

The (anti)politics of trust: Reflections on trust as a mechanism of democratic representation

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Introduction

Within mainstream political science, trust is commonly perceived as one of the main pillars of a healthy democracy (Lenard, 2007). For instance, Putnam et al. (1993) famously argue that an active civil society, infused with high levels of impersonal trust, constitutes the bedrock of any well-functioning democracy. In a similar vein, Fukuyama (1995) claims trust to be the underlying principle of social and economic prosperity, making trust-based social capital ‘the *sine qua non* of stable liberal democracy’ (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 7). Building on these points, Uslaner (2002, p. 1) sees trust as an absolute value that ‘brings us all sorts of good things’, while Tilly (2005) advances the argument that the proliferation of so-called ‘trust networks’ is key to democratization in otherwise undemocratic societies. Hence, although some scholars have emphasized the democratic virtues of *distrust* (Rosanvallon, 2008) and *mistrust* (Lenard, 2008), the overarching conceptual consensus seems to be that trust and democracy are normatively and causally linked.

Empirically, however, we are currently witnessing a dramatic erosion of political trust in all corners of the world (Newton et al., 2018). For instance, a survey conducted by Edelman (2018) exposes a crisis of trust across 28 nations, with 2017 marking an all-time low for Western countries following the Brexit-vote and the election of Donald Trump. While the survey finds the steepest decline in political trust ever measured in the U.S, only one out of ten European populations considered its institutions trustworthy (namely, the Netherlands). A common denominator across such empirical surveys is that politicians and political parties are among the least trusted actors, often deemed less trustworthy than complete strangers (Zmerli and Newton, 2017) and barely more honest than lobbyists and car salespeople (Gallup, 2017). Such findings have led some scholars to conclude that ‘we need a stronger dose of trust’ to make democracy work (Uslaner, 2018, p. 6), whereas others have taken the opposite stance, claiming that citizens should remain ‘distrustful of state powers and the political elites who wield the

power' (Warren, 2018, p. 91). What these otherwise opposed positions share is the assumption that the level of trust has a direct bearing on the health of representative democracy.

Although we fully recognize the value of this literature, we argue that the current debate has become deadlocked around the issues of normativity and causality, with the dominant position claiming that trust is a necessary ingredient in democracy and minority positions reversing that conclusion rather than challenging its base. To move the debate forward, we introduce a different perspective. Instead of asserting normatively whether trust is constitutive of democracy *ipso facto*, we describe one particular function of trust within a democratic context. Drawing on the work of Niklas Luhmann (1979), we argue that trust – in its horizontal or social as well as its vertical or political form – should be seen as a mechanism for reducing complexity. Trust allows people to navigate a world of constant change because it suspends the temporal distance between the present and the future. To show trust is, in other words, 'to anticipate the future' and 'to behave as though the future were certain' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 12). According to Luhmann, the reason we lack trust in politicians is thus that we doubt their ability to realize our own anticipation of the future.

This understanding of trust, we argue, becomes particularly interesting when merged with Ernesto Laclau's (1990) conception of the relationship between time and politics. Based on a distinction between 'the temporal' (as an effect of dislocation) and 'the spatial' (as an effect of sedimentation), Laclau establishes temporality as the medium of politics, meaning that social change always happens *in time*. Whenever temporality is suspended, so is the condition for politics. In other words, if the future is said to follow a predetermined script, there is no room for change and no room for politics. Conceptualized as such, trust and politics seem to exclude one another: 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, 1979, p. 23). Trust is anti-politics and vice versa.

Having established this theoretical impasse, we move on to investigate its empirical purview, arguing that the tension may prove productive in relation to the question of democratic representation. We illustrate this point through an analysis of the use of trust in *The Alternative*, a recently founded Danish political party. Beginning from an ethnographic observation at a meeting in the party's executive body, we show that the conceptualization of trust as an inherently apolitical mechanism is too hasty. While trust does, indeed, allow individuals to

anticipate a certain future, it simultaneously allows other people to do the same. Thus, we find that trust is *apolitical* to the extent that it suspends the need for political decision-making (instead of choosing between A and B, one can simply trust that the right choice will eventually be made), but that it is *political* because an extension of the ‘moment of undecidability’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 27) provides a fertile ground for ‘radical imagination’, understood as the ability of individuals or groups to envision that which does not yet exist (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). The analysis of trust in The Alternative thus reveals an interesting paradox: The apolitical function of trust is precisely what makes politics possible.

