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Changing Values in Europe: Individualization, Postmaterialism, Cultural Memory, and European Identity

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Abstract: *Over the past decades, European societies have undergone significant transformations in their value systems. These changes are closely linked to processes of modernization, generational replacement, European integration, and increasing cultural diversity. Drawing on empirical evidence from large-scale surveys such as the Eurobarometer and the European Values Study, as well as on theoretical contributions from value change, individualization, and identity research, this article analyzes the multidimensional nature of changing values in Europe. It argues that European value change is characterized by the rise of postmaterialist and individualistic orientations, the decline of traditional authority and institutions, the redefinition of cultural heritage and collective memory, and the ambivalent emergence of a European identity. The article highlights both the empirical trends and their broader sociopolitical implications for European integration.*

Keywords *European values; Eurobaromete;, European Values Stud; postmaterialism; individualization; European identity; cultural memory;*

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Introduction

Values provide a normative framework through which individuals and societies evaluate actions, institutions, and social goals. In Europe, value change has been a central feature of postwar development and has become increasingly visible since the 1970s. While values are often regarded as relatively stable orientations, longitudinal research demonstrates that they evolve gradually in response to structural changes such as economic development, political integration, secularization, and globalization.

This article examines changing values in Europe by integrating empirical findings from cross-national surveys with theoretical perspectives on modernization, individualization, and identity formation. We compared and used data from Eurobarometer and from European Values Study, integrated with data related to the analysis of European values, from the specialized literature.

The analysis focuses on four interrelated dimensions: (1) the shift from materialist to postmaterialist values, (2) the process of individualization and de-traditionalization, (3) the transformation of European cultural heritage and memory, and (4) the construction of European identity within the context of institutional integration.

In the context of the tumultuous movements of recent times - economic crises, wars, large differences between social classes, etc. - we believe it is important to understand what produces these collective behaviors. Which are the main values that Europeans relate to and how have these changed in recent years?

Values and Social Change

In classical social science, values are understood as latent orientations that guide individual behavior and collective aspirations (Gunderlach, 1992). Although values alone do not directly produce social change, they define the normative boundaries within which social action takes

place. Situational constraints and institutional structures may limit the immediate realization of values, yet shifts in value priorities often signal deeper transformations in society.

In the "Atlas of European Values: Change and Continuity in Turbulent Times", Halman et al (2022) mentioned, as main topics related to the European values, the following: identity, welfare, migration, sustainability, solidarity, democracy. At the beginning, the authors stated that: "The European Union is a community of values. It is a peace project, which emerged from the tragedy of war and was founded on the respect for human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. These are the fundamental values that open societies share and must defend" (Halman et al, 2022, p. 5). They also mentioned that all Europeans are "united in diversity".

Modernization theory suggests that long-term economic security and rising levels of education reduce dependence on traditional authority and increase the emphasis on autonomy and self-expression. Consequently, value change is typically gradual, cumulative, and strongly shaped by generational dynamics.

Greenfield (2016) considers that, at the cultural level, these sociodemographic changes are associated with a shift in value orientations from collectivistic systems – such as family, community, or nation-centered frameworks – toward more individualistic ones. As societies adapt to new conditions, values governing social relationships shift from hierarchical to more egalitarian gender relations, from ascribed to self-selected gender roles, and from an emphasis on giving to others to prioritizing individual attainment; at the same time, the importance of materialism and fame increases.

Values that were adaptive in agrarian contexts, including obedience and age-graded authority, decline in importance, whereas child-centeredness becomes more prominent. Preferred cognitive styles also change, shifting from tradition to innovation and from contextualized cognition to more abstract forms of thinking. At the metacognitive level, values move away from the assumption of a single correct perspective toward the recognition of multiple perspectives.

Greenfield's theory of social change, cultural evolution, and human development offers an integrative framework for examining the cultural and psychological consequences of large-scale societal transformations, complementing lay or folk theories with systematic psychological evidence. According to this theory, as societies become increasingly urbanized, formally educated, commercialized, affluent, technologically advanced, and globally interconnected—while family and household sizes decrease, reflecting the dominant trajectory of social change in a globalizing world—cultural values, learning environments (i.e., socialization processes), and patterns of human development and behavior shift in predictable ways in order to adapt to these new conditions.

