TRUST in MODERN SOCIETIES

Barbara A. Misztal
Trust in Modern Societies
To my children
Berenika and Blaise
Trust in Modern Societies

The Search for the Bases of Social Order

Barbara A. Misztal

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Introduction

Why the new interest in trust?

The rationality of trust within particular structures of social and political relations is a pressing issue in political understanding in any society of the modern world.

Dunn 1984a: 281

The concept of trust entered sociological theory by way of philosophical and political writings, never having been a central focus of sociological theory. Although incorporated into many models of social relationships, trust was seldom explicitly questioned or studied. Its silent presence can be detected in all main sociological writings, starting with the assumptions of classical theory about changes in the basis of trust which occurred in the process of transition from pre-modern to modern society (from those based on kinship, community and tradition to the impersonal trust of functionally interdependent modern society). Within the following debate over the moral basis of the new industrial order two positions on the role of trust can be distinguished. In the first strand, trust was assumed to be a valued and scarce resource which could soften the atomistic individualism of modern society. The other, more vocal, position in this debate argued that in modern society, with its complex division of labour, there was a need to economize on trust in persons and confide instead in institutions. When sociology abandoned its first ‘moralistic’ stand, notions of moral obligation, such as trust and solidarity, were rendered irrelevant. In fact, the structural functionalist and Marxist phases ignored the issue of trust altogether.

Consequently, until recently, in both political theories (which debate the means of creating and sustaining organizational structures to enable
cooperation between political agents) and sociological theories (which search for mechanisms of integration) the focus was 'the more or less rational pursuit of interests' (Dunn 1993: 641). Similarly, in economic theory, assumptions underlying the market process have rested on the perception of individual actors as rational egoists. Generally, it can be said that modern social sciences have not contributed significantly to our understanding of the concept of trust and the conditions under which trust relations thrive or struggle to survive. Fortunately, however, in the last decade the concept of trust has featured with growing frequency and prominence in theorization about modern society. Moreover, this time, the interest in trust has not been limited to disputes about how to confide in institutions but has related to debates as to how to project qualities of trust and cooperation on to the state and the market. Trust is no longer seen as a regulatory mechanism but rather as a public good; these theories do not dismiss interpersonal trust but investigate its changing role.

The most recent use of the term places trust in relation to changes in the conditions of modernity and presents the importance of trust in the context of the specific features of modern societies, such as their reflexivity, globalization and level of risk (Giddens 1990). It is argued that the rationality of modern society, which requires consideration of the possibility of future damage, as a consequence of our actions, and risk taking, as far as others are involved, demands trust (Beck 1992).

The notion of trust is also being increasingly used by social researchers in an attempt to explain the empirical differences in achieved levels of cooperation in various social and political environments. They investigate trust as a supplement to or substitute for contractual and bureaucratic bonds, arguing that trust lubricates cooperation and is thus in the collective interest (Gambetta 1988a). In a similar vein, many studies of successful economic regions emphasize the importance of the trust relationship between partners in economic activity. Trust is seen here not only as a necessary precondition for the development of flexibly specialized local economies but also as a product of this type of development (Sabel 1989: 45–52).

The concept of trust has also been entering sociological debate under the headline of civil society, albeit less explicitly (Wolfe 1989; Keane 1988; Bellah et al. 1991; Seligman 1992; Wolfe 1991). The search for ways in which the demands of individuality can be reconciled with those of community leads to the revitalization of the idea of civil society, at the centre of which trust and mutual obligations are placed. The same mood of debate resurfaces in contemporary political philosophy, with an entire new school claiming the necessity of attending to community, which is seen as based on mutual obligations and trust, alongside liberty and

At the present time there is also a growing interest in the study of personalized trust, which is based on deliberately cultivated, face-to-face relationships with friends, lovers and family (Giddens 1991, 1992). Furthermore, the increase in research on motivation that goes beyond self-interest, in which the empirical and normative points of view are quite frequently mixed, has contributed to a new understanding of collective behaviour (Mansbridge 1990). The revision by psychologists and economists of the adversary model (and the rational choice strand within it) supports the need for a new approach incorporating values and norms (Margolis 1984; Ostrom 1990). Empirical answers to the question of whom we trust can also be found in numerous studies of social values and political cultures (Dalton 1988; Anderson 1993; Ashford and Timms 1992). In these types of studies, however, trust does not appear at a high level of conceptualization or abstraction.

Trust will never be a central topic of mainstream sociology. Nevertheless, even a quick survey of recent sociological literature provides convincing evidence of the popularity and increased topicality of the notion of trust in many sociological subdisciplines. These various investigations into the changing, renewed and continuing role of trust within modern society raise the question: why is the concept of trust becoming increasingly popular in so many areas of the social sciences?

