



The Future

Society can't function without trust, and our complex, interconnected, and global society needs a lot of it. We need to be able to trust the people we interact with directly: as we sit next to them on airplanes, eat the food they serve us in the cabin, and get into their taxis when we land. We need to be able to trust the organizations and institutions that make modern society possible: that the airplanes we fly and the cars we ride in are well-made and well-maintained, that the food we buy is safe and their labels truthful, that the laws in the places we live and the places we travel will be enforced fairly. We need to be able to trust all sorts of technological systems: that the ATM network, the phone system, and the Internet will work wherever we are. We need to be able to trust strangers, singly and in organizations, all over the world all the time. We also need to be able to trust indirectly; we need to trust the trust people we don't already know and systems we don't yet understand. We need to trust trust.

Making this all work ourselves is impossible. We can't even begin to personally verify, and then deliberately decide whether or not to trust, the hundreds—thousands?—of people we interact with directly, and the millions of others we interact with indirectly, as we go about our daily lives. That's just too many, and we'll never meet them all. And even if we could magically decide to trust the people, we don't have the expertise to make technical and scientific decisions about trusting things like airplane safety, modern banking, and pharmacology.

Writing about trust, economist Bart Nooteboom said: "Trust in things or people entails the willingness to submit to the risk that they may fail us, with the expectation that they will not, or the neglect of lack of awareness of that possibility that they might." Those three are all intertwined: we aren't willing to risk unless we're sure in our expectation that the risk is minor, so minor that most of the time we don't even have to think about it.

That's the value of societal pressures. They induce compliance with the group norms—that is, cooperation—so we're able to approximate the intimate trust we have in our friends on a much larger scale. It's not perfect, of course. The trust we have in actions and systems isn't as broad or deep as personal trust, but it's good enough. Societal pressures reduce the scope of defection. In a sense, by trusting societal pressures, we don't have to do the work of figuring out whether or not to trust individuals.

By inducing cooperation throughout society, societal pressures allow us to relax our guard a little bit. It's less stressful to live in a world where you trust people. Once you assume people can, in general and with qualifications, be trusted to be fair, nice, altruistic, cooperative, and trustworthy, you can stop expending energy constantly worrying about security. Then, even though you get burned by the occasional exception, your life is still more comfortable if you continue to believe.¹

We intuitively know this, even if we've never analyzed the mechanisms before. But the mechanisms of societal pressure are important. Societal pressures enable society's doves to thrive, even though there's a minority of hawks. Societal pressures enable society.

And despite the largest trust gap in our history, it largely works. It's easy to focus on defection—the crime, the rudeness, the complete mess of the political system in several countries around the world—but the evidence is all around you. Society is still here, alive and ticking. Trust is common, as is fairness, altruism, cooperation, and kindness. People don't automatically attack strangers or cheat each other. Murders, burglaries, fraud, and so on are rare.

We have a plethora of security systems to deal with the risks that remain. We know how to walk through the streets of our communities. We know how to shop on the Internet. We know how to interact with friends and strangers, whether—and how—to lock our doors at night, and what precautions to take against crime. The very fact that I was able to write and publish this book, and you were able to buy and read it, is a testament to all of our societal pressure systems. We might get it wrong sometimes, but we largely get it right.

At the same time, defection abounds. Defectors in our society have become more powerful, and they've learned to evade and sometimes manipulate societal pressures to enable their continued defection. They've used the rapid pace of technological change to increase their scope of defection, while society remains unable to implement new societal pressures fast enough in response. Societal pressures fail regularly.

The important thing to remember is this: no security system is perfect. It's hard to admit in our technologically advanced society that we can't do something, but in security there are a lot of things we can't do. This isn't a reason to live in fear, or even necessarily a cause for concern. This is the normal state of life. It might even be a good thing. Being alive entails risk, and there always will be outliers. Even if you reduced the murder rate to one in a million, three hundred unlucky people in the U.S. would be murdered every year.

These are not technical problems, though societal pressures are filled with those. No, the biggest and most important problems are at the policy level: global climate change, regulation and governance, political process, civil liberties, the social safety net. Historically, group interests either coalesced organically around the people concerned, or were dictated by a government. Today, understanding group interests increasingly involves scientific expertise, or new social constructs stemming from new technologies, or different problems resulting from yet another increase in scale.

Philosopher Sissela Bok wrote: "...trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged the community as a whole suffers; and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse." More generally, trust is the key component of social capital, and high-trust societies are better off in many dimensions than low-trust societies. And in the world today, levels of trust vary all over the map—although never down to the level of baboons.²

We're now at a critical juncture in society: we need to implement new societal systems to deal with the new world created by today's globalizing technologies. It is critical that we understand what societal pressures do and don't do, why they work and fail, and how scale affects them. If we do, we can continue building trust into our society. If we don't, the parasites will kill the host.

In closing, there are several points I want to make.

No matter how much societal pressure you deploy, there always will be defectors. All complex ecosystems contain parasites, and all human systems of cooperation and trust include people who try to take advantage of them. This will not change as long as societies are made up of humans. The possibility of perfect trust, or unbreakable security, is a science-fiction future that won't happen in the lifetime of anyone we know.

Increasing societal pressure isn't always worth it. It's not just the problem of diminishing returns discussed in Chapter 10. Looking back through history, the societies that enforce cooperation and conformance to the group norm, that

ruthlessly clamp down and punish defectors, and that monitor every aspect of their citizens' lives are not societies we think of as free. This is true whether the norms accurately reflect the desires of the group or are imposed from the top down.³ Security always has side effects and unwanted consequences.