In sum, we contribute to the debate about trust and democracy by, first, providing a theoretical basis for talking about trust as a social and political *mechanism* rather than a moral *value* and to relate this understanding to the theme of politics. Secondly, we provide an empirical illustration of how trust functions within a context of party politics, thereby nuancing the debate about the relationship between democracy and trust. Our overall claim is that the question of whether or not trust is constitutive of democracy cannot be resolved *a priori*, but is fully dependent on its local articulation. The case of The Alternative shows how trust can be used to both enable and constrain politics, because it helps prevent ideological closure. This specific function, we argue, makes trust essential to parties and movements that claim to be ‘alternative’, as it resolves the dichotomy between individual autonomy and collective solidarity by allowing members of such groups to be ‘different together’ (Parker et al., 2014, p. 38) and, hence, for democratic representation to be upheld despite political differences.

Modalities of trust: Cause or mechanism?

Our reconceptualization of trust has a broad and primarily theoretical aim as well as a more specific and empirically informed objective. In general terms, we hope to contribute to the debate about the role of trust in democratic societies, arguing that trust is a mechanism of representative democracy, not an absolute value. More specifically, we provide an illustrative analysis of trust as a mechanism of representation within a newly formed political party. In some respects our argument resembles that of Stavrakakis et al. (2018, p. 10) who argue that:

... Without a real systemic blockage, a collapse of trust and a failure within established modes of representation, there is no space created for political

outsiders/newcomers to put forward their supposedly superior claim to represent (to voice) the frustrated popular will in a potentially hegemonic way.

Like SYRIZA, the case brought forth by these authors, The Alternative was formed as a reaction to a perceived crisis of trust and has since thrived on claims to alternative representation. Further, just as we are inspired by Laclau's anti-essentialism, Stavrakakis and his colleagues build their study of the relationship between crisis and populism on this position. However, we seek to unpack the even more 'foundationalized' relationship between trust and democracy, showing that trust does not precede representative democracy as its normative basis, but, instead, is but one mechanism of democratic politics, one way of bracketing the contingencies and complexities of representation. Thus, we seek to contribute to what Glynos (2003, p. 2) has called 'probing the limits of democratic theory'. In order to establish the basis for doing so, we begin by mapping the terrain we seek to push beyond.

What is trust?

Although the literature on trust and democracy is vast and proliferating, certain themes recur: Trust is defined as either social or political (Newton et al., 2018), as a specific or diffuse sentiment (Hetherington, 1998), as an individual or collective judgment (Catterberg and Moreno, 2006; Kramer et al., 1996), and as a rationally or an emotionally established attitude (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005; van Elsas, 2015); it is studied as a process or a product (Möllering, 2013), a cause or an effect (Nootebom and Six, 2003). Similarly, political performance is predicated upon or seen as a result of trust (Seyd, 2014). Researchers disagree as to whether or not each of these tensions and bifurcations should be studied in isolation from or as they relate to each other, whether or not trust is, in fact, a multi- or single-dimensional phenomenon (Hooghe, 2011; Mishler and Rose, 2001). Further, it is debated whether the two sides of each pair are cumulative or contradictory – for instance, can trust be both a process and a product, or should the concept exclusively refer to one or the other? (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017).

All differences aside, trust is commonly and predominantly conceived as a necessary ingredient of a well-functioning democracy (Warren, 1999). This consensual view is rooted in a shared recognition of trust as comprising two features: Confidence and vulnerability (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust, then, is generally defined as a relational attitude of evaluation or judgement

through which one individual or collective actor (e.g. a citizen or the citizenry) reaches a conclusion about the trustworthiness of another such actor (e.g. a politician or the government) (Levi and Stoker, 2000, p. 476). Trust is in operation by which one actor leaves it in the hands of another to act on their behalf. As such, trust is a necessary, but uncertain ingredient of ‘stable liberal democracy’ (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 7). In other words, it *should* be present.

Cause or effect?

The consensus that trust is normatively essential to representative democracy forms the basis of an empirically informed debate as to whether and why trust in democracy is currently declining (Edelman, 2018; van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017). Further, it lays the ground for a conceptual discussion as to whether a ‘state of trust’ is a prerequisite or a result of well-functioning democracy (Levi, 1998); that is, does trust in democratic institutions stem from people’s prior trust in each other, or does it arise through participation in democratic processes?

