Rethinking Diplomatic Transformation Through Social Theories of Trust

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RETHINKING DIPLOMATIC TRANSFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL THEORIES OF TRUST

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ABSTRACT

In the 2012 Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, Nicholas Wheeler explored how trust might be built between political leaders, drawing primarily on how the interpersonal relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev changed the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. This paper engages the theoretical and empirical claims made in this article, arguing that the focus on the interpersonal relationship obscures more potentially important dynamics of trust-building between states. It seeks to show how focusing on the interpersonal relationships alone not only cannot account for long-term trust building, but also how the focus on the interpersonal relationship creates a highly simplified narrative that fails to account for important structural conditions that transformed the diplomatic relationship. Contrary to the claim that 'trustworthiness belong[s] to the individual and interpersonal level,' this paper suggests that investigations of diplomatic transformation through trust-building must include both international and societal components and examines the issues that must be considered to build a larger theory of state trust.

INTRODUCTION

In the 2012 Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, Professor Nicholas Wheeler argued that the interpersonal trust built between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev played a key role in ending of the Cold War. This understanding on the role of trust in the international system, focusing on the personal characteristics of or relations between leaders, has been explored by several authors focusing on either the emotional or psychological nature of trust. Within this literature, positive diplomatic transformation is fundamentally tied into the ability of leaders to either signal to or empathize with the other.

The question that frames this paper is whether the individual and inter-personal is the best level to understand diplomatic transformation? Should we consider the determination of trustworthiness or the construction of trusting relationships as being a property of the individuals who make decisions on behalf of the state? Alternatively, should we conceptualize states as actors within the international system with a
capacity for the determination of trustworthiness or the construction of trusting relationships unto themselves?

This paper takes the second course arguing that despite the claims of several authors, this individualistic understanding of trust that focusses on the characteristics and interpersonal relationships of leaders is reasonably limited in what it can explain. Instead, to understand how diplomatic transformations take place, we need to take these relationships as potential, though not even necessary, starting point that is inexorably tied to larger social processes of trust.

This levels-of-analysis problem that this debate reflects is certainly not a new in international relations. However, the purpose of this paper is to show not only how this decision can have large theoretical effects on our ability to understand the function of trust between agents, but also affects our ability to theorize processes relating to international security. I hope to show that this levels-of-analysis decision affects the quality and possible scope of the theories on trust, be they either rationalist or social.

This paper will proceed in three parts. The first will examine both the advantages and limitations of using the level of the characteristics or interpersonal relationships of elites to understand the dynamics of trusting relationships in both rationalist and social definitions of trust by examining the recent works of Brian Rathbun and Nicholas Wheeler. Second, it will argue that these limitations can be overcome by theorizing trust between states, that states can, and should, be conceptualized as agents in the international system with the ability to either determine trustworthiness or enter into trusting relationships, using the rationalist works of Andrew Kydd and social works of Aaron Hoffman. Third, it will suggest some mechanisms through which we might be able to understand trust between states and not simply individual leaders.

**Trust as a Property of the Individual**

The two major ways that trust is tied to individual leaders within the literature comes from Brian Rathbun, who focusses on the psychological nature of generalized trust, and Nicholas Wheeler, who focusses on the importance of the interpersonal relationships between leaders. This section seeks to provide an overview of their contributions to diplomatic transformations.

Brian Rathbun’s research focus on the perspective of individual leaders as agents of trust comes out of his interest in the psychological differences between individuals that might lead some to be more trusting and some to be less trusting. This is tied into an seemingly rationalist perspective on trust, where trust is nothing more than ‘the belief that one will not be harmed when his or her fate is placed in the hand of others’ (Rathbun 2012, 10), but augmented by the presence of moralistic trust, where ‘trusters believe that intentions and behavior reflects the aims of the trustee, rather than the situation.’ (Rathbun 2012, 25) With this backdrop, Rathbun’s research focus rests on individuals who are a priori more likely to see the other side as potentially trustworthy. This is important because the ability for some individuals to be more trusting than others serves as a social lubricant to allow higher levels of cooperation within the international system than might otherwise be available (Rathbun 2012, 26).
Rathbun suggests that there are two general categories of statesperson. The first are those who are more likely to cooperate and will be more interested in constructing institutions with binding commitments, whom he calls generalized trusters. The second are those who are more likely not to cooperate and will want to keep unilateral options available when they decide to cooperate (Rathbun 2012, 6). Rathbun suggests that the differences between generalized trusters and distrusters arise from the political psychology of the individual politicians, arguing that liberals tend to be generalized trusters and conservatives tend to be generalized distrusters.

