



On the negative social effects of exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition

Rodrigo Gonzalez-Fernandez (rodgonza@uchile.cl) Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Universidad de Chile (Santiago, Chile) <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9693-0541>

Abstract

In view of Kramer's theory about paranoid cognition, this paper examines how exaggerated distrust and such cognition produce important negative effects upon social reality. The first section deals with Searle's theory of social reality, and how it is basically explained in terms of one world of physical particles and groups of intentional agents performing "we" actions. The aim of this section is to show that the "we" actions of collective intentionality allow fundamental social practices, namely, those related to institutions. Looking at trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality, the second section examines in what sense these three elements form the triad of human civilization. Finally, the last section analyses which negative effects exaggerated distrust and Kramer's paranoid cognition have upon the Searlean social reality: both, which break off cooperative relations and solemn pacts, end up disrupting the triad.

Keywords: trust, distrust, cooperation, collective intentionality, paranoid cognition.

Introduction

The most well-known quote attributed to Socrates, "I know that I know nothing" is as old as it's controversial. Given the meaning of this sentence, it's worth asking whether Socrates is a philosopher of distrust. Although the answer to the question should be clear, it isn't. He doesn't say exactly that, but "[...] I do not think I know what I do not know," according to Plato (in *Apology* and *Meno*). For Socrates, then, it's crucial that one shouldn't believe that we think we know when we don't. Despite the different meanings of the two sentences, Socrates' motto is indeed famous and very influential, especially in relation to ignorance, and whether distrust can be justified sometimes. Moreover, it can also be linked to the relation of trust and social reality (i.e., social systems), one of the issues I address in the forthcoming sections of this paper.

Indeed, in social reality we trust other intentional agents, to the point of cooperating with them in forms of collective intentionality, that is, of collective relations that are driven by "we" actions. Such actions, I contend here, abide by solemn pacts and tacit promises, insofar as they suppose cooperation. For example, we play chess, we play football, we play some instruments in an orchestra, we attend classes, we teach the students, just to mention a few instances in which intentional agents develop cooperative relations which abide by solemn pacts and (tacit) promises. Whether people trust when they cooperate, and especially the sense in which collective



intentionality involves the “we” actions, has drawn the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers. Given this issue, the research question that I address in this paper is whether exaggerated distrust, which is the essence of Kramer’s paranoid cognition ([Paranoid cognition in social systems](#)), may break off solemn pacts and (tacit) promises. As I conclude, this negative effect ends up disrupting the triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides the key points of Searle’s theory of social reality, especially regarding how the “we” actions, which require a minimum degree of trust, leads to the creation of institutions. Then, the second section deals with what I call the “triad” of civilization in Searlean terms: trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality. Finally, the last section examines how the “we” actions can be dramatically disrupted by forms of exaggerated distrust, and especially of the occurrence of paranoid cognition. For example, the excess of rationalistic individualism (i.e., the mafioso’s behaviour) doesn’t only trigger *paranoid cognition*; additionally, it disrupts the triad of civilization: trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality.

1. Searle’s social reality: from one world of physical particles to intentional agents

In this section, I briefly sketch Searle’s theory of social reality. The story is well-known, but for clarity, it’s better to review the key points of Searle’s theory so that the reader understands: i) Why institutions are the product of collective intentionality in social reality; ii) Why cooperative relations such as “we” actions require a minimum degree of trust. Thus, points i) and ii) are crucial for explaining in what sense collective intentionality leads to institutions, which in turn summarize the diverse social practices that depend upon solemn pacts and (tacit) promises. I complete the normative dimension of social reality by including a key attitude of intentional agents: trust.

In [The construction of social reality](#) and [Making the social world](#), Searle proposes a theory that examines the structure of human civilization, especially regarding its creation and maintenance. To further this goal, he systematizes other previous theories such as the Speech Acts theory, the Intentionality theory and the relation of mind, language, and society. By doing so, he not only adopts a synthesis method to clarify how such categories are related and intertwined. In addition, he prepares the ground for what he calls the *Philosophy of Society*, which concerns an interdisciplinary study on the structure of human civilization.

