



THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

What makes trusting strangers a reasonable,
rather than a suicidal act?

Economist Paul Seabright posed this question in his 2004 book, *The Company of Strangers* (Princeton, revised 2010), which investigates trust between total strangers, even though mistrust and violence are in our genes. He currently teaches at the University of Toulouse and his most recent work, *War of the Sexes*, examines how conflict and cooperation have shaped men and women through the ages.

When your train is late, do you curse this or marvel at the fact that the train manages to come at all?

Seabright: This may sound pious nonsense, but writing that book did make me more patient, as did travel. I lived in India as a graduate student and the practical hassle you face is the price you pay for what is enjoyable and stimulating about such a wonderful country. When you then return to a place where things work, you realize how much

smoothness of operation is the unobtrusive fruit of an astonishing amount of teamwork. Being exposed to situations where that breaks down does make you more appreciative of the fact it works at all.

In *The Company of Strangers*, you wrote that citizens of industrialized economies have lost their sense of wonder; few appreciate the cooperation on which society is built. Does this matter?

Well, it is difficult to function if you persistently marvel at the fact that the modern world exists at all. We more or less have to cultivate “tunnel vision” in order to get on with life. What I think is a shame is that for most of us it becomes a permanent habit, something we can’t break out from. Children are much better at it than adults and, in a sense, I started writing that book for my kids.

It is hard to imagine *The Company of Strangers* as a children’s book.

We used to watch documentaries where people



such as David Attenborough would turn up at an ants' nest in Borneo and talk about how amazing this complicated behavior is. My kids were fascinated, but couldn't imagine economics to be interesting in the same manner. The book was partially an attempt to prove them wrong, to say, "Remember the nature programs we watched and shared a sense of amazement that tiny-brained creatures can interact in a way that produces such a complex and purposeful community? Well, someone could do the same with us." You could imagine some giant interplanetary David Attenborough striding into human civilization with a camera and saying, "Isn't it extraordinary that *Homo sapiens*, this uncouth, brutish, large-brained ape, has managed to produce such complex and delicate structures." In the end, the book took so long to write that my kids were old enough to read it when it finally came out.

You talk about tunnel vision – a capacity to play one's part in society without necessarily caring much about the overall outcome – as having helped create civilization, but is it also a threat?

Absolutely. Think in terms of climate change or the financial crisis. Many problems arise because most of us focus on more manageable, local and

circumscribed tasks to get through our daily jobs. Our brains are only good at paying attention to a limited number of things at any given time, and this leaves us vulnerable. For example, pilots have a clear set of rules to pay attention to, yet there are well-documented cases of pilots coming down to land when other planes are on the runway, which in retrospect is an incredibly obvious danger. This opens up a set of interesting questions, particularly on the financial crisis. A lot of people now say that, given the build-up of opaque derivative instruments, the housing bubbles, the growth of the shadow banking system and so on, it was clear it was a disaster waiting to happen. The problem is you may remember life in retrospect, but we have to live it going forward. We don't have a good way of understanding how to be sure not to miss things that in the future will seem blindingly obvious.

In your chapter on the financial crisis, you said it was a failure of social trust on a massive scale. How bad is it?

That's a tough question. The cumulative fall in US production is enormous, the largest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Though not as bad as in the 1930s, the high and persistent level of unemployment

brings a social cost which will impact on millions of people for decades to come. In Europe, what we are seeing in Greece and Spain is also extremely costly for people, their families, their livelihoods and the narrative of their lives. We cannot be sure that we will get through this without some serious social conflicts. At the same time it's hard not to be struck by the determination with which people get on with their collective lives in the face of shocks of this kind.

As bad as the crisis is, will it amount to more than a blip in the history of trust?

From a very long-term perspective, it is striking how well the world weathers crises of this kind. I am not saying that the financial crisis is not bad – that would be absurd, especially from the comfort of tenured academia. Yet, if you look at the social catastrophes that were the Thirty Years' War or the Hundred Years' War, it does put issues like high unemployment into perspective. You get a sense of how

remarkably resilient our societies actually are. **In terms of society, you wrote that one of the great human developments is the ability to treat strangers as honorary family and friends. Yet, given that these big-brained apes are so violent, the first person who tried to cooperate with strangers must have either been incredibly brave or incredibly dumb.**

Yes, the sad thing is we don't know the name and identities of these people. We don't know how many people died in the attempt, but we can safely bet that lots of people tried and were killed before cooperation was established between non-family members. It is a shame that we have no way of honoring the people that first tried it.

In your book, you use "trust" a lot, although not as much as might be expected. Instead, you refer to "cooperation" and "reciprocity."

Trust is a complex phenomenon. I wanted to break it down into the various components needed for trust to arise so we can understand it better. These fall into various categories, including aspects of psychology and our emotions, our cognitive skills for assessing people, and institutions – everything from the police to justice systems to market exchange to the infrastructure of human life. Trust is the phenomenon to be analyzed, but things like reciprocity are part of the story of how we understand it.

Would you trust someone who never smiles or laughs?

My rational brain says yes, but it is hard work. It is easier to trust people if they smile spontaneously, which is something many political leaders, financial scammers and con men know. They profit from our tendency to assess people's trustworthiness on the basis of their facial expressions, which usually operates quite effectively, but can be easy for skillful manipulators to exploit for their financial or political advantage.



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