



# Max Weber Lecture Series

MWP – LS 2009/01  
**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

DOES TRUST HAVE A HISTORY?

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**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE**  
**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

*Does Trust Have a History?*

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MAX WEBER LECTURE No. 2009/01

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ISSN 1830-7736

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Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

**Abstract**

Authors like Francis Fukuyama or Robert Putnam claim that modern societies suffer from a decline of trust. On the other hand political scientists like Margaret Levi or Susan Stokes and sociologists like Karen Cook contend that as nice as trust might be, we can easily do without it. Especially in political life, distrust, vigilance and scepticism seem to be healthier and more fruitful than trust and modern societies do not depend on trusting relations but on well-functioning institutions.

There are social and cultural differences in the amount and quality of trust, as well as historical differences that directly relate to different stages of economic, social and political development. These differences can be connected to other developments such as the growth of government control, the rise of trans-local or even transnational networks of information gathering and monitoring, higher mobility rates and the like.

Modern politics rely heavily on institutionalized mechanisms of trust and distrust. At the same time, though, these mechanisms tend to root out the emotional substance of trust. Although many efforts were made during the late 19th and 20th centuries to extend trust to institutions, this somehow failed. People find it hard to trust governments, parties, courts, insurance companies. On the other hand, they trust the head of the government, local or national party leaders, judges or CEOs. As much as modern politics show a strong trend towards a more impersonal, bureaucratic approach citizens use trust to reintroduce emotional bonds.

**Keywords**

Trust, Distrust, Institutions, Civil Society, Fear, Politics, History



My question “Does Trust Have a History” logically implies that trust has a presence, that it is a given thing in the world that we inhabit today. Looking at the current situation, though, we might wonder if this really is the case. Wherever you go, whichever paper you read, people talk about trust being in crisis. The breakdown of financial institutions is described as a “crisis of trust” (or confidence) – bankers not trusting each other and not lending money. The current economic crisis is defined in similar terms – consumers not trusting the market, holding back money and not buying things that they can do without. So there seems to be a ubiquitous lack of trust which slows down the economy, and eventually might even bring it to a halt. On the other hand, the perception that trust is endangered, in crisis, absent, implies that recently it was still there – and that it still is, albeit directed to different people and institutions. Instead of trusting financial and economic players, people now trust the state that is supposed to set things right. Even in countries like Britain or the US, whose political culture is much less state-centred than, say, the culture of Germany or France, the state is called upon to mend things, to help homeowners, car producers, and investment bankers alike.

But trust is not only lacking when it comes to the economy. It is also in high demand in politics, especially in the realm of foreign policy. International or bi-national conflicts are seen to be extremely reliant on trust. Without trust, it seems virtually impossible to solve conflicts. The Cold War is a case in point. It was a major breakthrough when, after long and tedious negotiations at the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 for the first time introduced “Confidence-Building Measures” (CBM) among the signature states. By establishing information exchange and notification on military holdings and activities, they were to reduce insecurity and increase predictability. They thus allowed and promoted trust – which has come to be regarded as an essential asset of foreign relations and preventive diplomacy. It proved so successful – and was promoted so enthusiastically - that other world regions got interested, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation as much as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Why am I starting my talk about the History of Trust with contemporary observations? The point that I want to introduce here, is the following: we are currently attributing a lot of what goes wrong in the world to a lack of trust. We thus elevate trust to a central feature of cooperation, in all fields, at any time. Trust, it seems, (not money) makes the world go round, and a lack of trust creates problems or makes it extremely difficult to solve problems.

My main argument is that this obsession with trust is a central feature of modernity. Trust, so to speak, has been invented in and by modernity. Its history is deeply connected with the ups and downs that modern societies have been and still are experiencing.

This argument might come as a surprise. Why on earth should the modern world system as it developed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, be so keen on trust? As a system, it depends on a high degree of labor division, on a dense network of international institutions, on a constant flow of information and communication. What has something as elementary and primordial as trust got to do with this highly artificial and sophisticated system? Aren't we mixing up categories here? Should we not reserve trust for social relations that are intimate, close, and personal – rather than transferring it to abstract relations of foreign policy or economic transaction?

