

## **Is higher education not to be trusted or is the government unable to trust? Analysis from a Simmelian perspective**

### **Outline :**

#### **- Trust, UK Government and Higher Education**

Higher education is under more and more pressure to be accountable (Power, 1994, 1997; Hoecht, 2006). What underlies this audit culture, “rituals of verification” (Power, 1997), is the decrease of trust from the government. Power (1994) argued that “audit has spread as much because of its power as an idea, and that contrary to the assumptions of the story of lost trust, its spread actually creates the very distrust it is meant to address” (ibid.: 10). Take the UK as an example. The autonomy of UK higher education has been greatly undermined due to the government’s hard managerialism and constant stress on accountability over the past three decades. British governments since 1980s are seen to follow the same severe political logic concerning higher education set up in the Thatcher’s regime (1979-1990) aiming to save “British decline” (Trow, 2005). Two important political philosophies adopted since Thatcher’s regime were identified: centralised management and control, and market orientation (ibid.). Almost all the resources and decision making power regarding higher education, such as subject enrolments, department funding and teaching criteria, were all taken to the central government under its “very fine micromanagement” (ibid.:4). As a consequence, the autonomy of higher education institutions was greatly weakened. UK government certainly gain total control of its higher education.

A large literature on the issues of trust decline and accountability in higher education already exist. The typical arguments fall into two groups: either (1) a critique of current system on higher education such as Hoecht (2006), Sidhu (2008) and Harvey and Williams (2010), or (2) questioning or trying to re-establish the link between higher education and public trust, such as Trow (1996, 2005, 2006), Quillian (2006) and Kirwan (2006). However, a commonality is shared by these two groups of studies: the analysis tends to have a focus on higher education. In other words, the issue of trust is often examined and treated as the issue of ‘the trusted’ or ‘should-be-trusted’, in this case, higher education. This raises the questions such as: what does decline of trust signify for ‘the truster’, the government? What does trust decline tell us about the government? How would the picture be like if it is the truster who is at the centre of the trust enquiry? What makes the government not able to trust?

#### **- Nature of Trust: When Trust Departs from Distrust**

Drawing on Simmel (1950, 2005 trans) and Luhman's works (1979), three important characteristics of trust are identified: accepted vulnerability, reflectivity and future prospect.

- ***Accepted Vulnerability***

Trust is a manifestation of accepted vulnerability. Vulnerability in trust has two expressions: risk and ignorance (Baier, 1986; Gembetta, 2000). The unattainability of total knowledge, as discussed earlier, makes all decisions and judgements involve risks and ignorance. The unbearability of total complexity makes one avoid acknowledging certain aspects of phenomena, which reinforces the elements of risks and ignorance. Whether risks and ignorance are inherent components (due to unattainability of total knowledge), unintended results (due to unbearability of total complexity) or a combination of both, the act of trust entails risks and ignorance.

- ***Reflexivity***

Trust entails reflexivity. It has double signification. The first is self-reflexivity, which I called, the 'inner trust'. The incompleteness of external reality, resulted from the unattainability of total knowledge and the unbearability of total complexity, makes the act of trust or distrust to a significant extent a reflection of internal reality – in other words, how one relates to oneself or 'inner trust'. One who is able to trust reflects that one feels oneself can be trusted. One who trusts trusts oneself. It is relevant to self trustworthiness. When one trusts, one projects one's feelings about self trustworthiness to the external reality. On the other hand, one who finds difficult to trust the other to a significant degree has also difficulties in finding oneself trustworthy or can be trusted (Simmel, 1950, 2005; Luhman, 1979, 1985).

- ***Future Prospect - Space for the future***

Tomorrow exists because trust exists. One important property of trust is its future projection. Trust is an idea which has a strong connotation of time. For trust to be relevant, there must be a possibility of relating to the future, the future positivity. One concept is therefore pertinent here: the presentness. The future and the present are closely related. The future can be found in the present when possibilities or potentialities are opened up due to some selections through decisions or preferences. The present can be found in the future when the selection of possibilities is embodied and forms a new present. The future is the projection of the present; the present is the projection of the future. The intertwining relationship between the two corresponds to what Luhmann (1979: 13) called "the future in the present" and "the present in the future".

One characteristic shared between the future and the present is infinity. Since the two are inextricably intertwined, when the future is infinite, so is the present. The infinity of the future lies in its possibilities and potentialities, which lead to uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity, linking to 'the present in the future'. The infinity of the present consists in its complexity and convolution, which are linked to surprises and possibilities too, referring to 'the future in the present'.

