Blockchain Politics: Ideology and the Crisis of Social Trust

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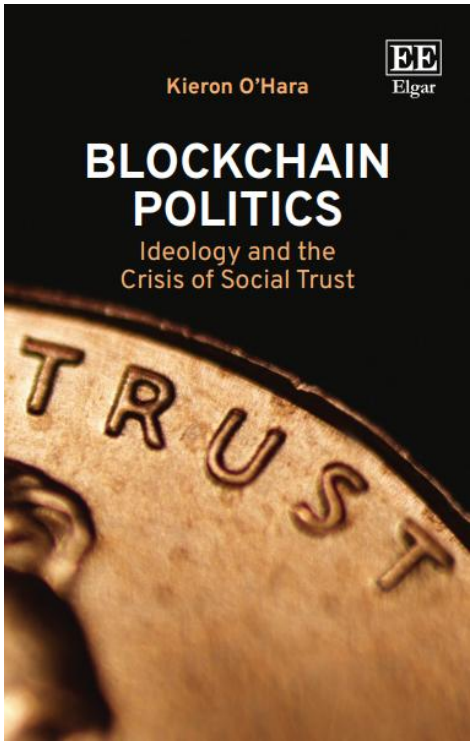

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Excerpts from the Introduction

Abstract: This chapter introduces the premise of the book, that there has been a shift in democratic politics from an activity for achieving compromise and consensus over resource allocation in plural societies, to a moral struggle to achieve ideological supremacy. The former style relies heavily on political and social trust, while the latter tends to reduce it. Two extremes of current democratic politics are introduced: the 'Peasants', or right wing populists, and the 'Puritans', or critical identity theorists. The dynamics of their interaction reduce the space for trust still further, and as a result the successes of one group tend to provoke a reactive response from the other. The failure to prosecute Brexit successfully is given as an example of how the efficacy of politics is diminished by a lack of trust.

Key words: populism, identity politics, trust, Brexit, social capital

21st century politics are utterly bizarre. Despite relatively few people engaging directly with extremes, we seem to have been transported to the 17th century world of Matthew Hopkins, Witchfinder General. On one side we have a puritan, compassion-free, vengeful, punitive regiment of unsmiling moral police determined to suppress all trace of old sinful ways and to purge wicked traditions, contemptuous of due process and untarnished by presumption of innocence. They face a pugnacious mob of snarling, swivel-eyed, snaggle-toothed peasants with pitchforks, impervious to reason, disdainful of calls for calm, scornful of authority, oppugnant to the Riot Act, and utterly convinced by their preachers that they are beset by every kind of sprite, gargoyle and demon that ever featured in a story book.

To talk of political trust in these circumstances is heroic. Like the humane, sherry-tippling squire of 1647, we are trapped in a pincer by two terrible Manichaean movements, who agree only on the immanence of the apocalyptic struggle of Good versus Evil, cooperate only to drown moderate voices in a torrent of manufactured invective. The impediment under which we labour today, unlike the hapless squire of yore, is that ideas spread far more quickly and effectively with networked digital technology. And the technology that both sides use to automate their mobs is increasingly defended as a means by which society can be run devoid of trust. It wasn't so long ago that trust was seen as the glue that held societies together and allowed them to prosper (Fukuyama 1995). Now, Puritans and Peasants alike see it as a dangerous vulnerability to be transcended.

The structure of this book

The Puritans and the Peasants are both corrosive to democratic politics. In the literature, the Peasants get the worst of it (Mounk 2023, 17-18, for quantitative evidence). Few writers of any quality are prepared to go on the record and defend Trump, Farage, Le Pen, Cruz, DeSantis, Wilders et al, while the conspiracy theories that are catnip to this bizarre tribe are easily dismissed. Academics are appalled when young people are 'radicalised' by the far right, and write hand-wringing articles on how to stop it, while doing their best to radicalise their students on the Puritan side. Yet when we ask why the Peasants thrive in public life, few commentators are able to admit the unpalatable truth that they are widely preferred to the Puritans.