What would social scientists say to this? They have thought a lot about trust during the past decade or so, and they hold strong – though highly contradictory – opinions. Political scientists like Robert Putnam or Francis Fukuyama argue that modern societies actually suffer from a decline of trust and

that they would be better off if this decline could be stopped.<sup>1</sup> Others disagree. In their opinion, modern societies do not at all depend on trusting relations. Instead, they depend on well-functioning institutions. It is those institutions that regulate individual behaviour, facilitate cooperation and make social order possible. They generally work, so the argument goes, without trust – but they might eventually “lead to trust through the ongoing relationships they help to constitute”.<sup>2</sup>

This argument uses a definition of trust that draws on Russell Hardin’s concept of “encapsulated interest”: “Trust exists when one party to the relation believes the other party has incentive to act in his or her interest or to take his or her interests to heart”.<sup>3</sup> In my view, this comes close to the definition of trust that has been suggested by the philosopher Annette Baier. Trusting for her means entrusting something that a person really cares about to another person’s (or institution’s) safekeeping. The level of trust then rises with the worth of what is entrusted. It is this moral dimension, the expectation of “goodwill” on the part of the trusted, that for Baier distinguishes trust from reliance.<sup>4</sup> Although Hardin explicitly rejects any moral dimension of trust, his concept of “encapsulated interest” basically comes down to the same issue: the idea that the trusted is supposed to take my interests “to heart” (sic).

But let us not argue about definitions. Let’s rather talk about contexts. Most social scientists agree that trust is substantially linked to the experience of uncertainty, insecurity or risk. It bridges (to quote sociologist Georg Simmel) the gap between knowing and not-knowing. Somebody who knows everything doesn’t need trust; somebody who doesn’t know and cannot control the consequences of their actions has to trust.<sup>5</sup>

This basically makes trust an essential feature, a *sine qua non* of the *conditio humana*. Nobody can know everything, let alone control the consequences of one’s actions. Everybody acts under risk and uncertainty – in any place, at any time. So trust seems to be an anthropological necessity, inherent in any cooperation among people.

But evidently, there are cultural, social and historical differences, and they invite interesting questions. Societies differ not only in the amount and character of risks that they produce; they also differ in the degree to which they try to reduce those risks and uncertainties. Furthermore, they use different methods and measures to reduce risks. Most societies – be they small or large – install social norms that regulate their members’ mutual cooperation. These norms are embedded in social institutions – like family, church or congregations, guilds, etc. They might also be formally enshrined in legal codifications and be enforced by the police and the judicial system.

Other societies might resort to openly repressive forms of making people comply with what they consider appropriate behaviour. They install mechanisms of fear and pressure to elicit obedience.<sup>6</sup> As a rule of thumb, though, repressive elements normally go hand in hand with more liberal and encouraging ways of ensuring social, economic and political cooperation. Regimes that are purely based on violence or the threat of violence, soon face enormous difficulties and cannot survive for long. The same holds true for trust: societies or communities that reduce the amount of trust felt and displayed by their members tend to be less stable than those which encourage or facilitate trusting relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000; Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Karen S. Cook, Russell Hardin, Margaret Levi eds., *Cooperation without Trust?*, New York 2005, p.187.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Annette C. Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*, Cambridge/Mass. 1994, p. 98/99.

<sup>5</sup> Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, Frankfurt 1992, p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> For an anthropological account of societies that rest on fear and respect rather than trust, see Bredrik Barth, *The Last Wali of Swat*, New York 1985; for state terrorism against their own people, see the literature on Stalinist Russia and National Socialist Germany.



But why, we may ask, is there still need for trust when there are social norms and enforcement agencies that heavily reduce the risks and uncertainties of cooperation? The answer is somewhat banal: reducing does not mean obliterating or abolishing risks and uncertainties altogether. Any interaction, no matter how tightly observed and sanctioned, entails a certain degree of insecurity. You can never be 100 % sure that a friend will act in your interest – even if the code of friendship is deeply cherished in a given society’s culture. You can never be sure that your husband will not cheat on you – even if the institution of faithful marriage is culturally valid and stable. You can never be sure that the person you lend money to will give it back – even if there are legal sanctions that induce them to do so.

