Doubt, Suspicion, Mistrust . . . Semantic Approximations

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Doubt, suspicion, and mistrust are closely related concepts. Consider the following sentence: In the absence of trust, people approach an object with suspicion, and are likely to cast doubt on any information emanating from it. The ease with which these concepts can be meaningfully placed in a single sentence is suggestive of the overlap between them. But reordering the sentence causes complications. It cannot start with doubt because to be doubtful does not necessarily imply being suspicious or mistrusting. That is, while suspicion and mistrust refer to negatively charged dispositions, this is not always the case with doubt. Moreover, suspicion needs to stay in the middle because its focused directionality makes it a sort of connector between the other two concepts. Suspicion denotes a direct and active engagement with an object, and, although mistrust and doubt also imply engagement, mistrust can equally refer to a latent disposition, while doubt can also be used to refer to largely internal processes of the mind.

Before elaborating on the differences between these concepts, it is important to ask what it is that they hold in common. Doubt, suspicion, and mistrust refer to a tension between a subject and that which is doubted, suspected, mistrusted. I say tension rather than rupture because the mistrustful, suspicious, or doubtful relationship has substance, which can be productive or destructive. Moreover, they are relative in the sense that radical doubt and radical mistrust are untenable. In addition to this, assertions of mistrust and doubt at one level tend to assert trust and certainty at different levels, even if only implicitly. Finally, while each term implies an epistemic crisis, this entails more than the logical operations of falsification, verification, and probability attribution. The crisis extends to the intention and integrity that underpin the

epistemic assertions. In other words, mistrust, suspicion, and doubt entail not a detached but an affective position towards knowledge, carrying evaluative (aesthetic, moral, political) dimensions.

The point of highlighting these commonalities is to establish a comparative framework within which to make sense of the differences. Tension, relativity, and affect are manifested differently and with different consequences in the cases of doubt, mistrust and suspicion. This is what the next three sections set out to explore, in reverse order. Let me be clear that the point of these semantic reflections is not so much to gain terminological clarity (although there is nothing wrong with that) but rather to highlight important aspects of human practice that are addressed through these terms. Such attention is warranted because these aspects have received insufficient analytic attention (see Mühlfried, introduction to this volume). It is also of particular relevance given that political mobilization in the contemporary world seems to be based less on hope and idealism than on mistrust and fear. In order to connect the semantic explorations to current political processes I will use vignettes from the 2016 U.S. elections, starting the next two sections with quotes taken from a July 2016 episode of the Daily Show, a popular American political comedy show. Here we follow reporter Jessica Williams who interviews a small group of voters who had initially supported the Democrat Bernie Sanders, but shifted their support to Donald Trump when Hillary Clinton clinched the nomination of the Democratic Party.[1] The Daily Show obviously selected and presented responses of supporters for comic effect, choosing those with particularly stark features. While this comical bias should be kept in mind, the responses do still offer good starting points for an analytic discussion of how doubt, suspicion, and mistrust work in contemporary political processes.

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1 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwfM5LGMmxg

Affective Knowledge

> Hillary Clinton has been a scam artist all her life. She will bring us to war within the first ninety
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> days ... Hillary Clinton is just a stack of garbage . . . She disgusts me
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> Sanders-turned-Trump supporter, Daily Show, 30 June 2016.

Mistrust, doubt, and suspicion denote an epistemic crisis of sorts, one in which appearances, assumptions and assertions are being interrogated. With regards to doubt, philosophers have often employed this feature in their metaphysical contemplations. Descartes famously depicted himself as a 'being that doubts' and set himself the task of systematically discarding all opinions and preconceptions, because this would enable him to build from a solid and unquestionable foundation a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences (1996: 12-15). While such systematic doubt has obvious value in scholarly work, it is important to point out that 'lived doubt' is usually less deliberate and systematic, and as a result has very different qualities. As some critics have pointed out, the doubt Descartes advocated was 'staged doubt' (Skirry 2005) and, therefore, offers us little insight into the doubting subject and their engagement with the objects of their doubt. Peirce captured the central problem when rebuking this staging of doubt: 'Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts' (Peirce 1868: 141).

