Afterword

Mistrust after Truth?

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Strangely overlooked as an object of ethnographic enquiry, mistrust comes into rich empirical focus through this timely and compelling collection. It does so through the move to bracket the analytic questions: of what it is and whether this is good. Mühlfried is surely right to insist, as he does in his incisive introductory essay, that the lacunae is in part an artefact of the functionalist logic of mainstream social theory, specifically a persistent interest in trust as an element of social cohesion. Once these commitments are suspended we see that, as in the cases of 'ignorance' (Mair et al. 2012) and 'detachment' (Candea et al. 2015), the existence of mistrust is not just an incidental absence or negation but a specific kind of thing – a practice, an orientation, a form of personhood – that has qualities and substance of its own. A central insight from these essays is that this may be productive, literally in the sense it constitutes social practices and relationships, and more profoundly in the various ways that people may actively value and cultivate mistrust as a positive virtue. Mistrust is not anti-social in any straightforward sense. Its absence may be incidental (dis-trust in Schiocchet's terms) but is often a more active kind of presence. Beyond the vivid details of the cases the collection of these makes clear how mistrust is shot through with the multiplicity of its locations and so de-stabilizes what we might think we know about it. Mistrust develops through multiple contexts and concerns as ethical and ideological sensitivities, orientations performed through people, material contexts, domestic spaces and institutional cultures of various kinds. Like the phenomenon of mistrust itself, the book achieves its overall effect through holding these phenomena together, while remaining sceptical of the possibility of aggregation. I want to tease out two strands from this complexity, before trying to articulate how these might help us to think about the current moment in which the book takes shape – where discourses about 'post truth', have been contexts for novel forms of mis-trust.

Demarcation

According to Mühlfried, mistrust is a way of relating to the world in a distanced manner. It is not, he suggests, that interactions are avoided but, in his striking phrase, 'never entered at full stake' (Introduction: 8). To mistrust is to demarcate what can be trusted from what cannot. The contributors here have demonstrated that there is no straightforward or singular way in which this happens. As an orientation that may be primarily epistemic, social, or indissolubly both, efforts to distinguish trust from mistrust act to define communities in a range of ways.

In Mühlfried's comparative discussion, profound mistrust of mainstream social norms becomes a foundational act of community-making. Through renunciation of the social structures into which they were born, members of Russian gangs create a radical and profound break between the society they reject and the community of 'thieves in law' into which they enter. Notwithstanding some profoundly different orientations, Jihadists likewise strive for hermetic demarcation that emerges on the basis of an absolute rejection of prevailing social norms. In both cases mistrust directed beyond a community has its counterpart in strong trust amongst a community of believers. By contrast the forms of social demarcation at stake for inhabitants of Russian apartment blocks described by Utekhin are far less absolute. Ongoing suspicion and mistrust emerge here as more or less pronounced elements of most if not all interactions, directed towards a set of relationships in which people are intimately enmeshed. In close proximity to familiar and familial relations, suspicion is deeply engrained. People withhold aspects of themselves as 'the other side' to relations of intimate domesticity and a 'quasi-familial lack of distance'. Likewise, in the otherwise distinctive context of Sierra Leone, Bürge discusses how trust and mistrust articulate in a never fully resolved form. In a situation where trust is understood to be missing, people are concerned to fabricate it: trust (locally rendered *'tros'*) links people, objects and practices, in networks that are constantly made and un-made, through the situated demarcation of mistrust. In both these cases a sharp but un-resolved relation between trust and mistrust has its counterpart in suspicions directed towards communities in which people continue to engage, and in social boundaries that are situationally specified, unresolved and always in question.

These acts of demarcation involve complex configurations of engagement and detachment. Mistrust involves a scepticism that can be a way of holding elements of the world – people or things – at a distance. This distancing, as Brand observes of domestic abuse counsellors in South Africa, can itself be a form of engagement – a way of understanding and interacting with the subjects or objects thereby distanced. Mistrust can be foundational to productive relationships of distance, including through critique, objectification and epis-

temic scepticism. From another perspective, mistrust enacts a distance from some things that is the very condition through which proximity to others is established. Close communities are imagined and made through the distancing mistrust from other social worlds.

Truth

Mistrust entails a sceptical orientation to truth, associated with more and less profound questioning. Proximate uncertainties and challenges to authoritative knowledge are not new and may ultimately assume and re-inscribe a faith in 'the truth' to which these refer. In the context of South Africa, Brand shows how counsellors' generalized mistrust of clients is ultimately founded on the epistemic practices of counselling. Conviction (trust) in their own ability to ascertain an objective truth orients mistrust externally – to the subjects whose circumstances they seek to understand. In the socio-legal practices explored by Bognitz in Rwanda, mistrust is central to the negotiations that surround the settlement of disputes. Mediators fabricate trust against this background of suspicion, drawing on evidence to establish how things 'really are'. Objective truth is grounded in the subjectivity of the 'true' self of the mediator: qualities performed in practice through being humble, having humility and listening attentively.