This is where you need trust – again, to quote Simmel, to bridge the gap between not-knowing and acting. The fact that there are institutions regulating our behaviour undoubtedly helps a lot to narrow the gap. But it cannot close it completely. Think, for example, of cab drivers who need a fair amount of trust when taking passengers. How do they know that they will get paid? How can they make sure that they won’t get hit on the head instead, or even get killed? They can’t – and that’s why they have to trust. But how does trust develop, on what grounds is it given or withdrawn? For cab drivers this is not a trivial question - it might become one of life and death. They’d better watch out.

So – what do they actually do? How do they decide who to trust and who not? How do they establish their customers’ trustworthiness? A recent study about taxi-drivers in New York and Belfast revealed interesting differences. While New Yorkers responded positively to ethnic sameness, Belfasters based their trust on religious grounds.<sup>7</sup> This alerts us to the fact that trustworthiness is a highly contingent category – contingent on matters of class, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality. I once overheard an English woman telling the story of how she was cheated by a seemingly trustworthy man. He had impressed her with his polite manners, his Oxford accent and the way he dressed, so she gave him the money that he had requested and promised to send back. Germans would probably value other signs of trustworthiness (the accent would not play a role), and so would, I suppose, Italians.

Having said this, we can assume that as much as there are social and cultural differences in the amount and quality of trust, there are historical differences as well. And this brings me back to my initial argument: that trust is a modern invention. How can I prove this? I first try out my colleagues in social science who might have some ideas of their own on how trust developed. Georg Simmel, to start with, expected less trust in so-called “primitive” or face-to-face societies in which everybody knew everybody. On the other hand, modern, highly differentiated societies, whose members see each other as strangers, need much more trust. Niklas Luhmann shared this view when he talked about trust as a reduction of complexity. Since complexity is seen as a characteristic feature of modern societies in contrast to pre-modern ones, trust is a functional necessity in modern societies and basically irrelevant in earlier types.<sup>8</sup> Russell Hardin and others who publish in the multi-volume Russell Sage Series on Social Trust take a different perspective, though. They do agree that modern societies are more complex and interactive than pre-modern ones. People cooperate with more people over more issues. But as they can rely on an ever denser network of social, legal, economic institutions, they do not need trust. They can easily live without it. Trust, then, appears to be much more in demand in societies where such institutions are either weak or absent.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Diego Gambetta and Heather Hamill, *Streetwise*, New York 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Vertrauen: Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*, Stuttgart 1968.

<sup>9</sup> See, above all, Cook et al, *Cooperation*; Matthew R. Cleary, Susan Stokes, *Democracy and the Culture of Skepticism: Political Trust in Argentina and Mexico*, New York 2006; Karen S. Cook ed., *Trust in Society*, New York 2001; Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, New York 2002; Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi, eds., *Trust and Governance*, New York 1998

As you can easily see, we have a problem here. Our authors from social science are fabricating bold – and contradictory – hypotheses about social change. They do so by applying a functionalist model of social order. They talk about functional necessities, functional equivalents, functional substitutes – but they don't ask if and how those alleged necessities were actually perceived and dealt with, neither 'in former times' nor today. So we might ask the Hardin group how they account for the ubiquitous trust talk in our own society – if trust were, as they assume, unnecessary in the present world, why would people care so much? False consciousness? That would be a weak explanation, especially after we learnt so much about how imaginations, desires, and – more generally speaking – perceptions actually shape reality and actions. Another thing that bothers me about social science is how generously vague and idealistic they are about 'former times'. Any pre-modern society counts as such, be it the "small village a century or more ago", the "primitive society" or Roman-Greek antiquity.

