

O privire critică
asupra teoriei
postmaterialismului
a lui Inglehart

A CRITIQUE OF INGLEHART'S THEORY OF POSTMATERIALISM

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In December 1971 *The American Political Science Review* published Ronald Inglehart's article „The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies”, in which he proposed a theory of value change from materialism to postmaterialism. His theory was rapidly disseminated among the members of scientific community, generating both criticism and agreement. An impressive number of studies based on the postmaterialist theory were published since then, Inglehart itself returning to his theory in order to improve it. In this paper I will shortly present Inglehart's theory and some of the most important critiques to it. In the end of the paper I will present my own critique of the theory of postmaterialism, showing that some of its assumptions are erroneous.

Inglehart constructed his theory starting from an empirical observation: the younger generations tend to have less materialistic values than the older generations, and they tend to accord a greater importance to different values, centered around issues like freedom and quality of life. Inglehart predicted that the main effect of these changes would be perceived in the political culture, especially in the attitudes toward different issues on the political agenda and in the support for political parties. The model used by Inglehart distinguishes among three levels: system-level changes, individual-level changes, and system-level consequences. The changes, that



appeared at the level of the system as a whole (economic and technological development, distinctive cohort experiences, rising levels of education, and expansion of mass communications) are responsible for the changes that appear at the level of the individual (changes in values – the needs for belonging, esteem, and self-realization become more important, and changes in skills – increase in the proportion of population having skills to cope with politics at the national level). Changes at this level will re-aggregate themselves and will result in consequences at the level of the system (the issues related to „life-style“ become more important in the arena of politics; relative decline of social class conflict; changes in support for established national institutions; change in the dominant types of political participation)¹.

The theory of postmaterialism is based on two main assumptions. The first assumption is developed on Maslow's pyramid of needs, and states that „given individuals pursue various goals in hierarchical order – giving maximum attention to the things they sense to be the most important unsatisfied needs at a given time.“² Maslow's theory, corroborated with the fact that the period between 1950 and 1970 was characterized by an unusual prosperity experienced by the Western nations, permits Inglehart to conclude that the physiological needs will become less important and that a higher importance will be accorded to less materialistic needs. In other words, when everybody has bread, everybody will look for circus. The second assumption is that once the basic character of a person was shaped through socialization during childhood and youth, that person will tend to maintain the same value hierarchy for the rest of its life. The socio-economic environment in which a person is forming its personality has, in Inglehart's theory, an extremely important role. The economic boom in the two decades that followed the Second World War generated the feeling of economic security. The absence of war in this period generated the feeling of physical security. The combina-

tion between economic and physical security is responsible for the changes in values that Inglehart observed in his empirical analyses.

The theory of value change has two main hypotheses: the scarcity hypothesis that states that „an individual's priorities reflect the socioeconomic environment: one places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply“³, and the hypothesis of socialization which predicts that „the relationship between socioeconomic environment and value priorities is not one of immediate adjustment: a substantial time lag is involved, for, to a large extent, one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's preadult years“⁴.

These assumptions and hypotheses describe the relationship between system level changes and individual-level changes, relationship that was reinforced by the empirical data. When Inglehart elaborated his theory, the relationship between individual-level changes and system-level consequences was not based on empirical data; it was rather a prediction of the possible effects that these changes could have on the whole system. This prediction was made under the presumption that the changes observed at the individual level will simply aggregate at the macro-level, with predictable effects. Since the elaboration of this theory, the empirical data became more abundant and most of the predictions that Inglehart made were confirmed: „the growth of postmaterialist values appears to have contributed to a decline of social class voting and to the rise of new social movements, particularly environmentalist movements and parties. Changing value priorities may be reshaping the nature of political cleavages and the political meaning of *left* and *right*, giving rise to a *new politics axis*.“⁵

In order to test his theory, Inglehart used what is called now „the Postmaterialism battery“, a set of 12 items that were intended to tap both materialist and postmaterialist needs. The respondents were asked to choose the two most important goals from three sets of four state-

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ments. The answers of the subjects to these twelve items were used to classify each subject as materialist, postmaterialist, or mixed.

• Set 1:

- Maintaining a high rate of economic growth.
- Making sure that this country has strong defense forces.
- Seeing that the people have more to say in how things get decided at work and in their communities.
- Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful.