Postmaterialism and Individualization

One of the most influential approaches to value change is the theory of materialist and postmaterialist values (Inglehart, 1977, 1990). Materialist values emphasize economic security, physical safety, social order, and strong authority, reflecting conditions of scarcity. Postmaterialist values, by contrast, prioritize self-expression, freedom of speech, participation, and quality of life.

Closely related to this shift is the broader process of individualization. Individualization refers to the increasing reliance on personal choice rather than tradition or institutional prescriptions in shaping beliefs, values, and behavior (Ester et al., 1994; Beck, 1992; Beck, 2002). As individuals gain greater autonomy, traditional norms regarding religion, family,

morality, and authority lose their binding force, leading to de-traditionalization across multiple life domains

Methodology

Empirical analyses of European value change rely primarily on large-scale cross-national surveys, most notably the Eurobarometer and the European Values Study (EVS).

The Eurobarometer, initiated in the early 1970s, provides repeated measurements of public attitudes across EU member states, enabling both longitudinal and cross-national comparisons (Nissen, 2012). In its brochure *35 Years of Eurobarometer*, the European Commission describes the core design of the surveys as the regular repetition of a set of questions that are (a) worded identically across waves, (b) administered using a consistent and reliable methodology, and (c) implemented in all European Union Member States (European Commission, 2008). In addition, the Eurobarometer—both Standard and Special waves—is characterized as an omnibus survey, as it includes questions commissioned by multiple Directorates-General of the European Commission (European Commission, 2008). These design principles enable the data to be analyzed longitudinally to examine changes over time, comparatively to assess cross-national differences among member states, or through integrated approaches that combine temporal and transnational perspectives.

The European Values Study complements this by focusing explicitly on values related to religion, morality, family, politics, and individual autonomy (Halman, 2001; Halman et al., 2008). The European Values Study is a large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey research program on Europeans' opinions about family, work, religion, politics, and society. Conducted every nine years across a growing number of countries, the survey offers valuable insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values, and opinions of citizens throughout Europe.

As previous waves conducted in 1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, the 2017 EVS maintains a continuous focus on a broad range of values. Questions are highly comparable across waves and regions, making EVS suitable for research aimed at studying trends over time. The 2017 EVS includes data and documentation of 37 participating countries.

The topics are regarding:

1. Perceptions of life

This dimension explores individuals' views on key aspects of life, including the importance of work, family, friends, leisure, politics, and religion; levels of happiness and life satisfaction; self-rated health; and perceived control over life outcomes. It also examines civic engagement through membership and participation in voluntary, charitable, religious, cultural, professional, political, and recreational organizations, as well as recent involvement in voluntary work. Further topics include tolerance toward minorities, social trust, perceptions of fairness and helpfulness, and the importance attached to educational goals and desirable qualities in children.

2. Work

The survey investigates attitudes toward work, such as its role in personal development, moral obligations to society, and beliefs about unemployment. It also assesses the importance of various job characteristics and opinions on labor market priorities, including preferences for nationals over foreigners and men over women in employment.

3. Religion and morality

This section covers religious affiliation, religious practice (currently and during childhood), self-assessed religiosity, and beliefs in God, the afterlife, and other supernatural concepts. It further examines the personal importance of religion, prayer frequency, moral

attitudes toward a wide range of social and ethical issues, non-institutional forms of spirituality, beliefs in luck or talismans, participation in church-related groups, and holding official roles within religious institutions.

4. Family

Family-related attitudes include trust within the family, views on the prerequisites for a successful marriage or partnership, and opinions on marriage as a social institution. The survey also addresses gender roles, attitudes toward same-sex parenting, societal expectations regarding childbearing, responsibilities of adult children toward aging parents, and the importance of making one's parents proud.

5. Politics and society

This dimension examines political interest, ideological self-placement, and preferences regarding freedom versus equality, individual versus state responsibility, competition, income distribution, and ownership structures. It also covers post-materialist values, national priorities, willingness to defend the country, trust in institutions, conception of democracy, electoral participation and party preferences, perceptions of electoral integrity, attitudes toward state surveillance, media consumption of political information, social solidarity, and broader societal goals.

6. National identity

The survey explores social trust across different groups, feelings of belonging at local, national, European, and global levels, and attitudes toward immigration and immigrants' impact on society. It also addresses views on cultural integration, criteria for being European, and opinions on European Union enlargement.

