

Piotr Sztompka

Theoretical Approaches to Trust; Their Implications for the Resolution of Intergroup Conflict

Kultura i Polityka : zeszyty naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Europejskiej im. ks.
Józefa Tischnera w Krakowie nr 17, 125-134

2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

Piotr Sztompka*

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO TRUST; THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RESOLUTION OF INTERGROUP CONFLICT

Abstract

In the rich and evolving research of trust there are two opposite theoretical approaches. One in the tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), Robert Putnam (1993), Francis Fukuyama (1995) and many others considers trust as a quality of interpersonal relations emerging from below, turning into shared cultural resource and producing viable democracy and prosperous economy. The causal vector is from micro to macro, from interpersonal networks to organizations, institutions and the state. This is the dominant approach. But there is also an alternative perspective which claims that trust is facilitated or even enforced by the “civilized public sphere” (Papakostas 2012), or “institutionalized skepticism” (Cleary and Stokes 2006), i.e. the rational political and economic organization, and particularly the clear, stable, transparent and consistent law universalistically and efficiently applied and executed. Here the causal vector is from the state, organizations and institutions toward interpersonal trust, from macro to micro. Both approaches should not be considered as competing but rather as complementary. They have also different but complementary implications concerning the resolution of intergroup conflicts by building trust. For example, the earlier suggests cultivating trust from below by encouraging personal contacts, mutual acquaintance, cooperation, participation in common voluntary ventures by hostile groups. The latter approach would rather emphasize the need for enforcing trustworthiness by overarching, higher-level structure of organizations, institutions and laws assuring accountability, stability, transparency of social relations, through

125

* **Piotr Sztompka** is the professor of the J. Tischner’s European University and the professor emeritus of theoretical sociology at the Jagiellonian University at Krakow, Poland. He has taught at numerous Universities in the US, Europe, Latin America and Australia. In 1995 he was the recipient of New Europe Prize, granted by six Institutes for Advanced Studies. In 2006 he received the highest Polish academic prize granted by the Foundation of Polish Science, known as the “Polish Nobel”. Member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Academia Europaea (London), and American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, Mass.). In the years 2002-2006 he served as an elected President of the International Sociological Association (ISA). He received honorary doctoral degrees from State University of Social Sciences in Moscow, Soderborn University at Stockholm and Academy of Fine Arts at Krakow.

Among his books, most of which are published in English, there are: *System and Function* (1974), *Sociological Dilemmas* (1979), *Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile* (1986), *Society in Action* (1991), *The Sociology of Social Change* (1993), *Trust: a Sociological Theory* (1999, Polish edition 2007), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (with J. Alexander, N. Smelser et al.) (2004). His books and articles came out in fourteen languages.

control and surveillance of both feuding parties. It is only the parallel employment of emergence and enforcement of trust that opens the possibility of gradual resolving of intergroup conflict.

Keywords

endemic conflict, conflict resolution, trust, public sphere



My purpose is a theoretical and analytic explication of the problem of trust and distrust in the situation of interpersonal or intergroup conflict. I will not refer to any concrete conflict, but rather draw a conceptual map applicable to a variety of conflicts. The main focus will be the emergence of trust and distrust in the interpersonal and intergroup relations. But then we shall narrow down the focus to the question how trust can be rebuilt when distrust is pervasive between individuals or groups, taking for granted that distrust is a core definitional quality of an interpersonal or intergroup conflict.

There are two theoretical approaches concerning the emergence or decay of trust. First we may speak of the trust or distrust rooted in history. i.e. building trust and distrust incrementally from below. Both are perceived as path-dependent, emerging in the long cumulative process made of beneficial or harmful experiences in mutual relationships. History of peaceful and fruitful cooperation or coexistence begets trust whereas history of mutual violence and wars results in distrust. In the same way history of mutual support and coalitions against outside enemies produces trust, whereas history of breached treaties, disloyalty and treason leads to distrust.

