

# Democracy and Trust

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*Edited by*

Mark E. Warren

*Georgetown University*



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# 1 Introduction

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*Mark E. Warren*

It was not self-evident until recently that there might be important questions to be asked about the relationship between democracy and trust. Considered historically, we can appreciate why: Liberalism, and then liberal democracy, emerged from the distrust of traditional political and clerical authorities. Liberal innovations were aimed at checking the discretionary powers implied in trust relations (Dunn 1988; Ely 1980). More democracy has meant more oversight of and less trust in authorities. The topic does not seem any more obvious when we consider the place of trust within political life from a more generic perspective. Politics is distinguished from other kinds of social relations by conflicts of interests and identities, so that the mere fact that a social relationship has become political throws into question the very conditions for trust. Trust involves a judgment, however implicit, to accept vulnerability to the potential ill will of others by granting them discretionary power over some good. When one trusts, one accepts some amount of risk for potential harm in exchange for the benefits of cooperation. As Annette Baier (1986: 235) puts it, “Where one depends on another’s good will, one is necessarily vulnerable to the limits of that good will. One leaves others an opportunity to harm one when one trusts, and also shows one’s confidence that they will not take it.” So if I extend trust I am also judging – however habitually or tacitly – that my trust will not be abused. And this implies that there is no essential conflict of interest between myself and the person to whom I extend trust, or at least no conflict of interest that is not mitigated by other relationships, securities, or protections.

In *political* situations, however, the assumption of solidarity with others often is suspect, and herein lies the ambiguous, even paradoxical, nature of the topic of democracy and trust. What makes a situation political *is* that some issue or problem or pressing matter for collective action meets with conflicts of interests or identities, and that parties bring their resources to bear upon these conflicts (Warren 1999). An important democratic innovation was the recognition that in many relationships trust is misplaced or inappropriate, suppressing real conflicts of interest while

sustaining exploitative and paternalistic relations (Barber 1983: 93). Democratic mechanisms such as voting, freedoms of speech and association, and separations of power enable people to challenge supposed relations of trust, while limiting the discretion of the trusted, and thus the potential harm, in whatever trust relations remain.

Yet the fact that democracy requires mechanisms that help produce a decent political life in the absence of less than complete trust does not mean that democracy can do without trust. In almost trivial ways, without trust the most basic activities of everyday life would become impossible. Why should we not expect some fundamental relationships between this fact and the ways we govern ourselves? For example, as Claus Offe points out in Chapter 3 of this volume, trust can produce desirable means of social coordination when other means – in particular, state regulation through sanctioned rules and the unintentional coordinations of markets – are limited in their capacities to accomplish necessary and desirable social tasks. A society that fosters robust relations of trust is probably also a society that can afford fewer regulations and greater freedoms, deal with more contingencies, tap the energy and ingenuity of its citizens, limit the inefficiencies of rule-based means of coordination, and provide a greater sense of existential security and satisfaction. Precisely how do democratic modes of governance relate to these virtues?

While there is a significant literature on trust, with few exceptions it has not been directed at the complex relationship between democratic politics and trust – whether trust in political authorities or trust that is generated (or undermined) within society as an indirect consequence of political institutions, economic development, or cultural transformation. The essays collected in this volume aim at defining the issues involved in the complex of relationships between democracy and trust. They are interdisciplinary, and many combine theory with empirical findings. This eclectic mix is intentional, since defining the issues and questions indicated by the topic “democracy and trust” involves, at least, contributions from philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history. The topic also requires, if I may say so, some indulgence from the reader. While the authors have sought to speak to one another and to coordinate their disciplinary languages across fields, tensions remain that reflect distinctive disciplinary orientations and problems as much as they do disagreements about conceptualizing, explaining, and judging the phenomena in question.

In what follows, I provide some initial definition for the topic of democracy and trust as it is developed in this volume. The topic breaks down into a number of distinct, although closely related, problems. These include the problems of scale, complexity, and interdependency that often



work to limit democratic ways of making decisions and to create functional pressures for trust, a problem I summarize in the first section. In the second section, I raise the issue of it means to trust institutions as opposed to individuals, and whether it can ever make sense, from a democratic perspective, to trust institutions. The third section introduces an important distinction between particularized and generalized trust. According to arguments made in this volume, generalized trust is conducive to desirable forms of democracy, while particularized trust – trust limited to family or to members of ethnic or religious groups, for example – is not. The fourth and fifth sections introduce “social capital” arguments: the view that trust is a key element of civil society’s capacities to direct and discipline government, as well as to organize and coordinate collective actions. In the sixth section, I comment upon the important relationship between security, risk, and trust, emphasizing the close link between economic and political securities, and the capacities of people to organize collective actions through trust. The final section introduces the question of whether and how relations of trust might enter directly into democratic ways of doing politics.

### **Interdependency, complexity, and trust**

As societies become more complex, more differentiated, and more interdependent, individuals increasingly confront a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, these developments can, and often do, generate expanded life-choices – choices resulting from greater efficiencies, pluralization, and mobility. On the other hand, increasing interdependencies extend the vulnerabilities of individuals, while increasing complexities reduce the chances that individuals can monitor the vulnerabilities to which they are subject (cf. Offe 1996: chap. 1). To be sure, individuals never could have had full confidence in the institutions and interdependencies to which they were subject, since that would have implied that they could have known the universe of their vulnerabilities. Today, however, the gap seems unbridgeable between the cognitive resources of individuals and their abilities to know and judge the contingencies that bear on their lives.