The synthesis method aims to deal with an issue: certain philosophical topics have become perennial problems in philosophy, such as the existence of the material world, direct perception, the stability of reference, truth, and causality. As all of them fuel endless theoretical debates, Searle argues that the perennial philosophical problems require a more pragmatic approach: they can be tackled by certain *default* positions, that is, by some presupposed positions that enable thought and action (Searle. [Mind, language and society](#)). For example, humans automatically presuppose the existence of the material world, direct access to perception, the existence of stable reference, the existence of truth, and the existence of causality. This is even more relevant in action: when human beings act, they simply presuppose such categories. No action would exist if actions *only* depended upon theory. Consequently, the *default* positions are essential for the synthesis method, and how Searle subsequently addresses the structure of civilization, which supposes those default positions.

Despite its complexity, Searle’s theory can be briefly sketched. Firstly, we live in one world: the world of physical particles and systems of such particles. Secondly, some systems of physical



particles have evolved, developing intentionality and consciousness, that is, some systems, which are aware of the environment, have intentional mental states *about* certain objects. This aboutness also allows intentional agents to represent roles and practices. Thirdly, the intentional and conscious mental states of humans enable collective intentionality, i.e., “we” actions. Fourthly, via collective intentionality humans create status functions, which are necessary to ascribe functions to objects, persons, events, processes, and the like. Functions are represented, as words represent objects in language. Thus, objects aren’t limited by their physical properties when it comes to their status functions. For example, a crown made of gold serves to *represent* a monarchy independently of its material. In fact, the crown as a physical object *counts* as the symbol of monarchy in the United Kingdom.

Even though humans live in a world of physical particles, they build institutions whose main role is to enable the existence of institutional facts. These are intentionality-dependent facts, unlike the brute facts that exist in nature independently of human minds (Searle. [The construction of social reality](#)). For example, a brute fact is that the movement of tectonic plates causes earthquakes, which would exist even if no human lived on Earth. In turn, a monarchy, as an institution, exists because certain intentional agents have agreed that such an institution exists. They even recognize the queen as the monarch of the kingdom (I return to the problem of recognition below) by *counting* her as the queen. Note that this Searlean distinction between brute and institutional facts doesn’t involve dualism: the social reality requires imagination and doesn’t constitute a separate world. As a result, humans create the social reality, but this creation as well as its maintenance, doesn’t entail two different worlds. Again, the only world is the world of physical particles.

The Searlean formula “X counts as Y in C” is then essential to understand human civilization (Searle. [Social ontology](#), Searle. [Making the social world](#)). Interestingly, the crown represents an institution that wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for the accords and pacts that have some intentional agents have made. In fact, the subjects who are governed by the queen recognize the crown as an object that has a status function: it represents the power of the monarchy qua institution. Importantly, status functions give rise to status indicators (Searle. [The construction of social reality](#)), i.e., representations of the functions associated with institutions, which act like words. For example, like a crown, a uniform, a badge, and a wedding ring, they are all status indicators that represent certain institutions. In these cases, the institutions are the firemen, the police, and marriage. Incidentally, humans recognize the status indicators automatically in the sense that they get used to recognizing the represented institutions without consciously thinking about them.

Now, institutions are the core of human civilization: they enable humans to develop collective “we” actions that wouldn’t exist otherwise. Moreover, such actions are related to human practices in civilization, all of which involve constitutive rules, that is, rules that prescribe institutional actions, and which can be followed automatically (Searle. [The construction of social reality](#), Searle. [Making the social world](#)) (these constitutive rules are directly involved in the normative dimension of Searle’s view about human civilization). Such practices are fundamental for Bourdieu’s *habitus* ([The logic of practice](#)), which certainly resembles Searle’s background of intentional *automatic* abilities (Searle. [Intentionality](#), Searle. [The construction of social reality](#)). The *habitus* are those practices related to institutions. Weren’t for the constitutive rules of money, there’d be no economic *habitus* for this institution; rather, there would only be pieces of paper and chunks of metal. Neither economic institutions nor economic practices would then exist.



Constitutive rules guide collective human practices. If we stripped money off the constitutive rules, paper and metal would only exist. However, money's an institution that's been created by humans to *summarize* certain economic fundamental "we" practices. These are selling, buying, renting, and the like. Consequently, institutions imply collective practices, which on occasions can be enacted automatically like *default positions*. For example, John doesn't need to consciously think that a 5 pounds note enables him to buy candy. He just uses the note to purchase candy, without consciously thinking what he's doing. On the other hand, the kiosk owner automatically receives the note without thinking about the economic transaction that is taking place. Several presuppositions are present in this example, which act like *default positions*.