Rathbun argues that this differentiation has important effects at the beginning of relationships, where information about the other party is scarce or where the relationship is not been institutionalized. Absent leaders who are generalized trusters, Rathbun argues that it is difficult for states to take initial steps in forming any type of relationship that might make them vulnerable. Thus leadership plays a key role in the potential for diplomatic transformation. Where generalized trusters win the day in the domestic setting, states will be more likely to cooperate, and vice versa with generalized distrusters.

Rathbun’s focus on the individual level is necessary given his psychological model. It is the leaders who are either generalized trusters or generalized distrusters. So when the United States fails to join the League of Nations, Rathbun claims that generalized trusters like Wilson could not overcome the political opposition of the Republican generalized distrusters (Rathbun 2012, 57-109). The construction of the United Nations, alternatively, was successful because the Democrats/generalized trusters incorporated the arguments of the Republicans/generalized distrusters in advance (Rathbun 2012, 112) by incorporating a veto into the proposal (Rathbun 2012, 134-135), and through this concession won the day politically – allowing the United States to join.

Though Rathbun focusses exclusively on whether the United States chose to join multilateral organizations, his theory has direct consequences for thinking about the possibility of diplomatic transformation between states. The primary driving force for diplomatic transformation lies in the domestic contestations between political elites – where generalized trusters, or liberals, are successful in domestic politics on both sides, the possibility of diplomatic transformation goes up significantly. However, where generalized distrusters, or conservatives, are successful in domestic politics on either or both sides, the likelihood of diplomatic transformation is low.

The other scholar to focus on the individual level in diplomatic transformation is Nicholas Wheeler. Whereas like Rathbun he focusses on the importance of individuals within governments in the achievement of diplomatic transformation, unlike Rathbun, who is merely interested in the propensity for individuals to see other agents as trustworthy, Wheeler incorporates social theory to ask whether the leaders can enter into a trusting relationship. He claims that ‘trust between policy-makers, and their counterparts in an adversary state, is critical to the kind of moves that can transform a conflict.’ (Wheeler 2013, 478)

1 Trusting relationships, according to Wheeler, are created through dialogue and empathy with...
the security problems of the other leader (Wheeler 2013, 478). Writing with Ken Booth, Wheeler argues that successful dialogues will enable both leaders to see each other as reliable, understand the other’s fear, accept their own vulnerability, and take a leap of trust that signals their benign intent and willingness to enter into a trusting relationship (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 2314-245). This leap of trust, or frame-breaking conciliatory move, is the primary means of entering into a trusting relationship for Wheeler, as it clearly communicates trustworthiness to the other actor in the hopes that this might be positively reciprocated – leading ultimately to a virtuous spiral of trust-building (Wheeler 2009b, 476-477).

Wheeler points to the importance of security sensibility and the leap of trust in diplomatic transformation in several case studies. In the Cold War tensions between Brazil and Argentina, “there is evidence that successive leaders were not only able to exercise such empathetic responsiveness to each other’s security concerns, but also used this knowledge to develop policies that signalled their mutual trustworthiness.” (Wheeler 2009a, 436) The relationship between Egypt and Israel were normalized through Anwar Sadat’s 1977 flight to Jerusalem and recognition of Israel’s right to exist (Booth and Wheeler 2008, 235). It was the development of interpersonal relationships between successive French and German politicians, particularly Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Charles de Gaulle, that built trust between the two countries after World War II (Keating and Wheeler 2014, 68-70). At the same time, Wheeler understands the risk in these ventures, as he points out in his article concerning the misplaced trust that Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee placed in Pakistani General Pervez Musharraf that led to the Kargil crisis (Wheeler 2010). Here the Vajpayee, through the symbolism of the Lahore Declaration and Memorandum of Understanding, “made a highly significant conciliatory move to signal trustworthiness” (Wheeler 2010, 320) that was then taken advantage of by Pakistani armed forces.