The recent increase in the visibility of the issue of trust can be attributed to the emergence of a widespread consciousness that existing bases for social cooperation, solidarity and consensus have been eroded and that there is a need to search for new alternatives. It is often argued that we live in uncertain and confused times and that we have lost the symbols or ideologies able to represent the meaning of integration. Hence the current search for new bases of integration. This new need for a re-discussion of alternatives to the traditional bases of cooperation revives a concern with trust seen as a valuable asset, which develops in the mutually formative interplay of public institutions and individuals. The awareness of the transitional character of present Western society is widely acknowledged in the social sciences and is labelled in many different ways: some researchers write about post-modernity, others about post-industrial society and yet others about global society. Since ‘[t]rust is central to social life when neither traditional certainties nor modern probabilities hold’ (Hart 1988: 191), the renewed significance of the issue of trust in recent studies can be explained by the transitional character of our present condition. It seems that the main characteristic of the present transitional stage is the trend towards ‘the decentring of some of our most important institutions’ (Wolfe 1991: 462).
One of the most important developments in modern Western societies in the twentieth century has been the expansion of citizenship rights – civil, political and social. The Keynesian welfare state in the West and the presence of centralized party states in Eastern and Central Europe ensured a low profile for issues of social cohesion in the post-war era. Moreover, national consensus at the time of the Cold War was facilitated by the perception of a mutual military threat and was sustained by favourable economic conditions. However, the decade of the 1980s, with its deregulation and privatization and its reliance on individualistic culture, showed not only that social citizenship was not firmly founded in civil and political rights (Marquand 1991), but also that the old consensus and solidarity no longer exist (Galbraith 1992). With decreasing resources and the ongoing process of globalization – and faced with the collapse of communism – modern industrial nations are being forced to redefine and articulate new collective values and aspirations. A similar process of decentering and a growing confusion of values has been affecting people’s personal lives (Wolfe 1991b), demanding from them a redefinition of rules by which they structure their existence. Thus, until new patterns of normality emerge, which will restore confidence and predictability to our social, political and economic arrangements, ‘things once taken for granted will increasingly be subject to complex and difficult negotiations’ (Wolfe 1991a: 468). This collapse of traditional standards around such issues as family, work, discipline, the decline of industrial and class identities, the increase of culturally specific identities (ethnic, racial, territorial), the weakening of the welfare state and the decline and suppression of national boundaries, all raise a vital question for modern society: where are we to look for reliable bases for social solidarity, cooperation and consensus? Consequently, the questions of how social trust is produced and what kinds of social trust enhance economic and governmental performance increasingly become the central set of theoretical issues in social sciences (Levi 1993: 375).

The search for new bases of social cohesion and cooperation not only occupies social scientists but also animates public discussions, political debates and journalistic disputes. One of the best-known and most popular answers to the question of a new basis for integration points to the necessity for a restructuring of the micro-foundations of our lives. In particular, it emphasizes the need for a new cultural basis to support the economic system. This perspective begins by asking what are the causes of our main failures – that is, unemployment and slow economic growth. These economic problems, seen in the context of increased competitiveness and the impressive growth rates of east Asia – over the past twenty-five years, eight economies in this region have together raised their incomes per head by nearly 6 per cent, compared with the 2.3 per cent of
the OECD countries (*The Economist*, 2 October 1993: 18) – cast a special light on the nature of difficulties experienced by the Western industrialized world. Practically all explanations of the economic success of east Asia emphasize the significance of their cultural context, which – it is assumed – facilitates its industrial expansion. For instance, comparisons between Japan and the United States or Western European countries, so often pursued not only in academic writing but also in many popular newspapers and magazines, bring to our attention the solidaristic structure of Japanese industry, whereby a relatively high level of trust exists between employees and managers. At the same time, the low-trust culture of Western management style (particularly British and American styles), the presence of conflict and a lack of mutual loyalty and responsibility between workers and bosses are stressed (Block 1991). Consequently, the growing concern over the failure of Western capitalism in the context of increased competition from east Asia results in calls for a national revival based on a recognition of the importance of mutual obligations and a more collectivistic culture. A proposed way forward is to embrace group solidarity, a more communal and unselfish orientation and the creation of bonds of trust between people (Dertouzos et al. 1989; Reich 1991; Clarke 1992). This stance not only echoes the way that political philosophy questions the relationship between rights and duties or between the individual and community but also the ways in which sociological writing perceives economic action as embedded in social relations and argues that social relations and the obligations inherent in them are mainly responsible for the production of trust, which in turn facilitates cooperation (Sabel 1989; Zetlin 1989).

With the collapse of communism, the debate about what kind of cultural characteristics are needed to sustain economic growth has been enriched and has gained in importance. The disintegration of the Soviet system, which proved that the weakness of undemocratic states lies in their lack of social trust, has brought forward an additional question about the role of political arrangements in securing economic development. Can an economic system based on distrust and disinformation sustain long-term economic growth? Again, this type of debate has been taken up by a wide range of publications, from daily newspapers to academic studies. As the majority of writers note, this new knowledge does not mean the ‘end of history’, but rather it initiates a new and confusing search for the proper mixture of culture, politics and economics, adequate for the new world. The different type of answer to the question of the bases of a new integration and social cohesion comes from two traditional ideological camps. Although the Left and the Right differ in their proposed alternatives to existing economic and political arrangements (more state or more market, respectively), both perspec-
tives imply a crucial role for trust. Each of them recognizes the need for trust as public good or as social capital. According to the New Right, 'market order would depend upon certain public goods – civility, honesty, mutual trust, community even – which the market itself cannot supply' (Marquand 1991: 337). On the other hand, according to the critics of liberal democracy, who postulate the democratization not only of political but also of economic life, and thus recommend a powerful and interventionist state, the state-based solution should depend upon the legitimacy of government. This solution, consequently, leads to a need for 'still greater attention to the ways in which states' action can be made more democratically accountable' (Pierson 1993: 196). Central to this argument is the role of trust within the community and of governmental trustworthiness, both seen as an essential condition for effective, responsive representative institutions.