Individuals do bridge the gap, however. In most cases, they do so not by knowing their vulnerabilities but by *trusting* others, institutions, and systems with their fortunes. As Luhmann (1979), Giddens (1990), and others have emphasized, extensions of trust, especially to strangers embedded in institutions, enable coordination of actions over large domains of space and time, which in turn permits the benefits of more complex, differentiated, and diverse societies. At the same time, trust reduces complexity for individuals while providing them with a sense of security by

allowing them to take for granted most of the relationships upon which they depend. These effects not only contribute to well-being in itself, but also enable individuals to expand their horizons of action. This is so in the most basic of ways. If I am unwilling to trust that the strangers I meet on the street will not mug me, I will be unable to leave my house. So the alternative to trust, particularly in complex societies, is not a transparent knowledge of risks and contingencies – which is impossible in any case – but rather generalized distrust, which offers a sense of security but at the cost of an impoverished existence.

Unhappily for democrats, the same factors that drive the increasing functional importance of trust also constrain the extent to which people can participate in the decisions that affect their lives either directly, or indirectly by using their political resources to direct and discipline their political representatives. Strongly democratic expectations that individuals ought to have a say in decisions that affect them merely amplify the paradox. In politics as elsewhere we are subject to many more vulnerabilities than we might affect through political participation owing to the disproportion between our political resources (such as time and knowledge) and the complex web of extended dependencies within which we live. For most of the decisions that affect our lives, we are inevitably in situations in which it would, perhaps, be *desirable* to trust, since trust – where it is warranted – would allow us to optimize the ways in which we allocate our scarce political resources. Warranted trust in specific institutions, representatives, and authorities would allow individuals in democracies to focus their resources on those issues that matter – in particular, those where they have good reason to distrust (Warren 1996). Thus, from a strictly functional perspective, we might think of trust and democracy as *distinct but complementary ways of making collective decisions and organizing collective actions*. When one trusts, one *forges* the opportunity to influence decision-making, on the assumption that there are shared or convergent interests between truster and trustee. If justified trust could in some instances relieve the burdens of *political* decision-making for both individuals and institutions, then democratic decision-making in complex societies might become more robust.

### **Should democrats trust political institutions?**

Such functional expectations no doubt lie, in part, behind the widespread concern with research that shows precipitous declines in trust for political institutions and authorities in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Western Europe over the last several decades (see Patterson,

Inglehart, and Uslaner, this volume). But whether this is a problem – as opposed, say, to a sign of an increasingly sophisticated citizenry – depends in part on whether or not it *ever* makes sense to place trust in political institutions or even in political representatives. If we are to assume that there is some important relationship between democracy, trust, and political institutions, we need to know what trust requires and when it is appropriate. In Chapter 2 (“Do we want trust in government?”), Russell Hardin turns a skeptical eye toward the thesis that declining trust in government is undesirable. Indeed, if we assume that people think and act sensibly, “we should not generally want trust in government for the simple reason that typical citizens cannot be in the relevant relation to government or the overwhelming majority of government officials to be able to trust them except by mistaken inference” (pp. 23–24). The issue, in Hardin’s view, is whether *any* individual can ever be in a position, epistemologically speaking, to know all that is needed to warrant relations of trust with government – which is, after all, in most countries today made of up hundreds if not thousands of agencies, offices, branches, and levels, populated by people we can never know directly, and who act in ways we can never judge through direct experience.

Hardin’s judgment depends in part on a specific conception of trust – namely, trust as an expression of “encapsulated interest” (cf. Hardin 1993), an account that extends rational choice axioms to relations of trust. According to these axioms, individuals seek to maximize (self-interested) preferences, while economizing on the effort of gaining the information necessary to know what course of action, in any instance, will maximize preferences. Thus, to “say that I trust you with respect to some matter means that I have reason to expect *you to act in my interest* with respect to that matter because you have good reasons to do so, *reasons that are grounded in my interest.*” . . . Your interest encapsulates my interest (p. 26). Still, from a rational choice perspective trust is paradoxical. On the one hand, relations of trust decrease the cost of information while increasing the utilities of cooperation. On the other hand, because individuals are self-interested, those who trust would seem to be choosing, irrationally, to increase their vulnerability to others. Hardin deals with the paradox by conceptualizing trust as “in a cognitive category with knowledge,” so that trust and distrust make sense only when “I know or think I know relevant things about you, especially about your motivations toward me” (p. 24). In contrast to conceptions developed by Offe, Harré, and Mansbridge in this volume, Hardin attributes no moral content to trust (as opposed to trustworthiness). Rather, one should trust when it is in one’s interest to do so, and one can *know* this to be so by knowing the motivations of the trusted.