What do historians say to this? Despite the lack of historical analysis in this field, we can at least voice scepticism. We deeply distrust the image of idyllic pasts, of closely-knit communities of trusting people (or, if we adopt Simmel's reasoning, of people who did not even need trust because they knew each other from the bottom of their heart). We know about the huge amount of insecurity and uncertainty that governed rural and urban life in medieval or early modern periods. Risks were not confined to economic issues, mainly harvests and trade. In addition, there were epidemics and high mortality rates, and there were the calamities of political power and powerlessness. Who, then, was there to trust or be trusted? Proverbs give a first hint that things were not as easy as contemporary sociologists might think. They all point towards the limits of trust – before you trust, make sure that the trusted deserves it. Who was considered trustworthy by whom, on which grounds and under which conditions – this is a question that opens up a huge area of historical research.

Historical research, just as any other, has to be guided by epistemological interests, questions, and hypotheses. Here, we might start with what Charles Tilly once framed as "Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" (1984). My hypothesis would be the following. Trust is not a new lemma in our emotional lexicon. It does have a history – that probably varies from country to country, from region to region. Social, economic, political and religious factors structure the ways how, when and to what degree trust is being given by whom to whom. To assume that pre-modern societies could do without trust does not seem quite right. First of all, they have never been so homogeneous, face-to-face, and self-contained as sociologists want us to believe. Apart from their structural asymmetry that also shaped information and communication, they knew the figure of the stranger – someone who knocks on the door at night and asks to be let in. He might bring pleasure or pain, who knows. Our fairy tales are full of the ambiguity and anxiety that those encounters entail, and so are religious texts. Tribal, ancient, and medieval societies have developed more or less sophisticated rituals on how to deal with strangers – welcoming them or not, excluding or including them, giving and building trust or withholding it.

Second, there was insecurity and danger (as mentioned before) haunting humans at any time, in any place. Threats to one's well-being were ubiquitous, and people tried out different ways how to avoid and cope with them. And there were not just dangers (given by the environment) but also risks (defined as insecurities that were self-produced). Risky behaviour was displayed by kings like the Macedonian Alexander the Great who took his armies as far as India in the 4<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era. It was part of Marco Polo's voyage to China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and of the Fuggers' far-distance trade starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. All these endeavours needed trust – trust in God, trust in people whose behaviour could never be completely predicted.

But – didn't I claim in the beginning that trust is basically a modern phenomenon? Do we have a contradiction here? No, not really. Modernity, I would argue, greatly increases and generalises the demand for trust. Mobility becomes a way of life that is available to – or forced upon – more and more people. Everybody can be a stranger at a certain time, in a certain situation. Insecurities grow, and so do the means to cope with them (that then might induce new risks). But modernity is not just about

risk-reducing and risk-producing technology. It is also about institution-building. It is institutions that give us modern people our fundamental sense of security. We rely on educational institutions that teach our children how to do well in this ever-changing world. We rely on economic and financial institutions in order to make a living. We rely on insurance companies that help us cope with illness or old age. And we rely, absolutely crucial, on the rule of law and on legal institutions that protect our rights and sanction those who violate them.

Now – how do trust and institutions go together? We remember Hardin’s argument that institutions essentially render trust unnecessary. Indeed they do a good job reducing insecurities. But, again, reducing insecurities doesn’t mean obliterating them altogether. And we can go even further than that: we can argue that it is institutions that actually make trust possible. Without institutions trust is much harder to convey. How can you trust strangers when there is no one to protect you and your interests? On the other hand, the fact that my rights and interests are sheltered by law, by the police, and by the state, can make it much easier for me to trust someone that I do not know. This, then, would turn trust into an attitude, or an emotion, or an emotional practice, that can be realised most fully under conditions of modernity. Modernity allows me to choose between trust and distrust, and to mix the two. It prevents me from bestowing “blind trust” and making a fool of myself. But it also liberates me from being a genuinely distrusting person that leads a miserably unhappy life.