Note that these "we" automatic actions, which are presupposed, show the natural way things are in society. Thus, certain constitutive rules are internalized by groups of intentional agents, who then perform some "we" actions in function of how things are supposed to be in the social reality. The result is essential to maintain civilization: the "we" actions involve *cooperation*, and this attitude requires a minimum degree of trust amongst the intentional agents. That is, intentional agents usually trust each other when their actions depend upon constitutive rules. These get automatized, like the *habitus* and the abovementioned default positions.

Interestingly, intentional agents usually presuppose the interaction of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality. However, the collective practices of "we" actions finally involve a triad. The purpose of the second section is to analyse this triad, and how it elucidates the way things are supposed to be in human civilization.

2. The triad of civilization: collective intentionality, cooperation, and trust

One of the marvels of civilization is that *we* live together, owing to several practices related to structural institutions, which require solemn pacts and (tacit) promises amongst intentional agents. Again, if some subjects are governed by a queen, they should *recognize* her power and *cooperate* with her. In fact, the subjects act together recognizing their status as well as the queen's status as a monarch. For this reason, monarchies and money are institutions that enable human *collective* practices, or the "we" actions that I stressed in section 1.

Such practices and actions, in turn, give rise to deontic powers (Searle. [Making the social world](#)), either positive, when they enable people to do things, or negative, when they forbid certain actions. For example, money gives the right to purchase goods according to the value of coins and notes. Likewise, a fence indicates the existence of property; thus, trespassing isn't allowed to strangers. Note that cooperation goes in both directions when deontic powers are implemented: while some positive deontic powers allow intentional agents to do things along with other intentional agents, negative deontic powers usually forbid some intentional agents to do certain actions; as a result, these agents restrain to do things with other intentional agents.

Oddly enough, the Searlean theory of civilization doesn't mention trust, even though this attitude is essential for recognizing and respecting the structural institutions that stem from the cooperative "we" actions. When cooperation amongst intentional agents does exist, collective intentionality also exists. In particular, collective intentionality exists, despite the fact that it does so in individual minds that cooperate, an important feature of the status functions, institutions and "we" actions.



Accordingly, collective intentionality is implemented by *groups* of intentional agents acting in virtue of their cooperation.

Although the plurality of certain plural pronouns (i.e., *we* play football) suggests the existence of a sort of supra-agent, only individual minds exist, according to Searle. This is explained by the fact that Searlean collective intentionality abides by *methodological individualism* (Searle. [Making the social world](#)), that is, the thesis according to which mental states exist in individual minds, even if some actions require the “we” plural form. In short, these “we” actions don’t imply a supra mind; rather, each member of a group of intentional agents has a “we perform X” in their minds. Methodological individualism implies that collective intentionality can’t be reduced to individual intentionality, even if there’s cooperation amongst intentional agents.

Take Searle’s example of Business School 1 and 2, which evince a notorious difference:

“BUSINESS SCHOOL CASE 1

Imagine a group of Harvard Business School graduates who were taught and come to believe Adam Smith’s theory of the invisible hand [...] After graduation day, each goes out in the world and try to benefit humanity by being as selfish as each of them possibly can and by trying to become as individually rich as they can [...]

BUSINESS SCHOOL CASE 2

There is a second possible case where we imagine they all get together on graduation day and make a solemn pact that they will go out and try to help humanity by becoming as rich as they can and by acting as selfishly as they can [...]

There is a tremendous difference in the two cases because *in the second case there is an obligation assumed by each individual member. In the first case, the individuals have no pact or promise to act in this way [...]* But *in the second case, there is a solemn promise made by each to all of the others*” (Searle 2010:47-48, my emphasis).

Despite the importance of cooperation in the second case, Searle disregards the role that trust may play in “we” actions that imply pacts and (tacit) promises. This is an important addendum to make in Searle’s theory, because in the second case all school members, besides having subscribed an obligation, trust each other as they believe the others will do their part or role as they’re supposed to do. Moreover, the obligation itself doesn’t guarantee that the members of the group will act as they’re supposed to. When *we* play football, each member of the team cooperates with the rest of the players, that is, each player expects that the other members of the team will do what they’re supposed to.

