ConTrust
Vertrauen im Konflikt
Ein Clusterprojekt des Landes Hessen

No. 1
ConTrust
01/2022
Working Paper Series

Trust in Conflict

Notes on a Research Program

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NORMATIVE ORDERS
Forschungszentrum der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

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Recommended Citation
Nicole Deitelhoff, Rainer Forst, Vinzenz Hediger, and Tobias Wille, "Trust in Conflict. Notes on a Research Program", ConTrust Working Paper, No. 1, Frankfurt am Main: ConTrust – Trust in Conflict, 2022. contrust.uni-frankfurt.de/wp-1

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◐ **Publisher:** ConTrust - Trust in Conflict
Research Centre "Normative Orders" of Goethe University Frankfurt am Main
Max-Horkheimer-Str. 2 | D-60323 Frankfurt am Main

https://contrust.uni-frankfurt.de/en/wp-series

ConTrust Working Paper No. 1 | September 2022

Trust in Conflict: Notes on a Research Program[1]

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Abstract. The ConTrust research initiative challenges the conventional wisdom that trust is antithetical to conflict. Instead, ConTrust posits that under certain social and institutional conditions, trust can also emerge in and through conflict. To lay the groundwork for this agenda, this working paper develops a basic concept of trust that is the foundation for more specific conceptions of trust. Furthermore, it distinguishes between justified and unjustified trust, introduces a notion of social integration through conflict, highlights the role of uncertainty and crisis in contemporary trust dynamics, and outlines avenues for studying trust formation in contexts of political, socio-economic, epistemic, and security conflict. Through this work, ConTrust seeks to advance our understanding of how modern pluralistic societies (and international orders) generate trust in the relative absence of shared norms and values, and to provide guidance on how conflict can be organized and shaped in ways that are productive of trust.

Keywords. Conflict; Crisis; Social Cohesion; Justification; Trust; Uncertainty

1. Introduction

Social and political conflict is a common feature of political life within and beyond the nation-state. In fact, political and social orders can best be described as orders of conflict. But if this is the case, how is it possible that conflicts do not escalate to the point of tearing societies or international systems apart? How can their members expect that the parties to a conflict will abide by certain rules, that institutions will protect everyone against transgressions, and that the social world as a whole is sufficiently stable to allow individuals to orient their actions within it in meaningful ways? A key answer to these questions lies in the concept of *trust*. Trust creates a form of risky, "insecure security" that can never be fully secured, and yet constitutes a social bond that holds the secret of political coexistence. But how does trust come about?

To answer this question, the research initiative "ConTrust: Trust in Conflict – Political Life under Conditions of Uncertainty" seeks to understand the relationship between trust and conflict. Contrary to many approaches to conflict and trust research, ConTrust assumes that trust is not always opposed to conflict, but rather arises, manifests itself, takes shape, and demonstrates its value in conflict. Thus, we aim to analyze *trust in and through conflict*. More specifically, our research seeks to identify under what social and institutional conditions, how, and with what effects trust emerges from and can at least be stabilized in and through conflict.

Of course, we do not assume that trust *only* emerges in conflict, nor that all conflict generates trust. Nor do we assume that every kind of trust is beneficial to political and social life. As we argue below, trust can be justified or unjustified, and unjustified trust can be detrimental to the stability and proper functioning of political systems. Nevertheless, conflict is characteristic of modern pluralistic societies, and we argue that it must be recognized as a relevant source of trust. Otherwise, we do not see how social and political cooperation in pluralistic societies and international systems can be fully explained.

In this working paper, we aim to unfold the general research agenda of ConTrust by explicating the core idea of *trust in conflict*. We begin by highlighting the need for trust in modern pluralistic societies (and beyond) and how conflict features in these societies (section 2), before outlining our relational and experiential understanding of trust (section 3) and an integrative understanding of conflict (section 4). Building trust in conflict is even more challenging in times of

1 This text was written as a programmatic attempt to orient our research when our project started in 2021/22. In the time after, we updated it slightly with regard to more recent findings, especially from within our initiative.

widespread and fundamental uncertainty that fuels conflict, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated (section 5). We conclude our paper with illustrative insights into the four social contexts in which ConTrust examines the relationship between trust and conflict (section 6).

2. Trust versus conflict?

Societies need trust. Trust is the basic ingredient that makes cooperation within, between, and beyond societies possible. In the face of the ever-present danger of being cheated or dominated by others, trust provides a sense of security that others will (at least) refrain from harming you, thus allowing you to cooperate with them. But the more diverse and conflicted societies and political arrangements become, the harder it seems to reproduce sufficient levels of trust. Modern pluralistic societies, as well as relations between societies, are characterized by conflicts of various kinds and intensities. Our research focuses on the following types and contexts of conflict: *Political* conflicts arise over the legitimate distribution of power within and between societies, over appropriate forms of governance, or over the basic values and norms that a society should embrace. *Socio-economic* conflicts concern the distribution of resources and the creation or lack of opportunities. In capitalist societies, competition is the main mode of economic life, but resource and opportunity conflicts also play out in arenas and settings beyond markets, such as the family. *Epistemic* conflicts erupt over knowledge and information and the normative force of representation. Disinformation campaigns aim to undermine the trustworthiness of journalistic media, political authorities, and scientific institutions on issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, or Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Epistemic conflicts also concern issues of epistemic justice, such as bias in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Finally, *security* conflicts erupt within and between states, in disputes over the right to territory or resources, in challenges to internal security systems, and, increasingly, in architectures of cybersecurity. Security conflicts represent a liminal case in that they often involve violence, both physical and symbolic, and jeopardize the continued functioning of existing orders or individual lives.