On this meaning of trust, Hardin argues, it makes little sense to speak of trust in the institutions of government. We may *depend* upon government. We may find government reassuringly *predictable*. But we should not *trust* government: We simply are not in a position to trust or not because we can't know the relevant interests and circumstances. Thus, regarding the relations between people and government in large-scale, complex societies, not even democracy can generate trust, nor should we expect it to do so. On Hardin's account, if trust is a good thing, it should be sought, identified, explained, and encouraged in arenas where there is a chance that its basic cognitive conditions might exist – and this is typically not the case in distant relations between individuals and government, or even between individuals and their elected representatives. In this sense, the decline of trust in political institutions is not a problem. Indeed, it may even be a sign that citizens are becoming increasingly sophisticated about the conditions of trust, an argument suggested also by Ronald Inglehart in this volume and elsewhere (Inglehart 1997).

In contrast, Claus Offe (Chapter 3, “How can we trust our fellow citizens?”) sees the “deficit of trust” in institutions as a problem for democracy, in the West as well as the postcommunist East. Without informal modes of social coordination, he argues, it is difficult if not impossible to solve the numerous collective-action problems that confront societies today. With the increasing interdependence of large-scale systems, the state has become more and more involved in solving problems that were once solved by spontaneous organizations of civil society. In many countries today, however, the state has become too weak to implement and enforce its policies and must rely increasingly on civic trust and cooperation (cf. Offe 1996). In complex societies, the issue cannot be conceived (as neoconservatives conceive it) as a problem of reestablishing trust based on face-to-face relations. Rather, the kinds of trust appropriate to major problems of social coordination are unavoidably institutional, because such problems are, as Offe puts it, between “me” and “everyone else,” with no *personal* dimension to the “everyone else.”

Offe seeks to locate precisely the sense in which institutions might speak to this particular deficit of trust by conceiving what it might mean to “trust institutions.” He agrees with Hardin that trusting institutions is not the same thing as trusting individuals, but argues (as do Harré and Patterson in this volume) that nonetheless there is an important sense in which the idea is intelligible. “Trusting institutions” means something different from “trusting my neighbor”: It means knowing the “basic idea” or good of an institution. If this idea makes sufficient sense to people, it will motivate their support for the institution and their compliance with its rules. Trusting one's neighbor, on Offe's view, involves the expectation

of reciprocity. If we define trust in this way, it is as meaningless to trust an institution as it is to trust one's bicycle, as neither is capable of acting reciprocally. Like a bicycle, institutions can never be the object of genuine trust, but only the objects of empirical or theoretical knowledge and beliefs. Only persons, as social actors, are capable of following norms, including reciprocity, compliance with which is necessary for the reproduction of trust. Thus, Offe argues, "Knowing the repertoire of meaning and justification that is being generated by institutions allows 'me,' the participant observer, to determine the measure of trust I can extend to those who, although strangers, are still co-residents within an institutional regime and whose patterns of behavior 'I' have reasons expect to be shaped and informed by the evident meaning that is inherent in an institution" (p. 71). "Trusting an institution" amounts to knowing that its constitutive rules, values, and norms are shared by participants and that they regard them as binding.

In contrast to Hardin, then, who sees the absence of trust in institutions as a result of individuals' limited information, Offe's approach focuses on deficits in key "cultural and moral resources." Whether institutions can be trusted depends on whether they are structured so that they might recur discursively to their constitutive norms. Where institutions do not recur consistently to these norms, the bases for generalized trust erode. In the end, Offe suggests, only two strategies can address the deficit of trust in institutions. The first is "top-down": Trust can be increased if institutions develop an "impeccable record" in fulfilling the norms of truth-telling, promise-keeping, fairness, and solidarity. The other is "bottom-up" and is exemplified in the "civic communitarian" strategy that seeks to develop the habits and dispositions of extending trust to strangers by increasing citizen involvement in associational life.

The research Ronald Inglehart presents in Chapter 4, "Trust, well-being, and democracy," helps to clarify the role of trust in maintaining existing democracies. Drawing on data from the 1990–1991 and 1995–1997 World Values Surveys in 41 countries, Inglehart suggests that trust in specific political institutions and elites is not very important, at least to the long-term stability of existing democracies. Rather, stability derives from two other factors: subjective well-being and interpersonal trust. *Transitions* to democracy are likely to be accompanied by low levels of subjective well-being and trust. But once in place, democratic regimes require for their stability (1) a general culture of political trust sufficient to underwrite political opposition and transitions of power, and (2) diffuse mass support for existing political institutions. What best predicts this culture are high levels of interpersonal trust and subjective well-being rather than trust in political institutions and elites. Nor does Inglehart

find that existing democratic institutions play an important role in causing interpersonal trust. This is not surprising, he suggests, since for most people political life is a relatively minor part of their life: Work, family, home, income, and friends are much more important. Rather, the interpersonal trust and subjective well-being that seem necessary for the stability of democratic institutions are most closely correlated with economic development and security. Other authors in this volume (Offe and Patterson) suggest that there are theoretical reasons to think that having more resources – such as economic wealth, status, and knowledge – makes it less risky to trust others, especially strangers removed in time and space. Inglehart's data indicate that those who fit a "postmaterial" profile – higher incomes and educations – also register higher levels of interpersonal trust. In addition, Inglehart finds a strong correlation between levels of interpersonal trust and the religious tradition of a country. Historically Catholic countries tend to be low on interpersonal trust as well as on levels of economic development, while historically Protestant and Confucian countries tend to be high. It is likely, Inglehart argues, that long-term cultural factors such as these make a strong and independent contribution both to economic development and to the dispositions that stabilize democracy.

