SOCIAL ANIMALS

In Way Too Little We Trust

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Why social trust matters, and seven reasons for its decline.

As America's problems go, the hemorrhaging of social trust is a torque point of definition for the future.[1] If this trend, now at least three decades deep, cannot be stanched and reversed, comparative social history suggests there will be big trouble ahead. After all, as many a sage has told us, great powers rarely succumb to external threats unless their verve and virtue have decayed from the inside out.

This is not the place to repeat why social trust is so critical except in summary terms, for others have done that well. But it may be worthwhile to speculate on the reasons for its leakage in the United States using, but going beyond, the books footnoted below. So let us quickly lay down the basics for why social trust matters, and then get to the possible reasons for its decline, of which I identify seven.

Human beings are social animals, and like all social animals our natures comprise a wondrous mix of impulses to both compete and cooperate. Competition helps motivate us; cooperation constrains us as individuals from being too motivated for our collective good, and more important perhaps, provides an array of benefits to individuals that individuals cannot achieve on their own.

One way we strike a functional balance between competition and cooperation as a community of animals is through our knack for quickly sizing up the intentions of others. This we do in cases of direct contact though speech and a host of more anciently honed paralinguistic cues inherent in facial expressions and body language. We can glance at other people, just as we quickly glance at our ambient environment for danger from predatory animals and natural hazards, to get a sense of whether we are bound to compete or cooperate with—or merely ignore—that person or group of persons at any given time. We will either recognize the appropriateness of the competitive, cooperative, or disengaged frame in given contexts, or we sense inappropriateness and respond accordingly.

Repetition and routine help us reckon, so we get good at quickly recognizing intentionality in those we interact with most often—family members. In a civilized context, we get good at estimating the intentions of others beyond the immediate circle of family to the extent that cultural sharing is deep and wide. It tends to be

deepest within extended families (called tribes or clans by anthropologists) that see each other at least from time to time, getting shallower as relationships become more distant.

Trust tends to be deep among friends who live close to one another and engage in similar or complementary ways of making a living; propinquity encourages what evolutionary biologists call reciprocal altruism. It attenuates with loser bonds. That is partly because of what some call mental myopia, which just means we tend to trust information we take from direct experience more than information mediated in various and sundry ways.[2]

Culture sharing in large agglomerations of population, like modern nations, usually depends most on a common language, but also on a more or less thick symbolic sharing enabled by various narratives to which members of the society are socialized. That sharing, which enables its function even among individuals who never lay eyes on one another, in turn appears to depend on reasonably widespread literacy, which is why leaders of nascent nationalist movements historically put such a premium on developing a vernacular written language and literature.

At the margins, too, human societies supplement sharing with what are often dismissed as mere manners, or etiquette, that allow relative strangers to share ways to gauge the intentions of others over a range of social interactions—trading, sharing a meal, socializing, forming a militia or a fire brigade, and so forth. Contrary to common understanding, then, glancing actually involves a deep, penetrating assessment of our environment, and manners have a social history and purpose that are anything but trivial.

The essence of all this is that people who share common mazeways from having lived together and been socialized generation to generation can anticipate what others are up to, and the result is a network or web of *reciprocal shared expectations*. These expectations give rise to natural if informal authority structures, what Hannah Arendt once called "pre-political authority" in a 1954 essay. Over time, these expectations are reified into norms, usually sacralized by religion into an articulated (and ultimately written) moral code. And in many cases informal norms and religious codes have become embedded ultimately in secular law—that, at least, was the pattern in the Western world.

What this means, as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and many others of their 18th-century era understood explicitly and wrote about, is that below the level of formal law —in the British and then the American case customary law—lay centuries of informal development at whose root was the social network of reciprocal shared expectations. The most obvious example to Smith had to do with routines of trading commodities and services being the prerequisite for the eventual development of formal legal contracts. Put a slightly different way, James C. Scott, in his "anarchist's squint," insists that:

> Most villages and neighborhoods function precisely because of the informal, transient networks of coordination that do not require formal organization. . . . [T]he formal order of the liberal state depends fundamentally on a social capital of habits of mutuality and cooperation that antedate it. . . ."[3]

Burke could not have said it better.

The existence of social networks of reciprocal shared expectations within a given community is what "social trust" means as a locution of contemporary social science—or social capital in Scott's and others' terminology. Having it conduces to efficient, reliable, and hence more voluminous exchanges at low transactional costs, hence adding to general prosperity via the balm of local comparative advantage. Having it allows people to relax a bit, take some basic stabilities of social relations for granted, and hence reduce the cognitive load of day-to-day transactions. Having it usually conduces, too, to a sense of shared responsibility for the commons, and hence to spontaneous informal cooperation in the face of challenge or miscellaneous perceived need from which everyone may benefit. In short, social trust facilitates transactions, provides a secure nest for the expression of individual creativity, and enables collective action for the common weal.