That is to say, in discussions of lived reality the 'epistemic crisis' that is connoted through terms such as doubt, suspicion, and mistrust is not only a logical one, but an affective one as well. The challenge therefore is to examine the various ways in which thought and feeling come together in such epistemic crises. Looking at the everyday use of the terms under review, it is clear that doubt is associated with a wide range of affective states. Doubt can refer to a sense of curious wonder about, say, the existence of an afterlife; it can also refer to the teasing assertion 'I really doubt that,' such as in response to a truth-statement by a know-it-all-friend. It can also refer to the to worrying or even desperate thoughts that emerge in situations of intense uncertainty (such as after a betrayal or conflict) about what to believe,

whom to trust, and what to do next. The person who doubts is never indifferent, but actively engages with alternatives: he or she is of 'two minds', as the number two in the German *Zweifel* and the French *douter* already suggest (see Pelkmans 2013: 4).

The affective dimension is even more conspicuously present in the cases of suspicion and mistrust. Here, it is not so much engagement with 'alternatives' that creates the tension, but rather the negative perception of the institution or person that stands behind a statement or publicly available information. In other words, as soon as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, or other right-wing populists open their mouths, I personally have an immediate negative gut feeling that their words need to be treated with suspicion. And as the opening quotation from the Daily Show suggests, many American voters experienced similar negative feelings when they heard Hillary Clinton speak. Here, mistrust for Hillary Clinton, for the government, or for the Democratic Party, complicated their epistemic engagement with information. Whatever Clinton said was filtered through aesthetic registers (a 'stack of garbage') and through a moral prism (a 'scam artist'). In this highly polarised environment, statements or claims emanating from 'the other side' were immediately treated as a front for some deeper truth.

Tying these reflections together, several overarching questions concerning the relationship between subjects and knowledge can be formulated. Crucially, we need to ask how epistemic dispositions and probes are amplified, modified, and tempered by the affective ties between actors. We also must consider what stands behind the statements and the available information. Moreover, we need to think about how these affective-epistemic engagements emerge from and have an effect on larger socio-political landscapes.

Relative Positioning

> [Trump] has diarrhoea of the mouth, but he will say what many people think ... he is a bigot and a
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> racist, however . . . Hillary Clinton has been a scam artist all her life

The word 'however' in the quotation above forms the crux of what this section tries to convey. The Sanders-turned-Trump supporters were clearly not enthusiastic about Donald Trump's oral diarrhoea and his bigoted and racist persona. But they were ready to suspend their reservations, and view as positive that 'he will say what many people think.' Their willingness to do so is captured by the 'however', which suggests that their greater mistrust and suspicion of Clinton pushed them to be more accepting of the disliked but not mistrusted Trump. To be mistrustful of everything and everyone is untenable, or as Mühlfried (this volume) points out, 'radical forms of mistrust are difficult to live'.

A comparison with the impossibility of radical doubt is valuable here. In his treatise *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein wrote: 'If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty' (1969: 114-115). I support Wittgenstein's point about the impossibility of radical doubt not only because of its logical significance, but also because it illuminates an important aspect of the manifestation of doubt in everyday life. This aspect has been empirically illustrated in several ethnographic explorations. In her work on gold mining in Mongolia, Mette High analysed how informally operating miners dealt with uncertainty and unpredictability. They conceptualised their misfortunes as part of a 'destabilisation of the cosmos' and were preoccupied with the role that spirits played in this disordering. While doubting the intentions and questioning the strength and actions of these spirits, the miners could not help but reaffirm their reality (High 2013). A similar logic emanates from the doubts expressed by Old Believers living in the Danube delta as studied by Vlad Naumescu. These Old Believers despaired that they no longer had the knowledge to properly carry out rituals, but through their worries and doubts they ended up affirming the importance of leading a Christian life (Naumescu 2013). Doubt

denotes an active engagement with the world, and it is this engagement that affirms certainty about reality at other levels.

In other words, what starts out as an epistemic crisis ends up as an epistemic affirmation. This dynamic is equally visible in the case of suspicion and mistrust. As Victor Vakhshtayn (2016) argued, there is a negative correlation between institutional and interpersonal mistrust. The point here is that when people are more mistrusting of the institutions of the state they are more likely to invest in interpersonal relations. Every mistrustful assertion needs to be hinged on a solid foundation. Returning briefly to the quotation with which I started the section, mistrust of Hillary Clinton and 'the establishment' often led to a suspension of doubt with regard to the alternative, Donald Trump. Trust and mistrust, doubt and certainty, suspicion and acceptance, feed off of each other. In other words, the interrogatory focus not only leaves unseen and thus unchallenged what lies in the margins, but, moreover, its recoil effect strengthens those elements that were needed for launching the interrogation in the first place.

