Peace and Beyond

Taking a leap: building social trust

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Contemporary evidence suggests that social trust is not based on economic self-interest, as utilitarianism in the 19th century once argued, but rather, as the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) puts it, in the capacity for confidence in the reliability of people, institutions and structures. This embeds trust in the quality of social relationships, rather than on calculations of self-interest.

There is thus a two-dimensional flow in the connection between social trust and conflict. Low levels of social trust can be one cause of the breakdown in social relationships, even in the emergence of communal violence, while societies emerging out of conflict are defined by the disruption in social trust as a result of the violence. With regard to social trust and peace processes, if truth is the first casualty of war, another early casualty is social trust, such that post-conflict societies are marked by low levels of social trust.

In what follows, I will make some observations about the nature and meaning of social trust, reflecting on how it has been negatively affected by wider social changes in society, let alone by war. To understand the operation of social trust in post-conflict societies, I will make three sets of distinctions, which help us clarify what we mean by trust in societies emerging out of conflict. I will distinguish two types of trust, and with respect to one of these types, called social trust, which is the focus here, I will contrast the different levels it operates on and the different stages through which it develops. I conclude by suggesting that victims of conflict are moral beacons from whom we can learn a great deal with regards to social trust.

Types of trust in peace processes

Trust and peace seem a mutual couplet. Yet it is necessary to consider types of trust as they connect to conflict transformation and peace processes. Trust is important to conflict resolution and transformation that stops the war. Participants to a resolution process need to trust one another – and their mediators – or they will not come to the negotiation table, nor stay there, and will fail to agree a settlement. However, ending the conflict is the first part of a much longer process of peacebuilding. The second part is social transformation (on the distinction between conflict transformation and social transformation, see Brewer, 2015; Brewer et al., 2011). If trust is critical to the first part by bringing people to the negotiation table and keeping them there, it is perhaps even more important to the second phase of a peace process, where people learn to live together in tolerance after conflict.

It is worth distinguishing between the forms of trust essential to these two parts. In conflict transformation, trust works between warring political groups enough to get them to make and commit to a political settlement. In social transformation trusts works between ordinary men and women to facilitate healing, reconciliation and tolerance in society. So different are these forms of trust that it is worth referring to political trust as part of the process of conflict transformation and social trust as part of the process of social transformation.

Social trust in late modernity

Social trust is grounded in the quality and frequency of our personal relationships. Sociologists see it as rooted in the density of the social networks in which people are located (for example see Misztal, 1996; Sztompka, 2008). The more people in social networks know each other, the more friends and acquaintances are themselves linked, the more dense social networks become, from which develops what Sztompka (2008) calls 'trust cultures'. The more people interact with people known to each other, the more willing they are to trust them, since their trustworthiness is closely related to their capacity to trust the people to whom they relate and who are known to them. Social trust is like kindness or respect; it spreads around among people linked in bonds of friendship, expanding with the boundaries of social interaction.

Late modern society, however, is becoming less and less capable of social trust. Sociologists refer to late modern society as the risk society (Beck, 1992, 1999), with traditional structures linked to religion, close-knit neighbourhood and dense social networks losing their ability to shape social life, which both increases vulnerabilities and increases sensitivity to and awareness of these vulnerabilities (on which see Misztal, 2011). The boundaries of social trust have narrowed as a result of profound social changes. Close-knit community structures have been replaced by more mobile and frenetic forms of social life that transcend local space and time. As sociologists argue, the social networks that defined the trustworthiness of people, institutions and structures have become disembedded from local family and community structures and from neighbourhood-based friendship patterns. Senses of place are now global rather than local. Thus there are now long-distance families, with their sense of themselves as a family unit kept alive by extended social processes and technology. Social relationships and friendships are no longer embedded in personal relations in local place and space so that social trust is no longer spatial and localised. Social trust therefore needs to be reproduced over extended distances, often by forms of social media and telecommunications that have replaced the face-to-face personal relations that formerly grounded social trust and defined the people who were considered trustworthy. One of the significant social changes that has occurred as modernity has advanced with the emergence of the risk society (Beck, 1992) is that we have moved from social trust to social untrustworthiness as the default social condition. This does not mean an absence of social trust in late modernity, only that social trust has first to be learned.

