The Dilemma of Trust in the Risk Society.
Commentary on Gil Eyal, Larry Au and Cristian Capotescu's "Trust is a Verb!"

Elena Esposito*

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy)
Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld (Germany)

Abstract

Referring to Niklas Luhmann's theory, this brief commentary on the text by Eyal et al. (2024) argues that trust — compared to distrust — increases the possibilities available to the decision-maker. Those who trust can keep more possibilities open and nevertheless decide, because they do not need to know all the details. This "controlled indifference" would be especially valuable in our society, where the multiplication of risks requires us to constantly make decisions under conditions of uncertainty — that is, incomplete information. When the awareness of risks increases, however, trust tends to decrease regardless of the competence of decision-makers or the transparency of decisions, because the increase in information highlights the complexity of the factors involved, and the decision to trust appears itself increasingly risky.

Keywords: trust; mistrust; confidence; risk; risk society; complexity reduction; hope.

* ✉ elena.esposito9@unibo.it

1   The Problem of Trust in Society and Sociology

Today trust is a serious social problem, as shown by the debate on the crisis of expertise to which Gil Eyal (2019) has provided enlightening contributions. But is it also a sociological problem? And in what form? Eyal et al. (2024) rightly ask this question at the very beginning of their abstract: "How should trust be studied?". It is highly useful to reconstruct today the roots of the sociological debate on trust, which in the 1970s touched the very foundations of social life, and then in the following decades expanded by intertwining with other issues — for reasons we will have to consider.

How and in what form is the issue of trust fundamental? And how does it relate to other topics connected with the management of uncertainty? In this brief contribution, I take up the arguments of Eyal et al. referring to one of the sociological reflections that provide the background for their considerations: the theory of Niklas Luhmann. And I connect the notion of trust with the debate on risk and the risk society.

2   Trust as Controlled Indifference

A central point in Eyal et al.'s argument is the distinction between "trust itself" and "the placing of trust" (p. 175). Given the complexity, contingency and variability of social life, the idea of trust as an "object" that can be attributed and studied as such quickly appears unworkable. Eyal et al., accordingly, move in the direction of "trust methods" as "practical devices that people employ to accomplish trusting as accountably responsible" (p. 178). But if, as they themselves acknowledge, "trusting is inescapable" (p. 179), the question is not so much if to trust but how to trust and to mistrust — that is, how to articulate the basic condition that underscores the relationship of each of us to the inevitable uncertainty of the social world. How is a "trusting" (Möllering, 2013) to be understood that encompasses both trust and mistrust, and also the subtraction of trust? How does it figure in the relationship of individuals to the social world, and how does it change as society and its structures evolve?

It was to answer these questions that Luhmann (1973) began his treatise on trust[1] by describing "trust in the broadest sense" as "an elementary fact of social life".

> In many situations, people actually have a choice as to whether or not they want to place their trust in certain respects. Without any trust, however, they would not be able to leave their bed in the morning. They would be overcome by undefined fear and paralyzing dread. They could not even formulate a specific mistrust and make it the basis of defensive precautions, because that would presuppose that they trust in other respects. Anything would be possible. No human being can withstand such a direct confrontation with the extreme complexity of the world (p. 1).

As a generic condition of confidence[2] as a form of unquestioned trust is unavoidable, what one needs to explore are the strategies that are adopted in ever-changing circumstances, on ever-changing issues and with ever-changing interlocutors, "to move from a default confidence to

---

1.   Here and in the following the translations from the German text are mine (EE).

2.   The German text (Luhmann, 1973, ch. 3) distinguishes between "*Vertrautheit*", which expresses the condition in which something is taken for granted without questioning it ("the unquestioned, self-evident world", p. 19), and "*Vertrauen*", which corresponds to trust. The term "*Vertrautheit*" is difficult to express in English. In this context it seems to me more appropriate to translate it with "confidence" rather than "familiarity", as it appears instead in the English translation.

trust or mistrust, from mistrust to trust, from trust to unproblematic confidence" (Luhmann, 1973, p. 80) — strategies to deal with the complexity of situations and decisions in the most effective way, even when one does not have all the information. For Luhmann, as for Eyal et al., the problem becomes which strategies, or "methods", work best in different circumstances.

