

Community of Distrust

MICHEL PEILLON

In 1995 and 1996, the glue which had kept Irish society together apparently dissolved: trust broke down. We have been confronted with what could have hardly been imagined a few years ago. The revelation of the many occurrences of incest and severe abuse which take place behind the closed doors of the home has brought to public consciousness an horrific side of family life. The daily disclosures of clerical sexual abuse struck hard at the heart of traditional Ireland. And then, it was no longer safe to put our life in the hands of medical institutions, as some patients were dying of the neglect or incompetence of "caring" agencies. The good, wholesome food of Ireland, which had long been taken for granted, was also deemed harmful and in some cases lethal. Consumption of beef became a risky business, while pork was shot through and through with anti-biotics. With each bite of fruit and vegetables, one could be ingesting a heavy load of pesticides and fertilisers.

The changing nature of trust

Through these crises Ireland is being propelled, at an incredible pace, into what Anthony Giddens has called *high modernity*.¹

1 Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge: The Polity Press, 1990

He has placed trust at the centre of the transformation of modern societies. He develops the view that trust constitutes a central ingredient of social cohesion; he also contends that the nature of trust is changing. In traditional societies, trust follows the network of face-to-face relations, those of community, kinship or friendship. One trusts what is familiar and this trust is sustained by traditional rules and personal loyalty. The development of the industrial society has brought about what he calls *simple modernity*, in which trust becomes more impersonal. Every day, one trusts the technical competence of other people, the expertise of those who possess the relevant specialised knowledge.

Today, whole populations are learning that experts disagree with each other and have no monopoly of truth. The unreliability of the expert-systems has created the real possibility of a generalised collapse of trust, and has ushered in another stage of modernity: that of high modernity. Trust, no longer automatically given, has to be won and sustained in the light of alternatives. We still depend on abstract and expert-systems, but we are now responsible for the expertise we choose to trust. Trust has become active and entails a constant monitoring and scrutiny; the statements of experts are subjected to critique and appraisal in an on-going institutional way. All social agents, individual or collective, now adopt this critical attitude in which the statements of experts are bracketed and submitted to a kind of permanent doubt. Irish society has been abruptly confronted with the necessity of becoming reflexive and of moving into high modernity. It no longer operates according to fixed rules and regulations, but organises its collective life in the light of the information and knowledge which it produces about itself x

Clerical abuses

-y The Catholic Church does not operate effectively if it does not form a community of trust. The priest in the parish can be a very isolated figure without the trust of parishioners. The Church, through the clergy, reaches individuals in order

to ensure that its teaching is followed; it moulds and "normalises" individual behaviour. The shepherding of souls demands that the priest be given access to the inner self of the parishioners, to be monitored and shaped into a christian mould: that of norms and deeply embedded practices which conform to or uphold the moral principles according to which a religion defines itself. Priests possess the expert knowledge which allows them to officiate and mediate between the daily life of parishioners and God's moral order. But they do not enjoy trust on the basis of such an expert function; it must be propped up by face-to-face interaction, by the familiarity which derives from being close to people and caring for them. Clerical practice in Ireland is rooted in such a traditional trust in order to generate the closeness it requires. For this very reason, sexual abuse by clerics, when revealed, strikes at the heart of the system of trust on which the Catholic Church operates. Only a very small minority of priests may have breached this trust and abused the young people to whom they had been given more or less unrestrained access. x Such cases nonetheless went beyond the occasional, aberrant episode. Bishop Duffy declared that the morale of priests was battered by clerical scandals; he referred to them as "the clay feet of the Church" (*Irish Times*, 23 March 1995).

y The personalised nature of the relationship amongst priests extends to the relations between bishops and their diocesan clergy. The hierarchical relations which exist between them are in some way embedded in a certain familiarity and in personal knowledge of each other. The hierarchy and the community of priests have responded to the disclosure of sexual abuse in a symptomatic way. They must have first reacted with incredulity and denial, for such abuses contravene core values of the Church. But once the reality and extent of such abuse had been acknowledged, it was treated as an aberration, as a kind of momentary disease to be overcome. The bishops turned to other experts, outside their own traditional area of competency, to therapists who would cure the disease and remove this aberration. Deviant or rather "sick" priests were sent for a few months to therapy sessions

and, when deemed cured, returned to normal pastoral duties. Cardinal Daly declared that it would be good for the perpetrators of such abuse to confront their own guilty secret and get the therapy and help they needed (*Irish Times*, 5 October 1995). The remark has been made that the abusers were far more likely to be offered treatment than the abused.