Collective action includes security considerations—"eyes on the street," as Jane Jacobs called it in a modern urban context in her justly famous _The Death and Life of Great American Cities_ (1961), a concept related as well to James Q. Wilson's famous "broken windows" insight. And it includes a sense of there being a certain seemingly natural common responsibility to care for the weakest members of the society: the very young, the very old, the ill, and the infirm. Institutional extensions of faith communities traditionally took up this burden. When that institutional set up yields to government responsibility, it means something significant has changed (see reason seven, below).

It is important to stress the role of _social_ virtues—norms that the culture holds up as character traits to which individuals are bidden to aspire. As Fukuyama put it: "The social virtues, including honesty, reliability, cooperativeness, and a sense of duty to others, are critical for incubating the individual ones. . . ."[4] Wrote another social scientist, "Social life takes up and freezes into itself the conceptions we have of it," so when social life produces conceptions of proper behavior and positive character traits, individuals through their behavior become the intertwined carriers and transmitters forward of those conceptions.[5] Not all such conceptions, moral and otherwise, have obvious or direct implications for prosperity or communal security, but many do.

Again with reference to Burke and his era of liberal thinkers—as the word liberal was used then—a community that takes care of itself in this highly interpersonal and relatively "flat" manner does not need the heavy hierarchical hand of distant government to do such things for it:

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without.

The conclusion, as it moves from the domains of anthropology and sociology to political theory, almost states itself: The ballast provided by social trust enables a relatively light-handed government to do for a collection of communities in a larger country only what they cannot readily do for themselves. Hence it conduces to government that is neither greedy of its purview and hence is not just limited but self-limiting; that conduces to federal arrangements that recognize the merit in balanced subsidiarity; that is not overbearing in its demeanor (read: authoritarian); and that is not mercantilist in its method of self-funding, but rather social-contractual. The result can be, in a word, liberty.

With that brief grounding in what social trust is and why it matters, we can address why we seem to have less, really altogether too little, of it today. I make no claim about the meaningfulness of the order of presentation here, or necessarily as to how the seven pieces might relate to one another. None are fully original to me; all are in circulation, and entire books have been written about most of them. Some are more often invoked and more widely accepted than others; some are more controversial than others, as well. Some are richly based empirically, others less so, one or two barely more anchored than educated speculation.

But as you will see, these seven points are drawn from very different domains and hence spite conventional academic boundaries. Alas, as is often the case when causal tracks vary in this way, some observers will focus on one or two to the exclusion of the others. My aim is simply to note down all seven *in one place*, in the hope that a simple and relatively short synoptic display might stimulate creative analysis.

First, but not necessarily most important, the United States has now a more heterogeneous population than it has had for a long time. Of our roughly 325 million people, some 43 million are foreign-born immigrants—about 13.4 percent. That figure does not include at least ten million illegal immigrants, or take into account the usual demographic momentum of first-generation Americans; if we add foreign-born and first-generation Americans together, we get more than 80 million, or something like a full quarter of the legal population. We have not seen numbers like that since before the 1924 immigration restrictions; even for an historically immigrant-based society, we are near historic highs. And the heterogeneity generated by this immigration, set off by legal changes dating from 1965, has been unprecedentedly mobile: More different kinds of culture-bearers live in more places in the United States than was ever the case before 1924.

People of different subcultures, whose very volume makes them hard to assimilate quickly, will naturally lack a strong sense of reciprocal shared expectations with more tenured residents. "Old-timers" will not as readily trust culturally distinct newcomers as much as people like themselves, not necessarily because they are xenophobes,

bigots, or racists, but because their ability to judge intentions will be reduced. When they hear different languages and see different living styles that reflect different value priorities, their cognitive load increases; there is less that can be taken for granted. Moreover, some groups of immigrants will not incline to trust other groups of immigrants for the same reason. In short, while diversity is beneficial socially over the long haul, too much diversity too fast undermines social trust.[6]

It is true that while behavioral traits are the main cause here, physical appearance often cannot be, or at any rate is not, separated from behavior. That includes everything from styles of dress, which can be changed quickly, to skin tones, which cannot.

Some believe that there is a genetic element involved here, too, whose main impact is to affect behavior but which may correlate with appearance. People with more or less the same allele distribution (the genome itself is invariant in all humans, hence the confusion about what is meant by the term "race") tend to share attitudes nurtured by the institutional setup of their hearth culture; they are more likely to have reasonably reciprocal expectations of others' behavior. Those with different allele distributions, and hence from slightly-to-significantly different institutional setups, are less likely to have reasonably reciprocal expectations of others' behavior.[7] This is a thesis that is both plausible and discomfiting to many, for obvious reasons; in any event, its accuracy or error remains to be empirically demonstrated.