The reasoning, however, develops in different directions. Whereas Eyal et al. deal primarily with the perspective of individual decision-makers, Luhmann turns to the structural factors and social consequences of different strategies for managing uncertainty. He argues that when complexity increases (i.e., the number and diversity of options to be considered increase) trust — compared to distrust — increases the possibilities available to the decision-maker. Those who trust can keep more possibilities open and nevertheless decide, because they do not need to know all the details. As Simmel (1922, pp. 26 ff.) argues, they can achieve an effective mixture of knowledge and non-knowledge. They know enough not to need to know about what they trust others on, with respect to which they allow themselves a controlled indifference (p. 26) — so that in the end they can keep open many more possibilities than can be considered by those who do not trust and rely only on themselves (assuming they trust their own choices). The world of those who trust is then richer and more complex than the world of those who do not trust — and a society that allows trust is more open and diverse than one in which trust is discouraged. Of course, the willingness to trust is not given blindly (blind trust) but is evaluated and held in check — but in practice those who trust do not control individual facts but their trust, and relate to facts only indirectly through it (p. 31). And they know that if their trust is disappointed, they can always react by withdrawing it.

The alternative strategy is distrust, which has advantages as well. Distrust also reduces complexity, and does it in a way that can offer a kind of relief. Those who do not trust may well be very informed, but they process information less problematically — only few is accepted and retained as a prerequisite for their decisions. Those who do not trust "become more dependent on less information" (p. 79), effectively reducing the openness of their relationship with the world — what can have a reassuring effect. The complexity of the world (the range of possibilities to be considered) must still be reduced, but the selection of those who do not trust closes them off more sharply, while those who do trust leave many more possibilities open.

This is also why trust, even more than distrust, always remains an open problem. It is provisional and revisable, and inevitably relies on what in ethics is called "supererogation": an action that goes beyond the call of duty and is not (strictly) required (Heyd, 2015). Eyal et al. also speak of a "leap of faith" (pp. 175ff) that cannot be justified on a purely rational level (Möllering, 2001). Luhmann, however, argues that trust is different from *hope* in a way that becomes socially relevant. In both cases, one is not sure how things will turn out, and in both cases, one wishes that they will turn out well, but hope refers indefinitely to the world and the future: despite uncertainty, the hopeful simply wishes for a good outcome, blindly or not. In the case of trust, on the other hand, a decision must be made: the successful outcome depends on the behavior and expertise of others on a specific issue — one is not obliged to trust, and one knows that one can withdraw trust if one is disappointed. When trust is given, one considers, implicitly or not, the possibility of regretting it if things do not go as one wishes — that is, one reflects future contingency in the present decision. Whereas hope disregards contingency, trust reflects contingency (Luhmann, 1979, p. 25).

3   Trust Methods and the Management of Mistrust

From the angle of the way of considering in the present *the possibility of future repentance*, the distinction between hope and trust points to the distinction between danger and risk that underlies the sociological theory of risk as it was developed a couple of decades after the reflection on trust, and which in my view has subsumed some of its problems: we talk less about trust because we talk about risk and its conditions in our "risk society" (Douglas & Wildawsky, 1982; Beck, 1986).

Risk is a modern concept, which arose first in 17$^{\text{th}}$ century, dealing with the uncertainty about the future and the possibility of a future damage — *considered in the present*. This uncertainty has always existed in the form of *danger*, but *risk* implies an additional component: it concerns an event that depends on our behavior and requires a contingent decision. If one does nothing, the damage does not occur — but neither does the benefit. It is up to us to decide whether to vaccinate, to invest in the stock market or to get married. We do not have to, and we know that it can bring considerable advantages but also great damages if things go wrong — and we know already in the present that we will attribute the merit (or the blame) for the positive (or negative) outcome to ourselves and our decision. We do not simply rely on fate or luck, which are independent on us, and we cannot intervene on — we do not simply hope that the damage does not occur as in the case of dangers.

In more and more occasions, even dealing with natural events like earthquakes or floods, we know now that there is something we can do (or not) to avoid or mitigate the possible damage (building with earthquake-resistant techniques, reinforcing riverbanks etc.). These preventive measures also have costs, and may prove unnecessary, but we still have to make a decision. Since the future is always uncertain, we have to make it without the necessary information, and we know that we may regret it (as when we decide to trust). Then also danger becomes risk: a present decision made with knowledge of the possibility of future regret. Risk gets virtually ubiquitous.

Risk is a complex concept, that has among others the interesting feature that it excludes a condition of safety (Luhmann, 1991, pp. 28ff.). Not running a risk does not lead to safety, but only to different risks. Vaccination reduces the chance of getting seriously ill, but may have negative side effects. Avoiding speculating in the stock market protects against possible crashes, but one forgoes possible gains. In this as in all other cases, one knows that one may regret it. In our society, safety becomes an empty concept and the future always takes the form of risk. Gathering more information to be safer is not the solution, because increase in knowledge does not reduce risks but rather increases them, since it increases the awareness of the possible damages and of what one could do (or not do).

