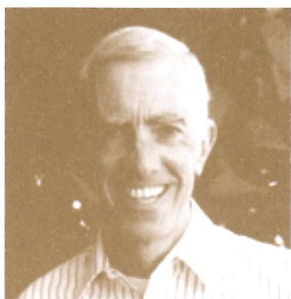


TECHNOLOGY AND TRUST

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WE THINK OF TRUST AS THE ANIMATING SPIRIT OF A PROSPEROUS SOCIETY. TRUST MAKES PROMISES WORKABLE, CREDIT EXTENDABLE AND CONTRACTS REASONABLE. If you try to make trust dispensable through a system of fail-safe controls, you end up with a stultifyingly cumbersome apparatus, and the cost of handling things would exceed the price of producing them. If there is no trust at all in the person who is buying a 50p ballpoint pen, you have to frisk the person to make sure he or she is not planning a hold-up, ascertain their identity by checking their fingerprint or retina, get at least three independent checks on their credit worthiness or, if they want to pay cash, make sure through careful analysis that their money is not counterfeit. And before he or she leaves the store, you have to make sure they are not taking anything from the store, except the ballpoint pen, which now costs £2.50.

Another poor substitute for trust is fear. An elaborate system of surveillance, combined with draconian punishments, can make people behave reliably more or less. But compliance is always grudging and unproductive. As the workers under the Communist regime in East Germany used to say, "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." When a totalitarian regime falls and there is no prior tradition of trust to fall back on, the result is bandit capitalism. The economy is held together by the power of cliques. Connections and servility take the place of competence and merit. The result is terrible inefficiency and, worse, inequality.

There are, of course, degrees of trust and mixtures of trust, fear and cronyism. But it remains that a high degree of trust seems to be a necessary condition for society to prosper. The USA is the most prosperous country in the world. It has never been more prosperous. In the last thirty years, personal income has more than doubled.¹ So trust in the USA must have been rising also or at least holding steady? Far from it.²

People's trust in government and institutions³ generally has been declining over the last thirty years by a tenth to a third, depending on how the question is put and what the object of trust is, and distrust has risen accordingly.⁴ People's trust in one another is also diminishing, if not as steeply.⁵ How can this be? Does the decline of trust indicate a decline or at least a threat to prosperity?

Trust overlaps with civic-mindedness or what Robert Putnam and others have called social capital. In his extensive and thorough survey of the decline of trust and social capital in the USA,⁶ Putnam argues that

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American prosperity is imperilled; but so far there is no indication that this is so – for half a century civic-mindedness has been going down, and the standard of living has been going up.⁷ Trust can evidently decline while prosperity along with security and longevity can remain stable or even grow. There does not seem to be an obvious or overt price to be paid for the loss of trust.

So, what has taken the place of trust, as people understand it when queried by social scientists? If not trust, what is it that holds the advanced industrial societies together and continues to increase the prosperity, comforts and life-expectancy of its citizens? To comprehend the driving force of a culture is a difficult task. But the word technology captures as well as any the processes and objects that distinguish advanced industrial culture, and it gathers the right intuitions in our minds albeit in a rough and sometimes inconsistent way. What then, put more clearly and consistently, is technology as the distinctive form of contemporary culture?

It can best be grasped when we look at the way it has transformed and still transforms traditional cultural phenomena. Take a case where trust has traditionally been strong and indispensable in the face of the perils and hardships people had to face. One of them was fire. Open flames in candles, kerosene lamps, fireplaces and cooking stoves were a constant presence in houses of two hundred years ago. So were combustible materials such as wood, straw, cotton, oil and grease. You had to trust people to be careful with light and heat. Carelessness could be catastrophic. Fire could consume everything you had, including your cattle and this year's harvest. If the unthinkable happened and your house and barn went up in flames, you had to trust your relatives or neighbours to take you and your family in. If you saved your cattle but lost your hay barn, you had to rely on your neighbours to let you have some of their feed and help you build a barn in the springtime.

This issue of trust has been replaced, piece by piece. Electricity has replaced open flames. Materials have been fireproofed. Insurance policies provide for a housing allowance that lets you move into a hotel and that provide money to rebuild your house and replace your possessions. You no longer have to trust your children with candles, and you no longer need to count on relatives and neighbours.

Is there a pattern to these developments? There is, in fact, and it holds the key to the fate of trust. The most

evident feature of the pattern is liberation, a sense of freedom that is real and personal rather than political. Technological devices disburden us from the claims of things and of people. We can have light at the flick of a switch. We do not have to find matches, trim candlewicks and ensure that we have a ready supply of candles available. We do not have to presume on your neighbour when we run out of fuel for the oil-lamp and neither will they have to impose on you.

In the process of liberation, the world has been subtly and radically transformed. Moral commodification, largely overlapping with economic commodification, is severing the evident ties of time, place, and people a thing or a practice used to have, and to render the item in question available in a special sense. Light, for example, is technologically available when it is at our disposal instantaneously, ubiquitously, safely and easily. The function of making something available is transferred to some machinery in a broad sense, in the case of light to generation plants, power grids, light-bulb manufacturers, etc., rather than candles or strips of fat wood or pitch pine that were produced in the household by previous generations.