The tension between the moral and economic dimensions of the liberal solution, and the tension between the moral and political aspects of the socio-democratic approach, present the same kind of difficulties. In the past the valuable public good, such as trust, was supplied by common tradition, community and the Church. What are the sources of trust now? The answer to this question provided by the representatives of both perspectives points to the concept of civil society. Some argue that one vague and murky concept is simply replaced by another. Certainly, it does not solve the problem, but only pushes the question further: how can the problem of civil society – that is, the problem of 'the synthesis between collective solidarity and individualism and of reigning definitions of each' (Seligman 1992: 169) – be solved?

This way of approaching the problem of the bases of social cohesion brings sociological enquiry to centre stage. Placing civil society at the heart of the issue of integration presents a very interesting challenge for social theory. Sociologists make it clear that issues of civil society should be seen as the problem of constituting trust in society (Wolfe 1989; Seligman 1992). Thus, the revitalization of the idea of civil society is, in essence, nothing more than an attempt to theorize more concrete and meaningful criteria of trust in modern, rationalized and highly differentiated societies. The sociological search, initiated by the civil society's approach, for new bases of obligations and new relationships between members of a society, is an interesting continuation of the classical sociological belief in the progressive triumph of civil society over the state and the Church (Touraine 1992: 60). One of the consequences of this sociological preoccupation with civil society has been the decreasing significance of Marxism, which excluded trust and based social order on conflict, rejecting, by the same token, the importance of civil society. The understanding that not all forms of social relationships can be classified
around conflict and calculative action, that people in interdependent relationships can sometimes renounce conflict and cooperate, that egoistic behaviour alone cannot account for social order – seem to be at the core of the new thinking. The re-invention of civil society, the renewal of the importance of personal bonds and the adaptation of the post-modern and post-industrial schemes as features of Western development relate to sociological attempts to find a balance between the competing nature of the different values. Sociology, thanks mostly to the Durkheimian and Weberian traditions, seems to be able to recognize the importance of particular affiliations without rejecting the formal rationality of our modern age. It seems that the majority of sociological strategies put strong emphasis on moderation, preferring the optimal solution, which in a rational way tries to combine positive elements of various perspectives. It rejects a zero-sum vision of society and aims at the minimalization of risk and increasing stability. This sober and balanced approach assumes that neither conflict nor liberation, but rather mutual adjustment and self-control, will secure a better future. Thus, a new critical politics, as Offe and Preuss (1991) and Cohen and Arato (1992) argue, will be a reflective politics of self-control and self-limitation.

This does not mean, of course, that sociological answers to the question of the basis of social integration are not confronted with many difficulties related to the properties of the notion of trust. Firstly, it is not always realized that, while the present changes have made trust a more explicitly valuable asset than it was previously, they have not made its attainment or maintenance any easier. The pressures exerted by global changes on the cohesion of national electorates, on the autonomy of national economies and on the extent of economic inequalities between both classes and regions make the production of trust increasingly problematic. Trust cannot be seen any more as an automatic by-product of macro-social or macro-economic processes, but rather it needs to be perceived as an active political accomplishment.

Secondly, any attempt to integrate society as a system of trust relationships is faced with new tensions between universalism and particularism, duties and rights, autonomy and community, market and state, integration and fragmentation, local and global. The search for a new balance between these tensions has re-opened debates about the fate of modernity and the meaning of progress, about the principles of integration, about individual freedom and collective responsibility, about the modern political identity and the construction of the modern self.

Thirdly, the sociological emphasis on civil society can be accused of relying on too many optimistic assumptions. It is impossible to believe that civil society, as the domain of solidarity and justice, can solve
problems of limited resources and limited sympathies. Maybe it is even too Utopian for our sceptical world. However, if we agree with Habermas (1992: 26) that the exhaustion of a particular model of Utopia, based on the concept of self-realization through labour, does not mean that progress is not possible, we ought to examine the idea of trust and civil society as one of the few strategies available in a new world.

The concept of trust, so conveniently wrapped up in the idea of civil society, plays a double role within this notion. Many projects for a new basis of democratic civil society employ the concept of trust in rather circular ways. Firstly, trust – as one of the important sources of cooperation – is seen as a socially desirable aim. Secondly, it is argued that, in order to achieve it, we must proceed in a trustworthy way. It is this double and ambiguous meaning that makes the concept of trust difficult to examine yet simultaneously attractive to use. Thus, while it is not surprising that the concept of trust is so frequently employed, answers provided with the help of this notion are not always sufficient solutions, but rather merely reformulations of problems in ‘moral’ language. Moreover, this re-emergence of Tocqueville’s argument that civic participation, which depends upon trust between members of society, is the only effective means of training responsible and trustworthy citizens suited for liberty (Hall 1992), comes when it is rather difficult to identify clearly the concept of society. While it is not an ‘easy task bringing together fellow citizens who had lived for many centuries aloof from, or even hostile, to each other and teaching them to co-operate in their own affairs’ (Tocqueville 1955: 107), to create trust in an increasingly underdefined space for ‘society’ seems almost impossible. The concept of the trustworthy society cannot be defined if we do not have a clear answer to the question of whether ‘society’ should be vested in nations, smaller groups or wider associations. It should now be clear that the problems of trust are directly connected with the most urgent and important questions of the modern world. In order to be able to address these problems we need to know more about trust and its properties.