Conflicts thus take many forms and revolve around a wide variety of goals and objects of contention. In many cases, they cannot be contained by a conventional, shared belief in common values or by an unquestioned source of authority, so alternative ways of developing trust are needed. ConTrust asks whether trust can be generated in and through conflict. And if so, how is this possible? Is trust not to be found precisely where conflict is absent? ConTrust challenges this widely held assumption across disciplines.[2]

In the social sciences, a communitarian assumption associated with a long tradition in social philosophy finds considerable support, according to which culturally homogeneous communities with low levels of conflict represent the paradigmatic context for the formation of trust (Fukuyama 1995; Sandel 1996); in his influential book *Bowling Alone,* Robert Putnam locates "thick" forms of trust in communities that allow for face-to-face interaction (Putnam 2020: 136). From this perspective, "thinner," generalized forms of trust can only emerge in larger contexts if they are nourished by sources of shared identity, familiarity, or other forms of substantive commonality (Endreß 2002). In a review of 87 studies, Dinesen et al. (2020) ascertained that the overwhelming majority of them find a significant negative correlation between ethnic diversity and social trust (in line with Putnam 2007).

In moral philosophy, Annette Baier's seminal article on "Trust and Antitrust" (1986) locates trust in personal, moral relationships of good will and accepted vulnerability to the actions of others, and she suggests that trust be located in caring rather than contractual relationships. Following Baier, Martin Hartmann (2020: 89, 116) sees relationships of love, friendship, and familiarity as paradigmatic contexts in which relationships of trust develop. This constitutes a certain mainstream in philosophical trust research, which, like Darwall (2017: 46), argues that trust is a non-deontic "second-personal attitude of the heart" that has its place in personal relationships and attachments (see also Budnik 2021).

In media and communication studies, trust in the media is seen as an important resource for democratic governance. Starting with the work of Hovland in the 1950s, the ability of the media to shape and potentially change attitudes has been measured in terms of credibility, i.e., perceived expertise and trustworthiness, while trustworthiness was linked to impartiality and political neutrality (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley, 1959). The model has since been refined to include multiple factors (Kohring and Matthes 2007), but the focus of long-term studies such as Gallup's multi-decade panel study of trust in the media remains on trust levels in representative focus groups and is centered on what are now best described as legacy mass media (television and newspapers). The influential two-stage flow or "opinion leader" model of communication developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld in the 1950s, which continues to inform trust research in communication studies, links political opinions to the influence of respected community members at the face-to-face level (Campus 2012) and introduces a focus on community and personalized trust into the field of mass communication studies.

At the same time, trust in the so-called mass media is a non-reciprocal relationship based on parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956; Hediger and Simon 2024), and thus a paradigmatic case of trust not based on face-to-face communication. As such, mass media continue to pose a challenge to communitarian notions of trust, a challenge that remains largely implicit in the literature because trust relationships in the media remain undertheorized (Ström-

2 The argumentation in this section of the paper focuses on the the authors' disciplines, i.e. peace and conflict studies (Deitelhoff), political philosophy (Forst), media studies (Hediger), and international relations (Wille). Other members of the ConTrust research initiative have extended the argument to economics, law, literature, social psychology, sociology, and other disciplines. For an overview of this work, see, for example, Pfeifer and Weipert-Fenner 2022; Wolff 2023; Cozzaglio 2023; Friebel et al. 2023; Schidel 2023; Peukert 2023.

bäck et al. 2020). Three possible scenarios for the impact of the Internet on trust relationships are: Internet communication transforms social capital and creates new networks of trust; Internet communication further isolates individuals and reduces trust; and Internet-based relationships complement existing trust relationships and merge into new forms of social capital. Social media and networked communication seem more suited to the reciprocal trust relationship advocated by Putnam (Håkansson and Witmer 2015), to the point where it has been argued that a platform such as Facebook is based on trust (Waldman 2016). At the same time, such platforms have also emerged as drivers of particularized and authoritarian trust (Flew 2019). Beyond mass and social media, trust in the veracity of representation is an important concern in documentary theory and practice. While the digitization of image technologies has triggered a "crisis of indexicality" and thus a crisis of trust in the veracity of the documentary image (Hediger 2006), questions of trust remain at the heart of the debate on documentary ethics (Nash 2012, Hediger 2021). Across disciplines, however, mediated communication is by default seen as a challenge and potential problem for personalized trust relationships, which are implicitly posited as the norm against which other forms of trust should be measured.

Even in the field of peace and conflict studies, which has extensively studied trust relations in the context of – mostly violent – conflict, the majority of contributions subscribe to the juxtaposition of trust and conflict that ConTrust challenges. A large body of literature on the effects of violent conflict on trust emphasizes that violent conflict generally destroys trust and reduces the chances for cooperation. The longer and more intense the violence, the greater the loss of trust between the parties and the more difficult it is to return to peace. This applies to both interstate and intrastate violence (Cassar et al. 2013; Colletta and Cullen 2000; Collier et al. 2013; de Juan and Pierskalla 2016; Rohner et al. 2013). There is also some research on trust building in conflict, focusing primarily on trust building within the respective groups, although this may also contribute to intergroup trust building as peace processes progress (Gilligan et al. 2014; Traunmüller et al. 2015). Thus, in this literature, trust is generally seen as a precondition for successful conflict resolution (cf. Marková and Gillespie 2012), but not, as in ConTrust, as a variable that is generated and changed in and through conflict.