The second approach focuses on the trust and distrust as rooted in a wider structural context, i.e. building trust and distrust purposefully from above, by shaping the environment of actions, individual and collective. Both trust and distrust are perceived as emerging due to the imposition of respectively secure or insecure environment for the mutual relationships. Order and predictability by means of a rule of law and consistent policies is conducive to trust, whereas anarchy, *anomie* and arbitrariness of law and law enforcement begets distrust. In other words public accountability of action is crucial. Russell Hardin observes: "Much of our ability to trust others on ordinary matters of modest scope depends on having institutions in place that block especially destructive implications of untrustworthiness" (Hardin 2002: 109). Equally important is the efficient and transparent administration which results in trust, whereas weak, inefficient, secretive bu-

reocracy easily leads to pervasive distrust. Another important aspect of the environment of action is the “civilized public sphere”: “the social conditions and mechanisms that make actors, institutions and organizations act and perform in a civilized manner in a public sphere” (Papakostas 2012: viii). Such context induces trust, whereas decay of everyday civility and basic moral bonds of loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity and sympathy is the assured road to pervasive distrust. Finally more intangible factors matter as well. I have in mind the aesthetic frame of everyday life, cleanliness, neatness, orderly arrangements, light and color which breed optimism and trust, whereas dirt, decay, disorder, greyness and darkness stimulate gloom and distrust.

I will treat both approaches as complementary rather than alternative or competing, drawing implications for the problem from both of them. Now we have to narrow our focus by distinguishing four modalities of trust building, or trust decay, i.e. four types of processes dependent on the different starting points. First, it may happen that trust or distrust already existing is simply enhanced, extended, deepened (e.g. trust in a long-time friend, distrust in a long-standing enemy). This is quite common, because of the well known mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1996: 183-204). If we trust somebody, and particularly if we have been trusting for a long time, we tend to interpret his/her actions as signals of trustworthiness, up to a moment when the evidence of untrustworthiness becomes overwhelming. The reverse is true of distrust. If somebody is distrusted, and particularly when distrust is pervasive for a long time, his/her actions are easily interpreted as a proof of untrustworthiness, e.g. cynical schemes to lower the vigilance and disarm the enemy, unless overwhelming evidence points to the contrary with strong proofs of authentic good intentions. Second, we sometimes reach trust or distrust *ad hoc* in an encounter with a stranger (e.g. due to the impulse of “first impressions”). Third, we may attempt to reverse the vector of trust or distrust. Trust is a fragile resource. When breached or abused, it easily collapses. The more commitment to the relationship and the stronger trust, the more rapid and dramatic is the reaction to the evidence of untrustworthiness (e.g. the loss of trust in the disloyal spouse). On the other hand initial distrust is much more resistant to change, obtains of certain inertia. The most demanding case is breaking the vicious cycle of deepening distrust and beginning the slow construction of trust. There is a certain asymmetry: “Distrust is harder to unlearn when conditions change to justify trust, than is trust when conditions change to justify distrust” (Hardin 2002: 107). Therefore the situation of interpersonal or intergroup conflict, by definition implying distrust, presents the

most difficult challenge. Regaining trust in the enemy sounds like a *contradictio in adiecto*. To probe if such a situation is necessarily hopeless, we must make certain conceptual clarifications.

Trust and distrust appear in the context of uncertainty about the future actions of others: individuals or groups. Both concepts are symmetrical: "Trust and distrust are functionally equivalent in that they tell us how to act when we do not know for sure the other's motives and intentions and being wrong could have undesirable consequences" (Luhmann 1979: 71). Trust is an optimistic bet: those actions of the other will be beneficial, meet our expectations. One may call it a "bridge over the sea of uncertainty". Distrust is a pessimistic bet: those actions of the other will be harmful, disappoint our expectations. It is a prediction of "being harassed, threatened, harmed, subjugated, persecuted, accused, mistreated, wronged, tormented, disparaged, or vilified by the other" (Kramer 2004: 141). Distrust is a "wall against the threat of uncertainty".