The former position is most clearly articulated in Putnam’s influential work; here, social capital is assumed to underwrite political trust (Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 1993; see also the many studies inspired by Putnam, e.g. Keele, 2007). Further, the stream of literature that studies the interrelations of political trust and ethnic diversity begins from a similar assumption when linking trust to commonality and asking how diverse a society can become before political trust begins to erode (Criado et al., 2015; Gundelach and Manatschal, 2017; Herreros and Criado, 2009; see Stolle et al., 2008 for a study that challenges the assumption that diversity erodes trust). In a piece on representational majorities, for instance, Taylor (2010, p. 390) concludes that ‘democracy requires high trust levels, particularly from minorities, so majorities should, morally and prudentially, encourage trust by acting contrary to their immediate interests in the wider and long-term social interest’. Tellingly, this conclusion is drawn without any other explicit references to trust; it is purely based on the assumption with which it begins.

While studies in this vein establish or, indeed, assume social trust as a causal antecedent of political trust, others have failed to find any such causality (e.g. Newton, 2001), and some go on to argue in favor of the reverse relationship, positing trust as the result of rather than a prerequisite for representative democracy (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). Both positions differ from the one we propose. To us, trust is neither a cause nor an effect, but a particular mechanism that may be operationalized within democratic systems. When conceptualized as a

mechanism, trust is not inherently good or bad but may be put to better or worse use by those seeking to leverage it. To make this argument, we draw on Luhmann's conceptualization of trust and Laclau's understanding of politics. We begin with the former.

Conceptual framework

Luhmann: Trust and time

The German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, begins his exposition of trust with the premise that the world is far too complex for any social system (e.g. an organization) or psychic system (i.e. individual consciousness) to comprehend in its totality. The relative freedom of other systems renders so many courses of action possible that anyone trying to consider them all would end up paralyzed. To act, we need mechanisms for reducing complexity – means of provisionally disregarding the multiple ways in which events could potentially unfold. According to Luhmann, this is precisely the function of trust. In the absence of certainty, trust allows us to get up in the morning without falling 'prey to a vague sense of dread', since without a minimal level of trust, 'anything and everything would be possible' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 5).

Notably, trust should be distinguished from both confidence and hope. Whereas confidence signifies unquestioned assumptions about the current state of affairs, hope is characterized by blind faith (see Sztompka, 1999). For instance, one may have confidence in the value of money and hope that the economy does not slide into recession. Neither of these attitudes requires an active choice. Contrarily, trust represents a risky course of action, because it requires the trustor to choose between actually existing alternatives, some of which may lead to disappointment. In other words, trust 'presupposes a situation of risk' (Luhmann, 1988, p. 97). A classic example of a risky situation is the prisoner's dilemma. Here, each prisoner must make an active choice about whether to trust his/her fellow inmate. The risky nature of this decision is reflected in its contingency: The prisoner is forced to act in an undecidable terrain, meaning that there is no underlying structure governing the proper course of action. However, when choosing to trust, the *undecidable* is rendered *decidable* by momentarily disregarding the contingent nature of the situation. As Luhmann (1979, 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 [e.g. being betrayed by one's fellow inmate]. 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. First, it shows that trust is only trust when it influences a decision. There is no need for trust if the prisoner knows with certainty the other inmate's intentions, or if the prisoner is forced into confession, as complexity will have been reduced by other means (knowledge or coercion). Secondly, 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, but also in general. If, conversely, the benefits outweigh the potential harm, the decision is simply a matter of 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, 1979, p. 12), in the sense that the temporal distance between present and future is disregarded:

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 (Luhmann, 1979, p. 12).

To conceptualize this latter point more accurately, Luhmann proposes a distinction between the notions of 'future present' and 'present future'. While the former designates the future that will eventually become present and then past, the latter designates current anticipations about the future. In this sense, 'every present has its own future', manifested as 'the open horizon of future possibilities' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 15). The function of trust is, crudely put, to bridge these two perceptions of time by resolving potential discrepancies between them. When bestowing trust, one assumes that the present future and future present will remain identical. Notably, this does not entail assumptions about zero change. One can easily imagine a future radically different from the present – as the analysis will show – but trust allows one to 'prune the future so as to measure up with the present' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 15).

As such, trust enhances our tolerance of ambiguity. It does so, Luhmann claims, by replacing external certainty with internal certainty. Instead of trying to control the outside world, trust transforms the problem of complexity overload into a ‘secondary problem’ of inner assurance (Luhmann, 1979, p. 30). This transformation 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 (1979, p. 91) puts it: ‘The person who trusts presents himself as someone who is by his nature inclined to bestow trust’, which is why every act of trust is also a matter of self-presentation. This point is worth keeping in mind throughout the analysis. However, before we get thus far, we turn to Laclau’s conceptualization of time and politics.