The conjunction of machinery and commodity is embodied in a technological device, and the pattern of transforming the world into machineries and commodities we can call the device paradigm. Mechanisation and commodification are the two sides of the device paradigm and the rule of this pattern is wide, and widening. Just as food, clothing, housing and entertainment have long been commodified, so health, child-bearing, physical appearance, companionship and information are now being turned into mere products.

The crucial point regarding trust is the commitment to safety and ease in the construction of technological machineries which has made the device paradigm trustworthy, and people's trust has not been disappointed. The world is not as safe as it could and should be. Global warming and the dwindling oil reserves are the ominous threats that hang over us. But in the daily lives of the advanced industrial societies, morbidity and mortality have been declining for a century and a half now. When you turn on your light, you can be sure that you are not setting off an inferno. Safety regulations, training standards, certification and building codes see to it that our commodities are safely and reliably available.

People have an implicit trust in and grasp of the device paradigm of technology, and they are willing to

Technological trust aims at control and yields satisfaction ... But there is no blessedness.

NOTES

1. David G Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 6 and 137.
2. The decline of trust first is not just an American problem. It is visible in Japan and in European countries, although in complex patterns. See Robert Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000); and Bruno S Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Well-Being* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 126.
3. This includes religious institutions. Trust is not only a part of civic-mindedness, it is also a part of faith, or in one of its versions the very same thing as faith. While the decline of civic and personal trust has been steady in the USA, in European countries the decline of belief in God and eternal life has been precipitous. See Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York/London: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 69–78), and John L Allen Jr, "European Synod", *National Catholic Reporter* 24 September 1999, pp. 3–4. Christians must draw a very important lesson: the decline of Christian faith cannot be halted, far less reversed, if we threaten the faithless with growing disorder and falling prosperity.
4. Lane, *Loss of Happiness*, pp. 199–207. Frey and Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics*, p. 127.
5. Lane, *Loss of Happiness*, p. 27. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 134–47.
6. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 319–25.
7. Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 8–10.
8. In addition to Myers, Lane, Frey and Stutzer, Easterbrook, and Putnam, see also Martin EP Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize your Potential for Lasting* (New York: Free Press, 2002) and Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz (ed.), *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

► contribute what is needed to maintain it, to work, to pay their bills, to obey traffic signs, etc. But this trust in technology makes trust in persons and in pre-modern things increasingly dispensable.

When you drive to work, you do not have to trust people personally to be considerate, helpful or generous. You trust that they have bought into the system of lanes, signals and rules that are part of the technological machinery. When you buy groceries, you need not worry whether the checkout cashier is honest and trustworthy as long as you can be sure he or she scans the bar codes properly. When checkouts become automated, the question of whether to trust the cashier will be pointless.

Of course, there are always problems of trust at the margins of technology and at its leading edges. Can I trust an Internet vendor with my credit card number? Can I trust my employer not to search my email? Can I trust my virus protection? Can I trust the government not to intrude into my private sphere? These are important issues, to be sure, and they deserve scrutiny and vigilance. At the same time, these immediately urgent issues deflect us from the truly troubling issue – as we solidify our trust in technology, we make trust in people and in things that exist in their own right still more pointless.

But there is, thank God, a chink in the armour of technological trust. People trust technology not only to liberate them from the burdens of persons and reality, but also to make them happy, to gratify them with an abundance of pleasures. The promise of pleasure is an extension of the promise of liberation. The pleasures we expect from technology we want to be as free of burdens and impositions as the necessities of light, water and warmth. We want pure pleasures, pleasures unmixed with risks, exertions, or obligations.

But pleasures that fail to engage our courage, stamina, generosity, intellect and the breadth and depth of our faculties cannot give us a sense of profound well-being. The wisdom of the ages, from Aristotle to Mill, endorses this insight, and so does, at last, an abundance of social science research.⁸

Our trust in the happiness-bestowing power of the device paradigm is disappointed daily. An evening of television leaves me depressed, a carton of ice cream makes me listless and fat, my sleek new car fails to excite me after a mere month. The commodities money can buy do not make me happy. But as ancient

traditions and contemporary research also show, engagements with persons and with things that have a commanding presence make me feel grateful and blessed.

But the sight of commodious pleasures is like an optical illusion. You can measure the two lines with arrowheads at each end (one set pointing inwards, the other pointing outwards) of the Muller-Lyer illusion a dozen times and it still looks as though one line is clearly longer than the other. We know that money and the commodities it buys do not make us happy, but we cannot get ourselves to believe it.

Hence, there is a certain despondency underlying the energy and productivity of Western culture, and yet the frustrating pursuit of pure pleasures continues and may go on for a long time to come. The malaise can only be reversed if personal trust is kindled again. But this will not happen until we can become real persons again rather than mere consumers and dutiful labourers, and that in turn requires a setting of engaging things and practices, the common preparation of a meal, for example, setting it on the table, lighting the candles, sitting down to say grace and break bread.

Technological trust aims at control and yields satisfaction – a flick of the switch, the push of a button, instantaneous food from the microwave oven, or a television program conjured up by remote control. But there is no blessedness. Personal trust is risky. People can be weak or even mean. But when trust is answered, a little miracle happens. There is grace, more than we had a right to expect, a small re-enactment of loaves and fish multiplied, a foretaste of the great wedding feast. If we are bearers of the grace that inspires and sustains personal trust, we can help to cure the quiet desperation that haunts contemporary culture. ■