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Doing Trust – Precarious Practices

Report on the Workshop “Trust, Crisis, Catastrophe III: Practices,” organized by Nina Doejen, Gerald Hartung, Katharina Kalthoff, Florian Kappeler, and Cécile Stehrenberger, January 18–20, 2023, University of Wuppertal (Germany)

With the COVID-19 pandemic, practices of trust and mistrust – such as regular hand washing, wearing surgical face masks and vaccination – became the focus of public and scientific attention. Besides these infection risk-reducing practices (i.e. “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity,” Schatzki 2001, 11), narrative practices of trust and mistrust also became the focus of public and scientific attention. Within her “Mosse Lecture” at the Humboldt University of Berlin in 2021, Eva Horn addressed the phenomenon of conspiracy narratives (Mosse Lectures 2021). Moreover, narrative modelbuilding has also come to the fore and raised questions about how we frame crises and catastrophes through narrative means. Warwick Anderson (2021, 168) explored not only statistical modelling to capture the perception of epidemic disease. He also opens his article by referring to Albert Camus’ novel *La Peste*, originally from 1947, which was rapidly sold out in the early days of the pandemic and became an often-cited example.

How practices of trust and mistrust work and change in and through communication and narration in front of such precarious backgrounds belongs to the research interests of the interdisciplinary research group *Doing Trust in the Era of Crises and Catastrophes*. Their workshop “Trust, Crisis, Catastrophe III: Practices” on January 18–20th was the third in a series of events with different emphases on what constitutes trust and mistrust in crises and catastrophes. Workshop I (03.–04.02.2022) and workshop II (30.06–01.07.2022) focused on narratives as a mis-/trust-generating practice. The ten guest speakers of the third workshop focused stronger on praxeological perspectives. Practice approaches are central in social studies, but since the proclamation of the “practice turn” more than 20 years ago with the publication of *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki et al. 2001), disciplines in the humanities (Elias et al. 2014) such as philosophy (Redecker 2018) and literature (Bathon et al. 2020) have also introduced practice approaches. Moreover, trust studies (Hartmann 2011) have particularly benefited from applying practice approaches. The ten guest speakers presented their ideas in twenty to thirty-minute talks. As I would particularly like to highlight in this report, the speakers repeatedly addressed narratives as practices of trust and mistrust, thus combining narratology and praxeology.

Day 1

How language and narratives are related to trust was already discussed on the evening of the first day. The Ankara-born writer *Zafer Şenocak* (Berlin) gave a public reading of his literary works *In deinen Worten* (2016) and *Das Fremde, das in jedem wohnt* (2018) at the cultural centre LOCH Wuppertal. The reading was followed by a discussion moderated by *Katharina Kalthoff* (University of Wuppertal) in which *Nina Doejen* (University of Wuppertal) and *Florian Kappeler* (University of Wuppertal) focused on how language generates trust and mistrust. The German word for trust translates to *güven* in Turkish. The term is synonymous with safety and security. In the evening and the following days, discussions emphasized this translational relationship repeatedly.

Day 2

The official beginning of the workshop took place the following day. *Ilka Jakobs* (Media Studies, University of Mainz) opened the workshop with a lecture on the practice of media use. In “Trust in Media in Times of Crisis – Current Developments in Times of Corona Pandemic, Ukraine War and Energy Crisis,” she first provided a theoretical introduction to the concept of trust in media (“Medienvertrauen”) in the context of democracy and society before presenting the “Mainz Long-Term Study on Media Trust,” a study conducted annually throughout Germany since 2008 using telephone surveys. One result of the study is that trust in ‘the media’ increases in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, while “media cynicism” decreases.

A more critical discussion of ‘the media’ was presented by *Franziska Kohlt* (History of Science, Leeds). In her paper “Words Matter: Metaphor, Narrative and Behaviour Change in Risk and Health Communication around Covid-19,” Kohlt examined trust practices in science communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. She addressed the war metaphor in visual crisis communication in English journalistic and digital media, which differed significantly from narratives in Germany (COVID-19 as a natural disaster) and Sweden (COVID-19 as a flu disease). Her talk concluded the first section of the workshop, which dealt thematically with the pandemic. However, the focus on mediality and science communication also played a role in the following two papers.

In his talk “Faith, Hope, Love, and Disappointment. Metaphysical and Economic Coordinates of Trust,” *Heiner Wilharm* (Design, Media and Communication Studies, University of Dortmund) discussed media practices of staging trust through allegories (*pietas* and *caritas*). By analyzing the narratological setting of paintings of the early modern period and their profane representation in a Deutsche Bank advertising campaign produced for television in the 1990s, Wilharm detected a visual model of generating trust.

Cécile Stehrenberger (Historical-Comparative Science and Technology Studies, University of Wuppertal) spoke on “Exploring Explosions and Erosions: Trust, Science, and Disaster.” She examined the question of trust in science and crisis communication after disasters, referring to various disasters of the past, such as the Palomares nuclear accident in 1966 and the Annobón waste scandal of 1988, but especially to the explosion in the Chempark Leverkusen in 2021.