Aside from the numbers, our heterogeneity is amplified, arguably, by the advent of a form of identity politics that mitigates against assimilation. We are not only more heterogeneous, but pressures to assimilate have attenuated to the point that many old-time natives think that the heterogeneity will freeze in place, deepen, and increase. They fear, sometimes irrationally, that this process will end up marginalizing those who were once a clear majority. Rational or not, such anticipations—a combination of raw numbers and changed social norms—can be disconcerting to some people, and obviously not just Americans, as crowds chanting for a "white Europe" illustrate.

At one level anyway, such concerns should hardly be surprising. Every country in the world has what in German is called a *leitkultur*, a leading culture. That *leitkultur* everywhere supplies the template for social trust to accrue and consummate its positive benefits for community. The ideological point of view that sees all nationalism and, indeed, all local vernacular social affinities as anti-liberal is not only mistaken on the merits, but flies in the face of several millennia of social history and its attendant logic.

Second, America is no longer a religious Protestant society, and the decline of traditional religion as the *ur*-source of moral, still-mainly-informal and often-implicit mutuality, is a key source of social trust destruction. Recall from above that the social virtues are usually incubated in one phase or another of their development within faith communities. That was certainly true for Britain and America. John Adams probably said it best: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is

wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Other societies, Adams suggested, that lack institutions to properly restrain the passions must drop a heavier hand of government on the people.[8] And so let us complete the famous Burke quote brought above:

> Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

But wait, I hear the objection: How can it be claimed that America is no longer a religious Protestant society when Evangelical Protestantism is so strong, and when rural America shows fewer signs of having been pulled along in a secularist direction?

The answer is twofold: First, the census numbers show that America is no longer majority Protestant—the figure is now about 46 percent. Indeed, for the first time in American history we have a Supreme Court with no Protestants among its Justices—a vivid symbol of a changed sectarian demography.

Second, more important, evangelical Protestantism should not be equated with traditional Protestant moral norms. Evangelical Protestantism in the United States today (26.3 percent of the total) is not traditional, but rather a form of Christian neo-fundamentalism. While it is treacherous to generalize, much of it derives from a 19th-century revisionist theology associated with John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren. This is where the pre-millenarian theology of the Rapture comes from, so central to the Evangelical mindset—and so very different from the tenderly pragmatic worldly faith of the American Founders. The "ol' time religion" it claims itself to be it most certainly isn't.

The mainline Protestant successors to the Founders—including latter-day descendants of both Anglican/Episcopalian and Calvinist/Dutch Reform variants of Protestantism—make up not 46 percent but only about 16 percent of the population. This is a very far cry from its dominance in John Adams's time.

It goes almost without saying, too, that the nation's elites—political, economic, media, and cultural—tend to the secular side, aggressively so as one moves toward the Left on the political spectrum. And like it or not, elites punch above their demographic weight in all societies.

One can observe the implications of this imbalance between elite and mass, and correspondingly between urban and rural, in the tectonic shift in recent years concerning attitudes toward gender, particularly homosexuality and all matters related thereto. By noting this shift I am not judging it; I am merely suggesting that it constitutes an illustrative sidebar to the erosion of the traditional mainline Protestant American moral code that correlates with, and is probably causally related to, the decline in social trust. It seems that once the majority—and the dominant majority among American elites—stopped affirming by their behavior the motto "In God We Trust," then trust in general began to plummet.

Societies need a common language to discuss good and evil—and whether the distinction is artificial or foundational is almost beside the point. Without one, without the ability to sustain a credible storyline about right and wrong behavior, societies suffer.

And it is not only the headline "Thou Shalts" and "Thou Shalt Nots" that matter. Beneath the articulated moral code in any society is a general sense of propriety, which used to be commonly expressed in the Anglo-American world by the term "unseemly." Certain behaviors may not violate the explicit moral canon, but they are "simply not done." Clearly, understood definitions of unseemly behavior have generally been class-focused—and a lot of them have clustered around relations between male and female, where being too explicit was itself taken to be unseemly. But in self-described egalitarian societies like that of the United States (never mind the reality for the time being), the distance between this subtler form of "middle-class morality," to use the famous phrase uttered by Stanley Holloway in *My Fair Lady*, and the more explicit code has been arguably shorter than in more class-stratified Britain. When a serviceable hypocrisy can no longer maintain the authority of this under-level of moral authority, it drains the reservoir of social trust within, and between, social classes.

