

REALISM AND METHODOLOGY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE: Our Need For Generalisations

By

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Abstract

Generalisations play a major role in social science knowledge. However, their specific features as they appear in the social sciences have never been clarified. Yet, it is argued that the social sciences can do without them and the special methodology that supports them, namely statistics. However, searching for generalisations in the social sciences is not part and parcel of an attempt at making the social sciences bend to the positivistic ideal-type of the natural sciences.

INTRODUCTION

The surge in interest for post-modernist studies and the hermeneutic methodology during the last twenty years has, of course, many sources. A large part of political science deals with political thought, where the use of empirical methods of research has little or no relevance. Perhaps the same is true, more or less, of normative and mathematical political theory. I have no argument with this. What I wish to focus upon is that part of political science which is made up of analyses of the world of micro behaviour or actions and the macro world of regimes or polities. Without a statistical approach, our knowledge about this external world will suffer.

I do not wish to claim that micro or macro research into politics can only be done within a statistical framework. This would amount to an exaggeration as useless as the post-modernist claim that all research with more than 4-5 cases run the risk of the allegation: rubbish in – rubbish out. Why try to deny the relevance of case studies? Why deny that the comparative methods of agreement and difference can be put to ingenious use? Yet, allowing for the fertility of other approaches than the statistical one, I would still wish to argue that the statistical framework offers a some great benefits both in micro and macro research, if our goal is to understand reality, and not interpret texts or speeches.

Attempting to understand politics as it occur every day among citizens (micro) or in our social systems (macro), we need generalisations. The social sciences employ generalisation that are different in character from the natural sciences. Failure to recognize this leads automatically to the accusation of positivistic bias against the social sciences. If positivism is bad, then perhaps we should avoid doing research on large N:s using statistics?

The purpose of this article is to try to remove the charge of neo-positivism by identifying the nature of the generalisations that statistical research looks for in political science. I will then give three examples of how such generalisations play a vital role in understanding what is happening in politics.

SOCIAL SCIENCE GENERALISATIONS

Although much of political research deals with single events or unique phenomena, the need for generalisations is obvious when one reflects somewhat at how we go about things. I will take three examples below: the new G8 policy towards Africa, the emergence of homosexuality as a major cleavage and the question of Muslim retardation. Elucidating these problems of high political relevance one would have to find data about the average African country, its predicament, as well as the average attitudes towards homosexuality in the electorate and finally the general belief patterns among Muslims. Stating and validating such generalisations is what much political science is all about. It definitely requires the employment of a statistical methodology.

Generalisations about the conditions for promoting economic development by means of public policy in Sub-Saharan Africa or generalisations about attitudes in mass politics state essential things about reality. They describe the average case or trend. It is true that one case (country or individual) may deviate far from the average score. In a sense, averages are not true of any single case. Thus, they may be suspected of being superficial. Post-modernist methodology would favour instead a in depth analysis of one case – but it has little inductive power. Generalisations must be more reliable than case studies as the number of cases in the universe covered, N , increases.

Is this positivism? I would answer NO if we mean by “generalisations” the same as law like statements in the natural sciences. In the social science, all generalisations have a space and time component. Only theoretical economics strives to establish generalisations about human nature. When we speak about theorizing a phenomenon in the social sciences, we do not have the ambition to unravel eternal truths, as it were. We simply want to find out what things look like for the moment, on average that is.

The analysis of the presently existing reality is not journalism. Although the reality of the social sciences is not the past, which is the property of historians, but the present world, the social sciences attempt to penetrate deeper than what a mere journalistic analysis may do. To achieve this, generalisations are necessary. They state what is characteristic of phenomena, going beyond the accidental or contingent. However, they need not establish universal laws of social systems, as it were.

These crucial generalisations have a large range, as they may deal with both micro and macro properties, behaviour as well as attitudes, actions as well as expectations. However, they do not constitute laws of nature, as it were. Putting forward such generalisations and finding evidence for or against them is a core activity in the social sciences. They require the same combination of theoretical imagination and serious attention to data that is typical of the natural sciences.