While economic development and other cultural factors may contribute to the interpersonal trust and subjective well-being that stabilize democracies, these same factors may coexist with – indeed, possibly cause – declining trust in political institutions and elites. We should not, Inglehart suggests, necessarily assume that this development is bad for democracy (cf. *The Pew Research Center 1997: 7*). In the stable democracies, political institutions and elites are probably no less trustworthy than in the past. Rather, the decline in trust in institutions probably reflects a more general decline in respect for authority that has come with the development of post-material cultures. When people no longer worry for their survival, they do not need to cling unquestioningly to the authorities they hope will ensure their survival. Instead, as material well-being increases, trust in political institutions and elites is likely to decline as publics begin to evaluate their leaders and institutions by more demanding standards.

### **Generalized and particularized trust: What kinds of trust are good for democracy?**

While a number of contributors to this volume suggest that democracy depends more on interpersonal trust than on trust in political institutions and elites, not all kinds of interpersonal trust are good for democracy. Eric Uslaner argues in Chapter 5, "Democracy and social capital,"

that trust matters for democracy in large part because trust is the key component of “social capital” – but not all forms of interpersonal trust contribute to social capital.

The term “social capital,” introduced by James Coleman (1990: chap. 5), was initially coined to describe the social norms and expectations that underwrite economic activity, but which could not be accounted for from a strictly economic perspective. In particular, the term explained the capacities possessed by economically successful groups of people to extend their transactions over time and space, and more generally to control transaction costs through the “soft” regulations of norms and mutual expectations rather than through, for example, the “hard” rules of commercial law or even through the logic of instrumental reciprocity. By analogy to economic capital, groups with accumulated “social” capital can be more productive (cf. Fukuyama 1995). The term has expanded beyond its economic genesis, however, to indicate the networks, associations, and shared habits that enable individuals to act collectively.

On Uslaner’s account, the kind of trust that contributes to social capital is trust that can be *generalized* to people who are strangers, as compared to trust that is *particular*, limited to one’s family or group. Particularized trust tends to be attached to the kinds of group identities that are solidified against outsiders, which in turn increases factionalization and decreases chances that conflicts can be negotiated by democratic means. Generalized trust, on the other hand, helps to build large-scale, complex, interdependent social networks and institutions and for this reason is a key disposition for developing social capital. Moreover, generalized trust is connected to a number of dispositions that underwrite democratic culture, including tolerance for pluralism and criticism. Like Inglehart, however, Uslaner suggests that optimism about economic security is also closely associated with generalized trust, both as cause and effect. Perceptions of economic security reduce the perceived risks of trust, while generalized trust also enables economic development through its contributions to social capital.

For these reasons, Uslaner argues, we *should* be concerned about the fact that generalized trust in the United States has declined in the last several decades – although this is clearly a different matter than the decline of trust in government, addressed by Hardin and Inglehart: “In 1960, 58 percent of Americans believed that ‘most people can be trusted.’ By 1994 and 1995, a bit more than one-third (35 percent) of Americans had faith in their fellow men and women” (p. 13). Uslaner is interested in pinpointing the degree to which generalized trust has declined in the United States, and the reasons for the decline. While agreeing with Robert Putnam’s (1995a, 1996) general conclusion that social capital is



“disappearing” in the United States, he takes issue with Putnam’s claim that television is the main cause for the erosion of social capital. Uslaner argues instead that trust has to do with the psychological dispositions of optimism and pessimism that in turn reflect perceptions of key life experiences, such as economic security. Are there life experiences other than economic security that create generalized trust? Uslaner examines the civic-republican view that participation in associational life can create trust. Although some kinds of associations create generalized trust, not all do. He finds the strongest effects in sports associations. These associations do not merely select for people who are likely to be trusting anyway; they actually transform people, creating generalized forms of trust. Perhaps there is more to the common analogy between sports and politics than meets the eye: If one can trust a competitor to play by the rules in sports, might this disposition generalize to politics? Do associations that cultivate competition within the context of clearly defined and generally accepted rules develop more general capacities for collective action in the face of difference and competition?

In Chapter 6, “Liberty against the democratic state: on the historical and contemporary sources of american distrust,” Orlando Patterson rejects the view advanced by Putnam and Uslaner (cf. The Pew Research Center 1997) that the United States is experiencing an erosion of the trust that underwrites civic engagement and social capital. Instead, Patterson argues, we must place the relatively short time period measured by the surveys within a broader theoretical and historical context. American democracy incorporates several different kinds of trust and has done so in different ways at different times. Patterson distinguishes four kinds of trust: (a) affective based on face-to-face relations and incorporating direct normative sanction; (b) intermediary trust, which relies on the same mechanisms but works at a distance through intermediaries; (c) collective trust, involving situations in which persons have direct, but impersonal, contact with “familiar strangers” within their midst; and (d) delegated trust, which depends upon third-party, institutional guarantees. From the earliest days America incorporated two very different models of democracy, each depending upon different kinds of trust. In the Northern colonies, democracy evolved on the basis of direct personal trust, combined with the important generalizing element of a shared religious belief in duty to others. In the Southern colonies, however, democracy depended upon an opposition between the *demos* and the other. In this model, reminiscent of Athenian democracy, the liberties of white Americans were defined in opposition to slavery. Here, trust among citizens depended on particular boundaries of exclusion. So the trust that mediated this kind of democracy was a variant of the “collective trust”