Third, Americans engage in less face-to-face behavior thanks to the advancing technology of 21st-century capitalism, and we have more class segregation (which overlaps with racial segregation still to a considerable degree) partly as a result as well. Thanks, for example, originally to television—the *ur* source of postwar social isolation —and then to ATMs, smart gas pumps and grocery store checkout technologies, ring roads around inner cities, video games, and now IT-enabled social media obsessiveness —complete with its much-remarked echo-chamber effects—people of different social classes (and political views) encounter and interact with each other less than they once did.

In social terms, all this amounts to a form of added mediation in an era characterized generally by technology-driven *dis*intermediation, showing that technology can cause both. But the IT-driven effects also pose a paradox. Their cumulative effects, while mixed, lean heavily toward isolation and hence individuation, but their extant and especially potential uses by large IT companies and governments threaten a massive erosion of privacy and genuine autonomy—the foundational basis of American liberal democratic culture.

Since the "tribal" political divisions from which we suffer are class-based far more that raw race-based, the relative segregation of face-to-face interaction matters. Not that members of different classes in America ever trusted each other as much as did members within a class, but constant and frequent interaction did arguably reduce the social distance and hence the sense of otherness between classes. People from different walks of life and viewpoints just don't talk with each other much anymore, and that is a problem.

It is also harder to form face-to-face aided bonds of trust with people when nearly everyone seems to have become a short-termer; just when you get to really know workmates, either they're gone or you are. That brings to mind an old Carol King lyric fragment—"Doesn't anybody stay in one place, anymore?"—that reflected a generic complaint of the times. Sixties idealists hated big institutions—corporations, bureaucracies, and bourgeoisie trade unions—and vowed to destroy them in their desire to run Ferdinand Tönnies backwards: from the alienating industrial hardness of *Gesellschaft* toward the communal softness of *Gemeinschaft*. But those large institutions, whatever their downsides, combined people of different socio-economic strata more stably and better than do the more niche-like workplaces of today. As Richard Sennett put it more than a dozen years ago in a Yale lecture series:

> The fragmenting of the big institutions has left many people's lives in a fragmented state: the places they work more resembling train stations than villages, as family life is disoriented by the demands of work. Migration is the icon of the global age, moving on rather than settling in. Taking institutions apart has not produced more community.[9]

Or, as he might have added, produced more social trust.

It could be, too, that not only are Americans more distant and alienated from those of different socio-economic classes, but also from themselves—or rather, from who they wish and once expected to be. Grappling with work for most people these days in the "gig economy" means being relentlessly tilted toward the uncertainties of the future than toward the stabilities of the past. Again, Sennett:

> A self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is—to put a kindly face on the matter—an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this; they need a sustaining life narrative; they take pride in being good at something specific; and they value the experiences they've lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them.[10]

And damaged people, all else equal, are disinclined to trust anything or anyone.

Fourth, for a variety of reasons American institutions do not work as well as they used to. Institutional failures can wash back on people's expectations, so the decline in trust is manifest not only in face-to-face social relations but also in individuals' interactions with organizations, governmental and otherwise. As David Blankenhorn put it:

It's possible, of course, that declining social trust is less the cause of our problems than the result of them. This argument has a familiar ring. Americans stopped trusting politicians when politicians, particularly in the Vietnam and Watergate era, stopped being trustworthy. Americans lost trust in many key social institutions—from marriage to political parties to organized religion to news organizations—when those institutions stopped meeting people's needs and expectations. Americans stopped trusting people with whom they disagree politically when those people started embracing crazy, dangerous ideas.

He might have added government bureaucracy, as the enlarging American administrative state showed its frailties. Support for redistributive programs like food stamps and affirmative action fell when people increasingly doubted government's basic management competency.[11]

In other words, there may well be a rolling dialectic going on here, institutional dysfunction being both consequence and then cause of trust leakages elsewhere and for additional other reasons. If, therefore, the seven reasons noted here form some kind of logical sequence, the backwash of institutional dysfunction as a source of trust leakage would perhaps be somewhere in the middle.

What Blankenhorn does not mention is that it is not only dysfunctional institutions that can create a backwash of eroded trust, but also the behavior of the elites who run those institutions or, at the least, are identified with them. When elites are perceived as being self-serving, corrupt, arrogant, detached, patronizing and condescending, it matters because it smashes accumulated bridging social capital between classes. And when business and political elites produce material outcomes—like perceived growing inequality (never mind the details, which are often got wrong[12])—that appear to harm non-elites, the smashing gets louder. Hillary Clinton's mistake was not just using the word "deplorables"; it was the fact that she used it as though she really meant it. People need not be racists or xenophobes to have their basic human dignity assaulted, and she—along with far too much of the Democratic Party elite—did exactly that, with consequences since manifest.