Given this picture and the recurrent materialization of violent conflict, trust is commonly seen as the basis for cooperation, but also as severely lacking in interstate relations (see Rathbun 2018; Wille 2025). Consider Kenneth Waltz' famous formulation that "because some states may at any time use force, all states need to be prepared to do so" (Waltz 1979: 102). Without an overarching authority capable of effectively managing conflicts between them, states live in a self-help system in which trust in others, if betrayed, can have devastating consequences (Waltz 1979; Booth and Wheeler 2008; Jervis 1978). While the radical notion of a complete absence of trust in international politics has long been abandoned, the notion that international politics must often be conducted without or with little trust persists. Even in institutionalist theories, cooperation is not built on trust, but trust eventually grows out of it, as actors who enter into cooperation in order to maximize utility eventually begin to gain *confidence* in the reliability of their cooperation partners (Keohane 1984; see also Hoffman 2006). These theories distinguish between cooperation problems on the basis of the severity of the distributive conflict and the trust problems that underlie them, and from this they derive hypotheses about the likelihood that certain conflicts can be resolved cooperatively (Schelling 1980; Zürn 1992; on institutional design see Koremenos et al. 2004; Kydd 2004). In this literature, however, trust is at best an outcome of cooperation, safeguarded by institutional mechanisms such as verification and sanctions.

More recently, peace and conflict scholars have turned to interactions between heads of state and other decision-makers to develop more complex hypotheses about the conditions under which trust emerges and cooperation becomes possible (Holmes and Wheeler 2020; Kydd 2005; Rathbun 2012; Wheeler 2018). However, even in this literature, the juxtaposition of conflict and mistrust on the one side and cooperation and trust on the other is rarely challenged (but see Wille and Martill 2023). Thus, despite the considerable attention that trust has received in peace and conflict studies, the generation of trust in conflict has scarcely been the focus of research (see Listhaug and Jakobsen 2018: 571-72).

In light of this situation, ConTrust proposes two major innovations. First, we aim to develop conceptual and methodological tools to understand how trust emerges and can be maintained in conflict situations in different social contexts. Second, we aim to develop these tools in an interdisciplinary way, as we believe that the phenomena we need to understand are of such complexity that they call for new perspectives that combine the strengths of different disciplines and overcome their blind spots and biases. Understanding different conflict and trust dynamics requires bringing together various empirical, theoretical, and methodological approaches, each of which emphasizes different dimensions of trust and conflict. What has been lacking so far is both a cross-disciplinary heuristic for researching forms and contexts of conflict and an *integrative research language* that analyzes conceptions of trust in different social and political conflict contexts on the basis of a common basic concept of trust and that enables insights that extend and transcend disciplinary perspectives. In researching several contexts of conflict and the dynamics of trust within them, we draw on different methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, quasi-experimental, and experimental approaches to develop such a perspective.

3. A relational understanding of trust

Against the backdrop of the dominant consensus in trust research, our research agenda is admittedly bold – *namely, to explore conflict as a relevant factor in the formation and reproduction of trust in modern societies*. This agenda is

based on a general dynamic-processual concept of trust (see Forst 2022 and 2023 for a fuller discussion). According to this core concept, where A and B are parties to a trust relationship, trust is a practical attitude characterized by the *positive expectation* on the part of A that B will be *motivated* and *competent* to act (or function, if we are talking about an institution) in a way that is *conducive* to (or at least not detrimental to) A's interests (relevant to the trust relationship), without A being able to *know* whether B will act (or function) accordingly, and without A being able to *control* B's motivations and behavior (or functioning). Trust does not exist as a fixed quantity or "resource" of a substantial shared identity, but is understood as a relational attitude based on certain experiences and convictions. Trust relations are always in motion, and trust represents an "advance payment" (*Vorschuss* in Luhmann's terms, 2014: 30) for others in certain social contexts of uncertainty (from small groups to larger relational structures to complex systems; see Freitag and Traunmüller 2009; Herzog 2013; Uslaner 2002). Because of the inherent risk and uncertainty of trust, not knowing whether the trusted party is fully trustworthy and will repay the trust invested, trust depends on confirmation (Hardin 2002). When confirmation is provided by the trustworthiness of others (in the eyes of the trustor), trust is reproduced and developed.

In its research agenda, ConTrust places particular emphasis on the distinction between *justified* and *unjustified* trust (O'Neill 2002; Norris 2022). Too often, discussions of trust as a general value in social and democratic life neglect this distinction, since we argue that only justified trust is valuable, depending on the standards of justification used. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that those who trust, say, a populist leader do not operate with ideas about what justifies that trust (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2017; Vitale and Girard 2022; Hediger and Simon 2024), which is why further distinctions between *partial* and *impartial* justifications of trust are needed (Forst 2022).

Another important conceptual innovation proposed by ConTrust is to make special use of the distinction between a basic concept of trust and context-specific *conceptions* of trust (related to the contexts to be analyzed). This builds on a distinction originally proposed by John Rawls (1971), but used differently here (following Forst 2013: ch. 1 and Forst 2024b: chs. 4 and 5). ConTrust suggests that the unity of different disciplinary as well as contextual analyses of trust is made possible by a common understanding of a shared *non-normative* concept of trust, which can be developed into a plurality of different explanatory as well as normative *conceptions* of trust.

