

The Politics of Trust

How trust reconciles autonomy and solidarity in alternative organizations

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The Politics of Trust: How trust reconciles autonomy and solidarity in alternative organizations

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the politics of trust in alternative organizations, understood as counter-hegemonic collectives characterized by an equal commitment to individual autonomy and collective solidarity. Although trust is rarely theorized in studies of alternative organizations, it is frequently claimed to be the glue that holds such collectives together. The main purpose of the paper is to substantiate this claim theoretically. Drawing eclectically on Niklas Luhmann and Ernesto Laclau, we argue that trust serves at least two functions in alternative organizations. First, trust serves as an object of identification for people who long for an alternative to the current state of affairs. Such identification rests on the creation of an antagonistic frontier between the organization and its constitutive outside. Here, trust is understood as a way of establishing alternatives by providing space for individual autonomy. We refer to this as the *political* function of trust. Second, trust serves as a mechanism that renders possible the reconciliation of otherwise irreconcilable interests and identities. Trust fulfils this function by suspending the temporal distance between present and future, thereby creating an extensive ‘moment of undecidability’ in which competing interpretations of what it means to be alternative may coexist. Here, trust is understood as a way of maintaining alternatives by cultivating solidarity between diverse individuals. We refer to this as the *depoliticizing* function of trust. Combined, these two functions allow people to be ‘different together’, which is often claimed to be the sine qua non of alternative organizing. In conclusion, we hypothesize that both functions of trust may be operative in mainstream organizations as well, although the depoliticizing function is clearly more prevalent.

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Introduction

As Gerbaudo (2021) notes, we are currently living through a time of perpetual crisis in which things that were previously taken for granted – such as globalization and economic growth – are now questioned by a multiplicity of political forces, leaving the Western world in a state of profound disorientation and consternation (see also Beckett, 2019). In times of crisis, alternative organizations tend to emerge and thrive, as they offer political representation for ‘the frustrated popular will’ who has lost faith in society’s established institutions as well as its traditional rulers (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis, Nikisianis, & Siomos, 2018, p. 10). Alternative organizations, understood as associations that manage to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable principles of *individual autonomy* and *collective solidarity* (Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014), not only thrive when trust in mainstream organizations is challenged, but actively employ trust as a mechanism for governing their own internal affairs (e.g. Christensen, 2021; Daskalaki, Fotaki & Sotiropoulou, 2019; Husted, 2020; Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016). Moving from the observation that alternative organizations are currently flourishing to an investigation of how trust operates within such collectives, we seek to conceptualize trust as an ‘organizing principle’ (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003) that serves a number of important functions for alternatives. That is, we move from a focus on *systemic* trust to a focus on *interpersonal* trust (Newton, 2007). How, we ask, does trust work to establish and maintain alternative organizations?

Within organization and management studies, interpersonal trust is commonly understood as an active accomplishment or process of keeping the organization together (Grey & Garsten, 2001). While it is sometimes acknowledged that trust is not necessarily good in the normative sense (Siebert, Martin, Bozic, & Docherty,

2015; Skinner, Dietz, & Weibel, 2014), it is nevertheless assumed to be a necessary ingredient of well-functioning organizations (e.g. Kramer & Tyler, 1996). Further, the recognition that trust is never interest-free (Culbert & McDonough, 1986) is nonetheless accompanied by a tendency to assume that issues concerning lack or misuse of trust should be solved with more or better trust (e.g. Bachmann, Gillespie, & Priem, 2015; Dietz & Gillespie, 2011; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; McEvily et al., 2003). Hence, the literature generally admonishes us to ‘trust trust’ (Gambetta, 1988), skirting the basic issue of why trust is so important in organizations and, instead, favouring the study of how trust relations are created, preserved, broken and/or restored (e.g. Gillespie & Siebert, 2018; Gustafsson, Gillespie, Searle, Hailey, & Dietz, 2020; Hernandez, Long, & Sitkin, 2014; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). Such studies, then, do not explain the foundational functions of trust in organizations, and in focusing on how trust itself is organized, they tend to ‘forget’ that trust is an inherently political construct. That is, they see trust as the resolution of contentious issues rather than an integral part of such disputes. In this paper, we bring out this seen but unobserved political dimension of trust as it manifests in alternative organizations.

To this end, we draw primarily on Niklas Luhmann’s theory of trust as an interpersonal mechanism for reducing the type of complexity that follows from not knowing what the future might bring. Trust allows people to act in the face of this temporal uncertainty because it momentarily suspends the distance between present and future, thereby making it possible for the trustor ‘to behave as though the future were certain’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 12). Accordingly, to bestow trust is to disregard the complex unpredictability of the future by assuming that tomorrow will somehow follow today. If, for instance, we trust a babysitter to take care of our children,

we anticipate the future by assuming that everything will go according to plan and that no harm will befall them. In this case, we use trust as a means of ignoring all of the negative things that might potentially happen in our absence, thereby effectively suspending the temporal gap between now and then (Luhmann, 1988). Trust, one might say, is time arrested.

To tease out the consequences of this definition, we introduce Ernesto Laclau's conception of politics as the '*instituting* moment' of the social (Laclau, 1996, p. 47). Laclau (1990) establishes temporality as the very medium of politics, based on the assumption that social change depends on a perceived discrepancy between present and future. If the future is assumed to follow a predetermined script, as with the infamous 'end of history' thesis or the so-called TINA doctrine, there is no room for change and therefore no room for political action. This assumption troubles the relationship between trust and politics, since the former suddenly appears to obstruct the latter: whereas politics occurs within a 'widening of the field of the possible' (Laclau, 1990, p. 43), trust narrows down that field by allowing people to act 'as though there were only certain possibilities in the future' (Luhmann, 2017, p. 23). In this paper, we bring these two positions into the discussion of trust in alternative organizations because they allow us to explain a fundamental dilemma of alternative organizations: their combined need for social/organizational stability and political change.

