

## From distributive to cultural struggle and back. Views on Norris’ and Inglehart’s theory of cultural modernization

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Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural backlash. Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. First published. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. Paperback, £ 22.99, ISBN: 9781108444422

After the fall of the Berlin Wall the vision of a world based on emancipatory progressivism, multilateralism, liberal democracy and post national border crossing seemed within reach. This vision is history now in the third decade of the millennium. Prospects of universal democracy and global peace, as conveyed in 1992 by Francis Fukuyama withered away, whereas the picture of an emerging “clash of civilizations” drawn at the same time by Samuel Huntington, has been able to take shape. Fukuyama’s and Huntington’s anticipations appear as utopian dream versus dystopian nightmare of a world in which national borders either merge into a globally shared cultural space or into a century of culturally and religiously fueled conflict. Initially, these outlooks were taken up more in Fukuyama’s optimistic sense. This turned out to be—from today’s perspective—a serious misinterpretation. What we have now is a neo-nationalist turn towards authoritarian illiberal values worldwide. This course of things raises questions, calls for explanation and has already led to various interpretations in academia and beyond.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart provide some extensive and profound attempts to explain what they call a “cultural backlash”. It manifests itself in upheavals and unexpected transformations, namely the rise of authoritarian populism and parochial-

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ism in a number of countries and societies around the globe. In explaining threats to the liberal consensus that has long been unchallenged in established Western democracies, the authors focus on changing views on values in politics, personal attitudes and questions of social morality.

Both authors are among the most prominent researchers in the field of right-wing populism. Their core argument is simple. They emphasize spreading authoritarian values did not arise from economic deprivation and inequality in the first place. Their data clearly show that it is a phenomenon not only of poor but also of affluent societies and even welfare states like Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Denmark with high living standards and economically secure populations. Their explanation perceives prosperity not as a protective shield against authoritarian illiberalism but as its cause, actually a second-order effect of a progressive modernization process. They argue that prosperity paved the way for post-materialist values, which are now meeting with growing resistance from traditionalist people. Macroeconomic and regional crises deepen but do not trigger the cultural backlash. Accordingly, the proneness to authoritarian values appears to be a crucial prior condition for the success of right-wing populism. This shows the importance of attitudes, community cultures and historical learning, social capital so to say, as inhibiting or supporting factors of political change.

At the micro level of behavior, it is mostly neither the rich nor the poorest who support right-wing populist parties. The majority of their followers come from the traditionalist lower middle class. They feel threatened by social deprivation and neglected by ruling parties and their elitist leadership. The illiberal conservative revolt against long-term, ongoing social change, thus, emanates from relevant sections of mostly liberal societies, regardless of how strong right-wing populist parties are in individual countries.

## 1 The economics of culture

Backward facing parts of the middle class are the breeding ground for populist elite criticism and a new nationalism everywhere. Although they feel threatened by economic decline, they do not oppose social inequality. Right-wing populists rather oppose the change in values of the last half century and thereby see themselves as agents of an imagined majority. They disapprove of liberal lifestyles that have been and are still spreading in their societies. Norris' and Inglehart's explanation points to culturally defined attitudes marked by developments towards more openness in regard of diversity, sexual liberation, minority rights, gender and racial equality and more secular and cosmopolitan worldviews. Such transformations triggered a deep and intense reaction among traditionalists who feel losing their cultural identities (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 449). Data based on the World Value Survey and election research identify illiberal opponents of post-materialistic value change as predominantly male, older, whiter, mainly rural and generally less well educated.

The authors do not say that economic grievances have no impact on populism, but that "authoritarian values are more strongly linked with the respondent's birth cohort than with any of the economic indicators." (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 166).

The effects of social deprivation are there but “less consistent and weaker as predictors of authoritarian values” (op.cit.). Indeed, many wealthy Americans vote for and support Donald Trump. So the general conclusion would be that values precede interests? The authors remain ambiguous in this respect. By referring to the success of populist parties in poorer regions of Europe and the US, they vaguely consider an economic explanation, which, however, carries the risk of an ecological fallacy. On this point they suggest that “cultures are also influenced by period-effects, especially those associated with economic insecurity, such as job losses due to the decline of manufacturing industries, as well as rapid changes associated with migrant flows and the perceived risks of terrorism.” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 42). Blaming economic factors for populism may apply to declining regions of the US and Southern Europe, but would hardly explain populism in Scandinavian Welfare States and fast growing Eastern Europe as well as among saturated classes in all countries. In contrast, the event hypothesis seems more convincing namely with reference to the 2007–2013 financial crisis and growing rejection of undocumented migration up to the 2015 European refugee-crises. The latter is considered in detail in both books concluding that “unprecedented massive immigration, have produced a long-term period effect supporting the populist vote” (Inglehart 2018, p. 186).

One could object to the culturalist approach that economic interests largely explain the success at least of American authoritarian populism. Trump's promise to counteract deindustrialization, curb low-wage competition from migrants, and bring investments and jobs back home has far more to do with economics than with cultural attitudes. The same may be true for France, Hungary, Italy and the Nordic countries. This political-economic rational choice perspective, as represented in Dani Rodrik's research, appears only marginally in both books and—if applied—is skillfully translated into a predominantly culturalist or even tribalist group approach.