Wheeler’s favorite case study, however, suggests that the personal diplomacy between Reagan and Gorbachev was pivotal in the transformation of the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union (Wheeler and Considine Forthcoming, Wheeler 2013, 2009b, 475-476, 2009c, 17-18, 2008, 499-503, Booth and Wheeler 2008, 145-158). The argument is that both leaders ‘showed both the intention and capacity to enter into the counter-fear of their adversary, with spectacular results in terms of the transformation of East-West relations.” (Wheeler 2009a, 500) Key in this was Reagan’s ability to use security dilemma sensibility, particularly after the 1983 Abel Archer crisis, to understand that the Soviet leadership might be acting out of fear and not hostility (Wheeler 2009a, 500). This drove Reagan to want to clarify US intentions with the Soviet leadership. He found in Gorbachev a willing partner, who also shared Reagan’s security dilemma sensibility (Wheeler 2009a, 500-501). The result was series of arms negotiations, starting with Reykjavik and proceeding to the INF and START, which built trust and enabled the Cold War to come to a close. Because of this relationship, brought on by Reagan’s growing understanding of the mutual fear between the two states, Gorbachev could make several conciliatory and frame-breaking moves (Wheeler 2013, 481, 489).

In sum, Wheeler’s preference for the interpersonal relationships between state elites is reasonably thorough. However, he does not completely ignore other forces at play. Although trust belongs at the
individual and interpersonal level, these elite agents are special in that they claim to speak and act in the name of states, and are therein both enabled and constrained by structural factors such as their domestic systems, wider societal narratives, and favorable international conditions (Wheeler 2013, 480, 2009a, 441). He also mentions in that positive relations between leaders ‘spill-over’ into societies, such as in the case of Brazil-Argentina (Wheeler 2009a, 437) or Germany-France (Keating and Wheeler 2014, 68-70).

Despite these concessions, the process through which individual level trust on the level of leadership turns into a wider trust between states is unclear. We are thus left with a theoretical proposition that focusses primarily on the individual level, similar to Rathbun’s claim of the importance of generalized psychological trust. This focus results in some serious problems for explaining diplomatic transformation that will be examined in the next section.

PROBLEMS WITH TRUST AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The primary problem in explaining diplomatic transformation in both Rathbun and Wheeler is a lack of consideration over how the beliefs of leaders lead to outcomes on the state level. Rathbun gets around this by not analytically differentiating between the individual leaders and the states themselves. Instead, he uses both levels at the same time. So the relationship between the strategic trust between states and the generalized trust between individuals exists simultaneously without ever explaining how we can make this shift in the level of analysis (Rathbun 2011a, 244-245, 2011b, 4-8). This is perhaps best displayed in how the referent of trust by the leadership, be they generalized trusters or not, is never described as elites in other states, but other states as a whole. If the administration is filled with generalized trusters, then it does not seem to matter what the object of trust is, be it the leadership of the other state, or the other state itself as an entity. What matters is that the administration tends to trust or tends not to trust.3

Wheeler commits the same error, arguing that Gorbachev’s alleged trust in Reagan led the Soviet Union, as a state, to engage in costly signaling. So we are left with the question of how we have moved up a level of analysis since Gorbachev’s control over the entire state was clearly not total, and whether this method might favor particular types of totalitarian regimes where the absolute control of the state is relatively clear. While there is no doubt that having the leadership enter into a trusting relationship might facilitate cooperation on the state level, they are not the same thing.

