

Trust and Society: Suggestions for Further Development of Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Trust

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Abstract

This paper addresses an apparent gap in the work of Niklas Luhmann. While the issue of trust continues to receive widespread attention in the social sciences, Luhmann's interest in this topic declined following the development of his systems theory. It is argued that this decline does not reflect any diminished relevance of trust for systems theory, but rather that the architectural remodeling of theory cannot easily be applied to the issue of trust. Here, the issue of trust is reconceptualized as a connection medium. This entails a reconstruction of Luhmann's early theory of trust, especially with regard to function and social positioning. In this context, trust can in turn be linked to the concept of medium in Luhmann's late work. As a connection medium, trust mediates between the different levels of sociality—interaction, organization, and society. These theoretical considerations are employed to develop a more applied framework for empirical research, with a brief case study from southern Italy. From this perspective, the idea of trust as society's glue is seen to be overly simplistic. The

common ethical understanding that more trust leads to a better society is also questioned on the grounds that social cooperation can also lead to social sclerosis. Finally, risk and trust are shown to accommodate the formation of different cultures of trust. The paper shows how Luhmann's updated version of trust can inspire current research and enhance our understanding of how trust operates in contemporary society.

Resume'

Cet article traite d'une contradiction apparente dans les travaux de Niklas Luhmann. Alors que les sciences sociales s'emparaient largement

de la question de la confiance, l'interêt que lui portait initialement Luhmann s'est affaibli quand il a développé sa théorie des systèmes. Cela serait dû non pas à une pertinence moindre de la confiance dans la théorie des systèmes mais plutôt à ce que la refonte de la théorie ne s'applique pas aisément à la question de la confiance. Celle-ci est reconceptualisée comme un médium de connexion. Cela implique de retourner aux premières théories de Luhmann sur la confiance, particulièrement en ce qui concerne la fonction et le positionnement social. Ce faisant, la confiance peut également être rapprochée du concept de médium tel que développé par Luhmann dans ses derniers travaux. En tant que médium de connexion, la confiance sert d'intermédiaire entre les différents niveaux de la sociabilité — l'interaction, l'organisation et la société. Ces considérations théoriques sont utilisées pour bâtir un cadre plus adapté à la recherche empirique, illustré brièvement à travers un cas d'étude portant sur l'Italie du Sud. Selon la perspective adoptée ici, l'idée de la confiance comme ciment de la société apparaît comme trop simpliste. L'article interroge également la conception selon laquelle plus de confiance mène à une meilleure société, considérant que la coopération peut également entraîner une sclérose sociale. Enfin, le risque et la confiance entraînent l'existence de différentes cultures de la confiance. L'article montre que repenser la théorie de Luhmann sur la confiance peut nourrir la recherche et améliorer notre compréhension du fonctionnement de la confiance dans la société contemporaine.

SINCE THE 1990s, THE ISSUE of trust has attracted considerable scientific attention, to the point of becoming a buzzword since the new millennium in such areas as economics and organization theory, in education and psychology, in philosophy and political science, and in sociology (see Arnott 2007; Ebert 2007).

This increasing interest stands in contrast to the trajectory of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. Trust is a central topic in Luhmann's early writings, including an entire monograph (first translation published in English in 1979, revised in 2017). His interest was already declining by the 1980s, despite a shorter essay on the subject (Luhmann 1988) and a subchapter in the book *Social Systems* (see Luhmann [1984] 1995:127–29; for an account of this period and the role of trust, see Jalava 2003). In Luhmann's late period during the 1990s, beyond sporadic remarks and footnotes, the issue had almost completely vanished (see Watier 2002). The term *trust* was never fully reworked to address Luhmann's later theoretical developments. *Social Systems* (Luhmann [1984] 1995), which set the benchmark for terms like communication and autopoiesis, sought to combine trust with the problem of double contingency, but no integration of trust can be found in Luhmann's subsequent works.

On that basis, this paper will explore whether Luhmann's earlier conception of trust can be reformulated and integrated into his later work. However, this exploration will deviate slightly from traditional exegesis, in that attempting to identify and link earlier writings to related ideas in

his later work would gloss over a range of conceptual problems in Luhmann's early book on trust. That would also be to ignore how the changing structure of his theory related to a shifting conception of the structure of society and therefore the role of trust. Finally, a literal exegesis is likely to yield a relatively dry account that fails to demonstrate the consequences of such a conceptual shift or its relevance for further research and debate.

As a consequence, this reconstruction begins with something of a de-tour. In identifying some core ideas of trust as in Luhmann's early phase, these ideas will not simply be summarized. Such a rereading already en-tails some degree of foresight, as the identification of core ideas will appear conceptually problematic from Luhmann's later perspective. In the middle part of the paper, identifying some key theoretical vocabulary that Luhmann developed in his later phase, particular attention will be paid to the idea of *connection medium*. Trust will be discussed as a possible candidate, along with values and feelings. Following this reconstruction, the theoretical vocabulary is further stretched in outlining some consequences for further research in this area. The paper, then, seeks to advance knowledge of trust with regard to three issues:

1. What are the core theoretical arguments in Luhmann's early writings on trust?
2. Can trust be conceptualized as a connection medium?
3. What are the consequences of these theoretical changes for the distinction between personal and system trust, for differentiation among cultures of trust, and for conceptualizing the crisis of trust?

THE CONCEPT OF TRUST IN THE EARLY SYSTEMS THEORY OF NIKLAS LUHMANN

In Luhmann's early theory, trust was bound to the phenomenological concept of *meaning* and to the cybernetic concept of *complexity*. For Luhmann (1990a), meaning is the central ordering device of any human experience as characterized by a dual structure: "... the momentary given that fills experience at any time always and irrevocably refers to something else" (p. 25). The basic problem of all meaningful experience and action derives from this structure; how can these experiences be permanently integrated despite their temporality and range of other possibilities? This question is developed in a central concern of Luhmann's earliest version of systems theory: how the complexity of these vast possibilities can be reduced to a manageable level.

