

**Is it a Question of Generations? Evaluating the Origins, Evolution,
and Validity of Inglehart's Theory of Postmaterialism**

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Over the past two decades a literature has emerged in the field of Comparative Politics that offers a generational explanation for the process of social and political change in advanced industrial societies. At the forefront of this movement has been Ronald Inglehart and his Postmaterialist thesis. This theory suggests a fundamental change in the nature of political conflict in Western Europe and other advanced industrial societies based on the fading of the old Left-Right class based cleavage and the arrival of a new Materialist-Postmaterialist cleavage. Because Inglehart's work fundamentally rests on the assumption of generational replacement as the ultimate cause of this social change, it is particularly appropriate that we evaluate this work a generation after it began. In this article I will identify the theoretical origins of this theory of generational change, explain how it has evolved, and evaluate its validity in terms of the empirical data we now possess.

Theoretical Origins

The ancients were the first to address the issue of generational transformation as a precipitant of social change. Greek philosophers recognized that the differences between generations would serve as a stimulant and foster political change¹, but it was Mannheim's essay, "The Problem of Generations," that has served as the foundation for more recent empirical investigations. In this essay Mannheim explicated the general theory of generational change as we know it today. Mannheim identifies a generation as an "age related group embedded in a historical-social process." Generations are bonded by "being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization."² Generations exist within a time-period and are constantly progressing through life so that they are replacing and being replaced by other generations. Because generations are always evolving and thus society always changing, one cannot exactly pinpoint the location of a certain cohort at a particular point in time. Nevertheless, these generations are one of "the basic factors contributing to the genesis of the dynamic of historical development" and are constantly modifying the traditions of the past.³

The study of generational change gained importance in the 1960's as a new youth culture erupted and social theorists searched for explanations. The youth culture of the 1960s differed dramatically from that of preceding generations and a social revolution appeared imminent. Historians and sociologists stressed the significance of the distillation of new values in the youth of the 1960s, and affluence was seen as the crucial variable that distinguished this new generation from the previous one. The Sixties generation had been reared in unprecedented prosperity which allowed them to focus concerns on values such as self-expression, participation, preservation of the environment, equality, freedom, and

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those values we now associate with the New Left. On account of these developments the study of generational change shifted to explaining the sources of the New Left and its set of values.⁴

Another source of Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism was the change associated with the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society. Daniel Bell argued in his seminal work, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, that Western societies were passing from an industrial age where work predominantly occurred within industrial plants to a society where the service economy would become dominant.⁵ Bell's work and others of that period emphasized the importance of technology and information in post-industrial society. The structural change identified by Bell needed to be analyzed in terms of its effects on individual level attitudes and behavior. It was not until Inglehart effectively developed his theory of postmaterialism that this linkage became specified.

Scholars in the field of political socialization also were an important source of inspiration for Inglehart's theory. In the 1960s they began to reexamine the importance of the family as the pivotal transmitter of values. Some now began to discuss socialization as intergenerational negotiation and as a confrontation between generations rather than a smooth process of providing continuity from one generation to the next. They began to emphasize the importance of the social and political environment in which maturation takes place. This became closely connected with the belief that the Sixties generation had been raised in a unique time period exacerbating the so-called generation gap. This interpretation supports those who stressed affluence as a fundamental reason for the arrival of these values associated with the New Left.⁶

The Arrival of Postmaterialism

Theories of social change in the 1960s tended to remain separate under the categories of New Left theory, post-industrial theory, and political socialization until Inglehart's seminal article in the 1971 *American Political Science Review* effectively integrated many of the existing theories and conceptions of social change of that time. In this article Inglehart developed a theory which was to guide much of the recent research in the field. He contended that changes are taking place in the values of individuals in post-industrial societies on the basis of two assumptions. First, individuals have a hierarchical set of goals, and they place greatest value on that which is scarce in society. Unlike its predecessor, the post-war generation has always lived in economic and physical security and tends to take these values for granted. Instead, this generation seeks new higher ordered values such as self-expression, aesthetic satisfaction, and those values we associate with the New Left. Second, individuals develop their values in their pre-adult years so that these values tend to remain with them for the rest of their lives. The first assumption of scarcity effectively incorporates New Left scholars and post-industrial theorists, and the second assumption of socialization directly follows from the work of others in political socialization. Because the pre and post-war cohorts were socialized under such different conditions, Inglehart expected these two generations to come in conflict and labeled this difference in the fundamental values between the two as acquisitive versus post-bourgeois. The older generation remains primarily concerned with physical and economic security while the