Novel contexts may pose challenges to the truths of experts without necessarily undermining these. Indeed for the crypto-advocates studied by Ruh, 'generalized' and fundamental mistrust in the security of Internet transactions not only directs attention to the truths of mathematics but also ultimately amplifies trust in their professional-cum-epistemic practices. Moreover, even as the internet is associated with a novel explicitness and awareness about the fallibility of human interactions, crypto-advocates' doubts have their counterpart in a continued faith in the possibility and desirability of a return to what, as they see it, has been lost: an ultimate trust in notions of 'authenticity' and 'integrity' of interaction. For those involved in online dating scams, Beek highlights how online environments are associated with a similar mistrust but involve a fundamentally different epistemic orientation. Here the truths in question are not those of experts but of the romantic appeal of 'genuine love' and the ideas of 'credibility' that support these. These older romantic tropes remain central, even as the medium leads to profound mistrust of the message. In both cases, truth and trust become newly explicit concerns in digital environments associated with anxieties about the threat to these valued ideals. Mistrust is novel, insofar as a truth that was given is now in doubt.

By contrast, the examples of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Russia, remind us that in many parts of the world, there is nothing new about the kinds of

mistrust that relate to profoundly doubtful orientations to truth, and so to circumstances in which trust was never a given. In Russian apartment blocks a post-socialist 'logic of suspicion' has its roots, according to Utekhin, in a Soviet mentality where mistrust was systematic and practices of un-masking were second-nature. In Guinea, Somparé and Botta Somparé trace how the Ebola epidemic re-animates an already systemic mistrust in foreign organisations and elites and so in the medical knowledge that was central to their response. The chapter thus makes evident how social and epistemic trusts are intimately related in this post-colonial context.

After Trust?

We are living through a time that many would characterize as a crisis of trust. The trust in question is that once reserved for 'experts', and the questioning involves a form of mistrust that comes in many forms. Over the last three decades, political movements, social activists, media commentators and politicians on both the left and right have sought to undermine the veracity of expert authority, alleging a series of vested interests. Accusations of expert fallibility emerge through a range of left-wing discourses, including the anti-globalisation movement's challenge to the economic orthodoxy of 'development' (Williams 2008) and participatory challenges to the elitist knowledge of experts (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Right-wing discourses more commonly attack experts as representing of the bureaucratic antithesis of 'the market', where the latter is positioned as the ultimate arbiter of value (DuGay 2000). Allegations of expert elitism gain particular traction in contexts where class divides and inequalities have been sharpened through post-industrial decline and decades of neoliberal reform (Green 2016). Commentators have connected the post-modern relativization of 'truth' to digital media technologies, through which perspective proliferates and knowledge is reduced to information (Agar 2003; Tsoukas 1997). 'Post truth' is also 'post-trust', at least in the kinds of knowledge and institutions that were once considered the bedrock of liberal democracy.

Anthropologically speaking, 'post-truth' is a significant phenomenon, if not one that has yet received much ethnographic attention. It is a set of discourses that constitute a newfound explicitness about the limits of experts, and a broad mistrust in the truths for which they were once, at least in much of Europe and America, un-questioned arbiters. Whereas experts were always subject to contingent mistrust, this was rarely systemic in Euro-American contexts. What is new is that they are increasingly in the position of having to fabricate knowledge, authority and trust in contexts where it cannot be assumed. At this juncture many of the things that anchored trust, including ideas about scientific truth, authenticity and integrity remain relevant even as they are newly in

question, mistrusted and challenged from various sides, including through the auto-critiques of experts themselves. Public doubt and scepticism is connected to the explication of what could once be implicit: in multiple ways including academic and other forms of audit (Furedi 2004; Strathern 2000), science that is oriented to social utility (Nowotny 2003), the authority of expert knowledge is reconfigured and re-distributed if not necessarily undermined through entanglements with a range of 'social' and 'public' external audiences.

While few of the contributors to this volume are explicitly concerned with the challenges of 'post truth' sociality, they help to locate these recent discourses, and to question some of the more general assumptions that inform these. They do this by bringing into focus the myriad ways in which truth, trust and mistrust are entangled, by pointing to the multiple forms these take, and the specific historical and cultural trajectories through which these arise. We may still want to insist that things have changed, that mistrust is being re-animated in ways that are far reaching and profound, but the careful foregoing descriptions help explain the terrain on which these myriad configurations are now taking shape. At this juncture the collection reminds us to remain mis-trustful of grand-narratives and singular diagnoses of social change, including of the reduction of these changes to a meta-phenomena for which one may be 'for' or against.

And so I want to return to where the introduction to this volume ended, via a plea for ethnography as a method of being ambivalent in relation to the question of who and what is trusted. When anthropologists 'come home', particularly to focus on experts and expertise, the prevailing mode of engagement has been via a hermeneutics of suspicion that echoes and amplifies some of the populist tendencies (from right and left), particularly in the claim or assumption that trust in these people and their knowledge is misplaced. Foucauldian inspired deconstructions have sought to make apparent a misplaced trust in experts. That served as an important corrective, but has tended to result in 'thin' ethnography that does little to illuminate the ethnographic substance of what is involved – ideologically, ethically, epistemologically, personally and so on (Boyer 2008; Brown et al. 2017). Methodologically speaking, it might be useful to suspend mistrust for longer, in order to produce a more ethnographically nuanced understanding of these practices.

If we want to better understand the current, or indeed any, moment it seems important to approach the mistrustful sentiments of 'angry citizens', along with the scientific and expert purveyors of 'objective evidence' in the same way: through understanding and critique, derived from empirical enquiry into the specific conditions in which others live their lives, through relationships founded on a dialectic of trust and mistrust that is never fully resolved.

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