

The Element of Trust
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One of the most important elements in having participatory democracy, as well as flourishing capitalism, is trust. Trust is so embedded in our lives that we scarcely ever think about it.

We use trust every day. We trust that other drivers are obeying the same laws and rules of the road that we are. Of course, driving requires both trust and caution. Some people do not obey the rules, and we must look out for them, although they are comparatively rare.

When we shop for food in the market, we trust that almost everything we need will be stocked and available. We trust that the price listed is valid and that we do not need to barter. However, I lived for a time in Iran (on the cusp of the Islamic Revolution) and remember when you couldn't trust that there would always be onions in the market or predict their price. There was great insecurity about such things at the time because the social norms and all trusted institutions were under attack.

We trust that the products we buy, from over-the-counter drugs to packaged foods in the markets, are safe to consume. The gasoline for our cars is what it should be: regular, plus, or premium. We trust that our doctors are trained and certified, and that lawyers, should we need them, are approved by the State to practice law.

One reason for all this trust is that we not only have a capitalist system in which entrepreneurs can flourish, but all of these systems are tempered by a government that tries to protect us. Regulations are under attack by political conservatives today, but I would not like to live in a country where we cannot turn on the tap and get safe water, take meds that will not harm us, and buy foods that are not contaminated. These sureties were not there before the regulators began to protect us.

Scientists give us their best assessments of how our world works, but are honest in correcting their information when new things add to our knowledge. Mainstream newspapers and media try to give us accounts of real events, and are willing to correct errors when they occur. They probe for facts. There are no "alternate facts."

The things that we trust are now under attack by agents of destruction: those who want to plant distrust against all of our institutions to show democracy's flaws. Russia's President Putin is weaponizing propaganda, using social media to plant fake news, sow dissension among groups already hostile to each other, and convincing the least educated among us to distrust leaders, the educated, and those promoting global culture. His campaigns have already worked in Europe, spurring toxic nationalists to reject their own governments and all international organizations.

The rise of neo-fascism is unmistakable as one country after another loses liberal democracy to creeping dictatorships. Putin's greatest success goes beyond convincing the British to leave the EU. He helped get a flawed, charismatic narcissist, Donald Trump, into the White House. Trump's daily behavior in sowing dissent and distrust in every democratic institution (courts, press, and competing political party) is a gift to Putin that keeps giving.

A new column now appears in our daily papers: "Fact Check." Trump's daily flood of pronouncements (Tweets and speeches) are laced with fantasies, lies, contradictions, and exaggerations. During one day during his visit to Japan, he lied that the US would "very soon" go to Mars (we will not). He claimed that the American people do not pay for his tariffs on China, saying it makes money for our government (no, the consumers pay). He complains about the "Iran deal" that Obama signed is the worst agreement ever made (it was an agreement made after years of negotiation, and included Russia, China, the EU, the US, and Iran, and until Trump rejected it, it was working).

"Factba.se," a data analytics group, measures Trump's rhetoric twice as extreme than all presidents for the last century. Using emotion to circumvent reason, to overwhelm trust, has equals only in another tradition: totalitarianism. What happens when we can no longer trust?

685 words

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