Mistrusting mistrust

Postfactuality

If there is anything that motivates and stimulates furious citizens and Trump voters it is mistrust. This mistrust is directed at political elites, the established media and scientific experts, all of whom are identified as mainstream. It is not just that Pegida supporters and Trump followers no longer feel represented by this mainstream. They also question its truthfulness. Truthfulness is constituted by the ability to refer its assertions back to facts that have been subjected to objective tests. In their systemic mistrust, protest voters have ceased to acknowledge these facts and indeed they fundamentally deny the experts' claim to any objectivity and hence refuse them all legitimacy.

Thanks to the considerable increase throughout the West of movements hostile to experts, a political constitution has been establishing itself that can be described as 'post-factual'. This word, which was chosen by the Association for the German Language as the un-word of the year in 2016, describes an attitude characterized by the growing mistrust of facts as presented by established institutions. In this world of mistrust politicians who situate themselves outside the establishment present themselves as saviours. Trump, for example, promises to overcome 'chasms of mistrust' by means of 'bridges of possibility'.

Thus at the centre of this crisis of factuality stands the phenomenon of mistrust. In order to overcome this crisis, we might argue, this mistrust must be overcome. In fact, the call to regain citizens' trust has become a political battle cry. Mistrust in the meantime has become the epitome of false consciousness that prevents rational government, to which there is ultimately no alternative. Even protest-savvy left-wingers critical of the ruling powers call upon others to abandon an 'anti-mainstream rhetoric' in post-factual times so as to avoid standing shoulder-to-shoulder with angry citizens.

Crises of trust

Mistrust plays an important part in other capital crises of the present over and above the crisis of factuality. Unleashed by the international banking crisis, trust in the stability of the banks was eroded among German savers to the point where in September 2008 a run on people's accounts could only be prevented by the Federal Government's

undertaking to guarantee all savings in German banks (although this was subsequently admitted to be a false announcement). Trust could be restored only by the state throwing its own trustworthiness in the scales. During the banking crisis, however, it was not just savers who mistrusted the banks, but the banks who distrusted one another: They refused to lend each other money anymore and if they did lend, then it was at exorbitantly high interest rates. Here too the government intervened as regulator by taking over bad loans and making money available cheaply.

But trust in the government itself was eroded or so it was feared. The reasons for this are to be found in Edward Snowden's revelations, which triggered the NSA crisis. Snowden published documents classified as secret that proved how massively people worldwide are under surveillance by US secret services. According to his report, around five million digital communications are inspected by the US security services, the NSA, every month, millions of people are classified as suspicious and tens of thousands of computers are infected with NSA Trojans. Moreover, German and British agencies make extensive use of the NSA spy programmes and monitor their citizens, politicians and businesses, in part reciprocally. The collaboration of German, British and American intelligence services created a closely knit surveillance network monitoring the virtual space, turning it from the perspective of governments into a law-free zone. EU-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker warned about 'a crisis of confidence in the state on the part of our citizens'. Here the idea of risk is built in to mistrust from the outset.

Even the crisis that the car industry has brought upon itself through its manipulation of exhaust emissions is being treated as a crisis of confidence. Thus an advertisement by Volkswagen in early October 2015 states: 'We have destroyed the most important part of our cars: your trust'. Here is one of Germany's largest carmakers saying 'Mea culpa' – that through the targeted manipulation of exhaust emissions, it was guilty not only of evading legal requirements but also of having damaged 'the trust our customers have placed in our vehicles', as it is admitted in another advertisement. Trust in German products is also regarded as an essential asset by the Federal Government, without however putting any particular pressure on the carmakers.

What all these crises have in common is that through their recourse to the concept of trust and its implied invocation of the dangers of mistrust, they shift the focus of debate away from its centre. The behaviour of the banks, the spying activities of the secret services or the

manipulations of the vehicle industry are no longer the primary issue; what matters is people's response to them. By positing trust as the norm – if not as a normal state of affairs then at least as an absolute necessity for a social and political community – mistrust becomes the actual problem that has to be made to disappear.