Building our conceptual framework on these initial observations, we argue that trust serves at least two critical functions within alternative organizations. One function is political, while the other serves a depoliticizing purpose. First, trust functions to establish the alternative organization by offering an object of identification for people who long for an alternative to the current state of affairs. Such identification rests on the creation of an antagonistic frontier between the organization and its constitutive outside, which enables an organization to form on the basis of mutual trust. This is the *political* function of trust, as it allows for the institution of a new social space (i.e. the

alternative organization). Second, trust renders possible the reconciliation of otherwise irreconcilable interests and identities within the organization. Trust fulfils this function by suspending the temporal distance between present and future, thus creating an extensive 'moment of undecidability' (Laclau, 1995) in which many competing interpretations of what it means to be alternative may coexist. This is the *depoliticizing* function of trust. In theorizing trust as an organizing principle that both demarcates a new social space (the political function) and keeps it open for interpretation (the depoliticizing function), we contribute to the literature on alternative organizations by explaining how such organizations succeed in reconciling the otherwise irreconcilable principles of autonomy and solidarity. Furthermore, we contribute to the literature on organizational trust more broadly by establishing the two functions of trust and discussing their generalizability.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin with a review of the literature on trust in organizations, concluding that its conceptual relationship with politics has been largely ignored. We then proceed to a consideration of the literature on alternative organization, highlighting the many references to trust as particularly important to the internal orchestration of alternatives. This makes alternative organizations 'critical cases' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of trust-based organizing in the sense that they intensify and make visible otherwise latent dynamics related to trust and politics in organizations. Having established the need to theorize 'the politics of trust' in alternative organizations, we unfold the paper's main conceptual framework, based on Luhmann's notion of trust and Laclau's concept of politics, offering an illustrative application of the framework to the case of an alternative political party. We conclude by specifying the relevance of our conceptualization and offer some thoughts on the prospect of generalization.

Trust and Organizational Politics

The literature on trust typically distinguishes between 'systemic' trust (i.e. trust in government

institutions) and ‘interpersonal’ trust (i.e. trust in other people), with organization theorists usually prioritizing the latter (Newton, 2007). Although definitions of interpersonal trust vary, attempts to synthesize the literature have found recurring basic elements (e.g. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). First, trust involves a willingness to make oneself vulnerable in relation to the other, meaning that something valuable is at stake in the relationship and that this ‘something’ may be lost if trust is somehow betrayed (Zand, 1972). Hence, trust relations are conditioned by the constant threat of disappointment and may lead to instant regret (Deutsch, 1958). Second, the establishment and maintenance of trust depends on certain characteristics attributed by the trustor to the trustee, meaning that subjective perceptions of trustworthiness are at the heart of all trust relations (Hardin, 2002). As Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995, p. 717) note, certain ‘factors of trustworthiness’ such as *ability* (the belief in the competences of the trustee), *benevolence* (the belief that the trustee has positive intentions) and *integrity* (the belief that the trustee adheres to a particular set of principles) are particularly central in this regard. Building on these elements, Rousseau and colleagues (1998, p. 395) propose the following broad definition of interpersonal trust: ‘Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.’

Within organization and management studies, as well as in popular business literature, interpersonal trust is typically understood as a necessary ingredient of well-functioning enterprises and other social groupings (Kramer & Cook, 2004; Kramer & Tyler, 1996). For instance, Gambetta (1988) suggests that trust is fundamental to all cooperative relations because positive expectations toward the intentions of others is necessary for people’s willingness to work together (for a moderation of this argument, see Mayer et al., 1995). Similarly, Grey and Garsten (2001) argue that trust is an active accomplishment and ongoing process that is vital for contemporary organizations because it entails a type of behavioral predictability that allows members of a collective to rely on each

other in the absence of direct control. Conducting an extensive literature review, Dirks and Ferrin (2001) conclude that trust is beneficial for organizations, because it tends to generate more positive workplace attitudes, better cooperation and superior performance levels. Building on such arguments, McEvily et al. (2003, p. 93) propose that trust should be understood as an ‘organizing principle’ that renders decision-making more effective ‘by simplifying the acquisition and interpretation of information’ and by ‘suggesting behaviors and routines that are most viable and beneficial’ for the organization. Judging from this literature, there is little doubt that trust ‘brings us all sorts of good things’ (Uslaner, 2002, p. 1) and that organizational trustfulness is an all-out desirable condition (see also Beccerra & Gupta, 1999; Handy, 1995; McAllister, 1995).

Accepting this conclusion, albeit with certain reservations (see e.g. Skinner et al., 2014), organization and management scholars have largely assumed trust’s (beneficial) organizational functions, abandoning the conceptualization of such functions to, instead, turn their attention to empirical explorations of how trust relations are established, maintained, broken and re-established. One example of the former is Hernandez and colleagues’ (2014) study of how certain leadership behaviours are more effective than others in terms of cultivating so-called ‘follower trust’ within business firms and how ‘relational’ leadership behaviour is particularly effective in terms of mediating the outcomes of other leadership styles (see also Bligh, 2017). An example of the latter is Kramer and Lewicki’s (2010) piece on ‘trust repair’, which delineates prominent ways that trust relations may be broken (including disrespectful behaviour and underachievement) and repaired (including forgiveness and reinstatement). Bachmann and colleagues (2015) follow a similar trajectory, but employ a macro perspective on trust repair in order to suggest how so-called *impersonal* trust can be restored in times of crisis (see also Dietz & Gillespie, 2011; Gustafsson et al., 2020).

The merits of these studies notwithstanding, their somewhat instrumental ‘how-to’ approach

turns a blind eye to the role that trust plays in relation to organizational politics. By assuming that trust is inherently good, the literature predominantly turns to the cultivation and restoration of trust relations and largely ignores the fact that trust may sometimes prove a ‘poisoned chalice’ (Skinner et al., 2014), serving managerial interests at the expense of the common good (Siebert et al., 2015). Further, and on a more fundamental level, the literature fails to consider the strictly political role that trust plays within organizations; that is, the function of trust in terms of ‘instituting’ (Laclau, 1996) a particular social reality. In other words, the organizing principle of trust is assumed rather than unpacked, side-stepping the issues of the internal politics of trust within organizations.

