The Hidden Fabric Of Trust: Liberalism, Distrust And Recognition

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ABSTRACT

This paper excavates the moral and political philosophy of trust and distrust in modern thought, tracing how liberalism transformed a pervasive mood of suspicion into the very foundation of social order. Against this background, the paper explores how modern political thought, particularly in Hobbes and Locke, reframed human relations as driven by fear, hostility, and self-interest, making contractual cooperation and political authority dependent on a rationalized distrust. Later sections revisit contemporary approaches—from Fukuyama's cultural theory of trust to Luhmann's and Giddens's sociology of institutions—to show that modern societies silently rely on deeper, pre-political layers of trust that are often forgotten or denied. The paper concludes by arguing that liberalism's embrace of distrust leaves unexplored a richer conception of trust, grounded in recognition, dignity, and the ethics of care, indispensable for sustaining social and political life. For this purpose, it engages with feminist theories of care, which foreground trust as a relational and affective phenomenon rooted in vulnerability and human dependence.

Keywords: Trust; Distrust; Care; Liberalism; Contractarianism; Recognition.

RESUMO

Este artigo realiza uma escavação na filosofia moral e política da confiança e da desconfiança no pensamento moderno, mostrando como o liberalismo transformou um clima generalizado de suspeita no próprio fundamento da ordem social. A partir desse pano de fundo, o texto examina como o pensamento político moderno, especialmente em Hobbes e Locke, reformulou as relações humanas como marcadas pelo medo, pela hostilidade e pelo interesse próprio, fazendo da cooperação contratual e da autoridade política uma resposta racionalizada à desconfiança. As seções seguintes revisitam abordagens contemporâneas — da teoria cultural da confiança em Fukuyama à sociologia

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das instituições em Luhmann e Giddens — para mostrar que as sociedades modernas dependem silenciosamente de camadas mais profundas e pré-políticas de confiança, frequentemente esquecidas ou negadas. O artigo conclui argumentando que a adesão liberal à desconfiança deixa de tematizar uma concepção mais rica de confiança, fundamentada no reconhecimento, na dignidade e na ética do cuidado, indispensável para a sustentação da vida social e política. Para tanto, o artigo recorre a teorias feministas do cuidado, que destacam a confiança como um fenômeno relacional e afetivo, enraizado na vulnerabilidade e na dependência humana.
Palavras-chave: Confiança; Desconfiança; Cuidado; Liberalismo; Contratualismo; Reconhecimento.

Introduction

The multiple phenomena of distrust we face today – distrust of science in climate change and pandemic denial, distrust of vaccination, distrust of the media, distrust of representative democracy manifest in political apathy and declining voter turnout, distrust of ideals such as democracy, justice, and human rights, distrust of neighbors in constant fear of violence – call for more than mere diagnosis: they compel a philosophical response. To think about trust today is not only to describe its conditions but also to ask what forms of trust we ought to sustain, what relations deserve our confidence, and what forms of authority masquerade as trustworthy while undermining our dignity. Talking about trust is always thorny, given its many meanings. We speak of trusting institutions like science or government, trusting ourselves, trusting God, trusting events, partners, and strangers. Sometimes we think trust is a choice, yet we know we cannot truly trust those who have betrayed us. Trust oscillates between faith, naïve optimism, and affect, on one side, and rational calculation and prudential judgment on the other.

This paper undertakes an excavation of the concept of trust in modern political, social, and moral thought. It begins on the surface, with

the prevailing modern mood of distrust—a pervasive assumption that others are threats or competitors. Liberalism emerges historically as a political theory that not only recognizes this distrust but embraces it, turning suspicion into a rational stance and contract enforcement into the cornerstone of social cooperation. Yet, as the paper argues, this view is partial and ultimately distorting. Beneath this rationalized distrust lie deeper, forgotten layers of trust—silent, invisible, yet constitutive of human life and social order. By progressively peeling back the historical and conceptual strata of modern thought, the paper reveals how liberal and neoliberal theories have built their political imaginaries on a truncated notion of trust, obscuring its more fundamental role as recognition of dignity.

The paper proceeds in five sections, each moving one layer deeper in this excavation. Section I examines how modern thought—from Hobbes to Freud and Kant—casts human relations as driven by fear, hostility, and suspicion. Section II shows how liberal political theory transforms this mood into a rational framework, making distrust the premise of social order. Section III explores how thinkers like Hobbes and Locke framed political authority as fiduciary power, revealing that even a society of contracts rests on a shadow trust in the sovereign. Section IV turns to Fukuyama's attempt to recover trust as a cultural resource for modern markets, while showing how this approach remains limited by neoliberal assumptions. Section V engages with the sociology of trust in Luhmann and Giddens, uncovering the silent, backgrounded confidence in abstract institutions and systemic mechanisms that makes modern cooperation possible, even among strangers. Finally, Section VI excavates beneath these layers to uncover a constitutive, pre-political trust—woven into human vulnerability, recognition, and dignity—that sustains both society and political order, even when forgotten or denied.

I. The mood of distrust

Modern thought predominantly portrays human beings as inherently suspicious and distrustful. This section explores this typical modern view of human beings by drawing upon three influential thinkers—Hobbes, Kant, and Freud—whose theories profoundly shaped modern self-understanding. Their perspectives will set the stage for critically assessing how liberalism conceives social cooperation and trust in the following section.