One of the acute ways that ordinary people have experienced the profound social changes in family and community structures, and in the faster pace of social life that have occurred in their lifetime, is through the boundaries of social trust. Place alone no longer confers confidence in the reliability of people, institutions and community structures. Social trust is no longer a natural part of the social and cultural obligations that formed the local community to which they belonged; they now have to learn, sometimes through bitter experience, who they can trust in a risky and vulnerable society. It is for this reason that Mollering (2001) refers to people in modern societies having to learn the confidence to take 'leaps of trust' in face of the threatening 'unknowables' that shape their expectations of trustworthiness. Clan and kinship systems, and solidaristic, close-knit communities assumed social trust through familiarity; untrustworthiness had to be learned based on experience. It is the opposite in the late modern risk society, where among strangers trust has to be learned.

This significant social change complicates the development of social trust in post-conflict societies as people learn to live together in tolerance after conflict. Conflict polarises people and severely contracts and narrows the boundaries of the people considered as trustworthy. Post-conflict societies are therefore among the most untrusting, despite the significant diminution in their levels of violence; the violence has ended, justifying their depiction as post-conflict, but the legacy of that violence lives on in low levels of social trust. This imposes a significant burden on peace processes, and the extent to which social trust has been garnered offers a measure against which we can assess negotiated peace settlements like the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement.

Social trust after the Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement

Any assessment of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement starts badly; disagreement over what to call it was a portent of the contention that bedevils it, with Unionists and Loyalists preferring the Belfast Agreement and Nationalists and Republicans the Good Friday Agreement. For most of the 20 years since its signing, attention, effort and policy has been devoted to getting the structures of governance right, focusing on institutional reform to improve the effectiveness of governance structures and to resolve problematic politics. This effort and policy focus is best described as statebuilding rather than peacebuilding (on which distinction see Brewer, 2015), looking both to improve the institutions for governance and to create new institutions to monitor this improvement (like the Equality Commission, the Police Ombudsman Office, the Human Rights Commission, and the Victims and Survivors Service).

Conflict resolution experts and negotiators in 1998 made two assumptions: that the political trust needed to agree the settlement would resolve problematic politics; and that once problematic politics was resolved, healing in society would naturally occur. The negotiators believed, as it were, that the political trust necessary among the parties to agree the settlement in 1998 would extend to social trust between lay people in society more generally. Despite massive levels of investment in the peace process from the EU and the Irish and UK governments, these assumptions proved naive.

Political trust between the political parties quickly broke down and the terms of the agreement had to go through several iterations to get the power-sharing executive up and running again after several temporary collapses. The executive is currently suspended and has been so since January 2017. Other forms of statebuilding have worked very well, however.

Policing reform, against all predictions, has succeeded. The institutions established to monitor the improvement in governance structures have survived and work very effectively. The central pillar of statebuilding, the devolved power-sharing executive, has, however, no immediate prospect of resumption. Political trust was not deeply embedded enough within the political parties to survive the travails of the peace process.

This is in some part because the question of social trust was largely ignored. Peacebuilding between formerly warring communities was under-resourced and relatively neglected with the emphasis on statebuilding; few policies and practices were established through which healing in society was prioritised, broken relationships restored, social trust rebuilt, fear and anxiety assuaged and by which people learned to live together in tolerance and civility. The brutalisation of everyday life caused by the violence endures as a legacy into the peace process to create polarisation, mistrust and fear (see Brewer et al., 2018b). Paul Gallagher, himself a victim of Northern Ireland's conflict and a leading advocate on victim issues in victim support groups like WAVE and The Injured Group, commented that the seed of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was 'planted in an inhospitable wasteland'. Northern Ireland remains, he said, 'a place devoid of social trust across the community boundaries. The Troubles had destroyed much of the social fabric, as well as the physical space, of Northern Ireland. While there was a strong sense of community within the two respective communities, it was based on the need for the two communities to stay separate, to only trust our "own sort" in order to maintain basic safety and security. There was a dearth of trust between the communities.' (Private communication with the author.)

Speaking on the panel on social trust at the Peace and Beyond conference, Judith Thompson, Chief Commissioner for the Commission for Victims and Survivors, recognised the importance of peacebuilding and of the need to combine it with effective statebuilding. She said: 'Building social trust within and between communities in a society transitioning from conflict is an essential ingredient to reconciliation and building a better future for everyone and the generations that follow.'