Culbert and McDonough (1986) offer one exception to this rule and conceptualize the ‘politics of trust’ in terms of the relationship between organizational commitment, empowerment and trust. These authors begin from the observations that people usually commit to organizations that exhibit values similar to their own (this tendency is known as person–organization ‘value congruence’) and that they tend to trust individuals with similar values (labelled as sharing ‘personally-convenient reality constructions’). This does not mean that trust only occurs between people who share the same socio-economic demographics (see also Sturgis et al., 2010), but it does imply that trust tends to flourish between people with similar worldviews. As Culbert and McDonough (1986, pp. 174–175) put it:

An individual only trusts those whose ways of being empowered cause them to relate to and interpret events compatible with his or her own perceptions – those who are predisposed to valuing both the goals he or she is seeking and his or her particular ways of pursuing them. [. . .] Conversely, people do not trust those whom they believe are proceeding with a way of perceiving events and valuing contributions that is not harmonious with their own.

They use this conception to argue that trust takes on ‘highly-political overtones’ because it becomes a ‘commodity that an individual

attributes to others based on how those others see reality’ (Culbert & McDonough, 1986, p. 174). To underscore this point, the authors tie the notion of trust to empowerment, claiming the latter to be a byproduct of the former: we seek to empower those whom we trust, which coincidentally tend to be those who share our own beliefs. In other words, people use trust (deliberately or not) as a mechanism to bolster and advance their own views and interests in organizational settings.

This framing offers an initial starting point for understanding the organizational politics of trust, but a number of unresolved questions remain. For instance, how does the social mechanism of trust actually work in relation to organizational politics (beyond its commodification) and how does trust influence political decisions about the identity and objectives of an organization? To answer these questions, we need a conceptual framework for explaining the interrelation between trust and politics. Such a framework can, as we will detail below, be established by supplementing Luhmann’s notion of trust with Laclau’s conception of politics. Before we get to this theoretical fusion, however, we need to specify the *organizational* problem at hand. We do this by considering the role assigned to trust within the literature on ‘alternative organization’, considering this setting to be a ‘critical case’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of trust-based organizing. That is, the internal orchestration of collectives that represent alternatives to mainstream forms of social, political and/or economic organizing exposes and intensifies dynamics that are present but less visible in mainstream organizations. In what follows, we first seek to substantiate this position and, second, turn to unpacking the organizing principle of trust in the context of alternative organizations.

The Trust-Based Organization of Alternatives

As mentioned, alternatives are often established as reactions to crises of trust in established institutions. This makes trust in alternative organizations particularly important, not only

as a recruitment strategy, but also as a – and perhaps *the* – central organizing principle. While those who join alternative organizations have a wrought relationship with trust (as they have lost faith in the institutions of society), they are also looking to mend this relationship (as they continue to hope for a different future). As such, they may be anxious about making themselves vulnerable to each other, but they could also be acutely aware of the power vested in such vulnerability (see Butler, 2016).

While the existing literature recognizes that trust is essential to alternative organizations, the role of trust is more often implicitly assumed than explicitly acknowledged, let alone explored. Among the studies that do centre trust, Christensen (2021) argues that when the management of a non-profit festival decides to trust volunteers with essential tasks and assignments, this creates a sense of responsibility that motivates the volunteers to exercise their individual autonomy (or, their ‘voluntariness’) in solidarity with the objectives of the collective. Here, trust flows from the organization to its individual members, endowing the volunteers with the ability and willingness to re-enact the festival year upon year. Reversing the flow of trust, Daskalaki and colleagues (2019) suggest that trust-building is central to the ‘value practices’ of so-called grassroots exchange networks, as participants have to trust these networks to make them work. When endowed with trust, such collectives are able to prefigure different post-capitalist futures while maintaining organizational cohesiveness in the absence of formal controls (see also Cutcher & Mason, 2014). Similarly, Reedy and colleagues (2016, p. 1568) claim that ‘social bonds of personal trust’ are fundamental to alternative groups and that these bonds run deeper than ‘casual sociality’, as they underpin most activities in these groups. In fact, it is precisely because of interpersonal trust and informal personal relations (i.e. friendships) that alternative groups are able to thrive against all odds (see Husted, 2020, for a similar argument).

These studies establish the relationship between trust and two fundamental principles of alternative organizations: autonomy and

solidarity (Parker et al., 2014).¹ While the first principle holds forth the value of individual freedom, the second principle emphasizes the importance of realizing this freedom *through* the collective; that is, with support from others and without compromising the ability of these others to exercise their own individual autonomy. This conceptualization establishes a fundamental tension at the heart of alternative organizations, because it requires such collectives to find ways of being ‘different together’ (Buzzanell et al., 1997).² As Parker and colleagues (2014, pp. 37–38) put it:

How can we be both true to ourselves, and at the same time orient ourselves to the collective? How can we value freedom, but then give it up to the group? Our answer to these problems is that we need to understand both principles as co-produced. (. . .) We can be ‘different together’, a position which appears to dissolve a clear distinction between liberalism and communitarianism, between the demand for freedom and the embracing of a collectivity.

Other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions. For instance, in their study of a UK-based activist collective, Reedy and colleagues (2016) show how the notion of ‘individuation’ is central to alternative groups in general. Contrary to individualization, understood as simple self-centredness, the notion of individuation signifies the equilibrium attained when autonomy and solidarity are co-produced. It represents a situation in which ‘the individuated self has the capacity to pursue their own projects in collaboration with others’ by ‘behaving agentically while actually conforming to external social influences’ (Reedy et al., 2016, p. 1556). In other words, alternative organizations are collectives that allow individuals to develop their own individuality *because* of – and not *despite* – the heterogeneity of the group (see also Daskalaki et al., 2019; Husted, 2021; Kokkinidis, 2015a).

As such, autonomy and its reconciliation with solidarity is the *sine qua non* of alternative organizations. Unlike traditional business firms and other mainstream enterprises, alternatives

‘attain unity through variety’ (Follett, 1918, p. 39) because there simply is ‘no predominant personnel “style” such as there is in a bureaucratic organization’ (White, 1969, p. 39).