I will take three examples of such key generalisations below. First, I will ask where the chief difficulty lies in supporting Sub-Saharan Africa in the effort to move it out of poverty. Answering this question calls for a macro generalisation about the role of African government in the underdevelopment process of Africa since independence, i.e. a set of generalisations about the political systems of Africa. Second, I will ask why homosexuality has become such a major issue in the political of advanced societies. This would only be possible, if the electorate supports the claims of gay and lesbian groups – a set of generalisations that refer

ultimately to individual attitudes in mass politics. Although the emergence of the political of homosexuality involves developments in political and legal theory, without the backing from strong social groups the politics of homosexuality would never have received the attention necessary to change the *status quo* of established rights and duties. Here, the key micro generalisation deals with mass attitudes in the electorate. Finally, I will examine the explosive question about civilisation differences by looking at mass attitudes towards modernity, which is again a matter of micro research.

Thus, the generalisation we search for in order to analyse the external reality may be macro or micro, they may be based upon a small number of observations or a huge number, as N may vary from 20 to 100 000. Yet, only statistical tools can allow us to find and support these key tools of knowledge about the world out there.

REJECTION OF SUBJECTIVISM

One radical bend of post-modernist methodology denies the possibility of capturing reality. It argues that social reality is indeterminate or that that it is made up of values which cannot be studied scientifically. I will rebut these two claims.

- a) **Indeterminism:** social actions and social systems do not follow regularities in the same way as natural phenomena. A number of arguments have been formulated in order to deliver this conclusion, such as the freedom of the will, the complexity of social systems, the intentionality of human action, the stochastic nature of social interaction, etc.

I will merely state that I do not know whether determinism applies to social systems, if it really is true of nature in the first place. However, this does not alter the fundamental point made here, namely that generalisations constitute an essential part of the social sciences, with no pretence to the effect that they are lawlike statements.

- b) **Values:** scientific laws cannot cover human actions since values play a fundamental role in social actions and systems and they are outside of science as a value free enterprise.

This argument does not distinguish between the value orientations of actors and the value premises of the scholar. If this distinction is clearly made, then nothing prevents the conduct of research into value orientations, finding some general patterns among these, formulated in generalisations. I will offer a few examples of such generalisations over value orientations today.

TEMPORARY SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The object of the social sciences, corresponding to the generalisations they search to find and establish with evidence, is not some eternally true fabric of universe or the essential components of all forms of life. In stead the social sciences enquire into the social structures that condition behaviour in the world we are living in today. Thus, the concepts employed include always a time or space reference, meaning that they are not universally valid ones.

In the philosophy of the social sciences one has debated whether they are nomothetical or ideographical. However, this distinction does not help capturing the special features of the social sciences, as they are to be placed somewhere in between these two horns. The social sciences analyse temporary structures such e.g. the different family patterns in the world today, the European Union in the 21st century and the emerging market economies in Eastern Europe. This temporary or spatial aspect of social structures explains both the quest for relevance (positive) so typical of the social sciences and the frequent criticism of social science works that they are not up to date (negative).

The quest for relevance looms no doubt very large in the social sciences. Analyses have a very short life span, as new developments arrive changing the temporary structures. Dynamics is worth more than statics. This emphasis upon relevance opens up for the criticism that the social sciences are merely informed journalism. Although the social sciences study what I call temporary structures, it is not a question about single stories. It is not only the method that is different, but also the focus. What interests the social sciences is what single stories entail in terms of generalisations. It is what is typical in the occurrence of events that interests the social scientist. Thus, the focus is upon generalisation uncovering temporary structures. Let me give three examples of such temporary structures.

MACRO GENERALISATIONS: HELPING SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The predicament in Sub-Saharan Africa is more and more becoming a major policy issue in the period of globalisation. The alarming and disturbing signs have multiplied in the 21st century, as anarchy, civil war and famine threaten large parts of the population in several countries. The G8 has finally decided to embark on a concerted effort. But what to do? The choice of a proper strategy depends, of course, upon the definition of the problem as well as the existence of available strategies.

The African agenda of the G8 summit included several strategies, from peace keeping to debt relief. One action alternative is described as follows: "An offer to work towards spending half or more of the G8's annual new development aid - about \$6bn - on African nations that govern justly" (BBC News, 22 June). What lies behind this conditional action plan is the omnipresence in African countries of the flaw of corruption. How to pin down this phenomenon?

Using generalisations, one would employ a macro index to derive an overall picture of a country and then compare its score with global or regional averages. Table 1 presents such a generalisation employing the so-called transparency index measuring perceived corruption.