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2 Rathbun is not the only trust scholar in international relations to do this. Deborah Larson, who is also interested in the psychological aspects of trust, flips back and forth between using states and leaders as referents, suggesting that she treats them as the same thing. For instance she claims that the, ‘U.S. and Soviet leaders passed up opportunities to cooperate’ (Larson 1997, 5) [emphasis mine] while arguing in general that, ‘States decide to trust based on their estimate of the other side’s intentions’ (Larson 1997, 21) [emphasis mine]

3 These weaknesses are further obscured by the case study selection process. All the cases Rathbun chooses involve the creation of international organizations where the participation or non-participation of the United States is essential to the failure (League of Nations) or success (United Nations/NATO) of the institution. The question of whether or not American domestic politics favored or disfavored the situation is therefore enhanced significantly.
This conflation of the state and leadership levels presents further difficulties. Wheeler, in maintaining his focus on the individual, further claims that ‘Gorbachev was careful to distinguish between his trust in Reagan and his confidence in the motives and intentions of the United States.’ (Wheeler 2013, 493) However, in making this claim Wheeler runs into a problem in the narrative he just created concerning the creation of a relationship between the two leaders and the Soviet Union engaging in costly signaling in 1987 and 1988 – and its importance to overall trust-building. Gorbachev was surely aware of the term limits facing US presidents, and therefore the surety of a new president in the near future. If trust was solely built between Reagan and Gorbachev, then why would Gorbachev make these politically dangerous moves knowing that a new president was just around the corner with no guarantee of having the same relationship? Diplomatic transformation through trust, if focused on a personal level, leaves us in a very unstable position, for if the trusting relationships between leaders are of key importance, then this factor will potentially change dramatically with changes in leadership.

These problems mirror more general concerns in international relations over theories that focus exclusively on the level of the leadership. As Robert Jervis argues, although leaders can be larger than life figures, and are at least written about in history as primary movers, whether this comes at the expense of environmental variables is a big question. We know that leaders are both socialized by their environments, and where they are not they are still constrained by both domestic and international forces and norms (Jervis 2013, 154-156). The necessity to examine the state as a whole and not just the individual leadership goes back to a seminal piece written in the 1960s by Arnold Wolfers, who argued that those who are interested in focusing on the minds-of-men approach seem to ‘assume that better understanding between peoples opens up the safest path to peace while ... peoples who know and understand each other perfectly may nevertheless become involved in war.’ (Wolfers 1962, 7) There are limits to personal empathy where real political differences exist. Even where there might be the possibility of diplomatic transformation, there are relatively large barriers for the effectiveness of private relationships since, ‘as long as men identify themselves with their nation and cling to such national possessions as sovereign independence, territorial integrity, and national security, the establishment of harmonious private relations across national borders will have little impact on the course of international political events and encounters.’ (Wolfers 1962, 8) While not completely dismissing the role that individuals might play, Wolfers concluded that only when there is a stress on examining the relationships of the state, and not simply individuals, can we understand politics in the international system (Wolfers 1962, 9).

In sum, trust theories that focus on the individual level either run into the problem of descending into a monodimensional focus on domestic politics like Rathbun or end up with a very transient and unstable vision of trust like Wheeler. What is needed is a sense of how trust can be socialized into state apparatus, and even the state as a whole itself, and thus trusting relationships are not driven by the whims of particular leaders.

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4In fact, in the very next sentence, Wheeler notes that Gorbachev’s ‘policy of cooperation had to be set against the risks and costs of the alternative path of confronting the United States’ (Wheeler 2013, 493), which seems to radically reduce the story about trust in favor of Gorbachev taking the best possible option given his strategic position.
THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST ON A STATE LEVEL

Given the issues with individual-level trust, I argue that theorizing state level trust is the fundamental goal for trust research on the international level. Partially this is due to normative considerations, since trust between states automatically points to a much more stable foundation for the defraying of global security concerns that trust simply between individual leaders. Though I support examining this through a social theory of trust, it is important to point out that even state-level rational theories of trust make advances that solve some of these problems. To demonstrate this, I will take the archetypical rational scholar of trust, Andrew Kydd.

Kydd explicitly takes states as the primary unit of analysis, and operates in a standard international relations mode by assuming that the international level is characterized by a state of anarchy that is fundamentally different from domestic systems (Kydd 2005, 12). The fundamental problem of trust for Kydd is whether states will be able to identify other states that are trustworthy so that they can cooperate without fear of defection. Trustworthy states are defined as those with Assurance Game preferences, whose those that are untrustworthy have Prisoners Dilemma preferences. This separation is achieved through repeated interaction in a Bayesian framework – states slowly get a better idea of the type of the other through iterated learning.

