

RONALD INGLEHART'S COMMENT ON "AFTER POSTMATERIALISM": A REPLY

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CRITIQUE

Professor Inglehart and I are involved in a foreground/background dispute. We see the same black-and-white image (Figure 1) but interpret it differently. Inglehart's foreground is white, leading to him to conclude that the image portrays two faces. My foreground is black, leading me to conclude that the image portrays a goblet. His foreground (my background) consists of the intergenerational causes of value change, notably socialization in relatively peaceful and prosperous times and the concomitant proliferation of higher-status occupations. My foreground (his background) consists of geopolitical rivalry and growing income inequality, forces that push the citizens of today's Great Powers away from postmaterialism and into the camp of the meaner angels of our nature. True, we can see each other's foreground — I adduce data showing that young Chinese citizens are more postmaterialistic than their elder compatriots; Inglehart admits that growing geopolitical rivalries and income inequality have stymied Russia's advance to postmaterialism — but we each insist that *our* foreground is the main story.

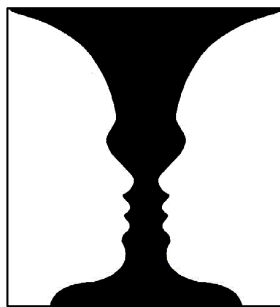


Figure 1: The Rubin Goblet

Inglehart's main story is Whiggish (Butterfield, 1931). For him, history is the evolution of humanity toward a glorious present, driven by the engine of rising GDP per capita (which, notwithstanding his qualifications, he consistently uses as his main independent variable). Just as Marx thought that the most advanced capitalist countries would lead less developed countries to socialism, Inglehart (2012) insists that China will follow Sweden and the United States to postmaterialism.

Lacking Inglehart's apparent ability to see the future, I have resigned myself to showing that, between the late 1970s and the present, rapidly growing Chinese prosperity has not been greeted with the outcome he expects. In China, postmaterialism is a dead letter while militarized nationalism grows year by year. Contrary to Inglehart's claim, I do not expect short-term changes in GDP per capita to be reflected immediately in value change. I do expect that if 37 years of 11 percent mean annual growth in GDP is associated with a precipitous *decline* in the mean level of postmaterialism, as is the case in China, one would be obliged to revise one's theory accordingly.

Inglehart asserts that few economists would recognize my story about rising Russian prosperity during the oil boom (2000 to 2013 or 2014, depending on the analyst). I guess we read different economists. In 2009, reflecting widespread if not unanimous opinion, economists at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, an influential American think tank based in Washington, DC, had this to say on the subject:

There is no aspect of contemporary Russia that has changed more rapidly and unexpectedly than its economic situation. When Vladimir Putin became President [in 2000], Russia was effectively bankrupt as it owed more money to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) than it had in foreign currency reserves. Since then, Russia has achieved a virtual macro-economic revolution to the point where it is one of the largest creditors of US debt in the world. Its nominal dollar GDP has increased by more than a factor of six.... Growth of this magnitude would equate to nearly a tenfold increase in GDP over the course of a decade (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009).

Inglehart plays down Russia's economic growth by presenting a data series on real per capita GDP that begins not with the onset of the oil boom in 2000, but in 1989, before the dissolution of the Soviet Union precipitated a five-year downturn in the Russian economy. This misleading starting point allows him to assert that real per capita GDP increased only 10 percent. However, according to his own figures, real per capita GDP increased 98 percent from 1999 to 2013, during the oil boom

(Inglehart, 2016: Table 1). A near doubling of real per capita GDP in fourteen years is hardly evidence of economic stagnation.

I also find it disingenuous of Inglehart to assert that some of my indicators of survival vs. self-expression values in China (1) fail to distinguish basic values and attitudes and (2) lack face validity. My indicators are based on measures that have been recognized as valid indicators of basic values by many researchers, including Inglehart (Bomhoff and Gu, 2010; Dalton and Ong, 2005; Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Inglehart and Welzel, 2009).

Labelling my foreground factors "short-term" aberrations and his foreground factors meaningful "long-term" trends is another maneuver that does not withstand scrutiny. I document the significance of two generations of growing security and prosperity in China — hardly a short-term aberration by any reasonable standard. Inglehart documents the significance of a decline in Russian GDP per capita for just a few years immediately after the collapse of communism — hardly a long-term trend. The important question is not whether some factors are short-term and others long-term, but which set of factors predominates at a given time for a given set of countries and with what consequences.

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In 1940, George Orwell argued that people want more out of life than "ease, security and avoidance of pain" (Orwell, 1940 [1970]: 29). Three decades later, Ronald Inglehart echoed Orwell's opinion. However, the two men drew different conclusions from similar observations. Inglehart was born during the Great Depression and attended graduate school mainly in the United States at the height of the student movement in the prosperous 1960s. His experience evidently encouraged him to form the opinion that, after escaping poverty and achieving a certain standard of prosperity and security, people seek self-actualization and universalism. As a young adult, Orwell fought fascism in the Spanish Civil War and then witnessed the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of World War II. His experience apparently encouraged him to form the opinion that people, in addition to wanting "comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control" and the like "also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty parades" (Orwell, 1940 [1970]: 29).

Inglehart and Orwell both have a point. However, as social scientists, we should want to learn about the conditions that lead people to choose self-actualization and universalism *or* violent self-sacrifice in the name

of nationalistic, ethnic or religious ideals. One thing should be clear in this regard. Socialization in good times and the enjoyment of material security are not always enough to push people toward postmaterialism. The university-educated, middle- and upper-class men who planned and executed 9/11 are evidence enough of that.

Material well-being and relative security may lead to postmaterialism but, under identifiable conditions, they can also lead away from liberalism and the desire for self-actualization, toward nationalism and military expansionism. The theory of postmaterialism emphasizes only one possibility, paying little attention to the bitter and recalcitrant reality that puts values that both Inglehart and I admire at risk in many parts of the world (Brym and Andersen, 2016; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009). I am encouraged that Inglehart has now, apparently for the first time, acknowledged that growing geopolitical rivalries and economic inequality can throw the march to postmaterialism off course. He has not gone so far as to admit that foreground can become background. But it's a start.

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