A vivid manifestation of this modern mood of distrust emerges clearly in Freud's skeptical reaction to the ancient commandment "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself":

> But if he is a stranger to me and if he cannot attract me by any worth of his own of any significance that he may already have acquired for my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him. Indeed, I should be wrong to do so, for my love is valued by all my own people as a sign of my preferring them, and it is an injustice to them if I put a stranger on a par with them (Fredu, 1989, p. 66)

We might object that not being worthy of love differs fundamentally from being an object of distrust or hostility. However, Freud quickly dispels this distinction:

> Not merely is this stranger in general unworthy of my love, I must honestly confess that he has more claim to my hostility and even my hatred. He seems not to have the least trace of love for me and shows me not the slightest consideration. If it will do him any good he has no hesitation in injuring me, nor does he ask himself whether the amount of advantage he gains bears any proportion to the extent of the harm he does to me (Freud, 1989, p. 67)

Thus, for Freud, the injunction "love thy neighbor" becomes incomprehensible, a cumbersome relic of an alien cultural past. More radically, the neighbor appears primarily as a potential aggressor, a threat

waiting to cause harm. Humans are depicted as fundamentally self-interested, driven by desire beyond rational calculation, capable of humiliating or harming others without personal benefit.

Political philosopher Thomas Hobbes provides the most conceptually rigorous account of interpersonal distrust, or diffidence. For Hobbes, distrust is central to human interaction, shaping even the most intimate and mundane behaviors:

> Let him therefore consider with himself, when taking a journey he armes himself, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his dores; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there bee Lawes, and publike Officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall bee done him; what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow Citizens, when he locks his dores; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words? (Hobbes, 2017, p. 186–187)

In this passage, Hobbes invites us to realize how our private behavior constantly confirms that our primary relationship with others is grounded on distrust. In these small acts, we state something about how we see our fellow citizens and those closest to us. For example, in locking our houses, we state that our fellow citizens are untrustworthy. In locking out chests, we state that our children are not trustworthy. On the other way around, Hobbes shows how pervasive distrust conducts many actions in our everyday life. In a context of pervasive distrust, individuals must continuously find protective devices and erect barriers between themselves and others.

Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy initially appears in stark contrast to Hobbes's political realism, nevertheless echoes this perspective when discussing the transition from a state of nature to civil society:

> No one is bound to refrain from encroaching on what another possesses if the other gives him no equal assurance [*Sicherheit*] that he will observe the same

> restraint toward him. No one, therefore, need wait until he has learned by bitter experience of the other's contrary disposition; for what should bind him to wait till he has suffered a loss before he becomes prudent, when he can quite well perceive within himself the inclination of human beings generally to lord it over others as their master (not to respect the superiority of the rights of others when they feel superior to them in strength or cunning)? And it is not necessary to wait for actual hostility; one is authorized to use coercion against someone who already, by his nature, threatens him with coercion. (Quilibet praesumitur malus, donec securitatem dederit oppositi.) (Kant, 1999, p. 452)

This passage is particularly revealing. First, it highlights the deep, if often unacknowledged, influence of Hobbes on Kant's late philosophy of law.[1] Here, Kant adopts the same introspective method used by Hobbes, inviting us to look within and acknowledge our natural inclination to play the master over others [*über andere den Meister zu spielen*]. By nature, we are power-seeking beings, inclined to dominate our peers. Consequently, we perceive others as inherent threats, and, in the absence of a civil condition, we feel justified in using coercion preemptively—even before suffering any harm. Kant encapsulates this view in the Latin maxim: Quilibet praesumitur malus, donec securitatem dederit oppositi — "Everyone is presumed evil, until [they] provide assurance of the contrary." Yet, in Kant's reasoning, no purely interpersonal assurance can ever suffice; only a superior authority can establish genuine security between fundamentally distrustful individuals. In this way, Hobbesian distrust resurfaces as a cornerstone of the very justification for political authority (Hobbes, 2018, p. 30).

Trust, for Hobbes, is a "passion proceeding from belief of him from whom we expect or hope for good so free from doubt that upon the same we pursue no other way" (Hobbes, 2018, p. 30). Where hope is

[1] For Hobbes' influence in Kant's legal philosophy (and, of course, their differences) see Flikschuh (2000, p. 99–111; 136); Ripstein (2010, p. 146–7)

simply the "expectation of good to come, as fear is the expectation of evil." Conversely, distrust or diffidence is "doubt that maketh him endeavour to provide himself by other means" (Hobbes, 2018, p. 30). Trust and distrust are thus intertwined passions, rooted in hope and fear, in our expectations of goodwill or ill will from others. For Hobbes, distrust is not an anomaly but a fundamental modality of fear, expressed alongside suspicion, flight, and the instinct to take precautions until fear can be overcome (Hobbes, 1983, p. 45).[2]

Hobbes derives a state of general distrust from the very fact of natural equality. Along these lines, he states:

> In the first place I set down for a Principle by experience known to all men, and denied by none, to wit, that the dispositions of men are naturally such, that except they be restrained through feare of some coercive power, every man will distrust and dread each other, and as by naturall right he may, so by necessity he wil be forced to make use of the strength hee hath, toward the preservation of himself (Hobbes, 1983, p. 32)

Distrust, in turn, intensifies the environment of uncertainty, for in order to become secure in such a context, individuals act in "Anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him" (Hobbes, 2017, p. 184). In other words, human desire urges individuals toward violence to subdue others, while the pervasive state of diffidence compels them to preemptively defend themselves against anticipated aggression. This condition is what Hobbes calls a state of war, which, as he makes clear, is not the active combat but a "tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known" (Hobbes, 2017, p. 186). Thus, the time of war is that of continual fear and danger, leaving no room for industry, culture, let alone justice.

