



Authoritarians are on the march

They argue that universal values are the new imperialism, imposed on people who want security and stability instead.

Here is why they are wrong

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The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 held out the promise that the world was about to enter a **virtuous circle**. Growing prosperity would foster freedom and tolerance, which in turn would create more prosperity. Unfortunately, that hope disappointed. Our analysis this week, based on the definitive global survey of social attitudes, shows just how naive it turned out to be.

Prosperity certainly rose. In the three decades to 2019, global output increased more than four-fold. **Roughly 70% of the 2bn people living in extreme poverty escaped it.**

Alas, **individual freedom and tolerance evolved quite differently**. Large numbers of people around the world continue to swear fealty to traditional beliefs, sometimes intolerant ones. And although they are much wealthier these days, they often have an us-and-them contempt for others. **The idea that despots and dictators shun the universal values enshrined in the UN Charter should come as no surprise.** **The shock is that so many of their people seem to think their leaders are right.**

The World Values Survey takes place every five years. The latest results, which go up to 2022, include interviews with almost 130,000 people in 90 countries. One sign that universal values are lagging behind is that countries that were once secular and ethno-nationalist, such as Russia and Georgia, are not becoming more tolerant as they grow, but more tightly bound to traditional religious values instead. They are increasingly joining an illiberal grouping that contains places like Egypt and Morocco. Another sign is that young people in Islamic and Orthodox countries are not much more individualistic or secular than their elders. By contrast, the young in northern Europe and America are racing ahead. **The world is not becoming more similar as it gets richer. Instead,**



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countries where burning the Koran is tolerated and those where it is an outrage look on each other with growing incomprehension.

On the face of it, all this seems to support the argument made by China's Communist Party that universal values are bunkum. Under Xi Jinping, it has mounted a campaign to dismiss them as a racist form of neo-imperialism, in which white **Western elites impose their own version of freedom and democracy on people who want security and stability instead.**

In fact, the survey suggests something more subtle. And this leads to the conclusion that, contrary to the Chinese argument, universal values are more valuable than ever. Start with the subtlety.

The man behind the survey, Ron Inglehart, a professor at the University of Michigan who died in 2021, would have agreed with the Chinese observation that people want security. **He thought the key to his work was to understand that a sense of threat drives people to seek refuge in family, racial or national groups, while at the same time tradition and organised religion offer them solace.**

This is one way to see America's doomed attempts to establish democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the failure of the Arab spring. Whereas the emancipation of central and eastern Europe brought security, thanks partly to membership of the European Union and NATO, **the overthrow of dictatorships in the Middle East and Afghanistan brought lawlessness and upheaval.** As a result, people sought safety in their tribe or their sect; hoping that order would be restored, some welcomed the return of dictators. Because the Arab world's fledgling democracies could not provide stability, they never took wing.

The subtlety the Chinese argument misses is the fact that cynical politicians sometimes set out to engineer insecurity because they know that frightened people yearn for strongman rule. That is what Bashar al-Assad did in Syria when he released murderous jihadists from his country's jails at the start of the Arab spring. He bet that the threat of Sunni violence would cause Syrians from other sects to rally round him.

Something similar has happened in Russia. Having lived through a devastating economic collapse and jarring reforms in the 1990s, Russians thrived in the 2000s. Between 1999 and 2013, GDP per head increased 12-fold in dollar terms. Yet, that was not enough to dispel their accumulated sense of dread. As growth has slowed, President Vladimir Putin has played on ethno-nationalist



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insecurities, culminating in his disastrous invasion of Ukraine. Economically weakened and insecure, Russia will struggle to escape the trap.

Even in Western countries, some leaders seek to gain by inciting fear. In the past the World Values Survey recorded that the United States and much of Latin America combined individualism with strong religious conviction. Recently, however, they have become more secular—a change driven by the young. That has created a reaction among older, more conservative voters who reflect the values of decades past and feel bewildered and left behind.

Polarising politicians like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, the former presidents of America and Brazil, saw that they could exploit people's anxieties to mobilise support. Accordingly, they set about warning that their political opponents wanted to destroy their supporters' way of life and threatened the very survival of their countries. That has, in turn, spread alarm and hostility on the other side. Republicans' sweeping dismissal of this week's indictment of Mr Trump contains the threat that countries can slip back into intolerance and tribalism.

Even allowing for that, the Chinese claim that universal values are an imposition is upside down. From Chile to Japan, the World Values Survey provides examples showing that, **when people feel secure, they really do become more tolerant and more eager to express their own individuality.** Nothing suggests that Western countries are unique in that. The question is how to help people feel more secure.

China's answer is based on creating order for a loyal, deferential majority that stays out of politics and avoids defying their rulers, at the expense of individual and minority rights. However, within that model lurks deep insecurity. It is a majoritarian system in which lines move, sometimes arbitrarily or without warning—especially when power passes unpredictably from one party chief to another. Anybody once deemed safe can suddenly end up in a precarious minority. Only inalienable rights and accountable government guarantee true security.

A better answer comes from sustained prosperity built on the rule of law.

Wealthy countries have more to spend on dealing with disasters, such as pandemic disease. Likewise, confident in their savings and the social safety-net, the citizens of rich countries know that they are less vulnerable to the chance events that wreck lives elsewhere.



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However, the deepest solution to insecurity lies in how countries cope with change. The years to come will bring a lot of upheaval, generated by long-term phenomena such as global warming, the spread of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and the growing tensions between China and America. The countries that manage change well will be better at making society feel confident in the future. Those that manage it poorly will find that their people seek refuge in tradition and us-and-them hostility.

And that is where universal values come into their own. Classical liberalism—not the “ultraliberal” sort condemned by French commentators, or the progressive liberalism of the left—draws on tolerance, free expression and individual inquiry to tease out the costs and benefits of change. Conservatives resist change, revolutionaries impose it by force and dictatorships become trapped in one party’s—or, in China’s case, one man’s—vision of what it must be. By contrast, liberals seek to harness change through consensus forged by reasoned debate and constant reform. There is no better way to bring about progress.

Universal values are much more than a Western piety. They are a mechanism that fortifies societies against insecurity. What the World Values Survey shows is that they are also hard-won. ■

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