And here we hint at something that escapes those who think in purely functionalist terms. There is an emotional value to trust that cannot be adequately judged by any theory that perceives men (and women) as players who only cooperate in order to maximise their economic gains or their material well-being. Instead, trust is part of an emotional lexicon that is closely tied to the moral foundations of modern democracy. Modernity does not just allow us to trust, it also wants us to trust. We modern people love to trust. It makes our lives easier and nicer. We feel happier when we can trust, and we disapprove of people whom we experience as suspicious and distrustful. Trust, so to speak, is a feel-good-word, and we therefore use it in abundance. It is this moral and emotional dimension of trust that explains why people are so shattered by the current financial crisis. Their trust, so they feel, has been betrayed by bankers who obviously had not taken their customers’ interests “to heart”. This is not just considered an economic misdemeanour, but a moral offense, an attack on the emotional stability and dignity of each individual.

How did this high emotional value of trust come into being? Let’s leave the level of “big structures and large processes” aside and instead have a look at historical sources. A very interesting and revealing one is an article on trust published in 1746, in one of the first German-language encyclopaedias. Encyclopaedias were a new genre that developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They collected, summed up and presented current knowledge to well-educated readers who craved for information and orientation in a rapidly changing world. Now - what does the article have to say to its avid readers? Interestingly, 90 percent of the text deals with trust in God, which is taken to be the most fundamental type of trust.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, this indicates the strong grip that religion still had on people’s minds and behaviour around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And it certainly evokes the Protestant tradition – Luther having warned his audience against trusting people, because only God deserves trust.

Looking deeper, though, we might wonder to what degree this warning was rooted not so much in theological dogma but in social experience. It might well reflect pre-modern conditions of basic insecurity and contingency. First, most of the dangers threatening individuals seemed to be out of human control – famine, disease, catastrophic weather, ubiquitous death. Only God could help here, and this is why it was Him who had to be trusted. Second, there was little stability in political and economic relations; legal safeguards were underdeveloped and did not offer much support. Trusting people was thus in itself a high-risk operation.

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<sup>10</sup> Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 48, Leipzig 1746.

Indeed, our author only mentioned – and approved of – social trust once. He reserved it for the relationship between doctor and patient. Here, trust seemed to be both, necessary and possible. In other respects, the author recommended being careful and watching out and he deliberately set himself apart from others who apparently took a different stance. He maliciously called them “Erneuerte” – modernists, reformers, followers of progress and Enlightenment. He did not share their positive views on mankind. For him, men were “fragile” and “unstable” – nothing to build trust upon. To recommend more trust among people, as the modernists did, was just weakness, not strength.

This article provides a great starting-point for our investigation into the history of trust and distrust. It draws our attention to a controversy that in many ways defines and shapes the emergence of modernity: should the new society be based on trust or distrust? How much trust is needed in order to build a civil society? Is distrust good or bad? What kind of institutional setup do we need in order to allow for trusting relations among citizens?

Again, encyclopaedias offer some insight into this debate – and into its consequences. To cut a long story short: the modernists are on the winning side. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dimension of social trust grew – to the detriment of trust in God, which virtually disappeared from the articles. Trust among export merchants, between soldiers and their officers, between the rich and the poor, between servants and masters, among friends and family is mentioned time and again. Furthermore, composite words proliferate, testifying to the increasing charms of trust. Pedagogical literature takes it up and turns trust into a cornerstone of the teacher-student relationship. Parents are advised to treat their children in a way that will not make them lose trust. Trust even enters industrial relations. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more companies have introduced workers’ councils that consisted of elected “trustees”. Their role was to negotiate with the owner or manager of the company and thus learn to “surmount mutual distrust”.<sup>11</sup> While distrust was seen as disruptive and obstructive, trust was held to foster communication and co-operation – things that were deemed crucial for a modern society with a high – and ever rising – degree of labour division.

Last, but not least, trust entered the political arena: citizens used trust to claim more political rights; governments and monarchs demanded to be trusted and pretended to be trustworthy. It is this political dimension of trust that I want to focus on. The choice is a deliberate one and reflects my own research interests which center on political communication in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I am particularly concerned with the emotional language that shapes communication between citizens and governments or heads-of-state. This language has a lot to tell, I suppose, about expectations and their legitimising, about desires and their containment. It makes us think more generally about the role of emotions in the display and perception of political power. Emotional language, so my argument goes, both expresses and mitigates power relations in politics. It enables citizens to directly approach those in power, to voice approval or disapproval, to communicate concerns and interests. Most importantly, it allows them to see power as a personal relationship, embodied in human beings that can be reached through emotional appeals.