Aims and the structure of the book

As we have seen, many scholars argue that the role of trust in modern society is significant and increasing. The increased importance of this notion is the result of the main structural changes specific to the present transitional stage of Western societies. At the same time there are remarkable commonalities characterizing the various attempts at social reform. Such programmes reject traditional Marxist-inspired concepts of revolutionary change but, at the same time, they are also aware of unmet
potentials in liberal democratic regimes. The proposed remedy, the re-
birth of civil society and active citizenry, is seen as a means of ensuring
cooperation, self-realization, solidarity and freedom. It puts trust at the
centre of an understanding of modern societies and their politics. The
aim of this book is to provide support for the view that trust becomes a
more urgent and central concern in today’s contingent, uncertain and
global conditions. It does not propose a vision of politics and of human
life as resting upon trust, but instead attempts to look at modern societies
and their problems from the perspective of the quality of social relation-
ships rather than in terms of goal achievement or performance of the
system. In Western democracies political order is not ensured by a shared
value system or trust in authority. However, to create a new quality of
social relationships, social cooperation, solidarity and tolerance we need
to devote more attention to the relationships among people and to the
relationship between people and decision makers. Because experience of
how societies cooperate and cohere points to the conclusion that it is the
relationships that hold us together, trust and the conditions facilitating
trustworthy relationships should be at the centre of public attention.

The aim of this book is not just to collect evidence in support of the
thesis concerned with the growing significance of trust relationships. I
shall try to demonstrate not only how changes in contemporary societies
are making the construction of trust more urgent but also how they
require a new, more active type of trust and how they make trust more
difficult to attain. The pressures exerted by global changes on the cohe-
sion of national electorates, on the autonomy of national economies and
on the extent of economic inequalities between social groups and be-
tween regions make the production of trust increasingly problematic in
ways that I shall outline in detail. In order to be able to address these
problems we need to know more about trust, its properties and its
changing nature. It is also my aim to present various ways of conceptu-
alizing the notion of trust and the ways in which sociological theories
deal with it. Since trust is a very imprecise and confusing notion and our
intellectual understanding of trust is seriously underdeveloped, this over-
view of the field is necessary in order to facilitate an advance in the
debate about this phenomenon. Fourthly, I hope that an incorporation of
the experience of communist and post-communist societies of Europe,
which can be seen as a testing ground for the role of trust, will offer a
particularly instructive insight to both the necessity and the difficulty of
generating social cooperation based on trust.

The first chapter examines various definitions of trust. Aiming at
bridging the interpersonal and systematic levels of analysis, I conceptual-
ize trust as a social mechanism which can be explained by people’s beliefs
and motivations. To trust is to believe that results of somebody’s in-

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tended action will be appropriate from our point of view. Social relations and obligations inherent in them are presented as being mainly responsible for the production of trust. To hold that trust cannot be fully understood without an examination of institutions leads to the argument that the problem of constituting trust in society is an issue concerning the conditions necessary for social order.

The aim of the second chapter is to show the shortcomings of the classical sociologists’ conceptualization of trust as a self-evident social good emerging in a spontaneous way. The relationship between trust and collective order in Spencer’s utilitarian model, Durkheim’s normative approach and in writings of Toennies, Simmel and Weber are examined. It is proposed that, for the purpose of analysing trust, three types of order should be distinguished: stable order, which accounts for the predictability, reliability and legibility of the social reality; cohesive order, which can be seen as based on normative integration; and the third type of order, collaborative order, referring to social cooperation. The main difference between these three types of order is connected not with the types of motivation behind trusting behaviour but with the particular function of trust within each of these models.

Chapter 3 specifies the uniqueness of the role played by trust in these three types of order by analysing contemporary sociological theories which debate the function of trust in modern societies. By examining Parsons’ and Luhmann’s rational choice theory and Giddens’ conceptualization of trust, I shall demonstrate that trust can perform a multitude of functions. It can be a silent background, sustaining the unproblematic, smooth running of cooperative relations. It can be a solution to the free-rider problem. It can help people to reconcile their own interests with those of others. But above all, trust, by keeping our mind open to all evidence, secures communication and dialogue. Combining the theories of social order with some theoretical assumptions about the various functions of trust, I shall argue that the relations between order and trust can only be understood by examining the role of trust relations in stable, cohesive and collaborative orders by asking the following questions: How is the stability of social order protected? Whom do we trust? What are the conditions for collaboration?

Trust understood in the context of three different types of order is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The three forms of trust, whether understood as habitus, passion or policy, are seen not as alternatives but rather as mutually reinforcing types of social capital. The following part of the book is more narrative in nature and applies these common foundational features of trust to an examination of modern societies.

