

# Knowledge production and the World Values Survey

## *Objective measuring with ethno-centric conclusions*

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### *Abstract*

*This chapter discusses The World Values Survey (WVS) and especially its investigations of values in the Arab/Muslim world. It is argued that the WVS represents an ambition, widespread in political science, to copy, as much as possible, research methods from the natural sciences. A claim is made that a certain eagerness within this perspective to produce measurable data may lead to a simplifying of complex social and political realities to the extent that the results become superficial and sometimes distorted. The WVS will be used as an example of how a focus on measuring can come at the expense of understanding and lead to ethno-centric conclusions.*

Few researchers would disagree with the claim that the main purpose of science, social science included, is the search for knowledge. Beyond the common basis in the quest for knowledge, there are, however, very different ideas about how we attain an increased understanding about the world around us and whether some kinds of knowledge are more valuable and meaningful than others.

After World War II, positivism, or modified versions of it, began to make its way into the social sciences (Bryder, 2010, 48). It was expected that a more scientific<sup>1</sup> approach would lead to objectivity and to results based on reliable facts. Social science, it was hoped, would be steered away from ideology and research based on unverified beliefs and speculation. A retired political scientist, reflecting on his long career and on the developments in his discipline, has described how he and his colleagues came to embrace these new ideals:

*This scientific ideal is associated with the natural sciences. The reason why this ideal entered the fields of human and social sciences was the admiration felt for the natural*

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<sup>1</sup> When the term "scientific" is used in this chapter it refers to the methods and ways of producing knowledge that are predominant within the natural sciences.

*scientists, their coherence (---) and usefulness. If we made an effort we could be just as good as them. That is how we were quietly thinking.*<sup>2</sup>

One result of this “scientific turn” was an increased interest in large, comparative studies with large data sets. One of the characteristics of modern political science has been described as a quest for precision, “primarily by trying to quantify observations when possible” (Bryder, 2010, 50).

The fondness for quantitative data has resulted in a growing number of studies attempting to “measure” the political, social and cultural reality. Even intangible phenomena such as values, feelings and psychological predispositions are operationalized, measured and transformed into numbers and figures.

To identify regularities and patterns and to develop general theories is the aim within the more scientifically inclined branch of political science. One may assume that the main advantage of a scientific approach, using extensive data samples and statistical methods, would be that it is objective and neutral vis-à-vis its research objects. However (and although the value of scientific studies aiming at developing general theories and testable hypotheses is indisputable) I shall focus in this chapter on some of the problematic aspects of this approach. To the hard-core social scientist, more or less everything can be measured in quantitative terms and in a uniform manner independently of cultural, social, and political circumstances. Just as we can measure the average temperature in a country, we can measure the average level of happiness. What I want to argue here is that this approach often entails misguided illusions of objectivity and implicitly ethnocentric and biased assumptions.

I shall do so by scrutinizing some of the main arguments of the *World Values Survey* (WVS) - a survey carried out at various intervals in over 80 countries all over the world. As the name indicates, the purpose of the WVS is to measure people’s values. This survey is referred to and used extensively within the social sciences and most political science students, as well as students in other social science disciplines, are probably familiar with its main conclusions. Despite the critique presented in this chapter, it is important to emphasize that the knowledge which has been produced by the WVS can be, and has been, used for interesting comparative studies. The findings of the surveys that have been carried out have captured important changes over time, they have provided us with rich empirical material that can contradict prejudices and preconceived conclusions about different cultures and societies, and they have evoked many thought-provoking ideas about the importance of values for understanding a number of phenomena.

From 1970 to 1979, prior to the first round of the World Values Survey, the American political scientist Ronald Inglehart carried out surveys in the US and a number of Western European states with the purpose of exploring value changes in the populations. These surveys showed that the generations born after World War II had different values from those of the generations born before the war.

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<sup>2</sup> Quote translated by me from Björklund (2010, 76): “Detta vetenskapsideal förknippas i första hand med naturvetenskaperna. Orsaken till att idealet trängde in i humaniora och samhällsvetenskap var vördnaden inför naturvetenskapsmännen, deras stringens, obegriplighet och nyttighet. Om vi skärpte oss borde vi väl kunna bli lika bra som de, så tänkte man i det tysta.”

While the latter held "materialist values", meaning that they gave high priority to economic and physical security, the post-war generations were "post-materialists" and valued other things in life, such as esteem, self-expression and esthetic satisfaction (Inglehart, 1981, 881). Since values are difficult to measure directly, they were "inferred from a consistent pattern of emphasis on given types of goals" (Inglehart, 1981, 884). When presented with a list of goals and asked which of these goals they found most important, "materialists" chose the following goals:<sup>3</sup>

- Maintain order in the nation
- Fight rising prices
- Maintain a high rate of economic growth
- Make sure that this country has strong defense forces
- Maintain a stable economy
- Fight against crime

"Post-materialists" prioritized the following goals:

- Give people more say in the decisions of the government
- Protect freedom of speech
- Give people more say in how things are decided at work and in their community
- Try to make our cities and countryside more beautiful
- Move toward a friendlier, less impersonal society
- Move toward a society where ideas count more than money

The theoretical framework of Inglehart's study was the scarcity hypothesis. People prioritize things that are in relatively short supply. Thus, the generations that grew up in Western societies after the war under comparatively safe and wealthy conditions were less concerned with money and material needs than previous generations had been (Inglehart, 1981, 880-81). These surveys were also shaped by Maslow's famous concept of a hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, physiological needs take priority over social, intellectual and/or esthetic needs (Inglehart, 1981, 881). Inglehart's conclusion is, then, that

*beyond a certain point, material production produces (---) a diminishing payoff. When there are two cars in every garage, a third adds relatively little; a fourth and a fifth would be positively burdensome.* (Inglehart, 1981, 898).