Laclau: Time and politics

Perhaps due to its somewhat constricted notion of politics, the work of Luhmann has remained at the margins of political science (Kim, 2015). While this is not the case for the Argentinian political theorist, Ernesto Laclau (see Devenney et al., 2016), his writings have only rarely appeared in debates about trust and politics. An intermediate purpose of this paper is to remedy this shortcoming. Our source of inspiration is an essay entitled *New reflections of the revolutions of our time*, published just after the ‘end of history’. Here, Laclau (1990) sets out to systematize and rearrange his earlier work in a way that allows him to reformulate the political project of twenty-first century socialism. In the midst of this reformulation, an interesting conception of time appears.

The key term in this context is ‘dislocation’, which literally designates the displacement of ‘parts or elements’ from their ‘former place or location’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). Besides arguing that all structural arrangements are dislocated to the extent that they never achieve full suture, 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). Laclau contrasts the process of dislocation with that of ‘sedimentation’. While the former signifies a ‘widening of the field of the possible’, the latter signifies the reverse process of narrowing down that field (Laclau, 1990, p. 43). Underlying the conceptual pair of dislocation and

sedimentation is the notion of contingency, which is an ontological condition for both Laclau and Luhmann (Andersen, 2003). In times of dislocation, the contingent nature of a given structure is exposed, but with the process of sedimentation, ‘the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of original contingency to fade’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 34).

This brings us to the question of time. For Laclau as well as for Luhmann, time should not be understood as a river flowing uninterrupted from past through present to future. On the contrary, time is ‘an aspect of the social construction of reality’ (Luhmann, 1976, p. 134), meaning that a plurality of social times exists, depending on the observer and his/her social context. As such, 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. As Laclau and Mouffe (1987, p. 99) put it: ‘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 ‘time’. In other words, politics is only possible if the plurality of social times is acknowledged.

Somewhat controversially, Laclau views time as the exact opposite of space (see Howarth, 2006, for a discussion of the controversy). Notably, however, space for Laclau is not synonymous with x/y/z coordinates or material arrangements. Instead, he uses the notion of space more symbolically to signify ‘any repetition governed by a structural law of successions’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 41). If tomorrow resembles today, or if the future is said to unfold according to a predetermined plan – a structural law of successions – this means that temporality has been spatialized, as the plurality of time is made singular. In the impossible event of total spatialization, the conditions for politics are eliminated, because there is no room for change. As Laclau (1990, p. 68) puts it: ‘Politics and space are antinomic terms. Politics only exists insofar as the spatial eludes us’. In other words, while ‘the temporal dimension points to the fact that everything could become something other than what it is’ (Luhmann, 1979, p. 17), the spatial dimension represents the elimination of that possibility. Space is time arrested.

Synthesis: Politics and trust

As indicated, Luhmann and Laclau share roughly the same conception of time as something that is not naturally given, but socially constructed in the present. The two authors differ in so

far as Luhmann relates the notion of time to trust, whereas Laclau relates it to politics. The purpose of this section 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 trust not only involves a problematic relationship with time, as Luhmann has it, but also with politics in Laclau's sense. If politics depends on the plurality of social time – no temporal differences means no room for change – then trust obstructs the very possibility of politics. Translated into Laclauian vocabulary, we could say that trust is one way of spatializing time. Trust is time arrested.

When behaving 'as though the future were certain' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 12), we live according to a more or less predetermined plan. At least, we momentarily disregard the fact that the future could potentially bring disappointment, and in doing so, we effectively suspend the need to act politically; to practice what Otto von Bismarck famously termed 'the art of the possible'. Political decision-making is only necessary/possible in situations where alternatives exist. The suspension of all but one course of action thus equals the end of politics (Laclau, 1996). To be sure, this is how the 'trustee'-model of representative democracy works. By electing politicians to represent us in parliament, by bestowing trust on them, we free ourselves of the responsibility of acting politically (Pitkin, 1967). Without a minimal level of trust, representation simply does not work, which is one reason why so many scholars emphasize trust as a core pillar of democracy, as we saw above.

Now, due to its spatializing nature, trust is typically predicated on the trustor and the trustee implicitly agreeing on a certain course of action (Luhmann, 1979). For instance, leaving a young child in the care of a babysitter implies an agreement between the parent and the babysitter that the child's needs are satisfied by the latter in the absence of the former. The same is true for representative politics. When throwing a ballot in the box, the represented and the representative enter an implicit agreement that the latter will pursue certain political objectives in the absence of the former. This is what makes trust an apolitical mechanism, as it deprives (or frees) the trustor of the (respons)ability to act politically in a particular context and, instead, ties him/her to the promise made to the trustee. However, as we shall see below, such agreements are not always constitutive of trust relationships in representative politics. In the case of *The Alternative*, trust between represented and representative is established despite the lack of a well-defined course of action. Paradoxically, this provides a fertile ground for

what has been called ‘radical’ or ‘utopian’ imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; De Cock et al., 2018).

