Social Divisions of Trust: Scepticism and Democracy in the *GM Nation?* Debate

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Abstract

This paper reviews recent developments in research on institutional and expert trust across a number of disciplines to show that a deferential and accepting public stance in relation to officially sanctioned judgements is increasingly being replaced by a more sceptical approach. One outcome is a move towards greater public engagement in issues of high profile new technology. This paper reviews the literature and considers the most substantial public engagement exercise in the UK so far – the *GM Nation?* debate in 2002-3. It shows that scepticism is widespread but that the relation between scepticism and trust differs across social groups. Among the more privileged scepticism undermines trust. Among working class and less well educated groups scepticism and trust are positively correlated

Introduction

It is a commonplace of academic and policy debate that trust in experts and in institutions is changing. The traditional deferential, accepting trust of the lay public in the wisdom of authorities (political, administrative and technical) has increasingly been replaced by more critical and engaged attitudes. The impact of this shift can be traced in UK government activities that seek the active engagement of a wider citizenry to enhance public commitment to new policy directions. However, there is increasing evidence that shifts in trust and trust responses are socially differentiated by experience and social group so that a 'one size fits all' approach to public engagement may disregard some interests. One reason for this may be that the emphasis in some of the contributing social sciences has tended to be on approaches which stress the idea of the public as a homogenous entity, encapsulated in the notion of a respondent in a survey or an experiment as an undifferentiated 'universal individual'. The outcome may be a process of policy development that directs attention disproportionately to the interests of those groups most prominent in engagement exercises.

This paper considers discussion of the importance of and trends in trust in recent political science, sociology and psychology, and then goes on to examine the *GM Nation?* debate – the largest consultation exercise so far in the UK – and some recent evidence on the structure of public trust in this area.

The Social Significance of Trust

Two themes emerge most powerfully in recent discussion of institutional and expert trust. First, trust at this level has been seen as socially important because it facilitates

by reducing the authority and capacity to act of co-ordinating institutions such as national governments while increasing the potential for instability of international financial and product markets (Held, 1999);

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It stresses the emergence of a more discriminating and sceptical approach to trust among what might be seen as a better educated, ('cleverer' as Giddens, 1994, puts it), but more querulous citizenry.

The Contributions of Political Science, Sociology and Psychology

The idea that trust resources are under pressure is reflected in work across a range of disciplines, which we will briefly review:

Political Science

A central concern of political science is the expansion and sustainability of democratic government. A path breaking work in the post-war period was Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*, which sought to identify through cross-national research the essential components of a civic culture capable of sustaining democracy. Their conclusions identify two basic components: engagement and deference (1963). On the one hand, the citizens of democracy must be sufficiently concerned about the democratic process and sufficiently well informed to participate as appropriate, in voting at periodic elections, in calling their representatives to account and in feeding information on their needs to the politicians. On the other, they must be sufficiently deferential to accept the results of elections and of political processes which set priorities they may not themselves share.

A major recent study, coming from the Harvard government project, investigates the decline in trust in major governmental institutions observed internationally during the past three decades. Norris is careful, following Easton (1965, 75) to distinguish different aspects of political trust. She interprets a range of studies drawing on ISSP, WVS and national election study evidence to argue: 'in established democracies during the last decades of the 20th century, growing numbers of citizens have become

dissatisfied with the performance of their political system and particularly the institutions of representative government' (1999, 269).

Nye carries out a careful analysis of possible explanations of declining trust in US and West European governments and argues that the most important factors are bound up with the 'Third Industrial Revolution' and current continuing social changes (the impact on the political process of new media which democratise and accelerate information flows, an increasingly globalised world, the associated loss of nation-state authority, and the realignment of elites) rather than with economic shifts (the slow-down in growth and rising inequality of the 1980s and 1990s) or the growth of 'bi government (Nye, Zelikow and King, 1997, Table 11-1). He argues that 'a certain level of mistrust of government is a long-standing and healthy feature of ?American life' (p.276). It remains unclear whether this is in the longer term damaging for the democratic ideal and for government capacity to carry out its tasks, or a source of pressure for maintaining high standards.