younger age-groups emphasize values of fulfillment and self-expression.⁷

In 1977 Inglehart expanded his thesis of inter-generational change in advanced industrial societies in his book, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. This work offered more empirical evidence to support his thesis and more clearly elaborated the dichotomy of values which he now labelled materialism versus postmaterialism. In this book Inglehart specifically listed six sources of generational change: (1) technological innovation, (2) changes in occupational structure, (3) economic growth, (4) expansion of education, (5) development of mass communications, and (6) distinctive cohort experiences.⁸ These sources of generational change concatenate much of the previous work of other scholars. Technological innovation and change in occupational structure reflect the work of post-industrial theorists. Economic growth expansion of education, and the development of mass communications are traditionally cited as precipitants of the New Left. Finally, distinct cohort experience incorporates the work in political socialization. Jennings and Niemi offer a summation of this theory as it has been applied in recent political research: "Generation effects derive from age cohorts undergoing a shared community of experiences under roughly similar circumstances at pivotal, impressionable points (usually before adulthood) in the life cycle."⁹

Inglehart's most recent book *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies* provides time series data that indicates that intergenerational value change is occurring as his Postmaterialism thesis would suggest. As younger, more postmaterialistic generations are replacing older, more materialistic generations, the mass publics of Western Europe are increasingly becoming more postmaterialistic in their value orientation. Inglehart's data also suggests that differences between generations are relatively stable and persistent throughout the life cycle despite some period effects that temporarily may alter mass attitudes and beliefs.¹⁰

Bengston's matrix on the nature of generational theory provides a framework for placing Inglehart's thesis within the existing literature. Because Inglehart's theory emphasizes the permanent nature of value change due to structural factors and because there is a great gap in terms of the value choices, his "Silent Revolution" would qualify, according to Bengston's classification scheme, as a social revolution. In other words, the changing values in advanced industrial societies are transforming these political systems in a fundamental way.

A Typology of Generational Theories *

		Nature and Effect of	Generational Differences
		Structural Factors: Permanent Change	Developmental Factors Temporary Change
Extent of	Great Gap	Social Revolution	Normal Rebellion
Generational	Selective Gap	Social Evolution	Nothing Really New
Difference	Illusory Gap	Social Change but not by Generations	Solidarity Will Prevail

* Source: Vern L. Bengston, "The Generation Gap: A Review and Typology of Social Psychological Perspectives," *Youth & Society* 2 (September 1970), 26.

When surveying the literature cumulatively, one can see progression in the theory of generational change. The most important steps in this process were the contributions of Mannheim and Inglehart. Mannheim successfully developed an abstract theory of cohort transformation while Inglehart adopted the theory to fit the more concrete modern situation. Inglehart's analysis, since it is much more closely linked with historical circumstance, is more easily attacked on empirical grounds. For example, Inglehart's first assumption attributing value to that which is scarce in society overlooks the possibility that certain things remain important to individuals even when they are in abundance. People do attach importance to certain values which have little to do with their availability. Individuals value honesty, courage, and a whole array of virtues even if they are dominant in society. Therefore, Inglehart's analysis of Western European value change should not necessarily assume that values will change according to their availability. Religion, for example, remains an important cleavage in Western societies despite the onset of other value changes, and Inglehart has come to recognize this in his most recent work.¹¹

Another set of criticisms of Inglehart's theory is that Postmaterialism does not arise in response to societal conditions but from differing exposures to specific world views bred in particular communications networks.¹² Inglehart claims that this explanation does not contradict his thesis but complements it by explaining this logic of intra-generational transmission of values but not their inception. It is his scarcity hypothesis that provides the explanation for the emergence of postmaterialism.¹³

Finally, Inglehart's socialization hypothesis and argument for generational change has been questioned even more in terms of the possible confounding life-cycle and period effects. The methodological considerations in disentangling these effects will be discussed below, but they provide powerful arguments for critics of Inglehart's theory. Despite these criticisms and others, the power and parsimony of Inglehart's theory of generational change warrant empirical investigation. In the following pages we will survey the evidence that has been accumulated to determine if Inglehart's thesis accounts for the changes that have taken place in advanced industrial societies.

