# Britannica Blog
Where Ideas Matter

A World without Trust

Paul Cranmer - *August 18th, 2008*

I recently had occasion to read the epilogue from Farhad Manjoo's book: *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*. The epilogue is entitled "Living in a World without Trust." In it he cites the research of political scientist Edward Banfield in southern Italy. As the author put it, Banfield's question was "Why, when the villagers of the North of Italy were succeeding, Southern peasants remained peasants, mired in deprivation unseen in most of the Western world?"
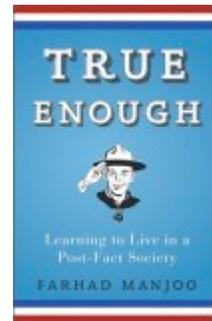
Since I lived in Italy for twenty years, I was aware of this phenomenon and very interested in the answer. Banfield concluded that because people did not trust each other, they could not "act together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family." Basically, he recognized the interdependence between trust and social wellbeing.

As I read this, several memories popped into my mind. When I first lived in Italy in the 1960s, Italians viewed Americans as primarily honest and trustworthy people. One said to me, "A handshake is enough to close a deal." He contrasted this affirmation with his own business environment, in which one must always assume that the other party is scheming to cheat. It made me think of how my own cultural environment has changed since I was a child in 1950s.

Changing Values and an Existential World

I grew up with the concepts of right and wrong, and of one's role, responsibilities, and relationship to the larger body of society that were common to my grandfather's generation. But well before my time, these things had been changing, especially among intellectuals, philosophers, academics, artists, writers, and the like. The difference seems to be that their world view was no longer based on what they thought society ought to be, but rather on their perception of what it was. This perception often focused on the harsh and seedy world of raw survival and was considered a much more honest assessment of life than the hypocrisy of the Victorian era. The change had been gradually filtering into ordinary people's lives since before the turn of the century, but the dramatic events of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II gave it more substance.

So in the years after World War II, society was already feeling that something was truly changing. I noticed the change reflected in what I saw on television. In the 50s, there was an ad on TV with slogan "The family that prays together, stays together." By the end of the 60s, another ad declared "You only go around once in life, get all the gusto you can get." It was quite a shift from a deontological to an existential view of life. In other words, it was no longer a question of my responsibility to society, but rather my freedom to seek my own gratification. In an existential world, each of us becomes the center of his or her universe

and thus in competition and on a collision course with all other pretenders to the throne at the center. As our world-view has become more self-centered, we tend to question even less its subjectivity.

I mention this because, though not by any means the only factor, it is a significant and often overlooked belief system behind many changes in how, as Americans, we relate to each other. While the events of the first half of 20th century made us face how ugly reality can be, at the same time they made us acutely aware of our need for one another. In post-war America, however, materialistic satisfaction has effectively eclipsed the felt need for relationships. Our society has resulted less cohesive, more polarized, and much less objective.

Our most basic American values of individualism, independence, self-reliance, and competition have assumed an antisocial role. They inspire us to look at life as a totally personal accomplishment and not a corporate endeavor. They easily blind us to an increasing lack of altruism.

Even in religion the emphasis has changed. The rise of fundamentalism has tended to replace the bond of love with the expectations and rules of acceptable performance. The focus on the unity, mutual support, and growth of the body of believers as a whole has shifted to the individual's personal responsibility. You must carry your own burden, and someone who appears to fail to do so is not seen as someone needing help, but rather as someone who is choosing not to accept his or her responsibility. The appearance of success becomes paramount, and those who succeed make their personal experience the norm by which they judge others. It's as if Jesus had not said "they will know you are my disciples by your love for one another," but rather "they will know you are my disciples by how righteous you are."

Our subjective world-view has extended to our sources of information. An inappropriate application of the "scientific method" has replaced *deductive reasoning* with *inductive hypothesis,* and many times objective fact succumbs to the temptation to "induce" the desired "truth." This is particularly acute in the news media. Reporting of facts has been replaced with opinion, and all too often that "opinion" deliberately misrepresents the truth for a desired end. Truth in advertising? What truth? Falsehood appears much more effective. It's just like Mark Twain observed: "A lie can get halfway around the world before the truth can even get its boots on." You feel like you just can't trust anyone or anything.

An Existential Business World

In the business world, the change is even more evident. When my grandfather was the superintendent of an oil refinery in the 1940s and 50s, the employees didn't need a labor union to represent them because his management style looked at productivity as interdependent with a positive work environment. He considered meeting the workers' needs as a fundamental requirement for business success. I remember as a child how there was a feeling of our being part of an extended family. Relationships were valued, and there was a sense of security.

What I see and experience in business today is much more indicative of social Darwinism. Parenthetically, I have noted how those of the religious right have become unwitting bedfellows with the social Darwinist. The social Darwinist says: "If I can exploit you, it's your fault not mine," and religious right affirms: "If you don't succeed, it's your choice, and not my responsibility."   Right or wrong, they characterize the reality we experience.

I recently read a quote from **Frederick Winslow Taylor**, who wrote *The Principles of Scientific Management* back in 1911. He said, "In the past the man has been first, in the

future the system must be first."   This is a fair assessment of today's business management styles. Any trust that there might have been has vanished. Just like the bond of love in religion has been replaced by the demands of performance standards, so have *metrics* replaced *people skills* in business. People have become simply *human resources* to be exploited and discarded when no longer considered necessary. The relationship between employee and management is now generally adversarial. People no longer count simply because they're people. It's all down to survival of the fittest, and the "fittest" is the one who can exploit you or eliminate you for his or her own advancement.