These developments parallel new approaches in political theory. Building on the work of writers such as Mouffe (1993), recent work has stressed the importance of deliberation and reflection rather than simple representation in democratic processes (Beetham, 2000) Processes of deliberation and engagement are seen as central to building a stable and responsive democracy in a more globalised world, and ensuring that good opportunities are available for more critical and active citizens to challenge authorities (Held 2002, ch 1). This approach is influential in work oriented more directly to practical politics, for example Giddens, 1998 (subtitled the *The Renewal of Social Democracy*), or Marquand and Crouch (1995).

Sociology

Sociological interest in trust covers a broad range of issues from individual to social and community to institutional and structural; it has also accommodated a range of theoretical frameworks, from rational actor models (Coleman, 1986) though to highly cultural approaches (Lash in Beck et al 1994). A high degree of recognition of declining trust is evident across the discipline and here we focus on the socio-cultural

approaches, most notably risk society, which typify the distinctive contribution of the discipline.

question informs a great deal of sociological work (Tulloch and Lupton 2003; Lupton 1999;Giddens 1994; Lash et al, 1996; Bauman 1998). There is considerable evidence for the co-existence of diverse normative systems in relation to child care (Duncan and Edwards 1999) and in family life (Finch 1989; Williams 2003). These processes throw greater stress on mechanisms for social integration and some commentators argue that new forms of trust are emerging in this context. On this topic, Beck and Beck Gernsheim endorse Giddens' approach: 'Giddens gives a guardedly optimistic answer to the question of what holds modern society together: namely 'active trust' which ultimately requires a democratisation of democracy. Active trust is the basis of self culture. It assumes not a clinging to consensus, but the presence of dissent; it rests upon recognition … of the claim to a 'life of one's own' in a cosmopolitan world.' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 46). Giddens sees 'active trust' as replacing older traditions of trust. Whether or not to trust becomes in itself a

directly to risk and uncertainty. This leads to a definition of trust which expands Das and Teng's core idea: trust is 'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the behaviour of another' (1998, 395, compare 'voluntarily being vulnerable' Crasswell, 1993, 104)

This approach has generated a body of work developing increasingly sophisticated analyses of the components of trust, and now leads back to a refinement of the core notion. This has been applied by social psychologists in examination of the circumstances under which lay publics would or would not accept expert and official claims about matters which concerned them and the implications of this for understanding the social role of institutional trust (for example, Weyman and Kelly, 1999, Petts, 1998; Renn and Levine, 1991, Slovic, 2000, Royal Society 1997).

Initial work on trust identified two dimensions: competence and care, or trustworthiness (see for example Hovland et al, 1953). Further analysis refined the list of components, typically using principal components analysis techniques on responses to batteries of items in questionnaires. Renn and Levine (1991) identify

Other work on trust emphasizes the importance of affective and cultural components. Cvetovich and Earle (1997) argue that in everyday life, most people find complex risk issues too difficult and wearisome to analysis and resort to a general sense of sympathy with the institution (or otherwise) rather than cognition to guide them. This is analogous to Slovic's notion of the importance of an affect heuristic in making risky choices, and there are parallels to the notion of 'quick trust' (Alaszewski, 2003, 238) or 'facework-based trust' (Cook, ch 1 in Kramer and Cook, 2004) to account for the processes whereby people make decisions whether or not to trust doctors on the basis of brief interviews when they themselves are not competent to judge the issues. This approach is further developed by Eiser and colleagues (2002). Viklund (2003) and Rohrmann (1999, 145) stress the role of cultural factors to account for otherwise puzzling cross-national differences in levels of trust in relation to parallel developments, but this is relatively unexplored by psychologists.

The analysis of the dimensionality of trust to some extent parallels work in political science where typically the personal efficacy of the individual is distinguished from

social activities under conditions of uncertainty, which are particularly pressing at present. Secondly, there is quite widespread agreement that there have been substantial shifts in approaches to trust, reflecting shifts in the social context in which trust relations are important. Thirdly, there is a shift towards greater self-activity in relation to trust. From different perspectives, the language of critical citizens, active trust and accountability/scepticism points in a common direction which may be termed the 'new scepticism'.

