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## Globalization and Postmodern Values

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# Globalization and Postmodern Values

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A growing body of evidence indicates that deep-rooted changes in world views are taking place. These changes seem to be reshaping economic, political, and social life in societies around the world. The most important body of evidence comes from the World Values Surveys (WVS), which have measured the values and beliefs of the publics on all six inhabited continents in 1981, 1990, and 1995. The WVS will carry out its fourth wave of surveys in 1999-2000. It has already surveyed more than sixty societies representing almost 75 percent of the world's population and covering the full range of variation, from societies with per capita incomes as low as three hundred dollars per year, to societies with per capita incomes one hundred times that high; and from long-established democracies with market economies, to authoritarian states and societies making the transition to market economies. This unique investigation has found strong linkages between the beliefs of individuals and the characteristics of their societies—such as those between peoples' values and the birth rates of their societies, or between political culture and democratic institutions. Figure 1 shows the societies that have been explored in the two most recent waves of these surveys.

The WVS have detected a pattern of systematic changes in values and motivations among those of advanced industrial societies. These changes reflect economic and technological changes that have tremendously reduced the likelihood that people will die prematurely from starvation or disease. Figure 2 demonstrates a well-known but very significant fact: as economic development takes place, human life expectancy rises. In the poorest countries of the world, even today the average life expectancy is forty years or less. In the rich-

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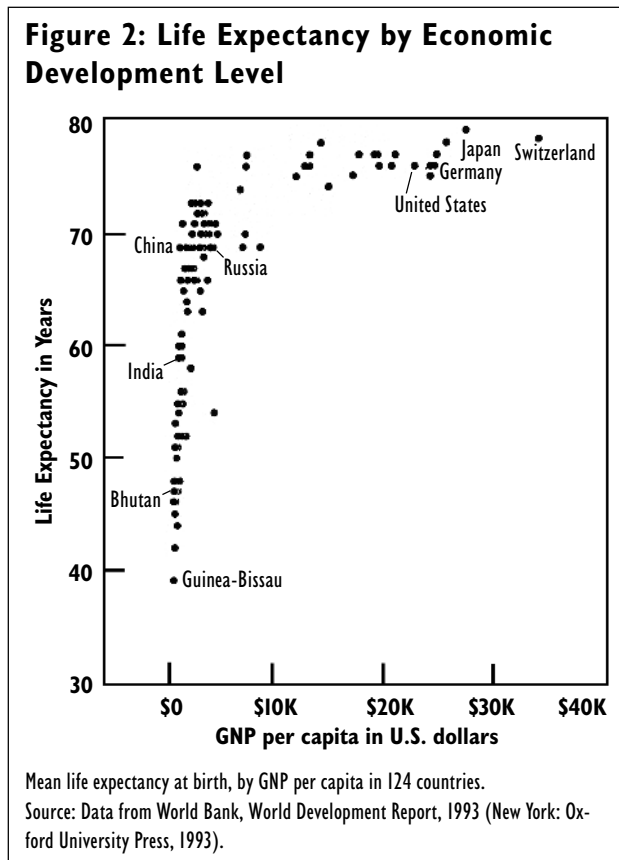
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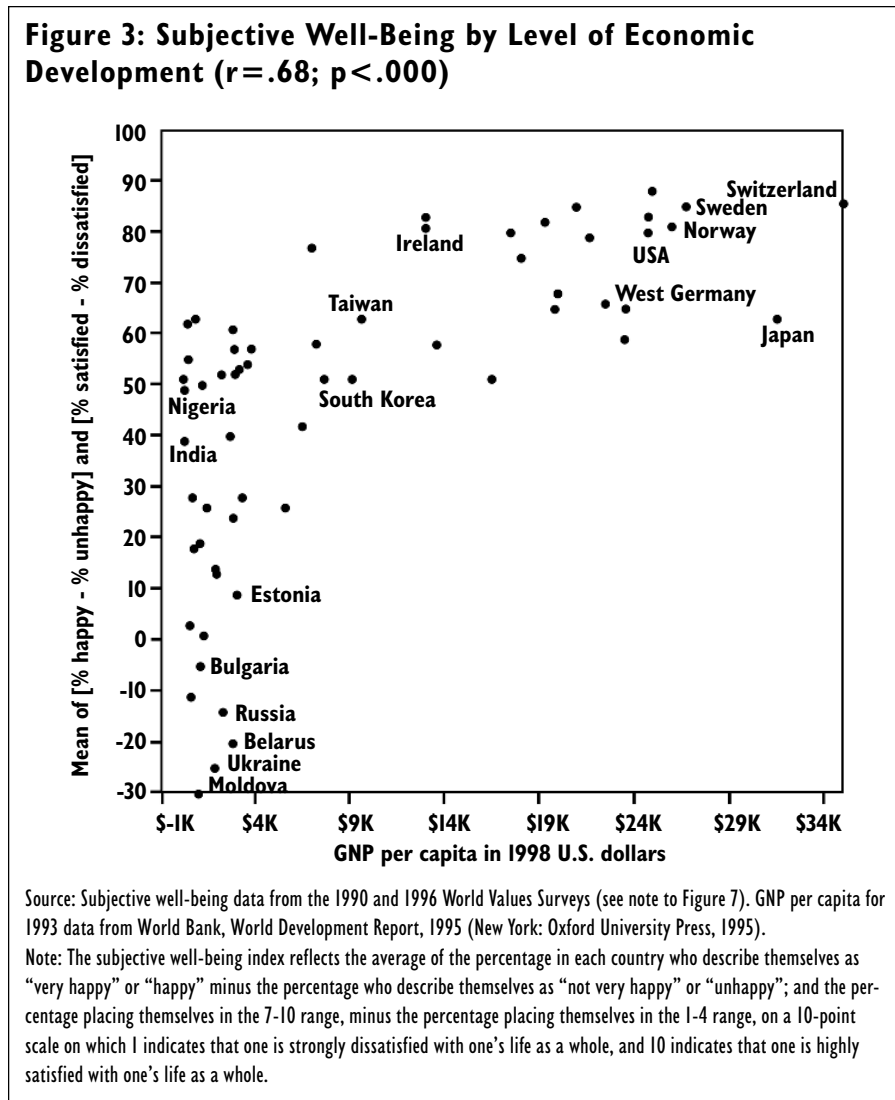
est societies, such as Japan or Switzerland, it approaches eighty years. But this relationship is curvilinear. We find a steep rise in life expectancy as income rises from the subsistence level to several thousand dollars per year; but when