The supposed link between interest and attitude reads as follows. Authoritarian values are said to be a rational response to perceived “tribal” threats. “If life is insecure, the community needs to close ranks behind strong leaders, within-group solidarity, rejection of outsiders, and conformity to group norms” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 445).

Although often described as ‘right-wing,’ in fact authoritarian intolerance cuts across the conventional economic-based left–right dimension. Although racism, nationalism and ethnocentrism tend to be dismissed by liberals and educated elites as irrational and deplorable feelings, if one perceives the world as a dangerous place, if elected representatives are failing to defend us, the authoritarian reflex seems to be a rational response to protecting the tribe, even at the expense of individual freedom. (op.cit.)

Such anthropological interpretations do not explain individual attitudes as they may result from individual interests. They rather focus on group formation in a self-pitying milieu of petty bourgeois populists. The observation, however, of heterogeneous and volatile currents in the catchment areas of populism makes such milieus appear less “tribal” than is suggested here. Regardless of whether the authors are subject to misinterpretations of group behavior or of cause–effect relationships; their empirical results seem to be fully consistent with the wide gap they claim between

materialistic and post-materialistic values. Materialists hold on to egoistic consumer mentalities of the past. Their illiberal values are thus not just manifestations of group identities or outcomes of manipulated discourse. We must rather assume that illiberal values reflect individual experiences linked to economic interests. This applies at least to parts of the population threatened by social relegation as well as to parts of the super-rich driven by greed and the fight for power.

## 2 No attention for ideology and party systems

One can learn a lot about seemingly archaic identity issues and tribal identity groups but little about modern aspects of consciousness and ideology. Right at the beginning, the authors exclude a few explanatory approaches from their analysis among them right-wing populism being a conservative ideology:

We reject alternative conceptualizations which suggest that populism in politics reflects: (1) a distinct set of policy preferences, specifically, shortsighted economic policies of state-controlled industrialization or protectionist policies that appeal to the poor, (2) a type of party organization with a mass base dominated by charismatic leaders, (3) a type of party defined by its social base, or (4) an ideology (Norris and Inglehart 2019, p. 24).

In concentrating on archaic tribal attitudes, Inglehart and Norris neglect party politics as well as the programmatic thrust and intellectual foundations of right-wing authoritarianism. Therefore, they must conclude that ideology plays no significant role in it. In contrast to that, we must assume that today's right-wing populisms tie in with specific old ideologies and therefore will probably not exhaust themselves in empty thoughts worn by metaphoric old white men. Such hopes miss the rising popularity of authoritarian values among young people—native and immigrant. Of course, Inglehart and Norris know about populist parties positioning themselves as defenders of Western liberal permissive values against traditional homophobic cultures and religions. They consider such kind of populism in the Netherlands and Scandinavian as proof of their culturalist approach, but do not cast any doubts on the generational explanation according to which the old represent authoritarian thoughts whereas younger cohorts are in a way immune to it. One should also not forget that fights against globalization and the rise of identity issues began in the late 1990ies with left-wing youth protests. Right-wing populists jumped on this bandwagon, just as fascists in the late 1920s took up left-wing issues. Such historical comparisons are missing in the analyses. Rather, in parts they give the impression that history begins with the 1981 world value surveys.

Both books are based on models of generational value shifts, with younger age cohorts being progressive and older age cohorts regressive. Although this is supported by data analysis, some doubts are raised when looking at recent election studies in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany. The Thuringian AfD, for example, was quite popular with young voters in the last election. The generational hypothesis could hardly provide an explanation for this, mainly because it ignores party competition and its dynamics. How parties react to right-wing populists

makes a big difference. A circle-the-wagons mentality against right-wing populist parties seemingly secures their permanent existence—as a result of frustration with democracy or of defiant reactions in parts of the conservative electorate.

Opinion research can describe authoritarian populism and make it understandable to a certain point. Data analysis, as applied in both books, needs theoretical categorizations and empirical generalizations to avoid drowning in the mass of tens of thousands of numbers. However, this bears a risk of misinterpretation based on theoretical and methodological premises. Both volumes tie up with Inglehart's famous theory on rising post-materialist values formulated in 1977 at first. The new backlash concept tries to reconcile Inglehart's old theory with current streams of authoritarian populism. In "Cultural Evolution" he expands his original approach to a general model of development. The relationship between cultural and economic change is also the focus here.