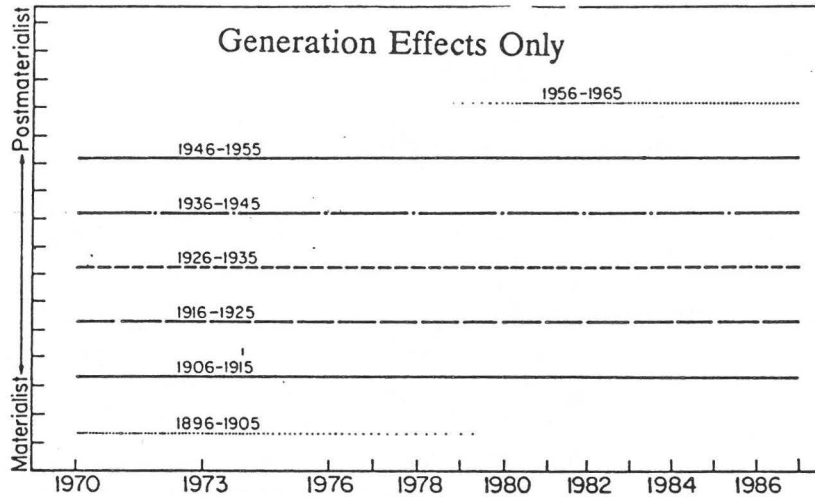
Methodological Considerations

After developing a theory of generational transformation, Inglehart and others have attempted to devise measures to determine if the theory corresponds to empirical reality. In doing so, they have been wary of several potential problems. First, it must be recognized that the theory of intergenerational change does not assume intragenerational stability. In other words, the theory predicts that the cohort as a whole will change regardless of changes within individuals themselves.¹⁴ Confusing intragenerational and intergenerational change could result in the apparent necessity of panel data when in fact only time-series data is required to measure intergenerational change. Despite fluidity in individual level values, there is a remarkably high level of aggregate stability provided by survey data.¹⁵

The second methodological consideration concerns the measurement of generational change itself. Some early studies employed cross-sectional analysis to determine cohort transformations. This approach, however, ignores the possibility that the life-cycle or aging process (effect) could be the agent of the differentiation between generations. Therefore, one must employ longitudinal data to determine if the generational differences identified at one point in time persist or whether younger generations will assimilate prior cohorts'

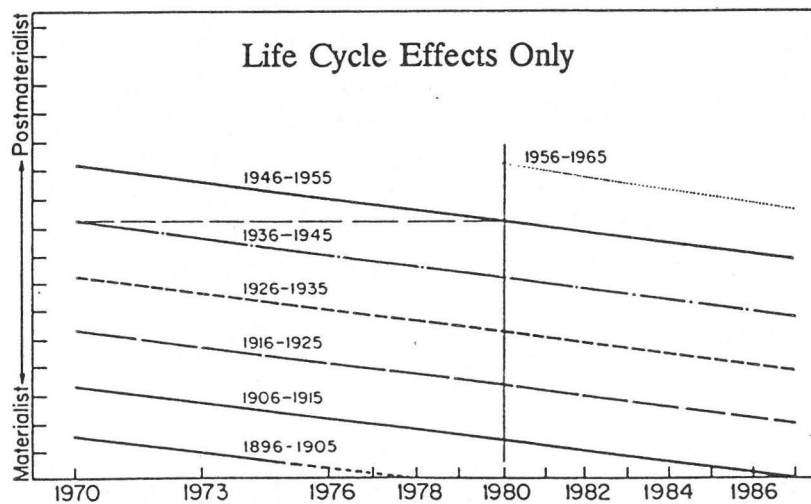
values as they age. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the differences between generational change and life cycle effects. This distinction between generational and life-cycle effects is important because many, including Aristotle and Weber, contend that individuals do moderate their views as they age. Therefore, it is essential to employ time-series analysis to separate these effects.¹⁶

-Figure 1



Source: Inglehart 1990, 80.