We know now that many of these priests have "relapsed" into abusing young boys and girls as soon as they had the opportunity. The Hierarchy has acknowledged that the "expert-system" on which they depended has been found lacking. They trusted an interpretation of deviant priestly behaviour to which counselling and therapy formed the response: but these experts did not deliver. Trust based on familiarity and close personal relations, on easy access to the family, has been seriously damaged; expert-systems have totally failed. Trust can only be reconstructed by embracing what Giddens calls *active trust*. Priests will be far less able than before to rely on an automatic deference and acceptance from parishioners: they need to overcome suspicion or, more simply, caution and win their trust the hard way. The trust of the hierarchy in faulty expertise will no longer shield them from blame. They will have to take responsibility for the kind of expertise they choose to mobilise. In so doing, they will move from both traditional and modern trust to the active trust of late modernity.

Food scares

✕ All expert discourses formulated around food have in the past few years been thoroughly discredited. Assertions which are made about every category of food are contradicted a few months later. Butter has, for instance, undergone a series of metamorphoses from a dangerous substance to "not so bad after all". People who heed the statements of experts experience regular dietary shifts.

✕ In November 1986, Bovine Spongyform Encephalopathy (BSE or, as it became popularly known, *Mad Cow Disease*), was first identified as a disease; it was recorded in Ireland in

1989. It was then thought that the cattle contracted the disease by being fed compounds which contained offal and bonemeal from sheep infected with scrapies. Consequently, the offal of diseased cows was banned for human consumption or from entering the food chain. Over the years, the number of BSE cases in England increased dramatically: 153,592 cases were officially registered between 1989 and 1995, while only 124 cases were recorded in Ireland for the same period. The number of new cases rose in 1996 to 64 (from 16 in 1995). There exists no clear evidence of the disease being transmitted from cow to calf or from animal to animal in the herd. Nevertheless, a policy of herd slaughtering was adopted in Ireland.

✕ We were of course assured that the disease could not pass the species barrier and that humans simply would not contract mad cow disease from eating infected beef (or in any other way). In March 1996, what had been the steadfastly proclaimed scientific view was abandoned. It was acknowledged that ten people in England had died from a type of Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (CJD) attributable only to the consumption of infected beef. The BSE crisis broke out when the possibility of such a link was acknowledged by the Minister of Agriculture in the Commons, with an ensuing worldwide ban on British beef export. Politicians mobilised science in an exercise of damage limitation. But their pronouncements and interventions intensified popular distrust. Science was used according to a strange logic: the lack of absolute evidence about such links was interpreted as the absence of such links.

✕ The collapse of the expert system around BSE has generated many responses. In all cases, the responses aimed at restoring some trust. The most obvious response consisted of declarations of reassurance: "Our beef is good for you" or "You can be sure of Irish Beef" (An Bord Bia) represented standard statements by farmers, butchers and politicians alike. Then it was realised that supermarkets shelved hundreds of products containing British beef derivatives. We were quickly assured of the safety of such products.

However, politicians knew that their statements carried little credence: it was not what they were saying which met with disbelief, but the fact that they were saying it. Reassurance would have to come from another source, clearly above suspicion. The government put forward the idea of an independent Food Safety Board, composed of experts and with wide-ranging powers. The Board was established in October 1996, but the definition of its actual functions became embroiled in party politics; its future remains uncertain to this day.