This is why, when societies become more affluent and people take basic material security for granted, they will value other things in life, and materialist values are replaced with post-materialist values.

In a similar vein to the surveys undertaken in the US and Western Europe in the 1970s, Inglehart later turned to the rest of the world and the first World Values Survey was carried out in 1990 followed by second, third, fourth and fifth rounds in 1995, 1999-2001 and 2005-7 and 2010-14 respectively (WVS

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<sup>3</sup> The list of goals is from Inglehart, 1981, 884.

webpage).<sup>4</sup> In these surveys there is still a focus on materialist vs. post-materialist values, although a new value-dimension was introduced as a distinction was made between *survival values* and *self-expression values*.

Survival values and self-expression values are expressed as each other's opposites. According to the WVS, people who hold survival values:<sup>5</sup>

- Emphasize economic security over self-expression (materialist over post-materialist values)
- Think that men make better political leaders than women; Men have more right to a job than women
- Prioritize a good income and a safe job over a sense of accomplishment
- Think that homosexuality is never justifiable
- Reject foreigners
- Are unhappy, dissatisfied with life
- Are not involved in politics and environmental protection.

Self-expression values emphasize the opposite. People who have self-expression values give high priority to environmental protection, gender equality and tolerance of outsider groups, including foreigners, gays and lesbians. They are also more involved in politics, they are more satisfied and happy and they have more trust in others (Inglehart, 2007, 28).

One finding of the WVS is that people in the Western so-called developed world have high levels of self-expression values, while people in the rest of the world, by and large, have high levels of survival values. The survey also finds a strong and positive correlation between self-expression values and democracy (see figure 1 below). In states that are stable democracies, people have post-materialist, self-expression values to a much higher degree than in undemocratic states. The obvious question, then, is whether it is democracy that gives rise to certain values or whether certain values are more conducive to democracy. Inglehart claims that self-expression values are a precondition for democracy, and he rules out the hypothesis that it is democracy that creates those values. He postulates "the following causal sequence: economic development → higher levels of self-expression values → higher levels of democracy" (Inglehart, 2003, 56). Economic development and modernization lead to a progression towards self-expression values which in turn are more conducive to democracy since these values "erode the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and make democracy increasingly likely to emerge" (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010, 552).

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<sup>4</sup> The WVS questionnaires are accessible at the [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org). The WVS is described, on its official webpage as "a network of social scientists coordinated by a central body, the World Values Survey Association". Its organizational structure includes an "executive committee", a "scientific advisory committee" and a secretariat. Ronald Inglehart has played a central role in constructing the survey and has published extensively using the WVS data. Several other researchers have also based a large part of their work on the WVS material, amongst them Norris and Welzel.

<sup>5</sup> The list of survival values is from Inglehart, 2007, 28.