However, this is complicated by two factors: general uncertainty and the role of external factors in identifying the other state’s type. Because of the condition of uncertainty, Kydd defines the level of trust as the probability that one actor believes the other to have Assurance Game preferences. Trust is only possible where this level of trust exceeds a minimum level for each party (Kydd 2005, 9).

What is important about Kydd’s contribution is that this process is affected not only by the internal construction of state preferences, like found in Rathbun, but also by external conditions. States might find themselves in an external environment that itself inhibits trust, or what Kydd calls a noncooperative equilibrium. These situations are crucial in Kydd’s theory, because not only does the presence of a noncooperative equilibrium ensure that both states will not cooperate, but it also means that it is impossible for each to identify the other’s type since all actors act in a similar manner. Alternatively, in a separating equilibrium, the external conditions will allow Assurance Game actors to cooperate if they can identify each other’s type through iterative learning (Kydd 2005, 42).

By starting with state actors in the international system, Kydd has provided a more complete theory of how states cooperate that either Rathbun or Wheeler. This it because the theory not only takes into consideration the levels of trust of both actors, but also how the international environment might inhibit trust and, consequently, the possibility of trustworthy states from finding each other. Put most starkly, the only contribution that Rathbun makes to an otherwise reasonably complete theory of Kydd is that he

5 Unlike the Prisoner’s Dilemma, where the optimum strategy for both sides is to defect, in the Assurance Game, the optimum strategy is to cooperate if the other side is likely to cooperate, but to otherwise defect. (Kydd 2005, 7-8).

6 An example of a cooperative equilibrium might be found in situations where the costs of conflict are high and the advantage of first strikes low. This structural condition means that there will be a low minimum threshold of trust necessary for cooperation (Kydd 2005, 41).
explains why states might have Assurance Game or Prisoners Dilemma preferences in the first place. States where generalized trusters prevail in domestic politics will tend to have Assurance Game preferences and vice versa. So we can see already how understanding the state level provides a fuller explanation of the potential for diplomatic transformation, even from a purely rationalist perspective.

If we move to a social theory of trust, we need to consider whether the state can be considered an actor in the first place. If states can be considered actors, then what type of actor are they, and how might the actoriness of the state relate to the actoriness of the humans within the state. Conceptualizing the agency of the state is not completely straightforward. Though it is clear that the state has social effects, at the end of the day individual actors are ontologically primary since, 'nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done.' (Bhaskar, 174)

The idea that states act as collective agents is phenomenologically suggested by international politics itself. When we say that states fear domination by other states and this leads to a security dilemma, what is the object that fears? The fear of nuclear annihilation is not simply felt by the leadership or the government bureaucracy alone, but also by the population of those people in the state, who know that they will be targeted by the fact that they are citizens of the state should there be a nuclear war. If states fear another state, the actual experience of the fear is done by individuals, but these experiences are made possible by the fact of the state itself (Wendt 2004, 313-314). What conceptually works for an emotional belief like fear likely also works for trust, but is it possible to consider this outside of a phenomenological approach?

Wendt suggests that states cannot be reduced to their governments for two reasons. First, states have a collective dimension that “causes macro-level regularities among their elements (governments) over space and time.” (Wendt 1999, 217) States are social systems that exist on more than just the micro level, or the desires and beliefs of individuals. If they were not, then states could be reduced to beliefs of the individuals within the government. Instead, the reproduction of structures of collective knowledge within the state leads to certain macro-level regularities. Secondly, there is no way to make sense of government action outside of the structure of states that constitute their meaning (Wendt 1999, 217). Wendt gives the following example illustrating the micro- and macro-structures involved:

Bill Clinton’s belief that he is the President, for example, only has the content that it does as long as other members of his administration (and society) recognize this, and the common knowledge of his administration is in turn constituted as the 'US government' by the structure of collective knowledge which defines the US state. A group of individuals only becomes a government, in other words, in virtue of the state which it instantiates. (Wendt 1999, 218)