If possible damages cannot be excluded and are attributed to decisions, the socially relevant question becomes whose decisions will be possibly blamed — our own decisions or the decisions of others, whom we can trust or not trust. Here the question of trust comes up again, becoming central but highly problematic. The assignment of trust is itself a risky decision, which concerns the behavior of others, who also inevitably operate under conditions of uncertainty. Research shows that there is a *double standard*: the willingness to accept damages attributed to the decision of others is much lower than the willingness to accept the consequences of our own risky decisions (Luhmann, 1991, ch. 6). Examples abound: think about the difference in attitude of the driver versus the passenger in cases of reckless driving, or the widespread distrust of mandatory vaccination. How can one place trust?

If risks increase, as is the case in our society, trust becomes increasingly scarce regardless

of the competence of decision-makers or the transparency of decisions, because the increase in information — as we have seen — tends rather to highlight the complexity of the factors involved, and the decision to trust appears increasingly risky. The trust methods highlighted and analyzed by Eyal et al. concern precisely this. As complexity and the need to make decisions become more and more unavoidable, it becomes more and more inevitable that we have to trust: the experts, the technologies, the reassurances and scrupulousness of others — and at the same time trusting becomes more and more problematic. The result is a paradoxical condition of distrustful trust, in which one cannot not trust but does not really trust.

Eyal et al. show this: although the public does not trust doctors, they trust "my doctor" (p. 170), resorting to "pre-categorical" contextual and personal factors (Husserl, 1972) to make a decision that cannot be justified explicitly. Surveys reveal that trust is granted in a "tacit and routinized" (p. 175) manner, while it is rejected in the face of an explicit recognition of risk. The granting of trust, when it occurs, is a "situated practice" (p. 183) — implying that in other circumstances one does not trust. Underlying this is the insoluble contrast (they speak of "contradiction", p. 178) between the belief of well-founded trust and the awareness of its absurdity — between inescapable trusting and unavoidable mistrust.

4 Conclusions

In our risk society, as in any other, trust is fundamental and indispensable. Our society, however, which increasingly needs trust, makes it increasingly unlikely. Today, trusting (as a verb) takes the form of a dilemma that affects the very foundations of social life. When the willingness to trust is reduced, so is, as we have seen, social complexity. If one trusts, one can act in a controlled way without knowing all the information directly — if people cannot trust, fewer and less diverse possibilities are available to society as a whole. The "controlled indifference" enabled by trust would be especially valuable in our society, where the multiplication of risks requires us to constantly make decisions under conditions of uncertainty — that is, incomplete information. We need to rely more on trusted others, but the very increase in uncertainty makes trusting difficult. The dilemma between trusting and risk, to which the text by Eyal et al. is an inspiring contribution, is a crucial issue for both society and sociology, on which research is urgently needed.

References

Beck, U. (1986). *Die Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Douglas, M., & Wildawsky, A. (1982). *Risk and Culture: An Essay on Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Eyal, G. (2019). *The Crisis of Expertise*. Cambridge: Polity.

Eyal, G., Au, L., & Capotescu, C. (2024). Trust Is a Verb! A Critical Reconstruction of the Sociological Theory of Trust. *Sociologica*, *18*(2), 169–191. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/19316

Heyd, D. (2015). Supererogation. In E.N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Husserl, E. (1972). *Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*. Hamburg: Meiner.

Luhmann, N. (1973). *Vertrauen: Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*. Stuttgart: Enke.

Luhmann, N. (1991). *Soziologie des Risikos*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Möllering, G. (2001). The Nature of Trust: From Georg Simmel to a Theory of Expectation, Interpretation and Suspension. *Sociology*, *35*(2), 403–420. https://doi.org/10.1177/S003 8038501000190

Möllering, G. (2013). Process Views of Trusting and Crises. In R. Bachmann & A. Zaheer (Eds.), *Handbook of Advances in Trust Research* (pp. 285–305). Cheltenham: Elgar.

Simmel, G. (1922). *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.

Elena Esposito – Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy); Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld (Germany)

 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3075-292X | elena.esposito9@unibo.it

 https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/elena.esposito9/

Elena Esposito is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and the University of Bologna (Italy). She has published extensively on the theory of society, media theory, memory theory and the sociology of financial markets. Her current research on algorithmic prediction is supported by a five-year Advanced Grant from the European Research Council. Her latest books are *Artificial Communication: How Algorithms Produce Social Intelligence* (MIT Press, 2022) and *Kommunikation mit unverständlichen Maschinen* (Residenz, 2024).