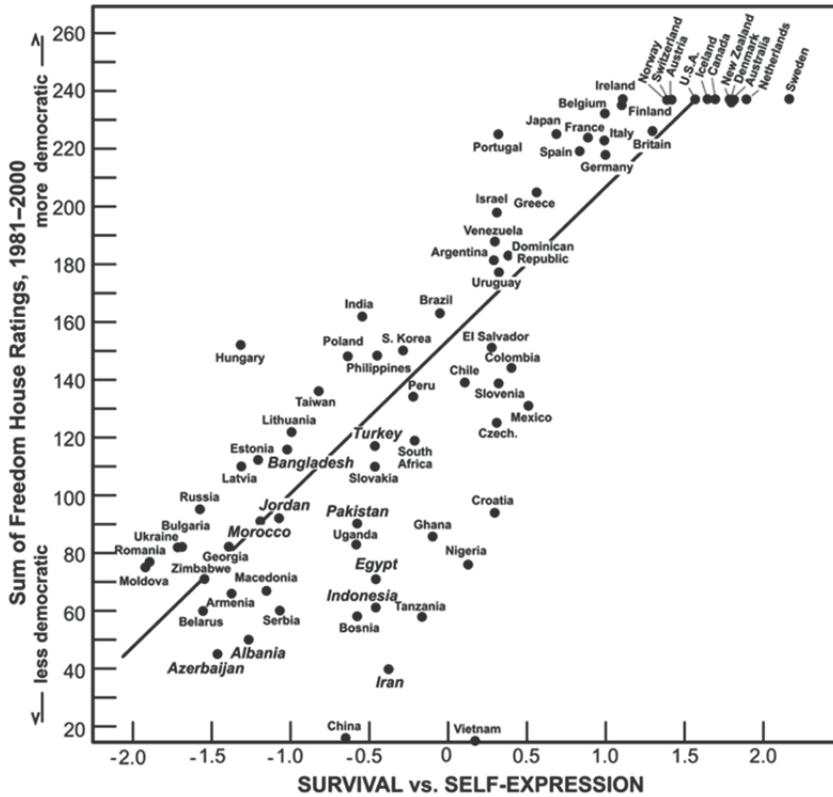


Figure 1 Self-expression values and Democratic institutions<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 shows the strong correlation between self-expression values and democracy.<sup>7</sup> It is the Western European states, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (in this article I shall refer to these states as “Western states”) along with Japan that score highest on the measurement of self-expression values. Self-expression values are dominant among citizens of the world’s wealthiest and most democratic countries (those in the upper right-hand corner of the figure). One thing we can conclude from the WVS is thus that citizens of these wealthy and democratic states care more about the environment than people in the rest of the world. They are more tolerant and more involved in politics. They have more trust in each other and they care more about gender equality. They are also happier and more satisfied with life.

Besides measuring self-expression vs. survival values in each country and relating the result to the level of democracy, Inglehart has used the WVS data to

<sup>6</sup> Inglehart, 2003, 55.

<sup>7</sup> The WVS uses the Freedom House index when defining democracy. The Freedom House index measures political and civil liberties such as the right to vote freely, “compete for public office, join political parties and organizations and elect representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate. Civil liberties allow for the freedoms of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state” ([www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2012/methodology](http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2012/methodology)). For more information on the Freedom House index and methodology, see the homepage of the Freedom House organization: [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

make a division of the world into nine cultural zones, thus making it possible to analyze what kind of values distinguishes each zone. The absence of democracy in most Muslim and/or Arab countries has been analyzed by many social scientists, and in an article by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris from 2003 they present their analysis of why so many Arab and/or Muslim countries seem to be so resistant to democratization. They emphasize the crucial role played by values when it comes to predicting democracy and argue that the Muslim world and the West are “worlds apart when it comes to attitudes toward divorce, abortion, gender equality, and gay rights – which may not bode well for democracy’s future in the Middle East.” (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 63).

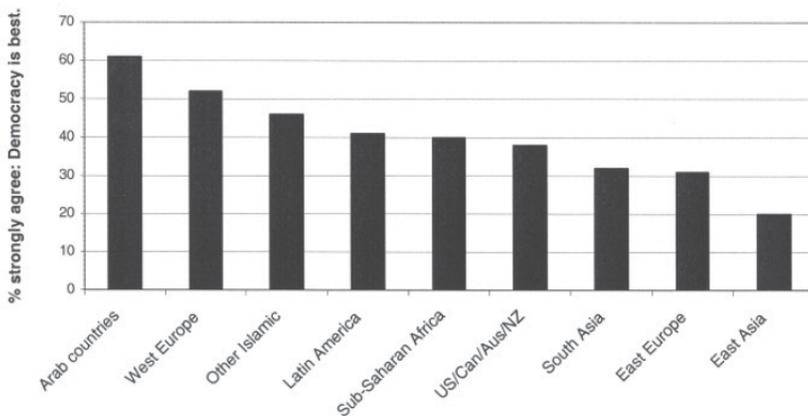


Figure 2 Support for democracy in nine cultural zones<sup>8</sup>

Figure 2 above shows how people in different regions of the world value democracy. We can see that, in the Arab states that are included in the survey, the overt support for democracy is higher than in any other part of the world. In response to the item “Democracy may have many problems but it’s better than any other form of government”, over 60 per cent of the citizens in the category “Arab states” (which includes Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco) agreed strongly. This is a higher percentage than in any other region. It looks thus, as if the preconditions for democracy would be very strong in the Arab world. But, somewhat surprisingly, this is not the case. On the contrary, one conclusion of the WVS is that, when it comes to predicting democracy, overt support for democracy is not as important as having self-expression values. The extent to which a society is characterized by self-expression values (trust, tolerance, wellbeing, etc.) is a more powerful predictor of stable democracy, according to Inglehart and Norris. What distinguishes the Muslim societies from the Western ones is *not* that the former have less positive attitudes to democracy. The difference has to do with other values, basically about the attitudes to gender equality and sexual liberation. “*(T)he values separating the two cultures have much more to do with eros than demos*” (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 65). Even though

<sup>8</sup> Inglehart, 2007, 41. The category “Arab countries” comprises Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. The category “Other Islamic” comprises Albania, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Turkey.

the majority of citizens in Muslim countries express overt support for democracy they still, claim Inglehart and Norris, lack the underlying values that have to be there in order to sustain a stable democratic system. Thus, “*paying lip service to democracy does not necessarily prove that people genuinely support basic democratic norms*” (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 66).

After this description of some of the findings of the WVS, I shall now turn to certain issues that I find problematic with this kind of knowledge production. Although it may seem neutral and unbiased to measure values by asking precisely the same questions of respondents all over the world, I shall argue that, without considering the different contexts in which people answer a question, the method is not at all objective or culture-neutral. In fact, it is likely that the same questions are perceived very differently and have different meanings depending on the reality in which a person is living and that even basic concepts could mean different things in different cultural, social and political settings.