This leads Luhmann to question what strategies and structural patterns exist for coping with this contingent character of social life. According to Luhmann, trust represents such a means of reducing complexity—a general mechanism or attitude that makes our everyday life manageable. To cope with this problem, "trust goes beyond the information it derives

from the past and takes the risk of defining the future” (Luhmann 2017:23), so reducing the uncertainty of future events. A social action blinds itself to certain futures; by firmly setting the current future, one affords other actors an opportunity to determine their future by enabling them to coordinate common actions. In this sense, trust is so basic that we cannot live without it, and this understanding has become commonplace in advanced research on trust (Hawley 2012).

While these notions of contingency, uncertainty, and trust are widely accepted, they overlook an important problem that appears only when this question is seen within the wider context of Luhmann’s theory. Beyond the context of trust, the reduction of complexity paradigm is a key concern in his early system theory, in which systems are seen as a means of reducing social complexity. For instance, the legal system deals only with a particular domain and not with all issues in its environment; it fulfills a particular function—reducing complexity—by guarding against disappointment of one’s expectations (see Luhmann 2004). In contrast, any such particularity of function remains underspecified in the case of trust. As a consequence, Luhmann does not integrate trust into an over-all theory of society, and it is not juxtaposed with other social structures. Furthermore, the theoretical vocabulary used to describe trust remains at odds with his theory; it is not a system, nor a medium, but a mechanism. In light of this critical analysis, it can be said that any reconstruction seeking a place for trust in Luhmann’s later theory must overcome these issues and in particular identify a “place” within its theory of society.

This question of localization entails another important issue articulated principally by Luhmann: his distinction between personal trust and system trust or confidence, which has especially influenced the wider field of organization studies (see Bachmann and Lane 2009). The subsequent literature has reformulated this issue as one of micro versus macro trust. For example, Lane's (1996) study of supplier relations in Britain and Germany demonstrated that trust-based relations between buyer and supplier firms rarely evolve spontaneously at the level of individual interaction (Luhmann's *personal trust*), but instead depend on stable legal, political, and social institutions (Luhmann's *system trust*). However, this overlooks the problem outlined above. In particular, it ignores why, especially in contemporary society, such a distinction has developed between different forms of trust. A simplistic model suggesting that this is rooted in small versus big systems neglects how Luhmann relates the development of social structures to specific structural requirements deriving from the differentiation of society (see Luhmann 1977). This very important distinction and its development in contemporary society also seems linked to the search for a more precise solution to the localization and function of trust. Personal versus system trust cannot simply be captured as an issue of small versus big.

Despite these problems and the further development of Luhmann's theory, this should not be taken to mean that Luhmann could not accommodate trust in his later theory, or that trust had lost all relevance for him. In many of his newer publications, Luhmann references this older concept (for instance, Luhmann 2000:408, 2004:148, 2012:230–31). Certainly, his systems theory moved on, as seen especially in the significant changes to its conceptual framework. It therefore seems necessary to ask how the concept of trust might be incorporated into this newer theoretical framework, requiring reformulation both of the current theoretical foundations of systems theory and of recent developments in trust research. Such a reformulation will draw on Luhmann's late writings, in which the term *medium* relates to the question of societal organization. Discussing the social use of the medium, the paper will demonstrate that the application of the term *medium* in connection with trust offers a possible explanation for trust's seeming ubiquity, and why different types of trust can exist.

THE IMPROBABILITY OF COMMUNICATION AND TRUST AS CONNECTION MEDIUM

The concept of *medium* has gained some momentum within the tradition of sociological systems theory (see Tække and Paulsen 2010). Luhmann's theory of medium relates to broader changes in his theory—in particular, to the introduction of self-reference and communication, where communication is described as a process of meaning-making through a series of interlinked communications. Meaning arises through the sequential ordering of communications because the selectivity and contingency of meaningful acts is facilitated through adjustive responses. If the reproduction of

such sequences is successful, social systems emerge. Nevertheless, Luhmann (1990b) considers the successful interlinking of communications to be highly improbable:

The type of communication theory I am trying to advise therefore starts from the premise that communication is improbable, despite the fact that we experience and practice it every day of our lives and would not exist without it. This improbability of which we have become unaware must first be understood, and to do so requires what might be described as a contra-phenomenological effort, viewing communication not as a phenomenon but as a problem; thus, instead of looking for the most appropriate concept to cover the facts, we must first ask how communication is possible at all. (P. 87)

Among the multitude of problems that make communication improbable, Luhmann (1990b:88) identifies three core issues. (1) How can one person understand what another means? (2) How can communication reach out to and gain the attention of more recipients than those present in a given situation? (3) Even if a communication is understood, why should it be accepted? The concept of medium is characterized as capable of

transforming these improbabilities into probable communication (Luhmann 1990b:89–90).

- (1) The requisite medium for coping with the first improbability is language, which extends the scope of communication beyond basic perceptions or nonverbal behavior.
- (2) The media of dissemination (writing, printing, radio, television, and similar technologies), fulfilling the function of transcending the immediate boundaries of face-to-face communication.
- (3) Symbolically generalized media, such as truth, money, love, and power, react to the improbability of an offer on which further communication is based, increasing the chances of acceptance. Improbabilities are transformed into probabilities by, for instance, offering payment in exchange for services and goods, those payments then being used in further transactions.