we reach the ranks of the advanced industrial societies, there is very little increase. Life expectancy in Germany is no higher than it is in Ireland, even though the average German income is twice as high. This suggests that industrialization and economic growth have a tremendous payoff in terms of human survival, but beyond a certain point they bring diminishing returns.

Figure 3 demonstrates a fact that is

equally significant, but was not recognized until the WVS measured happiness and life satisfaction throughout the world. Human happiness also shows a strong linkage with economic development. Here, too, the relationship is curvilinear. As one moves from subsistence-level economies, such as India or Nigeria, to advanced industrial societies, there is a large increase in the proportion of the population who consider themselves very happy or very satisfied with their lives as a whole. But above a certain level (about where South Korea or Ireland currently are), the curve levels off. Among advanced industrial societies, there is practically no relationship between income level and subjective well being. Here too, Ireland ranks higher than West Germany.



As one would expect, rising income levels go with rising levels of happiness and life satisfaction. The peoples of rich societies are happier than those of poor societies. The overall correlation is very strong (0.68). But beyond a certain point, the curve levels off. As we move from low-income societies to high-income societies, there is a steep increase in subjective well-being. But the impact of rising income stops when we reach the threshold of \$10,000. Beyond that point, there is practically no relationship between income and subjective well-being. The Irish are happier than the Germans, although the Germans are twice as wealthy. And the Taiwanese are as happy as the Japanese although the Japanese are three times as wealthy.