## Measuring preferences for democracy

One problem with the aim of producing measurable data is that measurability often takes precedence over interpreting empirical data in their context. Below we shall look at how the World Values Survey measures support for democracy.

When people are asked whether they think democracy is a good way of governing their country, the support for democracy is overwhelming in most of the countries included in the WVS, both in stable democracies where self-expression values are strong and in undemocratic countries where self-expression values are weak.<sup>9</sup>

There is one noteworthy difference, however, between stable democracies and countries with low levels of democracy. Even though the majority of people in countries with low levels of democracy express a preference for democracy, many agree, at the same time, with the proposition that “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections or parliament” is a good way of governing their country. Thus, they simultaneously endorse democracy *and* rule by a strong leader. The WVS did not find this result in any of the stable democracies of the world.<sup>10</sup> In none of them did a majority endorse rule by a strong leader (Inglehart, 2003, 52-54). The question is, how do we interpret this? According to Inglehart, the support for democracy is solid in the established democracies where people have post-materialist values: “*(p)ostmaterialists value democratic freedoms highly, and do not support democracy only in so far as it is linked with prosperity and physical security*” (Inglehart, 2003, 54). People in countries with materialist/survival values, on the other hand, usually pay lip service to democracy but, at the same time, they often, as we saw above, endorse rule by an elite or a strong leader (Inglehart, 2003, 52).

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<sup>9</sup> The question asked in the WVS questionnaire is whether “having a democratic political system” is a “very good”, “fairly good”, “fairly bad” or “very bad” “way of governing this country”. In virtually every country a majority answered either “very good” or “fairly good.”

<sup>10</sup> Inglehart’s definition of a “stable democracy” is that the country has been “continuously under democratic government for the past 30 years” (Inglehart, 2003, 52).

In another article, Inglehart and Welzel make a distinction between “intrinsic” support for democracy, on the one hand, and support that is “superficial,” “instrumental” or “shallow,” on the other (Inglehart and Welzel, 2009, 129). They argue that mass preferences for democracy can motivate people to pursue democratization actively and can lead to the emergence of democracy in a country. But only when those preferences for democracy are intrinsic, that is, “when democracy is valued as a good in itself” (ibid., 129). This is not always the case, however. Preferences for democracy can also, as mentioned above, be “shallow”, “superficial or instrumental”. And if that is the case, “they will not motivate people to struggle or risk their lives to obtain democracy” (ibid., 129). In order to know whether people prefer democracy intrinsically or if they prefer democracy for shallow or instrumental reasons, one needs, according to Inglehart and Welzel, to “find out how strongly they emphasize emancipative values” (ibid., 129). Inglehart and Welzel use the terms “self-expression values” and “emancipative values” interchangeably since they are closely related. The more strongly people emphasize emancipative values, the more likely they are to support democracy intrinsically. If we look again at Figure 1, we can conclude that people in Western Europe, North America, Japan, New Zealand and Australia, since they have strong self-expression values, are likely to value democracy as a good in itself. People in other parts of the world *say* that they value democracy, but since they do not have strong self-expression values they are, consequently, likely to value democracy for superficial and instrumental reasons.

The question raised here concerns whether people in different parts of the world really do value democracy differently, or if their answers merely reflect the situation in which they find themselves rather than any deep-rooted value differences. I argue that, since the survey questions and the way people respond to them are not contextualized, they are not comparable. I shall focus on the question of how to interpret the fact that many respondents in unstable and weak democracies, while saying that they support democracy, also express support for rule by a strong leader.

Does the fact that people in non-democratic countries often endorse rule by a strong leader prove, as Inglehart claims, that their support for democracy is less solid? Or is it just that there are other things at stake for them? A hypothetical example can illustrate my point. Let us imagine a situation in which two people (for some reason) have to spend an hour outdoors waiting for something and they are offered either a blanket or a book while they wait. Wouldn't their choices be likely to depend on the weather conditions? If one person is in a place where it is minus 20 degrees outside, he would probably prefer a blanket. If the other person is in a place where it is 20 degrees plus, he would probably choose a book that he can read while waiting. Can we, from these choices, draw the conclusion that the first person cares more about basic physical needs, while the other cares more about intellectual stimulation? I claim that such a conclusion would be wrong, and that rather than having measured the respondents' values,

we have merely measured what they prefer in the specific situation in which they find themselves.<sup>11</sup>

With reference to the hypothetical example above, how should we understand the fact that inhabitants of undemocratic states, unlike people living in stable democracies, are more inclined to express a preference for “rule by a strong leader”? Is it likely that World Values Survey, as it claims, reveals a real difference in values? Another way of interpreting the different answers given to the questions in the WVS questionnaire (for example, the question whether rule by a strong leader is a good way of governing one’s country) is that the different responses have less to do with people having different values and more to do with people living in very different political realities.