Trust, so it seems, is a relatively new word in the emotional lexicon of politics. Political scientists will easily trace it back to John Locke, the British liberal philosopher writing in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Locke coined the phrase “government by trust”. In this view, trust defined the relations between the people and parliament that held supreme power, meaning the power to give laws. Parliament acted as the trustee of the British people, with which it shared not only interests, but also, as Edmund Burke put it a century later, feelings and desires.<sup>12</sup> Such trusting relations were essentially absent on the European continent where monarchs held absolute power, and parliament in the British sense was unknown.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ute Frevert, *Vertrauen – eine historische Spurensuche*, in: Frevert ed., *Vertrauen*, Göttingen 2003, p. 46..

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. Thomas P. Peardon, New York 1952, p. 81 ff.; Edmund Burke, *Works*, vol 3, London 1855, p. 334.

Instead of trust, people spoke of loyalty and fidelity. The absolutist princes commanded their subjects' fidelity and obedience, not their trust.

So what is the difference between trust and fidelity? The main difference, as I see it, concerns issues of fluidity and stability. Fidelity, in the medieval sense, characterised relationships that were bound to last. Once sworn, fidelity could not be broken or reversed. If it was, this amounted to treason which was considered a major crime. In contrast, trust is reversible. Although it remained part of the traditional semantics of allegiance, love and reverence, it gradually cast off its passive connotations and acquired a more active quality. Talking trust increasingly meant negotiating power relations. Those who offered trust made demands, they stated conditions under which trust was granted and threatened to withdraw it in case those conditions were not met.

Trust thus became part of the new emotional lexicon that the upheaval of the French Revolution had introduced in continental Europe. Even in those countries that did not follow the French model, it made an impact. Monarchs who did not want to share the fate of Louis XVI, were eager to "strengthen the bonds of trust between Us and Our people". Self-confident citizens in turn urged the government to trust the people rather than demanding people's trust. In 1848, they campaigned for a "trusting state" – meaning that the monarchy should share power rather than monopolize it. Sharing power also entailed making power transparent. Secrecy was held to harm and impede trust while publicity was thought to strengthen it.<sup>13</sup>

During those negotiations, trust was presented as a scarce resource, as something that had to be built and consolidated by a chain of favourable decisions and careful policy making. Lurking behind this message was the abundance of distrust. Distrust, too, was a new lemma in the emotional lexicon of 19<sup>th</sup> century politics. It entered it, so to speak, on the footsteps of trust. To talk about trust as a political demand opened up the possibility to talk about the absence of trust, or, stronger still, the state of distrust. Distrust was defined as the weapon of the powerless or the less powerful – a newly discovered weapon, to be sure, since it could only be used in a political system that valued trust.

Parliamentary democracy, as it stands, emerged as a system of politics that depended heavily on the careful balance between trust and distrust. It started with an act of trust embodied in the constitution – an act of power sharing that was either forced upon or eked out of the previous monopolist. There were at least two echelons of trust: one between government and parliament, the other between parliament and citizens. Both went along with inbuilt mechanisms of distrust. Citizens chose their representatives only for a limited amount of time and could visibly withdraw their trust in new elections. The Parliament also relied on a mixture of trust and distrust. It controlled and supervised the actions of the government and could withdraw its support (and bring down government) by an explicit vote of distrust.

In the long run, power sharing had dramatic consequences. It depersonalised power, in other words it made it lose its personal touch and embodiment. In republics where both the heads of government and the heads of state could change very fast, it introduced a sense of volatility and insecurity, to which many citizens found it hard to adjust. Legal government with a complex and efficient bureaucracy could be accountable to its citizens (and thus prove itself trustworthy), but it did not infuse enthusiasm, as Max Weber knew so well. While trust and distrust had produced a powerful rhetoric during the transformative period of bourgeois revolutions and constitutional reform, their charms got lost soon after parliamentary government was firmly established.