### **- A Reflective Analysis and Conclusion**

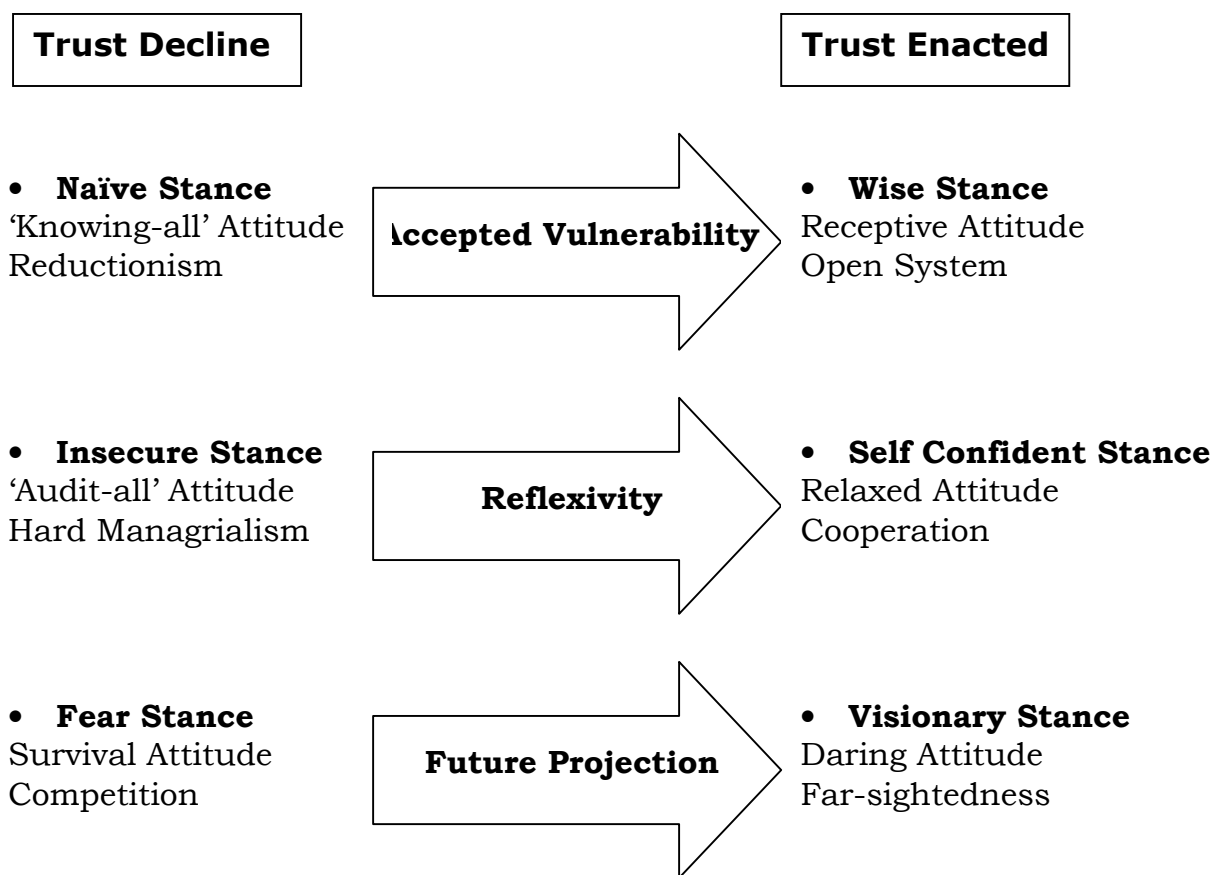
The trust decline in higher education from the UK government therefore has three significations. First, it means that the government cannot accept its own vulnerability. It fails to understand the unattainability of total knowledge and total complexity and therefore has difficulty to admit its own ignorance. This facilitates a naïve and mechanic stance, which leads to its 'knowing-all' attitude. It is a government who presumably knows 'everything' about higher education. Next, trust decline means that the government loses its inner trust in itself and therefore its capacity to establish mutual trust in a relationship. The lack of self-trustworthiness in its internal reality facilitates the government adopting an insecure and unstable stance. This results in its 'auditing all' attitude: political anxiety caused by self doubt makes the government obsessed by accountability issues and building an audit culture. Furthermore, trust decline also signifies that the decrease of the government's capacity to generate future and long-term prospects. This is because the government loses both grounds: one for 'the future in the present' and the other for 'the present in the future'. The stance that is adopted by the government is a fear one: the government feels 'threatened' and is afraid of losing its power and influence. This results in its survival attitude: the government struggles to just remain alive. In other words, the purpose of the government is greatly reduced to a very basic level. This explains why the government is short-sighted, narrow-minded, calculative, competitive and non-reflective.

(Figure 1)

For restoring the state of being able to trust in the government, this paper argues that the government needs accept its own vulnerability, reinstall its inner trust and have future long-term prospect. The quality of self-reflection on its internal reality, full-inherence in the presentness, and being able to understand the unattainability of total knowledge will facilitate such restoration. It urges the government to change its stances from the naive, the insecure and the afraid to the wise, the self-confident and the visionary. Such stances help develop the government's receptive, relaxed and daring attitudes. Those attitudes will allow the government to be open-minded, far-sighted, creative and adventurous, and contribute to successful relationships with mutual trust.

Figure:

Figure 1. Two Sets of Dispositions to Trust –  
From Trust Decline to Trust Enacted



(Source: compiled by the author drawing on the materials discussed in the text)

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