The labour of mistrust

Even though the problem of mistrust is so prominently represented in the great crises of the present, it has barely featured in research up to now. In recent decades, however, there has been a flood of publications on the subject of trust. Fundamental work has been done by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), who put trust at the very centre of his theory in his study with that name in 1968. For Luhmann trust makes possible the reduction of social complexity and therefore helps us with the management of our lives. Where trust is absent, 'indeterminate anxiety, paralysing horror' renders everyday action impossible. In short, without trust, man cannot exist.

The same thing holds good for society, according to Anthony Giddens (*1938), especially for modern society since it can no longer rely on a personalised trust, but is forced instead to place its trust in institutions. Jürgen Habermas (*1929) translates trust into the truthfulness of one's interlocutor, i.e. into acts of successful communication, which he regards as the foundation of social understanding and consensus-finding. Thus trust now is not only the grease in the machinery of society, as it was for the classical sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918): it is the very foundation, the constitutional precondition, of the project of modernity.

We might then measure the success of this project by the degree of trust that is present. Proceeding from this assumption, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama (*1952) made a map of the world. On the one hand, there are the 'high-trust societies' such as Germany, the USA and Japan; on the other hand, there are the 'low-trust societies', such as France, Italy or the post-Soviet societies. Trust, according to Fukuyama, translates directly into political stability and economic success. In this sense, one of the prime duties of politics is to cultivate the trust of its citizens, while the task of the economy is to capitalize on trust.

On the other hand, hardly anyone ascribes a constructive potential to mistrust. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the few to regard mistrust as a good worth striving for. He advises the aspiring philosopher

to strive not for wisdom but to perfect his mistrust. 'The more mistrust, the more philosophy.' Mistrust is in his eyes a 'source of truthfulness' because it 'makes tension, observation and reflection necessary'.

However, these remarks have remained largely without consequences. Mistrust was unable to prevail either as a means of acquiring knowledge or as a fully-fledged object of scientific scrutiny. The inadequate reflection of social practices that we associate with mistrust reduces it to the opposite of trust, to what is left where there is no trust – in short, to the *absence* of something and hence to a *problem*.

As an *absence*, mistrust is localized to what is left if the attributes of trust are absent. One reason for this is to be found in the meaning of the word itself. The prefix 'mis' in 'mistrust' [or 'miss' in German] and 'dis' in 'distrust' expresses a contrast, an antithesis and a deficiency. However, the absence of trust tends to lead to anxiety or indifference and hence to passive attitudes that should not be confused with mistrust. Mistrust in contrast involves a commitment, which finds expression in 'defensive measures' (Luhmann). Unlike the situation with trust, no positive outcome is envisaged; instead failure is built into the calculation. So as to avoid the consequences of a possible failure, alternative courses of action are considered and precautions are taken for emergencies. Hence mistrust does not prevent actions; it is a form of labour. To think of mistrust as an absence, then, is a misunderstanding.

This misunderstanding becomes comprehensible only when its negativity is viewed as a problem. In contrast to doubt, a closely related concept, to which the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) ascribed supreme value in the systematic acquisition of true knowledge, no heuristic value, no knowledge-fostering quality is attributed to mistrust (by anyone except Nietzsche). In therapeutic interventions efforts are made to overcome mistrust in order to make cooperation and solidarity or cohesion possible. 'Where id was, there ego shall be', was the credo of psychoanalysis. We might follow this up by saying, 'Where there was mistrust, there shall now be trust'. In business the mistrust of the workforce is deemed a serious source of disruption. Some advisers point the way to 'trust as the key to leadership success'.

'A deep-seated syndrome of mistrust' represents the central obstacle in a society's transition to democracy. This is true not just for the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, but also for such sociologists as Piotr Sztomka (*1944) and Barbara Misztal (*1951). To make possible a political transformation for the better despite that, trust-building

measures are essential. In practical applications in particular, mistrust is operationalized as an indicator of a substantial problem. Once it has been recognized, mechanisms to overcome it have to be set in motion as fast as possible. If this is not done (or if it is done without success), mistrust may become systemic and put its stamp on a person or a group.

