* **[Trust in modern societies](https://nation.com.pk/16-Jan-2020/trust-in-modern-societies" \t "_new)**

Atle Hetland January 16, 2020

Modern societies and modern people, living either in tradition societies, or more often, in melting pots, as immigrants, or recipients of immigrants, and in societies under change, as per capitalism’s rules, have different challenges than before. People have to find new moral and existential foundations. Many times, religion plays a less important role than before in setting the rules and standards.

Today, societies are more often multi-religious and multi-cultural and diverse in so many other ways. The term melting-pot can be used about many places, not only with reference to the big cities in USA when immigrants populated the New World. Somehow, they made it, not only for a prosperous life, but also in finding meaning and purpose, with religion playing a more important role than elsewhere in the West. In our time, in America and more so in Europe and elsewhere, there is need for finding new social cohesion and glue between people and groups, within nations and between nations. Trust becomes less.

We also have to re-invent international institutions and organizations, and establish new control bodies and standards for the multinational companies and other aspects of capitalism, not relying on self-regulation and social responsibility. Today, we have mainly left the post-colonial era, with development aid and other systems trying to assist the developing countries and keep them tied to the West. The United Nations, including the World Bank and IMF, form important parts of this world order, giving USA, not only Europe, a greater place than before WWII. Although we have left the Cold War era, NATO, which was created after WWII, is still by far the West’s and the world’s largest military organization, and it has trice undertaken operations outside its own countries’ territories, notably in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, going beyond its direct mandate of defence.

The mentioned roles of the international organizations lead to less trust in these organizations by people in most countries, even in those countries which currently benefit from the West’s upper hand. Hence, there is a trust deficit in the international framework in most societies. People realize that the system is undemocratic and morally and intellectually flawed. The leaders in the West, and people in those countries and other countries, may prefer the current system to a new system where other powers, indeed China and others, gain more power. In any case, all this contributes to people becoming more cynical about democracy and moral ideals, because the international system is not right.

The superstructure of a society is essential. Also, the governmental institutions and organizations, the non-governmental organizations that support as well as question power, and the intergovernmental and international organizations are also important. Under them are religions, ideology and moral standards. Yet, in everyday life, in our local communities, it is the cultures and traditions which have developed over generations that count, yes, less than the higher-up superstructure. The local communities are the foundations of society and they evaluate the modern and the old ways, deciding what to be for and what to be against. To them the national and international superstructure often becomes a bit too abstract and distant. They, or I should say we, are the most important in developing trust or distrust in the way the society goes. It is at these levels that the real debates take place. Politicians, civil servants and others exercising power, must not forget to listen to people at these levels.

Today, when unruly and populist groups and parties develop, especially in Europe, the old, established political parties must ask themselves if they have failed and not been able to modernise, and the see that their old voters and sympathisers, even own members, support the populists or go to other parties. Especially the social democratic parties are losing support, although it is a fact that they developed the welfare states in the West, fighting for gender equality, improved conditions for workers, and a broadened democracy.

Trust in political parties and multiple other organizations, yes, certainly in the government in power, is essential in a modern society. Also, trust in the civil service is essential. It must be politically neutral, fair, competent and knowledgeable, and there must be little corruption. In many countries today, there is a trust-deficit in the civil service. Many feel it mainly supports status quo and the interests of the middle and upper classes, and right-wing opinions.

In my home country Norway, there was recently a major scandal as regards the social sector, notably its main all-mighty body Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), which is entrusted one-third of the Norwegian government budget. NAV’s payment of benefits to clients had not been paid out as they should have been. The law had been wrongly interpreted for a number of years by NAV and even the courts. Tens of thousands of clients who visited or stayed in other European countries, which they had full right to do while receiving allowances, had been asked to pay back money they had received; some were charged with fraud and even sentenced to prison terms. The serious mistake by the civil service was discovered last autumn, although many junior civil servants in NAV had questioned the practice for years, but not been listened to by their bosses.

Now, people ask how this could indeed happen. A general explanation is that politicians and the civil service are worried about the high social services budget in the country and a general political signal to NAV has been to limit payments and be less generous. Sadly, the clients who have suffered are the most vulnerable and poorest among the otherwise very wealthy Norwegians, where the annual GDP per capita is about USD 75,000. The state, the politicians, NAV and other civil servants all regret and apologize for what has happened and NAV has begun paying back to the clients what was rightly theirs. They have begun realizing that it has led to a major government-people trust-deficit in society. Prime Minister Erna Solberg spoke about it in her New Year’s speech, saying she realized how serious it is, and that it will take time to rebuild trust, not only as regards social services, but in the government and beyond. But people ask whether the responsible in NAV and the huge civil service sector in the European welfare state, and others in powerful posts, have really understood the seriousness of the case. They must remember that the government sector is there to serve ordinary people, not (only) the establishment and the powerful. It is therefore a much wider issue than it seems at first glance.

From Karl Marx and Max Weber, up to social scientists, and politicians from left to right, in the last generations, many thoughts have come; there is a rich literature to be studied, so we all have to Google and find books and article that can help us learn about the issues. I hope we, in a time when the world has become so technocratic and IT based, and when civil servants even in the ‘sympathetic Scandinavian welfare states’, will revisit and question the roles of government and civil service. Many things have become impenetrable for ordinary people. Simple transparency is needed to rebuild trust in the modern societies, which in many ways have gone astray, without solid moral foundations. I have just mentioned a few aspects in today’s article, and would like to add more in future articles.