

Connecting and Criticising: Social relations of Trust

Elizabeth Rata

- How do academic disciplinary communities remain connected to their social contexts and at the same time criticise those contexts?

Where does this contradictory public-university engagement come from?

- Why should society trust the university?
- What should the university trust society?

Trust is a foundational mechanism for public engagement in modern societies.

- How do societies with populations that do not share a common past cohere and hold themselves together (status to contract issue is an old one for modern thinkers). Alan Macfarlane puts it this way ‘What is the way in which the individual is embedded in wider grouping?’ (2002, p. 5)
- Trust plays a significant role in modernity’s social cohesion – but how?

Argument:

- Trust is generated by ‘partial loyalty’ which enables the response to the structural contradictions of the modern world.
- The university plays a significant role in creating the social relations of trust.

Voltaire noted the role of trust in enabling engagement in business by people who were not connected through the traditional status mechanisms of kinship, race, or religion.

- The Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as though they all profess the same religion and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts' (Voltaire, 1647/1994, p.30)

- The very power of science to hold knowledge as collective property and to focus doubts on bits of currently accepted knowledge is founded upon a degree and a quality of trust which is arguably unparalleled elsewhere in our culture” (Steven Shaplin, 1994, p. 417).
- The development of a world of trust and openness as “the basis not only for capitalism but also for modern science” (Alan Macfarlane, 2002, p. 106)

How can trust function when contradictions exist?

- Knowledge created by people located within society must at the same time become independent of that society, i.e. objectified and universalised. (See Rata, 2012, Ch. 5).
- Academic disciplines as ‘coalitions of minds’ (Randall Collins) have a loyalty both to the discipline and to the society within which the knowledge creators (scientists) are located. This may conflict – especially given that disciplines provide the knowledge used to change society – often involves critique of the current situation - may be seen as ‘disloyal’.

Given the contradictions that may undermine trust -

How do academic disciplinary communities remain connected to their social contexts and at the same time criticise those contexts?'

- What is the source of trust?

'Partial Loyalty'

- Trust arises in its function as the means to secure the loyalty required for social bonds, but it is always a partial loyalty because of the structural contradictions of modern society.
- Partial loyalty enables trust to exist in the contradictory forces of connection and criticism.

Source of partial loyalty

- In the process of individualisation that characterises modernity
- The process of becoming individualised means separating from the status-based social group in order to re-connect through contract (the liberal explanation) or classed social relations of production (the Marxist understanding). Ulrich Beck's (1994, p. 13) uses the terms 'disembedding and re-embedding' to describe that process of individualisation.

It is in the process of attaching, separating and re-attaching that partial loyalty is created.

- For Marxists the individual is re-connected within the social relations of production. However the re-connection can only occur **within** the same class given that an exploitative relationship exists between the owners/controllers of the means of production and workers.
- For liberal theorists, the re-connection occurs in the site of citizenship (the contradictory worker/citizen), the contradictory capitalist/democratic state, and the contradictory nation (an imaginary of cohesion).

Loyalty to the contractual group, i.e. modern society, is only ever partial:

because

- the individual can join and leave
- can connect and criticise
- is equal (as a citizen) and unequal (as a productive force in capitalism)

The trust generated by partial loyalty is a 'product' with its own materiality:

It operates in:

- socio-emotional dispositions
- the practices of social interaction
- institutional policies and practices that provide the structures for those practices and dispositions

- Universities are not only institutions where trust is the mechanism for partial loyalty.
(There are many institutions of that type.)
- The university is also the place for creating the 'raw material' of partial loyalty

That 'raw material' or knowledge:

- provides the instrumental means for social coherence
- provides the affective and moral dispositions and practices for social coherence

In a world where people without a shared heritage form new societal bonds, those bonds must have ongoing value from a source other than tradition.

University knowledge is a main source of modern societal bonds. It creates the symbolic codes for all areas of public life: the instrumental or economic, the moral or spiritual, and the aesthetic or cultural. These are the symbolic codes of the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences.

What does the university give to society that ensures it is trusted?

- It provides the symbolic codes for social and political integration based on trust
- Those shared codes strengthen the partial loyalty that generates trust

This means that the university must serve society by keeping to its purpose – the creation of disciplinary knowledge for all areas of public life: the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

References

- Macfarlane, A. (2002). *The making of the modern world: Visions from the West and East*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Rata, E. (2012). *The Politics of Knowledge in Education*. NY & London: Routledge.
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A social history of truth: Civility and science in seventeenth century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Voltaire, F. (1994). *Letters concerning the English nation*. New York: Oxford University. (Originally published 1637)