But how can we understand these macro-regularities? One way is to conceptualize states as particular organisms or objects that have some type of collective consciousness, or a common subjective experience. John Searle, for instance, argues that all social facts involve collective intentions, and that collective intentional behavior ‘is a primitive phenomenon that cannot be analysed as just the summation of the
individual intentional behaviour' (Searle 1990, 401). Wendt alternatively suggests that states have collective cognition. Although there is one person or a group of people ultimately in charge of the state, they do not know everything the state as a collective knows. States themselves are characterized by a massive division of labor that allows them to operate as a single cognitive system. In any state practice, there is no one who knows about all of the tasks necessary to accomplish it, and yet states manage to do so. These tasks are impossible without thinking about the individuals doing them, but at the same time, are not reducible to the individuals themselves (Wendt 2004, 304).

In addition to thinking about how states can be actors who trust unto themselves, we also need to consider whether or not it makes sense to be able to trust other states as a whole. This issue is also taken up in trust research in those who see trust as solely a phenomenon that can occur between two or more human beings, which is suggested by the work of Rathbun and Wheeler, and those who do not. For instance, if we look to the work of Niklas Luhmann, he argues that trust works because we routinely take the objective reality in the world and cognitively create a subjective symbolic complex that is less complex than the reality itself. Trust, according to Luhmann, rests on a particular type of illusion where we take a world in which there is not enough information to trust, select certain data from it, and overdraw on this information in our subjective symbolic complex (Luhmann 1979, 32). Trust, as such, is not strictly rational but always ‘extrapolates from the available evidence.’ (Luhmann 1979, 26)

If this is a good model for how trust works, thinking about trust as the creation of a symbolic complex that overdraws on reality, then it has implications for the potential to put trust in other states. Luhmann argues that the symbolic complexes do not need to be created from other individuals – trust is available to abstract complexes, so long as there is a concrete reference to an object instead of only knowledge based on experience (Luhmann 1979, 27). Objects or social arrangements, in this case, states become symbol complexes in which actors can put trust (Luhmann 1979, 28).

The manifestation of how a social theory of trust between states can work is through a particular reading of the work of Aaron Hoffman. Hoffman, similarly to Wheeler, focusses on a particular manifestation of trust that he calls a trusting relationship (Hoffman 2002, 377). He specifically defines trusting relationships as occurring ‘when leaders enact policies that delegate control over their states’ interests based on the belief that their counterparts are trustworthy.’ (Hoffman 2002, 377) While this incorporates the agency of the leadership, Hoffman continuously characterizes the empirical trusting relationships he discusses as being between states, and not the leadership themselves (Hoffman 2002, 379, 380, 381, 385).

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7 For instance, both money and war are social exercises that require the assent of many participants to achieve a common goal. These corporate intentions arise from the fact that the members see themselves as part of a hierarchical and institutionalised group with shared ends. These group intentions are constructed by the structured interaction of the individuals within the group, and are irreducible to agency of the individuals put together (Wendt 2004, 297).

8 Hoffman does not openly discuss how he theorises the state and its relationship to human agency on the elite level, but I argue that his theory is amenable to this interpretation/modification.

9 Like other scholars, this is not always clear. For instance, Hoffman claims that ‘trusting interstate relationships emerge when leaders believe their counterparts are trustworthy and, based on this perception, enact policies that
Hoffman is interested in how we can identify trusting relationships between states. His first suggestion is to ‘identify policies that grant other states discretion over outcomes previously controlled by the first,’ that can be linked to the fact that the ‘leaders responsible for enacting such policies did so at least in part because they believed that their counterparts were trustworthy.’ This leads the state as an actor to enact policies that transfers the capacity to determine political outcomes to others (Hoffman 2002, 385, 2006, 26). Hoffman also suggests that a voluntary acceptance of vulnerability can be identified by examining the types of agreements that states sign up to. If states choose oversight mechanisms that permit more leeway in action on the part of both states, this lends evidence to a trusting relationship. (Hoffman 2002, 388, 2006, 28-32). Additionally, the rules states construct in written agreements can also be used as an indication of a trusting relationship. Framework-oriented agreements, in which the rules only specify constitutive rules such as 'basic structure, institutional forms, procedures and rights,' are more indicative of trusting relationships than statute-oriented agreements, which are dominated by specific codes. Like the oversight mechanisms, in one the opportunity for freedom in decision-making is greater, suggesting the presence of a trusting relationship over the alternative (Hoffman 2002, 391, 2006, 34-36). In general, Hoffman argues that the best way to use these three measures is as part of a multi-measure strategy, looking for convergence.