However, Luhmann's later writings (2012:247) introduced a fourth type of medium: the so-called connection medium. Such media cannot be assigned to any societal subsystem but stand in some orthogonal relation to such subsystems.

Using values as a case study to illustrate this new type of medium, Luhmann (2012) defines the medium of values as follows: "Values are the medium for assuming common ground, which limits what can be said and demanded without determining what should be done" (p. 205). While this medium lacks several important features: central coding, a clear difference between coding and programming, symbiotic symbols, and system-forming potential. Nevertheless, Luhmann (2012) holds that it is appropriate to speak of a

medium in terms of the “loose coupling of innumerable possibilities for action in accordance with value positions that then take shape in the individual case by weighing up values” (p. 247). The medium is also marked by a high level of independence and universalism.

The social location of values is described by Luhmann (2012) “as connecting medium between the fully operational communication media and the rest of society” (p. 247). This idea seems to align with the overall status of values operating at the level of society without determining interactions (see also Parsons 1967). What is striking here is the social location of these media; values mediate between functional systems and symbolic general-ized media, while the connection medium “feelings” (Baecker 2004) mediate between the societal system and the individual (Parsons 1977:247). Luhmann ([1984] 1995:223) speaks of their affiliating or bridging quality and stresses their role in mediating certain social distinctions. In the case of feelings, the affiliating quality seems directed to an improbability of communication that arises in modern society. According to Luhmann (2013), it is apparent that “occasions for irritation from the environment of the societal system have been proliferating dramatically . . . [in particular] with

Table 1
Connection Media and Societal Problems

Values	Feelings	Trust
Differentiation between symbolic generalized media and society	Differentiation between society and individuals	Differentiation between different levels of society

regard to the increasingly individualized, increasingly ‘idiosyncratic’ ex-pectations of individuals” (p. 120). Luhmann interprets this development as a consequence of the increasingly discrepant relationship between the societal system and its environment. It could be argued that feelings serve as a connective medium that facilitates and channels these irritations and so bridges this gap—at least to an extent—in the form of expressions justified simply by reference to inner feelings, which have an equalizing function. The advantage seems to be that no one can really argue against feelings, which motivates engagement in this type of communication or makes communication more probable.

Besides the contemporary differentiation of society into subsystems and between society and the individual (see Table 1), Luhmann (1987, [1984] 1995, 2013) suggests a third distinction between society and interac-tion, or between different societal levels (functional systems, organizations, and interactions). Social systems are defined as societies, including all so-cial operations entailing the quality of communication, so that societies shrink and expand according to changing communication potentials. So-cial systems are

characterized as interactions if communications are seen as to emerge in the presence of others. Interactions must take account of this. The articulation of different social levels does not mean separation; organizations cannot leave society but can only extend it.

However, the increasing differentiation of society, organizations, and interactions that occurs within the societal system (Luhmann 1987:115) changes the prospects of all three. Society is no longer tied to the limited possibilities of face-to-face interactions. Organizations can exploit the increased independence of interactions by incorporating them in a stream of decisions and interactions that deepen the potential for social reflexivity and intimacy. Each system becomes more complex in its own way, but this increased variety does not mean that modern societies are less integrated, as they have developed symbols to regulate the unity of the system (Luhmann 1987:124). Unity does not mean normative or harmonious integration, but represents the assured reliability of expected linkages. In other words, unity is not based on identity, but on difference.

Without such connective symbols, the different systems within a societal system would restrict their communication potential and render

communication improbable. For instance, if interactions could not rely on an imagined unity with other interactions, they would be severely con-strained or even impossible. If society could not rely on the identification of communication in interactions or organizations, this would severely limit its social functioning. For all of these reasons, it is argued here that trust can be seen as a connective medium, mediating the different levels (inter-actions, organizations, and function systems) of the societal system—an idea that Luhmann (2012:230) hinted at in suggesting that trust provides a connective symbolism for the further procession of meaning. Connective symbolism should not be misunderstood as a common lifeworld or shared norms; that is, the realm of values. The cause of action, as Luhmann (2012:201) explains, lies in values in the environment. Values are based on an attribution of experiencing, where the communicative selection of both alter and ego is attributed to an external cause. With trust, it is the case that the action of alter is experienced by ego. That is in itself normal. We observe someone doing something; why should that not be acceptable? However, the situation intensifies when this scenario is extended to the future, and where familiarity with that action cannot be sustained. Trust ensures that, despite that these future possibilities, an advance payment on the future can be granted, so that future actions become transferable to present experience.

This suggestion will be further explored by applying the range of criteria that Luhmann used in the case of values as another connective medium:

- (1) loose coupling of innumerable possibilities for the formation of ac-tions;
- (2) universal quality; and
- (3) symbolic templates.

Trust shares some (but not all) of these features with values. (1) The loose coupling of innumerable possibilities for the strict coupling of forms cannot rely on established value positions, as there is no standard set of criteria that would define and restrict trust in a mechanical way. Trust cannot rely on such external anchors, but is instead based on an internal organization derived from a connective semantic in the further use of meaning. Luhmann ([1984] 1995) refers here to Loomis (1959). The connective quality of the medium is enacted through a connective symbolism (a symbolism that envisages the future) in the further use of meaning. This connective quality is not based on simplification or even integration, where different situations and contexts are made to align (although such possibilities and their immanent contingencies cannot be ignored). Trust can develop a connective quality if it makes these immanent contingencies implicit, whereas an open calculation of trust is made explicit only as a kind of repair action (Bottom et al. 2002).

The connective quality of trust exploits the multiple possibilities for further communication for its own morphogenesis—that is, trust thrives on the contingency of all possibilities because it operates through computing with contingency. In this context, the term “computing” is defined by Baecker (2003) at two levels: (1) *counting* of elements or possibilities and (2) taking something into *account*. Trust requires that numerous possibilities can be differentiated and thereby linked to each other. For instance, decoupled from their environment through “reliable indifference” (Luhmann 1987:124), interactions can account for their own history and can be invested in symmetric and more personalized relations or submit to higher levels of specialization.

