

Trust and Distrust: Sociocultural Perspectives

reviewed by Tania Zittoun — April 16, 2008

Trust and Distrust is a well-constructed collection of essays that enables the reader to get a sense of the complex roles that trust and distrust play in our society and the variety of forms they can take in different social, political and historical environments. Combining several theoretical perspectives, different levels of analysis, and observing social patterns in a variety of countries, the book brings us to question the taken-for-granted aspect of everyday expectations.

In the first section, the editors of the book, Ivana Marková and Alex Gillespie, together with Per Linell, propose a clear and solid conceptual model that identifies different forms of trust. It is organized around two dimensions. The first dimension follows different levels of analysis of the social reality, spanning what is identified as micro-social trust (e.g., trust in intimate relations) to macro-social trust (e.g., a society's trust in the role of a political leader). The second dimension organizes forms of reflectivity involved in trust, from immediate, taken for granted trust (e.g., the trust in the mother-infant interaction) to reflective trust (e.g., when a person carefully examines a contract before signing it). Crossing these two dimensions, the authors identify four basic types of trust. A first variety is an *a priori* trust, at a macro-social level; hence, a society functions on the basis of the unquestioned trust people have in their institutions. The second variety is reflective at this macro-social level; it can take the form of an explicit social contract, or in contrast, of political manipulation. A third type, micro-social and taken-for-granted, characterizes for example emotional interdependence in close relationships. The fourth type, micro-social and reflective, can take the shape of interpersonal dialogue, or self-doubt. These forms of trust are dynamic, interdependent, and evolve in their historical and cultural contexts. Examining societal changes between the 15th and 17th centuries in Europe, Geoffrey Hosking shows how the Reformation corresponds to a reduction of the importance of the group and its values, resulting in a privatization of faith, which heightens individual anxiety. In that sense, there is a transformation from macro-social, taken-for-granted trust, to a more micro-social and reflective trust.

Two types of trust are more systematically explored in two sections of the volume. Section II examines trust at a macro-social level, and follows the construction and evolution of pre-conceptual forms of trust. Li Liu describes forms of social trust in China and their evolution along socio-political and ideological transitions. For example, the politics of distrust under communism has broken basic trust and loyalty in families; it has been replaced by "Guanxi," a form of social-network trust. Sang-Chin Choi and Gyuseog Han show that the Korean society is functioning thanks to "shilrae," an unquestioned trust rooted in the philosophical background of the culture. Sandra Jovchelovitch shows that the Brazilian society is experiencing very different forms of trust in the privacy of homes and the public sphere. All these chapters show how transformations of societies affect people's relations with their immediate social environment and with centralized forms of power. Different varieties of trust or distrust appear as better coping strategies for individuals or for groups. Also, people appear to be able to display diverse modalities of trust in the diverse social network to which they belong.

In Section III, trust and distrust are examined when they become reflective within social interactions, mainly at the micro-social level. Here, trust becomes problematic as it is related to vulnerability. Alex Gillespie examines how tourists hesitate to trust souvenir sellers in North India, while the latter display techniques aimed at creating such trust. Srikant Sarangi explores people's difficulties in revealing that they are HIV positive in India, where they risk social rejection, and Jorge Correia Jesuino examines the Portuguese population's lack of trust in politicians and managers. These chapters show that some people's decision to trust or not to trust another person is grounded in local and societal contexts. It strongly depends on people's evaluation of what they risk to lose if the trust is misplaced.

Section IV presents the case study of the Baltic States in their transition to democracy. Here, macro-social and micro-social trusts appear in dynamic interrelations. Analyzing the rapid evolution of the Baltic economy, Emmanuel Mathias suggests that the histories of Estonia and Latvia, more than Lithuania, enable the population to trust their young leaders in promoting a liberal economy. Maaris Raudsepp, Mati Heidmets and Jüri Kruusvall show how the dissolution of the communist ideology in Estonia, with its strong in-group trust and out-group distrust, results in complex inter-ethnic relations. Hence, macro-social trust diffuses in various aspects of society: memory, economy and daily inter-group interactions; daily opportunities and constraints create micro-social trust, and in turn, transform modalities of macro-social trust.

Each section of the book is followed by a synthetic chapter written by the editors; these chapters show how each essay contributes to the whole project and help the reader to locate them in the general conceptual structure. In a concluding chapter, Alex Gillespie introduces a transversal dimension, which deepens the analysis: as trust always occurs in interpersonal relations, it can be more or less reflective. In what he calls "direct perspective," the person trusts the other, as he or she appears immediately trustable (e.g., the child directly trusts her mother). "Metaperspectives" take place when the person is aware of the other's perspective (e.g., the buyer tries to identify whether the seller is honest). Finally "meta-metaperspectives" designate the person's awareness of the other's metaperspective (e.g., the seller knows that the buyer is trying to guess whether the seller is trustworthy).

Through the book, punctuated by the editors' voices, the reader naturally gets a sense of the complexity and the multidimensionality of trust. *Trust and Distrust* thus offers conceptual tools which can be used to analyze a wide range of societal issues. For example, one might say that the whole educational enterprise depends on trust. In order to learn, children must have direct, unreflective trust in teachers; only so can they leave what they know to engage in the unknown. Parents also must have trust in the educational system before sending their children to school. The stakes are high, given the fact that the school has the capacity to durably shape the development of the child. Parents therefore become reflective. The increasing choice of public and private schools and the public discourse about school evaluation increases such reflectivity. Parents also might develop meta-perspectives on teachers. If parents and teacher do not share cultural references, the construction of meta-perspectives might be hindered, which could in turn generate distrust. At the macro-social level, if a society is itself changing, then the whole society might question the trust to be placed in an educational system designed by institutions that have been judged untrustworthy. If parents distrust the educational system, children might in turn question their basic trust in teachers; might this not question children's basic engagement in learning? Hence, current challenges in education might usefully be analysed within the conceptual frame proposed by Markova and Gillespie.

Altogether, *Trust and Distrust* exposes clearly a complex socio-cultural issue, beyond disciplinary boundaries. Offering both a powerful conceptual framework as well as rich case studies, it gives the reader distancing means and conceptual tools for analysing societal challenges. A book that enables us to reflect upon that which is taken for granted in our daily lives and to grasp more of their complexities is a precious tool that can only be recommended.