[2] For more recent accounts of fear in Hobbes, see, especially, Ginzburg (2008) but also Blits (1989, Buchan (2001) and Jakonen (2011)

From this description, it becomes manifest that for Hobbes the most immediate relationship of human beings is instilled with distrust. Starting from this primary mood of mutual suspicion, Hobbes concludes that nothing inherent in human passions can overcome the anxiety arising from our constitutive vulnerability to others. As he remarkably stated, "men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deale of griefe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all" (Hobbes, 2017, p. 185). Outside the auspices of a tutelar authority, being next to another human being is not only a nuisance but also a grievance. And, even if this awesome power can guarantee some peace of mind, nothing seems to make human company pleasant. It is my task to demonstrate the political relevance of such a pervasive distrust.

By underscoring the pervasive presence of interpersonal distrust in influential thinkers such as Freud, Hobbes, and Kant, we highlight a defining characteristic of modern thought. This widespread atmosphere of distrust emerges directly from the model of ontological individualism dominant in modernity. The rise of bourgeois society and capitalist modes of production fostered a conception of individuals as fundamentally separate and self-contained beings, comprehensible primarily in isolation. This ontological individualism, resulting from a sociohistorical process, also shaped an epistemological perspective evident across modern disciplines—epistemic nominalism, atomistic physics, and moral individualism form a coherent constellation. Typically, moral philosophy begins with detached, autonomous individuals, viewing ethical relations as secondary and moral dilemmas as theoretical puzzles.

While figures of vulnerability and dependence—such as infancy, old age, madness, and disability—are acknowledged, modern thought often treats them as flawed or incomplete forms of individuality. The ultimate objective of upbringing and personal development is to establish

full independence. Given this presupposed ontological separation, interactions among individuals appear inherently risky. Consequently, trust, associated with dependence and vulnerability, has been systematically neglected by philosophical traditions. Baier notes a "strange silence on the topic in the tradition of moral philosophy," observing that the critical question "Whom should I trust in what way, and why?" (Baier, 1986, p. 232) remains largely unaddressed. Few philosophers have engaged systematically with trust, which, from the viewpoint of moral individualism, seems defective because it signifies dependence rather than rational autonomy. Trust thus emerges only in extraordinary circumstances—moments of exceptional vulnerability or strategic risk-taking.

Having demonstrated modernity's prevailing skepticism and neglect of trust through Freud, Hobbes, and Kant, the stage is now set for examining liberal thought. The following sections will explore how liberalism conceptualize social cooperation and trust.

II. Liberal Distrust

Building directly on the modern mood of distrust explored in the previous section, Russell Hardin (2006) does not merely acknowledge this pervasive attitude; he accepts and embraces it as the true foundation of modern political thought. In his liberal framework, distrust is not a flaw to be overcome but the basic condition upon which social order is constructed. Writing in the late 20th century, Russel Hardin explicitly positions himself against two dominant strands of thought: moral theories that attempt to ground trust in a positive normative rationale, and political diagnoses that lament a deficit of trust as a distinctive problem of late modernity. For Hardin, when we speak of the duty to

keep promises, the enforcement of contracts, or the social determinants of cooperation, we are not uncovering the logic of trusting itself but merely describing the logic of being trustworthy—and the instrumental, collective benefits that follow from it.

Hardin sought to establish distrust as the foundation of modernity, arguing that market reliability is central to modern sociability. His account draws on the standard narrative about modernity's emergence: traditional communities rested on shared norms of reciprocity in which trust was pivotal, whereas modern societies, by contrast, require interactions among strangers who have no intrinsic reasons to trust one another. Consequently, Hardin views distrust as the basic fact of modern life. For him, the contemporary "age of distrust" simply means that we regularly encounter and interact with strangers. He dismisses the idea that modernity has brought increased uncertainty or social risk. As Luhmann aptly observes, without a shared cosmological background that anchors collective beliefs, there is no straightforward passage from "general and common assumptions of belief to personal trust" (Luhmann, 2018, p. 49). Thus, the so-called age of distrust signifies nothing more than living as strangers in a world populated by strangers.

From this standpoint, liberalism appears as the most genuinely modern political doctrine, built on the premise that distrust is fundamental and that reliable social coordination rests on mechanisms that substitute for trust rather than presuppose it.

