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Must We Choose Between Criticism and Faith? Reflections on the Later Work of Bernard Barber*

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Bernard Barber's later work throws important light on a problem that has mystified sociological theory and investigation since its inception. This problem concerns the compatibility between faith and criticism, between trust—in people, in institutions, and in systems—and distrust, distance, conflict.

Trust seems essential to the maintenance of social order, but a democratic and liberal society is based on the right to disrupt society, to separate oneself from order. A community depends on firm values—the acceptance of standards without question, the loving attachment to ideals, things, and people without proof of justification. Yet an effective and open society must respond to contingency, develop a willingness to separate from attachments, to criticize and discard ideals, things, and even people when they have lost their utility or threaten our most basic principles or interests.

In his work over the last two decades, much more than in the important work of the 1950s, Bernard Barber has been increasingly sensitive to these tensions. Indeed, it may well be that the social conflicts of the 1960s, with their often liberating criticisms, gradually have been working themselves out in this later writing. Barber first thematizes the tension between faith and criticism in his co-authored *Research on Human Subjects* (Barber, Lally, Makarushka, and Sullivan 1973). In *Informed Consent in Medical Therapy and Research* (1980) he first dealt with it in a theoretically self-conscious way and challenged social systems theory accordingly.

Barber confronted the dilemma head on and developed a systematic theory of the relation between trust and criticism in *The Logic and Limits of Trust* (1983). I believe this to be a seminal work, which allows us to think of fundamental sociological problems in new ways. My opening account of the tension between faith and criticism is drawn directly from this book.

In order to appreciate what Barber accomplished in *The Logic and Limits of Trust*, we must place the tension that he explored into the broad framework of sociological theory.

In thinking about the relation between criticism and faith—a tension at the very center of modernity—sociological theory has tried to weld together three different intellectual traditions: democratic theory (which focuses on freedom and conflict), social system or organicist theory (which discusses what holds society together and focuses on social values and trust), and theories about the comparative development of cultural values (which depend on studies in comparative religion and ethics). In some essential way these traditions are incompatible; yet each is necessary to illuminate the tension between faith and criticism.

Weber and Parsons drew on each of these traditions and ignored the ways in which they were incompatible. Their work exhibited the tension between faith and criticism but never thematized it or made it explicit. As a result, the tension came to be inscribed deeply in the sociological tradition, and the theoretical possibilities for truly explaining their relation were never addressed.

* Paper delivered at Columbia University on the occasion of Bernard Barner's retirement, May 11, 1988.

In a significant part of his work, Weber offers a comparative and historical sociology of democratic societies. By comparison with the particularism of mysticism, ascetic religions are universalistic; in this-worldly asceticism, faithful followers become tools of the divine, trusting in God, not in man, with an obligation to exercise critical judgment against earthly things by right of their "office" from God. This line of reasoning culminates in Weber's account of the great Jewish prophets, his spiritual heroes.

At the same time, however, Weber's sociology develops a theory that posits resignation to authority and maintenance of order as sociologically necessary. Authority is legitimate if it is duly selected in accordance with charismatic, traditional, or rational-legal principles. In successful charismatic authority, the leader's will is subjectively unchallengable; in traditional societies, authority is maintained if the leader does things in the same way as they always have been done before.

Yet Judaic and Christian civilizations were both charismatic and traditional. How could members of those civilizations exercise their criticisms and create radical social change if their systems of legitimation really operated in this way? Weber cannot explain this paradox.

Consider rational legal authority. It is legitimate if leaders are selected by universally applicable rules; if leaders are selected in this way, Weber reasons, they must (and typically will) be obeyed unquestioningly by virtue of the authority of office. Does a bureaucratic office, in this organizational theory, bear any resemblance to the "office" inspired by the potent combination of otherworldly commitment and this-worldly criticism postulated in Weber's religious writings? Here is another unresolved, never-thematized tension in Weber's work.

Parsons's work obfuscates the tension between faith and criticism in much the same way. The pattern variable scheme elaborates democratic theory. Parsons argues that the values regulating modern societies—universalism, affective neutrality, specificity—demand criticism and distance, creating freedom and the space to move. The same democratic tradition informs Parsons's differentiation theory, whereby cultural norms gradually become separated from cultural systems and provide an image of values as resources for social change.