With a normatively neutral definition of the term and the distinction between *concept* and *conceptions*, it becomes possible to avoid premature commitments to specific understandings of trust that might otherwise be imported wholesale from particular disciplines. For example, the general *concept* of trust does not imply that trust is based on or dependent upon the benevolence of others, as is the case with the moral philosophical *conception* (cf. Baier 1986; Hartmann 2020). Nevertheless, trust always presupposes that what I trust in will benefit me – but the motive with which others "include" (Hardin 2006) one's concerns can be left open at the level of the general concept. Nor does the concept include whether trust is personal, particularized, generalized, or institutionalized (Uslaner 2002; Warren 2017), how "pre-reflexive" and "reflexive" elements of trust interact (Offe 2001b; Endreß 2002), whether it is communicated or remains implicit, and how affective and cognitive elements relate to each other. Moreover, the basic concept of trust does not contain the criteria for distinguishing between justified and unjustified trust; these must be elaborated separately depending on the context.

Any conception of trust must include a trusting agent who trusts another agent or institution with respect to something specific for specific reasons, because he or she assumes that those who are trusted are *trustworthy*. In the act of trusting, "the complexity of the future world is reduced," as Luhmann (2014: 24, our translation) puts it, and it remains an act of freedom that reckons with the freedom of others and consequently runs the risk of being disappointed (Gambetta 2001). We *trust* people, processes, and institutions that respond to (human)[3] reason-giving; in contrast, we *rely on* machines or certain abstract, impersonal processes and procedures (but we may trust the human agency required to create and regulate such infrastructures, in part because of the "humanness" at work in their operation [Lankton, McKnight and Tripp 2015]).

We propose the following four-part basic definition for the concept of a trust relationship:[4]

A trusts B in context C in relation to D.

Let us look briefly at the four positions A-D:

A: An agent (person or collective) who stands in some relationship to B and has positive expectations about B's *competence, motivations*, and *behavior*, but cannot be sure that these expectations will be fulfilled (and cannot control that they will be). At the conceptual level, trust does not require an expectation of B's *goodwill* in every context. We think that, in addition to B's *competence* to act in the desired way, the trust relationship requires A's expectation that B is *motivated* to act in a way that is *beneficial*, or at least *not detrimental,* to A on the basis of appropriate reasons – that is, internally, reasons that A deems appropriate for trust and, intersubjectively, reasons that A and B *could* mutually accept. The trustworthiness of B is given if B is sufficiently motivated to act in ways that are conducive or not detrimental to A's interests (as interpreted by A). This general, minimal definition at the basic conceptual level covers cases of trust in personal relationships, where the motivation is more demanding, as well as cases of trust in economic exchanges, in trusting colleagues, in trusting journalists, or in trusting political representa-

3 We acknowledge that this involves a substantive question concerning artificial intelligence, which we intend to address in our research.

4 The following is adapted in part from Forst 2022.

tives. Considerations of (justifiable) self-interest or a status ethos may count as appropriate motivations.

B: Given the above analysis, B can be a *person*, a *collective*, an *organization*, and (in a sense to be specified) a human *institution* that is sensitive to intersubjective communication and practical justification. Trust in an institution presupposes that the institution functions in a way that justifies the "advance payment" of a judgment of trustworthiness, knowing that the institution is not a perfect machine; it is fragile and depends on the responsible behavior of the persons in charge of it. In a given social setting, where participants have reasons to have confidence in particular institutions, it is this confidence that generates trust in the representatives of such institutions; but the generation of trust also works the other way around, since it is positive experiences with certain representatives that also generate institutional trust (Offe 2001a).

Thus, we should distinguish the levels of *personal* trust (in particular individuals), *particularized* trust (in members of a particular group), *generalized* trust (in members of a society or larger collective), *institutional* trust (in procedures, rules, and the functioning of an order of action), and, finally, *systemic* trust (in a social system). But it would be a mistake to overlook the ways in which these levels are interrelated.

C: C denotes a particular context of trust relations, and there are different ways to define such contexts. We focus on them primarily as *contexts of conflict* with certain conflict constellations, objects of conflict, etc. (i.e., A and B are currently or potentially in a conflictual relationship). The nature of such contexts co-determines the chances that trust will be destroyed or can be created or reproduced. In particular, the contexts of conflicts on which we focus include political conflicts (over power and governance), economic conflicts (over the allocation of resources and opportunities), epistemic conflicts (over knowledge, information, and representation), and security conflicts (over the physical and operational integrity of social orders and systems). In line with this analysis, we are primarily interested in conceptions of political trust, socio-economic trust, epistemic trust, and security-related trust.

The aforementioned contexts of conflict can also be seen as *normative contexts* of social expectations and conventions about when to trust whom. Vallier (2022), following Lahno (2001) and Mullin (2005), argues that the commitment that makes B trustworthy expresses a shared commitment to certain social norms, shared by A and B, that generate beliefs about when persons or agents can be trusted and why. This is indeed relevant for the analysis of context-specific conceptions of trust, although one should keep in mind how complex the normative orders of modern societies are and how much variation there is, if one thinks, for example, of all the norms that apply to the question of trustworthiness in a modern economy.