Table 1. Perceived corruption 2001-4

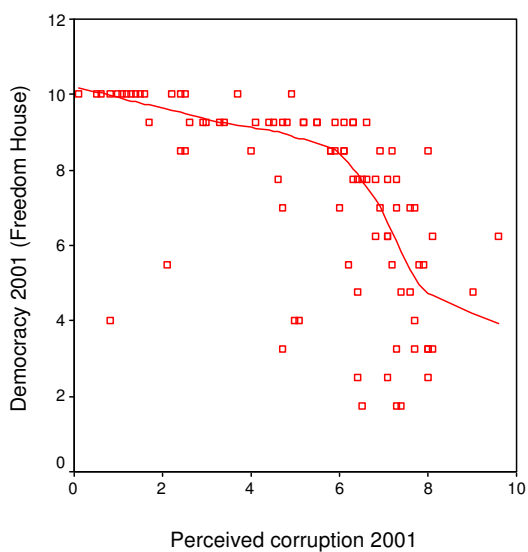
Report

NEW_CIV		CPI02	CPI04
arab	Mean	5,9000	6,2000
	N	4	18
	Std. Deviation	,65828	1,43732
western europe	Mean	3,1815	3,1448
	N	27	29
	Std. Deviation	1,98921	1,96498
eastern europe	Mean	6,7778	7,0083
	N	9	12
	Std. Deviation	,97824	,71409
north america	Mean	1,3000	1,4000
	N	4	4
	Std. Deviation	,76158	,86795
asian	Mean	5,8750	6,3500
	N	4	8
	Std. Deviation	1,22848	1,07438
africa-subsahara	Mean	7,0105	7,2900
	N	19	30
	Std. Deviation	1,31947	,90377
muslim-non arab	Mean	7,9600	7,7143
	N	5	7
	Std. Deviation	,55946	,57280
latin america	Mean	6,4474	6,2217
	N	19	23
	Std. Deviation	1,34593	1,50453
turkish	Mean	7,2000	7,6833
	N	3	6
	Std. Deviation	,45826	,44907
asean	Mean	5,2857	5,6125
	N	7	8
	Std. Deviation	2,59321	2,56428
Total	Mean	5,4782	5,8628
	N	101	145
	Std. Deviation	2,35642	2,21064

Source: <http://www.transparency.org/surveys/index.html#cpi>

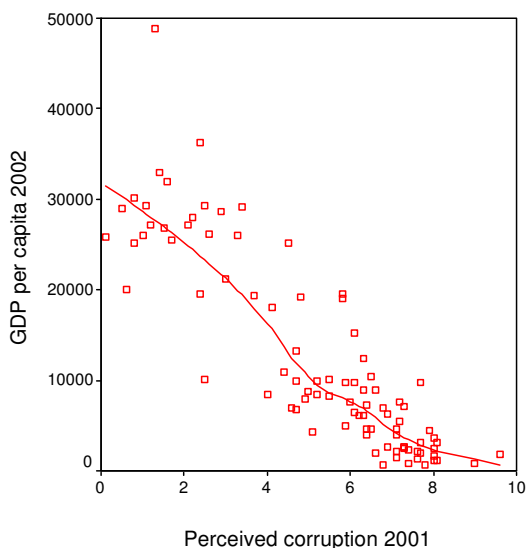
The Eta squared score amounts to .60 meaning that these groups are characterized by different levels of corruption. Africa scores low on this index. No one claims that these averages for 10 groups of countries in the world is true of anything except the early 21st century as an approximation. Thus, it is not a scientific law. The level of corruption may change for the better or for the worse, depending upon several factors. Thus, countries may change, moving up or down the transparency index. However, these scores are far from accidental or mere contingencies. They may guide action as vital information about what to expect in terms of other country characteristics, such as democracy and affluence. Look at Diagram 1 and 2 below, relating the occurrence of corruption to democracy and to GDP.

Diagram 1. Corruption and Democracy



Based upon corruption scores for some 146 countries of the world, Diagram 1 tests the prediction that democracy will be affected with a positive finding amounting to a correlation of .6. Similarly, Diagram 2 tests the prediction that affluence will be affected, again with a positive finding with a correlation at .77.

Diagram 2. Corruption and Affluence



Thus, the country generalisations about corruption at the beginning of the 21st century do not contain any eternal laws about social systems, but they capture a general set of phenomena that are interconnected: bad governance – instable democracy – low affluence. These macro findings are highly relevant for establishing a strategy to do something in relation to the dismal predicament of Sub-Saharan Africa today. Macro properties of a country may be

highly informative although they are not derived from positivistic laws about human nature. Such generalisation may, however, also be based upon micro data.

