After Postmaterialism: An Essay on China, Russia, and the United States

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Abstract
The postmaterialist thesis makes two main claims. First, over time, rising affluence enables many people to substantially satisfy their need for security and economic sustenance, allowing them to focus on pursuing personal autonomy and self-expression. Second, at a given time, wealthier societies, people in higher socio-economic positions, and younger people tend to be more postmaterialistic than are poorer societies, people in lower socio-economic positions, and older people. Preliminary analysis of American, Chinese, and Russian survey data since the late 1980s demonstrates that these generalizations are increasingly difficult to sustain. Intensifying geopolitical rivalries and growing inequality seem to have invigorated feelings of insecurity and nationalistic and conservative ideologies. While postmaterialism may have been on the rise in some countries in the last decades of the twentieth century, it seems to be a waning force among major world powers, giving way to increasing nationalism and selective xenophobia.

Big Exceptions
The Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg was founded about 200 years ago by Catherine the Great to promote the education of young women from the Russian nobility. It represents an early step in the long and unfinished march toward gender equality in Russia. A century later, during the October Revolution, the Smolny Institute embarked on a different path. It became the headquarters of the Bolsheviks and thus an engine of Russia’s remarkable economic growth in the twentieth century.

In 2012, Ronald Inglehart, the originator of the theory of postmaterialism and the driving force behind the World Values Survey, wove these two strands of Smolny history together without realizing it. He gave a lecture at the Smolny drawing a strong connection between economic growth, on the one hand, and attitudes toward gender equality and a host of related values, on the other. In his words,

in literally hundreds of surveys in nearly 100 countries in repeated waves, we find a pattern...which...points to the fact that growing existential security leads to changing values.... [T]hese changes lead to growing tolerance of gays, gender equality, more [political] participation, and in the long run, it makes democracy more probable (Inglehart, 2012).
In a nutshell, this is the theory of postmaterialism.

In recent iterations, Inglehart holds that the world’s countries can be located in a two-dimensional space, with the x-axis representing survival vs. self-expression values and the y-axis representing traditional versus secular-rational values (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). In general, he argues, as economic well-being measured by GDP per capita increases, people move to the upper right quadrant of this space, becoming more gender egalitarian, happier, more trusting, less religious, less beholden to authority, less xenophobic, less patriotic, and so on.

Forty-seven minutes into the Smolny lecture, after members of the audience had had a chance to inspect Inglehart’s graph, a well-mannered gentleman quietly interjected, “I’m sorry, but where is Russia?” It was an excellent question. “Russia,” replied Inglehart, is a special case. Most countries have been moving toward a little more secularization, and quite a lot towards self-expression values. Russia has moved in a retrograde direction, toward more traditional values and a bit more toward survival values. The theory, of course, does not say that every country in the world is magically drawn in this direction. The theory is that if the population grows up under increasing security, then it is drawn in this direction. Russia’s recent history, following the collapse of Communism, was not rising security; it was declining security (Inglehart, 2012).

If Russia is a special case, what about China? China, it turns out, is also a special case. Inglehart boldly noted that because “China has been experiencing a 10% yearly economic growth rate,... It [will] begin to approach Sweden, not immediately, but in the long run” (Inglehart, 2012). So despite more than three decades of the fastest economic growth the world has ever seen, China has not yet registered the kind of movement toward postmaterialist values that Inglehart’s theory predicts. In fact, as Inglehart had earlier shown, China’s postmaterialist values are mired at the level of Bulgaria’s (Inglehart and Baker, 2000: 40).

Such important exceptions suggest the need to examine more closely how all three world powers – Russia, China, and the United States – have fared in terms of the original postmaterialist scale, first proposed in the late 1980s.¹ (In recent work, the scale has become a component of the “survival vs. self-expression” dimension.) The results of this inquiry are displayed in Figure 1.