that holds together the group against the “familiar stranger,” the slave. In this “primal *herrenvolk* democracy,” the image of liberty defined in opposition to slavery became paramount, as did, eventually, a distrust of government, both of which helped align Southern democracy with *laissez-faire* capitalism and allowed for a marriage of convenience with a Northern “elite capitalist democracy.” The combination of Southern *herrenvolk* democracy and Northern elite capitalist democracy came to define the American political landscape. But the Northern model also included the image of democracy that originated in the colonies and eventually incorporated the values of pluralism, inclusion, and participation. The kinds of trust that mediated this model – affective, intermediary, and delegated trust – differed from the trust necessary for the *herrenvolk* democracy of the South. This alternative model, Patterson argues, represents the most desirable configuration of democracy and trust.

Patterson combines his theoretical argument and historical analysis with an analysis of General Social Survey data to make two general arguments. First, the United States is not experiencing a long-term decline in the kind of trust necessary for a democracy of pluralism, inclusion, and participation. To be sure, there are ups and downs. But the broad historical measures of participation show remarkable stability rather than crisis. Nor should we be particularly nostalgic about declines in the kind of trust that enabled *herrenvolk* democracy in the past.

But Patterson does not conclude that all is well. He finds a close relationship between high socioeconomic status and generalized trust, which in turn correlates with trust in political institutions. He argues that these factors are connected through a feedback loop that advantages high socioeconomic status groups and disadvantages low socioeconomic status groups. “Political influence and attendant gains lead to a realistic perception of political effectiveness, which reinforces generalized trust, political trust, and the tendency to be more politically active. The opposite set of linkages operates with persons from lower SES groups” (p. 196). The group most disadvantaged by these linkages are African-Americans, a finding that is disturbingly predictable given the incentives to distrust built into the history of slavery, semifeudal sharecropping, segregation, and disenfranchisement. Patterson’s second general argument is more optimistic. He suggests that we are witnessing the end of *herrenvolk* democracy, the form of democracy that has solidified itself by means of a rhetoric and practice of racial exclusion.

Patterson’s argument concurs with a number of other arguments in this volume (see especially the chapters by Offe, Inglehart, and Uslaner) that hold that generalized trust is associated with economic security or perceptions of security as well as with other resources such as education.

All other things being equal, the wealthy and well-educated tend to have higher levels of generalized trust, while the poor and less-educated tend toward distrust. Generalized trust makes it easier for the wealthy and well-educated to combine for purposes of collective action – whether for purposes of political influence or other goals – whereas distrust tends to discourage collective action. Offe and Patterson in particular suggest a novel way of looking at the relationship between economic class and political capacities. In general, they argue, those whose lives are more insecure can less afford to trust, since for them betrayed trust is relatively more consequential. On the other hand, the rich in resources can afford to trust, and when they do trust they also benefit. Economic insecurity and educational disadvantage may, then, be not only direct causes of what might be called the “social decapitalization” of the poor, but also indirect causes through the mediating factor of trust.

### **Civil society’s capacities for political resistance and direction**

Inclusive and pluralistic democracies, then, may depend upon a discriminating trust in political institutions. But they more certainly depend upon generalized trust among individuals and groups within society. Generalized trust is a key dimension of the political capacities of civil society, which in turn reflect the capacities of individuals and groups to act for common ends as well as to represent their interests to the state. Conversely, high levels of distrust within society erode these capacities, the absence of which is one condition for detached, unresponsive, and corrupt governments as Putnam’s (1993) work on Italy suggested (cf. Gambetta 1988). The importance of civil society in generating democratic resistance and direction was reinforced by the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe. Especially in those countries most likely to consolidate into constitutional democracies (Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic states), those leading the revolutions were able to overcome state strategies that sought to discourage political organization by cultivating distrust among individuals. Against state-induced distrust, they formed organizations such as Solidarity and Charta 77 that resisted the state, developed public spaces characterized by dialogue about issues of principle, and initiated political change through counter-hegemonic cultural transformations (Cohen and Arato 1992: chap. 1; Preuss 1995: chap. 5; Seligman 1992: 169ff.).

While there is now broad agreement that a robust civil society “makes democracy work,” the conceptual contribution of the notion of “social capital” and the associated notion of generalized trust is less clear. In

Chapter 7, “Trust, voluntary association and workable democracy: the contemporary American discourse of civil society,” Jean Cohen takes a critical look at the recent popularity of the notion of civil society, especially in the American context. In current usage, Cohen argues, the term has lost the progressive theoretical importance it once had, from Tocqueville in the nineteenth century to its rediscovery in the context of the democratization of Eastern Europe in the more recent past. In the current American context, the term has become equated with traditional forms of association, including traditional forms of the family. This analysis has been overlaid with a rhetoric of moral decline, so that the “social decapitalization” of America is often reduced to a problem of identifying sources of moral corruption within civil society. In this (neoconservative) view, the meaning of “democracy” is equated with the state’s non-interference with the voluntary associations of civil society. On this view, social trust, a key element of voluntary associations, can only be eroded, never generalized, by the means that states have available, democratic or otherwise.