In chapter 4, which deals with the tendency of the social order to be seen as stable, I shall draw an analogy between Bourdieu’s (1977) con-
cept of habitus and trust as a strategy for securing the stability of social order. Trust, understood as a specific type of habitus, allows us to account for the fact that social agents perceive the social world as stable. In order to ‘make coherence and necessity out of accident and contingency’ (Bourdieu 1977: 87), trust as habitus operates through rules of interaction, rules of distanciation and rules of remembering. I shall illustrate operation of these rules by examining habit, reputation and memory as three practices, which are deployed to sustain the stability of collective order.

Chapter 5 deals with the second type of order – that is, cohesive order – which can be understood in terms of the Parsonian societal community in which trust is based on familiarity, bonds of friendship and common faith and values. In this instance, trust takes on the connotations of passion, out of which motive and belief arise. I shall examine the role of trust as a passion by looking at the three bases of trust – namely, family, friendship and society.

In the third, collaborative, type of order, which is the topic of chapter 6, trust is defined as a device for coping with the freedom of others. Since trust can be seen as a mechanism for solving the problem of cooperation only when people cooperate irrespective of sanctions and rewards, we need to consider trust as a policy aiming at the creation of conditions which foster bonds of solidarity, tolerance and the legitimization of power.

The proposed synthetic approach, which attempts to combine contingency with the importance of sustaining collective order, permits the conclusion that to construct conditions in which people can learn to deal with one another in a trustworthy way without making everyone feel the same involves the generation of a sense of belonging and participation through the politics of democratization.
1
Defining Trust

What is trust?

Trustworthiness, the capacity to commit oneself to fulfilling the legitimate expectations of others, is both the constitutive virtue of, and the key causal precondition for the existence of, any society.

Dunn 1984a: 287

Trust is a highly problematic but recurrent feature of social relationships. Social theories tend to conceive of trust by pointing to the range of benefits that trust provides. For instance, it is seen as essential for stable relationships, vital for the maintenance of cooperation, fundamental for any exchange and necessary for even the most routine of everyday interactions. ‘Without trust only very simple forms of human cooperation which can be transacted on the spot are possible, and even individual action is much too sensitive to disruption to be capable of being planned, without trust, beyond the immediately assured moment’ (Luhmann 1979: 88).

It is argued that trust, understood often in a very vague and unsystematic way, shapes all aspects of human life. Whatever matters to human beings, says Bok, ‘trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives. . . . When it is damaged the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse’ (1979: 31 and 26–7). Also Hirsch (1977) sees trust as a public good which is necessary for the successful running of the economy. Trust is also essential for facilitating effective problem solving, because ‘it encourages the exchange of relevant information and determines whether team members are willing to allow others to influence their decisions and actions’ (Carnevale and Wechsler
DEFINING TRUST

1992: 471). The role of trust in the constitution and maintenance of systems of empirical knowledge is connected with its property as ‘the great civility’, which is ‘granting the conditions in which others can colonize our minds and expecting the conditions which allow us to colonize theirs’ (Shapin 1994: 36).

Furthermore, since autonomy requires trustworthiness in social communication, trust is also a prerequisite for the realization of our essential nature and the formulation of self-identity. Habermas (1984), for example, views the ability of communicative action to negotiate shared understanding, which in turn coordinates interaction, as based on the three validity claims – truth, rightness and sincerity. His communicative ethics presupposes that ‘communicating actors always infer that their exchange speech acts satisfy a condition of mutual trust. Communication can continue undisturbed if speakers suppose that they already act in accordance with a sincerity rule’ (Keane 1984: 159). Thus, communication, based on mutual trust, coordinates social and political interaction. A similar perspective is adopted by Bok when she notes that ‘[a] society whose members are unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones, would collapse’ (1979: 18). Following the Tocquevillian tradition, interpersonal trust is also seen as fostering democratic values and as the basis for sustaining republican society or civic community (Putnam 1993). An emphasis on trust as an essential element of our mutual welfare and more broadly as an aspect of a worthwhile life is indeed very common in political science and sociological literature. So, if without trust life would not be possible, what is trust?

The omnipresence of trust and its problematic and multiple meanings have resulted in a unimpressive record on the part of the social sciences in grasping its essence (Dunn 1993). Different disciplines in social science have attempted to study it, or at least register its presence, but without a great deal of effort being devoted to its conceptualization. A survey of the literature on trust in 1985 concludes that ‘the social science research on trust has produced a good deal of conceptual confusion regarding the meaning of trust and its place in social life’ (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 975). Even though trust has received considerable attention in recent years, the confusion continues with an increased mixture of approaches and perspectives.

In unravelling this conceptual complexity our concern will be limited to the social scientist’s perspective. Social science enquiries are designed with an explanatory purpose in mind, and their aim is to test a specific empirical context and the consequences of a given phenomenon. This means that we will not be interested in moral dilemmas since these are topics specific to normative philosophy. Similarly, trust as a psychological trait of personality, as studied by experimental psychologists in
laboratory settings, is not part of our immediate interest. Akin to our approach are the volumes of research on trust conducted by political scientists, interested in factors influencing social confidence in political systems and their leaders. Sociologists themselves have seldom studied or measured trust, although there have been some studies which have measured ‘confidence’ in public opinion surveys.