¹ In the past quarter of a century, the proportion of Americans expressing postmaterialist values fell more than 8 percentage points to 17 percent while the proportion of Chinese expressing postmaterialist values fell more than 10 percentage points to just 3 percent. The proportion of Russians expressing postmaterialist values dropped insignificantly by less than 1 percentage point in this period but only about 2 percent of Russian adults can be called postmaterialists by Inglehart’s measure. In fact, among the scores of countries included in the World Values Survey, Russia is the least postmaterialist (Inglehart and Baker, 2000: 40).
It is true, as Inglehart says, that Russia experienced its sharpest decline in postmaterialist attitudes immediately after the collapse of communism. However, on inspection, the general principle that postmaterialist attitudes are positively correlated with economic growth is not sustained. Thus, Russia's GPD per capita soared 103 percent in real terms during the oil boom between 2006 and 2012, but the proportion of Russians expressing postmaterialist attitudes barely budged during that period (Figure 1). Moreover, in China and the United States, the biggest declines in postmaterialism occurred during periods of rapid economic expansion. In the United States, GDP per capita rose 28 percent in real terms between 1999 and 2005 while in China GDP per capita shot up 92 percent in real terms between 1990 and 1995. Yet these periods witnessed the biggest declines in the proportion of Americans and Chinese expressing postmaterialist attitudes over the 25-year period under analysis. One is entitled to ask whether a theory claiming to predict value change worldwide is credible if the world's three main geopolitical powers containing more than a quarter of the planet's population are special cases that fail to validate the theory. One is also obliged to look for alternative explanations that might better account for value change.

Survival vs. Self-expression Values in China
The 2006 Chinese General Social Survey permits a first step toward that goal because it includes three questionnaire items that are correlates of Inglehart's survival vs. self-expression scale (Inglehart and Baker, 2000: 27). The question, "Do you agree that foreign movies, music, and books are having a bad influence on Chinese culture?" measures the respondent's level of xenophobia. The question, "Do you agree that, as long as the economy keeps growing, democratization is unnecessary?" measures the respondent's attitude toward democracy. The question, "Do you agree that obeying the government is always the right thing to do?" measures the respondent's attitude toward authority. Negative answers to these questions indicate that the respondent ranks high on the self-expression dimension, positive answers the opposite.²

These three items were combined in a scale and a regression model was then developed to account for variation in the degree to which people value self-expression over survival attitudes. Table 1 summarizes the findings for the 10,151 individuals surveyed.

Postmaterialist theory leads one to expect significant associations between the self-expression scale and twelve predictors in Table 1. Six predictors behaved as expected. Six did not. People who were male, younger, and more highly educated valued self-expression more than did people who were female, older, and less highly educated. Members of the working class and Party members valued self-expression more than peasants and non-Party members did. These findings suggest that some indicators of higher social status were associated with valuing self-expression, especially for people who experienced primary socialization in more prosperous times, as the postmaterialist thesis predicts. On the other hand, results for half of the predictors refute the postmaterialist thesis. The surprises are worth pondering.

In the postmaterialist view, placing a high value on self-expression should be associated with occupying a higher current class location and having originated in a higher
class. Yet Table 1 shows that Chinese people originating in the working, middle, and upper classes were no more likely than were people originating in the peasantry to place a high value on self-expression. Furthermore, people located in the middle and upper classes at the time of the survey were no more likely to favour self-expression values than were peasants. Similarly with annual income: Although, following the postmaterialist thesis, lower income earners were expected to favour survival values more than higher income earners were, no such association was discovered. It is also consistent with the postmaterialist thesis to expect that members of disadvantaged minority groups would be more concerned with survival values than with self-expression values, but that is not what was found.

In addition to showing the effects of individual-level variables, Table 1 displays contextual effects at the level of the province, autonomous region, and centrally-controlled municipality (28 such units are represented in the survey). Postmaterialist theory holds that contextual affluence causes survival values to fade in importance and self-expression values to blossom. The contexts examined in Table 1 exhibit considerable variation in affluence, with the poorest contexts having a median household income only a fifth that of the richest. Yet despite this wide variation, no significant difference in self-expression values was found between the richest and the poorest contexts.

One way of summarizing these results is to say that if one were to select any one of the twelve predictors at random, it would have a 50-50 chance of behaving in the way the postmaterialist thesis says it should: hardly a glowing endorsement of its validity.

Antisemitism in Russia
A few years ago, a team of survey researchers similarly demonstrated that, in Russia, urban, well-educated, and well-off respondents are the least postmaterialist citizens (Shaykhutdinov et al., 2010). Additional evidence concerning xenophobia increases one’s scepticism about the relevance of the postmaterialist thesis to the Russian case.