Hardin's starting point is the claim that trust is only developed between people who deal reciprocally (Hardin, 2006, p. 8). Trust emerges gradually from rich interpersonal interactions, making it fundamentally secondary—a state arising from an initial condition of distrust. But what exactly constitutes trust, and how does it arise? According to Hardin:

> I trust someone if I have reason to believe it will be in that person's interest to be trustworthy in the relevant way at the relevant time. My trust turns, however, not directly on the Trusted's interests per se, but on whether my own interests are encapsulated in the interest of the Trusted, that is, on whether the Trusted counts my interests as partly his or her own interests just because they are my interests (in philosophers' jargon, the Trusted counts my interests as his or her own qua my interests) (Hardin, 2006, p. 19)

The central category for Hardin, therefore, is interest, broadly understood to include financial gains, emotional attachments, and reputational concerns (Hardin, 2006, p. 31). Following the neoliberal tradition, he conceptualizes trust as a market-like alignment of interests. Individuals, conceived as independent, self-interested actors, come together to execute mutually advantageous transactions. Trust thus becomes the rational belief that another person's interests overlap with or include our own, or that the other genuinely seeks to maintain our relationship. Consequently, trust is fundamentally cognitive, requiring an informed assessment of another's motivations based on prior experience. Although trust inherently carries elements of uncertainty and risk, it must be justified rationally rather than granted arbitrarily. As Hardin emphasizes, if trust is knowledge, it cannot be a choice to trust. In brief, Hardin characterizes trust as a triadic relationship—"A trusts B to do X"—where the Trusted (B) possesses an incentive to act trustworthily, and the Truster (A) has sufficient evidence to justify that trust.

It is also important to note Hardin's crucial distinction between trust and helplessness. For Hardin, genuine trust cannot arise when there is a significant imbalance of power. Under conditions of helplessness, real trust is impossible. Rather, trust emerges when individuals possess sufficient independence and rational maturity to make informed judgments. For instance, a child cannot genuinely trust her mother: first, because the child is utterly vulnerable and dependent, resulting in an

enormous power differential; second, because the child lacks the intellectual maturity to form sound judgments.

What, then, are the mechanisms through which one's interests become encapsulated in another's interests? According to Hardin, encapsulation first occurs when the relationship itself is valued, giving each party a genuine incentive to preserve it. For example, I trust a company to deliver quality service because it is in their interest to maintain our ongoing relationship. Second, encapsulation can arise from affection and personal bonds. Let us say I trust my friend because I believe that it is in her interest that I am safe or happy. Finally, reputation can also work as a mechanism of trust. A good reputation is an incentive to sustain that reputation. Reputation plays an essential role in Hardin's argument because it is the only mechanism that allows the encapsulated interest model to be expanded to indirect relationships. Reputation is a piece of indirect knowledge that will enable me to trust someone I never had a previous experience with (Hardin, 2006, p. 24).

To illustrate his theory of trust, Hardin draws on Game Theory models. Take the classic Prisoner's Dilemma: why would Prisoner 1 trust that Prisoner 2 will choose to cooperate? What could justify that trust? For Hardin, nothing. In a one-shot, anonymous game, the Trusted has every incentive to defect, breaking any trust placed in them. However, if the game is repeated over time, patterns of cooperation begin to emerge. Through iteration, participants learn about one another's motivational structures, recognizing incentives that favor sustaining cooperation in future rounds. These models, though focused on cooperation rather than trust in its fuller sense, underline a key point for Hardin: trust always has a temporal dimension tied to the value of preserving future relationships.

In Hardin's framework, trust is stripped of any intrinsic moral value. It is nothing more than a rational calculation, a cognitive tool for

managing commercial transactions and minimizing risks. Trust is not a virtue, and distrust is not a moral failure—it is simply the basic condition of modern social life. Furthermore, Hardin insists that it makes little sense to speak of trusting governments or abstract institutions like science because these entities lack discernible motivational structures. We cannot meaningfully assess whether their interests encapsulate ours. Hence, for Hardin, diagnoses about rising distrust toward governments are misplaced. Governments can only be judged competent or incompetent in solving practical problems; they cannot truly be "trusted" or "distrusted." At most, we can hold a form of confidence—based on past experience—that they will behave in predictable ways (Hardin, 2006, p. 69).

III. Contractarian Trust

As the analysis of Hobbes in the first section already revealed, liberalism emerged within—and indeed embraced—a world marked by pervasive distrust. From its very inception, it assumed that social cooperation among fundamentally wary and self-protective individuals would be mediated primarily through contracts. Contracts became the foundational device to make life among distrustful agents possible, replacing any presumption of goodwill with enforceable commitments. Yet even in this meticulously constructed world of calculated agreements, early liberal thinkers conceded that a substratum of trust was unavoidable. Promises had to be credible, covenants could not operate without a baseline expectation of reliability. Locke, notably, emphasized throughout his writings that trustworthiness and promise-keeping were essential obligations rooted in natural law, thus representing a liberal view that affirms the moral character and centrality of trust.

Yet liberalism makes a decisive turn here: it acknowledges that individual trustworthiness can never, on its own, sustain social cooperation. Where spontaneous trust falters—and liberalism assumes it often will—only a higher authority can secure the fragile bonds of agreement. Thus, early liberal thinkers were forced to concede that beneath every private covenant lies a deeper, more fundamental trust: a trust in the state's power to compel compliance, enforce promises, and mediate conflicts. Hobbes explicitly argues that contracts made in a state of nature—without sovereign enforcement—are void, since "he that performeth first, has no assurance the other will performe after" (Hobbes, 2017, p. 196). Without political oversight, distrust escalates and leads inevitably to conflict. Without this sovereign guarantee, the grand architecture of contractual society would collapse under the weight of pervasive distrust.