This interconnectedness between communities is vital, otherwise 'perverse social trust' can develop, in which people trust according to social and political boundaries rather than on people's individual trustworthiness. In her work as chief commissioner, she highlights her encounters with those directly affected by the conflict, stating she had been 'moved by their resolve and humility in coping with the past and ongoing trauma in their own lives'. With reference to the Victims and Survivors Forum, a civic body made up of victims, Thompson describes how they gave a commitment to building social trust and ultimately, a better society for all, through a deliberative process of looking for solutions to how to deal with the past.

The thoughts of Judith Thompson chime very much with my own, for I want to suggest that Northern Ireland might take a lesson from victims in how to build social trust.

Victims as moral beacons of social trust

I have long been associated with the claim that the majority of first-generation victims are moral beacons in shining a light to the rest of society by their forgivingness, emotional empathy and magnanimity (for example, see Brewer, 2010; Brewer and Hayes, 2011; Brewer et al., 2017, 2018b). Paul Gallagher commented on this view from his personal experience: 'The moral beacons would show others how to rebuild social trust. A type of trust with deep roots, built on a long-term symbiotic relationship with others in their field. They were the people who would get their hands dirty, while others would sit on the garden fence, disparaging the state of the landscape.' (Private communication with the author.)

Based on research funded by the Leverhulme Trust on the emotional landscape of victims in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka, involving interviews with nearly 200 victims and two sample surveys (reported in Brewer et al., 2017, 2018a, 2018b), social trust is still a very problematic issue in first-generation victims. Most interviewees, however, reported on growing social trust over the years. The willingness of the vast number of victims to commit to the peace process and their hope for lasting peace suggests trust will develop, but they were not yet able to increase their feelings of trust dramatically. In short, social trust drops slower than peace. As one Protestant interviewee from Northern Ireland remarked: 'Well I go to and do courses with Catholic people. And we get on great. We have actually been away with Catholic people on residential. They have been through the same thing. They are just ordinary people like me. They have went through the same things, maybe worse. And we have told our stories and they have told their stories and sometimes theirs is 100 per cent worse than what happened to us. And I can empathise with that. And I would turn round and say I am sorry. There was one particular fella told his story and I turned round to him and said sorry. And he came up afterwards to me and he says, "I want to thank you for saying you are sorry. Because you listened to my story. But it was not your fault. And I do not want you to say you are sorry, I would rather give you a hug." So he gave me a hug. And when I got home, he was a Catholic, he sent me a beautiful card to say thanks. And I had never met that fella in my life before. But they went through the same. But the distrust is still there.'

To understand victims' capacity for social trust, I wish to make two sets of distinctions. We might call the first distinction between 'surface' and 'deep' social trust; the second between 'particularised' compared to 'generalised' social trust. The distinction between 'surface' and 'deep' social trust describes the level of trust; the distinction between 'particularised' and 'generalised' social trust describes the stages through which we broaden who it is that is considered trustworthy.

Let me come first to the issue of who is considered trustworthy. Only a very small minority of victims reported a complete lack of social trust in the former enemy, such as this victim when referring to Catholics. 'You couldn't trust them, no way could you trust them. You could be chatting to them in the morning and then they could be behind a ditch and shoot you the next day. How would you come to a compromise with those people?' However, borrowing from Mollering (2001), most first-generation victims were prepared to take 'the leap of trust'. The majority of these, did so, however, in a two-stage process. The key here is to slowly extend outwards the boundaries of those who can be trusted to cover individual members of the erstwhile groups rather than the collectivity as a whole. That is, social trust is first possible in a particularised way, extended to individuals known or who become known, as part of the victims' social network, making them able to trust individuals from the other community whom they knew and encountered, but not yet the 'other' group as a whole. It was trust on a one-to-one basis as the situation demanded it. From this particularised social trust can then hopefully follow generalised social trust, in which negative stereotypes and myths about the whole group are replaced by social trust.