Modern politics, then, heavily rely on institutionalized mechanisms of trust and distrust. At the same time, though, these mechanisms tend to devour and spit out the emotional substance of trust. Trust seems to be an intensely personal issue, it forms a bond between people. Although many efforts were

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<sup>13</sup> See Frevert, *Vertrauen*, esp. p. 25-27.

made during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to extend trust to institutions, this somehow did not work. People find it hard to trust government, parties, courts, insurance companies. On the other hand, they trust the head of government, local or national party leaders, judges, or CEOs.

As for politics, we find a lot of evidence in personal communications. National archives store millions of letters that citizens wrote to those at the top of the power hierarchy. Many more millions or billions have been thrown out because they did not seem important enough to keep for future reference. Reading those that have survived conveys an image of emotional citizenship that has not yet found any recognition in political science or history. Here we find normal people belonging to all age groups and social classes, of different gender and religion, addressing and communicating with the men whom they think to be in power, both symbolically and literally. They try to form a personal bond with them, they speak about their trust, their reverence, their love. They pour out their hearts, writing about family problems and their concerns with the state of the nation. They support these leaders, or they urge them to take action. They also talk about their emotional appeal, about the impact of their voice on the radio, their gestures on a photograph.

These people, in their great majority, are not lunatics. They are, again, normal people – who take the liberty to get in touch with their highest representative or leader, be it Abraham Lincoln or Hitler or comrade Stalin. This kind of direct communication (which remains, most of the time, one-sided) has a long tradition. It dates back to pre-democratic or pre-republican times, when the monarch was the one to capture and engage people's emotions. The more "bourgeois" or middle-class the royal family presented itself, the more it incited popular imagination and invited personal approaches. More and more people congratulated the king or queen on his or her birthday, or sent poems commemorating royal marriages or births. The death of a monarch sent shock waves through the population, even when it had been expected due to old age or poor health. People were interested in personal stories, and mass media like newspapers provided them eagerly. This far exceeded what we observe as "star power" in our contemporary world. It was more ubiquitous, more general, and more focused. The monarch personified material and symbolic power, rooted in tradition and the present political system. But he also personified – or pledged to personify – the nation, the fatherland, the community of citizens. He was the head of this community, the father of his children – meaning all of us.

Interestingly, this pre-modern image of political power survived well into the modern period. It even survived the radical rupture that occurred in France or Germany when the monarchy was forcefully abolished and a republic was established. Reading the letters that were addressed to the first German President (who also happened to be a Socialist) after 1919 conveys a surprising sense of continuity. Continuity was even more evident when his conservative successor took office in 1925. The outpouring of emotions was breathtaking. And it got even stronger after Hitler became chancellor in 1933 and president in 1934. All these letters were unsolicited and non-instrumental. Very few people wrote to request a favour – although many asked for a signed photograph (and got it). Most authors just took pleasure in forming a personal bond and assuring the Führer of their boundless love, loyalty and, for this matter, trust.

What has been lost in this communication is the conditional character of trust that was so dominant in the transformative period of constitutional politics. Trust was granted unconditionally, it came, so to speak, from the bottom of people's hearts. The new rhetoric of trust sounded rather medieval and was more akin to loyalty and fidelity. It was closely linked to obedience – following the Führer's commands was the familiar slogan that apparently found ready acceptance. At least this is what the letters convey, speaking a more or less identical language of personal dedication mixed with highest expectations. The Führer had made many promises, and people trusted him to keep them.

National Socialism, we know, was strong on propaganda. Evoking trust was among the major concerns of the regime. Trust talk abounded, in political speeches as well as in the renaming of institutions. What was called "factory council" during the Weimar republic, now figured as "council of

trust". Trust and fidelity became the core concepts of industrial relations connecting "leaders" and "followers" in an allegedly harmonious symbiosis. Conflict and struggle were outlawed – and externalised. The emphasis on trust within the national community contrasted sharply with the amount of distrust waged against those who did not belong: foreigners, German Jews, communists and socialist "internationalists".