Hence to insinuate that mistrust fundamentally determines someone's behaviour, that it is a habitual feature, means making that person or group appear problematic. Thus the insinuation of mistrust serves to cut someone off and is part of a strategy of making someone appear problematic. If someone is held to be mistrustful, he or she must be helped – or is beyond all help.

Revaluation

The discursive framing of mistrust as absence and as a problem, as well as instrumentalizing it in the same way, dominate the general understanding of the phenomenon in a way that allows of few other interpretations. Admittedly, what mistrust looks like in practice remains obscure. It is that 'practice' that this book is concerned with. To be able to comprehend it and describe it calls for a reversal of that evaluation. Instead of branding it a problem it will be treated here as a potential value, as the foundation for commitment. The fact is that mistrust unleashes actions; it does not lead to paralysis and lethargic despair. Such actions may be of very different kinds. They may be inwardly directed, working their way centripetally to the core of society or else act centrifugally, with a view to leaving society altogether. They may manifest themselves openly or else do their work out of the public eye.

Mistrust-induced actions then are not all negative – even if they are commonly thought to be so. In reality, mistrust plays a constructive role in the political culture of nations influenced by the West. The US Constitution in particular is highly mistrustful of the tendency of the state to interfere in all aspects of people's private lives and so restricts the powers of government accordingly. In the same way, the separation of powers, freedom of the press and checks and balances in society serve to scrutinize government mistrustfully. Mistrust, then, does not preclude social commitment but precedes it for the most part. Democracy cannot survive without trust, but it cannot survive without mistrust either.

The principle of mistrust

The mistrust that saved the world

On 26 September 1983, in a bunker belonging to the Soviet air defence forces near Moscow, the alarm was raised shortly after midnight. The computer system reported that a missile that had been launched from the US State of Montana was on its way towards the Soviet Union. According to military protocol the Soviet leadership then had 28 minutes to decide whether to respond with a nuclear counterblow. It was up to Stanislav Petrov, the duty officer, to pass the information on to the Soviet High Command. He assumed that the announcement of a nuclear attack on the USSR would lead to an instant Soviet nuclear counter-attack on the USA – with the aim of the total annihilation of the aggressor.

Because he could not or would not exclude the possibility of a technical glitch, Petrov failed to report the incident to his superiors. Shortly after this the computers reported that four additional missiles had been fired from the same region as the first and with the same target. Even then Petrov failed to reach for the telephone. The time left to launch a counterblow was running out; it had to be assumed that the missiles would land on Soviet soil within a few minutes.

However, they failed to arrive. It turned out to have been a false alarm.

This scene has not been taken from a film even though there were films at around this time that had very similar scenarios as their subject. In the Soviet film *Pisma myortvogo cheloveka* (*Dead Man's Letters*), directed by Konstantin Lopushansky in 1986, a computer error leads to a nuclear world war whose consequences were depicted in gory detail. And in the American film *War Games*, directed by John Badham a few years previously, it was also a computer failure that almost transformed the world into a nuclear winter. So the subject was familiar in the world of popular culture, but the actual event just described was kept under lock and key by the Soviet military until the 1990s.

And once again, it is a film that told us about this event, in this case a documentary. In *The Man Who Saved the World*, directed by Peter Anthony in 2014, Stanislav Petrov explains why he failed to pass on the computer-based warnings of the imminent American missile attack. The foremost reason Petrov advanced was his distrust of computers. What if

the computer had made a mistake? Can decisions about life and death on a mass scale be made to depend upon technical intelligence? Petrov used other technical avenues to obtain further information. The missiles could not be detected on satellite images, although this might have had something to do with the prevailing light conditions – it was sometime between night and morning. Certainty could be obtained only by waiting until the missiles appeared on Soviet radar screens – or not, as the case might be.

Petrov resolved to wait for certain knowledge and thus decided against the possibility of immediate nuclear retaliation, as was laid down by Soviet military doctrine in no uncertain terms. This reveals to us a further dimension of mistrust: mistrust of the system. Petrov explicitly refers to this in the film. What sense can there be in trusting a system that includes the extinguishing of all life on earth? And is even able and willing to put this into effect? It is a mistrust of the military logic that dominated both the Soviet Union and the USA during the Cold War. Only this mistrust enabled Petrov to rise above both political rationality and military doctrine. Without this mistrust we might none of us be alive today.