Thus, overcoming distrust required establishing a sovereign authority to arbitrate disputes and uphold contracts and property rights. However, this solution raises a paradox: the sovereign authority itself emerges through an original contract among mutually distrustful individuals. Trust, which analytically belongs to the concept of contract, paradoxically becomes the very foundation required to establish contracts (Hobbes, 2017, p. 193). How, then, can a social contract founded upon trust arise from a state of complete mutual distrust? Exploring this paradox clarifies liberalism's foundational assumptions about social cooperation, trust, and authority.

Hobbes resolves this paradox by emphasizing the unique nature of the original social contract. Rather than detailing specific obligations, it constitutes an unconditional commitment to obedience. This absolute commitment is sustained solely by an overwhelming passion: the fear of violent death, which overrides all alternative considerations. Locke shares a similar diagnosis regarding the necessity of political authority

but differs crucially from Hobbes in the nature of the initial compact. For Locke, even in the state of nature, private contracts and property rights exist, but their enforcement is precarious without a common power. Thus, individuals establish political authority through compact. Unlike Hobbes, however, Locke insists that this compact explicitly defines and limits governmental powers: "[f]or a man […] cannot, by compact […] enslave himself to anyone, nor put himself under the absolute, arbitrary power of another" (Locke, 1993, p. 126). For Locke, political power is fiduciary, therefore if the authority violates the terms of the contract, it can be legitimately resisted. If power is exercised beyond the law, beyond what is established by the covenant, it becomes tyrannical, unjust, and unlawful. Tyranny is the breach of trust and, therefore, of the contract; it can thus result in the dissolution of the government.

In both Hobbes and Locke, market relations and private contracts implicitly rely upon trust in a common authority, a shadow trust that quietly underpins every act of cooperation. Just as, for Hobbes, fear of sovereign power supersedes the fear individuals feel toward each other, mutual distrust among individuals can only be endured by placing absolute trust in a superior authority. The social contract thus represents a concentrated node of trust, neutralizing pervasive interpersonal suspicion. Consequently, every political power emerges inherently as fiduciary power. The belief that private contracts somehow eliminate the need for trust is a compelling illusion; everyday transactions unavoidably presuppose trust in the judicial framework that enforces them. While Hobbes views the social compact as a commitment to unconditional obedience and Locke holds that breaches of trust delegitimize authority, both fundamentally agree that the magistrate, as fiduciary power, forms the hidden foundation beneath all private agreements.

Trust lies at the very heart of political power. This does not imply, however, that those who hold positions of authority are

necessarily trusted by the people. Quite the contrary; as Locke candidly observes, "[t]his is an inconvenience, I confess, that attends all governments whatsoever, when the governors have brought it to this pass, to be generally suspected of their people" (Locke, 1993, p. 221). Russell Hardin pushes this further, arguing that a fundamental suspicion toward government officials is itself a defining feature of liberal thought (Hardin, 1999, 2002). There are thus two levels. On a more basic level, trust installs, structures, and gives intelligibility to the government. It draws the area and scope of legitimate political action as the criteria for judging those in office. In other words, it establishes the law. On another level, there are individuals invested with political authority. These individuals must be monitored and surveilled not to overstep legitimate action boundaries. Thus, one of the central tasks of liberal or limited governments is to institutionalize this pervasive distrust through an intricate architecture of checks and balances, constitutional safeguards, divisions of power, and mechanisms of surveillance (Rosanvallon, 2006). Beneath the fiduciary power, represented by the fundamental trust in authority itself, lies a perpetual suspicion directed toward specific authorities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this continual suspicion implicitly recognizes a deeper, more foundational reliance on authority as such.

IV. Embedded Trust: Culture and Markets

Fukuyama later showed, however, that the contractarian account of trust is still limited in a crucial way. Although it reveals how fundamental trust in political authority supports pervasive distrust, it overlooks an even more basic network of trust. Writing in the same post-Cold War context as Hardin, during the height of neoliberal dominance,

Fukuyama opens his work by declaring that once the ideal institutional framework—market-liberal democracy coupled with global capitalism—had been ostensibly secured, the decisive factors shaping economic outcomes were no longer institutional but cultural. Fukuyama situates trust precisely within this cultural domain, highlighting that markets alone cannot generate trust.

For Fukuyama, market interactions always exist within a broader cultural network composed of written and unwritten rules, practices, symbolic meanings, and rituals. Contracts and property rights rely not only on coercive authority but also on institutional and cultural frameworks that give these notions their intelligibility and efficacy. Like Hegel, Fukuyama recognizes that markets are not merely spaces of exchange but also arenas of social recognition. In modernity, recognition predominantly occurs within economic life, where one's social identity is defined by profession, status, and societal function (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 7). Thus, markets do not stand alone; they depend on communal contexts that foster solidarity and social associations (Durkheim, 2014; Tocqueville, 2004).

Fukuyama throws light on the ethical background behind the economic performance of different nations. But how does trust appear in that model? He is convinced that the level of trust in society has become a significant determinant in national economic performance and well-being. He builds upon James Coleman's concept of "social capital" (Coleman, 1988). With the notion of “human capital,” economists argued that capital has become less embodied in land and machines and increasingly embodied in human knowledge and skills. Coleman argued further that “human capital” – knowledge and skills – cannot be understood without the human capacity for association with others. This capacity for association is what he named “social capital.” Trust, adds Fukuyama, is a fundamental piece of social capital: “The ability to

associate depends, in turn, on the degree to which communities share norms and values and are able to subordinate individual interests to those of larger groups. Out of such shared values comes trust" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 10).