**As economic development takes place, human life expectancy rises.**

The relationship between economic development and subjective well-being shows another important finding: Communist rule had huge costs—not only materially, but also in terms of human happiness. Figure 3 demonstrates another important point: in the

1990s, the lowest levels of subjective well-being in the world were not found in the very poorest societies, such as India or Nigeria, but in the ex-Communist societies.

India and Nigeria are the poorest societies in Figure 3, and they show lower levels of subjective well-being than any advanced industrial society. But the ex-Communist societies are spectacular underachievers: their people are much less happy than those of other societies, even much poorer ones. This is especially true of the countries of the former Soviet Union.

India, for example, is a low-income society and ranks lower than virtually any advanced industrial society, with a score of about thirty on the subjective well-being index. But the countries of the former Soviet Union rank lower than India although their income levels are three or four times higher than India's. Even the people of the highest-ranking Soviet successor state (Estonia) are less happy than those of India, and the people of Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, and Ukraine show almost incredibly low levels of subjective well-being. Each of them falls below the zero point on this index, which means that a majority of their people consider themselves unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives as a whole. Subjective well-being was already extremely low in Russia in 1990, but life satisfaction and happiness have fallen even lower since the collapse of the Communist system and the Soviet Union, to such a degree that Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine show the lowest levels of subjective well-being ever recorded.

The phenomenally low levels of subjective well-being currently registered

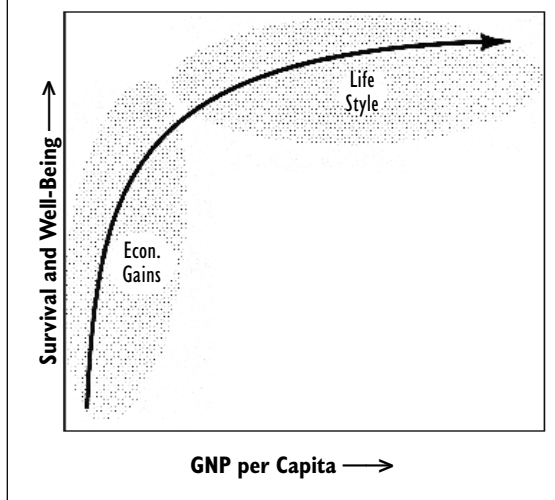
in the countries of the former Soviet Union have disturbing implications. As we will see below, reasonably high levels of subjective well-being seem to play a crucial role in the survival of democratic institutions.

The early phases of economic development seem to produce a big return, not only in terms of life expectancy but also in terms of human happiness. But the return levels off; above a certain point (roughly, Ireland's current level) economic growth doesn't seem to make much difference. Among the advanced industrial societies, there is still a lot of variation. Some societies rank much higher than others (for example, the Nordic societies rank far above Germany or Japan) but the difference seems to reflect lifestyle factors rather than economic determinism. Economic development eventually reaches a point of diminishing returns not only in terms of life expectancy but also in terms of human happiness. This leads to a gradual but fundamental shift in the basic values and goals of the people of advanced industrial societies.

The early stages of economic development seem to have a major impact on subjective well-being. Moving from a starvation level to a reasonably comfortable existence makes a big difference. But beyond a certain threshold, the subjective payoff from economic development ceases. Portugal and South Korea are now approaching this threshold. Great Britain and the United States passed it decades ago. Moving beyond this threshold leads to a gradual intergenerational shift in basic values in the societies that have passed this threshold. Figure 4 illustrates what happens. Societies at the early stages of the curve tend to emphasize economic growth at any price. But as they move beyond a given threshold, they begin to emphasize quality of life concerns such as environmental protection and lifestyle issues.