While trust enables greater differentiation between interactions and society, it also requires a stronger linking of communication within those interactions. Society and its functional systems can externalize the burden of experimentation, which is distributed across many interactions and organizations. Variations can be tested, and interactions can be discontinued if they prove unsuccessful. Conversely, if successful, variations can be amplified through organizations. The “ability to connect” (Luhmann [1984] 1995:434) communications to further communication becomes more probable as extreme positions in the societal system become less likely, although if they do appear, they have far-reaching consequences (Luhmann [1984] 1995:434).

Reverting to an older formulation of Luhmann, it could be said that trust is a connective medium that increases social complexity. Trust serves as a connective medium because it self-conditions selections: how society selects interactions, how organizations amplify selections, and how interactions

select society. The medium of trust supplies the operative fiction of a connective symbolism in the further use of meaning that conditions the twofold contingency¹ between different levels of society. For all of these reasons, trust can be seen as a connective medium, mediating contingency at different levels of sociality (interactions, organizations, and functional systems) and therefore found almost everywhere and in the form of a functional system.

(2) This meaningful structure of the connective medium has a universal form, by which Luhmann means that it is abstract enough to account for multiple situations. Trust is not confined to a particular social system, nor is there a social system of trust, but its mediation between the different levels of society create the impression that trust is everywhere. On this basis, trust has been described as “‘the chicken soup of social life’,

¹. On that basis, reliance and trust can be distinguished, as trust involves a connective symbolism that computes with contingency on different levels of society. In this sense, there is no trust in respect of a machine because the machine has no social contingency; when it breaks down or —stops working, one might feel angry or disappointed, but there is no breach of trust or sense of betrayal (see Holton 1994:67).

meaning that it seems to be something that cures and prevents all kinds of social problems, just as mum made chicken soup when we went down with a cold or flu, or any other illness for that matter” (Newton 2012:6). This understanding of trust overstretches the function of the connective medium, suggesting that a medium exists that might harmonize differentiation of the societal system. The symbolic potential of this medium lies elsewhere. Trust has developed a symbolism that represents the affiliating linkages in the further use of meaning in trustworthy communications. The important quality of these symbols is that they must remain hidden or unthematized, but this notion of hiddenness should not be confused with such ideas as tacit knowledge or unconscious calculation. It is perhaps unsurprising that Luhmann copublished his study of trust with a study of power in English. Power must be distinguished from coercion (Luhmann 2017:122); one does not achieve great power by exercising physical force, but by relying on a symbolism that hints at a potential to sanction others. In other words, power must create the illusion of what could be done by reference to the duties and insignia of the office or to ideologies and conditions that legitimize any claims (Luhmann 2017:134). Indeed, any use of force (such as physical violence) to control selection actually reflects a lack of power (Luhmann 2017:122). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that a sort of playful resistance has become commonplace as a means of testing other power holders (Morgner 2014).

The symbolic configuration of power is in this sense similar to trust. With its semantic of credibility or reliability, the symbolic cosmos of trust-worthiness cannot be a matter of

decision making or calculation, as this already reflects a lack of trust; the symbolism must be convincing in itself. Although Luhmann's early publications on the subject suggested that trust could be viewed in terms of risk (Luhmann 2017:27), he did not develop a theory of trust in connection with his later writings on risk (Luhmann 1993). Indeed, those writings make virtually no reference to the topic of trust beyond a few footnotes and minor remarks. This seems surprising in light of how current debate relates trust strongly to uncertainty and risk. Luhmann's 1993 concept of risk attributes risks to decisions or "to be more exact to [...] the risk of decision" (p. 22). This can only be said of a decision conceived as a choice between reasonable alternatives, which assumes that alternatives can be weighed or calculated even when the decision maker has overlooked them (Luhmann 1993:26). In other words, risk arises in situations assessed on the basis of alternative outcomes (Luhmann 1993:31), locating the problem of risk outside the "confidence zone" (Luhmann 1993:123).

To conceptualize trust or confidence and mistrust in terms of risk assessment means that the presupposed functioning of the symbols of trust, which cannot itself be regulated by trust, is already lifted (Luhmann 1993:123). Like power, the functioning of trust must remain hidden; a calculation that constructs alternatives instead indicates a lack of trust or

even serves to erode it (Luhmann 1993:114, footnote 21).² In this context, Simmel argues that trust is based neither on rational choice (knowledge) nor on hope (see Simmel 2011), and that the perception of risk is based on a potential lack of trust, or on different cultures of trust that problematize the loss of trust at different societal levels.

(3) The symbolic representation of trust directs research to questions of appearance, design, consistency, and authenticity as modes of interpretation and mediation of trust. As Kroeger (2010) explained, these symbols serve as templates for enacting trust—in particular, for condensing and confirming trust across various situations, leading to near-identical reproduction. However, the most important function of these templates lies in the hidden functioning of trust. The symbolic templates do not require that trust be made explicit or that another person's trust is directly asked for, as this is likely to be met with suspicion (Weber, Malhotra, and Murnighan 2005:97). The symbolic configuration of trust is also important for its function as a connective medium. As in the case of power, the functioning of the connective medium can be tested in a playful way or through small steps, reflecting the overall potential of trust without making it explicit. As Kroeger (2010) demonstrated, this playfulness can be tested without immediate sanction by virtue of the ambiguous nature of the symbolic template. This shores up trust, as wrongdoings or more explicit statements can always be attributed to misunderstandings or differing interpretations and so adapted to specific contexts and more complex or evolving social settings.