According to the postmaterialist thesis, tolerance of minorities is a component of postmaterialism and is therefore positively associated with economic well-being. Jews are not the most disliked minority group in Russia. That honour goes to Chechens. However, between 1999 and 2005, the World Values Survey asked a representative sample of Russian adults how they would feel about having Jews as next-door neighbours. The percentage who said they would not like to have Jews as next-door neighbours was nearly twice as high in Russia as it was in France, Germany, and the UK, and more than five times higher than the comparable figure in the Netherlands and Canada outside Quebec (Brym, Shaffir, and Weinfeld, 2010: vii). Moreover, in the most recent years for which data are available, 40 to 50 percent of Russians agreed with the statement that “Jews in Russia have too much power and influence” (Figure 2). This statement has deep anti-Semitic overtones in Russia, where a pamphlet outlining the alleged Jewish plan for world domination was first published and widely disseminated by the Tsarist secret police in 1905 and continues to be widely distributed in Russia (Anonymous, 1923).

As Figure 2 shows, between 1993 and 2007 the proportion of Russians agreeing that Jews have too much power and influence rose markedly. Yet over this period the size of the
Jewish population fell by 45 percent to about 210,000 and the population aged to the point at which nearly half the Jews in Russia were pensioners (2002 median age = 57.5) – hardly indicative of growing power and influence (American Jewish Yearbook, 1995: 478; 2007: 583; Federal Service of State Statistics, 2004). More importantly from the point of view of the postmaterialist thesis, the proportion of Russians agreeing that Jews have too much power and influence jumped as the economic situation of the country vastly improved (Brym, 2002). In some contexts, the xenophobic element of postmaterialism may fall with improving economic conditions, but the Russian case demonstrates that, in at least one context, the opposite may happen. Other indicators of the tolerance that is supposed to accompany economic growth, notably attitudes towards sexual minorities, have moved in the same direction as anti-Semitism: toward greater intolerance.

The Reorientation of the International System
The foregoing considerations suggest that the concept of postmaterialism does not adequately capture trends in value change in the leading geopolitical powers over the past few decades. Instead, as will now be argued, we are witnessing a politics of intensifying nationalism and xenophobia promoted by people holding dominant positions in the most geopolitically important states. In the context of the well-documented shift in global power away from the United States and toward China and Russia (Dobbs et al., 2012: 17; Edelman, 2010; Frank, 1998; Mahbubani, 2008), some members of ruling circles have expressed nationalistic and xenophobic values that have been endorsed by large segments of the public in the countries under examination here. A rapid increase in income inequality has disposed much of the public to such value change. To varying degrees, therefore, self-expression and quality-of-life issues have declined in importance while xenophobia and economic and security concerns have strengthened.

Consider the United States. According to a nationally representative poll taken in 2013, 53 percent of Americans think the US is less powerful on the world stage than it was a decade earlier, three times more than the percentage who think the US is more powerful. That is the by far the highest percentage of Americans sensing a decline in US power since pollsters started asking this question in 1974. The percentage has more than doubled since 2004. Polls of American foreign relations experts reveal the same tendency over time (Pew, 2013). Chinese economic and military growth and Islamic radicalism are widely perceived as the two main threats to American dominance, with Russian territorial ambitions recently coming to the fore. One result has been rising, if selective, xenophobia. For example, since 9/11, the proportion of Americans holding an unfavourable opinion of Islam has risen nearly 20 percentage points and now stands at nearly 50 percent (American Arab Institute, 2014; Kurzman, 2014).

The United States has responded to its growing sense of threat and declining power by seeking to shore up its security, largely by political and military means. It launched long and costly wars in the greater Middle East. It raised its military, diplomatic and economic posture in the Asia/Pacific region and encouraged its allies to do likewise. For example, it strengthened trade agreements with South Korea and other regional powers, sided with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan in their territorial disputes with China, and increased military cooperation with Australia. Finally, the United States and its Western European allies invited ten Eastern European countries to join the European Union and twelve to join
the NATO defence alliance as a buffer against Russia. Overall, the American response to its declining position has been aggressively security-oriented.