Artificial mistrust

The automation of the world and hence the shifting of decision-making powers to the realm of Artificial Intelligence advances relentlessly. Blurring the distinctions between man and machine generates disquiet, the difficulties of predicting robots' learning processes create mistrust about whether the hierarchical relationship between people and robots can be maintained: who will dominate whom in the future? Sometimes, the robots make their own contribution to this mistrust – for example, when the more articulate among them claim in interviews that they wish to take over the world or destroy it. Robots appear not have learned to follow a hidden agenda or to become adept at concealing their intentions. Perhaps they should first learn to mistrust if they would really like to seize power.

Alongside artificial intelligence reasons for mistrust are supplied by the latest communication technologies since they provide many ways of manipulating opinion-forming processes. For example, the Russian government stands accused of having supported hackers who set up fake accounts in the social media and influenced opinion in favour of Donald

Trump's candidacy for the presidency by disseminating fake news. A further accusation is that Russia hacked secret US-government emails and sent them on to WikiLeaks. Russia is also said to be running a so-called troll factory in St. Petersburg, which regularly feeds social media portals such as Facebook and the commentary slots of the major news websites with Kremlin-friendly views on such matters as the situation in the Crimea or Ukraine. Moreover, This government-sponsored troll army is claimed to be behind the fake news story about the rape by asylum-seekers of a Russian-born German woman from Berlin-Marzahn, a story which led in early 2016 to protests by Russian-born German immigrants against Merkel's refugee policies. A few days later it emerged that the girl had simply failed to return home.

Countries such as Saudi Arabia have learned from Russia and have activated trolls of their own. In summer 2018, for example, when the Canadian government criticized Saudi Arabia for having arrested the women's rights activist Samar Badawi, Saudi Arabia reacted not only by breaking off diplomatic relations and embargoing flight connections with Canada but also by unleashing a wave of indignation on Twitter. Countless tweets conveyed the self-same message: 'In Saudi Arabia we are concerned about the cultural genocide carried out by Canada against its indigenous population. Furthermore, we support Quebec's right to become an independent state.' American companies such as Google, by contrast, stand behind the foundation of what are ostensibly civil-society activist groups who send out massive numbers of emails and tweets to politicians objecting to copyright laws that might be disadvantageous to Google.

It looks as if the credibility of political and civil institutions is being undermined by a highly diverse range of participants. Who is trusted or distrusted is more commonly a matter of political conviction than of a judgement based on facts. One way or the other mistrust is being instrumentalized. And that draws suspicion again.

Infections

So the waves of mistrust have been rising ever higher. Worldwide, according to opinion polls, mistrust in companies, governments, NGOs and the media is growing. Numerous scandals and crises are adding to this trend. They include the worldwide banking and finance crisis, the euro crisis, the diesel scandal and the NSA surveillance affair. In Germany

we could list in addition the still incomprehensible involvement of the domestic intelligence service in the terrorist activities of the NSU [National-Socialist Underground] or the still unexplained death of Oury Jalloh in police custody in Dessau in 2005.

Mistrust can also be targeted. This targeting is part of a political agenda that can be labelled as 'post-truth'. One of the chief people responsible for this agenda is US President Donald Trump. It is not just that Trump makes no attempt to conceal his mistrust of obnoxious media; he also expects the same mistrust from his fellow-citizens by consistently referring to the media as 'fake news'. At the same time, he uses his countless tweets to spread numerous untruths of his own and so makes his own contribution to the erosion of the truth. *The Washington Post* estimates that in the months of June and July 1918 Trump told around 16 lies every day. Many suppose that his goal is to blur the distinction between fact and lie, between what is trustworthy and what is untrustworthy, beyond all recognition. What remains is irritation and confusion – a condition similar to the liminal state where one is most susceptible to indoctrination.