Cohen argues that this appropriation of the concept of civil society is theoretically impoverished and politically suspect. In democratic theory from Tocqueville to Habermas, the concept of civil society has served to identify key conditions of the public spheres through which individuals communicate about matters of mutual concern. The concept of civil society gained its meaning not only from its communicative role in public judgment, but also from its capacities to generate the norms that underwrite the rule of law. Finally, owing to their communicative functions, public spheres mediate among numerous associations, movements, religious organizations, and other foci of interests and ideas, thus enabling a vibrant pluralism within society.

The current rhetoric, however, has reduced these complex functions to a vague conception of “social trust,” which is assumed to be generated only by traditional family structures or traditional voluntary associations – both of which are in decline. Cohen agrees that voluntary associations are central to robust democracies. But the current rhetoric discounts the central role of legal and political institutions in making possible these associations and the social capital they represent. The rhetoric also fails to specify exactly what “social capital” is. In Putnam’s (1993, 1995a) studies, for example, a key weakness stems from the fact that the theory locates the genesis of social trust exclusively in face-to-face interpersonal relations among members of voluntary associations, an approach that cannot account for the generalization of norms such as those of law-abidingness and reciprocity. Sociologically speaking, the tools with which to account for the functions of civil society within large-scale, complex,

differentiated societies are simply not there if one discounts, as does Putnam, the integrating effects of legal and political institutions. Not recognizing the role that legal and political institutions play in providing conditions for social trust places the entire burden for “making democracy work” onto traditional voluntary associations, including the traditional family.

Cohen argues that numerous other kinds of institutions, especially legal institutions and their associated rights, play crucial roles in protecting, fostering, and generalizing social trust. In addition, many new nontraditional forms of association are taking the place of traditional associations. Like Patterson, Cohen also questions whether traditional forms of association should be valorized. The neoconservative rhetoric of civil society tends to hold up 1950s America as an ideal. But it was also an era, Cohen reminds us (as does Patterson), in which political speech was chilled by McCarthyism, and when traditional associations were involved in segregation, in denying civil rights, and in pushing women out of the work force. For these and other reasons, we must be much more exacting in the ways we conceptualize “social capital,” “social trust,” and their relation to civil society.

### **How does trust enable nonstate forms of collective action?**

Democratic theorists increasingly have come to accept a principle first associated with Tocqueville: there are inherent limits to collective actions organized by states or state-like organizations (Cohen and Rogers 1995; Habermas 1996). States get things done through the medium of laws sanctioned by power. But laws and sanctions are limited as means of organizing collective actions. The issue is analogous to Wittgenstein’s account of linguistic meaning: grammatical rules underdetermine meaning owing to the multiple contributions of context and usage. Likewise, even the most explicit set of laws or administrative rules is almost always insufficient to organize a collective action. Ultimately, collective action depends upon the good will of participants, their shared understandings, their common interests, and their skilled attention to contingencies (Baier 1986: 245–253). “Trust” is a way of describing the way groups of individuals presume the good will of others with respect to shared interests as well as the divisions of knowledge necessary to make use of explicit rules for collective action. Whatever capacities the state has for collective action draw upon trust – not as deference, but as the grasp individuals have of the contingencies and shared understandings necessary for working together. Trust is required not only within the domain of the state

proper, but also outside the state, especially in those many social tasks for which high-level organization is inappropriate. Yet trust cannot itself be created, at least directly, by the means the state has available. Instead, trust, like many other capacities for organization, flows from civil society. As Tocqueville (1969: 517) so famously put it, "In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others." Similarly, those who study the sociology of economics are increasingly drawing attention to the extent to which market relations depend upon socially embedded backgrounds of trust, without which "transaction costs" would be prohibitively high (Dasgupta 1988; Fukuyama 1995; Granovetter 1992; McAllister 1995; Michalos 1990; Sabel 1993; Zucker 1986).

In Chapter 8, Rom Harré ("Trust and its surrogates: psychological foundations of political process") seeks to identify psychological sources of trust, in part by clarifying the semantics of the word "trust." Following Wittgenstein, Harré notes that the meanings of trust are embedded in our usages. When Harré looks at our usages, he finds a complex mix of meanings that, in the end, refer back to relations between individuals. Most significantly, trust between persons and institutions is a "species of the person-to-person" relation, an account that concurs with Offe's analysis. "Our beliefs about, as well as our affective and social relations to, the personnel account for standing in a trust relation to the institution they staff" (p. 260). Institutions work well when they take into account the "thick" context of interpersonal relations, habits, and customs that determine the meanings and associated expectations of formal rules.