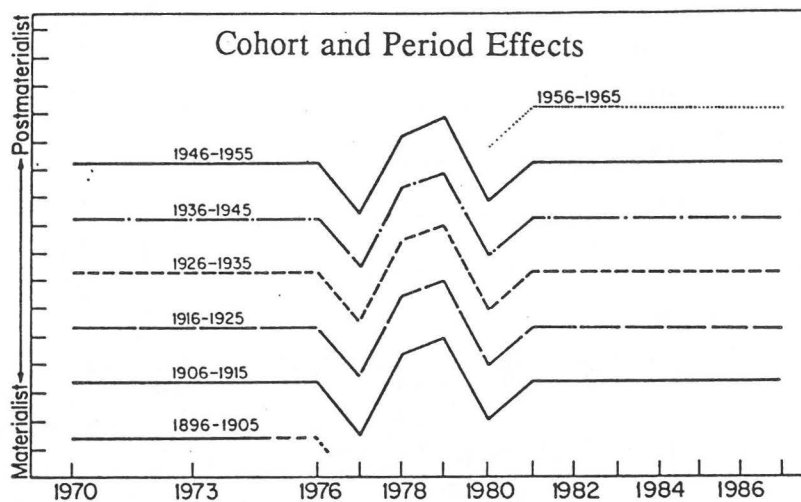
Figure 2



Source: Inglehart 1990, 81.

Period effects, such as wars and economic conditions, confuse the issue further and make it more difficult to determine the effect of generational change. However, one would expect that if episodes in history temporarily alter mass attitudes and beliefs they would similarly affect those who experience the event. Thus, the period effect should impact all cohorts and not necessarily reduce the impact of generational change. For Inglehart, the presence of period effects as illustrated in Figure 3 does not confound but confirm his thesis that values and attitudes respond in the near term to period effects.¹⁷

Figure 3



Source: Inglehart 1990, 81.

Another problem in empirically testing a theory of generational change is disentangling the main and interactive effects of period, age, and cohort. While one can conceptually distinguish these effects, the indirect indicators that measure these variables cannot disentangle their interactive effects.¹⁸ Related to the problem of disentangling the potential confounding effects of the life cycle, period effect, and their interaction with generational change is the threat of spuriousness. The possibility that a measurement of generational change may actually reflect some change in another factor seriously threatens any model of generational change.¹⁹ Because of these methodological difficulties, one need be wary of the empirical validity of any theory of generational change.

Evidence of Intergenerational Value Change in Advanced Industrial Societies

Thus far most of the empirical data supporting the claim of intergenerational change has been collected in Europe. Inglehart has primarily relied on Eurobarometer surveys that tap the values of individuals in European community nations for his evidence. In these surveys Inglehart has relied at first on a four-item battery of questions and later a twelve-item battery to determine the value type of an individual. In the four-item battery maintaining order and fighting prices indicate acquisitiveness or materialism while

participation and free speech indicate a post-bourgeois or postmaterialist orientation. The twelve-item battery expands on the differences between these two different types.