This symbolic configuration of the medium of trust has two other aspects: the attribution of symbols to different

levels of sociality (interactions, organizations, and functional systems) and the operative functioning of the medium of trust through inflationary use of its symbolic configuration. The former highlights an often-overlooked symbolic configuration of trust: the distinction between personal trust and system trust or confidence (see Luhmann 2017). The conception of trust as a connective medium mediating between the different levels of society facilitates understanding of the evolution and function of these two different forms of trust.

TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

Luhmann distinguishes between two types or levels of trust: personal trust and system trust, leading on to later formulations of trust and confidence. Personal trust remains largely at the level of interaction, in that the action must be visibly related to an individual. However, behavior that is institutionally regulated or directed by historical circumstances has no such

². This is overlooked in the theory of methodological individualism. Trust emerges here only as a resource or strategic means of behavior and is therefore external to social actions (see Coleman 1990; Deutsch 1958).

personal character. The personal element of trust should not be seen as an expression of a personality but as an attribution of social expectations. The attribution of risks and dangers in Luhmann's earlier writings provides the conceptual basis for his differentiation of trust and confidence. Where no alternative view is available, one finds oneself in a situation of system trust. However, where alternative actions are taken into account (including the possibility of being disappointed), Luhmann refers to a situation of personal trust.

In cases of system trust, any possible disappointment is attributed to the hazards of external circumstances (Luhmann 1993). Personal trust, however, attributes disappointments to internal factors, such as the decision to take a risk. The difference relates to the attribution of risks or dangers: whether actions are seen as based on a personal decision or as dependent on the decisions of others. As the result of an internal assessment of external circumstances, risks are components of decisions and actions. However, this distinction between internal and external is problematic, as it cannot be uniformly assigned across all levels of society. For instance, a business transaction is conducted at the level of functional systems but can be undertaken as a personal venture.

To resolve these issues, Peter Fuchs (1997) suggested replacing this *internal versus external* orientation by a distinction between *addressable* and *nonaddressable*. In systems theory, actions (and, consequently, actors) are constituted by the attributions generated in communicative processes, as *addresses*. For the purposes of this argument, one can say that while individuals and organizations "act," society's functional systems do not, as they are

nonattributable—that is, they have no address, and they cannot be addressed. No one can write a letter to society, and no one can speak for functional systems or for society; they have no observable motives or identifiable intentions. To address something as a subject or object, there remain only individuals in interactions and organizations. In this way, communication can refer to different addresses, affording an opportunity to ask questions under the magnifying glass of trust. This trust can be conditioned, and the contingency can be mirrored through the use of symbols. Computing with contingency can be extended in time by adopting a policy of small steps, channeled by repetition of interactions and the attribution of effects to specific addresses. This restriction also brings with it significant enhancements, enabling a sort of interaction control and extending trust beyond the immediate symbolic references of an interaction. As Kroeger (2013) notes,

Trust can be institutionalized in the form of roles and routines for trusting, which need to be creatively enacted. Thus, institutionalized trust emerges as a construct that consists of intersubjective rules for trusting and being (or appearing) trustworthy, but strictly speaking only exists in interaction. (P. 745)

At the same time, the trust gained in such a relationship is more fragile because small deviations from the symbolic representation of trust can lead to a major rupture. Nonaddressable trust or confidence places no such direct emphasis on a mirroring of contingency, but is mainly dependent on whether confidence validates itself. This self-validation is, in principle, achieved by two related symbolic constructions: efficiency and functioning (for a similar argument, see Luhmann 2017:55–56). As a means-end construction, efficiency validates itself if the means achieve their ends. For instance, the use of power leads to collective binding decisions, the use of money leads to further transactions, and the use of truth leads to valid or invalid statements. This efficiency must work in conjunction with a symbolic representation of functioning (for a similar argument, see Møllering 2006), which has two aspects. First, there is the more obvious idea that things run according to a means-end scheme—for instance, airplanes will take off and land as usual. However, functioning also requires a second symbolic expression, based on the correction of individual or minor mistakes. For example, if an airplane did crash, procedures would be required to show that corrections could be made to ensure that this would never happen again. For this reason, it is important that the cause of the accident remains localized—for instance, that the plane crash owed to a combination of haphazard circumstances or was caused by an individual act (e.g., a terrorist attack) that was not representative of symbolic functioning in general.

The distinction between addressable and nonaddressable forms of trust supports a perspective that links this distinction to the location and problem of trust in modern society, deriving from the increasing differentiation of systems of interaction, organization, and function. This link between personal and system trust and different levels of society further suggests that trust will be conditioned differently in different social contexts, depending on the performance quality of the above-mentioned symbols. This raises the important empirical question of whether weaker or stronger forms of trust may exist. Traditional empirical research in these fields asks respondents whether they trust the government or the media or the church, using a Likert's scale or similar (Lewicki and Brinsfield 2012; Welter and Alex 2012). Based on such quantitative information results, one might say that there is less trust in politics and more trust in the media. However, it remains unclear how trust can be weaker or stronger. What does it mean when someone says that he or she has only 57 percent trust in the media? Given that both forms of trust have a strong performative quality that refers to managing symbols of unity, it is reasonable to assume that they can build on each other and so develop into different symbolic cultures of trust. This view seems to be shared by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky in *Risk and Culture* (1982), in their distinction between *grid* and *group* as two important symbolic dimensions. While the grid dimension refers to the extent to which symbols are performed within bounded

Table 2
Management of Complexity³

	Weak use of nonaddressable symbolisms	Strong use of nonaddressable symbolisms
Weak use of addressable symbolisms	(1) The Doubter	(3) The Cynic
Strong use of addressable symbolisms	(2) The Romantic	(4) The Liberal

units, the latter refers to highly personalized symbolisms for managing social relations. In the present context, it could be argued that while this group dimension refers to symbolisms with a highly addressable form (in-dividuals, groups, or organizations), the grid dimension refers to external circumstances that seem to regulate the performance of social symbols, which could be reformulated as nonaddressable symbolisms (societal sub-systems and society). Depending on the performance of these symbols in managing complexity, their mutual support and reinforcement (or lack thereof) may engender differing cultures of trust (Table 2).