Following this line of thought, we can define a normative context of trust as a *context of justification* (Forst 2017; Forst and Günther 2021). This can be understood in two ways: first, as a context of norms (moral, legal, political, social, religious, etc., or a combination thereof) that are *de facto* regarded as binding and guiding; and second, as a context of norms that *justifiably* claim normative validity by meeting certain standards of justification. With respect to both empirical and critical normativity, trust relations are relations of justification. In a trust situation, A believes there is justification for trusting B, B believes there is justification for acting in a trustworthy manner with respect to D and in accordance with social norms relevant to C. A betrayal of trust will be judged along these lines, as will a form of misplaced trust. But in a critical analysis we need to go beyond these factual justification relations, because some of the norms that guide trust relations in a given society may be problematic, full of stereotypes, exclusions, and discriminations (King 2021; Fricker 2007; Schidel 2023). The same argument can be made for problematic representations of social agency in the media (Hall 1989, Dyer 2002, Brooks and Hébert 2006). In our view, one cannot simply trust trust as it is practiced in a given society; otherwise, one runs the risk of accepting the unacceptable or hypostasizing and even idealizing existing social orders. In other words, we need a *critical theory of trust*.

D: D is the object of trust or the point of the trust relationship – it defines what is important to A and what A expects from B. This is crucial to understanding and justifying the trust relationship. Trust relationships need not be all-encompassing; they have a specific point. Most of the time they are focused on specific goals.

Conceptions of trust, to indicate the further direction of our research, specify all four places, A–D, i.e., the trust relationship A to B, the context C, and the object D. They also imply a descriptive analysis of (standard) norms and reasons for trust for each context, as well as allowing for a normative analysis of justified trust. Our goal is to gain insight into the conflict dynamics that generate political, socio-economic, epistemic, and security trust. These are the four conceptions in which we are primarily interested.

4. A productive understanding of conflict

But what exactly is the relationship between conflict and trust? How is trust formed, stabilized – or endangered – in conflicts? ConTrust follows a tradition in the sociology of conflict, particularly associated with Georg Simmel (1992 [1908]), which emphasizes the importance of conflicts for social dynamics and social development. For Simmel, conflict is an elementary component of all social processes that have a *socializing function* (*Vergesellschaftungsfunktion*).

The pessimistic view of conflict, which sees it as revealing the divisions between members of society and tearing apart the normative bonds that exist between them, overlooks the diversity of conflict by reducing it to its most negative manifestation. It also fails to recognize the socializing aspects that are equally effective in conflict alongside all its divisive aspects. When individuals or social groups enter into conflict, they also relate to each other. They initiate or re-actualize a social relationship with each other, even if this

relationship is not initially cooperative.[5] This social relationship develops in the course of the conflict or in its aftermath: It can change its nature and intensity (Simmel 1968).

From this perspective, conflicts open up or make visible a shared social space between the conflicting parties. Simmel's student Lewis Coser and later Ralf Dahrendorf elaborated the socially integrative functions of conflict more systematically. Coser distinguished the various functions of conflict for political orders, which are closely interrelated: a realization function, an explanatory function, and a dynamic function. First, conflicts help actors realize that they are part of a social whole; second, they reveal previously latent, often unreflected normative expectations and rules of action, i.e., conflicts have an explanatory function: they point to sets of norms or institutions and the expectations associated with them (Coser 2009: 152). For conflicts not only point to what already exists, they also leave it open to the conflict parties to change it: Normative expectations and rules of action become an issue in conflict and can be discarded, updated, modified, condensed, or expanded accordingly. This is the third, dynamic function of conflict. These functions of conflict can be observed in all kinds of social orders, be they national or international.

According to Coser, it is precisely this dynamic function of conflict that contributes to social integration and thus to trust, because it enables societies to repeatedly adapt to changing contexts and to find innovative ways of dealing with them (Coser 2009: 153). By discovering and shaping new alternatives, as Dahrendorf points out (Dahrendorf 1972: 261; see also Sunstein 2003), conflict can also ensure that positions of power do not become rigid, but remain elastic – at least under certain social and political conditions. Social change and progress are the core concerns of Dahrendorf's reflections on social conflict, in which the openness of a society is determined by the way it deals with conflict. Thus, the more societies allow for conflict, under the right conditions (we should add), the more freedom they exhibit and the more trust they can build out of conflict.

Similarly, in political theory, conflict-inspired republican theories of democracy have emphasized the productive function of "checks and balances" and conflict (Rödel et al. 1989; Dubiel 1994, 1997; cf. Sander and Heitmeyer 1997; Rosanvallon 2010; Pettit 1999). According to these theories (some of which build on Arendt and Lefort), it is not a stable and substantive consensus on shared norms that lies at the heart of democracy, but the freedom to challenge reified forms of such consensus – and the recognition of the rights of all to do so. It is the general "ability to say no" that characterizes democracy, as Shapiro (1996) pointed out, or as Dubiel put it: "Democratic societies are not sustained by conflicting groups sacrificing their particular interests and opinions to an imaginary consensus. Rather, the normative capital that integrates them is created precisely in the chain of conflicts that are fought out according to rules" (Dubiel 2008: 666, our translation). Understood in this way, democracies are procedural (Habermas 1996) and structural entities that have developed certain rules or institutional arrangements in order to derive social integration from conflict, linking their own continued existence to the freedom of citizens to challenge established norms and develop democracy further (Rosanvallon 2008). This is the deeper normative meaning of conflict in democracy: under certain conditions (which we want to determine), in the dispute over how citizens want to live in a democratic polity and what that entails, a freedom to act differently arises, which generates the binding forces on which democratic polities thrive (Deitelhoff 2013; Clasen 2019: 236). In other words, democracy is an order of justification animated by the search for and conflict over concrete justifications (Forst 2012).