Throughout most of human history, for most people, survival has been uncertain. Even today, most of the world's people are not far above the subsistence level, and starvation is a real possibility. But for the peoples of advanced industrial societies, from North America to Western Europe to Japan, the economic

**Figure 4: Economic Development Leads to a Shift in Survival Strategies**

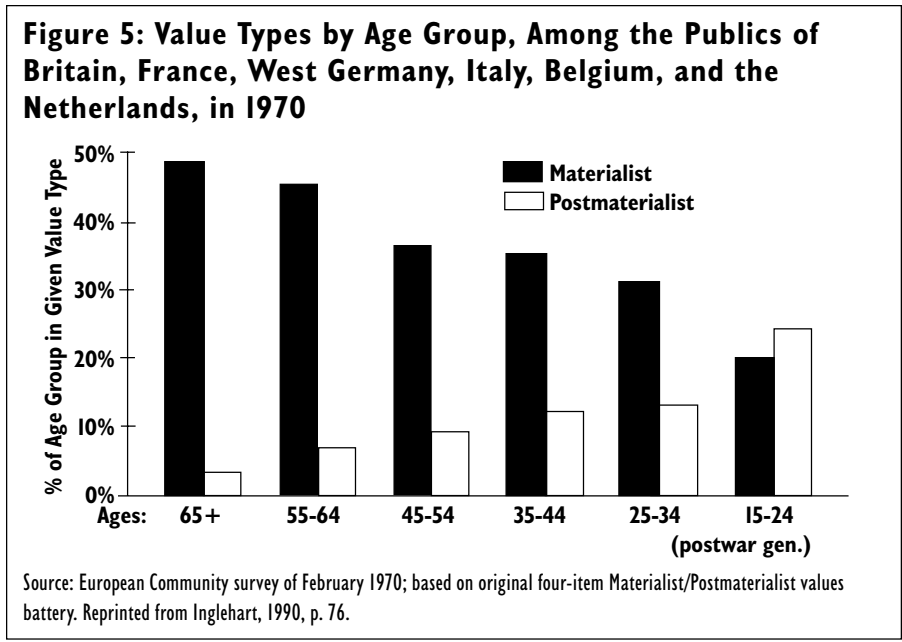


miracles of the postwar era, combined with the modern welfare state, have given rise to a new situation. In these societies hardly anyone starves, and a growing share of their population takes survival for granted. Though still interested in a high, material standard of living, they take it for granted and place increasing emphasis on the quality of life. Though economic growth is still valued, an increasing share of the public is willing to give environmental protection priority over economic growth when they conflict.

I began to measure one aspect of these cultural changes back in 1970, hypothesizing that the postwar generation in Western Europe would have different value priorities from older generations, because they have been brought up under much more secure formative conditions. While the generations that had experienced World War II, the Great Depression, and World War I would give top priority to economic and physical security, a growing share of the younger generation would give top priority to self-expression and the quality of life. Our research was guided by two key hypotheses:<sup>1</sup>

- A *scarcity hypothesis*. An individual's priorities reflect the socioeconomic environment. One places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply.
- A *socialization hypothesis*. The relationship between socioeconomic environment and value priorities is not one of immediate adjustment; a substantial time lag is involved for one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's pre-adult years.

The scarcity hypothesis implies that recent economic developments have



significant consequences. During the period since World War II, advanced industrial societies have attained much higher real-income levels than ever before in history. Coupled with the emergence of the welfare state, this has brought about an historically unprecedented situation: Most of their population does not live under conditions of hunger and economic insecurity. This has led to a gradual shift in which needs for belonging, self-expression, and a participant role in society became more prominent. Prolonged periods of prosperity tend to encourage the spread of postmaterialist values; economic decline tends to have the opposite effect.

But there is no simple one-to-one relationship between economic level and the prevalence of post-materialist values. These values reflect one's subjective sense of security, not one's economic level per se. While rich people tend to feel more secure than poor people, one's sense of security is also influenced by the cultural setting and social welfare institutions in which one is raised. Thus, the scarcity hypothesis must be supplemented with the socialization hypothesis: a basic personality structure tends to take shape by the time an individual reaches adulthood and changes relatively little thereafter.

Taken together, these two hypotheses generate a set of predictions concerning value change. First, while the scarcity hypothesis implies that prosperity is conducive to the spread of postmaterialist values, the socialization hypothesis implies that neither an individual's values nor those of a society as a whole will change overnight. For the most part, fundamental value change takes place as younger birth cohorts replace older ones in the adult population of a society. Consequently, after a long period of rising economic and physical security, one should find substantial differences between the value priorities of older and younger groups; they have been shaped by different experiences in their formative years.