The solemn pact and promise are implicit, but it could also be explicit, as in the second case. Cooperation exists along with trust, either implicitly or explicitly. Imagine, now, a football team in which a “we” action takes place. For example, Ben plays the role of a goalkeeper in his football team. He may throw the ball to Rich, who is the left wing. If Rich gets the ball, and he centres it to Bill, the centre forward, Rich expects a goal from Bill. All of them have expectations, and with them they trust that the other members of the team will behave as they’re supposed to. These expectations may even become automatic, as it occurs with the *default* positions in action.



In Business School 1 and 2, all members have made a promise, but in addition to that, there is trust that the other graduates will behave as planned and accorded in the solemn pact. No cooperation will take place if the graduates didn't trust each other. Indeed, they'd merely behave from an individualistic point of view if there was no trust amongst them. What I intend to stress here, then, is that Searle pins down cooperation as essential for the making of solemn pacts and promises; nevertheless, he neglects the role of trust in the existence of cooperation, which is also essential when the "we" actions take place. For trust is essential for the expectations of each member of the group in relation to the other members of the group.

Note that competition, which is also a form of collective intentionality, doesn't exclude cooperation and trust. When two boxing adversaries compete in the roped squared ring, they act as they're supposed to, namely, by cooperating with the competition. However, they also trust each other as they both *tacitly* assume that the other won't do anything improper such as dancing, sitting, or chatting in the ring. Rather, both adversaries perform the "we" action by boxing with cooperation *and* trust. If not, there'd be no fair play. In fact, the very existence of fair play suggests that intentional agents trust and cooperate to do some sport, as in the case of the boxing adversaries. This explanation goes for all kind of sports: football, basketball, volleyball, boxing, and so on, all of which are supposed to have fair play. Therefore, cooperation and trust *usually* go in tandem in the context of institutions and sports (Tomasello. [Why we cooperate](#). Tomasello. [Becoming human](#)).

However, cooperation may exist without trust. For example, Giuseppe, the owner of a bakery, may give Toto, the mafioso, a bribery each month so that "protection" is provided. On the other hand, Mary, a friend of Joseph's, may trust him, but she may not cooperate with doing his homework. Mary, then, may trust Joseph without cooperating with him. These two examples are exceptions to the rule: in social reality cooperation is strengthened by trust, and trust leads to cooperative collective relations. Again, in Searle's explanation of the making and maintenance of civilization, cooperation usually involves trust amongst intentional agents, and trust encourages such cooperation.

Searle's neglect of trust is important, because this attitude makes possible that institutions are maintained in the background, which is essential for the identity of intentional agents. Specifically, trust enables these agents to count on the institutions, so the background starts becoming part of their historic identities. Think of the following situation in which Luigi and Laura get married. Given this institutional fact, they become spouses, with two new civil statuses that are essential for their identities. Indeed, Luigi and Laura cooperate and trust in their relation: each partner will probably behave as supposed to. Trust, then, not only goes along with cooperation; additionally, it automatizes the contact between intentional agents and institutions, allowing the former to develop their identities in a cultural context.

Although Searle doesn't mention trust in the maintenance of institutions, he does resort to how these are accepted and recognized by intentional agents. However, two crucial points are to be noted. On the one hand, power comes from collective intentionality, and not collective intentionality from power (especially, from physical brute force). On the other hand, neither institution acceptance nor structural institution recognition entails any approval whatsoever. Searle remarks these two points as follows: "It is tempting to think that such institutional structures as property and the state itself are maintained by the police and military power of the state, and the acceptance will be compelled where necessary. But in the United States, and in several other



democratic societies, it is the other way around. The armed might of the state depends on the acceptance of systems of constitutive rules, much more than conversely” (Searle 1995:90).

Incidentally, he clarifies further the relation between acceptance of institutions and the collective recognition implied thus: “As a general point, institutional structures require *collective recognition* by the participants in the institution in order to function, but particular transactions within the institution require cooperation of the sort that I have been describing. So the couple who are planning marriage accept the institution of marriage prior to actually getting married [...] I sometimes used the hybrid of ‘collective recognition and acceptance’, and I want to make it clear that it marks a continuum that goes all the way from enthusiastic endorsement to just going along with the structure” (Searle 2010:57).