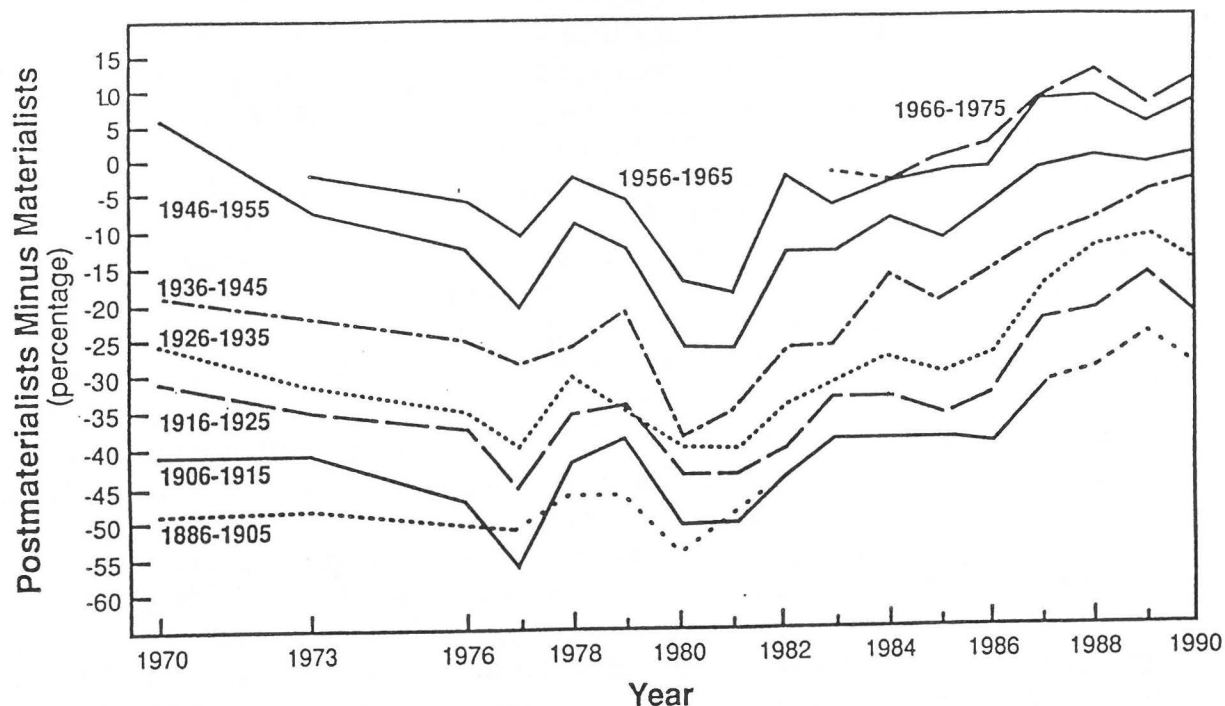
In 1971 Inglehart did not have any time-series data available, so he relied on cross-sectional data to demonstrate that intergenerational change was occurring. He argued that the increasing proportion of the population in higher socio-economic groups was more post-bourgeois (postmaterialist) and therefore was pushing the newer generations in that direction. Inglehart assumed that since these higher socio-economic groups were growing in these societies that they would gradually replace the more acquisitive (materialist) lower socio-economic groups leading to societal change. He emphasized higher levels of education and especially the universities were the focal point of this cohort change.²⁰

At the time, Inglehart's theory, while intriguing, lacked empirical verification because the cross-sectional data could not remove the possibility of a life cycle effect. In *The Silent Revolution* in 1977 Inglehart provided longitudinal data for the years 1970 to 1976 for the six nations included in the Eurobarometer.²¹ The generational differences in this period remained approximately the same, but one could easily contend that this was still too brief a period to validate Inglehart's thesis of cohort transformation and long-term differentiation between generations. At that time Inglehart also attempted to provide further evidence in support of his claim by citing evidence gathered by other scholars.²² By 1990 in his latest book *Culture Shift* Inglehart provided data for 18 years of Eurobarometer surveys. These findings demonstrated that the initial differences between cohorts remained and despite the presence of period effects individuals did not become more materialistic with age. In fact, all of the cohorts had become slightly more Postmaterialistic over this eighteen year period.²³ Inglehart's most recent work indicates that the difference between cohorts is sustained for a full twenty year period, 1970-1990.²⁴ (See Figure 4 on the next page). A more detailed analysis of eight of the twelve EC nations in terms of their Materialism/Postmaterialism trends reveals that over the past twenty years generational replacement has had a major impact in contributing to the growth of Postmaterialism in Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark, a lesser impact in France, Italy, and Ireland, and only a slight impact in Belgium.²⁵ Hence, the time series data now available provides evidence of a generational shift in value orientations that is not eliminated by the aging process or minimized by the presence of period effects.

Several national studies also lend credence to Inglehart's theory of intergenerational change in Western Europe. Jennings and Baker, Dalton, and Hildebrandt find evidence of cohort shifts in post-war West Germany.²⁶ Butler and Stokes identify generational change in Britain in terms of demographic trends, and Marsh also discovers cohort transformations in Britain.²⁷ Marsh, however, offers a different theory explaining this change than Inglehart. All of these studies suggest that some generational change in Europe has transpired even if they do not interpret these alterations in European society in Inglehart's materialist/postmaterialist terms.

The first empirical evidence of generational change in the United States began with *The American Voter*. These scholars demonstrated that those socialized during the Great Depression had different party identification patterns than preceding generations.²⁸ Since then scholars have striven to prove that a generational transformation was developing in the 1960's in the United States. Keniston contends in his book, *Young Radicals*, that the Sixties generation's affluence altered the way this generation's perspective on life. This included

Figure 4



Source: Inglehart 1992, 13.

