. The key to development of trust and appeal is certainly not charisma, but something quite different.

It is hard to predict what the effect of such promocracy will have on generalized trust. To trust means to accept a calculated risk that implies the possibility of crosschecking, otherwise it is no longer trust, but faith.

The behavior of an individual, in the capacity as social actor, in relation to the feeling of trust towards other social actors and society itself – viewed in its complexity and entirety – mainly depends upon the answers to local issues he/she expects from institutions: trust is not a consensus of value, but a feeling that arises or fails to arise in response to situations strictly related to contingency.

Therefore, trust has to do with the parts of future generated at a social level: others exist and I cannot know whether their actions might be favorable to myself or not. The more complex, thus modern, a society is, the more such risk increases.

Trust is a path to reduce such complexity. If we give trust to someone, it means we invest on that person. Sztompka's (2003, pp. 18 ff) definition thus comes in handy: trust is a bet on the future, contingent actions of others. This leads us to a zoom in on the field of trust in human actions. In this sense, trust and hope belong to two conceptually different categories. Trust has to do with human actions, and to a certain extent we can have an influence on the latter. Just consider the amazing statement by Simmel, who claims that personal trust activates a social relationship, and when we are given it, it shall be 'honored'; it implies an almost coercive prejudice, and to let it down requires a «positive meanness». Therefore, the act of trust implies the involvement not only of those who trust, but even those who are put trust in, who have the task to prove to be worthy of such trust. At times, though, when the act of trust is deeply disappointed, and those who trusted realize their trust was misplaced, the latter may brusquely turn into mistrust.

Hope contains an idea of destiny and fate, while trust may be classified as a social action. Trust is our expectation of any result among the actions that others may perform: it is trust in someone else's actions. Trust is thus a bet made by the social actor; he/she puts trust in another for the performance of an action. In short, trust is a person's expectation of a certain probability that another's actions will be favorable to him/her. Oppositely, if no active commitment is made, the action falls under a slightly vague category, which is not trust in the strict sense. Broadly speaking, confidence is a concept that is not based upon a personal action, but is generic, and does not give those who trust any power or imply a relationship.

There are thus a number of expressions at the various levels of trust: we may assign it to numerous and different social actors, and may assign it with different levels of generality.

A prime example of generalized trust is trust in democracy: a form of trust that provides a kind of ontological safety, a confidence in the continuity of our self-identity and in the social environments of action (Giddens, 1994).

There is a form of trust that is segmented, or addressed to a single sector and not to another. This may also involve institutions: we may trust one institution, but not another. Another important area is technological trust: nowadays, we could not live without a minimum amount of trust in the technological system we are immersed in – though it is quite mine-laden (Beck, 2013). Such trust has repercussions on products as well. Moreover, positional trust depends on the role a person has and is interested in preserving. Trust in people is a completely different matter, and depends on the perceived individual competence, reliability, integrity, and generosity.

The factor all the above subjects of trust have in common is an action, and the effects produced by such action.

#### **4. Trust and politics**

What is known as climate of trust or trust/mistrust atmosphere – which pervades society as a whole and is perceived at various levels – is a different matter (Griffero, 2016, p. 11). The overall trust atmosphere has grave consequences. A shared trust atmosphere – which manifests itself in all areas of society and goes as far as turning into an expectation of norms – becomes an integral part of cultural systems. Therefore, in presence of a trust or mistrust atmosphere, individuals feel compelled to show a certain trust/mistrust in their relationships that goes beyond personal inclination. In a perceived atmosphere of trust, culture of suspicion turns into a struggle to speak out, due indeed to the fact the atmosphere exists on a level that is external to us, which we must always deal with. Thus the atmosphere, as a gaseous substance, stretches unchallenged from its level to every individual, making both trust and mistrust contagious. Trust seems to have a top-down extension, while mistrust appears to have a bottom-up extension. In other words, when there is generalized trust, there is trust in institutions and in their subsystems. The more trust there is at higher levels, the easier it will be to spread it. The more consent leaders have, the more they will be able to disseminate trust, while the opposite goes for mistrust. Take the moments of acute crisis – for example the period of the *Tangentopoli* scandal in Italy. The accuse of corruption directed towards one or even multiple subjects has led to an apparently irreversible mistrust in the system, institutions, and everyone, and this caused the said dissemination: there is no right political system, there are no honest politicians, and politics as a whole is corrupt. It led to the destruction: the corrupt system must die and collapse. This goes to prove how trust is an extremely fragile good (Mutti, 1987), though questioning the sense to assign to such fragility may help overcome it. This was done successfully by Rosanvallon, though he ignored the failures and broken promises of democracy. As Rosanvallon highlights, it will be the trust citizens have in political leaders that will create control and the need for control, thus making the former more aware and participating. Once again, there is shift in meaning. Rosanvallon counterpoises a positive conception of trust to the complaints on the effects of individualism, the fall back on private services, and the decline of politics – with a detachment of the establishment from politics: counter-democracy, which is a participation mode that is not the opposite, but rather a complement of democracy. It is through such that civil society supervises and stimulates institutions:

a democracy of organized mistrust, which contrasts that of electoral legitimacy. Counter-democracy is thus an integral part of institutions, and by means of control and surveillance it expands and extends democracy. The erosion of trust as an invisible institution (Arrow) has given life to an organization of mistrust. Rosanvallon's proposal shall be right-fully included in the democratic approach towards mistrust, which finds expression in three forms: power of surveillance, forms of prohibition, and expression of judgement. Mistrust thus becomes a true political form. Rosanvallon's position is extremely inspiring in its reversal of perspective, but shall be contextualized and understood within the social conditions favoring mistrust, well analyzed by Sztompka. Social gaps and trust gaps in social relationships and political life need to be filled. Thus, a replacement of trust responding to social needs takes the stage. Giddens defined near-mistrust as the feeling of passive expectation and stagnation: the wait for a game-changing event. It is easy to see how – during such wait for a salvific event – a substitute of trust comes about and consolidates: ghettoization, with everything it implies in terms of closure. The lack of general trust is compensated by that towards one's own solid group, and turns into xenophobia. By cutting out the external world, people reduce part of the complexity and uncertainty. This phenomenon often results in the search for a strong figure with an iron hand to chase away all our existential fears and with the ability to reject all that which triggers our mistrust, those who are foreigners, those different to us: when such leaders emerge, they become the driveshaft of a blind replacement trust.

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