This raises the issue of how alternatives preserve heterogeneity while acting in unison. A number of solutions to this predicament have been proposed by scholars working with alternative organizations. For instance, research suggests that humanist values such as empathy, humility, reflexivity and compassion are crucial in terms of fostering and preserving membership diversity in such communities (e.g. Bryer, 2020; du Plessis & Just, 2021; Husted, 2020). Further, scholars have emphasized the important role of ‘mutual aid’ relationships (Kropotkin, 1902) for overcoming social, political and demographic differences within and between alternative organizations (e.g. Bousalham & Vidaillet, 2018; Land & King, 2014; Reedy et al., 2016). Finally, studies have shown how so-called ‘prefigurative’ practices can assist alternatives in creating ‘spaces of possibilities’ (Kokkinidis, 2015b) that allow people with fairly different beliefs and ambitions to find representation within the same organization (e.g. Maeckelbergh, 2009; Reinecke, 2018; Zanon, 2020).

The prefigurative turn to the future as a source of solidarity among autonomous individuals points directly to the role of trust as the enabler of such co-productive relationships. If members mutually trust each other to value and respect individual autonomy, then it seems possible to find ‘unity in difference’ and thereby resolve the otherwise irresolvable tension at the heart of alternative organizations by, simply, agreeing to be ‘different together’ (Buzzanell et al., 1997; Parker et al., 2014).

Returning to the question of how we may value freedom, but then give it up to the group, trust may support this move: members of alternative organizations value freedom *because* they trust other members to give it up to the group, and they exercise collective solidarity *because* they trust it will not breach their own individual freedom. Thus, the mutual vulnerability of members of alternatives makes these organizations possible.

This, however, leaves open the question of *how* trust reconciles autonomy and solidarity. How does this principle succeed in organizing the other two; what are its basic functions? In what follows, we will address these questions alongside more general concerns about the function of trust in relation to organizational politics. We begin by presenting our conceptual framework, which supplements Luhmann’s notion of trust with Laclau’s conception of politics, drawing eclectically from both theories. On this basis, we articulate a theory of the politics of trust in alternative organizations, which hinges on the potential of trust in terms of mediating between unity and difference. We will end the paper by considering whether and how such mediation may be a general precondition for not only alternatives, but all forms of organizing.

The Politics of Trust in Alternative Organizations

Seeking to conceptualize trust in alternative organizations, we combine Luhmann’s theory of trust with key insights from Laclau’s understanding of politics. While it is not common to combine the two, Luhmann’s and Laclau’s systems of thought converge in several areas (see Hansen, 2014). For instance, both are characterized by a radical commitment to post-structuralist epistemology as well as an enduring interest in deconstructing social ‘truths’ (Andersen, 2003). Beginning from these general commonalities, we focus on the specific common denominator of their shared constructivist understanding of *time*. Doing so allows us to see that while politics always unfolds in the temporal dimension (Laclau, 1990), ‘trust involves a problematic relationship with time’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 12). Noting the different ways in which Luhmann’s and Laclau’s common conception of temporality play out in relation to trust and politics, respectively, enables us to discuss these two concepts in relation to each other: if politics is temporal and trust suspends temporality, does trust suspend politics? More specifically, this allows us to explore how trust works in

alternative organizations; rather than assuming that trust is an inherent and necessary organizational good, we conceptualize what trust *does* in the alternative organizational setting.

As we will show in the following, trust serves at least two critical functions in alternative organizations. First, as an object of identification, trust serves to establish the organization by appealing to those attracted by the idea of trust-based organizing and by demarcating the collective from its ‘distrustful’ constitutive outside (see also Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Second, trust functions as a social mechanism that is capable of reconciling otherwise irreconcilable interests and identities. Taken together, we claim that the *political* function of trust is to mobilize different people longing for an alternative to a world dominated by distrust and that the *depoliticizing* function of trust is to reconcile the differences of the mobilized people. Combining Luhmann and Laclau, then, explains how trust both enables the organization to differentiate itself from its outside and to ‘contain multitudes’. In what follows, we unpack each element of this overall argument, beginning with a presentation of Luhmann’s theory of trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity.

Trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity by creating certainty

Niklas Luhmann (2017) begins his exposition of trust from the premise that the world is far too complex for any social system (organization) or psychic system (individual) to comprehend in its totality. This means that systems are fundamentally unknowable to themselves and, paradoxically, that they can only know themselves (Cevolini, 2012). To cope with this condition, systems operate on simplified distinctions of in- and exclusion (Luhmann, 2002). In other words, action is only possible through mechanisms for reducing complexity that enable the actor to provisionally disregard the multiple ways in which events could potentially unfold, but which it is impossible to anticipate. According to Luhmann, trust is one such mechanism of complexity

reduction, which operates on the distinction certainty-uncertainty in relation to time.³ In the absence of external certainty (knowing what will happen in the future), trust allows us to anticipate a course of action (assuming what will happen), thereby enabling us to get up in the morning without falling ‘prey to a vague sense of dread’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 5; see also Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021). Without trust, ‘anything and everything would be possible’, which is the recipe for paralysis (Luhmann, 2017, p. 5). With trust, however, we are able to sustain the belief that most things will turn out as anticipated, meaning that very few possibilities will actually materialize.

Notably, and unlike much literature on the topic, Luhmann (1988) distinguishes trust from both confidence and hope (see Kroeger, 2019). Whereas ‘confidence’ signifies unquestioned assumptions about the current state of affairs, the notion of ‘hope’ is characterized by blind faith (Sztompka, 1999). For instance, one may have *confidence* in the general value of money and *hope* that the economy does not slide into recession. Neither of these attitudes requires an active choice. As opposed to such situations, trust represents a risky course of action precisely because it requires the trustor to choose between actually existing alternatives, some of which may lead to disappointment (see also Deutsch, 1958; Mayer et al., 1995).