Public respect for most elites and their associated institutions is for the most part low in the United States and has been dropping for a long time now—though it has arguably been dropping even faster since around 2008–09. Increasingly, Americans don't trust any forms of social authority or those elites associated with them. And that is why the flow of information from beyond direct experience has become easier to disrupt by those with an interest in doing so; the Trump-era "fake news" phenomenon, in other words, is a consequence of the willful manipulation of natural mental myopia far more than it is a function of actual media bias.

This is not the first time this sort of thing has happened in history, or even in American history. A reasonable case can be made that the degree of mass mistrust of elites today is more the norm, the middle of the 20th century being an upside exception driven by the exigencies of the Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. I suspect

that argument is true but exaggerated. Whatever the case, several observers in recent years have picked up on Arnold Toynbee's vocabulary concerning the decay of a "creative minority" worthy of respect and emulation into a "dominant minority" whose failures and misdeeds lead even many of their own progeny to adopt anti-elite styles and, indeed, sometimes to set up the very lowest socio-economic echelons of society as their models for emulation.[13] Toynbee spoke of "lapses into truancy" when it came to civic obligations—not voting, for example, in electoral democracies—and "surrender to a sense of promiscuity" that is "apt to appear first in the ranks of the proletariat and spread from there to the ranks of the dominant minority." Evidence of this process in America includes the meteoric rise of tattoos and body piercings among middle and upper middle-class people, the adoption of hooker fashion in young women's clothing, the vulgarization of popular music lyrics (for example, "gangsta rap" and its broad popularity), art (for example, "Piss Christ" and those who claim to see its genius), comedy routines (for example, Louis C.K.)—and there is more.

When this process of what Toynbee called (a little insensitively in my view, my father having been a member of the Teamsters Union) the "proletarianization" of styles goes past a tipping point, it becomes, in his view, irreversible:

> Schism in the soul, schism in the body social, will not be resolved by any scheme to return to the good old days (archaism), or by programs guaranteed to render an ideal projected future (futurism), or even by the most realistic, hardheaded work to weld together again the deteriorating elements [of civilization]. Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new.

We can certainly detect in our circumstances what Toynbee meant by archaism (read: Trumpian "make America great again" nostalgia) and also by futurism (read: progressive "zero tolerance" utopianism). We can even recognize a few hardheaded centrist projects for renewal that come mainly from the margins, or from just outside, of the political class. As to the rest, perhaps he was mistaken in his ultimate conclusion?

Fifth, American's mass entertainment media plays a role in the decline of social trust. George Gerbner's "mean world syndrome" is, I believe, a very powerful explanatory factor in the leakage of social trust. Mass media "entertainment" messages, which Gerbner called "industrial folklore," leads people who watch a lot of television and Hollywood fare to think the world is a lot nastier a place than it really is.[14] The shock value that draws viewers, and hence that big retail-oriented companies love because it increases the reach of their advertising, draws from the artificial drama of violence, perversity, and corruption. All forms of these three categories are wildly more prevalent in fictionalized television and Hollywood drama then they are in reality, but most people, it turns out, are affected by what they take in whether they realize its fictional origin or not.

An adjunct of the "mean world syndrome" over the past few decades is what I have called the *Three Days of the Condor* syndrome: the massively popular idea that the U.S. government is evil, sinister, and amounts to some sort of deep state conspiracy that peddles crack to ghetto-dwellers, lies about having put a man on the moon, about how a plane seemingly crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11, and so on.

As it happens, the "mean world syndrome" is brought to us by messages apart from electronic media. For many years companies got "public service" tax breaks by putting pictures of "missing children" on milk cartons. The presumption allowed to stand was that these children were abducted and abused by sexual deviants, contributing to the premier American moral panic of the 1980s. Of course, the vast majority of them were actually abducted by one of their own parents or grandparents in bitter post-divorce custody battles. But perceptions changed anyway; for example, Halloween trick-or-treat customs in many places became seriously attenuated. All of this and more—fairly insane gun laws, which provide a path of all-but-no-resistance to mentally-ill people bent on mass murder, for example—have contributed to heightened risk-aversion sensitivity in general, which expresses itself everywhere from playground construction to the protocols of children being able to walk to school without chaperones.

Some think that gradual secular trends toward greater urbanization are partly responsible for this. No one is more alone than among a crowd in a large city, and nowhere else does our glancing shield kick into overdrive like it does in cities. But that remains to be empirically demonstrated.

Whatever the case, Americans have become more fearful overall. America's children have become more fearful in particular, whether because of the cues they pick up from rattled parents, or from the echo-chamber magnifications of social media, or from the exaggeration they are too young to parse of the threat of terrorism and a sensationalist media's amplification of that fear, or from mass killings seemingly every other week lately, or some combination of these and other factors. Whatever the sources, a fearful society is almost by definition going to hemorrhage social trust.