Hence this book is focused on the Puritans and their fellow-travellers. That does not mean that I don't condemn the Peasants; I do, but that is less of a lonely task. I have tried elsewhere to show how the small-c conservatism I outline in this book is opposed to right-wing populism (O'Hara 2021), but in general I assume without proof that the Peasants are unfit for office and inimical to trust, and therefore cannot provide solutions to the serious problems democracies face. They have no jointly coherent positive agenda, disagreeing, for example, on membership of the EU, support for Ukraine,

and women's and gay rights. They also don't really know what to do about, say, immigration; they oppose it, but are unable to work out how to stop it. That makes them far less effective politically than the Puritans, who get things done thanks to their strategic 'long march' through our cultural institutions (only in Eastern Europe have the Peasants successfully taken over the machinery of the state). The Peasants worry me far less than the Puritans. Hence the substantive arguments about unfitness for office and injuriousness to trust will be targeted at the Puritans only, in Part III.

It is not a binary, and I suspect relatively few people are firmly committed to either side. I tend to agree with Yascha Mounk that most citizens, ambivalent about politics, broadly want our diverse societies to succeed (2022, 18), but don't see why guilt, sanctimony and intolerance are required for the purpose.

The book falls into three parts. An opening chapter will look at political trust, and how the Puritans and the Peasants propose to wish it away. Part I of the book will review the nature of trust. This is foundational work, and could be skipped if you want to get straight into the politics, although my analysis of trust is a crucial premise for many of the political arguments. Part II will lay out a traditional Burkean small-c conservative ideology, to show how it both depends on, and fosters, trust in a tight circle. Part III will look more critically at how various prominent strands of Puritan thought undermine trust. In conclusion, the need for trust in plural and competitive democracies will be discussed, looking in particular at the political projects it would enable.

This book is itself part of a loose and unintended trilogy, the fruit of a project that grew out of hand. This is the middle part, appearing first. A conceptual opening would be an analysis of trust and how it operates in society; this is condensed into Part I here, with many lacunae, caveats and promissory notes which I hope will be made good later. The closing work would focus on the 'trust dividend': what could and should be done with trust restored and shored up in Western democracies.

Chapter 1: Trustless Trust and the Blockchain Metaphor

Abstract: The starting point of this chapter is the view of representative democracy taken from Burke's speech to the electors of Bristol. For this kind of democracy to work, the representative must be trusted, but populists and identity theorists trade in a rejection of trust, preferring to establish mechanisms to reduce representatives' discretion. Rather than hierarchical relations, both sides prefer networks (in the populists' case, a very flat hierarchy beneath a leader). Both of these extremes have been energised by the growth of digital modernity, or what Castells has called the network society. Following the financial crisis of 2007-09, trust is often seen as a vulnerability. The development of blockchain in response to the collapse of trust has been an inspiration for the extremes, as a secure, transparent, immutable and decentralised means of decision-making and data storage, introducing so-called 'trustless trust'.

Key words: populism, identity politics, blockchain, network society, representative democracy, trustless trust

Part I: A Theory of Trust

Abstract: The topics of trust and trustworthiness are introduced. Trust is an attitude of one agent to another, the affirmation of the trustworthiness of another. Trustworthiness is a property of an agent. Reciprocal trust relationships will be decomposed, for simplicity, into two mutual trust relationships. Trust has been given utilitarian and functional accounts, which are important, but not sufficient to describe the phenomenon. The 'problem of trust' is not how to increase trust, but how to align trust and trustworthiness. Society depends on the reflex of trust, the acceptance of the mutual obligations of social beings. One who trusts is called a 'trustor', one who is trusted is a 'trustee'. Being trusted does not entail the trustee is trustworthy.