Trust as a concept does not appear explicitly in these approaches (exceptions are Rosanvallon 2008 and Warren 2017). Thus, the task of ConTrust is to tease out the role of trust in conflict in order to address the trust-building aspects of conflict itself, i.e., the types and dynamics of conflict and the mechanisms for framing and managing conflict in which trust is generated and stabilized rather than compromised and destroyed in democracies and other forms of political and social organization. Only by understanding these dynamics, the corresponding forms of conflict management – such as political and legal procedures, diplomatic rules, market mechanisms, formats and protocols of communication and the production and dissemination of knowledge, regimes of physical and informational security, etc. – and their background conditions can we develop proposals for creating and maintaining trust in modern pluralistic societies in which conflict is inevitable. ConTrust will conduct a comparative typological analysis of these dynamics in different contexts in order to identify experiences, processes and procedures of productive conflict. It will have to develop normative and analytical criteria to distinguish between forms of justified and unjustified trust. Finally, the cultural and socio-economic conditions that promote or hinder trust will be examined. What forms of social division and inequality, or antagonistic opposition, make mediatized processes of trust in conflict impossible, but rather require distrust and resistance based on a critical perspective (Adorno 1996)?

With respect to the political context, for example, trust reckons with *conflict* and the possibility of failure or betrayal, and thus requires frameworks of justification that minimize this risk and work alongside and in conflict – and often emerge in conflict, seeking ways to establish *justificatory relations within conflict*, dealing with actual or potential conflict (for a more detailed analysis, see Forst 2022). Generally speaking, justified trust arises in conflict when agents *experience* a reliable and productive justificatory relationship with those with whom they disagree (perhaps bitterly), an experience (Wheeler 2018) that is often made possible by forms of *mediation* and *institutional framing* (Deitelhoff and Schmelzle 2023), where trust in such frameworks, as frameworks of justification and understanding,

5 Even in major wars, cooperation is usually not completely absent. Wars are fought within a system of established rules and procedures of international humanitarian law that regulate both legitimate forms of violence and the treatment of one's opponent. Even though those rules are often violated, their existence and basic validity is hardly disputed.

transforms conflicting parties into trusting partners, at least to some extent (while the conflict lasts). This comes about through higher-order trust formations, what Warren (2017: 34) calls "second-order trust" in political institutions "that channel political conflict into the democratic media of public discourse and voting" (see Schmalz-Bruns 2002). But what is crucial here in general, not just in political contexts, is that *a relation of justification emerges and persists within conflict*, and is often established precisely *because* of and *through* intersubjective and social conflict, transforming conflict into a productive social and political practice. Such relations of justification (Forst 2014) have a number of trust-conferring qualities: they secure a certain basic standing of agents (and thus provide *security* and *voice*); in cases of justified trust, they provide sites of justification that channel conflicts in a *fair* and *transparent* way; and, if all goes well, they even open the door to compromise and new forms of *understanding*. This can also take the form of agreeing to disagree. Such relationships of justification help to build trust by minimizing the risks of failures of trust and escalation.

The procedural dimension is crucial to understanding the dynamics of political trust. For "second-order trust" does not imply that conflicts disappear or are resolved; rather, it implies that they can be lived and dealt with in a justifiable way, by respecting rights and duties of justification, or by following protocols of mediated communication. Procedures mediate and transform conflicts. At their best, they do so by ensuring a shared reality of and belief in normative structures that secure basic justificatory standing while working out ways to manage and possibly resolve conflicts. Legal mechanisms, and the rule of law in general, provide a model for such procedures (Bogdandy 2022). The many ways in which the rule of law institutionalizes forms of respect that remain stable and functional while conflict is being dealt with are exemplary of the institutional trust that arises in conflict-at the same time, as noted above, this kind of trust involves a generalized trust in fellow citizens to play by those rules and a specialized trust in those who have functions in such a system. Trust in the media, which depends in large part on the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, is another example (Clemens 2020), as are regulations for consumer products and services.

Although conflicts are common in social contexts, their forms, objects, and occasions vary widely. It should therefore come as no surprise that to date there is no general theory of conflict (Bonacker 2009: 179), but rather theoretical elaborations on specific forms of conflict such as class conflict (Dahrendorf 1959), status conflict (Bourdieu 1984), civil war (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), interstate war (Organski and Kugler 1981), or legal disputes (Alexy 2010).

While all conflicts denote a difference in position between at least two actors, groups, classes or states (Imbusch 2006), both the nature of the difference and the way the conflict is conducted can vary. Conflicts can be triggered by positional differences over specific goals or over the means to achieve these goals; they can reflect differences of interest over relatively or absolutely valued goods or disputes over values and identities (Efinger and Zürn 1989: 224; cf. Senghaas 1992: 72; see also Bonacker 2009). The latter, also referred to as "indivisible" conflicts, are often seen as difficult to resolve through cooperation, while differences of interest are seen as "divisible" conflicts and thus easier to resolve (Hirschman 1994: 300). However, these attributions are not unproblematic, because the perception of the conflict parties about the divisible or indivisible nature of the object can change in the course of the conflict, and many conflicts have both divisible and indivisible aspects (Dubiel 1997; cf. Giegel 1998). The way in which conflicts unfold is also variable. For example, there are positional differences that are perceived but not contested (latent conflicts), while other differences give rise to intense contestation, including the use of violence (manifest conflicts). Within the latter case, Coser (2009) further distinguishes between realistic and unrealistic conflicts. Unrealistic conflicts characterize those often-violent disputes in which there is no concrete object of conflict and the dispute threatens to become an end in itself. Moreover, some conflicts of values and identities may turn out to be resolvable without zero-sum logics, as in the case of same-sex marriage, while some material conflicts, if interpreted as a major conflict over dominant power, may turn out to be indivisible.

