

Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-108-48931-7, 273 pages

Review by Marius Ioan TĂTAR

Ronald F. Inglehart is one of the most influential contemporary proponents of modernization theory, which sees economic, cultural and political factors as intertwined in multifaceted processes of social change that tend to propel societies in coherent and roughly predictable directions. In his previous work, Inglehart has found systematic correlations between changes in economic development and shifts in public attitudes on religion, gender equality, different lifestyles and democratic values, more generally. These findings, based on empirical analyses of data coming from the Eurobarometer and Values Surveys, reveal an evolution from materialist to post-materialist orientations and more broadly, from survival to self-expression values. The dynamics of cultural orientations during the last decades are revisited in the *Cultural Evolution*¹, in which Inglehart develops a new version of the theory of modernization.

The *Evolutionary Modernization* theory, as Inglehart calls it, highlights the central role played by people's sense of economic and physical security in shaping their motivations and life strategies. First, "socioeconomic development directly affects people's sense of existential security, determining whether physical survival seems uncertain or can be taken for granted" (p. 14). Second, people prioritize certain values and beliefs that reflect their perceptions of how safe is the environment in which they live. As Inglehart argues, "for most of history, survival was insecure, with population rising to meet the food supply and then

¹ This book was also translated into Romanian: Inglehart, Ronald F. (2019) *Evoluția culturală: schimbarea motivației umane și a modului în care aceasta transformă lumea*, (translated in Romanian by Mălina Voicu, preface by Mălina Voicu, Bogdan Voicu and Claudiu D. Tufiș) Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană, ISBN 978-606-797-264-1.

being held constant by starvation, disease and violence" (p. 8). This leads to what Inglehart names *The Authoritarian Reflex*, a survival strategy that prompts societies to emphasize solidarity with fellow members, conformity to group norms, xenophobia and obedience to strong leaders (pp. 8-9). On the other hand, Inglehart, shows that in the second half of the twentieth century, industrialization, urbanization and mass literacy in the West, promoted the civic and political mobilization of the working class. This has led to increasing electoral support for Left-wing governments implementing redistributive policies which, along with the absence of war, substantially increased the existential security of vast numbers of people, eventually making societies more open, tolerant and democratic. Under these conditions, young generations growing up in the rich world took economic and physical security for granted in the decades following the World War II, and this has changed their motivations, individual objectives and value orientations.

In this book, Inglehart identifies three mechanisms of cultural change. First, he convincingly demonstrates that changes in how young people perceived existential security in the post-war world has brought an intergenerational value shift from giving top priority to economic and physical security (materialist and survival orientations), toward greater emphasis on free choice, environmental protection, gender equality and tolerance of gays (post-materialist and self-expression orientations). Once the new generations, socialized under conditions of high existential security, replace older and more materialistic cohorts, self-expression value orientations seem to become dominant in society and could also diffuse relatively quickly to other segments of the population through social conformity pressures. Second, Inglehart shows that "intergenerational value change is shaped by short-term period effects such as economic booms or recessions, in addition to population replacement", but the effects of such economic shocks and growth might cancel out, on the long term (p. 23). Third, cultural change is path-dependent: while levels of existential security shape a society's values, its historical legacies influence the level at which such cultural shifts take place.

However, cultural changes reflecting perceptions of existential security do not occur in only one direction. In the last two chapters of this book, Inglehart discusses what he calls *the Silent Revolution in reverse*, that is a return of insecurities that open the door to "xenophobic populist authoritarian

movements in many countries, from France's National Front, to the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, to the rise of Donald Trump in the USA" (p. 5). According to Inglehart, these advanced industrial countries are entering the *Artificial Intelligence* society, a new phase of technological development that makes possible for "computer programs to replace not just industrial workers but also highly educated people, including lawyers, doctors, professors, scientists and even computer programmers" (p. 5). As secure and well-paid jobs are disappearing not only for the working class, but also for the middle class, "declining existential security triggers an Authoritarian Reflex that brings support for strong leaders, strong in-group solidarity, rigid conformity to group norms and rejection of outsiders" (p. 5). While authoritarian populist leaders blame massive immigration for the economic problems of these societies, Inglehart argues that in western countries "insecurity today results from growing inequality" and not from the scarcity of resources (p. 5). Since inequality is essentially a political issue, Inglehart asserts the need for a new political coalition to represent the interests of both the working and middle classes. This new coalition could increase existential security for the vast majority of people through governmental interventions.