(1) The Doubter’s management of complexity does not rely on sym-bolisms of a more personal or abstract nature and exhibits the quality of withdrawal from more complex performance of social symbolisms and meaning-making (Pidgeon, Poortinga, and Walls [1993]

2007). This trust culture is marked by a notion of escape, for instance, to refrain from dependence on others, but also not to invest into trust with an enduring and almost irreversible symbolism (Deutsch 1958; Meyerson et al. 1996). Trust is present but short-lived; there is a strong sense that trust may be positive but requires high levels of social control (Buskens and Raub 2002; Costa and Bijlsma-Frankema 2007), with a strong tendency not to accept the performance claims made by others and to constantly question their authenticity and self-presentation (Eden, Bear, and Walker 2008). Kafka (1971) captures this effect in his short story, "The Burrow": "My burrow takes up too much of my thoughts. I fled from the entrance fast enough, but soon I am back at it again. I seek out a good hiding place and keep watch on the entrance of my house— this time from outside—for whole days and nights. Call it foolish if you like; it gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me" (p. 362).

3. These labels are inspired by the literature cited in each category.

- (2) The Roman principle of *fiducia* conceived of trust as based on relationships—that is, on interactions and people that could be held responsible (Morgner 2013). For the Romantic, the personal and sometimes intimate element, which may refer to a person or an organization, characterizes the management of trust symbols (Rem-pel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985; Wang 2003), with a strong sense that you can truly know the other, and that they know you (McAllister 1995). For example, you may not have all the relevant documents for a passport application, but you have a friend somewhere in the ministry who can make an exception for you. Trust evolves here through a strong sense of association, as in a professional community or the local village (Lewicki and Bunker 1995; Wang 2003). In such contexts, authenticity and reliability are central to trust. In contrast, institutional contexts are bereft of this heart and soul (see Bellah 1985); they cannot see the “real you” and operate on principles designed by some remote and faceless bureaucrat. Putnam’s (1993) account of trust in a civic community neatly summarized this culture and the weak role of the state as a third party in managing trust. The Romantic may delight in forming vast networks of friends and like-minded people, possibly leading to social sclerosis, where no one else is accepted as a member of the club.
- (3) The case of the Cynic unfolds in a reverse logic. People can make mistakes and have bias and preferences, but this is not true of systems (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011). Systems work independently and according to universal or collectively agreed principles that may be based on strong scientific evidence. More importantly,

they have a history of success, backed by wider social agreement. This symbolism may be quite stereotypical, referring for instance to the excellent organization of public life in Germany or Japan as against the nepotistic or mafia-like governance in other countries (Huff and Kelley 2003). This introduces a cynical element in relation to trusting other people (Johnson and O'Leary-Kelly 2003; Pugh, Skarlicki, and Passell 2003), who may disappoint you because they have other interests and may exploit the trust invested in them for their own ends. For instance, initiatives to build trust may raise questions about whether these measures can be trusted; seen as deceptive symbols in this form of self-presentation, they engender cynicism rather than trust (Offe 1999). People may come and go; what remains are the overarching principles enhancing one's own independence.

- (4) The Liberal trust culture combines addressable and nonaddressable types of symbolic management. A general sense of optimism prevails (Govier 1993; Jones 1996; Uslander 1998), with nothing especially good or bad about people or abstract principles. Caution is required, but a high level of tolerance predominates

(Helliwell and Putnam 2007; Inglehardt 2000; Misztal 1996). Disappointment does not develop very easily and is somehow part of the game, and system trust and personal trust can be mutually re-inforcing (Morgner 2013). Abstract notions of common interest—for instance, in education or a healthy life—present a unifying quality across ethnically separated networks. Personal trust in a particular politician, clerical figure, or expert may translate into a more collective notion of trust in democracy or scientific knowledge. This trust is not just liberal in the sense of being open to new possibilities but is based on a foundation of trust in diversity (Kazemipur 2006; Uslander 2009). An overly homogenous social setting is unlikely to support a wide range of alternative symbolisms that potentially contradict each other, so revealing whether trust can hold or if learning and reordering is needed (Holmstrom 2007).

Kahan et al. (2006) suggested that this cultural embedding in different symbolic contexts must be taken into account in any wider discussion of risk and risk perception. As mentioned above, Luhmann (1993) suggested that risks be separated from dangers. While risk implies that the person affected by an action is also the agent, danger or endangering indicates that the affected person is not the agent, but that the impact comes from an external source beyond their control. Taking or accepting risks is more likely in settings where trust prevails; within a network of friends, one can assess potential risks and may receive the support if a decision backfires. Dangers are likely to appear in areas where trust is weak, outside one's safe zone, where disaster may strike without knowing where

it came from. As Georg Simmel (2011) observed, one can only hope in such situations or surrender to paranoia.

Reformulation of the distinction between personal and system trust as a distinction between addressable and nonaddressable trust, along with the different consequences for the conditioning of trust, leads to the question of how such conditioning and management symbols might come about or fall apart. In other words, how do different cultures of trust develop, and why do they decline?

