Introduction

“No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Churchill, 1947). This statement is so often cited because it expresses in a few words a feeling shared by the majority of citizens in all established democracies, and because it reflects the diagnosis formulated by dozens of philosophers, historians, sociologists, and experienced politicians: all societies advanced and developing, large and small, mature democracies and pseudo-democracies are full of dysfunctions generating political mistrust. But such an ubiquity does not stem from an epidemic sickness. If a phenomenon is present in so many countries, nourished in each one independently, then we are facing an important feature of contemporary politics.

Empirical evidence on political mistrust is available for almost one hundred nations, generated by many national surveys conducted over decades, and also by international surveys, particularly the World Values Surveys, the European Values Surveys, the Latin American Barometer.

Trustworthiness is an empirically grounded concept. Very few countries in the world today are immune to political mistrust. A society where all individuals would mistrust all others is sociologically inconceivable because it would rapidly dismember, dislocate, or disband. In fact, all countries could be ranked on a scale of trust-mistrust, as indicated in the following text and which proposes a threshold based on the potential frequency of misconduct separating a culture of trust from a culture of mistrust:

Democratic principles institutionalize distrust: they assume that trust can be breached and provide correctives for that. The fact that this is activated indicates that trust had in fact been breached. As long as corrective mechanisms happen sporadically, exceptionally, as a last resort, the culture of trust is not undermined, but rather enhanced by the proofs of effective accountability. But there is some threshold where this may backfire and the trend reverses itself. Hyperactivity of correctives indicates that there is perhaps too much to correct. For example, if people constantly resort to litigation and the courts are flooded with suits, if the Ombudsman is overloaded
with claims, if the police is overworked and prisons overcrowded, if the media constantly detect and censure political corruption, and citizens denounce or revoke their representatives — then the culture of trust may break down. To be pervasive and lasting, generalized trust cannot be due merely to efficient controls. Rather, it must see it in the potentiality of controls only the ultimate defense against unlikely and rare abuses of trust. Institutionalized distrust breeds spontaneous trust most effectively as long as it remains at the level of institutionalization, and does not turn into actual, routine practice. This is the specification of our paradox of democracy: the extensive potentiality of controls must be matched by their very limited actualization. Institutionalized distrust must remain in the shadows, as a distant protective framework for spontaneous actions. (Piotr Sztompka, Trust, Distrust, and the Paradox of Democracy, European Journal of Social Theory, 1998, 1)

This symposium does not include a chapter on the USA. For this country rich empirical evidence has been compiled. It has been the object of significant theoretical interpretations of political mistrust. I do not see how a chapter on the USA in this book would reveal anything really new. Consequently, priority has been given to other countries less well studied. This country remains nonetheless, at least implicitly, a point of reference for comparative research. Thus, it would be useful to recall here the American experience, by citing two scholarly testimonies.

The United States had experienced four troubled presidencies in a row. The previous two decades had been marked by an unrelenting sequence of crises: assassination, racial and social conflict, foreign policy disaster, political scandal, and economic disruption. The public turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s in many ways resembled the crises of the 1930s and 1940s, with one major difference. The New Deal and World War II entailed triumphant assertions of federal power. They demonstrated that, given the right leadership and a sense of collective purpose, government could be made to work. And so Americans came out of those decades with a sense of renewed confidence in institutions generally and in government specifically. Vietnam, Watergate, the energy crisis, recession, and hyperinflation demonstrated that our institutions generally, and the federal government in particular had failed to perform. The result, as documented in this book, was a collapse of confidence in those running our institutions. (S.M. Lipset and W. Schneider, The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind, 1987, p. 436)

Confidence in the government has declined. In 1964, three-quarters of the American public said that they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. Today only a quarter of the Americans admit to such trust... The top reasons given for distrusting government are that it is inefficient, wastes money, and spends on the wrong things... Government is not alone. Over the past three decades public confidence has dropped in