In many of the undemocratic countries or unstable democracies that are included in the WVS, people have experienced various degrees of political unrest, turmoil and civic violence. In many cases the only factor that might be able to contain an outburst of civil violence is a strong, albeit undemocratic, regime. The introduction of democracy (even if democracy is desired by the people) almost always, in such a context, and especially if it is done within a short time span, entails an increased risk of instability and threats to people’s physical security. Countries taking their first step towards democracy are more often than not prone to violence and bloodshed. Moreover, attempts to overthrow an undemocratic regime may result in democracy, but they might also result in a system that is even more oppressive than the one before it. Or the result might be a situation like that in Iraq where the old dictator is gone but where for over 10 years people have lived in conditions marked by insecurity and lack of basic safety and where more than one hundred thousand civilians have been killed.<sup>12</sup>

That people who live in non-democracies are more likely to endorse rule by a strong leader as compared with people in democratic states is thus not surprising, given that they are likely to face a choice that involves a trade-off between democracy, on the one hand, and security and stability, on the other. In such a context people may think that democracy is the best system, *in principle*, but, given the conditions under which they are living, the rule of a strong leader may be preferred to the extent that it brings stability and physical security. In Western democracies, people answer the questions of the World Values Survey in a context of political stability and economic wealth and in which they have a long-term experience of living in a stable democracy. In fact, most of the respondents have never had any other experience than that of living in a democracy. They probably do not even envision a trade-off between democracy and physical security when they answer the survey questions, since these conditions, in their experience, have always coincided. In affluent Western countries it is likely that democracy is seen as the guarantor of both stability and economic prosperity. Citizens of these states do not find themselves in a situation where democracy has

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the values that the WVS claims to measure are not the kinds of preferences that change from one day to another. On the contrary, Inglehart is interested in values that are formed during one’s preadult years and rarely change after that, even if a person’s life situation changes (Inglehart, 1981, 882; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 99).

<sup>12</sup> According to IBC, Iraqi Body Count, between 115, 294 and 126, 497 civilians had been killed in Iraq as of 2013.11.19.

a price in terms of civic violence, food shortages and struggle. In such situations it is easy to give your unreserved and unconditional support to democratic rule.

In the light of the above, Inglehart's view that people with self-expression values (i.e. people in Western democracies) value democracy intrinsically, while people in other parts of the world (characterized by survival values) only value democracy instrumentally is a conclusion that must be questioned. How *intrinsic* would the post-materialists' support for democracy be in a situation where the stability and security in their countries were perceived to be at stake? Numerous polls and studies undertaken in the United States after the 9/11 attacks have demonstrated that Americans are indeed willing to compromise on civil liberties for greater security (van Es, 2012, 121f). One established research finding is that people's support for civil liberties is lower when there is a sense of threat (Davis and Silver, 2004, 43; Huddy and Feldman, 2011, 455). As in the example above with the book and the blanket, we must ask ourselves if people really have different values or if they merely have different preferences, given the level of threat and insecurity that they live with. Inglehart acknowledges that people's first-hand experience with, for example, the rising crime rates, ethnic conflicts and corruption that have accompanied transitions in many states, has an effect on their support for democracy (Inglehart, 2003, 52-53). But that does not change his conclusion that there is a difference in values between people in stable democracies and people who do not live in stable democracies. As mentioned earlier (see footnote 11), values, according to Inglehart, are established early in life, during childhood and youth, and rarely change thereafter. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that a person who has grown up in a Western European country and who rejects rule by a strong leader could change his/her opinion in a very short time if s/he moved to an unstable country in Africa or the Middle East and got first-hand experience of living in a different political setting. In that case, we cannot really talk about differences in deep-seated values. Neither can we assume that the way people answer questions about authoritarian rule is a predictor of democratic rule. It would rather be the other way round.

The criticism here does not, however, concern the causal direction of the correlation between values and democracy. Rather, it is about the ethno-centric world-view produced by the WVS. By claiming that people with self-expression values, in other words, people in Western societies, unlike people in the rest of the world, have an intrinsic preference for democracy and appreciate democracy for its own sake, the WVS produces a description of the world in which it almost appears as if Western societies consist of more refined human beings. Although not intentionally, the WVS implies a distinction between Western societies that value democracy for its own sake and non-Western societies that only support democracy for instrumental and shallow reasons. One could argue that what the WVS produces is merely empirical facts. I claim that these empirical facts lack validity because they are taken out of context. By disregarding the fact that the respondents in the survey live in vastly different political, social and economic realities, the values that these surveys measure are not comparable, and the absence of interpretation and contextualization leads to conclusions that are ethno-centric.

## Measuring tolerance

In their article from 2003, Inglehart and Norris discuss the prospects for democracy in the Muslim world in the wake of the Bush Administration's efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. According to them, the U.S. should not "expect to foster democracy in the Muslim world simply by getting countries to adopt the trappings of democratic governance, such as holding elections and having a parliament" (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 70). They stress the importance of culture and values as preconditions for democracy and claim that, although people in the Muslim world want democracy, "democracy may not be sustainable in their societies" (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 65).

Why this gloomy outlook? What leads the authors to think that democracy may not be sustainable? What, more specifically, sets the Muslim countries apart from countries with stable and sustainable democratic systems? Their answer is that Muslim societies, unlike Western societies, lack strong support for "the principle of tolerance and egalitarianism" (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 65). In another article, Inglehart has explained that tolerance is a crucial prerequisite for democracy. Referring to Gibson (1998), he argues that "the very essence of democracy is that the government tolerates the opposition and allows it to advocate its views; and the crucial test of democracy is when one tolerates views one heartily dislikes." (Inglehart, 2003, 54).