Fukuyama recognizes that modern institutions—especially market liberal democracies—cannot independently generate normative bonds that underpin genuine association. Laws, contracts, and economic rationality alone fail to produce moral reciprocity or social obligations. Instead, modern institutions must rely upon pre-existing "pre-modern" institutions. Fukuyama rejects the simplistic neoclassical model of individuals as purely rational utility-maximizers. Instead, he argues that there is a complex interplay between tradition, social behavior, and utility-maximizing (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 18–20). Social cooperation and economic performance also depend on the capacity of individuals to trust and associate with each other. According to Fukuyama, trust is "the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). Legal mechanisms, such as contracts, are compensations for the absence of trust and result in undesired additional transaction costs. In turn, trust is thus something elementary, a natural outcome of practical habituation within a community of shared values and norms.

Fukuyama's concern stems from observing declining social trust in postindustrial societies. Economically, declining trust manifests as increased transactional costs and decreased efficiency, exemplified by rising legal disputes. He concludes that individualistic and contract-based interactions alone are insufficient; they require supportive cultural norms (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 351). Trust is the social fabric that structures and sustains economic practices. Therefore, the modern tendency toward

atomization and the dissolution of ethical bonds also harms the system's efficiency.

That concern with atomization and decreasing social capital has not only economic implications but also political (Putnam, 2001; Putnam; Leonardi; Nanetti, 1994). Vibrant democracies require dense networks of civic associations (Inglehart, 1999; Uslaner, 1999). When society is reduced to a mass of atoms whose sole political engagement takes place through voting, democracies tend to wane. In other words, genuine political trust can only arise from a thick nexus of horizontal trust. Fukuyama's and Putnam's anxiety with a decline in associations and trust mirrors Hegel's distress with the dissolution of corporations with the expansion of market relations in the early 19th century, as well as Durkheim's prognosis of anomie. Hegel insisted on the need for "mediations" in civil society and placed corporations at a central place in his architectonic of rights. Corporations were the only institution he could envisage to oppose the atomization tendency of market relations. Later, industrial labor performed, to some extent, that function by fostering solidarity among fellow workers up to the institutionalization of trade unions. However, with the third industrial revolution and the deindustrialization of major economies, nothing seemed to hinder the course of uncontrolled atomization and anomie.

In that sense, Fukuyama's work has an interesting, if not ironical, prescience. While he celebrates the triumph of market-liberal democracy, he diagnoses the dissipation of its ethical bedrock. The merit of Fukuyama is to place trust back in shared practices and institutions, in which what is at stake is not an individual's assessment of another's motivational structure but the normative structure unfolded through participation in these practices and the recognition of the dignity of fellow participants. Trust requires and only becomes intelligible through practices of recognition.

Nevertheless, Fukuyama's approach has two notable limitations. First, by categorizing trust under social capital, he reduces it merely to an economic asset, focusing primarily on national economic performance without exploring trust's broader rational dimensions. Second, his cultural perspective is somewhat simplistic, categorizing nations and communities as either naturally cooperative (e.g., Japan, Germany) or inherently uncooperative (e.g., China, the U.S. black community). Consequently, he overlooks how expanding market relations themselves reshape cultures and erode conditions necessary for trust.

V. The Social Machinery of Trust

Sociological approaches to trust illuminate an even deeper layer of trust in modern societies: the pervasive dependence on "abstract" institutions. More than any other modern tradition, sociology took the problem of trust seriously because it confronted a historical rupture: the dissolution of traditional communities and their stable forms of meaning. With modernity, as Luhmann (2018, p. 48) observes, life was no longer secured by a religious or mythical interpretation of the world as an ordered and meaningful cosmos in which all communication was founded on divine authority and impersonal trust was unnecessary. In modern settings, practices are no longer immediately intelligible. Our personal lives are entangled in distant events through opaque chains of causation. Decisions depend on institutions and knowledge far beyond our understanding or control. As Weber noted, rationalization and disenchantment do not mean "a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live" (Weber, 2004, p. 12) (Weber, 2004, p. 12).

Take a trivial example. Tomorrow I will fly from New York to Berlin. To plan this trip, I am confident that "JFK" and "5 pm" will mean

the same tomorrow, that my ticket will be valid, my passport recognized, the pilot competent, the aircraft safe, and that the physics of mechanics and fluids that explain a flying machine holds true. If confidence in any of these conditions falters, anxiety sets in: I rehearse alternative scenarios and outcomes. Trust relieves this burden, allowing me to pack, to plan, to live. Yet in truth, I have no mastery over language, law, engineering, borders, or science. These are outside my control, and they can fail me. My trust may be frustrated, leaving me worse off (Luhmann, 2018, p. 24).

Luhmann offers an illuminating account of how elementary trust operates. Strictly speaking, my example aligns more closely with what he calls "confidence," since for Luhmann genuine trust presupposes conscious awareness of risk and a decision among alternative courses of action—a boundary that, in practice, is often blurred. His theory pivots on the distinction between system and environment. A system, in his terms, is a self-referential unit—such as an individual or an organization—that selects information and actions in order to maintain its own operations. The environment comprises everything external to the system, the vast network of political, economic, social, and natural factors on which the system depends but cannot fully control. The environment is overwhelmingly complex: countless variables interact in unpredictable, uncontrollable, and sometimes unknowable ways, rendering personal decisions uncertain and outcomes indeterminate. Trust, for Luhmann, is a way to manage this excess of possibilities. It means assuming that certain variables (x, y) will behave in a predictable way despite the acknowledged risk (z), thereby reducing the burden of complexity. As he puts it, "[Trust] strengthens the capacity of the present for understanding and reducing complexity: it strengthens states as opposed to events and thus makes it possible *to live and to act with greater complexity in relation to events*" (Luhmann, 2018, p. 15).