Day 3

The opening lecture of the second day, *Tomás Usón*'s (Anthropology, Humboldt University of Berlin) talk “Rage Against the Machine: Creating Trust in a Climate-Changing World,” presented a case study from his current PhD project on the destruction of an early warning system in the Peruvian Andean region of Ancash. He detected risk management practices and the lack of trust in these practices on the part of the local population, leading to the destruction.

Similarly, the following presentation raised the question of how to trust in politics. The paper “Trust through ‘Humanity’? Affective Political Narrating under Conditions of Uncertainty” by *Marlon Barbehön* (Political Science, Heidelberg University) dealt with generating trust through emotions in a political context. Taking up the concept of “narrative” as defined by Albrecht Koschorke (2018, 18), Barbehön analyzed two German politicians facing the energy crisis in the German public, a newspaper interview with Frank-Walter Steinmeier in *Der Spiegel* and a radio interview with Robert Habeck. According to Barbehön, contemporary narratives of political communication generate trust through human emotions rather than through recourse to activity.

In her lecture “Confinement ‘Love.’ The ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ as a Multi-dimensional Crisis of Trust,” *Juliane Hornung* (History, University of Cologne) approached the medical practice of pathologizing the Stockholm syndrome from a discourse-analytical perspective. Since the 1970s, this phenomenon refers to the sympathy of victims for their abductors. Hornung attributed the emergence of the discourse to three causes: (1) the Cold War, (2) the emergence of the concept of terrorism, and – foremost – (3) the women’s movement.

During her talk “Fear in Capitalism,” *Bini Adamczak* (Philosophy, Berlin) discussed a specific form of mistrust: the system of fear within capitalist conditions. By expanding on the school class narrative from Dieter Duhm’s book *Angst im Kapitalismus* (1974), Adamczak traced the production of fear in the capitalist economy.

In his lecture “Mistrust of Rule before COVID-19: Segmentary Orders in Georgia,” *Florian Mühlfried* (Ethnology, Ilia State University in Tbilisi) referred to his book *Unherrschaft und Gegenherrschaft* (2022) and discussed practices of (the problematic concept of) mistrust in the rule, first in times of COVID-19 and then in pre-pandemic times using the example of the Georgian mountain village of Pchowi.

Conclusion

Crises and catastrophes expose practices of trust and mistrust in many ways. The workshop showed the interdisciplinary richness of the field of trust studies in front of precarious backgrounds, ranging from sociology and philosophy to science and technology studies. Accordingly, the speakers – young researchers as well as established researchers in the field of trust studies – came from disciplines such as journalism, history of science, design, media and communication studies, media didactics, anthropology, political science, history, philosophy, and ethnology. During the workshop, the ten guest speakers – unfortunately, none came from information technology, which is also part of the research group – presented their ideas on the main topic, a practice approach to trust studies. The frequent recourse to narratological terminology and concepts such as “perspective” in German advertisement and visual communication, or “narrative” (Koschorke 2018, 18) in a political context, marked a common point of reference in most of the talks. Given that most speakers were not mere narratologists, including narrative practice proves the interdisciplinary potential of narratology. But the risks and limits were also exposed by the speakers. Despite the potential challenges posed by interdisciplinary language barriers, the discussions overwhelmingly fostered harmony, with a notable convergence of viewpoints and minimal friction. However, if interdisciplinary trust studies want to do more than just scratching the surface, they need to engage with narratology in a more differentiated way. Stefan Rosmer offers such an approach for medieval studies. In one of his essays, he takes praxeological narratology as the sum of historical narratology and praxeology and seeks to understand how storytelling works historically (Rosmer 2022, 33). What is true about time must also be true about other materialities such as space, language, gender, or class. Methodologically, Rosmer (2022, 44) argues for a latent tension between hermeneutics and practice theory. An approach that overcomes mere hermeneutics, however, certainly appears desirable. Significantly, the authors of the chapter on practice (“Praxis”) in the book *Literaturtheorie nach 2001* (Bathon et al. 2020, 105) mention the special edition of *Representations*, edited by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, which rejects a mere hermeneutic textual interpretation in the face of contemporary disasters like Abu Ghraib or the Hurricane Katrina (Best / Marcus 2009, 2). Their approach is “relatively neutral about their objects of study, which they tend less to evaluate than to describe, and which they situate in landscapes neither utopian nor dystopian” (Best / Marcus 2009, 16). The authors share this interest in patterns with practice approaches. When seeking answers to questions surrounding matters of trust and mistrust, and their changing relations to narration and communication in a precarious setting, praxeology is a timely approach since it may harmonize and overcome disciplinary boundaries. The research group project *Doing Trust in the Era of Crises and Catastrophes* is currently in the application process and gives reason for hope in this respect.

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