Only when conflicts or conflicting parties work through the conflict over one or more objects in a meaningful way can disputes turn out to be productive. Productive conflicts are based on the fact that one level or dimension of interaction is at least temporarily exempted from radical questioning (the zone of trust), thus creating space for dealing with other dimensions (the zone of mistrust). On this basis, conflicts not only consume trust, but also generate it, since the two domains are intertwined: "Successful" (resolved or at least contained) conflicts reinforce trust, even if the zone of contention remains large and may have expanded, as long as it corresponds to an experience that signals trustworthiness, possibly even in places where it was not originally expected – in other words, a bond of justification remains in place.

Thus, in general terms, ConTrust aims to solve the puzzle of trust in conflict: Trust involves the expectation that B will positively consider the interests of A (broadly understood, including value-based interests) by at least not acting against them. Conflict, however, implies putting one's own interests ahead of those of others and, in extreme cases, denying the interests of others. How, then, can conflict lead to trust? Only, we argue, if the conflict leads to a learning process in which those involved (A and B) recognize *different layers* of their interests, so that they understand that in the conflict some of their interests are frustrated while others, possibly of a higher order, are preserved or fulfilled. A conflict is productive when such learning takes place.

5. Uncertainty as a challenge to trust relations

The framing of conflict comes under pressure from experiences of crisis when the procedures of conflict management themselves are caught in a maelstrom of uncertainty. ConTrust shares the assessment that the major crisis expe-

riences since the turn of the millennium have tended to corrode the certainty that existing institutions are capable of developing and implementing solutions appropriate to the problems we face, and that such solutions could exist without tragic trade-offs (Palmisano and Sacchi 2024; Rothstein 2000; Schmalz-Bruns and Zintl 2002; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017). By focusing on the formation of trust in conflict, ConTrust aims to provide a nuanced perspective on existing institutions and structures and to explain the often-diagnosed differences in the trust placed in them. This perspective also makes it possible to determine more precisely what uncertainties and insecurities consist of and where they stem from; in this context, the question of how cultural and socio-economic conditions relate to each other is not insignificant.

Decisions must always be made under conditions of greater or lesser uncertainty. If, however, the uncertainty can no longer be absorbed in procedures of conflict management or resolution, this can lead to a temporal, factual, and social fragmentation of the bases for decisions, which in turn can lead to the escalation, unresolved termination, or displacement of the conflict. This can be seen when people begin to believe only their own truths and beliefs and discredit those of others. They trust only the familiar and distrust the unfamiliar, for example when it comes to political principles and decisions, economic measures, and the recognition and prognosis of environmental hazards or epidemics and their social consequences.

A distinction must therefore be made between two understandings of uncertainty. As discussed above, a situation of uncertainty is conceptually constitutive of trust, since A takes the risk of trusting without knowing what B will do. Simmel (1992 [1908]: 393) characterizes trust as a "hypothesis about future behavior," where this hypothesis is a "middle state between knowing and not knowing" (cf. Möllering 2001). Trust is always a leap into the unknown. A different, more comprehensive understanding of uncertainty comes into play when the aforementioned epistemic, social and political fragmentation sets in. ConTrust investigates such conditions and processes, but does not subscribe to any grand social-theoretical thesis, such as the claim that after a "risk society" (*Risikogesellschaft*) we are now living in a (global) "uncertainty society" (*Ungewissheitsgesellschaft*) in which risk calculations are no longer possible. This opens up an important field of research in which, building on Knight's (1921) classic study of risk and uncertainty, questions can be raised about the new quality of uncertainty in social, economic, political, and media contexts (Beckert and Bronk 2019; Blyth 2010; Kay and King 2020; Gosh and Sarkar 2020; Katzenstein 2021).

In a situation of uncertainty in the second sense, social actors may resort to strategies that seek to counter uncertainty by minimizing, repressing, externalizing, or shutting down conflicts altogether – or even escalating them in a truncated manner (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016). However, this not only undermines general trust, but can also lead to the development of *authoritarian and aggressive forms of trust* (and associated mistrust) that declare conflicts to be battles against opponents who must be marginalized or defeated (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2017). Trust in charismatic leaders and aggressive demarcation (both internally and externally) is also a response to social and political insecurity and challenges democratic forms of conflict, compromise, and social pluralism (Forst 2019 and 2023; Günther 2020). Particularly in times of a "politics of survival," when existential threats exist or are perceived to exist, trust structures can emerge that are anti-democratic and threaten fundamental rights (Norris 2022). In contrast to many existing studies and research approaches that cast the concept of trust per se in a positive light, ConTrust assumes that there are also destructive dynamics in the formation of trust (and not only in the loss of trust) (Hartmann 2011; Offe 2001a; Schindler and Wille 2019).

6. Studying trust in different contexts of conflict. A research agenda

The ConTrust research agenda focuses on four contexts in which conflict occurs and which, taken together, form the basis for cooperative forms of social and political life. More specifically, we identify four types of uncertainty and corresponding objects of conflict that put trust to the test, but can also become sources of particular conceptions of trust: political uncertainty and struggles over power and governance, economic uncertainty and questions of allocation and opportunity, epistemic uncertainty and struggles over information and representation, and existential uncertainty and conflicts over physical and operational integrity. The common goal of the four research areas is to determine when and how conflict generates trust, and how trust in turn affects the course of conflict. We seek to better understand how political, socio-economic, epistemic, and security trust is built and maintained in conflict.