7. Environment

Environmental attitudes are assessed through opinions on environmental protection, personal responsibility, perceived trade-offs between environmental protection and economic growth, and willingness to bear personal costs to address environmental challenges.

Results and discussions

1. Empirical Trends in European Value Change

1.1 Generational Replacement and Postmaterialism

Research consistently shows that generational replacement is a key driver of value change in Europe. Younger cohorts display significantly more postmaterialist orientations than older generations, and as these cohorts gradually replace older ones, aggregate value distributions shift accordingly (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995).

Between the early 1970s and 1990, the proportion of postmaterialists in Western Europe nearly doubled, while the share of materialists declined markedly. These trends were observed across several countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, Denmark, France, Italy, and Ireland. Although declining birth rates have slowed the pace of generational replacement, its cumulative impact remains substantial.

Over the past decade, Materialist and Postmaterialist values have attracted substantial scholarly attention (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, & Welzel, 2005). With the inclusion of these measures in the 1990–91 World Values Survey, researchers have examined such values among mass publics in more than thirty countries. A considerable body of literature has since emerged addressing why younger adults tend to display more Postmaterialist orientations than older cohorts. The accumulated evidence indicates that these age-related differences stem

primarily from contrasting formative socialization experiences: younger Europeans came of age during periods of relative economic security, whereas older Europeans were socialized under conditions of greater material scarcity.

1.2 De-traditionalization across Value Domains

Findings from the European Values Study indicate that de-traditionalization has occurred across multiple life domains rather than being confined to a single sphere (Halman, 2009). Religiosity has declined as individuals increasingly rely on personal judgment rather than church authority in moral matters. Trust in traditional institutions such as government, parliament, and trade unions has also weakened, reflecting a broader decline of authority (Norris, 1999).

In the moral domain, personal sexual morality has become more permissive, with growing acceptance of divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. Family-related values have shifted away from traditional gender roles and family models toward greater emphasis on individual choice and autonomy. Although these trends were not linear – traditionalism temporarily increased during the 1980s – they became particularly pronounced during the 1990s.

Religious institutions and their moral authority have increasingly been subjected to societal scrutiny, while rigid moral standards imposed by religious leaders are no longer widely accepted as self-evident. Instead, moral orientation has become progressively individualized, with individuals assuming greater responsibility for their own ethical frameworks. Concurrently, overarching "grand narratives" or comprehensive worldviews have lost much of their social relevance, and the influence of traditional structures and affiliations—such as religion, family, and social class—has diminished. This transformation has expanded individual freedom and autonomy in the construction of personal life trajectories. As a result, individuals have gradually become more autonomous, self-determining, and self-reliant, no longer compelled to accept traditional authorities unquestioningly. In this context, the perceived legitimacy of external authority, whether religious or secular, has weakened, leading to a broader internalization of authority and a pervasive decline in deference toward institutional forms of power (Inglehart 1999).

2. European Values, Culture, and Memory

2.1 Cultural Heritage and Value Reinterpretation

Since its inception, European integration has been closely associated with values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. While these values are central to the EU's normative self-understanding, they are not uniquely European. Cultural policy has therefore played an important role in grounding European values in a shared yet pluralistic heritage.

Over time, European heritage policy has expanded from a focus on elite cultural artifacts and national traditions to include local cultures, minority identities, and everyday cultural practices (Calligaro, 2015). This shift reflects a broader rearticulation of European values rather than the introduction of entirely new ones.

Consistent with the documented increase in individualistic content and the decline of collectivistic themes in books, the values conveyed in the two most popular preteen television programs per decade from the 1960s through the 2000s changed markedly. Specifically, representations of community and collective belonging diminished, whereas the salience of fame and wealth increased. Complementing these findings, survey data from 9- to 15-year-olds indicate that individualistic, self-oriented aspirations – such as the pursuit of fame – are associated with greater television viewing and active engagement with social networking sites, a

combination linked to heightened narcissistic tendencies that often accompany fame-oriented motivations (Greenfield, 2016). By contrast, collectivistic, other-oriented aspirations were associated with participation in older, nontechnological activities, most of which were inherently social in nature.

2.2 Memory, Trauma, and Moral Responsibility

Since the 1990s, European values have increasingly incorporated the recognition of historical trauma and negative legacies. The end of the Cold War intensified debates about memory, responsibility, and collective guilt. At the EU level, this resulted in initiatives such as the designation of former concentration camps as European historical monuments and the institutionalization of Holocaust remembrance.