By explicitly making a connection between the human agents of the state and the state itself as a social phenomenon, Hoffman manages to keep the focus of agency on the individual, as Wheeler does, but at the same time notes that the relationships themselves can only be properly conceptualized as being between states. In doing so, he creates a much more stable theory of how trusting relationships come about, since if states as social structures are the ones who trust, then the socialization that occurs on the state level can act as a break on new agents who might want to overturn the relationship.

TOWARDS A SOCIAL THEORY OF DIPLOMATIC TRANSFORMATION

Having considered the possibility of states being the collective subjects of a trusting relationship, we need to consider by what mechanisms this might come about. What factors might be important in the development of a trusting relationship between states? There are two aspects that I want to suggest require further consideration. First is the relationship, if any, between identity and trust, and second is the potential of trust to exist at various levels within the state, and what effects this might have on conceptualizing trust on the part of the state as a whole.

make their states vulnerable to the actions of their counterparts,’ (Hoffman 2002, 385) which is a very individualistic take on trust, but in the footnote attached to this sentence claims ‘In other words, trusting interstate relationships emerge when potential trustor states entrust their interests to potential trustee states,’ (Hoffman 2002, 396) which suggests the exact opposite. This could be considered a tension within Hoffman’s work, which is otherwise characterised by a clear preference for describing trusting relationships as being between the states themselves. However, what might be considered a tension, if considered in the light of agents working within a larger social structure that itself has causal effects, might be a solution. The only possible agents in Hoffman’s scenario are human actors, as they are unequivocally endowed with agency. However, since they act within the framework of their state and the society of states, the proper place for the trusting relationship to exist is between states themselves if we expect change to occur on this level.

10 (Hoffman 2002, 385)
Considering the relationship between trust and identity, if we look to the domestic level, the phenomenon of nationalism constructs the imaginary community that offers a sense of internal cohesiveness through emotional or sentimental attachment to the idea of the nation (Anderson 2006). This explains, for instance, why there are no security problems between Leeds and Bradford as political units. The construction of an British identity that is socially reproduced through national symbolism, learned behavior, and formal education, decreases the security problems between those who are recognized as British (Billig 1995). However, is a similar global or regional identity needed internationally for similar levels of trust? Is it necessary that potential global or regional identities must compete and replace the state identity to have the same social trust? Much of the existing literature deals with the relationship between identity and trust, and attempts to theorize how the two are linked in order to understand how collective units can trust each other.

From a rationalist perspective, we can consider the existing work on security communities by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett. Despite being within the constructivist school, Adler and Barnett have a rationalist definition of trust as being ‘dependent on the assessment that another actor will behave in ways that are consistent with normative expectations.’ (Adler and Barnett 1998, 46) Adler and Barnett argue that the relationship between trust and identity within a security community is both reciprocal and reinforcing, as ‘the development of trust can strengthen mutual identification, and there is a general tendency to trust on the basis of mutual identification.’ (Adler and Barnett 1988, 45) However, they argue that trust, or the expectation that the other will behave in expected ways, is necessary before a mutual identity can develop. So without this relative certainty about future conduct, it is relatively unlikely that states will enter into a positive spiral of trust and identity.

From a social perspective, Jonathan Mercer comes to a completely different conclusion. He draws on Social Identity Theory to argue that the identity of an individual creates an emotion that creates trust. This emotional connection is useful for states, as it can then be used to solve collective action problems where there is a perception that interests are mutual, even to the point that individuals will be willing to sacrifice their particular interests for the group interests. However, Mercer also notes that the creation of the in-group trust based on identity necessitates a differentiation between in-group and out-group. Although he does recognize that in-group trust does not automatically create out-group distrust, it does involve a differentiation in the levels of trust between the two (Mercer 2005).