This thesis was first tested in surveys carried out in 1970 with representative national cross-sections of the publics of Great Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The people interviewed chose the goals they considered most important among a set of items designed to tap economic and physical security, on one hand, or self-expression and the nonmaterial quality of life, on the other hand.

Figure 5 shows the results from these surveys. As hypothesized, we found large differences between the values of younger and older generations.

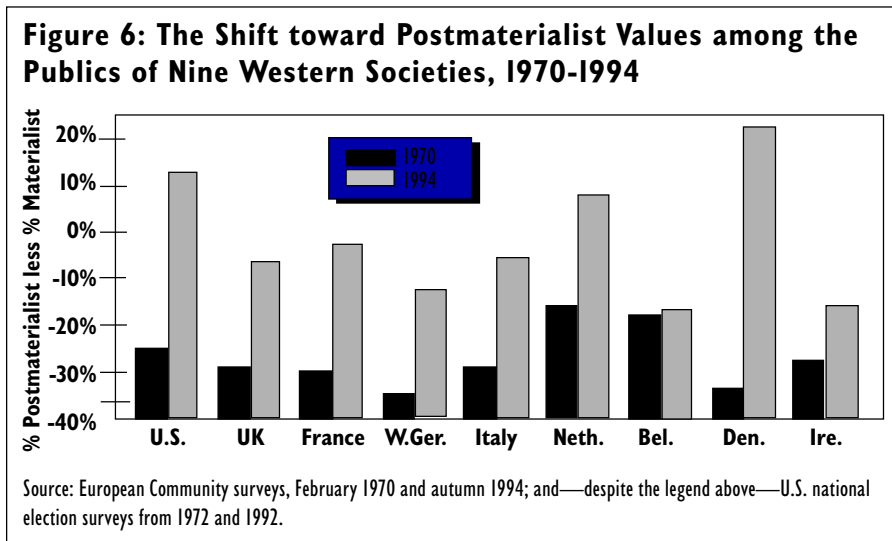
**H**uman happiness also shows a strong linkage with economic development.



Among the oldest age groups, we found an overwhelming majority to be materialists; those who gave top priority to economic and physical security outnumbered the postmaterialists (those who gave top priority to belonging and self-expression) by fourteen to one. But as we move from older to younger groups, the proportion of materialists declines and the proportion of postmaterialists increases. Among the postwar generation, postmaterialists outnumber materialists.

We interpreted these findings as resulting from an intergenerational value shift. Theoretically, these age differences could simply reflect life-cycle effects, which means that as the younger groups grew older, they would become just as materialistic as the older ones. But we have now followed these respective age groups over a quarter century. The younger groups did not become more materialistic as they aged. An intergenerational value shift is taking place. And as predicted, the ratio of postmaterialists to materialists has increased substantially in most societies. Figure 6 shows the changes that took place from 1970 to 1994 in the United States and seven other Western societies for which we have data covering a long time period. We find similar results in Japan.

This shift from materialist to postmaterialist values is only one aspect of a much broader shift from modern to postmodern values that is taking place throughout advanced industrial society. Postmodern values are uncommon in most developing societies; they are still moving from traditional to modern values. Both traditional and modern values were shaped by economic scarcity, which prevailed almost everywhere until recently. But during the past few decades, a new set of postmodern values has been transforming the social, political, economic, and sexual norms of rich countries around the



globe. These new values reflect conditions of economic security. If one grows up with a feeling that survival can be taken for granted, instead of the feeling that survival is uncertain, it influences almost every aspect of one's worldview.

In politics, insecurity is conducive to xenophobia, a need for strong decisive leaders and deference to authority. Accordingly, the Great Depression gave rise to xenophobic and authoritarian politics in many societies around the world. A sense of basic security has the opposite effect. Postmodern values emphasize self-expression instead of deference to authority and are tolerant of other groups and even regard exotic things and cultural diversity as stimulating and interesting, not threatening.