In other words, trust ‘presupposes a situation of risk’ (Luhmann, 1988, p. 97). A classic example of this is the so-called prisoner’s dilemma.⁴ Here, each prisoner must make an active choice about whether to trust their fellow inmate. The risky nature of this decision is reflected in its contingency: each prisoner is forced to act in an undecidable terrain in which no underlying structure governs the proper course of action. However, when one chooses to bestow trust on the other, the *undecidable* is rendered *decidable* by disregarding the contingent nature of the situation and ignoring the otherwise paralysing risk of disappointment. As Luhmann (2017, p. 28) notes:

[T]he benefit and rationale for action on the basis of trust are to be found (. . .) less in the definite mastery of longer chains of action or more extended causal connections (. . .) than, above all, in a boost towards *indifference*. By introducing trust, certain developments can be excluded from consideration. Certain dangers which cannot be removed but which should not disrupt action are neutralized.

The example of the prisoner's dilemma reveals at least three things about trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity by creating (the illusion of) certainty.

First, it shows that trust is only trust when it influences a decision. There is no need for trust if the prisoner already knows what the other inmate has decided to do or if the prisoner is forced into confession. In these instances, complexity will have been reduced by other means (i.e. knowledge or coercion).

Second, it shows that the damage following a breach of trust always outweighs the potential benefits gained from warranted trust. According to Luhmann, this is not only true in the case of the prisoner's dilemma, where being betrayed results in maximum jail sentence; rather, it is a defining feature of trust. If the benefits outweigh the potential harm, the decision will be a matter of simple calculation. Hence, trust is only required 'if a bad outcome would make you regret your action' (Luhmann, 1988, p. 98).

Finally, the example indirectly shows that 'trust involves a problematic relationship with time' (Luhmann, 2017, p. 12), in the sense that the temporal distance between present and future is momentarily suspended:

To show trust is to anticipate the future. It is to behave as though the future were certain. One might say that through trust time is superseded or at least differences in time are. This is perhaps the reason why ethics [and some corners of organization theory], out of concealed antipathy towards time, recommends trust as an attitude which seeks to make itself independent of the passage of time and so come close to eternity. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 12)

In detailing this point, Luhmann proposes a distinction between the notions of 'future present'

and 'present future' (Andersen & Pors, 2016). While the former designates the future that will eventually become present and then past, the latter refers to current anticipations about the future. In this sense, 'every present has its own future', manifested as 'the open horizon of future possibilities' (Luhmann, 2017, p. 15).

The function of trust is, crudely put, to bridge these two perceptions of time by suggesting that one will eventually turn into the other; the present vision of the future will, indeed, be realized as a future present. Notably, this does not entail assumptions about zero change. One can easily imagine a future that is radically different from the present, but trust allows one to 'prune the future' so as to match present expectations (Luhmann, 2017, p. 15). As such, trust displaces its own 'problematic relation with time' through an assumption that narrows down the field of potential action. Trust, in sum, draws a line from the present and into the open plane of the future, giving direction to otherwise unknowable temporal developments (thereby bringing the present into the future *and* the future into the present; cf. Hernes & Schultz, 2020).

Politics as a process that requires uncertainty

Luhmann's understanding of trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity by creating (an illusion of) certainty provides us with a starting point for understanding how trust works as an organizing principle in alternative organizations. Put bluntly, trust functions politically by neutralizing the political. More specifically, trust suspends the need for a political choice. To build this point, we supplement Luhmann's theory of trust with Laclau's notion of time in politics, which we introduce here before discussing its implications in the following section.

Significantly, Laclau defines politics in relation to the social (Marchart, 2014), arguing that the political is 'the *instituting* moment' of the social (Laclau, 1996, p. 47). That is, a group of

individuals becomes a collective by a strictly political decision (Norval, 2004). The key term in this context is ‘dislocation’, which refers to the disturbance or taking apart of ‘the usual organization of something’ (Oxford Learners Dictionary, 2021). Besides arguing that all structural arrangements are dislocated to the extent that they never achieve absolute fixation, Laclau uses the concept to describe moments of political turmoil where ‘the world is less “given” and must be increasingly constructed’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 40). In a moment of structural dislocation, ‘new possibilities for historical action’ emerge because the ‘field of decisions’ that is not predetermined by structure expands (Laclau, 1990, pp. 39–40).

Contrary to Luhmann’s position, as introduced above, Laclau argues that uncertainty enhances agency, in the sense that a certain degree of indeterminacy is required for the formation of a political decision. In this view, the availability of different options not only reveals the contingency of the future but enhances the possibility of acting in the present (Laclau, 1990, p. 34).

This brings us back to the question of time. For Laclau, as well as for Luhmann, time should not be understood as a linear river flowing uninterrupted from past through present to future. On the contrary, and in line with recent discussions of organizational temporality (see e.g. Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Lantz & Just, 2021; Reinecke & Ansari, 2017), time is ‘an aspect of the social construction of reality’ (Luhmann, 1976, p. 134), which means that multiple social times exist, depending on the observer’s cognitive horizon and social context. Nonetheless, members of a social system must be ‘synchronized’ in order to interact with one another, in the sense that ‘there can be no time difference’ between experiencing subjects. As Luhmann (1990, p. 39) puts it, ‘not only the Present itself but also its temporal horizons of Past or Future must be equalized’. Thus far, Laclau would agree, leading the two to the common conclusion that time must be divorced from the notion of chronology, since not everyone shares the same interpretation of the past and the future,

but also because those interpretations are never neutral (see also Holt & Johnsen, 2019). As Laclau and Mouffe (1987, p. 99) assert, ‘there is not an *in-itself* of history, but rather a multiple refraction of it’. According to Laclau (1990), this makes temporality the very medium of politics in the sense that the possibility of social change depends on the existence of more than one temporal trajectory. In other words, politics is only possible if the plurality of social time is recognized, but this renders the relationship between trust and politics problematic, as we shall explore next.