Sixth, like it or not, the social science evidence is simply irrefutable that unstable and broken families tend to sire emotionally insecure children, who grow up to become big insecure children who happen to resemble mature adults. Trust betrayed in youth sets a powerful psychological precedent. Young people who are in essence betrayed by the ones who are supposed to love them most and take care of them are often extremely reluctant to really repose trust in anyone or anything. Emotionally traumatized children, in turn, often have trouble forming solid marital bonds later on, which has the effect of perpetuating the problem.

There are those, mostly on the Left, who have attacked the very moral basis of the nuclear family, and for that matter of biologically based family altogether. Toward the extreme feminist and "queer" end of the "it takes a village" position, the traditional family is disdained because of its traditional patriarchal authority structure.[15] People can believe whatever they like; what they cannot do is change human social nature in a trice. They thus prove Jerry Rubin selectively right once again: Ideology is, indeed, a

brain disease. It strikes me as particularly ironic, as well as tragic, that the communities suffering most from unstable and broken families are the ones most damaged by this ideology—which is an after-rationalization of the "sexual revolution" with all the downsides airbrushed away—which claims special empathy for them.

Seventh, let us recall the mixed competitive and cooperative nature of human societies and human beings as social animals. Thomas Hobbes was half right and half wrong to call life in the absence of a sovereign (read: the state) nasty, brutish, and short. Yes, humans are competitive, but that is not all they are. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also half right and half wrong to believe in the noble savage whose nobility is effaced by the depravities of civilization. Yes, humans naturally cooperate, but that is not all they do.

As described at the outset, the sinews of normal social life are composed of informal mutualities arising from the habits of culture, and the sum is designed to constrain and channel both our competitive and our cooperative nature. This is, again to briefly repeat, the organic social glue that enables a liberal form of government to be limited, and self-limiting.

Should that glue dissolve for whatever reasons—and an excessive and self-actualizing belief in radical American individualism, coming from market fundamentalism on the Right and expressive individualism on the Left, seems to be the most important of these reasons[16]—a governing elite has two choices: It can substitute formal institutional authority for depleted informal mutuality; or it can try to find a way to restore informal mutuality.

Left-of-center types tend to prefer option one, right-of-center types prefer option two if they can think of a way to effect the restoration. We have in recent decades gone mainly the way of option one, and it may well be that an enlarged state does not so much *follow* from Hobbes's take-no-prisoner egoist so much as *create* that egoist. We quoted James C. Scott above, but now, as with the foregoing quote from Burke, let us see more of the same quote:

> [T]he formal order of the liberal state depends fundamentally on a social capital of habits of mutuality and cooperation that antedate it, *which it cannot create, and which in fact it undermines*. The state, arguably, destroys the natural initiative and responsibility that arise from voluntary cooperation. Further, the neoliberal celebration of the individual maximizer over society. . . encourage[s] habits of social calculation that smack of social Darwinism. . . . [W]e are in danger now of becoming precisely the dangerous predators that Hobbes thought populated the state of nature. Leviathan may have given birth to its own justification.[17]

In other words, spiting Tocqueville, Americans may have foolishly deprecated their own communalist past in the name of an ideological manqué of individualism, leading to more intrusive government to mend the resultant tears in the social fabric, leading in turn to the destruction of the basis for creative individualism. Ironic, no?

You don't have to be a squinting anarchist to grasp Scott's point, and you don't have to agree with all of it to see the sense in some of it. Many others, far more conservative than Scott, have decried the "soft despotism" of the "nanny state," and others have used different terminology to make the same point.[18] This suggests, among other things, that anarchists presumably on the Left and Burkean conservatives presumably on the Right actually share a basic understanding of political theory in what is a horseshoe-shaped rather than a straight-line political spectrum. The gap between the top of the left curve and the top of the right curve of the horseshoe often enough invites a synapse.

Even some to the Left have done similarly by pointing out the too-sly paternalism of "nudging," for example, arguing for more direct progressive steps to achieve desired social policy objectives without infantilizing the citizenry.[19] All of these perspectives share at least one conclusion: Trust suffers when the state insinuates itself into every nook and cranny of a person's decision calculus, displacing the natural dynamic of the informal cultural vernacular. It is a point reminiscent of the folk wisdom that defines how one spoils a child: Doing for the child what the child either can or needs to learn to do for himself.