The economic outlook of modern industrial society emphasized economic growth and economic achievement above all. Postmodern values give priority to environmental protection and cultural issues, even when these goals conflict with maximizing economic growth.

Modern industrial society was made possible by two key institutions: the mass production assembly line and bureaucratic organizations. These institutions made it possible to process huge numbers of products and huge numbers of people using centrally controlled standardized routines. They were highly effective, but they sharply reduced individual autonomy, which takes on an increasingly high priority in advanced industrial societies. As a result, hierarchical, centrally controlled bureaucratic institutions are becoming less acceptable in postmodern society.

In both traditional and early industrial society, the role of women was largely limited to child-bearing and child-rearing, two functions that were crucial to the survival of society, under conditions of high infant mortality and short life expectancy. By the time a woman had borne and raised the four or five children that were needed to replace the population, she was probably near the end of her life span. Sexual norms were rigidly geared to encouraging reproduction, but only within the two-parent heterosexual family. Today, with much lower infant mortality, and a much longer life span, Postmodern society is moving toward sexual norms that give wider latitude for individual sexual gratification and individual self-expression.

Religious orientations are changing too. In the uncertain world of subsistence societies, the need for absolute standards and a sense that an infallible higher power will ensure that things ultimately turn out well filled a major

**Communist rule had huge costs—not only materially, but also in terms of human happiness.**

psychological need. One of the key functions of religion was to provide a sense of certainty in an insecure environment. Physical as well as economic insecurity intensify this need; the old saying that “there are no atheists in foxholes” reflects the fact that physical danger leads to a need for belief in a higher power. But peace, prosperity, and the welfare state have produced an unprecedented sense of security that one will survive. This has diminished the need for the reassurance that religion traditionally provided. The postmodern world view is linked with declining acceptance of rigid religious norms concerning sex and reproduction and a diminishing need for absolute rules. But it also brings a growing concern for the meaning and purpose of

**We are witnessing not a decline in spiritual concerns but rather a redirection of them.**

life. Thus, though established religious organizations have declined in most advanced industrial societies, we are not witnessing a decline in spiritual concerns but rather a redirection of them.

This change in world views has given rise to a wide range of new social movements, from the environmentalist movement to the women’s movement, and to new norms concerning cultural diversity and growing acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles. Since the start of recorded history, in virtually all

societies, women have been restricted to completely different roles from those of men. Throughout advanced industrial societies, gender role differences are eroding. Established authority is increasingly being questioned. One consequence is that, though the economy was performing remarkably well by the usual indicators, trust in government among the U.S. public reached an all-time low in the mid-1990s. This did not reflect a state of political apathy; though party loyalty and voter turnout was falling, people were participating in petitions, political demonstrations, and boycotts in unprecedented numbers. The established political parties were losing their ability to bring out the voters, but elite-challenging political actions were steadily rising.

Changing values influence economic growth rates. A change in prevailing values—the rise of the Protestant ethic—played a crucial role in the rise of capitalism, paving the way for the Industrial Revolution. Until this happened, virtually all agrarian societies, including Christian Europe, stigmatized social mobility. In agrarian societies, the main source of wealth was land, which is in fixed supply; the only way to become rich was to seize someone else’s land—probably by killing the owner. Such violence threatened the survival of any society, and was repressed by norms that empha-

sized acceptance of the status into which one was born and stigmatized the economically ambitious. At the same time, traditional societies emphasized duties of sharing and charity—which helped compensate the poor for the absence of social mobility, but further undermined the legitimacy of economic accumulation.

In Western history, the rise of the Protestant ethic—a materialistic value system that tolerated economic accumulation and encouraged it as something laudable and heroic—was a key cultural change that opened the way for capitalism and industrialization. But precisely because they attained high levels of economic security, the Western societies that were the first to industrialize have gradually come to emphasize postmaterialist values, giving higher priority to the quality of life than to economic growth. In this respect, the rise of postmaterialist values reverses the rise of the Protestant ethic. Today, the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic is most vigorous in East Asia and is fading away in Protestant Europe, as technological development and cultural change become global.