Yet from the very beginning of his career we find in Parsons a contrary tendency, which emerges from organicist and systems traditions. Here values are the source not of criticism but of commitment to the social system itself! Only agreement about values—consensus—can hold the system together. Or consider the "theorem of institutionalization" from *The Social System* (1951). Stability can be maintained only if values are brought into the heart of society: the same value forms an element of psychological identity, a norm regulating role relationships, and a standard of culture.

Again, consider Parsons's insistence in *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Shils 1951), and in later works as well, that there is a homology between social and cultural objects. By insisting that for every kind of object there is a corresponding mode of orientation, Parson rightly emphasized that elements of the social system are always interpreted in a cultural frame. Yet he implied more: a strict one-to-one relation between the cultural system and the social system. This approach overemphasizes the coherence and coordination and underemphasizes the tension between culture and society.

Consider, too, Parsons's famous treatment of the doctor-patient relationship. Universalism, specificity, and neutrality regulate this relationship in the sense that, if these values are accepted and internalized by both parties, the result will be not only good medicine but also cooperation. If these values are not accepted, then

"institutionalized values" do not exist, and only conflict can result.

Parsons' theory of the "generalized media" is exactly the same. "Trust" via value commitment is the key to his model. Raw, brute power is regulated by a code, a set of values. If people accept the code, they accept power on faith, and they trust in the integrity and sincerity of the officeholder without demanding proof of sincerity or immediate beneficial results. If the code is not accepted (that is, if power is not legitimate), trust disappears and conflict between the power holders and the powerless breaks out. But are not universalistic codes, precisely when they are deeply institutionalized, designed to produce doubts about the trustworthiness of those who exercise power? Parsons never became aware of these tensions, any more than did Weber in his own theory of society.

Still, because Weber and Parsons were great theorists, and also synthetic theorists, both sides of the faith/criticism tension are important in their work. Most other social scientists are satisfied with one side or the other. Among theorists of democracy, such as Habermas, Rawls, and Coleman, there is virtually no room for trust. On the other hand, most theorists of trust—such as Garfinkel and Luhmann—show (not surprisingly) an almost total neglect of democracy and criticism.

The latter tradition, of course, originating with Weber and Parsons (and including Garfinkel and Luhmann), is the lineage from which Barber draws. By the time of his later work, he has become highly conscious of the dilemma that this tradition has ignored. "We tend in everyday discourse and even in social science," he writes (1983, p. 166), "to exaggerate both the need for full trust and the evils of imperfections in trust processes." "Trust," he concludes (p. 16, original italics), "has been a much admired *and somewhat idealized* quality in social thought."

To combat idealization or idolization, Barber tells us, we must differentiate the concept. He teaches us that one kind of trust is highly general and is oriented toward the cultural system. It concerns "the expectation of the persistence and fulfillment of the natural and moral social orders" (1983, p. 9). An example would be Americans' belief in the sanctity of the Constitution or their confidence in the American Dream.

A second kind of trust also is relatively generalized, but it is less far-reaching and more specific to relationships in the social system. This is fiduciary trust, the "expectation that partners in interaction will carry out their . . . obligations and responsibilities, that is, their duties in certain situations to place others' interests before their own" (1983, p. 9). An example would a patient's trust that a doctor cares whether he lives or dies, that the doctor wants to help him, and that the doctor is not cheating or manipulating him.

The third kind of trust, which is very specific, in the "expectation of technically competent role performance from those involved with us is social relationships and systems" (1983, p. 9). An example might be the patient's confidence that when a doctor prescribes a drug, it will be the right one.

These definitional distinctions are not trivial. They are the result of far-reaching theoretical and empirical work and they significantly clarify a basic social issue. They allow us to understand that we may be able to communicate and understand others—and even to share with them a commitment to high cultural codes and broad values—without trusting them to act in our interests, let alone to behave in a technically competent way. Correspondingly, we could trust others to act in our interests in the fiduciary sense but might distrust their technical abilities to "deliver the goods."