After 1945, the emotional lexicon of German politics changed considerably. Those terms that had been overused since the 1920s and particularly during National Socialism mostly disappeared: honour, fidelity, devotion. Interestingly enough, though, trust (that had been mixed up with fidelity before) re-entered the field. The West German Basic Law introduced trust and distrust as categories of parliamentary control over the government – which is the only time that it made explicit reference to emotions (tied to procedures). When it came to the issue of people's trust, however, the lawmakers remained sceptical. They all agreed that the people should not have a direct say on politics. While the Weimar constitution had included some plebiscitary elements, the Basic Law did not. Furthermore, it did not reinstall a strong president that, as Weimar had it, was to be elected directly by the people. Especially among Social Democrats, there was a deep distrust that people would again cherish authority and put their trust in a charismatic figure. Democracy, as Carlo Schmid phrased it in 1948, is about citizens' self-confidence, not about their trust in others.<sup>14</sup>

The early years of West German democracy proved him wrong, though. Rather than relying on their own capacity for political action, citizens delegated politics to stable governments and to men who seemed trustworthy because of their distinctly unemotional attire. The first chancellor Adenauer (14 years of office) and the first president Heuss (10) did not demand people's fidelity, love or devotion. They did not even talk about trust. Likewise, elections were not staged as markers of trust.

This does not mean, however, that post-war politics were completely devoid of emotions. Without much difficulty, we can sense an emotional basso continuo – Angst. First, there was fear of communism that was readily exploited for conservative aims. In the late 1950s, fear of nuclear war became pervasive. From the 1970s onwards, one type of fear followed the other: fear of nuclear power, of dying forests, of the armament race, of climate change – you name it. It seems as if West Germany developed a culture of fear that is hard to find in other European countries (the US being a powerful counterpart).

But how does trust relate to fear? Empirically, we can distinguish two reactions to fear: one is self-empowerment, the other is delegation of trust. The first reaction dominated West German political culture since the late 1960s. People did what Carlo Schmid had defined as democratic trust: they put trust in themselves. They formed groups and associations, they founded new parties and campaigned for each and everything. Willy Brandt's slogan "give Democracy a better chance", was received well. But this wave of self-empowerment and grassroots politicising could and did not last. This is where trust in others sets in – and what politicians like Helmut Kohl or Gerhard Schröder tried to capitalize on. Election campaigns since the late 1980s showed a marked tendency to use "trust" as a catchword that invites citizens to leave politics to trustworthy people. The latter, so the promise goes, will find solutions to the problems and fears that bother the public. If the public really buys this promise, still remains to be seen. Only recently, former chancellor Helmut Schmidt – who was notorious for his unemotional approach to politics – warned against trust talk as a method of wooing voters. For him, politicians who explicitly represent themselves as trustworthy run the risk of popularising and rather deserve distrust. I leave this matter to political scientists.

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<sup>14</sup> Ute Frevert, *Wer um Vertrauen wirbt, weckt Misstrauen. Politische Semantik zwischen Herausforderung und Besänftigung*, in: *Merkur* 63 (2009), p. 21-28.

*Ute Frevert*

So I come back to where I started: political science, and its claims to conceptualize and measure emotions of trust. As a historian, I am not satisfied with attempts to reduce trust to a reliance on institutions, on their well-functioning according to rules and procedures. I don't deny that this is a crucial element of modernity, but it is not the whole story. As much as modern politics show a strong trend towards a more institutional, impersonal, and bureaucratic approach, citizens use trust to reintroduce emotional bonds. The way this is done depends on the power structure of the political system, on cultural traditions, and on the availability of a public space. What is particularly interesting here, is to look at how emotions like trust, loyalty/fidelity or love interact in political discourse. My thesis is that under conditions of parliamentary democracy, trust supersedes fidelity. Totalitarian systems reinstall fidelity without dismissing trust altogether. Instead, trust is bereft of its short-term and limited character.

The case of post-war West Germany – that admittedly might be a special case – makes us aware of how difficult it is to re-establish an emotional language that had been inflated beyond recognition before 1945. Comparative analysis is needed to show to what degree ideas about trustworthiness were linked to feelings of fear and insecurity.

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*Lecture delivered on 15 October 2008*