### **Stable Democracy and Subjective Well-Being**

Mass values and attitudes are a major influence on whether or not democratic institutions survive in a given society. In the last several years, new democracies in Central Europe, East Asia, and the former Soviet Union have held their first free elections. But it is one thing to adopt formal democracy and another thing to attain stable democracy. Immediately after World War I, a number of new democracies were established, many of which did not survive the stresses of the interwar era. The most tragic and fateful case was that of Germany, where Hitler became chancellor through free elections.

Associated with defeat from its start, Weimar Germany soon faced the hyperinflation of the 1920s, was unable to maintain internal order, and finally collapsed under the impact of the Great Depression in the 1930s. After World War II, the West German regime did develop legitimacy, but it did so gradually. At first this acceptance was based on the postwar economic miracle. If a society has a high level of subjective well-being, its citizens feel that their entire way of life is fundamentally good. Their political institutions gain legitimacy by association.

If one feels that one's life as a whole has been going well under democratic institutions, it gives rise to a relatively deep, diffuse, and enduring basis of support for those institutions. Such a regime has built up a capital of mass support that can help the regime weather bad times. Legitimacy is helpful to any regime, but authoritarian systems can survive through coer-

cion; democratic regimes must be legitimate in the eyes of their citizens or, like the Weimar republic, they can be voted out of existence.

Figure 7 shows levels of subjective well-being in more than forty societies, based on combined responses to questions about life satisfaction and personal happiness. As this figure shows, societies with a relatively strong sense of subjective well-being are much more likely to be stable democracies than societies characterized by a low sense of well-being. More detailed analysis<sup>2</sup> confirms that subjective well-being plays an important role in legitimizing democratic institutions. Because subjective well-being is diffuse and deep-rooted, it provides a relatively stable basis of support for a given type of regime. Conversely, when people are dissatisfied with politics, they may change the parties in office. And when people become dissatisfied with their lives, they may reject their entire form of government or even break up the existing nation, as happened to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Only rarely does mass dissatisfaction reach this level.

**Subjective well-being plays an important role in legitimizing democratic institutions.**

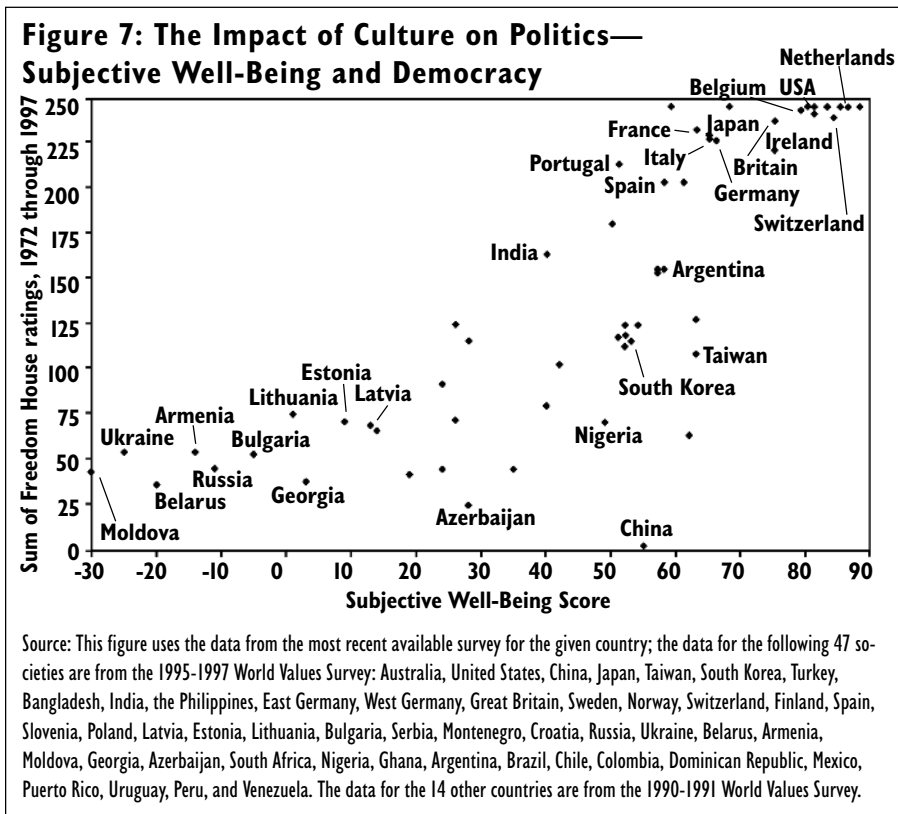
Normally, most people tend to describe themselves as either “happy” or “fairly happy”; and far more people describe themselves as satisfied with their lives as a whole than dissatisfied. Already in the 1990 WVS, the then-Communist societies revealed the lowest levels of subjective well-being ever recorded in research on this subject. In several of these countries, as many people described themselves as “unhappy” as “happy”; and as many said they were “dissatisfied with their lives as a whole” as said they were “satisfied.” This is an alarming finding. Subjective well-being had fallen to unheard-of levels. It is not surprising that, within two years, the economic and political systems had collapsed throughout Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.