A note on methods

In seeking to illustrate our theoretical argument empirically, we now turn to the case of The Alternative. In so doing, the paper draws on 38 interviews, more than 200 hours of participant observation, and well-over 1000 pages of written material, collected and conducted by the first author as part of a larger study of political organization (see Husted, 2017)¹. While the documents and the interviews will be used to position The Alternative as a trust-based party, the observations (both online and offline) will be used to unfold our overall argument about the (a)political function of trust. Analytically, we approached the data through Luhmann’s conception of trust and Laclau’s understanding of politics. This means that we coded the data for instances where trust is used to reduce complexity by extending undecidability. As we shall see, such instances are most visible in the ethnographic material, which is why observations constitute the empirical foundation of the ensuing analysis.

Analysis: Trust in The Alternative

The Alternative was founded in Denmark in November 2013 by Uffe Elbæk, a former minister of culture, as a reaction to the ‘old political culture’ and the unsustainability of neoliberal capitalism. However, instead of presenting a number of trademark issues or a list of tangible demands, the party was launched without a political program. Inspired by the collaborative nature of open-source communities, The Alternative’s program was developed during the following six months through a bottom-up process centered on a number of ‘Political Laboratories’, open to the general public (Husted and Plesner, 2017). Hence, rather than positioning the party on a classical left-right scale, Elbæk and his colleagues envisioned The Alternative as an organization capable of representing everyone ‘who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old’ (The Alternative, 2014a). This broad appeal attracted support from across the political spectrum. The vision of a ‘new political culture’, in particular, constituted a fertile ground for membership recruitment.

¹ Most of the quotes used in the analysis have been translated from Danish by the authors. Some of the documents are, however, originally written in English (see reference list for details).

At the center of this new approach to politics was a persistent focus on trust and the necessity of building trusting relations between politicians and the electorate. As stated in the first draft of the political program:

The people's trust in those elected is at a historical low, and never before have so few Danes been members of a political party. The distance between Christiansborg [the Danish Parliament] and the public gets bigger and bigger. The Alternative believes that this is due to a political and media culture where mudslinging, tactics, and spin takes up way too much space (...) If we are to implement those initiatives that are necessary for a sustainable transition, we need the public to support and trust that participation and engagement matters (The Alternative, 2014b, p. 8).

From the outset, The Alternative thus derived much of its legitimacy from portraying itself as a response to a 'crisis of trust' between the represented and the representatives (e.g. The Alternative, 2015a; 2015b; 2016). To ameliorate this situation, the party invented a number of organizational procedures for boosting trust internally as well as externally. Such procedures included a 'media declaration', stating that The Alternative would remain open and honest about its interaction with the press, and six organizational values all circulating around the vision of a trust-based political culture (see also Husted, 2018). Furthermore, an internal ombudsman's council was established and tasked with evaluating the party's performance in terms of realizing its own ideals – not least in relation to trust (The Alternative, 2014d). Finally, to specify how the new political culture should materialize in actual deliberations, The Alternative came up with a list of debate principles. These constitute six almost Habermasian dogmas 'conceived as benchmarks in our political discussions' (The Alternative, 2014e). For instance, one principle reads: 'We will acknowledge when we have no answer to a question or when we make mistakes'. And another principle states that: 'We will listen more than we speak and we will meet our political opponents on their own ground'.

As such, it seems fair to describe The Alternative as a trust-based party, which is a description shared by most members. For instance, when asked about the party's organizational values, members frequently emphasize trust as a meta-value that underlies all activities within the party, including the six official values. As one respondent noted: 'It is an extremely trust-based culture, but I think that's implied in the values. You can't have these values without trust'

(Respondent #28). Another respondent highlighted trust as ‘the only thing that binds us together’, while noting that he had never been in an organization with higher levels of ‘unconditional trust’ (Respondent #11). A third respondent explained that in organizations characterized by an absence of structure and political direction, such as The Alternative, ‘trust quickly becomes your only anchor’, leading him to conclude that ‘trust may be the single most important thing’ for the party (Respondent #14). This brings us to the question of the role of trust; what is its function within The Alternative as a political organization? To prepare the ground for answering this question, we begin with an observation from the first author’s fieldwork within the party. This observation will subsequently be used to reflect on The Alternative’s overall political development.