### 3 Feminization and effeminacy

Let us just look at chapter six on "the feminization of society and declining willingness to fight for one's country" (Inglehart 2018, pp. 106 ff). Here Inglehart concludes that welfare gains, feelings of security and the control of fertility make societies more feminine and simultaneously diminish the willingness to risk one's life in wars. Comparative data analyses do not readily support this finding. A meaningful correlation only results by excluding the former "Axis powers" and Scandinavian countries. Post-materialist Germany, Italy and Japan are outliers because the willingness to fight scores lower than expected when compared to partly lower individual-choice norms in these countries. In contrast, the people of Sweden, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands and of Switzerland are quite willing to fight for their countries, despite high scores in individual choice-norms and weaknesses in fertility. The explanation given by Inglehart is:

Axis powers' devastating defeat in World War II sharply diminished their people's willingness to fight for their country; while the exceptionally strong prevalence of Self-expression values in the Nordic countries led to the emergence of a military primarily geared to peace-keeping missions and developmental aid; this, in turn, led to the emergence of a distinctive and positive view of the role of the military among the Nordic publics, making them more willing to fight for their country (Inglehart 2018, p. 107).

This seems simplistic, at least in relation to Sweden and other small European countries whose societies show clear signs of defensive nationalism. They are subject to peculiar solidarity norms of "branch and fear communities", as Peter Katzenstein once called small corporatist European states. Their smallness exposes them to adaptive economic pressure, which the Swiss economist Peter Buomberger described as a "mocha-cup effect" that goes hand in hand with a particular vulnerability of these countries. In addition, some nations remember what it means to sacrifice her children on battlefields more than some small European countries, which had no or fewer casualties. The books offer bold interpretations, especially with regard to

specific political-economic and historical contexts. This is particularly evident in sections on the contribution of economic inequality to the emergence of populism.

Data on attitudes and realities of inequality would provide a test case to analyze the controversial value versus interest issue. Unfortunately, the authors do not address the question, to what extent factual inequality and attitudes towards inequality coincide or not. They identify inequality as a major driver of populism, but—in both books—do not provide any comparative data on it, neither on income inequality nor on the distribution of wealth in the countries studied. The only data one finds is on changing individual attitudes towards income inequality taken from the World Values Survey and European Values Study (Inglehart 2018, p. 213). The figures indicate that the support for more equality grew highest in Estonia, Egypt, Russia, China, Ukraine, Turkey and Germany, whereby Turkey appears twice in the diagram, once as a country with increasing, once with decreasing support for income equality—strange enough, may be a typesetting error?

There is no doubt that the gap has widened between rich and poor worldwide. Inglehart refers to Thomas Piketty in this regard and concludes:

In the long run, growing economic inequality is likely to bring a resurgence of mass support for government intervention—but for now, it is held in check by emotionally hot cultural issues such as immigration and same-sex marriage that enable conservative politicians to win the support of low-income voters. Effective politics is always a difficult balancing act. In recent decades, diminishing job security and rising inequality have led to an authoritarian reaction (Inglehart 2018, p. 210).

Both books provide an impressive overview of the motives and phenomena of populism. They cover various backgrounds and manifestations of populism in various countries and regions. Trumpism obviously differs from populist movements say in the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Britain, Norway or Hungary. “Cultural backlash” is full of examples taken from these countries. In around one-third of the countries under comparison, older cohorts were more populist than the younger cohorts. In parts of Northern Europe, however, this situation reversed, with the Millennials more populist than the interwar generation. Other cases, including France, Hungary, and Poland, showed no significant generational gaps. The role of grievances among the “left behinds” is generally not yet clear.

#### **4 A new “evolutionary modernization theory”**

Inglehart formulates as his own claim that his “Cultural Evolution” presents a new theory of development called “Evolutionary Modernization theory”. Together with Pippa Norris, both generate a set of hypotheses that they test against a unique database, the World Values Survey—co-founded by Inglehart in 1981—and the European Values Study, which carried out hundreds of surveys in more than 100 countries (Inglehart 2018, p. 5). Drawing on new evidence, the book advances a general theory why the silent revolution in values was its own gravedigger in

fueling support for a cultural backlash towards values perceived as authoritarian-populist in the US and Europe.

As in Inglehart's 1977 study on post-materialist value change, Germany still appears a paragon of liberal modernization. The country scores high and highest in many relevant variables as for instance post-materialist life attitudes, individual-choice norms, self-expression, secular rationality, unwillingness to fight for one's country, feminization etc. Here as elsewhere non-economic issues introduced by post-materialist discourse have overshadowed the classic economic left-right cleavage. This diverted public attention away from redistribution towards cultural issues, and in turn, paved the way for increasing levels of economic inequality. This suggests that the conflict cycle would return to its starting point if distributional issues were to regain the upper hand over cultural conflicts. Indeed Inglehart's last chapter in "Cultural Evolution" (2018, pp. 210ff.) suggests that a struggle for economic equality and redistribution is imminent. It will be increasingly driven by an emerging artificial intelligence society in which "virtually everyone's job can be automated" (Inglehart 2018, p. 201). How this affects the development of cultural values remains unclear. The rise of traditionalist values in Russia, China, Eastern Europe, India, Africa, and Latin America casts doubt on whether the confidence in progress that is so evident in both books will prove true. Only Japan, protestant northern Europe and the English-speaking countries remain turning away from traditional to secular values (Inglehart 2018, p. 225). However, the global economic consequences of the corona pandemic of 2020 may change this picture. Declining prosperity and increasing distributive conflicts are likely to reinforce rather than dampen the ongoing cultural backlash and its political consequences.

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