My next argument is not about whether or not Western societies are more tolerant than Muslim societies. Instead, I want to question *the basis on which* Inglehart and Norris draw the conclusion that, in comparison with Western societies, there is a lack of tolerance in Muslim societies.

Tolerance is about accepting what one does not like. It does not take tolerance to accept things or people we like or feel totally indifferent about. Consequently, when measuring tolerance the result will depend on the selection of phenomena that tolerance is measured against. People are more or less tolerant in relation to different things. Something that is unacceptable to person A may not even raise an eyebrow with person B, who instead may not be able to accept something else that A finds unobjectionable. Thus, the selection of phenomena against which tolerance is measured will decide the conclusions concerning the overall level of tolerance in a society.

When Inglehart and Norris argue that "democracy may not be sustainable" in the Muslim world, they base that argument, as we have seen, on an alleged lack of support in Muslim societies for principles such as tolerance and egalitarianism. The conclusion that there is a lack of support for the principle of tolerance in Muslim societies is mainly based on the fact that these societies, in comparison with Western societies, are less permissive towards three phenomena namely *divorce*, *abortion* and *homosexuality*. On these issues there is, according to Inglehart and Norris, a "cultural divide", a "fault line" between Western and Muslim societies (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 64).<sup>13</sup>

Inglehart and Norris do not explain why acceptance of divorce, abortion and homosexuality has been selected to evaluate the general level of tolerance in

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<sup>13</sup> They also identify gender equality as an issue that is part of this cultural divide.

Muslim societies. Why is it these particular phenomena that one has to tolerate in order to be tolerant? Surely there are things that are widely accepted and tolerated in Muslim societies that are not widely accepted and tolerated in Western societies and vice versa. With other indicators the result could have been very different, maybe even the reverse. The selection of indicators is crucial and one must know what people dislike before one can measure how tolerant they are.

Given that the concept of tolerance is relevant only in relation to things one does not approve of, it does not make sense to say that you tolerate something that you like or that you feel indifferent about. If Sweden (one of the most tolerant countries in the world according to the WVS) is used as an example, we might find that many Swedes, maybe even a majority, do not, to use Inglehart's words, "heartily dislike" either homosexuality, abortion or divorce. Maybe these phenomena are widely accepted in Swedish society. If so, the conclusion that Swedes, based on their attitudes to divorce, abortion and homosexuality, are tolerant has no foundation. To measure tolerance without finding out what people actually dislike before asking them what they tolerate entails a major problem of validity.

The single most important indicator of tolerance is, according to Inglehart, attitudes to homosexuality. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that a society's attitudes towards homosexuals constitute an "*effective litmus test of tolerance*" (Inglehart, 2003, 54).

In this case he acknowledges that tolerance is about accepting what we do not like and argues that, if we want to measure "how tolerant a nation really is", we should find out which group in society is most disliked and then ask to what extent that group is tolerated (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, 68). Inglehart does not, however, follow his own advice. Instead, he simply claims, without any verification, that homosexuals are "*the most disliked group in most societies*" today (Inglehart, 2003, 54).

To assume that homosexuals constitute the most disliked groups in most societies today is problematic. In many countries, homosexuals may not be the most disliked group or the majority may not dislike homosexuals at all. If that is the case, this "litmus test" fails to constitute a litmus test. In fact, it does not measure tolerance at all since people obviously have no problem in finding something they do not dislike justifiable.

A survey carried out by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health showed that 28 per cent of the respondents expressed negative attitudes towards homosexuality, while 32 per cent expressed positive attitudes (Österman, 2002, 19). In other words, there were more people in Sweden who had positive attitudes than there were people who had negative attitudes. To use attitudes to homosexuals as a litmus test for measuring general tolerance in Sweden is yet another example of how measuring without considering the context leads to arbitrary conclusions. Only in a country where homosexuals really are the most disliked group could this work as a litmus test.

Overall, the conclusion that Muslim societies are much less tolerant than Western societies seems to be based on an assumption that the same indicators can be used everywhere. However, by focusing on attitudes to homosexuality, abortion and divorce it is questionable whether the tolerance level of Western

societies is really put to the test. To the extent that these phenomena are more commonly accepted in Western countries, the WVS measures tolerance in these societies by asking people if they think that something that they already accept can be justified, and the conclusion that the level of tolerance is higher than in Muslim societies is more or less decided beforehand by the way tolerance has been operationalized and measured.

## Values and human development

We now turn to the way in which the WVS uses its collected data to define the concept of “human development”.<sup>14</sup> The idea of development in political science is more or less always normative, and in that sense the WVS presents just another mainstream approach to the concept. Development does not normally refer to just any kind of change, but to change from something less good to something better. It has been suggested that the development concept is an expression of Western hegemony in defining the meaning and the content of development (Rudebeck, 2010, 108). Whether one agrees with this or not, it is nevertheless clear that countries and populations of the world are constantly compared and ranked and in these rankings Western states generally come out as the most developed, while all the others are lagging behind at various distances from the “leading team”. What is problematic with the WVS definition of human development is that it not only claims that Western countries (along with Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea) are richer or more democratic than other parts of the world, but also that the *values* that characterize these societies are more developed.