There are also differences between approaches, particularly in relation to whether

correlated with social class. This leads some (for example, Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2003) to talk of a transformation rather than a decline in social capital.

From a social psychological perspective, there is evidence that trust and mistrust and engagement in consultations and similar exercises are spread differently across different social groups (Slovic 2000; Williams et al, 1999, 1021). Slovic also showed earlier that the degree of trust in experts and support for participation also varies between different societies (1993, 680). While much of risk society sociology operates at the level of an undifferentiated analysis of society, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim point out that the 'in the 1970s and 1980s it was no doubt possible to talk of an individualisation based on affluence, but since the early 1990s the starting point has rather been an individualisation based on the precarious conditions of a capitalism without work' (writing in the context of post-unification Germany - 2002, 47). This indicates that it may be appropriate to analyse the social processes that influence trust in terms of the impact on different social groups, rather than through a holistic social analysis in which a 'universal individual' is taken to stand for the whole of society.

Implications for Public Policy

The new scepticism may be seen as part of a positive development towards a more informed, disenchanted but engaged form of democracy, in which citizens do not provide automatic support for those who tell them that they know best, but demand to be treated on a more equal basis, something that might be seen as the development of traditional participatory democracy (Pateman, 1990) for more modern times. One response has been to seek to develop linkages between individuals and authorities that circumvent the traditional hierarchical patterns. These include a wide range of activities.

reforms. Examples are: the Social Security Roadshows in relation to Bush's proposals for substantial reduction of risk-pooling in relation to pensions in the US (VandeHei and Baker, 2005, 3); the 'Your Britain, Your Europe' Roadshow organised by the Foreign Office in 2000 (Hansard WA 7.4.00, 631W); the Roadshows to promote the wage support and benefit containment policies of New Labour (Glover and Stewart, 2000); and the *GM Nation?* debate, funded by government but conducted through an independent GM Public Debate Steering Board to 'find a way to foster informed public discussion of the development and application of new technologies' (AEBC, 2001, para 68) in 2001-2). These approaches form part of a new policy stance that treats service users more as quasi-independent consumers more than as dependent clients (Bauman, 1998). In general they correspond to an approach to government that emphasizes informed choice rather than top-down policy-making: 'Extending choice – for the many, not the few …. Choice and consumer power as the route to greater social justice not social division' (Blair 2003).

We now consider some recent empirical work on the most significant such exercise in the UK to date: the *GM Nation?* exercise.

The *'GM Nation?'* Debate

The development of GM food, particularly by US manufacturers, and attempts to introduce it to a largely resistant European market, were initially welcomed and supported by the UK government, eager to promote international trade and develop a position at the forefront of new technologies. This provoked widespread public concern summed up in headlines in the Daily Mail and elsewhere about the threat from 'Frankenfoods' (for example, Fowler, 2003) or the extensive warnings about 'the most powerful technology the world has ever known' on the GMWatch website (2005). As public concerns across Europe grew, many food retailers and processors have been forced to bar GM ingredients from their products. One result has been substantial pressure upon EU-level systems of environmental regulation leading to challenges to the traditional EU top-down technocratic approach and a greater emphasis on national subsidiarity. Different procedures have been followed in different countries with some placing more emphasis on regulation, some pursuing

experimentation and some relying more on ‘soft law’ approaches (Levidow, Carr and Wield, 2000, 203-5).

Mindful of the experience of BSE, in the late 1980s (Eldridge and Reilly, 2003, 140-2), when initial attempts by government to minimise the significance of the problem led to a damaging loss of public confidence as the government was forced to reverse

fragmented and considerable ambivalence co-existing alongside outright opposition' (Understanding Risk Team, 2004, 7). Thus 'the extent of opposition ..is probably lower than indicated in *GM Nation?* findings' (p. 10).

