CHAPTER 4

Social Trust and Its Origins

While the linkage between state strength/weakness and national identity has been recognized for a relatively long time, the awareness that efficient governance is also the source of generalized social trust is considerably more recent. However, the properties of social trust suggest that it is a phenomenon whose influence on international conflict cannot be ignored. Indeed, it may be that social trust is the ideational underpinning of international peace that the democratic peace theorists have been attempting to identify, and the determinant of diversionary behavior that will account for the outbreaks of diversionary violence far more efficiently than the hitherto used approaches relying on governmental popularity.

Definitions and Characteristics

The concept of social trust already enjoys a considerable body of literature in its own right. The definition of social trust employed here is Uslaner’s (2002) concept of moralistic, or generalized, social trust, which focuses on the individual propensity (or lack thereof) to view people who are complete strangers (and who may belong to different social classes, ethnic groups, or even nationalities) as trustworthy, or likely to validate one’s trust being placed in them, even in situations where the individuals in question may have no incentive to validate that trust. Generalized social trust is therefore a faith in others and a willingness to act in accordance with that belief, and an assumption that others will behave in a way consistent with one’s belief in their trustworthiness, even though no immediate benefit is expected (Uslaner 2002). As such, the concept of generalized trust stands in contrast with other conceptions of trust, for example, Hardin’s (2001) encapsulated trust, which posits that individuals view one
another as trustworthy only when they know cooperation is in the other individual’s interest, or particularized trust, which obtains in situations where the individuals are both members of a cohesive group, know each other well, or otherwise have the expectation of extended future interaction, and are thus operating under a long shadow of the future (Uslaner 2000). Social trust is also frequently identified as one of the elements of social capital as a facilitator of collective action (Putnam 2000). The heuristic nature of generalized social trust is a key feature distinguishing it from particularized trust (Uslaner 2002), which is more context-based, built on enforceable contracts, expectations of mutual behavior grounded in material self-interest, and a variety of other social constraints. In effect, the concept of particularized trust of encapsulated trust closely resemble one another, as both predict that individuals trust one another only under conditions where one actor believes, on the basis of tangible available evidence, that it is in another actor’s self-interest to behave in a cooperative fashion. Such trust molded by experience of interaction with that particular actor (Hardin 1996) rather than by the natural predisposition of the individual in question to place his or her in others. Thus, whereas strategic, or encapsulated/particularized, trust is built on the foundation of available information and evidence by which to judge other individuals, moralistic trust is based on normative statements and beliefs concerning how people should, and will, behave (Uslaner 2002), even in the absence of concrete evidence that would lead the “truster” to believe that such behavior is to be expected.

Generalized social trust literature is unanimous in confirming the importance of a high level of trust for the health of the society and both individual and group interactions therein, in interpersonal, commercial, and governmental settings. To cite Uslaner (2002), trust is the “chicken soup of social life.” Generalized social trust is a belief that others will not take advantage of one’s willingness to trust and cooperate, based in the goodwill of others even where there is a prospect of gain by doing so (Uslaner 2002; Thomas 1996) that exists in the knowledge that some of the benefit may go to bystanders, or free riders (Putnam 2000) who benefit from the behavior of others (in other words, consume trust) without contributing anything in return. Generalized social trust is a societal resource that links citizens to each other and enables them to pursue their common objectives more effectively.