Through the years, the development concept has been filled with various contents. According to the most limited definition of the concept, it can be measured solely in terms of economic growth. If political development is also considered, democracy and/or political and civil rights can be measured as well. The Human Development Index as defined by the United Nations has a less political perspective and measures development by looking at factors such as education, income and average life span. What the WVS does, as seen from Figure 3 below, is to measure development on the basis of what kind of values people have.

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<sup>14</sup> This section is based on a presentation posted on WVS homepage under the heading “Findings of the World Values Survey”. The author is Christian Welzel who is Vice president of the World Values Survey’s executive committee.

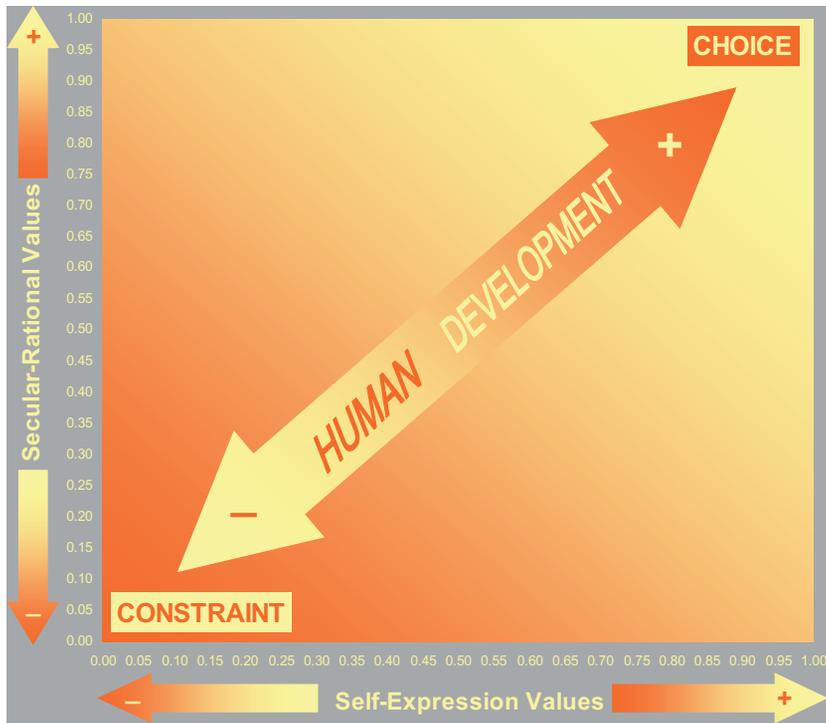


Figure 3 Values and Human Development<sup>15</sup>

“Human development” according to the WVS is characterized by a combination of strong self-expression values (horizontal axis) and strong *secular-rational values* (vertical axis). Secular-rational values are another set of values that is juxtaposed to *traditional values*. In the same way as survival values and self-expression values are defined as each other’s opposites, secular-rational values and *traditional values* are also each other’s opposites. People who have strong traditional values (and consequently weak secular-rational values) emphasize the following:

- Religion is very important
- One should teach a child to obey
- A strong sense of national pride
- A main goal in life is to make parents proud
- Divorce and abortion are never justifiable
- We need stricter limits on selling foreign goods
- We need more respect for authority (Inglehart, 2007, 27).

Secular-rational values emphasize the opposite (ibid.).

According to the WVS human development model, the combination of “weak secular-rational values and weak self-expression values pursues an ideal in which individuals are restrained by chaining them to survival communities,” while the combination of strong secular-rational and strong self-expression values pursues an ideal in which “individuals are free to express themselves by

<sup>15</sup> Welzel, 2006.

unchaining them from survival communities” (Welzel, 2006). In other words, the citizens in the wealthy Western states, which can be found in or close to the upper right-hand quarter in figure 3, are free to express themselves, whereas those in the rest of the world, which can be found outside the upper right-hand quarter, are in varying degrees “chained to survival communities”. Inglehart and Welzel talk about a polarization between emancipation and conformism (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 291). In societies with weak self-expression values, a “culture of conformism” prevails and in those cultures, “people’s minds tend to be closed” (ibid., 286). When, on the other hand, self-expression values are strong, there is an emphasis on autonomous human choice (ibid., 288).

The strong normative content of the development concept developed by the WVS researchers is perhaps most clearly expressed in the following sentence: “*Value change progressing from constraint to choice is a central aspect of Human Development because this value change makes people mentally free, motivating them to develop, unfold, and actualize their inner human potentials*” (Welzel, 2006). Thus, the more people in the rest of the world adopt the same values as people in the West the more *mentally free* they will be, and the more their *inner human potential* will develop.

Inglehart and Welzel do not deny that their definition of human development is normative but they claim that it “is not biased against certain cultures, since the ability to act in accordance with one’s autonomous choice is a universal ability of the human species” (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 288). They point to the Human Development Reports published by the UN annually which, as mentioned above, base their measurement on three key dimensions of human development, namely income, life expectancy and education. According to Inglehart and Welzel, the UN Human Development Report is harshly criticized by governments of low-ranking countries who accuse it of being ethnocentric – a critique the two researchers obviously disagree with. They ask, rhetorically: “Is it really only Western publics that prefer being rich to being poor? To prefer a long life expectancy to a short life? To aspire to being educated instead of ignorant?” (ibid., 289).