Taking action based on hypothetical belief, like in all bets, implies risk. The risk of trusting is that I will not get what I wanted, or that I will not regain a property or value I have entrusted. The risk of distrust is that I will pay unnecessary costs of surveillance and protection, that by avoidance or separation from the other I will forgo the opportunities of valuable relation, that my preemptive action will provoke retaliation, which wouldn't have happened otherwise, and hence will start a vicious cycle of growing animosities.

128

The beliefs about the target of distrust may be arranged along a certain scale. The other may be conceived as an inhuman monster which demands extermination. Such definition easily leads to genocide, because it releases the fundamental moral constraint which people normally experience when harming other people (Bauman 1989). A bit less viciously the other may be defined as the enemy threatening us, who therefore must be defeated (harmed, weakened, disarmed). A definition of the other as merely alien, different in ways hard to accept, but not directly threatening our well being implies the need for separation or isolation. The results are various measures of segregation, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, erecting ghettos. If other is treated as a stranger he/she is grudgingly tolerated, under the condition of respecting our values, ways of life, customs and Gods. This is sometimes referred to as a negative tolerance. "Live and let live" is the motto of the policy of multiculturalism. The most beneficial case is treating the other as a neighbor. This implies the acceptance and use of difference as enriching our own resources of information, knowledge, skills, competences. Sometimes we speak of positive tolerance.

The way out of deep conflict is the gradual deconstruction of the image of the other which may move through consecutive steps: from monster to mere enemy, from enemy to alien, from alien to stranger – and eventually to neighbor. But whether this process is feasible depends on the strength of beliefs about the other. The dynamics of weakening conflict is hard to start if the distrust is paranoid, insulated against any arguments. Such bad expectations about the other become particularly resistant when supported by religion, ideology or primordial nationalism. The extreme case has been described by social psychologists as a “groupthink” phenomenon (Janis 1982). “Trust often begins and ends at the social category or group boundary” (Kramer 2004: 138). In the intergroup conflict the beliefs about others become rooted at each side in emotions of group solidarity, loyalty, sharing with “us” and rejecting “them”. This easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when rejected others naturally respond with hostility, which seems to confirm the wisdom of initial rejection. “People reveal more altruism and reciprocity toward members of their own group even when the group is purely categorical and thus devoid of social interaction, than toward members of another group” (Foddy and Yamagishi 2009: 37). There is always a bonus of extra trust toward “we”, and the handicap of stronger distrust toward “them”.

To discuss the ways and measures to eradicate distrust it is necessary to see how distrust emerges, what is its genealogy? Distrust, like trust rests on three “legs”. First is the rational calculus, low estimation of trustworthiness of the other party. It takes into account six factors. First, the reputation; history of earlier deeds, experiences in earlier contacts with the partner. Here distrust is predicated upon a specific history of interaction with the other (Rotter 1980). The asymmetry mentioned earlier reappears here: impeccable reputation over a long period of time is needed to obtain trust, whereas single dishonesty, disloyalty or any hostile gesture produce distrust. Trust is a “fragile” resource. Second, we may take into account the credentials; second-hand warnings, direct or indirect evidence by trusted referees, symbols of threatening status. Third, the appearance matters i.e. external signs of untrustworthiness or hostile intentions. Fourth, we may observe the actual untrustworthy or hostile performance, actions taken by the distrusted other. Fifth, we may refer to “encapsulated interest” of the other (Hardin 2002: 3-9), by putting ourselves in the role of the enemy and empathically imagining the vested interest of the partner in cheating or harming oneself. Sixth, we may examine the environment of conflict with emphasis on the lack of accountability, when untrustworthiness cannot be easily punished and trust enforced.

The second “leg” on which distrust rests is purely psychological, beyond the purview of sociology. This is pervasive suspiciousness, a personality trait engendered by ineffective early socialization as well as later bad experiences in public life, in extreme cases leading to paranoid distrust.