Trust as an organizing principle in alternative organizations

This returns us to the proposition that trust may serve as an organizing principle for alternatives by neutralizing the need for political choice, and we can now explicate how this is done: trust enables organizational members to postpone decisions about present futures that would shape future presents, as each member is able to simply trust that their own preferred vision will, eventually, be realized. This is crucial to alternative organizing because it means that each organizational member can maintain their autonomy while professing mutual solidarity. To support this argument, we develop the role of time in relation to Luhmann’s notion of trust and Laclau’s concept of politics, respectively. As already indicated, Luhmann and Laclau both conceptualize time as being socially constructed in and through competing points of observation. The two differ in so far as Luhmann relates the notion of time to trust, whereas Laclau relates it to politics. The task now is to tie these two threads together.

Luhmann’s definition of trust as a mechanism that reduces complexity by resolving the discrepancy between chronological time (the future present) and our anticipation of forthcoming events (the present future) means that certainty can be established where it previously did not exist. As such, trust not only involves a problematic relationship with time, but also with politics in the Laclauian sense. If politics depends on the plurality of social time (no

temporal difference equals no room for change), then it seems logical to conclude that *trust obstructs the very possibility of politics*. As a mechanism for reducing complexity, trust is not ‘merely’ epistemological. Rather, trust is ontological in Laclau’s post-structuralist sense: in and through its contingent articulations, trust creates the illusion that we can know the future.

When behaving ‘as though the future were certain’ (Luhmann, 2017, p. 12), we live according to a more or less predetermined plan – what Laclau (1990, p. 41) calls a ‘structural law of successions’. We (momentarily) disregard the fact that the future remains uncertain and could potentially disappoint our expectations and, in doing so, we effectively suspend the need to act politically. As political decision-making is only necessary or possible in situations where actually conceivable options exist, the (momentary) suspension of all but one course of action equals the (provisional) end of politics (Laclau, 1996). When this concept of political temporality is brought into Luhmann’s conceptualization of trust, trust comes to mark a transition from the realm of the political to the social that does not involve a choice; instead of deciding between the available options, trust enables us to ‘forget’ contingency, establishing the social without foreclosure.

This is what makes trust an essential organizing principle for alternative organizations, as it allows different people to come together without reducing their differences. That is, by providing each individual member with assurance that their own preferred future present will be realized, the need for a collective decision on the present future is suspended. As such, and somewhat counterintuitively, trust enhances our tolerance for ambiguity. It does so, Luhmann explains, by replacing external certainty with internal certainty. Instead of trying to control the outside world, ‘the environment’ in systems theoretical terms, trust transforms the problem of complexity overload into a ‘secondary problem’ of inner certainty (Luhmann, 2017, p. 30). By postponing the need for a decision, then, trust functions as a mediating principle for the organization of alternatives that enables the two otherwise irreconcilable principles of autonomy and solidarity to be

in operation at the same time. It does so by offering the individual certainty that their preferred version of the organization’s future present will become realized while suspending the organization’s need to decide on a present future.

The Alternative: A Brief Illustration

Before unpacking these two dimensions further, let us offer a brief illustration. In 2013, a new political party, simply called the Alternative, was launched in Denmark. Conceived in direct opposition to the ‘old’ political culture, the organization of the new party was characterized by a spirit of radical inclusivity, enabling (and encouraging) all prospective members to read their own personal preferences into the party. This meant that the Alternative harboured more ideological diversity than most other political associations at the time, since all members initially had their own idiosyncratic idea of what it might mean to be ‘alternative’. For instance, some saw the party as a reaction to the destructive forces of the market economy, whereas others saw it as a countermeasure to the expansion and bureaucratization of the public sector. And while some saw it as a secular response to the rise of religious nationalism, others saw it as a spiritual awakening in an increasingly disenchanting world.

At its inception, the Alternative formed as an organization that was able to include competing interpretations of its purpose and identity, and it did so by organizing around trust. Let us briefly dwell on how this was done: ‘We need to place *trust in trust*.’ This exhortation marked the swift reconciliation of a moment of conflict at one of the central formative meetings of the party.⁵ At the meeting, participants were scheduled to vote on a number of policy proposals that would clearly specify *what kind of alternative* the Alternative was going to be. However, realizing that these decisions might tear the organization apart by marginalizing certain political views (thereby terminating the co-production of autonomy and solidarity), the moderator of the meeting decided to postpone the vote. The

participants, many of whom had travelled far to be part of the decision-making process, were initially infuriated by the postponement. However, resolution of the mounting tension presented itself with the admonition to *trust* that the Alternative would develop in a manner that might satisfy all, without explicitly deciding on a particular political direction.

In this incident, trust functioned to maintain and even extend the moment of undecidability by suspending the need for political decision-making. This was possible because the appeal to trust allowed members to ‘prune the future’ in their own image and to disregard the fact that the actual development of the organization might very well lead to disappointment. Thus, competing interpretations of the organization’s political goal and overall identity could continue to coexist, despite fundamental ideological differences. Through the medium of trust, the Alternative enabled its members to be ‘different together’ and avoided, temporarily at least, an ideological fragmentation of the party. Trust, in sum, seems to enable the formation of organizations in which members can both maintain their autonomy and offer each other solidarity. Let us consider this duality further, detailing each function in turn.

Trust enables autonomy

Alternative organizations are formed as reactions to a perceived failure or imperfection in mainstream organizing (Cheney, 2014). With Laclau, we could say that a dislocation is required for something new to emerge because otherwise ‘the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 34). Accordingly, the initial task for alternative organizations is to exploit or, perhaps, instigate a dislocation, thereby carving out a space for their own emergence. Arguably, this is why so many new initiatives have emerged in recent years and also why they usually position themselves as a response to an erosion of trust within the established socio-economic and/or political system (Gerbaudo, 2021; Pavía, Bodoque, & Martín, 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). It was also the driver of our illustrative

case of the Alternative. Here, the party’s leaders continuously and explicitly invoked a societal ‘crisis of trust’ as one of the primary motivations for establishing the party.