• Set 2:

- Maintaining order in the nation.
- Giving the people more to say in important government decisions.
- Fighting rising prices.
- Protecting freedom of speech.

• Set 3:

- Maintain a stable economy.
- Progress toward a less impersonal, more humane society.
- The fight against crime
- Progress toward a society where ideas are more important than money

Basically, Inglehart's theory could be reduced to the following statement: given the facts that (1) a person's values tend to be influenced by the socioeconomic environment in which the person's character was formed, that (2) the probability that a person would dramatically change its values after reaching adulthood is extremely low, and that (3) after the Second World War the Western countries experienced a long period of economic welfare, it is expected that (4) the proportion of population that is oriented toward materialist values will decrease, while the proportion of population that is oriented toward postmaterialist values will increase. The key factor responsible for this trend is the generational replacement: „(Generational) replacement is likely to remain a long-term force pushing postmaterialism upward. There are conditions under which replacement would not have this effect. Adverse economic conditions could cause materialism to rise despite generational replacement. But even under these condi-

tions replacement would tend to slow down the movement toward materialism.”

The last part of Inglehart's theory – the aggregation of changes at the individual level and their consequences at the level of the system – is extremely important, because it provides the theoretical framework for interpreting the changes that appeared in the political attitudes and in the political behavior of the western societies. More than twenty years after this theory was elaborated, most of the predicted effects at the system-level have become reality, at least to some extent.

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The critiques to Inglehart's theory appeared quickly. I will present only those that repeated with the highest frequency. One of the most important critiques came from the adepts of human development perspective. While the postmaterialist theory emphasizes the importance of the socioeconomic environment as a determining factor of the values of a person, the human development perspective considers that the system of values of a person is not fixed once that person has become adult. From this perspective, the value system is highly dependent on time, i.e. the different stages of the life cycle are responsible for the changes that might appear in the set of values internalized by a person. This critique attacks the basis of postmaterialism theory. Inglehart argued that the change that could be observed in the values of the Western societies is the result of the generational replacement and he predicted that, in these societies, the postmaterialists would outnumber the materialists by the end of the century. The other possible explanation is that „value orientation changes through lifecycle stages, (...) values formed at young ages are vulnerable to changes as people grow and their circumstances changed. From the statistical point of view it can be distinguished among three types of effects on individual systems of values: generational effects, life-cycle effects, and period effects. Both the theory of postma-



terialism and the human development perspective failed to measure exactly the influence of each of these three types of effects, mainly because of technical difficulties: „Cross-sectional research designs do not allow a test of whether the association between year of birth and postmaterialist value orientation is attributable to life cycle effects or generation effects. Even in panel studies, life cycle, generation, and period effects cannot be identified separately, because they are linear dependent." Although this critique seems to seriously weaken Inglehart's theory, this is not the case because the alternative explanation does not provide enough evidence to reject Inglehart's statement.

A second critique provides another explanation for the increase in postmaterialism. Duch and Taylor argue that it is not the security of the environment during the childhood of a person that is responsible for postmaterialist values, but rather the level of education of that person and the economic conditions in the present. Inglehart responded to these critiques, arguing, „findings from a broadly based study of 40 societies clearly demonstrate a strong relationship between economic prosperity and postmaterialism."⁹ His response to the statement that the level of education has an important role is, however, not sustained by the data, as in the first case, and argues that Duch and Taylor do not take into account the interpretation of education as an indicator of economic security during the childhood.

Brooks and Manza launched another important critique, by arguing that the postmaterialist thesis is flawed and fails to measure adequately the values of the respondents. They propose instead a value-pluralism approach. Analysing the items designed by Inglehart to measure the materialist and the postmaterialist values and the way the people are asked to answer to them, they find that the whole battery of items is constructed on an assumption which has neither theoretical nor empirical grounds: „because of the logical dependence between item selection, Inglehart's index also cannot differentiate between re-

spondents who embrace postmaterialist values and categorically reject materialist values – the extreme postmaterialist position – versus those who embrace postmaterialist values while simultaneously endorsing materialist values. (...) Because his index assumes that one cannot simultaneously embrace both postmaterialist and materialist values, the fundamental question of whether postmaterialist and materialist values necessarily exclude one another – and hence that there are two discrete classes of citizens – is simply assumed."¹⁰ Brooks and Manza consider that the assumption that underlies the postmaterialist battery of items cannot be proved to be true. Moreover, they believe that there is not a clear distinction between the two types of values, and that the respondents could easily support both types of values, because they are not mutually exclusive.