Area	Context	Conception of trust	Conflict over	Type of uncertainty
1	Political orders of the state and beyond	Political trust	Power and governance	Political uncertainty
2	Relations of socio-economic exchange	Socio-economic trust	Allocation and opportunity	Economic uncertainty
3	Media practices of media and knowledge	Epistemic trust	Information and representation	Epistemic uncertainty
4	Systems of security	Security trust	Physical and operational integrity	Existential uncertainty

Our own preliminary research, as well as a small number of studies in a variety of disciplines, suggests that evidence of trust in conflict can be found in all four of the contexts we have chosen to study. A good example of how trust can arise in political conflict in democracies is when conventional norms about whom to trust or distrust are challenged in cultural conflicts over whether teachers or judges should be allowed to wear Muslim headscarves. Overcoming stereotypical assumptions about Muslim religion, female autonomy, and state neutrality can open the way to trust in and out of conflict; i.e., the difference in faith remains, but a form of recognition (and toleration) develops that does not favor certain religions over others as being fully compa-

tible with the rule of law and democracy (Forst 2024a). Research by Deitelhoff and colleagues (Zimmermann et al. 2023) suggests that in conflicts over international norms and institutions, institutional channels that allow for regular contestation help prevent conflicts from escalating. Where such contestation does not find institutional channels or is actively sidelined, conflicts often result in a breakdown of trust and the destruction of shared institutions. A case in point is the African Union's contestation of the International Criminal Court in the 2000s, which led to a breakdown in African states' cooperation with the Court (Deitelhoff 2020). Trust can also arise in the context of economic conflicts over the allocation of goods and opportunities. A rare example where this has been systematically studied is the formation of teams in organizations. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) found that teams that initially went through a more intense "storming phase" with conflicts over rules and roles performed better than those that did not. In the area of media and knowledge practices and related conflicts over information and representation, we can observe a sustained campaign by the new right to undermine trust in the old media, including in particular public broadcasting (Połońska and Beckett 2019, Mini 2023). Independent journalism is increasingly being replaced by an ecosystem of so-called creator media, including influencers and podcasts (Khan 2024, Udupa 2024, Gogarty 2025), which systematically feeds distrust of existing institutions and challenges the authority of established sources of knowledge. Despite this troubling trend, recent quantitative research on media and trust in Germany suggests that the staging of conflictual debates on core issues on television has actually contributed to the growth of generalized trust in the institution of public broadcasting and, by extension, the institutions of liberal democracy (Quiring et al. 2024). In the realm of security, the creation of trust seems particularly unlikely because of the high stakes and intensity of conflict. And yet, even in wars, both individual enemy soldiers cooperate to spare each other (Chiu 2019) and states cooperate when they limit their conflict geographically and in terms of its intensity (Freedman 2014; Osgood 1957); both dynamics can hardly be understood without assuming that at least a modicum of trust can be built in conflict, even when it has reached the level of military confrontation.

In our research, we seek to identify the conditions under which conflict can produce trust rather than merely consume it. To better understand this potential, and for heuristic purposes, we distinguish three basic scenarios in which actors can gain trust in conflict. According to the first scenario, actors can learn in and through conflict about a pre-existing but previously unknown or neglected trustworthiness of other actors or institutions. For example, if an incumbent loses an election and removes the uncertainty inherent in the democratic process by adhering to democratic norms and accepting defeat, other political actors will learn from this experience that the incumbent (and their party) is trustworthy, and trust can grow out of conflict. We call this a scenario of *discovery*.

The second scenario is that in and through conflict, actors develop new criteria of trustworthiness, so that actors or institutions that previously did not appear trustworthy now do. For example, through the experience of litigating with a professional and objective judge who wears a headscarf, the parties may modify their assumptions about what constitutes trustworthiness and state neutrality in such a setting. We call this a scenario of *adaptation*.

In a third scenario, previously untrustworthy actors can change in and through conflict and become trustworthy. One example is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which transformed former perpetrators into trustworthy actors who acknowledged their past wrongdoings, thereby restoring the conditions for interpersonal and intergroup trust. We call this a scenario of *change*.

In all of these scenarios, *experiences* with other people, with *mediating agents* and *institutions* play an important role, whether through the intervention of a third party or through a set of – possibly – new institutions that enable a form of communication and recognition developed in the conflict. We argue that such a shift in perspective can lead to new ways of thinking about legal and democratic institutions.

We suggest that the production of trust in conflict, especially when it occurs in unbounded orders or situations of crisis, can be creative and generative of new protocols and institutional frameworks for conflict. In the absence of established rules and procedures, actors must come up with new approaches to managing conflict among themselves. We further suggest that trust building from conflict is particularly strong in iteration, i.e., the repetition of generic scenarios, which leads to the consolidation of expectations about the conduct of conflicts and their outcomes – as long as there is some form of reliable communication and recognition in which actors see themselves as respected and taken seriously. We are also particularly interested in the role of narrative patterns in stabilizing trust relationships and the consequences of the failure of shared narratives to emerge (Nyam and Hediger 2023).

Examining the relationship between trust and conflict in the four contexts will help us better understand how modern pluralistic societies satisfy their need for trust in the absence or relative absence of shared norms and values. More fundamentally, it will also serve as a guide for modern societies on how to manage their multiple conflicts, how to better distinguish between productive and unproductive conflicts, and how to design social, procedural, and institutional mechanisms that allow conflicts to remain or become productive for them. This could not and should not result in a simple recipe for resolving conflicts within and between societies. Nevertheless, our ambition is to contribute to a better understanding of how political life can be organized democratically and peacefully under conditions of uncertainty, allowing us to deal productively with challenges such as climate change, financial crises, and international and intrastate conflicts.

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