Thus, depending on whether you have a rationalist or social definition of trust, there is a stress on either the formation of an identity or the formation of trust as the first mover into a trusting relationship. This could mean one of two things. Either one of these cases is empirically stronger, in which case we must abandon one over the other, or both of these cases are correct because they actually deal with independent phenomena – the first a strict rational choice decision, and the second the creation of a social structure – and thus they both provide some useful theoretical perspective.

The second question to consider is the relationship between the state, the leadership, the government and the society as a whole. In previous work Wheeler and I differentiated between elite-level trust and society-level trust. We suggested that society-level trust, or embedded trust, is necessary to stabilize any breakthrough in the relationship between the elites. However, little time was given to theorizing the
importance of this level of trust, studying it empirically, or examining the relationship between the elite-level and the society-level trust. The importance of trusting relationships among leaders might not be that they can be formed, but how their formations might be translated into trusting relationships among their respective political communities. This can have important consequences, since elites have some ability to set the terms of discourse and since shifts in relationships between states, particularly from enemies to allies, can be difficult if the public does not give up on its hatred quickly. There is a role to be played in these situations for leaders, to embed the newfound trust between the states in the wider public. Otherwise, there would be little chance that states like Germany and Japan could have transformed themselves from dire enemies to pillars of the Western security system. Wolfers notes that such a change in alignment ‘did not depend on any prior change of public sentiment but did much to hasten such change,’ (Wolfers 1962, 32) pointing to some type of top-down process.

However, we can also conceptualize the growth and diminution of trust without the role of state elites. Elites are not the only actors that might have discursive power over the image of a particular identity. Other substate actors of many kinds no doubt play a large role. Though it is unlikely that any relationship between states will become trusting absent the participation of elites in the process, to ignore these other factors is to ignore factors pertinent to understanding the development of a trusting relationship. Elite leaders may have the will to forge trusting relationships, but unless there is sufficient support for this domestically, through the media, NGOs, and other local politicians and pundits, then there is little hope for elite agency. Likewise, we need to consider the way in which the elites themselves might be socialized by these same factors, which might represent the initial cause of the development of a trusting relationship, or a bottom-up approach. There is no doubt that political elites must play a role in the construction of a trusting relationship, but to focus on them alone is to seriously misrepresent the actual issues at play.

To further complicate matters, in his discussion of enmity and amity between states, Wolfers notes that there does not necessarily have to be a link between the amity between governments and the amity between the people. For instance, though at the time of writing, 1962, there was little amity between the average American and Blacks, there were still amicable relations between the United States and the various states in Africa. Similarly, despite a lack of enmity between most Americans and the Chinese, Sino-US relations were not amicable (Wolfers 1962, 25-26). Wolfers claimed that most states, most of the time, maintain either amicable or inimical relations independent of the popular sentiments, be they positive or negative (Wolfers 1962, 34), which questions the need for embedded trust in any conceptualization of trust between states.

So if we are to theorize trust between states, there are a number of issues to consider. The relationship between trust and identity, how the internal dynamics of the trusting relationship function, and how various levels – the leadership, the bureaucracy, the media and other NGOs, and finally the public, interact in order, within the structural framework of the state, to lead states to trust one another.
CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to defend the necessity to conceptualize the state as the referent of trust in the international system against the idea that only interpersonal contact by leadership figures can generate a trusting relationship. I have done this through a number of steps. First, I showed the limitations of conceptualizing a trusting relationship as existing solely between the leadership, and particularly how it is limited in its empirical exposition and creates an unstable version of trust that denies emancipatory change in the international political system. Second, I examined how existing theories on the state as an actor can be applied to a trusting relationship. Finally, I reviewed some of the theoretical debates over what factors might be important in conceiving how trust between social groups might be conceptualized, and raised the question, if we are to accept that trust can exist between states, then what are the internal dynamics shaping these decisions? While I not (yet) have a conclusion for this last question, the purpose of this paper is to show why it is that we need to consider this direction of research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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