When people become entangled with a large number of others who are either culturally unlike themselves, or with gray-suited bureaucrats who per force evince no personal culture whatsoever, their intention-detecting systems becomes worn out and numbed, desperate and exhausted. The result of increasingly intrusive government, then, is not to substitute in a positive way for the loss of the organic community dynamics of reciprocal expectations of behavior, but *to further erode them* by drying up the reservoir of opportunities for informal mutuality. One expression of this erosion is the over-the-top specificity of bureaucratic rule-making that squelches local initiative along with, frequently enough, common sense.[20] The point is that the liberal state can suffocate the social basis of its own legitimacy, the wellspring of its own vitality, when it fails to be sufficiently self-limiting.

When different kinds of causal threads interweave to produce any social outcome, it becomes increasingly difficult as time passes to specify their relative causal weight, their possible interactions and sequencing, and their trajectory going forward. Those difficulties I leave to those more expert than me, in hopes that some of them crack the code.

What is far clearer is that the seven strands differ as to how amenable they are to remediation through public policy. Of these seven factors—immigration-driven heterogeneity, the decline of traditional religious mores and related informal norms, technology-driven isolation, the backwash of institutional dysfunction and elite dethronement, the media-driven "mean world syndrome," family instability and breakdown, and the excessive intrusiveness of the state—only a few seem subject to even remotely quick fixes. Worse, the problem doubles back in such a way as to undermine at least some solutions to at least some aspects of the problem. Again, Blankenhorn gets the essence:

Perhaps, in order to regain trust in one another, we need some big, sweeping changes. Reform our election laws. Change how Congress operates. Put an end to gerrymandering. Reduce the influence of money in politics. Reinvent political parties. Make journalism more responsible. Reduce inequality. Make society more just. I'm convinced that these and similar changes could contribute significantly to renewing social trust, just as I'm convinced that doing any of these things will be difficult because . . . we don't trust one another.

This suggests that, however the problem arose, the decline of social trust has taken on a downward-spiraling life of its own, generating not only a compounding lack of trust but also an ambient pessimism about the future. So we have not just a problem, but a problem set defined by these seven causal elements.

All of which begs the question: What can be done about it? As Blankenhorn described the problem but avoided analyzing the reasons for it, I am content for now with analyzing the reasons but not venturing far into the prescriptive mode. I will, however, sketch out some bare basics.

It is possible to constrain and reshape immigration in order to reduce the churn of assimilating new citizens. Doing that would probably downshift American demographic momentum, with a range of depressive economic consequences. But it can be done in sensible and reasonably consensual ways, and it ought to be done.

As for making pragmatic but believing Protestants a majority again, or bringing back the tenor of what used to be the distinction between the proper and unseemly behavior, or throwing on the brakes to slow down 21st-century capitalist innovation, or putting a halt to the scoundrel cascades that now characterize American elite behavior,[21] or making media stop perpetuating the mean-world syndrome, or dealing with family instability and breakdown in vulnerable communities, there is little that conventional American politics can do directly to address any of these social trust sinkholes.

For example, if it is true, as one recent McKinsey study claims, that a third of the U.S. workforce might be displaced by automation within the next 13 years, then we obviously need to slow this process down dramatically so that we can figure out the deeper implications for society and figure some way to buffer them.[22] If we are driven nearly berserk politically by current levels of labor displacement—and we are—we will clearly enter the domain of full-frontal social unsustainability if the challenge more than quadruples in a single generation. And yet at present there is absolutely zero prospect that the American political class will do anything about this. Some people are terrified about what a rising deficit could mean, but compared to the existential threat to social order posed by an automation-driven political economy derangement of this magnitude, the deficit problem, serious as it is, seems like no more than a bad hangnail.

I have left the best part for last: intrusive, nanny state government. Yes, it is true, just as Scott and many others have pointed out, that, as I put it above, too much government can suffocate the social basis of its own legitimacy, and the wellspring of its own vitality, when it fails to be sufficiently self-limiting. But 21st-century capitalism is chewing up social trust the way an asphalting machine chews up old pavement and lays down new, and with the IT revolution it has gone into manic overdrive. It is no surprise, then, that demands for government to "do something" prove irresistible.

Market fundamentalists and libertarians often talk as though the Burkean sinews of healthy societies were never so much as mildly ruffled before the New Deal came along, and that subsequent ruffling has been all government's fault. A mere weekend reading of Karl Polanyi's 1944 classic *The Great Transformation* would disabuse them of their error, which is to think that social relations are embedded in economic realities rather than the other way around. Ironically, the epistemology of that error—the supposed all-but-primeval "natural" existence of markets and monetized economies—they have in common with none other than Rousseau and Marx. Only the affect differs.

The disturbing truth is that both the juggernaut of late capitalism *and* the modern administrative state's efforts to control that juggernaut incline to deplete social capital, such that efforts to deal with the problem often end up making it worse. The same is true in Europe, but to a lesser extent at least in those places where a tradition of social democracy, now a century old in some places, has managed to cling to a wiser balance between markets and government than that common in the United States at least since the 1980s.