Key words: trust, trustworthiness, uncertainty, community, association, reciprocity

Chapter 2: Preliminaries

Abstract: Trust and trustworthiness are ambiguous, suggesting the application of Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory of meaning. Their meaning depends on the context, or form of life, which often prescribes an attitude to trust and doubt, reducing the need for considered judgment. Some of the ambiguities are explored, including those between: (i) trust-in-trustworthiness and trust-in-reliance, (ii) explicit trust and inferred trust, (iii) evaluative, graded-trust and threshold-trust, as well as trust as an attitude and placing trust as an action, (iv) local and global trust, and (v) trust as ethically-charged and trust as expectation. The virtuousness of trust and trustworthiness is defended, despite some correlations between trust and coercion; the failure of virtue theory to tell us the right thing to do is defended as a positive aspect. Finally, trust and trustworthiness are argued to be universal aspects of civilisation, and not, as some argue, inventions of modernity.

Key words: trust, trustworthiness, virtue, reliance, coercion, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Chapter 3: Trustworthiness

Abstract: An agent is trustworthy when she is willing, able and motivated to carry out commitments made to an audience of beneficiaries. The commitments may be specific or open-ended, the audience general or particular, and the commitments may be taken on voluntarily or assigned. They assume a context, and may not apply outside it. Someone is untrustworthy when they take on commitments in full awareness that they are unwilling, unable or unmotivated to carry them out. Trustworthy people must signal their trustworthiness to others, so it is ineradicably other-directed; but signals may be faked by untrustworthy people. Someone is generally trustworthy when they are reliably willing, able and motivated to carry out the commitments they take on conscientiously. Those who are generally untrustworthy are regularly cavalier about their commitments. Trustworthiness is vital to promote collaboration, reciprocity and respect for others in communities.

Key words: trustworthiness, untrustworthiness; commitments; signalling; virtuousness; character

Chapter 4: Trust

Abstract: Trust is the attribution by a trustor to a trustee of willingness, ability and motivation to carry out commitments for an audience of beneficiaries within a limited set of contexts. Mistrust is the attribution of untrustworthiness. Trust may fail when the trustee is untrustworthy, or when the trustor's interpretation of the commitments disagrees with the trustee's. Trust and trustworthiness can be aligned by trustor and trustee engineering the context with sanctions, incentives, dialogue, norms and other social resources. It is often assumed that trustworthiness causes trust, but trust often precedes trustworthiness, which helps trustees learn trustworthiness and empathy. Some

have the character trait of being generally trusting, but this is distinct from the moral imperative to trust unconditionally (generalised trust). Generalised trust is a cosmopolitan ideal that may become counterproductive and coercive. Survey evidence is often cited for generalised trust, but it is of dubious significance.

Key words: trust, mistrust, risk, generalised trust, altruistic trust, empathy

Part II: Conservatism and its Affinity for Trust

Abstract: Part II of the book argues that the ideology of small-c conservatism has a strong affinity with trust. Social trust gives a foundation to conservative thinking and policy, while conservatism itself underpins the practices and institutions that facilitate trust in society. Trust is a response to uncertainty and free will that thrives in conditions of stability, order, predictability and managed expectations. A conservative society is therefore optimal for trust, all things being equal.

Key words: conservatism, populism, social trust, stability, order

Chapter 5: Small-c Conservatism

Abstract: Conservatism is a sceptical ideology intended to manage risk by conserving institutions and practice. It can be characterised by the knowledge principle, that highly-connected social networks, emergence and reflexivity all undermine policymaking models, and the change principle, that change brings with it unpredictable and unintended consequences heightening risk of undermining valuable institutions. It relies on trust of communities and of ancestors, and the wisdom they bequeath through authority, civility, custom and tradition. Different communities will therefore have different conservative imperatives, while conservatism within a community will use the standards of that community to judge social value. Political trust is important for conservatism (and *vice versa*), so that representatives need to engage far more deeply not only with the full range of their constituents, but also with their political opponents, in order to enable the long-term planning needed for social resilience.