Nevertheless, rather than institution acceptance, what seems to be more important is trust in the institutions, their relevance and competence, trust in their constitutive rules and, finally, the rationality and legitimacy of institutions, all of which are conditions for institutional trust.

Against this background, I contend that there’s an important triad in civilization, namely, trust, cooperation and, especially, collective intentionality. That is, collective intentionality goes along with cooperation, but no cooperation could possibly exist without a minimum degree of trust. Indeed, Luigi and Laura are supposed to trust each other if they intend to become spouses. However, what about distrust? As examined in the final section, Kramer’s paranoid cognition, which is a form of exaggerated distrust, disrupts the triad, affecting both the “we” actions and the cooperative relations that are implied.

3. How paranoid cognition disrupts the “we” actions (and cooperation)

Trust and distrust are two poles of attraction for philosophers and social scientists. Nevertheless, as McLeod emphasizes, “distrust has received surprisingly little attention from philosophers, although it has recently become a topic of serious concern for some of them” (McLeod 2020:1). As I’ll concentrate upon distrust in this final section, I proceed to characterize it as follows: it’s an attitude that hinders social interactions (Misztal. [Trust in modern societies](#)) and occurs even at the larger scale of non-dyadic trust (Alfano and Huijts. [Trust and distrust in institutions and governance](#)).

Distrust is a human, political, sociological, and philosophical phenomenon that may cause the loss of social capital. In addition, distrust may even represent a hindrance for the future life of intentional agents, especially when it boils down to their identity. However, what is relevant for this final section is that distrust, especially when it’s exaggerated, may cause the crisis of the Serlean structural institutions. As I argue here, intentional agents start disregarding such institutions due to the existence of exaggerated distrust, for example, with forms of paranoid cognition.

Despite the interest of philosophers and social scientists, the nature of distrust remains controversial. There is no consensus as to a general notion of distrust. Even so, McLeod pins down the following characteristics of distrust, all of which are attributed by D’Cruz ([Trust and distrust](#)).

Firstly, according to Hawley ([Trust, distrust and commitment](#)), Jones ([Trust as an affective attitude](#)) and Krishnamurthy ([White tyranny and the democratic value of distrust](#)), distrust isn’t the absence of trust, because in some situation it’s possible to neither trust nor distrust someone.



Secondly, although trust and distrust aren't exhaustive, they're exclusive. It isn't possible to trust and distrust someone at the same time (Ullmann-Margalit. [Trust, distrust, and in between](#)).

Thirdly, distrust doesn't always explain or justifies non-dependence (Hawley. [Trust, distrust and commitment](#)). Someone may decide not to trust a colleague because she's too busy, but not because one doesn't trust this person.

Fourthly, distrust has a normative face. If someone doesn't trust, they usually do so because they believe that the other person or institution has failed expectations, that is, it's unreasonable to trust; therefore, distrust sometimes is couched by normative reasons.

Fifthly, distrust is a form of non-dependance that implies avoidance or withdrawal, and thus action and cooperation aren't encouraged (D'Cruz. [Humble trust](#)).

Note that trust and distrust are important for living in community, especially in relation to the dependence and commitment of intentional agents in the context of social reality. For this reason, trust and distrust have effects on cooperation, either actual or future cooperation, and this explains why I believe that they should have been considered by Searle in his analysis. I contend that both attitudes are *usually* crucial for the creation and maintenance of structural institutions. However, what are the effects of distrust as to the stability of social systems?

It's possible that distrust disrupts social systems, causing an excess in rationalistic individualism, with mafia-like behaviours (Gambetta. [Mafia: the price of distrust](#)) and paranoid cognition (Colby. [Modelling a paranoid mind](#), Kramer. [Paranoid cognition in social systems](#)). But, before examining the excessive rationalistic individualism of paranoid cognition, it's worth considering whether "trust reduces the complexity of the future" (Luhmann 1979:24). Concerning this point, the question that can be raised is the following: Is distrust an extreme way of reducing the complexity of the future too?

It seems so because Lewis and Weigert argue that: "Distrust and suspicion help reduce complexity and uncertainty in social and organizational life by 'dictating a course of action based on suspicion, monitoring, and activation of institutional safeguards'. As Andrew Groove, CEO of Intel, likes to remind his executives: 'Only the paranoid survive'" (in Kramer 1998:270).