The (a)political function of trust

On a cold Sunday morning in early January 2015, I got on the train to Roskilde, a suburban city just outside Copenhagen, to observe The Alternative’s first so-called ‘Political Forum’ meeting. Not to be confused with Political Laboratories, the forum consists of approximately 40 people: The political leadership, the board, and representatives from local constituencies. The forum’s task is to deliberate about incoming policy proposals, developed bottom-up by ordinary members, and to decide whether or not to include these in the official political program. When I arrived in Roskilde, the spirit was high. Since most participants had been at the venue the whole weekend engaging in various team-building exercises, people seemed eager to get down to business. And in this context, ‘business’ meant voting. Several topics were on the agenda that Sunday, but the thing that concerned most people was a policy proposal about reducing the average workweek to 30 hours. This was a controversial proposal that seemed to divide members of The Alternative in a way that few proposals had done before. Typically for meetings in the party, the day began with a series of group exercises. It was during one of these exercises that I heard someone whisper: ‘Do people know we’re not gonna vote today?’ At first, I took it as a misguided rumor. After all, the main purpose of the meeting, I thought, was to vote on incoming proposals. However, when the group exercises ended, the forum’s moderator announced that there was not going to be any voting. This immediately caused a stir. Especially people who had travelled a long way were frustrated about the prospect of yet another day with more group exercises and plenary discussions. The political leadership tried to calm the waters by arguing that the forum should discuss more important things, such as The Alternative’s overall project, instead of just deciding whether or not to

accept specific policy proposals. This would also allow the leadership more room for maneuver instead of tying them to the political program. At this point, the tension in the room was palpable. A representative from Northern Denmark stood up and raised his voice: 'What if the leadership decides to go to war? I can't live with that!'. Other participants nodded their heads, and some started clapping. 'This is gonna explode', I wrote in my notebook while watching the events unfold. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, someone shouted from the back of the room: 'We need to trust the people we elect'. And suddenly, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, the mood changed from hostile to friendly. Another local representative agreed: 'We have to show trust', he said. People then started showing jazz hands in approval. Finally, the moderator closed the discussion by reminding people to place 'trust in trust, trust in good intentions' (Field notes, 2015).

To understand the role that trust plays in the above, we need to recall The Alternative's short but eventful history. Launched as a party capable of representing anyone longing for an alternative to the status quo, The Alternative initially mobilized members with dramatically different views. While some saw the party as a reaction to the environmental destruction caused by the market economy, others saw it as a countermeasure to the expansion and bureaucratization of the public sector; and while some saw the party as a secular response to the rise of religious nationalism, others saw it as a spiritual awakening in a disenchanted world. In other words, there were initially as many perceptions of The Alternative's ideological stance as there were members. However, with every proposal added to the political program, the scope of representation got increasingly smaller, to the point where some members started feeling marginalized. The events detailed above occurred at this defining moment in the party's lifetime. At this point, it was no longer possible for The Alternative to claim to represent all those 'who can feel that something new is starting to replace something old'. The decisive question was therefore *what kind of alternative* The Alternative was going to be.

As with several other proposals, the proposal about reducing the average workweek to 30 hours divided the members quite evenly. Some saw it as key to addressing multiple societal issues, including stress and unemployment, while others saw it as unnecessary government intervention in matters better left to individual negotiations of terms of employment. As such, the choice about whether or not to accept the proposal as official policy would almost certainly convince a segment of the members that The Alternative was no longer *their* alternative. Cancelling the vote momentarily solved that problem, but only after a heated discussion, as

described above. During that discussion, the irreconcilable nature of the party's membership base was exposed, with members wanting to steer the political leadership in opposing directions. What ultimately resolved this deadlock was a commitment to trust. By choosing to bestow trust on the leadership in terms of making the 'right' decision, irreconcilable positions were once again deferred by the overall vision of an alternative society and a new political culture. Even though there was little consensus about the 30 hour workweek proposal, the members could all agree on the importance of trust – and that allowed The Alternative to proceed despite fundamental disagreements.

We may decipher the role that trust plays in this particular context by means of the combined Luhmanian and Laclauian framework. As indicated above, The Alternative was initially characterized by a spirit of radical inclusivity, in the sense that members were allowed (and encouraged) to read their own personal preferences into the party. As one respondent noted: 'In the beginning, it was completely open for everyone. Anyone could set-up a flea market in their garage and claim to represent The Alternative. Anything could be The Alternative' (Respondent #18). Such instances are marked by what Laclau (1995, p. 93) following Derrida calls 'undecidability', meaning that 'no course of action necessarily follows' from that specific condition. In moments of undecidability, decisions have to be made in a destructured terrain, rendering them 'mad' to the extent that they cannot be justified with reference to an underlying rationality. A proper decision is thus a choice 'grounded in its own singularity' rather than a simple effect of an overarching universality (Laclau, 1996, p. 53), making it an 'act of politics through and through' (Norval, 2004, p. 143). Translated into the language of time and space, undecidability can thus be understood as an inherently temporal concept, because it conditions the moment that follows dislocation, whereas decision-making represents a move towards spatialization. Crudely put, then, the function of trust in the observation above is to avoid spatialization by prolonging the moment of undecidability.