Please do not infer that I believe that these negative dynamics are something new in our society. They have always been a part of human nature. What I see that has rendered them more influential, however, is that previously in our culture other belief systems had the power to counterbalance much of their effect. For now, at least, it appears that those belief systems have been subverted, and we are left deal with what it means to work, to be creative, even to survive, in a business environment without trust. Without trust I fear American business risks its own future. Without trust, how can its personnel possibly work "together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest"?

Posted in **Business**, **Personal**, **Culture**

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6 Responses to "A World without Trust"

1. *Anna* Says:
   August 18th, 2008 at 12:27 pm
   This is a wonderful summary of one of the key issues in society today. The only thing I can ask for beyond what I've already seen is a suggestion of how to remedy this. It seems that all too often we are quick to identify a problem, which has its merits in moderation, but we seldom are so ready with a solution or tentative course of action. What can be done about this?
   Other than the above gripe, this is an excellent analysis that I agree with wholeheartedly. Very nice!

2. *Blair Boland* Says:
   August 18th, 2008 at 3:56 pm
   There are too many disparate subjects jumbled together to form a coherent theme here, let alone a cogent vision. Whether it's another lamentation on 'civilization and its discontents' or an adumbral plaint on political economy, there's obviously a lot not to like about modern (or post-modern) society. Existential, however, is probably one of the most misunderstood and missused - when its used at all - words in the cultural lexicon, and should not be confused with solipsistic. Indeed, there's hardly any thinker that explored themes of love and redemption from many more angles than Kierkegaard. Other existentialist giants like Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, who explored quandries of alienation in bourgeois society, used subjectivity masterfully - not as a cheap form of hedonistic self-absoption. If such strands of thought were common currency today it would more likely represent a step forward rather than a step backward in deeper indiviual understanding and serve as a salutary antidote to "antisocial" cultural conformity. Rampant consumerism is an inevitable outgrowth of late capitalism and addressing its underlying social and political causes requires

rethinking many of the implicit assumptions of American triumphalism. Unquestionably, no one should "believe that these negative dynamics are something new in our society". In fact, as Walter McDougall has trenchantly suggested in his recent illuminating book(s), 'Freedom Just Around the Corner: a new American history': "We remain as we have been in most of our history, a nation of hustlers." Indeed, we can only look forward to the day when we become a nation of altruistic egalitarian existentialists rather than a nation of antisocial capitalist hustlers.

3. *Victor Thomas* Says:
   August 18th, 2008 at 4:19 pm
   I agree with a lot of what the blogger says here, though I'd suggest that a more current slogan that gets to the heart of our self-centered ways is the classic one from Nike: "Just Do It!" To hell with the consequences - just do it.

4. **Ramesh Raghuvanshi** Says:
   August 19th, 2008 at 12:11 pm
   Today weare living in consummer society. New communition systems bring us a speedy life. We want everything instantly. Life everywere is very very fast. You can see this trend all over world.

   We are also living in an uncertain world. In an uncertain world, we are untrustworthy. We do not even trust ourselves. Everything is salable

   The real culprit of this cataclysm is our madness of fast instant, a life created by new technology. But how can we stop the progress of science?

5. **Lee Cockerell** Says:
   August 19th, 2008 at 12:45 pm
   For the ten years I ran Walt Disney World Operations I focused on creating an environment where the leaders were taught and held accountable for managing their business and leading their teams. On our leadership survey every year which 80% of the Cast Members took the two most important questions were:

   1) Do you trust your leader?
   2) Would you work for your leader again if you had the choice?

   Leaders must start to worry about building a trusting culture if they are to survive. A culture where everybody matters and they know they matter. I just wrote a book that spells out how leaders can be become better leaders and create the right enviroment where people want to come to work verses having to come…There is a big difference….Lee Cockerell

6. *Paul Cranmer* Says:
   August 19th, 2008 at 3:27 pm
   I would like to respond to Mr. Boland's comments on my use of the term "existential." I consider the usage to be correct, although extremely basic. The classical concept of existence, as illustrated, for example, by Plato's forms, says that essence precedes existence, i.e. that the concept comes before the specific manifestation of the concept. Existentialism postulates that existence precedes essence (hence the term existentialism), i.e. that the specific manifestation of a thing comes before any understanding of the semantic concept that defines it. Consequential to this second presupposition is the negation of any absolutes in terms of meaning, purpose, ethics, etc. There is no right or wrong, only cause and effect, where they may be discernable. In this context our individual perception and interpretation of what we experience is

our only actual source of knowing and even that is compromised by our own subjectivity. Sartre alluded to the fact that as a result we are each the center of our own universe and that this fact puts each one of us on a collision course with others.

There was no attempt on my part to "out-think" the philosophers who have examined existentialism in depth. The intent of what I wrote has nothing to do with academic or profound philosophical treatment, though this appears to be the criterion for judgment that Mr. Boland employs. It is merely a collection of observations and thoughts. Given that most of the things I come across that discuss the dynamics behind where our society is and where it appears to be going refer to more immediate causes, I believe that it is worth noting the importance of looking below the surface to the relationship between our underlying and usually unconscious presuppositions and how these presuppositions condition the way we make our society to function.