I will return to the alleged complexity-reduction of distrust and suspicion below. Before doing so, I shall examine under what conditions the paranoid perceiver survives, and what negative effects forms of exaggerated distrust produce in social systems. As Groove remarks, paranoid cognition is sometimes adequate under certain circumstances. For example, after a natural disaster, one is more hyper-vigilant of the behaviour of third parties and groups. Typically, two questions are raised under such circumstances: Will some people engage in looting? And, on the other hand, will institutions, such as the police and private property, be recognized as they were before the natural disaster? (As I argue below, these concerns exist because intentional agents realize that solemn pacts and tacit promises of collective intentionality may break off).

A sign that trust makes the future less complex is that it gives rise to automatism, typical of the background of pre-intentional abilities (Searle. [Intentionality](#)). Just as someone automatically presupposes that the law of gravitation rules on Earth, they automatically cooperate (and expects



cooperation) when typical situations of daily life arise, e.g., taking a taxi, dining at a restaurant, and crossing the street. When a foreigner takes a taxi, she usually expects cooperation from the driver. That is, she expects that the driver will act as he's supposed to: the taxi driver is supposed to drive her to the hotel, for example. The same goes for dining at a restaurant: if the same foreigner goes to a restaurant and orders a dish to the waiters, she'll expect cooperation from the cook and the waiters. Finally, if the foreigner intends to cross the street, she expects the drivers to respect the transit rules. That is, pedestrians expect from drivers that they won't act recklessly.

Note that, as emphasized in the previous sections, all these actions are performed according to the way things are supposed to be in the civilized world. In other words, one cooperates with and expects socially typified cooperation from taxi drivers, waiters, and drivers. In typical situations of daily life, there may not even exist explicit inferences; rather, certain constitutive rules, which are automatically followed, are associated with some deontic powers, either positive or negative. Those powers are fundamental to understand how the "we" actions are in tatters with exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition. Additionally, deontic powers are crucial for understanding in what sense people guide their actions in view of desire-independent reasons. For example, a university professor will teach a class instead of going to the cinema. She could satisfy her desire to do so, but she postpones it because she belongs to an institution and the students expect that she'll teach the class.

Now, exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition disrupt social systems. When intentional agents develop exaggerated distrust, which is the onset of paranoid cognition, constitutive rules and deontic powers may get disrupted. Indeed, paranoid cognition undermines the collective intentionality associated with institutions, especially as to the solemn pacts and promises the "we" actions imply. Unlike animals (this point, which is still debatable, is acknowledged very early by Searle in *The construction of social reality*), humans associate, cooperate, and trust, at least most of the time. If they don't, the conditions for paranoid cognition may stem, since humans tend to protect their individuality, which can also be a rational choice.

In fact, an extreme rationalistic form of protecting individuality (e.g., the mafia) can lead to the crises of social systems that depend upon collective intentionality. For example, not transcending pure individualistic rationality causes trouble, as it occurs with the mafia. Schelling characterizes the mafioso's aim as follows: "The mafia is exemplary of those cases where the public interest lies in collapsing rather than *building* internal trust and cooperation" (quoted in Gambetta 1988:158, emphasis in original). Consequently, the mafiosi don't respect constitutive rules, and they don't abide by the deontic powers that follow from them, especially the negative ones that forbid actions.

A way to test in what sense the triad is disrupted by exaggerated trust and paranoid cognition is via the analysis of situations in which there's an absence of trust and/or cooperation, and thus the "we" actions simply vanish. For example, an excess of rationalistic individualism disrupts collective intentionality and social system, all of which makes life more complicated, pace Groove. This is the natural consequence of the weakening of obligations assumed by the individual members of groups, who act then individually, as in the Business School Case 1. Such behaviour, which can be individually rational, isn't clearly driven by collective intentionality, and especially by trust and cooperation. Note that the "we" actions simply cease existing when exaggerated distrust exists, and this process disrupts the social reality.