Through trust, the 'field of the possible' (Laclau, 1990, p. 43) is kept open, as the meaning of the party's project remains dislocated and thus undecided. As such, trust allows the members to 'anticipate the future' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 12) by continuously imagining *their alternative* as equivalent to *The Alternative*. Understood this way, the role of trust in this context is apolitical, since it removes the need for political decision-making. When the members trust that the leadership's aspirations are identical to their own, they effectively suspend the need for political action: Instead of choosing between A and B, they can simply trust that the 'right'

choice will be made for them. However, trust also preserves the very possibility of politics precisely by avoiding spatialization. As Laclau (1990, p. 68) notes, politics is only possible ‘insofar as the spatial eludes us’. We are thus left with a paradoxical situation, where trust in The Alternative preserves *the possibility* of politics while simultaneously suspending *the need* for politics.

The end of trust-based undecidability

Naturally, The Alternative could not (and did not want to) avoid making decisions on which proposals to include in the political program, and eventually it was decided to accept the 30 hour workweek proposal as official policy. In fact, that particular proposal ended up playing a vital role in The Alternative’s election campaign, which secured the party almost five percent of the votes in the national elections in June 2015. The entry into parliament forced The Alternative to develop policies at a much faster pace than previously. To avoid accusations of being a ‘populist party without policies’, The Alternative began producing a cornucopia of tangible proposals divided into more than 25 policy initiatives. In fact, during the first two years in parliament, The Alternative advanced nearly 200 proposals within many different areas including healthcare, agriculture, energy, entrepreneurship, education, taxation, immigration, foreign policy, and much more (see The Alternative, 2018). Such an approach to policymaking has been characterized as a ‘strategy of addition’, and it typically serves the purpose of appearing concrete and particular without marginalizing parts of the constituency (Mayer and Ely, 1998, p. 7). In other words, whenever proposals had been developed, they were simply added to the ever-expanding program without explicit prioritization.

However, that strategy only worked because The Alternative had little influence at the level of realpolitik. Being a small opposition party allowed The Alternative to operate more freely, but this condition changed substantially with the regional elections in November 2017. The months leading up to the elections were characterized by an unusual amount of internal criticism, with members accusing the political leadership of interfering in local affairs. These accusations were particularly pronounced in the Copenhagen branch of the party, which is by far the largest and most influential. Here, members voiced concerns about top-down control and party discipline in response to the publication of The Alternative’s electoral campaign (The Alternative, 2017), which had not been developed through a proper bottom-up process. This led other members –

particularly those running for office – to retaliate by once again appealing to trust. As one member argued on one of The Alternative’s Facebook pages:

Trust has to be the most central value in our new political culture (...). The old parties are plagued by machinations, gossip, and distrust. So much so that some parties have collapsed (...). We have to do better than that. The new political culture in The Alternative has to involve a fight against the culture of distrust. If you bestow trust on others, they grow. If you distrust fellow party members, you create dissension, you obstruct productive collaboration, you drain energy and spawn hopelessness. So, every time you feel distrustful, remember that the Alternativist next to you is working for the same vital and optimistic cause. Collaboration, energy, and engagement work much better on trust.

Interestingly, even if unintentionally, this quote elucidates the function of trust within The Alternative. The sentence, ‘every time you feel distrustful, remember that the Alternativist next to you is working for the same vital and optimistic cause’, is particularly telling in this regard, as it explicates the point that trust allows members (Alternativists) to imagine *their alternative* as equivalent to *The Alternative*. At least, it allows them to suspend differences in time by imagining that their personal preferences might one day be added to the official program. Such appeals to place ‘trust in trust’, as the moderator put it in the observation from the Political Forum, initially succeeded in calming down criticism. Though some remained skeptical about the oligarchic tendencies surrounding the regional elections, most decided to heed the call for more trust. However, once the election results were in, it became apparent that The Alternative in Copenhagen had received enough votes to place its leading candidate in one of the city’s six mayor positions (in Copenhagen, each administration has its own mayor). As a consequence, the party now had to decide – in a moment of undecidability – which administration and policy area to prioritize.