From the Russian point of view, the United States has wrested away piece after piece of the former Soviet Union’s former sphere of influence. Russia views NATO and EU expansion in Eastern Europe as a grave security and economic threat. Ukraine’s turn to the West and Russia’s subsequent annexation of Crimea and initiation of a proxy war in the Donbas in 2014 are only the most recent reactions to what Russia perceives as Western aggression. Earlier, in 1992, Transnistria, the eastern part of Moldova, refused to be separated from the Soviet Union, and a four-month armed conflict resulted in Russia stationing its troops there. Today, Russia effectively controls the region. War with Georgia in 2008 resulted in Russia recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, annexing them de facto. Like the United States, Russia has become increasingly security-oriented and aggressive since 2000.

In Russia’s highest political circles, the ideology of Eurasianism has taken firm hold. In this view, Russia should be the centre of an economic and political union that reintegrates most of the former Soviet Union. In its most extreme version, the Eurasian Empire is seen as extending well beyond the eastern, western, and southern borders of the USSR (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2014; Dugin, 1999; Lukin, 2014; Pomarantsev, 2013; Putin, 2014; Shlapentokh, 2014).

The Russian public has fallen in with this stance. Surveys show that Russians have become more traditional, religious, xenophobic, and imperialistic in recent decades. They have been flocking to the highly conservative and ethnically and religiously intolerant Russian Orthodox Church, which the state now strongly supports and heavily subsidizes (Evans and Northmore-Ball, 2012). In 1991, 37 percent minority of Russians thought it was natural for their country to be an empire. In 2012, a 44 percent plurality agreed. In 1991, 26 percent of Russians said that their country should exclude ethnic minorities. By 2012, that figure had more than doubled to 53 percent (Pew, 2012).

Turning to China, one finds that increasingly nationalistic and xenophobic views were expressed by some intellectuals beginning in the early 1990s (Zhao, 1997). These attitudes have since strengthened and become entrenched under the leadership of President Xi. Inspired by the glories of China’s imperial past, the government has in recent years vastly expanded international trade, investment and influence, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; rapidly increased the size and reach of the military; and advanced new Asian and Eurasian security initiatives. China has also become increasingly assertive about its territorial claims in the potentially oil- and gas-rich South China and East China Seas, where it has come into conflict with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands and with Japan over the Senkaku Islands. In this connection, China declared an air defence zone that overlaps Japan’s and South Korea’s, announced regional fishing regulations that none of its neighbours recognize, and started constructing islands to increase the scope of its maritime claims. It even redrew the embossed map on Chinese passports to include disputed areas in India and Southeast Asia. All of these actions have expressed and fuelled nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments in the population (Economy, 2014; Nathan, 2003; Poling, 2013).
Rising Inequality
Rapidly increasing income inequality seems to have rendered the American, Chinese, and Russian populations susceptible to such appeals. In the early 1980s, Russia and China were among the most egalitarian countries in the world as measured by market income (Gini = 0.280). Since then, income inequality has increased rapidly in both countries. By 2012, the Chinese Gini very nearly reached the American level (Gini = .475), which had itself been climbing rapidly (Adomanis, 2012; Oak, 2012; World Bank, 2015).

Research shows that a high level of inequality tends to make people dissatisfied with life, although their dissatisfaction is expressed to varying degrees, in different forms, and with different consequences across population categories and countries (OECD, 2013: 35). One well-known pattern involves scapegoating, or blaming dissatisfaction caused by high and rising inequality on immigrants who compete for jobs and foreign countries that threaten domestic security and economic welfare. Unfortunately, even the American General Social Survey does not allow one to plot financial dissatisfaction and xenophobia against the Gini index because questions about attitudes toward immigrants, China, and so on are asked too infrequently. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that three decades of steeply rising income inequality in all three of the countries under examination have helped to weaken postmaterialist values and strengthen nationalism and selective xenophobia in their populations.

Conclusion
The foregoing analysis suggests that, in the decades since the postmaterialist thesis was first proposed, value change among the citizens of the major world powers has not moved in the predicted direction – toward greater respect for all minorities, stronger endorsement of democracy, and so on. To the contrary, the evidence assembled here indicates movement in the opposite direction – and this despite considerable growth in overall prosperity in China, Russia, and the United States.