INFLATION AND DEFLATION AND THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF TRUST

Based on the conceptualization of trust as a symbolic connective medium, lack of trust can be translated into a question about the symbolic use of trust: what if symbols are used in an inflationary or deflationary manner? This relates to Parsons' (1967, 1969) account of the symbolic dimension and the "real entities" represented. For instance, monetary inflation refers

to an oversupply of symbols in relation to goods and services; the inflation of moral values refers to making so many serious commitments that it is hard to implement them; and political power is inflated where there is an oversupply of political promises in relation to the capacity to deliver. Conversely, deflation entails a reluctance to rely on generalized symbols, as in an unwillingness to honor one's commitments or an undersupply of political power to make decisions. Inflation arises where the symbolic dimension of the medium of trust asks or suggests more connective meanings than the medium can actually produce. Deflation is the reverse of this, where an opportunity to gain trust by reaffirming the symbolic dimension is not taken. While research in this area is limited, one familiar case of inflation of the symbolic dimension of trust is the former Soviet Union. Conversely, the deflation of this symbolic dimension of trust is seen in southern Italy from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The Soviet Union was born of a symbolic vision of a state in the becoming (see Gill 2011). It followed that the efficiency and functionality of social institutions were bound to the realization of this future state (see Rigby, Brown, and Reddaway 2008), and the self-validation of confidence was based on a symbolic complex of making the future available in the present (Holmes 1993). In its early years, the development of socialism was bound to economic production, and in particular to industrialization and agricultural collectivization. At the heart of this economic development was the government-organized plan, through which efficient organization and functioning were to be realized. The plan set out both the path to socialism and a means of surpassing

western capitalism. Typical symbolic representations depicted people marching toward a point outside the picture, gazing into the distance or toward a blurred horizon (Baburina 1985). The early plans focused on an efficiency and function based on individual targets and prestige projects—one immediately thinks of Lenin's summation of communism as Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country. Other pronouncements referred to the higher productivity of workers in the Soviet Union, and the ethos of socialist spirit driving them to heroic deeds of record-breaking performance. The realization of these projects and these heroic deeds was meant to symbolize the efficiency and function of the socialist project, so validating its system trust. However, the march toward the future could not rely entirely on individual goals, requiring as it did broader statements and symbols of the development of socialism and communism. In particular, the widely distributed image of Stalin served as such a unifying symbol (Trepanier 2010:140). Stalin, depicted as responsible for all the victories and guiding overall progress, was a sort of addressable framing device. In this way, the system trust of the early Soviet period was underwritten by the trust associated with images of particular individuals, so that all the future-based planning and development—with all its incongruences, advances, and failures—was symbolically embodied in the image of that person. With Stalin's death in 1953, that symbolic

presentation, known as the cult of personality, was discontinued and re-placed by symbolic configurations of the Communist Party (see Branden-berger, 2005). However, the whole agenda of achievements and progress could not be devalued, but was to be perpetuated. The party was now the key to success in the struggle to build communism, with the party program setting out the future course. Along with a number of individual goals, the determination that the Soviet Union should surpass the United States led to the introduction of a new element—a timeline, against which the higher efficiency and superior functioning of socialist institutions could be mea-sured, as a means of validating confidence in the system. However, a side effect of combining the goals of higher living standards or a prospering economy with this teleological timeline was that communist symbolism would be undermined if there was no sense that things were actually im-proving. “Thus, just at the time when the economy was beginning to run into difficulties, the credibility of the metanarrative was linked ineluctably with improved economic performance” (Gill 2013a:245). It soon became clear that these goals could not be achieved, and the time line was aban-doned in the late 1970s. And it is here that the first inflationary tendencies become evident, as the revised symbolism designed to gloss these changes was captured in the phrase “developed socialist society.” Although commu-nism was not yet reached, another hurdle was invented to bring it closer, if not already nearby. Communism was presented as a transition to happen naturally and in the near future. This natural transition was to involve organizing everyone into institutional channels, as the main apparatus

for regulating the functioning of the political system and its subcomponents. The party directed this process on the basis of a decision-making process that relied on scientific and technological knowledge. The self-validation of system trust became ever more entwined with the performance of state officials (*trust in cadres* was Brezhnev's catchphrase for this). "“Trust in cadres’ meant not only trust in the individual officials themselves, but in the system in which they worked” (Gill 2011:191) as officials and system became completely intertwined. As a consequence, any wrongdoing by those officials was seen as a failure of the system, and an inefficient functioning of the system could not be compensated for by new political faces. By the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985, this symbolism was in danger of becoming incoherent, as evidenced by growing corruption, the lack of economic progress, and the emergence of a conservative elite. There was general agreement about the need to articulate new ideals and induce changes, and an important trope of that era was *perestroika*, meaning re-structuring or reconstruction. At the outset, perestroika referred to minor changes, but soon extended to include not just changes in the attitude, but structural changes as well. With this dynamic set in motion, the term became even more radical, symbolizing revolution and a new conception of socialism. Perestroika was linked to a second symbol, *glasnost*, which was aimed at improving the efficiency and functioning of the system through

better transparency and freedom of information. The significant changes proposed by perestroika could not be fulfilled, partly because of internal political conflicts, but also because the symbolic resources for another revolution had been depleted and finally inflated. The new transparency meant that signs of inefficiency and nonfunctioning became even more apparent and, in particular, that these changes could not validate themselves in the face of the efficient and well-functioning west, ever present through the media (Holmes 1993). The system trust in the whole project began to wither. In the early 1990s, compensating measures attempted to cope with these problems by making even more pronounced changes to the point of reconceptualizing the nation by coining new names for the country. The symbolism became completely inflated and finally imploded, as did the So-viet Union as a symbolic entity (Gill 2013b:20). Due to the centrality of the party, the political system in particular was implicated in the overall decline, and politics was viewed as inefficient, corrupt, and nonfunctioning. Ten years after the end of the Soviet Union that image had not really changed. Stephen White (2002:42; see also Shlapentokh 2006) reports that system trust in the parliament and political parties rated lowest among the country's institutions, while the church enjoyed high levels of system trust.

