
Trust in Politics: review of Trust and Happiness in the History of European Political Thought (László Kontler and Mark Somos eds.,) Brill, 2017

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To live a daily life, we have to trust countless people and things. If you cannot trust anyone and anything, you cannot even take a bus, or relax in your own house. We do so because we trust bus drivers and carpenters. But even though trust is important and inevitable, trusting too much would not be a prudent choice. It would be dangerous to trust the driver too much and not fasten the seat belt. So how much do you trust?

This book is a collection of twenty-one essays (This book is based on a conference of the same name in 2014). These essays articulate, mainly from the perspective of history of thought, the role of trust in politics, where this question is most severely examined. After the editor's survey of the concept of trust from the viewpoint of its "Modernity", the contents of the book are divided into three parts. The first part consists of the studies of individual thinkers from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century; the second part consists of the studies of "trust" as an ideology chiefly in the age of religious wars. The third part contains the studies of political culture — the precipitation of such ideological struggles— from ancient Greece to the Soviet Union.

The recurring question in this book is how to foster a rational trust. Many thinkers in history have given good reasons to trust others: the nature of political animal, the divine providence in this world, the ties based on blood relations, and the fact that they hold the same God. But no matter how longer this list became, the opposite view that human beings are fundamentally untrustworthy never lost its strength. The original sin in Christian terms, or Machiavellism in secular terms, was simply a fact looming in front of everyone who seriously consider politics. In the age of confessionalism, specifically, the aspect of human untrustworthiness became more destructive than ever before. The proposition "it is not necessary to keep promises with heresy " casted serious doubt on reliability of the Augsburg Settlement and accelerated the centrifugal force during the Dutch War of Independence.

You cannot, therefore, trust others. But when you “Read thyself”, you find it is also the
case that others cannot trust you. Hobbes argued that only under the fear of a sovereign’s sword can mutual trust be achieved. This solution, however, seemed too optimistic for Locke. Is a sovereign so trustworthy? Other people are not worthy of trust, but is a sovereign anything more than human beings?

If there is no unconditionally trustworthy thing, what is necessary to foster mutual trust is to take the time. A successful example was the Peace of Westphalia, which brought the religious wars to an end. Focusing on this aspect of “time”, however, reveals an essentially gambling nature of trust rather than a solid way to the final solution. Power entrusted for good purposes in distant future may threaten the citizen’s security in near future; Trust based on behaviour until yesterday may be betrayed tomorrow. These uncertainties can never be wiped off.

In this book, which emphasizes the uncertainty of trust, “realism” political theorists will read the practical aspect of politics that we cannot hope to be theorized. But that is not the only message we can derive from this thought-provoking book. Trust is a gamble, yet there must be a shared basis to trust, without which practice itself in politics would be impossible. If we focus on the necessity of common grounds, this book as a whole can be interpreted as a voice to call for a universal political theory which cannot be reduced to mere practice. Whichever way you read it, this brilliant book is essential to consider trust, which is both a prerequisite and a final goal of politics.