Consumers of beef found their own ways of reestablishing some trust. Many people turned to retailers they had long dealt with. They thought that these retailers had a clear idea of where the meat came from, how it had been produced and processed. Some butchers can issue the required assurances. Several chains of butcher shops or small supermarkets have set up their own quality schemes. They have either bought their own farms and reared the cattle they sell, or else they have imposed clear standards concerning for instance what is fed to the cattle. Butcher shops have retained a significant proportion of the meat market and a return to this kind of personalised shopping is probably more manageable for the sale of meat than for other types of food.

But can the regression to a traditional form of trust in shopping be sustained in an era of mass consumption?

Another response consisted in creating a new type of expert-system which would guarantee the quality of the meat. Calls were made for the introduction of a labelling scheme for all beef products, with a display of origin and quality. Such a tagging procedure is used by the two hundred and seventy registered organic farmers, to allow consumers to track the meat back to the producer. Some scientists have been quick off the mark to find a way of tracing meat back to the farm of origin, using DNA samples. They have applied for a patent and set up a company to exploit the method. In May 1997, the Minister for Agriculture and Food announced the introduction of a beef quality assurance scheme which would trace the origin of the meat. It will be based on the mandatory registration of all relevant information about an

animal's history: farmers, hauliers and cattle dealers, marts, compound feed and meat processors will have to provide information at each stage. This information will be accessible from a central computer in the Department of Agriculture. Such a "National Beef Assurance Scheme" constitutes a procedure for monitoring the history of an animal and imposing standards. But the monitoring is not directed at consumers as such. Rather, experts, foreign customers and supermarkets will have access to the database. It sets up an administrative expert-system for other relevant experts.

This kind of response involves the elaboration of improved expert-systems which are meant to restore trust. If they succeed in doing so, the need to go further, to move beyond simple modernity disappears. At the same time, such a move facilitates the emergence of a very different kind of situation in which consumers face alternative systems of guarantee. Concerns about the treatment of poultry, for instance, have encouraged the creation of labels of guarantee for free-range eggs or free-range chickens. Similar strategies have been mobilised for organic food. These labelling strategies now belong to a marketing policy of promoting the image of a brand. In the same way, so-called green products have led to interminable claims and counterclaims about damage to the environment. Consumers are faced with a range of alternatives which all rely on alleged expert-systems, and they have to choose between them. The Irish consumer is being forced into the active trust of high modernity. Many people, mainly the young, have used their reflexive capability simply by opting for vegetarian food.

The BSE crisis epitomises the fact that, more than ever before, the consumption of food has become a risky business. The use and abuse of food has always carried its own dangers. But the new risks are more than ever man-made; food is not simply produced, but it is nowadays fabricated. The nature of the new risk is well illustrated in the following statement by the director of the British Consumer Association, and it applies, albeit with less immediacy, in the Irish context:

Consumers who want to avoid the risk of BSE have no choice but to cut out beef and beef products from their diet. There is currently an unquantifiable risk in eating beef.

Some consumers will decide that the risk is acceptable and our advice to them is that they can reduce the risk by only eating 'muscle meat'.

There is no scientific information available that can predict the level of risk with any security. This poses consumers with a very difficult choice. (*Irish Times*, 23 March 1996)

→ Dying from eating some types of food has become another risk of modern life which, in the same way as disability or unemployment, is nowadays insured against. A broker offered a lump sum of £25,000 for insured victims of CJD. It seems that if full trust is beyond our grasp, we can nonetheless find ways of accommodating distrust and living with it.

Doubt as the new basis of trust

→ The trust that people have in their institutions and about each other is being seriously eroded. Two dramatic occurrences of trust breakdown have been looked at, and similar considerations apply to the so-called blood scandals. Each situation involved a different mix of traditional and modern trust, one based on familiarity and the other on expert-systems. The Catholic Church, as a community of trust, has clearly been undermined by clerical sexual abuse, for its pastoral work reposes on the personal trust which derives from close contact. Parishioners will monitor the trust they put in their priests; bishops will have to take responsibility for their choice of experts. In the same way, the trust of consumers in beef and food in general has collapsed; they have ceased to rely on automatic expert-systems and have no option but to engage in active trust. There is, in a sense, something reassuring about the disagreement of experts, for it leaves some room for our own judgement. More worrying are those situations in which experts agree.