The fourth type of criticism, developed by Davis and Dowley, is grounded in the statistical analysis of the twelve items used for the classification of the respondents. There is consistent evidence, according to those who raised this critique, that the index used by Inglehart does not have an underlying value dimension of materialism – postmaterialism. First of all, the distribution of answers to the initial set of four items seems to have a rather random pattern of answering: „In a completely random selection process, the respondents would end up classified as materialists 16.7 percent of the time, postmaterialists 16.7 percent of the time, and mixed 66.7 percent of the time. (...) over time, the distribution of materialists, postmaterialists, and mixed respondents in the American surveys came to approximate a distribution that one would find if respondents had chosen the items randomly from the list that was offered: one-sixth materialists, one-sixth postmaterialists, and two-thirds mixed."¹¹ According to the probability theory, in the long run, the results of a random selection of two choices out of four without replacement will result in the distribution 16.66 - 66.66 - 16.66. Since the distribution of the respondents on the axis materialism – postmaterialism is almost identi-

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cal to the distribution that one would obtain by simply randomly choosing two out of the four statements proposed, it is difficult to prove that the observed distribution can be explained using a certain theory. Second, if the three sets of four items measure the same dimension, then the correlations between each pair of these sets should be relatively high. Computing the coefficients of correlation, Davis and Dowley found rather weak correlations: „Far from the expected moderate to high inter-index correlations, we find very weak correlations among the WVS (World Values) respondents as a whole. We therefore dispute the assertion that these indexes tap a single underlying materialism – postmaterialism dimension in people's thinking. The same conclusion is true not only of the entire set of WVS respondents but also of the respondents in every society in which the survey was administered. In their interpretation, either the value dimension does not exist, and the index developed by Inglehart does not have the object to measure, or the value exists, but the index fails to measure it correctly.

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In the following part of this paper I will present my own critiques to Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism and also what I believe to be the most important consequences of it.

One of the hypotheses of the postmaterialist theory is that „people tend to retain a given set of value priorities throughout adult life, once it has been established in their formative years.”¹³ Inglehart uses the word *tend* as a disclaimer, trying to say that the set of values does not remain stable during one's life, but later he argues that the probability that an adult will change his values is extremely low. This hypothesis is extremely important for the theory, because on its basis Inglehart could argue that the most important factor in determining the shift toward the postmaterialist attitudes is the status of the socioeconomic environment in which one's

set of values was built.

I believe that this hypothesis can not be accepted. If what Inglehart really meant by this hypothesis would be true, that would be close to a very deterministic view of human actions. Values are a main component of the core of the cognitive system of a person, and they shape to some extent the actions of that person. To argue that the values will change very little after the whole system of values formed means to argue that after childhood the actions one might perform are extremely restricted and that they can not go beyond the limits imposed by these values, i.e. a certain person which has certain values will never be able to perform certain actions. As people grow older, they receive new roles and new statuses, each of them composing different sets of values. In order to perform these roles in an efficient manner, the people have to adapt their value systems so that the new values will not only be included in the system, but they will also be reconciled with all the other values. In a world characterized by the multiplication of the different possible roles, nobody could survive without having a very flexible system of values, and this is completely opposed to Inglehart's hypothesis.

There are another two interconnected aspects, related to this hypothesis, which Inglehart left aside. First, the world is experiencing an on-going process of more and more extended globalization. What initially started as the expansion of the economic sphere beyond the boundaries of the states evolved later to include the expansion of knowledge and, during the past decades, included the dissemination of different values, either by internally impelling or by externally compelling them. The developments in mass communication systems (one of the factors responsible for the increase in postmaterialism) made possible the expansion of values. By internally impelling a value I understand the process by which certain values are internalized at the individual level, as a consequence of the possible positive effects (at this stage the mass media has a very important role) that people attribute to



them. Values like *freedom* and *equality* are likely to spread using this process. From the individual level, as the new value becomes more and more important, it will aggregate at system-level. An opposite process is that of externally compelling a value. This process means that a value is imposed from the top to the basis of a society. An example should clarify this process: if a country wants to become member of an international organism (i.e. European Union), it has to adhere to certain values shared by all the members of that organism. The simple act of formally adopting a certain value will have, in time, effects at the individual level, gaining more and more support from the people.