This is okay. We've repeatedly talked about societal pressures as being necessary to sustain trust⁴ This doesn't mean absolute trust, and it doesn't imply 100% cooperation. As long as the murder rate is low enough, speeders are few enough, and policemen on the take are rare enough, society flourishes.

Societal pressures can prevent cooperation, too. Not only do we sometimes fail to punish the guilty, we sometimes punish the innocent. People get reputations they don't deserve; people get convicted of crimes they didn't commit. And if the scope of defection is low enough, these false positives can be greater than the defection attempts thwarted. That's when you know it's time to dial back the knob.

We all defect at some times regarding some things. Sometimes we're simply being selfish. Sometimes we have another, stronger, self-interest. Sometimes we're just not paying attention. Sometimes our morality just doesn't permit us to cooperate with the group norm. And sometimes we feel a stronger attachment to another group, and its associated interests and norms. This is also okay.

Sometimes we defect honestly and innocently. Group norms can be too rigid for the way we live our lives. The white lies of our normal social interactions make relationships better, not worse. Sometimes assistants need to sign documents for their bosses, and sometimes attorneys and accountants need to innocently back-date documents. Sometimes defecting is a form of social lubricant: small social dishonesties that make life easier for everyone.

There are good defectors and there are bad defectors, and we can't always tell the difference—even though we think we can. We know that murderers are always bad and that pro-democracy demonstrators are always good, but even those truisms fray at the edges. Was the U.S.'s assassination of Osama bin Ladin good or bad? Is it okay that pro-democracy protesters in Egypt and other countries are anti-U.S. and anti-Israel? U.S. troops in Iraq may be either good or bad, depending on whether you're safely in the U.S., whether your daughter was just killed by one of them, or whether you own an oil company. Many defectors believe they are morally right: animal-rights activists who free animals from testing laboratories, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Nazis in Germany, just to name a few. And so did the Tiananmen Square protesters in China, and the United States' founding fathers.

I stumbled on this parable on the Internet as I was writing this book:

There was this kid who came from a poor family. He had no good options in life so he signed up for the military. After a few years he was deployed to a conflict infested, god-forsaken desert outpost. It was the worst tour of duty he could have been assigned. It was going to be hot and dangerous. Every day he had to live with a hostile populace who hated his presence and the very sight of his uniform. Plus, the place was swarming with insurgents and terrorists.

Anyhow, one morning the soldier goes to work and finds that he's been assigned that day to a detail that is supposed to oversee the execution of three convicted insurgents. The soldier shakes his head. He didn't sign up for this. His life just totally sucks. "They don't pay me enough," he thinks, "for the shit I have to do."

He doesn't know he's going to be executing the Son of God that day. He's just going to work, punching the time clock, keeping his head down. He's just trying to stay alive, get through the day, and send some money back home to Rome.

Systems of societal pressure can't tell the difference between good or bad defectors. Societal pressures are the mechanism by which societies impose rules upon themselves, even as the societies overlap and conflict. Those rules could be good, like a respect for human rights or a system for enforcing contracts. Those rules could be bad, like slavery, totalitarianism, persecution, or ritual murder. Or those rules could be perceived as good by some societies and bad by others: arranged marriages; heavy taxation; and prohibitions against drinking, dancing, pot smoking, or sharing music files via BitTorrent. Societal pressures simply enforce cooperation, without much consideration as to why the defector chose some competing interest. This is a good thing when it protects individuals from harm, loss, or social injustice, and a bad thing when it protects a regime that is not good to its people or prevents positive social change.

Society needs defectors. Groups benefit from the fact that some members do not follow the group norms. These are the outliers: the people who resist popular opinion for moral or other reasons. These are the people who invent new business models by copying and distributing music, movies, and books on the Internet. These are people like Copernicus and Galileo, who challenged official Church dogma on astronomy. These are the people who—to take a recent

example—disrupt energy auctions to protest government responsibility for climate change. They're also people living on the edge of society: squatters, survivalists, artists, cults, communes, hermits, and those who live off the grid or off the land. In 2011, U.S. Marine Dakota Meyer received the Medal of Honor for saving three dozen of his comrades who were under enemy fire. The thing is, he disobeyed orders in order to do so.

Defection represents an engine for innovation, an immunological challenge to ensure the health of the majority, a defense against the risk of monoculture, a reservoir of diversity, and a catalyst for social change. It's through defection from bad or merely outdated social norms that our society improves. In the stoat vs. rabbit Red Queen Effect from Chapter 2, it's the stoats that drive the change. Left to themselves, the rabbits will not improve.

This is important. The societies that societal pressures protect are not necessarily moral or desirable. In fact, they can protect some pretty awful ones. And because societal pressures necessarily become institutionalized—in police forces, in government agencies, in corporate security departments—they can be co-opted to justify and maintain those awful societies' awful institutions.

Sometimes a whistle-blower needs to publish documents proving his government has been waging an illegal bombing campaign in Laos and Cambodia. Sometimes a plutonium processing plant worker needs to contact a reporter to discuss her employer's inadequate safety practices. And sometimes a black woman needs to sit down at the front of a bus and not get up. Without defectors, social change would be impossible; stagnation would set in.

It's a tough balancing act, but I think we're up to it. Maybe not in the near term, but in the long term. History teaches how often we get it right. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice."⁵