The formation of alternatives represents a process of subjectification in a double sense. Not only does it turn an objective problem (the unpredictability of the future) into a subjective problem (the decision of whether to trust someone), it also installs in the trustor a certain mode of being. As Luhmann (2017, p. 91) puts it, ‘the person who trusts presents himself [sic!] as someone who is by his nature inclined to bestow trust’. This is why every act of trust is also a matter of self-presentation. In deciding to trust an organization that offers an alternative to the current state of affairs, each member of the organization also renders themselves vulnerable to the other members – and positions themselves as someone who accepts such vulnerability (Rousseau et al., 1998). Hence, trust is not only a mechanism that allows people to navigate an overly complex and inherently uncertain world, but also a mechanism that brings different people together without thwarting their differences, as each individual is committed to the idea(l) of interpersonal trust.

When one’s personal self-perception is tied to the act of trusting, terminating a trust relationship comes at a high price. This is not only because ‘the possible damage may be greater than the advantage’ sought through the act of trusting (Luhmann, 1988, p. 98), as we saw in the example of the prisoner’s dilemma, but also because a breach of trust entails a significant increase in both internal and external complexity. Hence, the decision to trust is always mired by fundamental anxiety:

Feelings accomplish external and internal reduction in a single operation – that is their strength and weakness. They reduce the possibilities of the environment by settling preferences on one object, and accordingly at the same time establish internal possibilities of processing experience. The affective system, as one says, ‘identifies’ with its object (. . .). Every breakdown of the emotional relationship would restore the crushing complexity of the world.

Anxiety therefore lurks in the background of feeling and motivates the continuance of the relationship, if it receives any kind of confirmation. Feelings try to make themselves immune from refutation, if at all possible. Love and hate make one blind. (Luhmann, 2017, p. 89)

Trust does not make blind, exactly, but once trust has been bestowed, betrayal of that trust will be a hard blow, and the trustor will often go to lengths to excuse – perhaps even ignore – that the trustee has, in fact, betrayed them. One might speculate that this is precisely what happened when the members of the Alternative decided to place ‘trust in trust’ instead of forcing a political decision.⁶

Trust enables solidarity

This leads us to the claim that trust functions to reconcile otherwise irreconcilable interests and identities, enabling solidarity without reducing autonomy. As we have argued, trust fulfils this function by momentarily suspending the temporal distance between present and future, thereby extending the moment of undecidability. This allows many competing interpretations of what it means to be alternative to coexist without marginalizing each other. In a moment of undecidability, no particular decision follows naturally, which means that several futures remain possible. In other words, an undecidable moment is a moment ripe with potentiality (Andersen & Pors, 2016), making it an ideal situation for being ‘different together’. Normally, such a moment would demand a political decision, but trust suspends (or, at least, postpones) that need, keeping all opportunities open.

In alternative organizations, the moment of undecidability is not only preserved by the time-suspending nature of trust (no one knows what ‘present future’ will become ‘future present’), but also by the affective relationship between members of such organizations. Emotionally at least, members have little incentive to decide the undecidable (i.e. to settle on a particular future), since this might lead to their own anxiety-ridden marginalization from the

collective. As Luhmann (2017, p. 89) notes in the passage quoted above, ‘feelings try to make themselves immune from refutation, if at all possible’. The act of trust means that each member becomes vulnerable to each other and equally at risk of becoming marginalized, thereby reducing the incentive to make a decision.

This adds another layer to the phrase ‘trust in trust’, and it unpacks the workings of trust as an organizing principle for alternative organizations: (1) trust serves as an object of identification for those sympathetic to the idea of an alternative without specifying what *that* particular alternative might be, thereby making possible the inclusion of many different people. (2) This creates an affective relationship that could prove emotionally difficult for members to terminate, leading them to cherish the relative undecidability generated by trusting the organization in order to be able to maintain solidarity even when becoming aware of their differences. Thereby, (3) enabling the reconciliation of otherwise irreconcilable interests and identities. In sum, trust makes it possible for alternative organizations to demarcate themselves from the mainstream and to maintain their status as alternative, pushing the substantiation of what that might mean into the future while remaining functional in the present. These three dimensions of trust in alternative organizations are visualized in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Bracketing the assumption that trust is an absolute organizational good, we have considered how trust works as an organizing principle for alternative organizations. This has led us to perceive trust as the ‘organizational glue’ between autonomy and solidarity, the two otherwise irreconcilable principles of alternative organizations. With trust, members of alternatives can be ‘different together’, enacting solidarity for each other’s autonomy, which is why trust is a particularly important organizing principle for alternatives. We have identified the basic functions of trust and explained how they operate through a theoretical consideration of

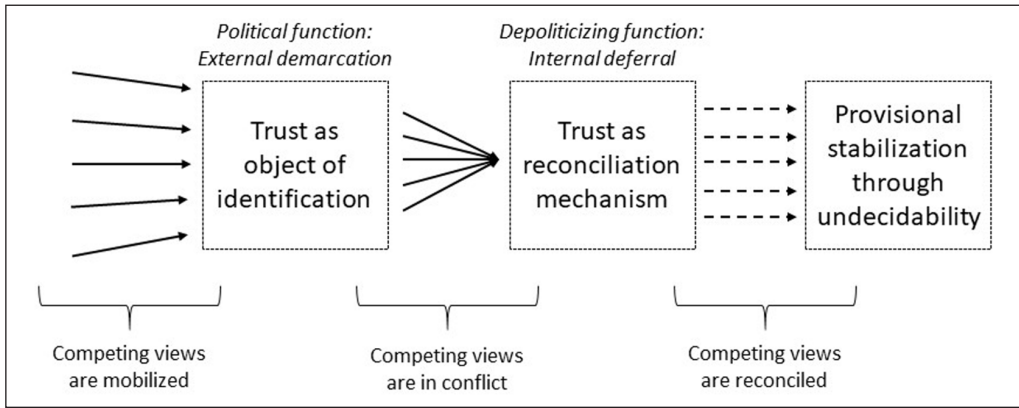


Figure 1. The two functions of trust in alternative organizations.

the interrelations between Luhmann's understanding of trust and Laclau's concept of politics, focusing on their shared understanding of time. While Luhmann views trust as a means of reducing the complexity of uncertain futures, Laclau sees politics as operating on this very uncertainty. Considering these two divergent dynamics reveals how trust suspends the need for a collective decision by extending the moment of undecidability; this is what makes the establishment and maintenance of alternative organizations possible.