What are the implications of these observations? Clearly, what we are observing is how people strive to create liveable situations, about how they navigate landscapes that are replete with unknowns and uncertainties, in which they focus their doubts and suspicions on certain objects, leaving issues that are less immediately problematic or threatening for what they are. The following questions are of vital interest: what forms of certainty are produced in the process of doubting? What relations of trust are intensified when people are mistrustful? What does generalised doubt and mistrust look like?

Productive Tensions

In politics and economics, prolonged reflection and contemplation is often seen negatively as a sign of indecisiveness. Contemporary political leaders therefore are unlikely to present themselves as doubters. This tempering or even obstructing effect of doubt is even acknowledged by those who refuse to dismiss its value. In his poem 'In praise of Doubt',

Bertold Brecht tellingly writes: 'the thoughtless who never doubt / Meet the thoughtful who never act' (Brecht 1979: 334). On the other hand, doubt is also seen as the driver of quests for knowledge. It is only when things are no longer taken for granted—when doubts are raised— that people reach out for knowledge, and in the process may end up finding new insights.[2] Moreover, commitment and conviction are not uncommonly the product of an active side-lining of doubt. Examples of this are presented by studies of recent converts who fervently proclaim their newfound conviction, in part because of their greater need (and momentary ability) to suspend lingering doubt (Pelkmans 2013). It thus appears that doubt is a constitutive aspect of commitment and conviction. At the same time, its effects depend on how these doubts are acted on: powerful energies are released when doubts are dismissed (or side-lined) during a moment of intense wavering. On the other hand, when doubts are allowed to linger they tend to have a tempering effect or may even prevent any action from materializing.

The emotive energies released by mistrust and suspicion suggest a somewhat different dynamic. Rather than the doubter's 'wavering' that can go in either direction, mistrust and suspicion are already negatively predisposed towards the object of their engagement. It is because of this that suspicion and mistrust are seen as an eroding and disrupting force. Modern institutions cannot operate without some level of trust. It is on the basis of this that Anthony Giddens argues that 'trust relations are basic to the extended time-space distanciation associated with modernity' (1990: 87), and he rightly suggests that without trust, modern societies would grind to a halt. However, we have already concluded that generalised or radical mistrust is untenable, and hence this correct theoretical statement is unhelpful in a practical sense. Another way to put this is to say that in as far as mistrust denotes an active rather than a passive disposition, mistrust bespeaks a positive engagement with the world. As Rosanvallon (2008) has insightfully argued, it is problematic to speak of 'disenchanted

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2 In academia this doubting approach is institutionalised as 'organised scepticism', a term used by Merton in his discussion of the four norms of scientific communities (Merton 1973: 267-280).

citizens' precisely because their rejection of mistrusted politicians and institutions results in the channelling of energies in alternative directions.

A useful example of the alternative ways citizens express their political engagement is conspiracy theorizing, not least because it can serve as the basis for the creation of alternative political communities. We see this logic play out in the current political landscape of North America and Europe, where widespread mistrust of 'the establishment' has translated into an explosion of conspiracy theorizing that has invigorated numerous populist movements. A good example is speculation surrounding the role of the CIA in bringing about (or facilitating) the 9/11 attacks. These conspiracy theorising activities crystallized in the formation of the '9/11 truth movement', which became a platform for voicing concerns about the collusion of power and capital in the higher echelons of American society.[3] Although some conspiracy theories are clearly extraordinary, many of the less spectacular but more realistic theories on display, such as those concerning secret deals between corporate business and politics, can potentially play a positive role in holding authorities accountable (see also Pelkmans and Machold 2011).

While conspiracy theorizing that is informed by distrust of dominant power can serve as a 'counter democracy' (Rosanvallon 2008: 9), when such mistrust merges with dominant (and racial) prejudices and stereotypes its effects tend to be more nefarious. This kind of conspiracy theorizing has been particularly prolific in right-wing corners, ranging from the insistence that climate change is a hoax to claims that Barack Obama was in cahoots with Jihadists.[4] Irrespective of effect, in all of these instances mistrust of 'the establishment' was translated into conspiracy theorizing, a channelling of suspicion that has lent a voice to those who found themselves on the margins of political and economic processes.