Based on data from representative national surveys of publics of France, Great Britain, West Germany, Italy, Belgium and The Netherlands, interviewed in European Community surveys of 1970, 1973 and Euro-Barometer surveys 6 through 33 (total N=214,168).

a transformation of values which spawned a large gap between the younger cohorts' values and those of their parents. He cites his observation of Vietnam Summer, the largest organized program of the New Left, as evidence of this cohort shift.²⁹

Many other studies support the view that generational change has taken place in American society. Jennings and Niemi find evidence of generational change in terms of the use of the media; voting behavior; levels of political information and knowledge, national images, levels of political trust and cynicism, and opinions on political issues in a panel study of high school seniors and their parents.³⁰ Abramson offers additional evidence of generational change in the United States. Examining the traditional connection between social class and partisanship, Abramson finds that this relationship is deteriorating, largely due to generational changes. Older voters still vote along class lines, but the younger groups no longer depend on social class as a cue for party identification and voting.³¹ Paul Allen Beck represents the consensus of contemporary scholars when he concludes that the evidence from the United States from the 1950's to the 1970's indicates that a generational transition has taken place.³²

Other cross-national surveys also support the findings of generational change. Danigelis and Cutler, for example, find that the trend toward moderation or conservatism in regards to

attitudes concerning law and order throughout the life-cycle cannot be found in their data drawn from eighteen national surveys from 1959-1985.³³ Some survey evidence from Japan suggests that this Eastern nation may be experiencing a generational transformation like other advanced industrial societies. Ike examines the survey evidence from Japan since World War II. Surveys conducted in 1953, 1958, 1963, and 1968 do not ask the same questions as those in the Eurobarometer surveys, but some of the questions tap similar dimensions. The survey results illustrate how the young in Japan are less acquisitive, more democratic, and have a greater regard for freedom than do their elders. Ike believes that these younger cohorts in Japan are becoming more post-bourgeois (postmaterialist) in Inglehart's terms, but he believes this cohort shift may be better explained by the cultural trend of moving from a collective mentality to one emphasizing individualism.³⁴ Inglehart, however, believes that the data from Japan supports his theory of a generational shift toward postmaterialism.³⁵

Evidence as to the coherence of the materialist/postmaterialist dichotomy supports Inglehart's contention that these are really separate and meaningful dimensions. First, these values do tend to cluster together on the twelve-item surveys.³⁶ Secondly, panel study evidence also attests that these responses tend to be fairly stable over time.³⁷ Thirdly, Lafferty and Knutson find evidence that at least in Norway the materialist versus postmaterialist division concerns a coherent set of value choices.³⁸ While several scholars have questioned Inglehart's conceptualization and manipulation of survey data, no other author has as of yet provided a competing thesis that offers as powerful of an explanation for the generational transformation we have witnessed in advanced industrial societies with the empirical evidence that Inglehart has gathered in support of his postmaterialist thesis. As a result, Inglehart's thesis has become the dominant paradigm employed to explain the process of political change associated with the arrival of advanced industrial society.

Implications of Generational Change

The major implication of the process of cohort transformation identified by Inglehart's theory concerns the nature of politics of advanced industrial societies. The old class based cleavage is becoming increasingly irrelevant in post-industrial societies. The political parties and other political institutions traditionally linked to this cleavage are losing their capacity to organize politics and define political conflict in advanced industrial societies. The "New Politics" that is emerging fundamentally differs from the old class-based politics of the past. New issues, new conflicts, new social movements, and new political parties are emerging that reflect the agenda of the younger more postmaterial generations of advanced industrial societies.

In sum, this generational shift from materialism toward postmaterialism represents a shift in society as fundamental as the Industrial Revolution several centuries ago. The materialistic philosophies of the industrial age, Marxism and consumerism, have become increasingly antiquated in an age of affluence and social welfare. New philosophies of individual self-fulfillment and expression become much more attractive for individuals in post-industrial societies. Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis successfully built on work in the fields of generational change and political socialization and thus has contributed to greatly to our understanding of the process of political and social change in advanced industrial societies.

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