These developments signal a moral reorientation in which acknowledgment of past violence and authoritarianism becomes an integral component of European values, reinforcing commitments to human dignity, democracy, and the rule of law.

These developments signal a moral reorientation in which acknowledgment of past violence and authoritarianism becomes an integral component of European values, reinforcing commitments to human dignity, democracy, and the rule of law. Collective memory thus functions not only as a retrospective exercise, but also as a forward-looking normative framework that shapes political expectations and institutional practices. By embedding remembrance into public rituals, educational curricula, and legal discourses, European institutions seek to transform historical awareness into a source of moral learning and prevention.

At the same time, this memory-centered value shift is not without tension. Competing national narratives, divergent experiences of twentieth-century violence, and asymmetries between Western and Eastern European histories complicate the construction of a shared European memory. Disagreements over the equivalence of totalitarian crimes, the scope of responsibility, and the recognition of victimhood reveal the contested nature of moral consensus in Europe. Nonetheless, the increasing centrality of memory politics underscores a broader transformation: European integration is no longer grounded solely in economic cooperation or functional governance, but also in a normative commitment to confronting the past as a condition for a shared political future.

3. Diversity, Intercultural Dialogue, and Citizenship

European diversity has evolved from a focus on national differences to encompass regional, minority, and migrant cultures. Following EU enlargement and increased international migration, diversity became increasingly internal to European societies. In response, the concept of intercultural dialogue emerged as a central element of EU cultural policy.

Intercultural dialogue frames diversity as a civic challenge rather than merely a cultural fact, linking value change to European citizenship and democratic participation (Calligaro, 2015). It emphasizes interaction, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility, reflecting broader individualistic and postmaterialist orientations.

Communication technologies have been shown to foster individualistic behaviors, attitudes, and values (Greenfield, 2016). In contrast, in-person social interaction not only cultivates social motivations but also supports the development of essential interpersonal skills, including the ability to accurately interpret others' emotional states. Relative to technology-mediated communication, face-to-face interaction more strongly enhances feelings of interpersonal closeness and social bonding between friends.

4. European Identity and Institutional Influence

In the late 1970s, social psychologist Henri Tajfel introduced the concept of social identity, referring to the way individuals define themselves through their membership in social groups. According to this perspective, a person's sense of self is shaped not only by individual traits but also by the groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Humans possess a natural inclination to identify with groups, which serves as a vital source of self-esteem, pride, and a sense of belonging. These groups can take many forms, including social class, profession, sports clubs, local communities, religious affiliations, ethnicity, and gender. However, the drive to belong to a group also tends to foster distinctions between "us" and "them": the existence of an in-group necessarily implies the presence of an out-group. European institutions actively promote a civic conception of European identity grounded in shared values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, identification with Europe remains uneven. While elites tend to identify more strongly with the EU, public identification is more ambivalent (Risse, 2010).

Risse draws on Castano's concept of entitativity to address two related puzzles: the persistent gap between elite and mass identification with Europe, and the shifts in identification observed during the 1990s. He argued that the social-psychological notion of entitativity is central to explaining these developments. Entitativity refers to the extent to which a social group is perceived as a coherent and reified community, arising from increasingly shared cultural values, a perceived common fate, heightened salience, and clear boundaries. These features foster collective identification. However, as Castano emphasizes, greater salience of a community in individuals' lives does not automatically translate into increased support; heightened visibility may also provoke resistance or rejection. Variation in perceived levels of entitativity therefore offers a plausible explanation for the substantial divergence between elite and mass identification with Europe and the European Union. The concept of entitativity helps explain this gap. For elites, the EU is a concrete and salient political reality, whereas for many citizens it remains abstract. Increased institutional visibility may therefore lead not only to stronger identification but also to resistance and skepticism.

Survey instruments such as the Eurobarometer play a dual role in this context. While they provide valuable data on public opinion, their close association with EU institutions raises concerns about political instrumentalization and the blurred boundary between measuring and shaping values (Nissen, 2012).

Conclusion

European value change since the 1970s reflects deep and interconnected processes of modernization, individualization, and cultural transformation. The rise of postmaterialist values, the decline of traditional authority, the redefinition of cultural heritage, and the contested emergence of European identity all point to a dynamic and pluralistic value landscape.