Trust, for Luhmann, is a mechanism that stabilizes expectations: it reinforces states—persistent patterns of reality—over isolated events, which are fleeting and disconnected from present experience. By doing so, trust increases the system's internal certainty even when the environment remains uncertain. Yet it can never detach entirely from environmental conditions, for such detachment would amount to a pathological or blind trust (Luhmann, 2018, p. 33). The system must still "read" signals from its surroundings to guide and orient its trust. In situations of pure chaos, where no patterns can be discerned, trust becomes meaningless and impossible. Nevertheless, trusting always entails some degree of ignorance and powerlessness in the face of possible events.

In a social setting, this elementary form of trust requires what Giddens calls "disembedding mechanisms": the "'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens, 1991, p. 21). The separation of time and space is a prerequisite for complex modern systems, where actions and consequences unfold across distant settings. Disembedding mechanisms enable this separation by providing the "reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups" (Giddens, 1991, p. 17). According to Giddens, two mechanisms are fundamental: expert systems and symbolic tokens, and crucially, "all disembedding mechanisms, both symbolic tokens and expert systems, depend upon trust" (Giddens, 1991, p. 26).

Expert systems are "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments" (Giddens, 1991, p. 27). They underpin daily life: from city infrastructures to medical treatments and aviation, our activities constantly rely on specialized knowledge we cannot individually master.

This is not merely a pragmatic shortcut; even scientific practice itself rests on trust. Research depends on testimony: scientists rely on the validity of colleagues' findings (Coady, 1992), and knowledge is embedded in a material network of documents, instruments, and devices beyond any single mind (Levy, 2007). This entire fabric of expertise is sustained by trust.

Symbolic tokens, by contrast, are "media of interchange which can be 'passed around' without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them" (Giddens, 1991, p. 24). They correspond to what Luhmann calls "communication media", the symbolic codes that "provide the capacity for intersubjective transmission of acts of selection over shorter or longer chains" (Luhmann, 2018, p. 48). Symbolic tokens stabilize shared expectations and motivations across vast distances and timeframes. Among them, Luhmann lists money, power, and truth—mediums that make complex coordination possible, yet only insofar as they are trusted.

A paradigmatic example of a symbolic token sustained by trust is money. More than a neutral means of exchange, money performs a profound disembedding function, enabling transactions to unfold across time and space. Imagine a simple barter: Individual 1 trades commodity X for Individual 2's commodity Y; exchange is immediate, anchored in a shared here and now. Introduce money, and the scene transforms: Individual 1 buys X from Individual 2 today, and only later does Individual 2 purchase Y from Individual 3. Time is bracketed, space stretched, and the transaction torn from its original context. This entire chain of deferred exchange relies on a single, fragile expectation: that the money in hand will be recognized and accepted by others in the future. Money speaks—it carries information, expresses value, signals opportunities through prices—but its voice is intelligible only if it is trusted. When trust evaporates, as in hyperinflationary crises, money

loses its capacity to communicate, and the economic order itself stutters, as though a common language had been forgotten overnight.

Yet language is the most primordial communication medium resting on trust. We inhabit a symbolic order—a network of rules, conventions, and meanings—that has no material anchor except our collective confidence in it. Lacan calls this the big Other, the fiction that sustains social reality. Žižek illustrates it with the figure of a judge. A judge's words bind us not because of any intrinsic power but because they are uttered from within the fiction of the law. This symbolic authority exists only because we collectively trust it, accepting that words can enact obligations, rights, and sentences. As Žižek puts it, social life presupposes our willingness to "taking what others say 'at their word's value'" (Žižek, 1997). To speak, to listen, to live among others is to surrender to this fiction—to be willing to be "duped" by language itself. Without this silent, pervasive trust, not only law but meaning, communication, and shared reality would disintegrate.

Trust in abstract institutions occupies a privileged place in modern sociology for good reason: it is the very precondition for basic social action in complex societies. Before entering a market to transact, individuals already rely on a vast infrastructure of mechanisms that make the market possible—shared language, valid contracts, stable currencies, legal authority, scientific knowledge, and the machinery of nation-states. Without this silent, taken-for-granted trust, even the simplest interactions would collapse. Luhmann rightly identifies how trust reduces overwhelming complexity, but his account frames it primarily as a prospective wager, a gamble under risk. As Giddens observes, this misses an important dimension: in most cases, trust is not a deliberate choice but a "continuous state" (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). I cannot consciously decide whether to trust modern physics, engineering, or state borders before boarding a flight; to distrust them entirely would unravel

the very world in which action is possible, plunging experience into pure Angst. Modern sociology thus sheds light on how trust silently sustains social order, more deeply than decision-theoretic or voluntarist models would suggest.