Without much hesitation, the party’s leading candidate in Copenhagen chose the often overlooked and less-prestigious Culture and Leisure Administration. To him, the choice was clear. After all, The Alternative was founded by the former minister of culture as a ‘cultural voice’ working towards a ‘new political culture’ (The Alternative, 2013). However, the decision to prioritize culture and leisure over policy areas that have traditionally carried more weight, such as employment or integration, sparked an unprecedented wave of criticism from members expressing their disappointment in no uncertain terms. Opinion pieces were published

in newspapers, pictures of resignation forms were posted on social media, and members appeared on national TV accusing The Alternative of betraying its ambition of working towards a sustainable future. Some even circulated pictures of the party's leading candidate in Copenhagen with an added speech bubble saying: 'Let them eat culture' – a thinly veiled reference to Marie-Antoinette's ignorance of the real needs of the people. On Facebook, one member phrased an ultimatum to the party's newly elected politicians:

I trusted The Alternative. I have waited for policy areas to be developed and defended the process all the way (...) If you choose Culture over food on citizens' tables, then you have definitively forfeited your own ideals and you will lose people's trust that your policies will ever address social sustainability. My own story about The Alternative will be radically different than before, unless you choose the EIA [the Employment and Integration Administration].

What is at stake here is that, at the regional elections, a decision had to be made – one unlike any the party ever had to make. While previous decisions had involved little demarcation, in the sense that choices about including various policy proposals in the political program did not marginalize other proposals, this particular decision installed a hierarchical relationship between different policy areas. The prioritization of 'culture and leisure' over 'employment and integration' convinced many members that The Alternative was a party for 'the creative class' rather than a party for everyone, which immediately resulted in declining support. In fact, following the regional elections, The Alternative went from 7.2 percent to 3.1 percent in opinion polls and lost more than 10 percent of its members (Megafon, 2018).

Returning to Laclau's and Luhmann's vocabularies, we could say that the decision to privilege culture broke the 'equivalential chain' (Laclau, 1994) of political demands represented by the party because it elevated one particular policy area. This spatialized The Alternative's political project, which caused the 'system of possible alternatives' to vanish and 'the traces of original contingency to fade' (Laclau, 1990, p. 34). When that happened, the need for trust instantly diminished, because complexity had been reduced by other means. Recalling the example of the prisoner's dilemma, we could say that members of the party no longer faced a dilemma in terms of whether or not to trust The Alternative's leadership, because the future had been made significantly less uncertain. In other words, the moment of undecidability had finally ended because a choice had been made, allowing members to judge whether that choice matched their own anticipations.

Conclusion: Trust and alternative politics

Our interpretation of the events surrounding the regional elections points to the conclusion that the maintenance of trust in the case of The Alternative had little to do with the leadership's actual trustworthiness and more to do with varying levels of complexity. Prior to the elections, trust was required to reduce complexity and to avoid paralysis in the absence of decidability. After the elections, complexity was reduced by the political decision to prioritize culture and leisure over other policy areas, thereby removing the need for trust. Hence, what made the party's leading politicians seem untrustworthy was, arguably, not only their attitude or behavior, but rather their inevitable failure to fulfill the multiplicity of anticipations about the future that co-existed within The Alternative.

This conclusion has some noteworthy implications for political parties and social movements that claim to be alternative. Most importantly, it shows the instrumental value of trust for such organizations. Not only does the 'crisis of trust' in contemporary society provide them with a legitimate reason for existence (Stavrakakis et al., 2018), it also prevents ideological closure within the organizations themselves. In the absence of political decidability, trust can function as the glue that ties alternative parties and movements together, despite fundamental political disagreements. Hence, trust seems to provide an answer to one of the most fundamental challenges facing alternative organizations (and collective action more broadly), concerning the tension between individual autonomy and collective solidarity. As Parker et al. (2014, p. 37) put it: 'How can we be 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?' Temporarily at least, trust can resolve this challenge by allowing people to be 'different together' (Parker et al., 2014, p. 38). Trust keeps the future open, but in doing so, it creates an unfixed space of counter-hegemonic representation that offers people an opportunity to activate their 'radical' or 'utopian' imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; De Cock et al., 2018).

This is the paradox that we have termed the '(anti)politics of trust': On the one hand trust suspends the need for decision-making, foreclosing specific political acts; on the other hand it extends the moment of undecidability, keeping the conditions of political possibility open. Paradoxically, then, trust serves to maintain support for the process of political decision-making as long as actual decisions are suspended, but becomes unnecessary (or, indeed,

irrelevant) once decisions are made. Understood this way, trust is an important mechanism of democratic representation, in the sense that it may be used to satisfy disparate anticipations about the future and create possibilities for radical imagination, but it should neither be seen as a normative ideal nor as a necessary ingredient of well-functioning democracies.

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