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3 Regarding the 9/11 conspiracies, see the various contributions to the website of the 9/11 truth movement (http://www.911truth.org) and the books of David Griffin (2007; 2012) about the possible collusions of power and capital in relation to these acts of terror.
4 For a discussion of these conspiracy theories, see the thoughtful article in the Atlantic, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/06/obama-radical-islam/487079/

Final Reflections

The concepts of mistrust and doubt allow us to engage analytically with a fractured and unstable world that is constantly changing. With economic forces becoming increasingly elusive, extensions of the state increasingly invisible, and the sources of news increasingly untraceable, our 'modes of coping with the unfamiliar' (Luhmann 2000: 102) are changing. For the moment this seems to play into the hands of those who are able to mobilise sentiments of mistrust and suspicion while promising a return to authentic power. The 'anti-expert' mood in the UK and the populist movements of the extreme right in Germany, France, and the Netherlands are examples of this trend. The rise of Donald Trump is particularly interesting (and worrying) in this regard. His election victory embodies the elevation of suspicion and mistrust to the highest levels of political power. Even before the 2016 elections Trump had become, as one commentator aptly put it, 'conspiracy-theorist-in-chief.'[5] His theories of voter fraud, his claims about Barrack Obama's alleged foreign birth and his allegations of secret ties between Clinton and global business, much of which was offhandedly tweeted, played a significant role in his ability to mobilise anti-establishment sentiment.

Writing in March 2017, two months after Trump assumed the presidency, it remains unclear what the ultimate outcome will be. Are we witnessing a movement from anti-establishment sentiment to a form of generalised mistrust and doubt, leading to chaos and uncertainty? Or, alternatively, are we seeing a shift from a situation in which suspicion and mistrust was projected onto the political establishment, to a situation in which suspicion and mistrust becomes a tool used by the new establishment to control, subject, and exclude?

A truly disturbing prospect is that in its elevation to the apex of political power, mistrust will be redirected outwards by an increasingly self-confident political establishment. The first months of the Trump presidency provided signs that this might be the case. The travel ban of

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5 Tim Murphy, "How Donald Trump Became Conspiracy Theorist in Chief," Mother Jones, 4 October 2016, see: http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/trump-infowars-alex-jones-clinton-conspiracy-theories

people from a limited number of Muslim-majority countries, and the tweets accusing foreign governments of hurting American interests suggested that mistrust was increasingly being projected outwards. In other words, suspicion and mistrust were increasingly used as defence mechanisms to shore up the powers of the establishment, in the process intensifying dynamics of gagging, marginalization and exclusion, perhaps with even worse still to come. However, this strategy has so far had limited effect because of considerable pushback from within various corners of American society, resulting for example in the collapse of the travel ban and an increasingly defensive White House.

So what are some of the other possibilities? If Trump continues to spout unfounded conspiracy theories and express suspicion about the establishment that he himself is supposedly leading, then this may well result in the actual realization of a 'post-truth era', that is, a situation in which 'truth' truly becomes irrelevant. And there are serious indications that this is the direction into which events are headed, at least for now. Faced with significant disgruntlement within the electorate and opposition within state institutions, Trump and his associates have increasingly projected their frustrations onto the 'deep state', that is, voicing the (conspiracy) theory that career government employees are colluding to upset and oust the elected government. A government whose leaders are themselves deeply suspicious of the establishment that they represent may well lead to generalised paranoia and as such to the implosion of the system. Generalised mistrust prevents cooperation and radical doubt implies chaos, thereby fostering confusion and apathy.

At this point it remains unclear which of the indicated tendencies will prevail. It is possible that the Trump government will overcome its first disappointments and develop into a regime that self-confidently projects its paranoia outwardly, with exclusionary and marginalizing effects for those groups that do not fit the political, economic, sexual, religious, and racial proclivities of the Trump government. It is against the background of this very real possibility that the prospect of chaos sounds desirable indeed. After all, the possible descent of the

Trump government into a destructive chaos may very well create the conditions that allow progressive political movements to capitalize on people's disenchantment. Perhaps they would even be able to focus the disillusionment and the associated suspicions to address the tremendous convergence of political power and capital (such as is evident in the number of billionaires in Trump's cabinet), and thereby to set a first step in the direction of badly needed real change.

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