These clarifications allow Harré to locate a paradoxical relation between democracy and trust. On the one hand, "democracy" ideally resolves issues through discursive rather than authoritarian means. On the other hand, democracy also increases inclusiveness and, as it does so, tends to shift from "custom to code" because wider inclusiveness means fewer "thick" relations can be taken for granted. Discursive resolution of political issues requires some level of background trust, which in turn depends on shared but inexplicit understandings and practices. Inclusiveness, however, tends to draw this background into question, thus forcing participants to rely more upon explicitly codified rules and procedures and less upon trust. Individuals depend upon code when they cannot, or do not, trust. But code cannot replace trust for the same kinds of reasons that grammar cannot replace language. So we should expect inclusive and pluralistic democracies to experience tensions between political (including democratic) procedures that tend toward the explicit codes, and the uncodifiable relations that make social life possible. In the United States, Harré suggests, the tension is exacerbated by an

individualistic, rights-based political culture that elevates code over custom. Code-based politics tend toward rigidity and lose the subtle possibilities, efficiencies, and flexibilities inherent in inexplicit, trust-based modes of social regulation. Harré prefers a political culture based on obligation, which, he argues, has a greater capacity to reinforce the kinds of trust that make democracy work.

Like Harré, James Scott notes that the subtle relationships between thick, multifaceted social relations and capacities for collective actions are far harder to engineer than to destroy. In Chapter 9, “Geographies of trust, geographies of hierarchy,” Scott examines the generally adversarial relationship between the state (and state-like powers) and the informal, unplanned, and apparently chaotic relations of trust that develop over time among people in a community. Criticizing the state-sponsored planners of “high modernity,” Scott notes that rationalized plans and rules typically disrupt thick relations of social trust and produce dysfunctional communities. This is in part because rationalized plans cannot accommodate the complexity and apparent irrationality of working social relationships. In part this is because where rationalized plans are actually implemented, they must be imposed by authoritarian means on communities that are recalcitrant just to the degree that they are functional. While the relations that make a community may be protected and enabled (often by liberal-democratic means), they cannot be planned and engineered. Insofar as the most complete visions of top-down planning have worked at all – Scott notes the examples of the Soviet collective farms – they have done so only because of an unofficial tolerance of unplanned activities, such as the cultivation of private plots or “borrowed” supplies and equipment. Similarly, Brasilia, a planned city, works only because of the unofficial tolerance of a much larger unplanned city. Scott’s essay suggests democracies must evolve distinctions among spheres sufficient to keep power relations from overgrowing their bounds – not only, as some would have it, to protect the rights of individuals, but more importantly to protect and enable the creative anarchy of civil society.

### **The politics of trust and risk**

Taken together, one might find within Chapters 8 and 9 an argument for that kind of conservatism rooted in a suspicion of reason as applied to human affairs. The conservative tradition, from Burke to Hayek, does indeed contain important insight with regard to the limits of rational planning. Yet progressive democracies also depend upon this insight. If every change must be planned and its full consequences known, then every new initiative will be unacceptably risky. In this sense, almost all of the

creative and progressive possibilities of politics depend upon trust, while defensive fears of change, including a distrust of what “everyone else” might do with one’s future, can impede actions that can be good for all. A progressive approach to democracy must therefore attend to the ways political institutions generate or undermine the background of trust against which political issues emerge. The reason for this is that political issues emerge when existing ways of doing things are no longer taken for granted. Owing to the future-oriented nature of politics, collective decisions inevitably involve some amount of uncertainty about future outcomes. This is why those with vested interests almost always oppose changes by seeking to undermine trust in their proponents, thus magnifying fears of malign uncertainties. An emphasis on the risks of new initiatives is usually related to a policy focus on security, whether in the domestic politics of health care (or crime, trade policy, etc.) or in foreign-policy choices between military and diplomatic/developmental strategies. When security-based political strategies are successful in focusing on uncertainties, individuals are less likely to extend the trust necessary for new collective actions, preferring known vulnerabilities to unknown (and perhaps unknowable) future risks. Absence of trust paralyzes collective action, democratic or otherwise.

Such tensions between politics and trust suggest that in political situations good forms of trust may be hard to get going. In Chapter 10, “Altruistic trust,” Jane Mansbridge examines how trust is initially established, especially in view of its risky nature (a point emphasized especially by Russell Hardin). Mansbridge argues that trust may draw on common kinds of moral resources and that there is a kind of trust that is morally praiseworthy. One account of trust – what Hardin conceptualizes as “encapsulated interest” – depends entirely upon the potential truster’s predictions about whether someone is trustworthy or not. Mansbridge argues that trust can be extended on other grounds as well. For purely moral or altruistic reasons, one may take on a risk beyond one’s ability to predict. Thus, one may extend trust out of respect for the other, in this way treating the other as one would oneself wish to be treated. One may extend trust out of a concern for the relationship. Or one may extend trust as a way of demonstrating virtuous action to others. To extend trust in these ways is not, Mansbridge argues, simply to make mistakes about the risks one is incurring. Rather, this kind of trust is motivated by independent moral reasons, and these reasons may be quite common in everyday relations of trust.