It is not just US policy under Trump that appears to have dedicated itself to this goal; the same may be said of the current politics of the Kremlin. As a flanking action accompanying the process of bringing the domestic media into line, parties from the extreme right or left as well as 'civil society organizations' are supported that take a critical stance towards the government. This support is then revealed to selected media representatives who report on it with the consequence that the population can no longer distinguish between authentic protest and protest that has been bought. Attacks of this kind on one's own population are designed to immobilize it, render it incapable of movement. Internationally, such a policy can be seen in the asymmetrical conduct of war: soldiers no longer appear as soldiers, but as 'concerned citizens' in uniform. These tactics were tried out in the Crimea and also appear in the current battle for the Eastern Ukraine.

In his afore-mentioned novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell summed up the effect of such propaganda: it is supposed to teach the citizen 'not to trust his own eyes and ears'. The mistrust desired and fostered by politicians enters the citizen's body like a virus and disables his capacities. This way of managing trust is a kind of manipulative body technique, highly appropriate for imposing totalitarian rule. Mistrust of one's own capacity is to be compensated for by absolute trust in the

government. This implies a total ban on all signs of mistrust in the government. Such absolutism in the distribution of trust and mistrust is characteristic of dictatorships as exemplified in the present volume by Stalinism.

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This means that every government must be measured by the degree to which it tolerates and respects the mistrust of its citizens. In the current situation, which is marked by the discursive downgrading of mistrust, governments would be well advised to be mindful of the constitutive role of mistrust in the preservation and strengthening of democracy. And they should be very clear about the disasters that have so often overwhelmed world history as a consequence of the frequent demands for mistrust to be suspended.

Ultimately, it is a paradox to demand trust in the name of democracy since the practical workings of democracy explicitly call for mistrust. Proclaiming trust to be a citizen's duty will do nothing to deter mistrust but only alter its direction: from inward (centripetal) to outward (centrifugal).

Potentialities

Mistrust is a force that can seize hold of you and take you over utterly. Possessed by mistrust, you see only what confirms it. The world becomes a hotchpotch of signs that all seem to indicate that trust is worthless and cannot last. This is how mistrust narrows down perception and imprisons the perceiver in a corset of compulsive complexity reduction. It becomes an obsession. On encountering itself, mistrust perpetuates, intensifies and consolidates. Spirals of mistrust arise, reproducing themselves like viruses. In a world sated by mistrust little can thrive apart from mistrust itself.

Ordinarily, however, mistrust survives alongside trust and does not exclude it. Considered by itself, it generates a particular form of engagement which, as open mistrust, may be channelled as a control-mechanism on institutions, while at other times it unfolds out of sight. As a form of engagement, mistrust is an essential, meaningful and valuable cultural technique. The blanket problematisation of mistrust ignores its emancipatory potential and attributes mistrust as a seemingly natural, intrinsic quality to people and societies who are to be regarded as

problematic. An anthropological perspective shows, however, that these supposedly deficient people and societies have developed competences in the practice of mistrust from which we can learn.

For, we shall still have need of our mistrust. This is assured by the growing power of international corporations and the simultaneously declining influence of government regulation, the devaluation of what were formerly reliable international agreements, disinformation campaigns on such subjects as climate change, destructive agriculture, the echo chambers of Facebook & Co. and the growing risks of nuclear war. In the light of these threats, mistrust can mutate from a cultural technique to a technique for survival. To achieve this, however, mistrust needs the space to develop centripetally. Should this space be absent, it will have a centrifugal impact and will even intensify the disintegration of the world.

In the current situation the discourse about trust has assumed hegemonic tendencies. Admittedly, no political regime has succeeded in permanently sidelining its citizens' mistrust up to now. It almost seems as though mistrust had an innate power to disrupt the encrustations of power and to create the space for new movement. In this way, mistrust can be a beginning – a first step to not feeling ashamed because of one's perceived distance from the course of events and to not allowing oneself to be shamed. It is possible to turn this distance into a positive stance. It is possible to turn the well-founded mistrust of banks, companies, secret services and media into political demands instead of feeling obligated to be trustful. It is possible to put regulations in place that put a stop to the governmental surveillance of virtual space. It is possible to make institutions transparent without becoming transparent oneself. It is possible to put our mistrust to the test and to do so again and again.

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