The crucially important third “leg” is cultural (Sztompka 1999: 119-138) the widespread distrust culture (captured in common parlance by metaphors such as bad social climate, hostile atmosphere, low morale). More precisely by distrust culture I mean shared, constraining, seemingly “external” social fact (Durkheim 1964 [1895]). It consists of a common belief about the other articulated in stereotypes, prejudices, myths, rumors, gossips, xenophobia and expressed in hostile actions. The emergence of distrust culture is likely if any of the four conditions obtain (and of course even more likely if all of them are to be found together). First condition is the emotion or mood of existential insecurity produced by the *anomie* (normative chaos), anarchy, inefficiency of public institutions, unpredictability of the future. Second is the instability, undermining of routines, rapid, traumatogenic change brought about by the conflict (Alexander et al. 2004). Third conducive factor is the secrecy and non-transparency of the actions and intentions of the other party. Fourth is the perception of the futility of measures taken against the untrustworthy partner, visible lack of accountability and responsibility for hostile actions, inefficiency of law enforcement and retaliatory measures.

130

If distrust is rooted in rational evidence (even if subjectively exaggerated or biased) and spreading in society as a culture of suspicion, the changing of such a condition, weakening distrust and rebuilding trust is very hard. The possible strategies and tactics may take two directions: become focused on the relationship of mutual distrust, or target on the structural context of conflict. And in both cases the attempts to disarm the conflict may be taken by the parties themselves or invoke the third parties as mediators.

For analytic purposes let us look at the situation of conflict first from the point of view of a party which distrusts, and then from the point of view of a distrusted party. A party which distrusts can resort to two strategies and the implementation of each depends on the construal of the distrusted. The negative strategy of violent prevention or armed defense aims at raising the costs of untrustworthy conduct. If it is targeted on the other defined as enemy, it is manifested in coercion, enforcing trustworthiness by power, sanctions, deterrence, stronger vigilance and surveillance, preemptive strikes. This is not always feasible and on many occasions self-defeating because it only feeds the

vicious spiral of hostility, producing even more distrust. “Distrust is circularly reinforced by the actions it provokes” (Hardin 2011: 92). The strategy differs if the other is perceived not as the enemy but merely alien. The measures taken toward untrustworthy aliens come down to the avoidance of contacts, segregation, defensive nonparticipation, breaking of relations. This is not always possible and particularly hard in the conditions of common settlement, close neighborhood, long cohabitation, kinship ties, division of labor. Russell Hardin refers to such conditions as “trapped relationships” (Hardin 2002: 92).

Another option are the positive strategies: instead of the defense against untrustworthiness, signals of tentative trust. They may take the form of small scale, piecemeal, incremental testing of untrustworthiness by revocable decisions (without “burning bridges”) , e.g. a temporary truce, cooperation in some limited domain, creating small islands of cooperation and mutual recognition. Such gestures of trust are of course less risky for a stronger party, which has more resources for damage control if moves of trusting prove futile.

Another strategy is assuming the rule of reciprocity and relying on the evocative trust, i.e. the obligation to become trustworthy if one receives unconditional, one-sided trust from a partner (Sztompka 1999: 28). In the conditions of conflict this requires a more risky, dramatic conciliatory gestures manifestly raising the vulnerability of the benevolent party. This may consist for example in resigning of some protections, releasing prisoners, partly disarming itself , opening the isolating boundaries and stopping segregation. Of course again only the stronger party can afford the risk of cynical abusing the opportunity by the opposite party in order to get the upper hand and gain advantage in the conflict.

The above strategies are open to the party which distrusts the other. On the other hand a party which is distrusted may attempt to modify the beliefs of the partner by providing some evidence of competence, or honesty, or sympathy, or even altruism by means of unilateral moves and signs of good will. Proving his/her trustworthiness; “a person can do something out of ordinary that would not otherwise be expected if he/she were untrustworthy” (Luhmann 1979: 42). Such gestures demonstrating trustworthiness may initiate a sustainable process of mutual trust and cooperation . It is known as a “graduated reciprocation in tension reduction” (GRIT strategy) (Osgood 1962). Of course if the distrust is mutual, as is most often the case, each party is at the same time distrusting and distrusted, and thus all strategies may be relevant and used together, in the best circumstances as mutually complementary.