In sum, the organizing principle of trust may be specified as two separate but related mechanisms: first, trust serves as an object of identification for individuals who may have little in common besides their commitment to something 'alternative'. This is central to the creation of alternatives as it enables mobilization of members to a community that is not bound together by anything but a mutual 'trust in trust'. Second, trust functions as a mechanism for keeping the organization open to different identities and interests. Again, this is central, as it means that the alternative organization can remain functional without foreclosing the reach of solidarity.

Combined, these two functions enable members of alternative organizations to unite and be 'different together'. That is, trust reconciles the irreconcilable by both performing the general political function of creating the organization as

distinct from its environment and deferring the more specific political function of delimiting the organization. It establishes 'the alternative' without necessitating a substantial definition of what the alternative *is*.

With this conceptualization of trust, then, we contribute to the literature on alternative organizations by unpacking a fundamental and underlying organizing principle of alternatives: the reconciliation of otherwise irreconcilable principles. Beyond explaining how alternative organizations are established and maintained, however, this conceptualization may also explain why it is proving so difficult for alternatives to actually make a difference. This problem has been articulated with reference to the relationship between alternatives and 'the mainstream'; given that alternatives are established as alternatives, it is inherently easier to specify what they are *not* than what they are (Cheney, 2014). This is very much in line with the first function of trust in alternative organization, as we have identified it here. People who join alternative organizations do so because they have already lost faith in traditional institutions, as well as the people inhabiting these, and are looking for alternatives.

To this principle of 'external demarcation' (the alternative as anything but the mainstream) we add the principle of 'internal deferral'. Trust enables alternatives to delay decision-making and, hence, to avoid closure, but this also delimits

what alternatives can actually do. Put differently, must the ambition of being ‘different together’ necessarily be abandoned once a decision has been made about *what kind of alternative* an alternative organization should represent? Or is it, in fact, possible to make decisions while continuing to reconcile the principles of autonomy and solidarity? In a sense, trust functions to stave off these questions. That is, as long as members trust that their specific goals will be served in the future, they are willing to remain within the organization, even if the organizational present is deemed less than perfect. However, this also means that no specific goals can actually be decided upon, let alone realized, without restricting what the alternative can be and for whom it is still trustworthy. In this sense, unpacking the organizing principle of trust indicates something even more fundamental about alternatives: they are necessarily ‘unfinished’, always in a state of perpetual becoming (see Dahlman, Du Plessis, Husted, & Just, 2022).

This brings us to the question of the boundary conditions of our theorization: Are the twin functions of trust equally visible in all alternative organizations? Our immediate answer has to be no. It is clear from the above that the *political* function of trust is most visible in alternatives that seek to mobilize ‘the frustrated popular will’ without specifying a particular direction. The Alternative party is one example, social movements like Occupy Wall Street and Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes another (see Shultziner & Kornblit, 2020). Alternative organizations that operate with more specific objectives such as worker cooperatives (Kokkinidis, 2015b) or non-profit festivals (Christensen, 2021) do not face the same problem of having to reconcile fundamentally irreconcilable identities and interests because they mobilize more homogeneous membership populations.

That said, any alternative worth its name will have to somehow strike a balance between individual autonomy and collective solidarity (Parker et al., 2014), and that ambition always gives rise to competing interpretations of what it means to be alternative. In that sense, all alternatives need some degree of undecidability to manage what has been called ‘the problem of

particularization’ (Husted & Hansen, 2017). This makes the *depoliticizing* function of trust relevant across different types of alternative organizations.

Further, it raises the question of whether and how this function might be generalized beyond alternative organizations; how is trust in alternatives different from or similar to trust in mainstream organizations? Here, a return to the assumption that trust is inherently good alerts us to a general shift within organizational theory and practice; as Luhmann says, if the outcome is certain or coerced, then trust is unnecessary. As organizations seek to navigate uncertain environments and to replace internal hierarchies with more dynamic and participatory processes, trust becomes an increasingly scarce and valuable resource. Under such conditions, the organizing principle of reconciling the irreconcilable might become constitutive of not only alternatives, but any and all organizations (see Klagge, 1995). However, invoking trust as a normative ideal tends to mask its more particular functions. Trust, we hypothesize, is an organizing principle in most organizations, but only in alternatives are the politics of trust readily visible. In mainstream organizations, to the contrary, hiding the fact that there is nothing to trust but trust itself is central to trust-based organizing.

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Notes

1. Alternative organizations are also commonly defined by the principle of responsibility toward the future. This principle relates more easily to the other two and, hence, is typically not politicized within alternative organizations. As such, it does not concern us here. The question of organizational or corporate responsibility is, however, highly political in relation to the

socio-political context of organizing (see e.g. Banerjee, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). This suggests that the internal functions of trust, on which we concentrate here, may also be at play externally, as the organization and its various stakeholders negotiate issues of responsibility.

2. Note that the definition of alternative organizations according to the principles of autonomy and solidarity (as well as responsibility) is not just descriptive, but also normative; it delineates a certain type of alternative organization as the only one worth the name. As we are interested in how trust may reconcile autonomy and solidarity, we accept this definition for present purposes and establish it as an initial boundary condition of our conceptualization – it is only about those organizations that do, indeed, need to reconcile autonomy and solidarity.
3. Risk, understood as a way of assuming responsibility for otherwise uncontrollable dangers, is another mechanism for reducing complexity (Luhmann, 1993).
4. While Luhmann consistently criticized rational choice theory, the example of the prisoner's dilemma still illustrates key aspects of trust. Our point, then, is not to settle the issue of whether supposedly rational people will trust their fellow inmates, but to underscore the risky character of any decision to trust.
5. As observed by one of the authors of this article; for more information see Husted (2017).
6. Incidentally, this may also explain why Donald Trump remained trustworthy in the eyes of so many voters, despite his continuing failure to deliver on pledges made during campaigns (see Shockley-Zalabak & Morreale, 2021).

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