The sociological literature conceptualizes trust as either the property of individuals, the property of social relationships or the property of the social system explained with attention to behaviour based on actions and orientations at the individual level. The first approach puts emphasis on feelings, emotions and individual values. Trust is seen as a function of individual personality variables (Deutsch 1958; Cole 1973; Wolfe 1976). In this socio-psychological work trust is confused with or closely related to cooperative mentality, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, hope or altruism. These attempts to develop a personality theory of trust are far too simplistic in their lack of attention to the social context (one may trust in some circumstances, not in others, and so on). Methodologically they are also unacceptable because in these studies trust is treated ‘in ways which have reductionistic consequences’ (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 975).

In the second approach, trust is seen more as a collective attribute, and is thus applicable to the institutional fabric of society. In this way, for example, Fordism as a mode of production is described as a ‘low trust system’ (Fox 1974), while ‘flexible specialisation’ or a post-Fordist organization of manufacturing is labelled as a ‘trust dependent system’ (Sabel 1989; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991). Trust is seen as a social resource that can be drawn upon in order to achieved certain organizational goals (Nachmias 1985).

The third approach sees trust as a valued public good, sustained by actions of members of a given society. It can be found, for instance, in Tocqueville’s classic description of the civic community as marked by a social fabric of trust and cooperation and reliant upon the activities of a public-spirited citizenry. Also Putnam’s (1993) search for an explanation of what ‘makes democracy work’ in northern Italy points to trust within community. He views trust as social capital, which is the essential condition for effective, responsive and representative institutions. A view of trust as an emergent property of the social system as much as a personal attribute allows this popular approach to apply trust as a valuable concept for overcoming the macro/micro distinction. In the same vein, Luhmann (1979) and Barber (1983), while starting with people’s expectations, view trust as a dimension of the social structure which ‘cannot be fully understood and studied exclusively on either the psychological level or on the institutional level, because it thoroughly permeates both’ (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 974). Seeing trust from this perspective makes
it possible to show how building trust on the micro-level contributes to the more abstract trust on the macro-level (Luhmann 1988). Each positive contact with our local doctor, for example, may gradually increase our confidence in the medical system.

Following this perspective, it can be said that an adequate conceptualization of trust as a sociological notion, aimed at bridging the interpersonal and the systematic levels of analysis, should see trust as a social mechanism, that is, ‘a specific causal pattern that can be recognised after the event but rarely foreseen’ (Elster 1993: 13). Studying trust as a social mechanism involves explaining people’s actions by their motivations and beliefs. It raises three questions: firstly, what kind of motivations? secondly, beliefs about what? and lastly, what are the sources of these motivations and beliefs? Before addressing these questions, it will be helpful to examine the most common definitions of trust.

The efficient way to grasp the most common connotations of the notion of trust is to analyse some basic definitions, rather than debating various attempts in sociological theory to identify its role and nature. Definitions of trust in sociological literature generally reflect the theoretical stands of the various authors, and as such they need to be discussed in the context of their respective theories (which will be our task in the following two chapters), while dictionary-type definitions show the most common properties of trust and illustrate an evolution of its meaning.

Trust has had many connotations. The oldest one relates this notion to faith or ‘the confidence in a supranatural Power on which man feels himself dependent’ (Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Morgan 1912: 464). Trust of this kind is present in all religious beliefs since to trust God as the source of salvation is an essence of every religion. ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in Jaweh and whose confidence Jaweh is’, says the Old Testament. ‘In God We Trust’ is on the coins and notes of the United States. ‘Trust in God’ is the Islamic suicide bombers’ final message. Trust is seen here as in part an article of ‘faith’ to which is attributed a broader meaning, including trust and some cognitive elements of assessment of a given doctrine. In the idea of faith the emphasis falls on its cognitive aspects, yet faith is always an antithesis to understanding since it relies upon a vague and partial understanding of its object. Faith is not, however, a passive acceptance of the unknown; rather it is, as in Pascal’s view, a strategic decision to take a risk in the condition of uncertainty. In Roman languages, the term used for trust, *fede* (translated into English as faith) also implies non-rational and incalculable elements (Pagden 1988: 129). It carries with it an element of duty to keep faith as the foundation of social life. For Giddens (1990: 27), trust is a form of faith, in which ‘confidence vested in probable outcomes expresses a commitment to something rather than just a cognitive understanding’. This brings us to
another concept closely connected with trust – namely, the notion of confidence.

The main definition of trust in the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies trust as ‘confidence in or reliance on some quality or attributes of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement’. In this definition, trust to a large extent merges with the idea of confidence, which expresses a firm trust. Without going into the debate about the criteria for the distinction between trust and confidence (see the discussion of Luhmann’s concept of trust and Giddens’ understanding of the notion of trust in chapter 3), it can be accepted that trust is a matter of individual determination and involves choosing between alternatives (I decide to take a risk and trust my new colleague), while confidence is more habitual expectation (I am habitually confident that my milkman will deliver milk to the doorstep tomorrow). The main difference between trust and confidence is connected with the degree of certainty that we attach to our expectations. It is, of course, much easier to decide whether to have confidence or not in one’s milkman than to decide which people can be trusted to reciprocate friendly actions, since trust involves a difficult task of assessment of other people’s capacities for the action. Thus, anything that facilitates accurate judgement about whom to trust has an important social value. Indeed, it is precisely the existence of many forms of complex interdependence and the freedom of others that creates such an enormous demand for trust and makes it an interesting social phenomenon.