Both parties to conflict may also resort to the third party with some legitimacy, authority or power recognized by both (international organizations, institutions of regional integration, hegemonic powers, famous charismatic leaders). They may be helpful in two ways: through mediation and through reshaping the context of conflict. Mediation may take various directions. First it may aim at clarifying some mutual misperceptions and stereotypes by fact-oriented arguments, certifying at least potential trustworthiness of both parties. Second it may attempt to demonstrate some common interest of both parties in stopping hostilities and emphasize the raised costs of escalation. Here the mediation changes the perception of incentives. Third, it may promote some higher level values or superordinate goals over the value differences, and the clash of purposes. The mediator may argue for religious ecumenism, or regional solidarity, or basic humanity. The fourth strategy is the fragmentation of the contested issues, showing that the conflict is not overall and promoting cooperation in some, selected areas whose risk is miniscule because incentives to cheat are small.

132

The third party may also make attempts to reshape the context of conflict, the environment in which the conflict develops. Again there are several possible measures. First is raising accountability and responsibility of both parties before the third party, embracing them by a common regime of rules and rule enforcement. Second, diluting the rigid distinction of “we” and “them” by facilitating bridging ties, flows and mobility through the boundaries of groups. Third, providing opportunities for attractive common ventures, e.g. profitable trade, sport events and competitions, art festivals, regional folk markets. Fourth, guaranteeing the stability of the situation by demonstrating consistency and permanency of long range policies adopted by the third party vis-à-vis parties in conflict. Fifth, revitalizing, ordering and aesthetically improving the environment of everyday life to raise existential security and overcome the emotions of gloom and hopelessness. And sixth, as a sort of meta-principle, all the policies and decisions described above must be made as transparent as possible.

All this requires a lot of ingenuity, commitment and good will of both parties to the conflict, as well as the intervening third parties. But I wish to end with a ray of hope. “There is evidence that the barriers to trust, though formidable are not insurmountable. The knot of distrust, if not untied completely, can at least be loosened” (Kramer 2004: 150). Optimism in this regard, as optimism in general, may have a self-fulfilling impact mobilizing the search for trust-building measures and in effect attenuating the conflict. The alternative is hopelessness and despair.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Jeffrey; Eyerman, Ron; Giesen, Bernard; Smelser, Neil and Sztompka, Piotr (2004), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley: California University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1989), *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Durkheim, Emile 1964 (1895), *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York: Free Press.
- Foddy, Margaret and Yamagishi, Toshio (2009), *Group-Base Trust*, in: K. Cook, M. Levy and R. Hardin (eds.), *Whom Can We Trust?*, New York: Russell Sage.
- Hardin, Russell (2002), *Trust and Trustworthiness*, New York: Russell Sage.
- Janis, Irving (1982), *Viscims of Groupthink*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kramer, Roderick (2004), *Collective Paranoia: Distrust Between Social Groups*, in: R. Hardin (ed.), *Distrust*, New York: Russell Sage, pp. 136–167.
- Kramer, Roderick and Cook, Karen (eds.) (2004), *Trust and Distrust in Organizations*, New York: Russell Sage.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1979), *Trust and Power*, New York: John Wiley.
- Merton, Robert 1996 [1948], *The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, in: P. Sztompka (ed.), *Robert K. Merton on Social Structure and Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 183–204.
- Osgood, Charles (1962), *An Alternative to War and Surrender*, Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Papakostas, Apostolis (2012), *Civilizing the Public Sphere: Distrust, Trust and Corruption*, New York: Palgrave.
- Rotter, Julian (1980), *Interpersonal Trust, Trustworthiness, and Gullibility*, in: "American Psychologist", vol. 35, pp. 1–7.
- Sztompka, Piotr (1999), *Trust: a Sociological Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Piotr Sztompka – wykładowca w Wyższej Szkole Europejskiej im. ks. J. Tischnera w Krakowie oraz profesor emerytowany teorii socjologii na Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim. Wykładał na licznych uczelniach w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Europie, Ameryce Łacińskiej i Australii. W 1995 roku otrzymał New Europe Prize (nagroda 6 centrów badań zaawansowanych w USA i Europie). W 2006 roku otrzymał „Polskiego Nobla” – najwyższe wyróżnienie naukowe przyznawane przez Fundację Nauki Polskiej. Jest członkiem Polskiej Akademii Nauk oraz Academia Europea w Londynie oraz American Academy of Arts and Sciences w Cambridge (stan Massachusetts). W latach 2002-2006 był prezesem Międzynarodowego Stowarzyszenia Socjologicznego (ISA). Jest doktorem honoris causa Rosyjskiego Państwowego Uniwersytetu Społecznego w Moskwie, Uniwersytetu Södertörn z siedzibą w Sztokholmie i Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie. Wśród jego książek, w większości wydanych w języku angielskim, należą: "System and Function" (1974), "Sociological Dilemmas" (1979), "Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile" (1986), "Society in Action" (1991), "The Sociology of Social Change" (1993), "Trust: a Sociological Theory" (1999, wydanie polskie