This point is reinforced by the work of Townsend and colleagues, which shows that 'more people than expected are willing to taste GM food and purchase it..' (Townsend

more critical approach by the public are becoming more marked in attitudes to authority in areas including science. The analysis concludes 'Conspicuously, all ratings on the first general trust factor were below the scale midpoint, indicating low trust in the government across the five risk issues. On the other hand, ratings on the scepticism factor were relatively high for each of the risk cases' (op cit, 43). Trust is low and scepticism of government high for GM Foods.

Table 1 about here

In the 2003 study, the questions covered trust in science and in government presentation and consultation more generally but focused on GM food. Trust in

Hirschmann's analysis, they have weak opportunities for exit or voice (Hirschman, 1970). In the science and society study, there was strong support for public consultation on scientific issues (81 per cent of the sample – DTI, 2005b 63). However some 70 per cent thought that government did not listen to the outcomes of public consultation and three quarters that it does not act on the outcome (63). 'The strong feelings of cynicism about the government and public consultation.. expressed at the discussion groups are supported by the survey findings. Far more feel that public consultation events are just public relations activities and do not make any difference to policy than feel they do' (64). In questions on the regulation of science 'the most widely given reasons tend to imply that *because* science is regulated we must trust the regulation: "we have to trust the scientists" (59).

There are some indications of why middle class groups might be less sceptical in this field. They believe themselves to be better informed (37), are more aware of the existence of government and professional regulation for science (58), more aware of consultation exercises such as *GM Nation?* (61) and much more willing to take part in consultation exercises (63). The detail of the pattern of attitudes is, however, complex. A cluster analysis of overall views on science produced six clusters. Two contained distinctively middle class respondents of which one was strongly oriented towards trust in science, but one was 'the least likely to place trust in science' (100-101), indicting sharp differences in opinion among this group.

This finding led to further analysis of the factor scales representing trust in government and scepticism for the 2003 survey. We examined the correlation between the scales among middle and working class groups and those with a higher and lower level of education (Table 3). Among middle class groups and those educated to first degree level or above there is a substantial and significant negative relationship between trust and scepticism (as might be expected), while for the less privileged the relation is weaker but highly significant and positive. The latter finding is counter-intuitive. On explanation, following Hirschman's analysis, would be that those with greater capacity and confidence to challenge and assess need to have their scepticism answered in order to trust, while others may experience scepticism, but feel they have little alternative but to trust. The former feel they have voice and need

to be convinced by government if their misgivings are to be assuaged. The latter lack voice and may be mistrustful but have no alternative to continued loyalty.

Table 3 about here

The group discussions fleshed this out. A number of issues, including the way the evidence on weapons of mass destruction issue had been handled in the run-up to the Iraq war, the BSE issue and the thalidomide tragedy were seen as '*particularly damaging to trust in Government*' (90). However the report concludes 'trust in government is low and more needs to be done to give reassurance to people on trust issues. ..the government needs to '*repay our trust.. We have nothing but blind faith in what they present to us*' (97).

Conclusions

The review of developments across a range

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Table 1: Factor analysis: attitudes to government about genetic testing, mobile phone radiation, climate change, GM food and radioactive waste, 2002

	Component

Table 2: Factor analysis: attitudes to government about GM food, 2003

	Component	
The government…	1	2
Has the same opinion as me about GM food	.80	-.14
Is doing good job with regard to GM food	.77	-.26
Distorts facts in its favour regarding GM food	-.30	.75
Changes policies regarding GM food without good reasons	-.32	.71
Is too influenced by the GM food industry	-.21	.79
Listens to concerns about GM food raised by the public	.66	-.30
Has the same ideas as me about GM food	.80	-.17
Listens what ordinary people think about GM food	.72	-.25
The government want to promote GM food	-.12	.62
Provides all relevant information about GM food to the public	.69	-.27
Eigenvalues	4.2	2.5
% of variance explained	38	23

Table 3: Correlations between the Trust and Scepticism factors – specific social groups, 2003

Social Class	Social Class A or B only (n=306)	Social Class D or E only (n=379)
Factor correlation	-.26**	+.13**
Level of education	Degree or Higher Degree only (n=275)	GCSE or Equivalent only (n=448)
Factor correlation	-.26**	+.45**