While the theoretical and analytical framework developed by Inglehart in this book brings substantial contributions to the literature explaining cultural and political change in contemporary societies, it has in my view two main limitations. First, the increased intra-generational inequality, which is particularly salient among today's youth, hinders the explanatory power of the main mechanism identified by Inglehart as leading to cultural change, namely the intergenerational shift from values shaped by scarcity, toward increased emphasis put on Postmaterialist and Self-expression values. Several decades ago, cultural shifts from materialist to postmaterialist values was brought about by younger generations. With the dissolution of social safety nets in recent decades, today's youth is a highly heterogeneous group living in different socio-economic conditions and experimenting divergent levels of existential (in)security. For instance, vulnerable young people living in the European Union face the risk of multiple exclusions that mutually reinforce each other: from the labor market, from education and from the democratic life of their societies (Tătar and Apăteanu, 2019). These young persons have a precarious status on the labor market (Tătar and Apăteanu, 2019) and the economic insecurities linked with this

situation may hinder the development of orientations toward tolerance and openness to new ideas. These developments seem to be at odds with the experiences of the young generations growing up in the post-World War II era, described by Inglehart in this book.

The second potential shortcoming of the analytical framework developed in *Cultural Evolution* stems from the mismatch between the conceptualization and measurement of the main explanatory variable of the Evolutionary Modernization theory, namely “existential security”. When Inglehart discusses the causes and consequences of “existential security” in the theoretical part of the book (see particularly Chapter 1), he makes several assertions that seem to qualify “existential security” mainly as a socio-psychological and subjective variable that should be measured at the individual level: “A society’s culture is shaped by the extent to which its *people* grow up *feeling* that survival is secure or insecure” (p. 8, emphasis mine); “Socioeconomic development directly affects *people’s sense* of existential security, determining whether physical survival *seems* uncertain or *can be taken for granted*” (p. 14, emphasis mine); “Cultural change is not simply determined by *cognitive* factors. To an even greater extent, it is shaped by *people’s* first-hand *experience* with existential security or insecurity” (p. 19, emphasis mine). Inglehart’s insistence on people’s *feeling*, *sense* or *experience* with existential (in)security seems to suggest that people’s subjective perceptions and evaluations on whether survival is secure or not is more important for understanding changes in their values, motivations and behavior, than objective degrees of existential security, measured at country level. However, Inglehart uses an index having 3 components to measure existential security in empirical analyses. The Existential Security index is based on each country’s life expectancy, infant mortality and GDP/capita in a given year (pp. 90-93; see also note 21 on p. 239). Thus, the country level operationalization of existential security through objective indicators tends to depart from Inglehart’s theoretical arguments which appear to define existential security as a key psychological (subjective) variable that shapes value orientations. Similarly, the hypotheses regarding the link between changes in existential security and cultural shifts are formulated and tested at country level. Perhaps, a future clarification of the concept of “existential security” would allow for more robust empirical tests of the propositions derived from the evolutionary modernization theory with various types of empirical data and at different levels of analysis.

To sum up, *Cultural Evolution* brings a welcome contribution to the study of economic, cultural and political change, opening new directions for research on these topics. In this book, Inglehart presents a new version of modernization theory that focuses on the causes and consequences of existential (in)security. Based on empirical evidence from more than 100 societies, this book examines how changes in the extent to which people take survival for granted shapes their motivations and behavior, leading to a plethora of long-term phenomena such as secularization, environmental protection, gender equality, same sex marriage, democratization, but also to more recent developments such as the rise of xenophobia and populist authoritarian parties and leaders.

References

Marius Ioan TĂTAR, Dan APĂTEANU (2019), "Multiple Exclusions: Civic and Political Disengagement of Vulnerable Youth in the European Union", pp. 477-505 in Karla Melida Barth, Mircea Brie, Dragoș Dărăbăneanu, Istvan Polgar (eds.) *The Role of Intercultural Communication in Adapting Ethnic Groups to the European Union Social Space*, Beau Bassin: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.