Rather than converging toward a single homogeneous model, European values continue to evolve through tensions between autonomy and solidarity, diversity and unity, memory and progress. Understanding these processes is essential for assessing the social foundations of European integration and the challenges facing Europe in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

A meta-analysis including 325 articles was conducted in order to develop a novel, multilevel typology aimed at conceptualizing and categorizing social change according to its psychological threat to individual well-being (de la Sablonnière, 2017). This typology delineates four social contexts: stability, inertia, incremental social change, and disruptive social change

(DSC). Four defining characteristics of DSC were further identified: the pace of social change, disruptions to social structure, disruptions to normative structures, and the degree of threat posed to cultural identity. In addition, a theoretical model is proposed that integrates these characteristics of social change and links them to the broader social contexts outlined in the typology.

The author defines the characteristics of DSC as it follows. The pace of social change, could either be slow or rapid, and is defined as the speed at which an event impacts a collectivity. Rupture in the social structure of a collectivity or a group refers to "process of re-definition and re-evaluation of societal norms, belief systems, and power structures" (de la Sablonnière, 2017, p. 8). The disruptions to normative structures happens when a society is confronted with DSC, so its normative structure is ruptured which may lead to societal dysfunction or important disruptions in the "usual" behavior of group members. Finally, the degree of threat posed to cultural identity suggests a potential modification in cultural identity.

We agree with the cited author (de la Sablonnière, 2017) that, in order to properly understand and diagnose the social changes and their implications, we can combine sociology – where social change is a central concern – and psychology, where rigorous scientific methods enable the systematic study of psychological processes among individuals living in evolving social contexts. By placing greater emphasis on social change, it becomes possible to integrate sociology's focus on macro-level transformations with psychology's attention to complex individual-level processes. More broadly, increased research on social change is essential to improve our capacity to predict, prevent, and mitigate its negative consequences. Collaborative efforts between psychologists and sociologists aimed at developing a psychology of social change may ultimately enhance our understanding of, and capacity to support, individuals who experience disruptive social change, thereby contributing to improvements in the quality of life for the millions affected.

On the other hand, talking about changes implies analyzing the inertia also. In contrast to stability, inertia refers to a condition that affects a substantial proportion, if not the majority, of members within a society. It describes a situation in which social developments, regardless of their pace or magnitude, fail either to restore equilibrium within a society's normative and social structures or to provide clarity regarding the cultural identity of its members.

Under conditions of inertia, even events perceived as positive are unable to generate sustainable transformative effects. Belarus provides a relevant example of such a condition. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has experienced prolonged political and social stagnation under the leadership of President Alexander Lukashenko, who has remained in power since 1994. Frequently characterized as "the last dictatorship in Europe," Belarus continues to exhibit authoritarian governance despite widespread aspirations among citizens for a more democratic and open society. Nevertheless, these aspirations have not resulted in substantial structural transformation, thereby illustrating a persistent state of inertia.

Buchanan et al. (2005) conceptualize inertia as an "absence of appropriate activity, a lack of capability, a failure to pay attention to signals, and thus as an impediment rather than a desired condition" (p. 190). From this perspective, inertia represents an undesirable state in which constructive change is inhibited because organizations or social groups lack either the necessary resources or the collective willingness to implement reform. Furthermore, the authors argue that the sustainability of change depends on the extent to which leaders, organizational members, or community actors share common objectives. In such contexts, minimizing uncertainty regarding the future constitutes a necessary condition for durable transformation.

Changing values have profound social implications, reshaping patterns of identity, solidarity, and conflict within societies. As norms surrounding authority, equality, and cultural diversity evolve, they influence how individuals relate to institutions and to one another, often redefining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Value change can foster greater social openness and innovation, but it may also generate uncertainty and polarization when different groups adapt at unequal speeds. These dynamics affect political participation, social trust, and the legitimacy of collective projects, making value change a central factor in contemporary social transformation.

Given the breadth of the topic, the complexity and interdependence of the variables involved, and the extensive body of highly specialized research in this field, the present study necessarily provides only a broad and integrative perspective on trends in value change in Europe. As such, it does not claim to offer an exhaustive account of the processes at work, nor to capture all regional, temporal, and social variations. Rather, its contribution lies in synthesizing general patterns of change and outlining their key sociological and psychological implications. Future research would benefit from more fine-grained, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary approaches capable of disentangling the multiple mechanisms underlying value transformation and of assessing their differential consequences across social groups and institutional contexts.

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