This point is also emphasized by Gambetta thus: “The mafioso himself has an interest in *regulated injections of distrust* into the market to increase the demand for the product he sells -that is, protection. If agents could trust each other independently of his intervention he would be -on this score at least- idle. The income he receives and the power he enjoys are the benefits to him of distrust [...] To choose to obtain the mafioso’s protection can hardly be considered irrational. The collective disaster that is likely to follow from these individually rational premises -sky-high murder rates, higher transaction costs, lower incentives for technological innovation other than ‘military’ innovation, migration of the best human capital, higher creating rates, poorer quality of products and services- it is the sad and largely unwanted result which has kept southern Italy the way it is” (Gambetta 1988:173, emphasis in original).

Other situations can also exacerbate individualistic rationality, to the detriment of the triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality. As in the mafia case, this is precisely what happens with natural disasters. In fact, a brief thought experiment will show how natural disasters can also disrupt the triad. Suppose that Mario, a survivor of an earthquake and a resident of a city that got hit by pillaging and looting, changes his attitude towards others. To avoid possible risks, and to survive from gangs, Mario gets hypervigilant and develops ruminating thoughts about others. Since Mario believes that his life is in danger, he even disregards the power of the state to preserve public order. Mario thus develops paranoid cognition, which makes him perceive others differently.

Further, in terms of Kramer’s view of paranoid cognition, Mario’s consciousness turns out to be dysphoric. This dysphoric consciousness is engendered when two conditions are satisfied, first, *hypervigilance* toward situations and the behaviours of others, and second, with *ruminating thoughts* about hidden intentions and conspiracies. Note that a state of dysphoric consciousness may make Mario more self-referential, and much less prone to “we” actions. For example, Mario’s self-referential ruminating thoughts cause him to feel like he’s in the limelight of others, so his hypervigilance and ruminating thoughts make him more prone to attributing malevolence too liberally, that is, without compelling evidence. In short, Mario processes social information with social misperceptions, and with incorrect judgments. Such judgments would show exaggerated distrust in others, and especially of groups, institutions, and all kind of “we” actions.

Mario’s paranoid cognition is resilient to evidence. He wouldn’t consider compelling evidence against his false and persecutory beliefs. On the contrary, as a paranoid perceiver, Mario tends to reinforce doubts and suspicion about others through believing in conspiracies. And the loop reinforces the hyper-vigilant and self-referential consciousness. Accordingly, this process involves an overly personalistic construal of social interaction and exaggerated perceptions of conspiracy (self-referentiality), all of which isolates Mario as an intentional agent.

Those who suffer from paranoid cognition tend to be ‘bad’ scientists. They manipulate all counterevidence to confirm their exaggerated distrust, or lack of trustworthiness in others (Kelley. [The processes of causal attribution](#)) and (Kramer. [Paranoid cognition in social systems](#)). Unlike Mario, people normally trust and/or feel suspicious based on inferential logic and hypothesis testing. If Mario were cured of his paranoid cognition, most doubts and suspicion about others would simply disappear. He would formulate inferences regarding suspicious behaviour and would test hypotheses about the real motives third parties may have for their behaviour (for a contrary position see Barber. [The logic and the limits of trust](#), Luhmann. [Familiarity, confidence, trust](#)).



Despite his hypervigilance and ruminating persecutory beliefs, Mario isn't psychotic. Kramer ([Paranoid cognition in social systems](#)), unlike Colby ([Modelling a paranoid mind](#)), argues that suspicion and exaggerated distrust, which are the pillars of paranoid cognition, don't necessarily imply a serious psychiatric disorder. Rather, Mario has simply developed dysphoria and an excess of rationalistic individualism. *Mutatis mutandis*, the mafiosi, who usually end up being murdered by other mafiosi, show the same sort of social information processing. Then, Kramer understands the term "paranoid cognition" very broadly. On the one hand, it involves misperceptions and misjudgements of self-referentiality, as with those persons who feel they're being damaged by other persons constantly. On the other hand, it causes the paranoid processing of social information via ruminating thoughts, none of which entail a loss of contact with reality.

But interestingly, and as maintained above, forms of paranoid cognition can also develop adaptive responses to extreme circumstances. Mario, a survivor of an earthquake, does respond to such extreme circumstances. Even so, he is an epitome of how paranoid cognition disrupts the triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality. It's decisive, for example, that Mario does no longer trust other intentional agents. In addition, he doesn't trust the state, the church, the government, and other well-recognized institutions. More importantly, Mario believes things no longer are the way they are supposed to be. But why is collective intentionality so disrupted by such paranoid social information processing? In view of the prosperity of many social systems, which depends upon the tandem of trust and cooperation, the former turns out to be a true social lubricant (Yamagishi. [The structure of trust](#)).