Key words: conservatism, resilience, risk, scepticism, custom, civility

Chapter 6: Legibility and Contextual Integrity

Abstract: An environment or practice is legible to someone if they can navigate it, feel comfortable in it, and work within it to achieve their goals. People are legible to each other when they similarly inhabit and reproduce a jointly legible environment. Legibility goes beyond mere familiarity, supporting interaction with strangers and the navigation of complexity. Legibility makes trust judgments more accurate, and fidelity to social standards is often taken as a proxy for trustworthiness. Preserving legibility, or contextual integrity, is therefore a conservative project that tends to support trust. Politeness and the civic virtues are especially valuable. Legibility will be contested, as some prefer deep legibility within communities, and others see opportunity in shallower, broader legibility across communities. Many examples of populism can be cast as crises of legibility, although populist politics is not well-suited to resolving them.

Key words: legibility, contextual integrity, trustworthiness, populism, politeness, trustworthiness

Chapter 7: Trust and Community

Abstract: Communities are sustained by mutual trust. This is aided by shared values, common experiences, collective memory and history, and structures of authority and hierarchy, and is hindered by diversity. However, shared experience is not necessary for mutual trust, and diversity can be a source of positive value. Communities can therefore be exclusive or inclusive, but to provide value to members they need to be sustainable and adaptable. Incomers to a community may find it hard to signal trustworthiness because of their lack of shared experience; however, their interests are still served by sustaining their adopted community, which they value for the positive benefits they hope to receive in future. They will be trusted more easily on the cosmopolitan model of generalised trust, but this provides less information for trustors, and by standardising behaviour

may ultimately prove coercive to trustees. Generalised trust works therefore to the disadvantage of both host and incomer.

Key words: trust, integration, inclusion, hierarchy, social capital, diversity

Chapter 8: Trust and the State

Abstract: The state, as the monopolist of legitimate force, is a focus of conservative thinking. Carl Schmitt argued that its power to subvert the rule of law allows the sovereign to decide on exceptions and emergencies. In contrast, Michael Oakeshott distinguished two co-existing aspects of the state: as a civil association, providing authoritative rules for civil society; and as an enterprise association, with its own goals which it can force citizens to work toward. While Oakeshott advocated a liberal state as civil association, he was unable to explain its authority in liberal terms of citizens' acceptance of obligations to it. Oakeshott's account is therefore augmented in this chapter by an understanding of citizens' acceptance of obligations, not as an act of will, but a learned cultural response. The legibility of the state to citizens depends on the social skills of public-facing bureaucrats. However, trustless trust mechanisms such as digital government undermine citizens' trust in the state.

Key words: the state, civil association, enterprise association, obligation, bureaucracy, digital government

Part III: Blockchaining Democracy

Abstract: Parts I and II argued that (i) hierarchies are supported by trust, while many power asymmetries are crucial for socialisation; (ii) it is cynical to suggest that trust is usually coercive; and (iii) trust between strangers is widespread through society, and does not have to be created by mechanisms. Trust is not a vulnerability, and it thrives, with positive effects, in the matrix of a legible community. The final task of this book is examining ideologies that are antithetical to trust. Subsequent chapters will look at technology and technocracy (the driving metaphor behind modernisation), the dominant Western ideology of liberalism, critical accounts from the post-Marxist left, and identity politics, in order to highlight aspects that impact directly on social trust.

Key words: ideology, technology, technocracy, liberalism, critical theory, identity politics

Chapter 9: Technology Against Trust

Abstract: The fashion for disruptive innovation has led some to turn to mechanism solutions to replace trust. Disintermediating complex processes can result in simplification, the removal of rent-seeking middlemen, and cheaper services. However, the disintermediated stages are often important for contextual integrity and social understanding. A particular problem has occurred in the production of news, where disintermediation has destroyed the business model of trustworthy news, and academics have undermined epistemic authority. Some principles of trustworthy information supply are suggested. In general, trustless trust cannot replace social trust-generating practices. The Doomsday Machine from *Dr Strangelove* is used, alongside problems with cryptocurrency exchanges and smart contracts, to show how removing humans from the loop creates, rather than removes, vulnerabilities. Trust is usually re-established by the restoration of a trusted third party, such as banking regulators in the case of cryptocurrency.