With respect to the levels of social trust, there tends to be a minimal level of 'surface' social trust that facilitates tolerance in the public sphere, such as when in mixed and cross-community settings with individual members of the former enemy. But the deep levels of social trust required in the private sphere, where the boundaries of the trustworthy person are very closely and narrowly defined, is often restricted to friends and kin. This parallels Robert Putnam's distinction between thin and thick trust (2000: 136): 'Trust embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks is sometimes called "thick trust." On the other hand, a thinner trust in "the generalised other", like your new acquaintance from the coffee shop, also rests implicitly on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity' (on the application of Putnam's writings on social capital to Northern Ireland, see Graham, 2016). Most first-generation victims are capable of surface social trust, but do not yet consider the erstwhile enemy as equivalent to the deeply trusted family member.

The point, though, is that this deep level of social trust is not necessary for the public practice of tolerance. Surface trust on a particularised basis is a good basis to start practising social trust in public. The lack of deep social trust reflects the hurt inflicted over the years of the conflict, leaving victims feeling vulnerable. Yet most first-generation victims in all three post-conflict societies were nonetheless willing to take the leap to surface social trust, extended first on a particularised rather than generalised basis. Surface social trust-building efforts among victims on a particularised basis consist of cross-community projects and befriending programmes organised by victim support groups and others, which extend the social networks of first-generation victims to include the 'other'. These social networks of trust, as we might call them, have the effect of increasing the numbers of first-generation victims capable of surface social trust on a particularised basis.

In this fact, lies hope for peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and societal healing. For example, interviewees frequently reported increased understanding and empathy for the members of the former out-group. Taking part in intergroup activities had promoted intergroup befriending and tolerance among individuals, providing clear evidence that surface social trust on a particularised basis is embedded in the quality of social relations in networks of social trust. Two instances can be cited from victims in Northern Ireland.

'We have gone cross-community, which I would not have done. This group has brought me to that stage. It is not the government. It is my own understanding. Because I do not want my grandchildren to go through what my children went through in the Troubles and all.'

'But what I enjoyed was, whenever I first came to the group, I think it was round about 2002 that we became involved in the Cross Border Project. And it was brilliant. We were able to go down and we met women from down the South of Ireland and you listened to their stories. So I think the more you hear from other people as well the more you can relate to them. And you can say to yourself – they are just like us as well. And people can set aside their differences then.'

Conclusion

Reconciliation, tolerance and peacebuilding expand outwards with social trust. However, to paraphrase WB Yeats's poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' about peace, social trust drops even more slowly. The hesitant reaching out to the erstwhile enemy requires victims to take a 'leap of trust'. This is more likely to happen in a two-stage process, where victims first learn to trust specific individuals from the other community on a particularised basis, with a level of trust best described as surface rather than deep. Yet it is in these gestures that social generalised and deep social trust is slowly learned. Societies emerging out of conflict thus need to artfully and skilfully construct everyday spaces for trust building, so that networks of social trust can be built slowly and people's confidence in the reliability of people from the other community is restored. Given what I argued at the beginning of this chapter about disembedded social relations and the rise of insecurity and risk in late modernity that negatively affects people's capacity for social trust, these networks of social trust therefore require careful nurturing so people are encouraged to resist any feelings of untrustworthiness and to take the leap of trust.

The argument here is that victims of conflict offer an example of how social trust can be slowly built in a frenetic society in which social relations are now disembedded from close-knit communities and extended kinship networks, truly making them 'moral beacons'. Their levels of social trust were enhanced by participation in intergroup networks. This suggests that social trust can be facilitated by social institutions and by politicians creating conducive environments and discourses for social trust essential. Social networks of trust are facilitated by policies and practices in civil society – in schools, women's groups, churches, universities, trade unions, in youth groups and the like – and they can be easily undermined as people question the confidence they place in erstwhile enemies and as their wider feelings of vulnerability and insecurity increase. Politicians, governments, the media, journalists, public commentators and cultural critics, parents, priests and pastors thus need to choose their words carefully, so as to support rather than undermine lay people's confidence in social trust. All too often careless use of language and senseless behaviour can erode social trust and polarise rather than heal divisions. Creating the social conditions for trust is thus the responsibility of us all if people are to challenge the untrustworthiness that is garnered by the disembedded social relations of late modernity.

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'Building social trust ... in a society transitioning from conflict is an essential ingredient to ... building a better future for everyone.'

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