Second, values have their own life cycle. They appear when they have to. It is highly unlikely that the Neanderthal „person” would have been interested in environmental issues. Inglehart interprets the formation of environmental movements as a sign of increase in postmaterialist values. I interpret this as a result of the technological and scientific discoveries. If the effects of the industry on the environment could have been accurately measured two centuries ago, Greenpeace would be celebrating now its two hundred anniversary. Nuclear power was discovered only 50 years ago, and anti-nuclear movements appeared soon after. The negative effects of the Freon gas on the ozone layer were discovered only a few years ago. The societal response appeared almost immediately. People were always concerned with the quality of their environment, but they had to know that something was bad, before starting to fight it. Inglehart argued that as the people do not need to be concerned anymore with their economic condition, they would start to support postmaterialist values. The real difference between the rich and the poor is not at the value level. They both value the beauty of the environment. The difference is that the rich buy art, while the poor buy kitsch, the rich spend their holidays in exotic places, while the poor spend theirs walking through parks – similar values, different means to express them.

For Inglehart, the increase in postmaterialist values in a still materialist world is reason to consider the postmaterialists as more oriented toward social change than the materialists: „Postmaterialists give top priority to such goals as a sense of community and the non-material quality of life, but they live in societies that have traditionally emphasized economic gains above all, even at the expense of these nonmaterial values. Hence they tend to be relatively favorable to social change.”¹⁴ From this hypothesis, Inglehart concludes that the old cleavages responsible for the emergence of the political parties and of social conflicts lost their importance, and that their place is taken by new patterns of political attitudes and behavior, that produce a change in the structure of different parties' supporters. This hypothesis lacks one of the distinctive characteristics of a hypothesis: it can not be tested with the data available at the moment. It is merely a prediction of what could happen if the trend that Inglehart observed would continue and, more important, would be correctly identified.

The last relationship stated by the theory of postmaterialism that I find incorrect is that between education and postmaterialist values. Inglehart argues that, although it seems that education determines the emergence of the postmaterialist values this is in fact the result of a more profound relationship: that between economic security and postmaterialism: „Educational attainment in Western Europe is strongly related to parental status. This relationship is clearly documented in Boudon's classic study of education and social mobility. Boudon presents the results of a study of over 14,000 Frenchmen sampled in 1964. His data reveal a very strong relationship between family origins (as defined by father's occupation) and educational attainment.”¹⁵ The real relationship between these three variables is thus: *education = function (economic security)* and *postmaterialist values = function (education, economic security)*.

Replacing the first equation into the second leaves us with the final equa-

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tion: *postmaterialist values* = *function (economic security)*. According to Inglehart, this equation does not explain the entire variance of the variable *postmaterialist values*, but it indicated which is the best predictor. This argument may have been correct in 1964, when Raymond Boudon conducted his study, but since then the factors that influenced the level of education of a person dramatically changed, and the influence of economic security became less important.

In the last decades education became available to large segments of the society. The scientific advances require more qualified people and society responded to this need by opening the gates of the educational system, by providing different ways to acquire higher education for those who lacked the material resources. The widely available education is responsible for the value changes observed by Inglehart. Younger people tend to have less materialistic values and, at the same time, tend to be better educated. But they are neither wealthier nor poorer than the older generations, and this casts even more doubts on the importance of the economic security. Moreover, when Inglehart considers economic security, he analyses it using only an objective definition, which is

incomplete. He does not take into account the subjective side which has the same importance. The transformation of the modern society into a mass society is characterized by an abundance of attractive goods. My hypothesis is that the people, after achieving an acceptable level of economic and physical security, will change their values not toward postmaterialist but rather toward other materialist values. They will want to have more and better. The equation that Inglehart proposed (*postmaterialist values* depending on *economic security*) is wrong. The best predictor for postmaterialist values is the level of education.

Although the theory of postmaterialism generated a plethora of criticism, one could argue that it is not completely wrong. Inglehart has the merit of observing the emergence of new, subtle changes in the value systems, and of trying to incorporate them into a complete theory. Some of the relationships described by his theory may be wrong, but others are true. By changing those relationships that were proved inaccurate, the importance of his theory would be fully recognized, and his findings will provide adequate tools for explaining other phenomena.

Notes and References

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