Key words: disruptive innovation, disintermediation, misinformation, trustless trust, smart contracts, cryptocurrencies

Chapter 10: Democratic Liberalism Against Trust

Abstract: Liberal democracy is an ongoing project of emancipation. As emancipated individuals withdraw from ascriptive roles, the state intervenes to fill them, but because this is too costly to maintain, they ultimately devolve to the private sphere (neoliberalism). The self-interested neoliberal individual will not work for the common good, so liberalism advocates institutionalised mistrust of political actors. As autonomous citizens may not treat everyone equally, liberalism also hegemonically polices the private sphere, undermining traditions, practices and institutions that help define private interests and associations. Conformism is seen by liberals as uncritical acceptance of such practices and so new modes of living are encouraged, even though they undermine legibility and the signalling of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes by examining and rejecting post-liberalism, arguing that liberalism has produced good societies, but threatens its own foundations of trust. Hence liberal societies need to be defended using conservative reasoning.

Key words: mistrust, dissent, private sphere, autonomy, conformism, legibility

Chapter 11: Critical 'Progressives' Against Trust

Abstract: Progressivism, influenced by critical theory, Nietzsche, Foucault and Bourdieu, focuses on power as a restraining force in bourgeois society. As a result, it conceptualises trusting relationships as exercises of power. Bourdieu's conceptual scheme of habitus, field and capital is distorted to proclaim that any arbitrariness in the distribution of social capital is unjust, which creates a dilemma

for progressives: either we live in a permanently unjust world, or we reconfigure fields and destroy social capital. The notion of symbolic violence is introduced by critical theorists to cover any type of symbolic constraint, including the operation of language or social norms. Truth-telling by the powerful, on this account, is an exercise of power, and by the oppressed is a symptom of weakness. It follows that those who wish to depart from the constitutional norms of democratic societies are justified in using unconstitutional means. It is clear from this analysis that critical progressivism is inimical to political trust.

Key words: critical theory, symbolic violence, dissent, direct action, power, social capital

Chapter 12: Identity Politics Against Trust

Abstract: Identity politics treats identity as the axis of oppression of minorities, and many of its resources are inimical to trust. Intersectionality fragments oppressed identities. Standpoint epistemology focuses on incommunicable experience, and posits incommensurable lifeworlds that prevent communication. White fragility asserts that the anti-racism of sympathetic white people is parasitic on the reproduction of structural racism. Allyship is an untenable position, requiring allies to be trustworthy toward oppressed minorities, while accepting they will never be trusted. Victimhood is important currency in identity politics, but for a victim trust is a losing strategy. Identity politics is fundamentally illiberal, as it demands unanimous rejection of opposing positions, leading ultimately to cancel culture. Attempts to create rainbow coalitions collapse, because calling out oppression is the only strategy activists have, undermining any unity they may begin with. Meanwhile, racist and sexist oppressors can exploit identity-political ideas, for example owning their prejudice, to position themselves as victims.

Key words: standpoint epistemology, allyship, white fragility, victimhood, rainbow coalition, cancel culture

Conclusion: The Trust Dividend

Abstract: If political trust is restored, it can revitalise democratic politics by enabling the identification of existential problems, and the reconfiguration of the state to address them across more than one electoral cycle. This need not involve consensus on policy, but agreement about what is valuable. Serious problems include current geopolitical developments and the reconfiguration of the global order, climate change and the need to decarbonise the economy, building and maintaining infrastructure, adapting health services and pensions to aging societies, controlling borders, and resetting post-Brexit relations between Britain and the EU. The restoration of civility should help reduce the baneful influence of identity politics and far right populism. Political elites need to stop imposing moral views on society, and instead defend the private sphere, and appreciate liberal democracy as an extension of the trusting and trustworthy practices of the bourgeoisie and working class.

Key words: geopolitics, climate change, infrastructure, immigration, civility, cross-party trust