w 2007 roku), "Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity" (z J. Alexander i N. Smelser, 2004). Jego książki i artykuły były tłumaczone na czternaście języków.

Abstrakt

W bogatych i rozwijających się badaniach na temat zaufania można wyróżnić dwa kontrastujące ze sobą podejścia teoretyczne. Pierwsze, zakorzenione w tradycji autorów takich jak Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), Robert Putnam (1993) czy Francis Fukuyama (1995), ujmuje zaufanie jako jakość relacji międzyludzkich, która pojawia się oddolnie by następnie stać się kulturowym zasobem niezbędnym do utrzymania trwałej demokracji i dobrze prosperującej gospodarki. Wektor przyczynowy przebiega tu w kierunku od mikro do makro – od sieci międzyludzkich po organizacje, instytucje i państwo. To podejście jest podejściem dominującym. Ale istnieje też ujęcie alternatywne, zgodnie z którym zaufanie powstaje dzięki, lub w całości za sprawą, „cywilizowanej sfery publicznej” (Papakostas, 2012) czy też „zinstytucjonalizowanego sceptycyzmu (Cleary and Stokes, 2006), na który składa się racjonalna organizacja polityczno-gospodarcza, a w szczególności przejrzyste, stabilne i konsekwentne prawo, które jest powszechnie i skutecznie wdrażane i egzekwowane. Tutaj wektor przyczynowy biegnie w kierunku makro-mikro, od państwa, organizacji i instytucji do zaufania na poziomie interpersonalnym. Te dwa pojęcia należy traktować nie jako sprzeczne, lecz uzupełniające się. Co ważne ich implikacje w zakresie rozwiązywania konfliktów grupowych za pomocą budowania zaufania też się uzupełniają. I tak na przykład pierwsze podejście zakłada kultywowanie zaufania oddolnie poprzez promowanie kontaktów międzyludzkich, współpracy i dobrowolnego udziału członków wrogich grup we wspólnych przedsięwzięciach. Drugie natomiast kładzie raczej nacisk na potrzebę wzmacniania zaufania przy pomocy odgórnych struktur organizacji i instytucji oraz praw gwarantujących odpowiedzialność, stabilność i przejrzystość relacji społecznych poprzez kontrolę i uważne obserwowanie członków zwaśnionych grup. Bowiem tylko połączenie przejrzystości i konsekwentnego budowania zaufania daje możliwość stopniowego rozwiązywania konfliktów grupowych.

134

Słowa kluczowe

konflikt endemiczny, rozwiązywanie konfliktów, zaufanie, sfera publiczna