Inglehart and Welzel are of course correct in pointing out that countries are constantly ranked and compared and they have a point when they claim that these rankings can serve a useful purpose by putting pressure on governments to do better (ibid., 289). But ranking countries based on more tangible factors such as literacy, average life span, GDP per capita, etc. is one thing and ranking countries based on what kind of values people supposedly have is another. To show that only 40 percent of the population can read or write in a certain country or that a certain number of people live on less than 1 US dollar per day, also implies a ranking of countries that, in some sense, puts Western states in a superior position. But these facts are more objective and comparatively less complicated to measure. They can also be important in shedding light on inequalities that most people would find unfair. When, on the other hand, it comes to categorizing countries according to values, the difficulties in measuring and interpreting are considerable and the risk of ethnocentrism is high. Most measuring and ranking is based on explicit or implicit normative assumptions. That it is better if no one, or as few people as possible, has to survive on less than

a dollar a day is, however, much less controversial than claiming, as the WVS does, that certain values represent a higher level of development than others.

A certain bias is also reflected in the way the survey questions are formulated so as to value individualism over communal values. Respondents in Western democracies most often agree with goals such as “I seek to be myself rather than to follow others” and “I decide my goals in life by myself”. Respondents in developing countries, on the other hand, express goals such as “One of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud” and “I make a lot of effort to live up to what my friends expect”. The interpretation of this is that the former are more independent, while the latter embrace more authoritarian values. The former are also regarded as indicators of a higher state of human development. Although it is not necessarily wrong to choose to describe people in the Western democracies (who have high levels of self-expression and secular-rational values) as independent, they could also have been described as selfish and too focused on their individual needs. It sounds quite nice to most people to seek to be yourself and to decide your own goals but another way of phrasing the same thing could be “I do not care much about what other people think” and “I do not value my parents’ advice and I do not care whether they are proud of me or not”. Overall the selection of questions and variables reflects an underlying celebration of individual independence. Wanting to make your parents proud becomes an indicator of a constrained life. Other values such as spirituality, willingness to sacrifice one’s own happiness for the well-being of family and friends, the aspiration to do one’s duty or to be a respected member of the community, are either ignored or regarded as indicators of a lack of human development.

Finally, it seems that the approach of the WVS leads to very reassuring results in the sense that all good things always seem to coincide. In the West people are not only more democratic, they are also more tolerant and more gender-equal. They have more trust in their fellow citizens, they care more about the environment and they are happier. This is very comforting in the sense that we are not faced with a result that shows a negative correlation between, for example, democracy and gender equality or between democracy and happiness. If that were the case, we would be in the uncomfortable situation of having to choose between two good things. Instead, according to the results of the WVS, democracy coincides with everything else that we like.

The problem is not the things that are included in the study, but rather the things that are omitted. As we have seen above, people in the Muslim world have traditional and survival values, they do not favour gender equality, they are intolerant towards homosexuals, they are not particularly happy and they do not care very much about the environment. It is also possible, although it is not measured in the WVS, that in those countries people commit fewer crimes, that there is a lower consumption of alcohol, lower suicide rates and less anti-social behaviour. People may not be involved in politics in the way measured in the WVS (by asking people if they have signed a petition or taken part in a boycott or a peaceful demonstration), but they may be more involved in the sense that they intervene when a fellow citizen in the street is in trouble. A problem in the post-material cultural sphere is that people are sometimes assaulted, beaten up or, in extreme cases, even killed in front of a crowd of people who are just watching although they could stop the crime. Maybe tolerance is just the obverse of

indifference? Furthermore, since the WVS measures happiness, why not also measure loneliness? It may turn out that involuntary loneliness is a big problem in many countries in the Western world and, if that is the case, the “all-good-things-coincide result” of the WVS may be less clear-cut.

If these things were taken into account, the result might be more inconvenient in the sense that the Western states, those which cluster in the upper right-hand corner of the figure, might be more democratic and share some other values that we may generally like. But it may also turn out that there is a positive correlation between democracy and the number of people who feel lonely and isolated or that democracy coincides with putting one’s own individual interests and needs above those of others, with a lack of involvement in what happens to a fellow human being next to you on the street, with higher crime rates, etc.

The research described in this chapter tends to confirm, through inbuilt biases, selective choices of variables and ethno-centric perspectives, the superiority of the Western world. It is an example of an approach where researchers take what they think is best in the Western world and then check if the rest of the world have it. Which, inevitably, it seems, they do not. We (in the Western world) have trust. They (the rest of the world) do not. We have social capital. They do not. We are tolerant. They are not. This means that most parts of the world are not studied on their own terms. The question is usually: Do they have the things that we have? Do they have the things that we think are important? And very often the conclusion is that they are lacking something crucial, whether it is civil society, trust, tolerance or something else. Thus it is often implicitly concluded that Western societies are more advanced than the rest of the world, not only in the sense that they are more democratic and prosperous, but also in the sense that Western values and culture are more “developed”. Not only are we, in the West, more democratic. We also have a culture that puts us ahead of the rest of the world in terms of human development. So in a way, when producing this kind of knowledge, we are at the same time involved in writing the success story of the Western world.

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