The democratic importance of altruistic trust is that it explains how relations of trust might get going in ways that become self-reinforcing, a problem especially pressing in political contexts that lack social and



cultural forms of assurance. To be sure, altruistic trust is fragile: Mansbridge speculates that it is likely to flourish only where the potential costs of defection are mitigated by relatively high levels of economic well-being (a point made by Patterson, Uslaner, and Offe as well) and where networks of moral sanction have some impact. But where these conditions exist – as, she suggests, they did in the American Midwest in the post-homesteading era – then altruistic trust may induce the development of cooperative relations.

### **Politics by means of deliberation and promise**

If democracy at its best – politics by means of deliberation and promise – requires trust, strong democrats are presented with a particular difficulty. Trust may be especially hard to get going in political situations, if only because the issues that require dialogue are often marked by a distinctive lack of the shared understandings and practices to which, for example, Harré refers. Deliberation, we must remember, is only one way of responding to political problems; other possibilities include coercion, blackmail, reliance on habit and tradition, and exit. Of these alternatives, deliberation is perhaps the most robust in its outcomes (producing either consensus or issues clarified sufficiently for a meaningful vote), but the most fragile in its preconditions. Without some degree of trust between them, conflicting parties may prefer the alternatives to deliberation. Moreover, the problem is not only one of getting dialogue going, which is hard enough. In addition, the typical outcome of a successful deliberation is a *promise* – codified, perhaps, in law, but also depending upon the good will of the parties for the law to work, and therefore leaving each party more vulnerable than each would seem to be were it to pursue strategies of distrust, each seeking to monopolize all resources necessary to security.

Race relations in America are so troubling in part because mutual distrust is often the norm. Critical numbers of individuals thus exit from dialogue in favor of relying on resources that would seem to offer more security. Surveys suggest that African-Americans trust government institutions more than do Euro-Americans, who, for their part, are relatively more supportive of liberal protections against government intervention (Jaynes and Williams 1989: 214) and relatively more likely to trust other individuals than government (Patterson, this volume). Clearly, for many African-Americans, the relative security of laws is preferable to the perhaps suspect (and historically often malign) intentions of Euro-Americans. This pattern of response leaves those who desire more racial equality and solidarity with something of a dilemma. Even when government



intervention can be organized, it often requires the willing cooperation of Euro-Americans, without which government programs can generate zero-sum dynamics and actually increase distrust between the groups. Some affirmative-action programs provide bitter examples. Although trust is not the only condition of politics by means of deliberation and promise, without trust these means are paralyzed.

Those who favor the politics of deliberation and promise will need to look closely at such paradoxical relations between politics and trust. My aim in Chapter 11 (“Democratic theory and trust”) is to provide a survey of the difficulties, initially by specifying what these paradoxical relationships are. Our received models of trust, I argue, tend to miss these paradoxes, primarily because they tend to be modeled from social relations generally rather than from political relations specifically. The most important features of social relations are that they are typically based on shared interests, as well as upon shared cultures that provide information about trusted individuals or institutions. Political relations, on the other hand, are typically those in which shared interests cannot be taken for granted and parties are, at least potentially, less likely to be constrained in their actions by shared culture. When we combine these points with the fact that political conflicts usually involve the deployment, or threatened deployment, of power, we can see that politics does not provide a natural environment for trust.

Democratic theorists who seek to conceptualize how the advantages of trust might be harnessed must pay close attention to its qualities within political contexts. The extent to which these problematic qualities are conceptualized and engaged distinguishes three emerging approaches to trust in democratic theory: what I refer to as *neoconservative*, *rational choice*, and *deliberative* approaches. These approaches locate sources of trust, respectively, within culture, within the rational monitoring of risks by individuals, and within discursive processes. They favor the political designs of neoconservatism (withdrawal of demands from the state in favor of social and economic modes of organization), traditional liberalism (interest-based monitoring of the state), and deliberative democracy (guidance of economic and political systems by deliberative publics).

The neoconservative approach, I argue, is theoretically inadequate as well as ethically suspect. As Jean Cohen also argues (this volume), this approach sees trust as an effect only of shared moral identities, enforced by traditional voluntary associations. The approach fails, however, to conceptualize the vulnerabilities and potential power relations involved in trust, which means that it cannot distinguish trust that is ethically warranted from trust that is not. Likewise, the neoconservative approach excludes the contributions that legal and political institutions might make

to nurturing and generalizing trust. In this approach, many of the problems of relating trust to politics are defined away at the outset. More promising, I suggest, are emerging rational choice approaches to trust – not, I think, because of the general adequacy of rational choice methodology in social science, but because the rational choice emphasis upon the risks and vulnerabilities in trust are especially appropriate to political contexts. In particular, rational choice approaches reveal how various legal devices, including rights, can produce trust indirectly by limiting vulnerabilities. But because rational choice approaches remain, in Mansbridge’s terms, “predictive” (or, in Hardin’s terms, trust is “encapsulated interest”), it is difficult to see how political interactions might, in principle, generate relations of trust. In contrast, emerging deliberative approaches to democracy focus on the generative nature of political interactions. This approach allows us to ask which kinds of political institutions – which kinds of protections and inducements – might best generate *warranted* relations of trust among individuals, groups, and between these and government. Close attention to the ways that democratic institutions manage and reduce the risks of trust may allow us to see how warranted trust and its benefits might be protected, enhanced, and generated.

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