Activist government does not *have* to chew up American social trust, however. There are examples in American history of bold government programs that have *created* social trust: Note the Homestead and Morrill Acts of 1862; the Civilian Conservation Corps; and the World War II-era draft and the GI Bill, for the main examples. Were we to adopt a more Whig-like view of government, we could—in theory at least—do this again: stop the rush of capillary-scale government intrusions and restart the bolder, constructive things government can do in building human capital and institutional coherence as well as social trust—the trinity formula for success in our time.[23]

Unfortunately, the chances of that happening with the current U.S. political class in charge are vanishingly small. As it is, the downward spiral composed of the dialectic between ravaging 21st-century capitalism and counterproductive government efforts to buffer it begins to look like the mechanism within Toynbee's death and rebirth scenario noted above. Hopefully, that perception will turn out to be mistaken.

[1]David Blankenhorn recently underlinedirected his intellect toward this subject. In so doing he followed several other older book-length assessments: Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* from 1995; Robert D. Putnam's famous *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, published in 2000 but derived from a 1995 essay in the *Journal of Democracy*; and Mark J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (2005).

[2]A caveat: Solomon Asch's famous conformity experiments from the 1950s show that even direct experience can be undermined by peer pressure in certain contexts.

[3]Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. xxi-xxii.

[4]Fukuyama, *Trust*, p. 43.

[5]See generally Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harper & Row, 1976).

[6]Left-of-center Americans want to resist this conclusion, for their Enlightenment-lite universalist faith postulates that people are so malleable as to be culturally interchangeable. Robert Putnam himself resisted this conclusion for years, until, as an honest social scientist, the data overwhelmed his bias. See Putnam, "*E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century, The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, 2007.

[7]Note Nicholas Wade, _The Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History_ (Penguin, 2014).

[8]This is as good a place as any to note that this brief essay leaves out a lot. Social trust (or capital) in any given society is not a simple dichotomous variable—either there is a lot, a little, or some. Every society has its own shape or signature of social trust. Putnam distinguished, for example, between bonding and bridging forms of social trust: trust within subunits of society and trust between them. For example, Russia is often characterized as a low-trust society, but experts show that this is too a description. Russian social trust is hourglass shaped: high within families; low between them; and high at the symbolic level for the upper institutions of the society, such as the president and the church. The prevalence of low trust in the great yawning middle of Russian society partly explains the reasons for high trust at the ends. The deeper historical reasons for this shape are debated.

[9]Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2006), p. 2. A compatible analysis attends both Daniel T. Rogers, *Age of Fracture* (Harvard University Press) and Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic* (Basic Books, 2016), and other recent works as well. But Sennett led the way.

[10]Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, p. 5.

[11]A key argument in Hetherington, *loc. cit.*

[12]To get them right, see Neil Gilbert, _Never Enough: Capitalism and the Progressive Spirit_ (Oxford University Press, 2017), and Tyler Cowen, "The Inequality That Matters," *The American Interest* (January/February 2011).

[13]For example, Charles Murray, _Coming Apart_ (Crown Forum, 2012), pp. 285-91. One needn't credit Murray's libertarianism—I do not— to learn from his work.

[14]For a review of Gerbner's work, see Joseph Turow, "Industrial Folklore," *The American Interest*.

[15]A recent example is Richard Beck, _We Believe the Children_ (PublicAffairs, 2015), which argues that the "patriarchal nuclear family" was the real cause behind the child-abuse moral panic of the 1980s.

[16]A key argument in Fukuyama, *Trust*, Part IV; and mooted in David Brooks, _The Social Animal_ (Random House, 2008), pp. 320–1.

[17]Scott, pp. xxii-xxiii. Italics added.

[18]Note for just one example Paul A. Rahe, _Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect_ (Yale University Press, 2009).

[19]Steven Teles, "Nudge, or Shove?" *The American Interest* (January/February 2015).

[20]The main argument of Philip K. Howard, _The Rule of Nobody: Saving America from Dead Laws and Broken Government_ (W.W. Norton, 2014), an interesting if somewhat cranky book.

[21]I defined a scoundrel cascade (and a virtue cascade) here. In brief, it happens when people do "what they know to be improper or harmful by using the excuse that if they don't do it, less morally constrained others will put them at a competitive disadvantage." Think athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs, or banksters almost all the time.

[22]See Danielle Paquette, "Robots Could Replace Nearly a Third of the U.S. Workforce by 2030," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2017.

[23]As I have suggested in "A New Pioneer Act," *National Affairs* (Winter 2016/2017).

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