Three corollaries follow. First, as Robert Andersen’s (2012) crossnational analysis of popular support for democracy implies, the degree to which a country’s citizens support postmaterialist values may be influenced at least as much by the country’s level of economic inequality as by its overall level of prosperity. In some cases, rising GDP per capita may bring about an increased sense of security, tolerance, and the like, as the postmaterialist thesis insists. However, if rising income and wealth are progressively more concentrated in the hands of the well-to-do, the opposite may result. In the latter case, ordinary citizens may consider themselves increasingly disadvantaged. They may focus more and more on seeking to improve their material well-being and blaming their troubles on domestic or foreign scapegoats. For geopolitical and domestic political reasons, elite groups may be eager to encourage such a value shift away from postmaterialism. The present essay is merely an early and tentative foray into this line of thought. Hopefully, future research will specify more precisely how variation in economic inequality modifies the relationship between prosperity and postmaterialist values.

A second corollary of this essay’s findings is that the historical traditions, cultural practices, and institutional continuities of countries influence their development paths, so much so that, in some cases, growing prosperity does not necessarily lead to increased individualism, greater democracy, and so on. In recent years, proponents of the postmaterialist thesis have acknowledged the significance of path dependency, but only
insofar as certain religious or political traditions may weaken the positive association between prosperity and postmaterialism. They do not entertain the possibility that, for some categories of countries, there exists no correlation between prosperity and postmaterialism or that, for other categories of countries, the correlation may be negative. In the words of Welzel, Inglehart, and Klingemann (2001: iii), “socioeconomic development, cultural modernization, and democratic regime performance constitute a coherent syndrome of social change (emphasis added).” Or as Inglehart said a few years ago at the Smolny Institute, China, its path dependency notwithstanding, is becoming Sweden. The implication of the present essay is that China, while not necessarily a thing unto itself, is following a development path that is distinct from that of Sweden. Future crossnational analyses of many more countries than the three singled out here should seek to acknowledge, categorize, and explain different development paths and associated value outcomes rather than adhering to an explanatory framework that is, at its core, ethnocentric.

The third and final corollary that follows from the foregoing analysis is that it is sometimes counterproductive to assume that countries (and their populations) are independent observations. Of course, much can be learned about the sources of value change from crossnational, statistical research based on the assumption of independent observations. However, suspending that assumption and recognizing that, to varying degrees, countries depend on one another economically, politically, and culturally can also lead to useful insights. As described earlier, for instance, in recent decades the actions of the United States have strongly influenced the reactions of Russia, and the actions of China have strongly influenced the reactions of the United States, with important implications for the values held by the populations of all three countries. Crossnational research on value change has largely ignored such interdependence, leading to conclusions that paint an overly rosy and more or less linear picture of “modernization.” In contrast, recognizing the existence of an international system adds an important dimension to the study of value change. The picture that emerges from the addition of this dimension is still hazy, but it appears to be more heterogeneous and realistic, and less linear and sanguine, than the postmaterialist thesis allows.

Notes

1. The scale is based on responses to the following question: “If you had to choose among the following things, which are the two that seem the most desirable to you?”
   1. maintaining order in the nation
   2. giving people more say in important political decisions
   3. fighting rising prices
   4. protecting freedom of speech

Materialists supposedly prioritize items 1 and 3, postmaterialists items 2 and 4.

2. The questions are not well constructed insofar as they are not neutrally phrased, but here we are interested in their correlates, not their level.

3. The collapse of the Russian rouble in 1998 prompted a hard-line general and Communist member of the Duma to assert in a television interview that all of Russia’s economic woes
are the fault of the Jews, who should be expelled from Russia. In an open letter, the head of the still-popular Communist Party of the Russian Federation (in the 1999 election, the Communists held 30 percent of the seats and were the largest party in the Duma) later qualified that assessment, stating that the problem was caused by “the Zionization of the governmental authorities of Russia.” During the ensuing public debate, polls registered a spike in anti-Jewish sentiment that abated only modestly over the next nine years despite greatly improved economic conditions (Brym, 2002).

References


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Figure 1  Postmaterialism, USA, Russia, and China, 1989-2014 (in percent)

Sources: Google (2014a; 2014b; 2014c); World Values Survey (2014).
Table 1  Hierarchical Linear Model for Self-Expression Values, China, 2006 (standard errors in parentheses)

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<td>Party membership (high)</td>
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* = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** = p < 0.001

Figure 2  Economic Misery and Anti-Semitism, Russia, 1993-2007

Economic misery index (inflation + unemployment rates)

Anti-semitism