In the 1995 WVS, subjective well-being had fallen even lower in Russia (reaching an unprecedented low level of -12, which means that most of the Russian people were unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives as a whole). In Russia’s 1996 presidential elections, the three leading contenders were Boris Yeltsin, the principal reformist candidate; a hard-line Communist candidate who represented the authoritarian Soviet model of politics; and an even more alarming xenophobic nationalist who promised to reestablish the former Soviet empire. For most of the year, it looked as if Yeltsin would lose. In the end he pulled out a victory, using methods that did not exactly fit democratic norms, but which averted potentially worse alternatives. Our

latest data suggest that democracy is becoming fairly secure in Central and Eastern Europe but that it hangs by a thread in Russia and most other countries of the former Soviet Union.

One interpretation would be that democratic institutions give rise to the cultural syndrome of self-expression values. In other words, democracy makes people healthy, happy, tolerant, and trusting and instills postmaterialist values (at least in the younger generation). I would love to believe this interpretation. It provides an enormously powerful argument for democracy, and implies that we have a quick fix for most of the world's problems: adopt democratic institutions and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, the experience of the people of the former Soviet Union doesn't support this interpretation. Since moving toward democracy in 1991, they have not become healthier, happier, more trusting, more tolerant or more postmaterialist. On the whole, they have moved in exactly the opposite direction.

Another interpretation is that the processes of modernization and postmodernization gradually give rise to social and cultural changes that make democratic institutions increasingly likely to survive and flourish. That would help explain why mass democracy did not emerge until a relatively recent point in history, and why, even now, it is most likely to be found in eco-



nominally more-developed countries, in particular, those that have high levels of postmodern values. This interpretation has both encouraging and discouraging implications. The bad news is that democracy is not something that can be easily attained by simply adopting the right laws. It is most likely to flourish under specific social and cultural conditions—and today, those conditions are not pervasive in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, and Moldova.

The good news is the long-term trend of the past several centuries has been toward economic development, a process that has accelerated and spread around the world during the past few decades. Economic development seems conducive to the social and cultural conditions under which democracy is most likely to emerge and survive. If the current outlook is discouraging in much of the former Soviet Union, the evidence in Figure 8 suggests that a number of other societies are closer to democracy than is generally suspected. Mexico, for example, seems ripe for the transition to democracy; its position on the postmodern values axis is roughly comparable to that of Argentina, Spain, or Italy. And the Chinese show a surprisingly high score on the values' dimension linked with democracy. The ruling Communist elite is committed to maintaining one-party rule, and as long as they retain control of the military they can probably hang on to power. But the Chinese public shows a predisposition toward democracy that would probably surprise most observers. As we have seen, economic development is conducive to the spread of postmaterialist values, which give increasingly high priority to freedom of speech and political participation, and is linked with the emergence of relatively high levels of subjective well-being. In the long run, economic development tends to bring cultural changes that are conducive to democracy. These changes are part of a broader process linked with the emergence of postmodern values.

## Notes

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1. Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).
2. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).