This is why sociology made trust a central problem of modernity: fragmented, post-traditional societies depend on confidence in abstract systems to coordinate life across time and space. These analyses capture vital aspects of trust that remained invisible in traditional settings. Yet even at their most insightful, they understand trust mainly as a functional response to uncertainty, a tool for managing complexity. They set aside its moral core: the fact that to trust is also to expose our vulnerability, to sustain moral personality, and to seek recognition of dignity. In the next sections, we turn to another strand of modern thought—liberal political theory—that neglects not only this deeper moral dimension but also much of the silent, systemic trust that sociology made visible. This double omission, I will argue, impoverishes our understanding of trust and weakens the liberal account of social cooperation itself.

V. The Deep Weave of Trust

This text takes a clear theoretical and normative stance: the key to understanding trust is vulnerability. This is not an obvious or uncontested starting point. As shown, many influential theories of trust – from rational-choice approaches to contractualist models – deny or downplay our constitutive dependence on others. To foreground vulnerability is to challenge these accounts, insisting that trust is not simply a decision, a wager, or an instrumental tool for cooperation. It is a fundamental human condition rooted in exposure to others' goodwill or

its failure. We entrust others with what we value most—our lives, the lives of those we love, the goods we cherish—because we cannot protect these alone. Human beings are dependent, relational creatures: the self is not a sealed entity but constituted through recognition by others. As vulnerable beings, we can be dishonored, humiliated, emotionally devastated, and even deprived of our own relation to ourselves by others. Hobbes reminds us that we are equally capable of killing one another. As Baier states, "where one depends on another's goodwill, one is necessarily vulnerable to the limits of that good will" (Baier, 1986, p. 235).

Baier (1986, p. 235) defines trust as "accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill will (or lack of goodwill) toward one." To trust is to count on others to recognize our vulnerability and not violate it. This expectation is nothing less than the recognition of our dignity. When we move in public spaces unafraid, trust is operative, silently assuring us that others will not harm us. But this silent conviction is not equally available to all. Whether one can take it for granted depends on gender, race, and social status. It is essentially tied to how we appear in the eyes of others. Fanon (2008) reminds us that the racist gaze distorts and wounds, denying recognition and shattering basic bonds of trust. Our capacity to trust strangers depends on belonging to a social world where our dignity is acknowledged—and knowing it is.

The ambiguity of trust is that, while it is a primary condition of human life—we must often trust in others' goodwill—it also enables exploitation and abuse. Baier clarifies this by distinguishing reliance from trust proper. We rely on others in numerous ways, for instance, counting on the mailman to deliver letters or expecting a response to certain actions. But trust is deeper: it involves vulnerability, an expectation of goodwill, and the possibility of betrayal. What is taken for granted can be shattered. Breaches of trust range from minor incidents

that leave us more cautious, to devastating experiences—betrayal by a friend, rape, or violent racist injury—that dismantle our sense of moral existence.

Thinking of trust in terms of recognition challenges the view of trust as a choice or gamble. Trust cannot be "installed" by decision, as McGeer and Pettit (2007) argue. Saying "I am counting on you" does not ensure genuine trust, even if it has a performative effect (Mcgeer; Pettit, 2017). From a rational choice perspective, deciding to trust is a matter of sufficient reason. Yet, as Bernstein shows, trust is never rationally justified. Retrospectively, trust always has a naïve tonality. Retrospectively, breaches of trust make us feel gullible: *How could I have exposed myself to such risk?* Prospectively, trust operates without certainty, rooted in an unknowable future. Consequently, reason cannot install trust (Bernstein, 2011, p. 404).

The fact that trust cannot be installed by reason does not mean that trust is irrational. On the contrary, trust is monitored, refined, corrected, and recalibrated by reason based on experience. Trust precedes reason, emerging in early childhood through care. The infant, utterly vulnerable, survives only by receiving care, experienced as love, which becomes a feeling of self-worth— of counting and mattering "in the eyes of the other" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 407). Trust develops through the routinization of care: feeling need, expecting nurturing, and experiencing certainty of being cared for. This culminates in perceiving oneself as valuable to others, recognized as vulnerable yet worthy.

Through care, the child is initiated into the world of language and the symbolic order, learning social norms, rules, and codes of behavior. This process includes developing the ability to express needs and desires, to take responsibility, and to keep promises. Over time, experiences of absence, lack, and disappointment—fundamental to child development—complicate this early trust. They demand rational

reflection and a reassessment of the meaning, scope, and limits of care, love, and trust. As they grow, human beings progressively refine their expectations and boundaries of trust, adapting them to different contexts and relationships—with family, friends, coworkers, professionals, and strangers alike.

In sum, trust is a primordial thread in the fabric of human life. Its very essence is vulnerability. As fragile creatures, human beings are fundamentally dependent on others, and it is this dependence that binds us together. Trust is the silent weaving of these bonds, first felt in the tenderness of love and the shelter of maternal care. It is born with our entry into the world of language, as we learn to inhabit a network of relations shaped by rules, promises, and mutual recognition. Our cherished sense of independence is but a secondary construction, resting upon this primal experience of being able to count on others. Even our dealings with strangers in civil society presuppose deeper, often invisible layers of trust—in laws, in institutions, in language itself, in science, in money. That we move through this web without noticing it is the surest sign of its power. Only when trust falters, when it is broken or withdrawn, does it surface—like a tight weave suddenly torn, the delicate fabric of the world we live in.

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