To understand why trust is a social lubricant that can be disrupted by exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition, suppose another scenario. Susan, an armourey who's in an operating room, suspects that the surgery team is secretly plotting against her because she's too perfectionist. In such a competitive context, Susan wouldn't only feel herself to be in the limelight of others, but also may develop a form of paranoid cognition. Would this type of social information processing modify her behaviour in the operating room? Surely, the "we" actions driven by collective intentionality, i.e., all the members belonging to the team, would be disrupted by her ruminating thoughts and self referentiality. Accordingly, the typical "we" action clearly results affected, because Susan's ruminating thoughts and beliefs of conspiracy would make her feel *isolated* and in danger, so the "we" actions, which are the product of collective intentionality, break off.

In other words, Susan's dysphoria, rumination, and self-referentiality would disrupt trust and cooperation, because the solemn pact, which is typical of collective intentionality would be unilaterally broken. In other words, the "we" of collective intentionality is disrupted when Susan is induced to paranoid cognition. The main point then is that Susan doesn't authentically cooperate with the other members of the team who plot against her. Her dysphoria, rumination, and self-referentiality are sufficient to break off the solemn pact. Now, a second question arises: In what sense is the pact of cooperation, in collective intentionality, broken off?

As examined, the "we" of "we are *committed* to doing X" interrupts with exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition. For example, Susan would point out that *they* (*the others*) plot against *me*, so the shift of focus is evident to her: she's completely isolated as the "we" action vanishes. As Susan doesn't trust the rest of the team, she's reluctant to *trust* and *cooperate* with them, and the broken pact ends up disrupting the basis of the surgery team's collective intentionality. Susan's dysphoric consciousness tends to be the contrary of the motto *Viribus Unitis*, that is, "with united forces". Or,



in the same vein, Alexander Dumas' famous saying in *Three Musketeers*: "all for one, one for all." For Susan, collective intentionality has come to an end, because she trusts no other member of the surgery team.

The moral, then, is that exaggerated distrust, which may cause dysphoria, has important negative effects upon social reality, namely, it ends up disrupting the triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality.

Briefly put, the argument of section 3 can be summarized as follows:

- a) The cooperation and trust of intentional agents are the product of solemn pacts and (tacit) promises.
- b) The triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality lays at the foundations of human civilization.
- c) Exaggerated trust and paranoid cognition lead to dysphoria, rumination, and self-reference.
- d) Dysphoria, rumination, and self-reference break off solemn pacts and (tacit) promises.
- e) Therefore, exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition disrupts the triad, with negative effects upon the foundations of human civilization.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've examined the negative effects of exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition upon the Searlean social reality (and, in general, in social systems which are the product of "we" actions and collective intentionality). I've analysed how the "we" actions of collective intentionality are disrupted when solemn pacts and (tacit) promises get broken off by exaggerated distrust and/or paranoid cognition. For example, this is the case for the mafioso's excess of rationalistic individualism. As I concluded, the plural form of collective intentionality and the "we" actions get disrupted, because the *others* are seen as potential enemies rather than allies.

Trust strengthens cooperation (Thöni. [Trust and cooperation](#)) and improves the social vitality of communities (Putnam. [Making democracy work](#), Fukuyama. [Trust](#), Kramer and Tyler. [Trust in organizations](#)). Furthermore, as I've argued in relation to broken pacts due to exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition, the triad of trust, cooperation, and collective intentionality lays at the very foundations of human civilization. And, as stressed, exaggerated distrust and paranoid cognition go towards the opposite direction: both undermine such foundations, precluding our successful navigation in the Searlean world of institutions.

Bibliography

- Gambetta, D. (1988). *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*. Basil Blackwell.
- Kramer, R. (1998). Paranoid cognition in social systems. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2(4), 251-275 https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0204_3
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and power*. Wiley and sons.
- McLeod, C. (2020). *Trust*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/trust/>
- Searle, J. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. The Free Press.
- Searle, J. (2010). *Making the social world*. OUP.



Received by 31 Jul 2022

Accepted by 4 Oct 2022