These possibilities demonstrate that trust can be present in the same situation or role relationship as conflict and distrust; trust in only one or two of its dimensions may not

create stability in an interaction. Barber himself points out a number of corollary implications of this differentiation of levels. One can have faith in the "system" (be it a society, a form of government, a way of life, or an organization) without having faith in the institutions or subsystems that compose it; or one may trust in the role (in its fiduciary mandate, for example) but not in the person performing it—in his or her fiduciary commitments or technical competence.

Yet this point involves more than the copresence of trust and criticism. Trust at the generalized or fiduciary level actually can inform and create distrust on more specific levels of performance. Thus if Americans believe that their social system embodies certain ideals of liberty and moral obligation, they will scrutinize their officeholders carefully for the purity of their actions and motives, and consequently will often distrust and fight with them. The American social system, however, is hardly delegitimated as a result.

With this more differentiated and flexible understanding of different kinds of trust, we finally possess a concept that matches the complexity of modernity. As Barber emphasizes, it is unlikely that different kinds of trust will be complementary, because modern social systems are segmented, pluralized, and differentiated. It is also unlikely that trust towards different social objects, or the trust manifested by different groups of actors, will be consistent or mutually reinforcing. As he states: "Expectations of trust within one relationship, group, or system may explicitly exclude competent performance or fiduciary obligation elsewhere" (1983, p. 17). Thus "a doctor's competent performance with respect to a particular client or class of clients (for example, the rich) may interfere with the expectations in these regards that other clients (for example, the poor), or society considered as a whole, have of him" (p. 17).

This last example points to the problem of trust and power. Barber's discussion of this issue is particularly illuminating and important (e.g., pp. 167ff.). He understands that the cooperative, intricate, and very challenging exercise of power demands trust from all concerned. He emphasizes, however, that those who are the objects of power—sometimes its very distant objects—often have neither fiduciary nor technical trust in those who wield it. Indeed, he insists, it is often beneficial that they do not. At the same time, these "distrustful masses" may have a great deal of generalized, cultural trust in the ideals that ground the system at large. As Barber says in arguing against democratic elitists (among whom he includes Lipset and Parsons), this is the story of American democracy.

This sophisticated theory of trust, which redefines the relation between criticism and faith, has two implications that I will discuss briefly in conclusion.

First, this new understanding points the way to a more central sociological role for the analysis of culture. The culture that regulates social life must be far more complex, multivalent, and differentiated than Weber and contemporary social system theorists have believed to be possible. Rather than being regarded as a one-to-one match between cultural and social elements, elements of a social system should be seen as "overdetermined" by cultural themes, in Freud's and Althusser's sense. After all, generalized trust can operate simultaneously with fiduciary and technical critique only if a given actor is understood as perceiving social institutions and roles in terms of multiple understandings and overlapping values. Thus role incumbents may act consistently with fiduciary and technical "values" but may disregard more general values—even though the latter also are institutionalized in the sense that they are expected to bind actors, roles, and organizations. This is one of the several important points that Barber intends to make when he writes that "trust cannot necessarily be generalized" (1983, p. 18).

The second implication of this new understanding concerns what Barber likes to call the theory of social systems. Contrary to the direction of orthodox functionalism, Barber insists in his later work that conflict must be seen as normal and, even more important, as normative. The more firmly modern and democratic values are institutionalized in society, the more what he calls "rational distrust" will result. It is because value institutionalization and distrust can go hand in hand that Barber can write of "those who are distrustful but not alienated" and can call such distrustful citizens "paragons of democratic virtue" (1983, p. 81).

"A democratic polity," Barber writes, "requires legitimate criticism based on democratic allegiance; some distrust, in this sense, is essential for a viable democratic order" (1983, p. 81). In order to appreciate the achievement of being able to write about distrust in this way, we must understand the deep ambiguities of the theoretical tradition within which Barber has worked. Barber has accomplished a profound theoretical reconstruction. When he states that "distrust . . . is [a] functionally equivalent instrument for maintaining social order" (p. 166), he is fully aware of its ironic implications.

Barber insists that "the public is now more competent and more knowledgeable, more capable of effective distrust" than it ever has been. This statement typifies the wisdom, humanity, and theoretical sophistication of his later work. It provides a fitting place to conclude this tribute to his still-unfolding professional career.

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