The other case will concern the deflation and the role of symbols and trust in Italy. Putnam's (1993) celebrated book on civic culture in Italy depicts a culture of trust in the north as against the prevailing distrust in the south. Civic life in the north, he says, is "bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and co-operation" (Putnam 1993:88). This culture enhances cooperation, as people are "helpful, respectful, and

trust-ful toward one another” (Putnam 1993:88), and the development of trust and general social life flourishes. In the south, however, he finds an in-dividualistic society based on a culture of “mutual distrust and defection, vertical dependence and exploitation, isolation and disorder, criminality and backwardness” (Putnam 1993:181). This distrust is rooted mainly in a tradition of clientelism and a lack of collective sensibility as far back as the thirteenth century, reproduced through path-dependency down to the present day. Underlying this state of affairs is the notorious concept of *amoral familism*—a strategy for maximizing the profits of the nuclear family, based on the assumption that all others will do likewise.

This culture undermines the efficiency of functional systems, in con-contrast to the north’s profitable economy, well-organized bureaucracy, and flourishing literature and sciences. The historical point of departure for this functional differentiation in the formation of Italy’s state, businesses, media, and universities and their implementation and legitimation was the semantic and historical narrative of the Renaissance as the standard against which all was measured. The south was largely excluded from this myth and imaginary (see Lumley and Morris 1997), as its social life, institutions, and standards were dismissed as backward and unfit

for modernity and “civilization had to be imposed on the inhabitants” (Gribaudo 1996:75).

The symbolic canon that lent economic, political, artistic, or scientific legitimacy was the standard of trustworthiness. The north was characterized as more efficient and better functioning, producing more reliable and higher profits. In contrast to the clientelism and distrust found in the south, northerners were seen to be impartial and collective. This prevailing view largely ignored more localized forms of trust (see Colombis 1983; Huysseune 2003; Marselli 1963). In particular, incentives deployed after the Second World War to eradicate the “backward” culture of the south further deepened that symbolism, with paradoxical consequences (for an overview, see Schneider 1998). First, the imposition of confidence and its related symbolism was measured against existing forms of trust. To borrow money, one did not need a bank but a wealthy friend, which was quicker and more reliable if one had a solid reputation and the local setting provided enough background information. The same applied to finding a job, getting an education, or joining a political organization, all of which based their collectiveness, efficiency, and functioning on more personal symbolisms—and, therefore, on trust. Why relinquish such things?

Second, the attempt to eradicate these forms of trust included parallel efforts to reintegrate some of them. Suddenly, a minority of people had access to vast resources, which completely destabilized local forms of trust. It was that the rise of modern institutions was met instead with distrust because of their unequal distribution, which compromised their symbolism of greater efficiency and better functioning. The symbolism associated with confidence and its

affirmations remained inert, and still more was invested in personal networks (see Gambetta 1993).

These empirical snapshots illustrate how the symbolic configuration of trust requires further studies to measure that trust. While lower or higher levels of trust appear to have no immediate effects, low levels of trust may have serious effects if inflation or deflation of the medium has reached a point where no longer socially useful. Future research should focus on the over- or undersupply of symbolic trust in particular social settings, informed by Luhmann's research on semantic and societal changes (see Morgner 2013).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The increasing sociological relevance of trust stands in marked contrast to the decline of this concept in Niklas Luhmann's later writings. From a position of early prominence, his theory of trust was supplanted by a general overhaul of theoretical terms and positions, switching from action to communication theory and diluting the theorem of complexity reduction. The present study seeks to integrate a theory of trust with these newer developments by identifying a social location or function of trust, elaborating

a viable theoretical framework, and resolving certain incongruences of the theory such as the role of trust and confidence, the crisis of the medium and symbolic configurations, advancing the concept of a connecting medium as opposed to symbolic generalized communication media.

However, Luhmann proposed that beyond such communication media, the connection medium exists as a distinct type. To illustrate this, he used the example of values that have no system-forming potential but form a loosely connected field of possibilities for action by reference to values. In line with that argument, it was suggested that trust may serve as a connection medium. This construction makes further theoretical developments possible, such as the identification of symbolic aspects of the medium, the social location of trust as mediating between different levels of society, and the symbolic configuration of the role of trust repair.

The symbolic dimension of trust can further be linked to the concept of address and so to the different levels of society. This requires a distinction to be drawn between personal trust and confidence, as these two different forms of the medium are based on a different conditioning of the related symbols. Finally, the measurement of trust was considered, illustrating how the inflation-deflation dimension illuminates the more generalized functioning of trust in a brief reflection on the case of the former Soviet Union and southern Italy.

As well as advancing the concept of trust in Luhmann's theory and integrating it with current theory, the paper outlines a series of empirical questions concerning the

symbolic dimension of trust, questions of inflation and deflation, and the differing operational qualities of trust and confidence, contributing to four aspects of current research.

(1) Trust is conceptualized as a societal category rather than as a psychological state.

(2) By foregrounding the symbolic configuration of trust, the implicit nature of trust is explained.

(3) An explanation is offered for why trust is so far-reaching and ubiquitous at all the different levels of society.

(4) The symbolic configuration and template structure point to differing logics of trust within addressable and nonaddressable systems. These forms of trust are not easily interchangeable and may even work against each other; for instance, trust in networks may lead to a social disorder that undermines confidence.

(5) Finally, the present findings point to new areas of research measuring the strength or weakness of trust in different social settings.

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