Further pursuing the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of trust, we discover that from an economic perspective trust is identified as ‘confidence in the ability and intention of a buyer to pay at a future time for goods supplied without present payment’. This definition points out that trust is an underlying feature of a specific exchange relationship. It is not a barter exchange, where face-to-face transaction takes place without any time delays. It is not a monetary market exchange, where buying and selling is based on common trust in money as the medium of transaction. This type of relationship can be described as a ‘credit’ type of exchange in which ‘trades trust each other’ (Anderlini and Sabourian 1992: 100). In this light, trust can be defined as ‘a set of expectations shared by those in an exchange’ (Zucker 1986: 54), and different types of exchange can be defined according to the level of trust present within the relationship.

Anthropological analyses, which tend to emphasize the normative standards that sustain exchange, show the importance of reciprocity as compelling obligations and prolonging partnerships (Shalins 1972). In his classic work *The Gift*, Mauss argues that the obligations to give, to receive and to return are not to be understood simply with respect to rational calculation. Gift giving is a form of non-immediate reciprocity
where reward is neither discussed nor consciously calculated at the moment the offering is made. In the long run, however, one expects gifts to be reciprocated. Thus, in primitive and archaic societies, those societies based on gift-relationships, ‘there is no middle path; there is either trust or mistrust’ (Mauss 1970: 79). Modern, stratified and divided societies, Mauss argues, by definition are no longer reciprocal. This pessimistic perspective is, however, contradicted by some writers, who point to the importance of gift exchange in our complex, large-scale society (Timuss 1969; Zucker 1986; Davis 1992) or to the significant function of other forms of exchange not based on the expectation of profit, as, for example, exchange between parents and children or charity donations (Davis 1992).

Accepting a broad and non-rigid classification of various types of exchange fosters the image of people as having a complex repertoire of behaviour, allowing them to be market-wise in commerce, reciprocal with friends, generous with their children, and in some situations even altruistic. However, in which types of exchange does trust play an important role? It is certainly not in hostile takeovers, nor in burglary nor in extortion, to mention only some of Davis’ repertoires of exchange. Trust seems to play a significant role in any exchange where each partner has clear expectations of the other, and where there is a time lapse between the exchange of goods or services. As Mauss (1970: 34) notes: ‘Time has to pass before a counter-presentation can be made and this requires trust.’ Thus, only the type of exchange based on mutual expectations (obligations) and involving a time lapse is underpinned by trust as an instrument of social organization. Both credit and gift giving can be included in this category. There is, however, a third case of this type of exchange, which is more interesting to sociologists than to anthropologists – namely, cooperation.

Trust as cooperative exchange is a more complex phenomenon than gift giving because the relationships between cooperation and trust are less straightforward than those between trust and gift giving. Gift exchanges, although also based on trust (when you give gifts you trust to receive one in return and, moreover, you are trusted to consider the welfare and interests of the persons you are giving to – for example, a record of classical music would not be the best present for someone solely devoted to jazz), implicitly produce trust because ‘histories of such exchange are usually readily available to the partners and because expectations are often culturally given’ (Zucker 1986: 61). Cooperation is seen as a by-product of trust rather than a source of trust and, moreover, a lack of cooperation can be a result of other factors (such as lack of sufficient information) rather than an absence of trust. ‘Consequently, while cooperation and trust are intimately related in that the
former is a central manifestation of the latter, the former cannot provide, for either the actor or the analyst, a simple redefinition of trust’ (Good 1988: 33). Despite this call for caution in identifying cooperation with trust, the definition of trust in the Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought (W. Outhwaite and T. Bottomore, eds, 1993) implicitly connects these two concepts.

Trust is defined here as ‘the willingness of other agents to fulfil their contractual obligation that is crucial for cooperation’. Identifying trust on the basis of its complex relationships with cooperation stresses only one particular aspect of trust, which is attributed to the problem posed by cooperation and arising ‘whenever agents cannot monitor each other’s action’. However, to some degree all social situations are arenas of mutual monitoring (Goffman 1963a), and, moreover, the ‘reflexive monitoring’ of social action (Giddens 1984) is an essential factor in the subjective assessment of the probability of whether others will cooperate. Lewis and Weigert note the other reason for not restricting discussion of the concept of trust to the issue of cooperation. According to them, equating the concept of trust with cooperation is a ‘strictly behavioural interpretation of the concept of trust’, whose value lies in ‘operationalising trust as trusting (i.e., cooperative) choice of behaviour [rather] than in developing an adequate conceptualisation of trust’ (1985: 975). Also Dunn’s (1993) observation that trust as a passion can be enabling and also disruptive (trust, as love, is blind) challenges the view that identifies the importance of trust solely in terms of cooperative relationships. Generally, it can be said that cooperation is only one type of exchange based on mutual obligations, and that there are other types of exchange as well as other types of relationships in which trust plays an important role. For instance, trust as an expectation of stability of social context (one trusts that the train timetables will be the same tomorrow) refers to the predictable rather than to the cooperative character of social order.

What integrates all the above definitions of trust is their common emphasis on the importance of several properties of trust relationships. The main common characteristic of trust, using Webster’s Third New International Dictionary’s formulation, is its ‘dependence on something future or contingent; confident anticipation’. The trust features are thus derived from the contingency of social reality and they require a time lapse between one’s expectations and the other’s action. What makes trust so puzzling is that to trust involves more than believing; in fact, to trust is to believe despite uncertainty. Trust always involves an element of risk resulting from our inability to monitor others’ behaviour, from our inability to have a complete knowledge about other people’s motivations and, generally, from the contingency of social reality. Consequently,
one’s behaviour is influenced by one’s beliefs about the likelihood of others behaving or not behaving in a certain way rather than solely by a cognitive understanding or by firm and certain calculation.

What kind of expectations and beliefs can we have about ‘something future’? This question brings us back to our conceptualization of trust as a social mechanism, which can be explained by people’s beliefs and motivations. We have posed three questions, asking about types, content and sources of motivation and beliefs. In what follows my objective will be to address these three questions. I will start with an analysis of the sources of motivation and beliefs. A sociological approach, which focuses on the way in which individuals and society interact, generally argues that social relations and interactions are the points of origin of motivations and beliefs. It has already been demonstrated by Garfinkel that trust and shared understanding are inherent in all social interactions. The production of trust motivations is similarly presented by Granovetter (1985) and Wolfe (1989). According to Granovetter (1985: 491), the main factors responsible for the production of trust in economic life are social relations and the obligations inherent in them. Wolfe argues that individuals create their moral rules – that is, mutual obligations – through the social interactions they experience with others. ‘We are not social because we are moral; we are moral because we live together with others and therefore need periodically to account for who we are. Morality matters because we have reputations to protect, cooperative tasks to carry out, legacies to leave, others to love and careers to follow’ (Wolfe 1989: 215). In this context, people’s mutual obligations towards one another are the fruit of the collective rewards of interaction.

By reconciling our needs with the needs of others in daily negotiations, organizing and reflecting on our relationships with others, we construct our expectations and our beliefs about others. Basing our assessment of what to do next on expectations that the actions of others will be constrained by their obligations towards us, helps us to account for the contingency and uncertainty of the situation. However, a cognitive basis of trusting attitudes is limited since the main source of information used by individuals to construct their views of other people is their interactive behaviour.

Clearly, since trust is an aspect of all social relationships, one needs to differentiate between various types of relationships and the various types of obligations connected with them. What one expects from children as a parent is different from what shopkeepers expect from shoppers. Furthermore, parents are expected to behave differently towards their children than shopkeepers towards their shoppers (parents are expected to make losses on the exchange with children, while shopkeepers are
expected to make profit in exchange with shoppers (Davis 1992: 42)). This suggests that trust does not need to be based only on familiarity or passion. It can rely on rational expectations, as our trust in money illustrates. However, as Dodd (1994: 137) notes, ‘the relationship between trust and rationality is complicated and uneven’. The complexity of this relationship is nowhere more visible than in difficulties faced by all rational attempts to build trust.

Expectations in relationships between patients and doctors, lawyers and clients, employers and employees, husbands and wives, citizens and politicians, students and teachers are all constructed in the process of gradual learning by establishing levels of shared understanding and mutual obligations. For instance, the issue of involuntary unemployment is better explained by levels of mutual obligations and understanding between employers and employees than by the neo-classical model of economics. Akerlof (1984: 145–71), after proving that all other possible factors (such as legislation, distribution of skills and so on) do not fully account for the levels of involuntary unemployment, argues that the shared concept of ‘a fair wage for a fair day’s work’, which creates mutual obligations and expectations between these two sets of actors, is the missing factor. The ‘gift of fairness’ in the employment relationship, which is learned and developed in the creative process of complex adjustment and negotiation, means that both parties trust each other to meet their respective obligations; workers try to work in excess of the minimum work standard; and the firm provides wages in excess of the market rate.

The duration and the stability of social relationships influence the clarity and visibility of mutual obligations. While we are not sure what is expected of us and what to expect of others in an unknown situation, our familiar and stable relationships with our friends and colleagues are not causes of such anxiety and uncertainty. Modern societies are full of ambiguities, creating opportunities to ‘take moral shortcuts’ and ‘not everyone resists them’ (Wolfe 1989: 219). However, the same ambiguity which increases ‘free-rider opportunities’ also permits the securing of general satisfaction, peace or order by facilitating the avoidance of direct or immediate confrontations or conflicts – for instance, peace-creating misunderstanding (Davis 1992: 54–7). The different ways people exploit this ambiguity must be analysed in order to ascertain whether and which modern conditions provide individuals with the opportunity to learn to trust others and to develop self-confidence and self-mastery. Furthermore, since modern life depends on contingent structures and changeable conditions and familiarity is not its dominant feature, there is also the need to examine the role of depersonalized trust – that is, trust