MICRO GENERALISATIONS: GENDER AND HOMOSEXUALITY AS A SOCIAL CLEAVAGE

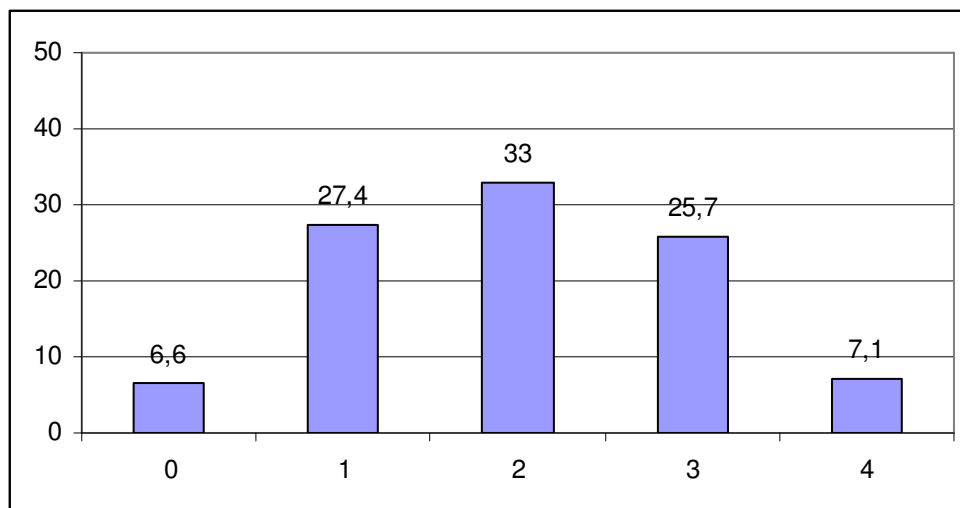
Sex may be looked upon as a new forthcoming cleavages in the post-modern society. Sex and politics have become intertwined in a few highly salient issues pertaining to gender and homosexuality as well as their recognition in politics.

We will examine below several aspects of sex as a cultural cleavage, including: (a) Is there a marked difference between men and women when it comes to the attitude towards gender equality? (b) Does the attitude towards gender equality matter for social values? We start with the macro question, probing into a few determinants of the country variation in gender equality. Then we will turn to the micro question where we will employ the same research strategy that was used in the analysis of values above. To measure sex as a set of cultural cleavages, we employ the following two types of indicators: (1) *Macro indices*: For measuring gender equality at the macro level across countries we employ. (a) Gender-related development index (GDI) as it has been developed by the UNDP team producing the annual Human Development Report - from 1995 it contains the GDI. Briefly GDI measures the relative position of females to males with respect to life expectancy, education and standard of living. (b) Gender empowerment measure (GEM) was also first presented in 1995 and it is a composite index on gender inequality in relation to “economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making and power over economic resources” (UNDP 2004 270). (c) Female representation in parliament measured as the percentage of women in parliament (second chamber if a bicameral system) (WOMAN). These three measures will refer to data for the early years of the 21st century, i.e. around 2000 to 2004.

In addition to these three macro based indices, we will also use: (2) *Micro index*: We will use a micro derived index on gender equality, based on aggregated attitudes on gender issues, available from the 3rd and 4th wave of the World Values Studies (Inglehart et al. 2000 and 2004) (Gender Equality Index; GEQ). The items employed for constructing the index are the following ones: On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do (strongly disagree); When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women (strongly disagree); A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl (strongly disagree); A woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled (strongly disagree); If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn't want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove? (Strongly approve) (cf Inglehart and Norris 2003b: 69). The variables have been recoded so that a positive value stands for gender equality and then a factor analysis has been employed to arrive at a gender equality index; the same procedure has been applied for the 3rd (1995-97) and 4th (1999-2002) waves of the WVS. Since the scores for the two periods strongly covary predicted scores based on the 3rd wave will be used as the country scores in the forthcoming analysis.

Figure 1 gives the size of the groups with different orientations towards gender equality, drawing upon the entire sample from all the countries within the VWS.

Figure 1 : Opinions on Gender Equality (GEQ) (percentages)

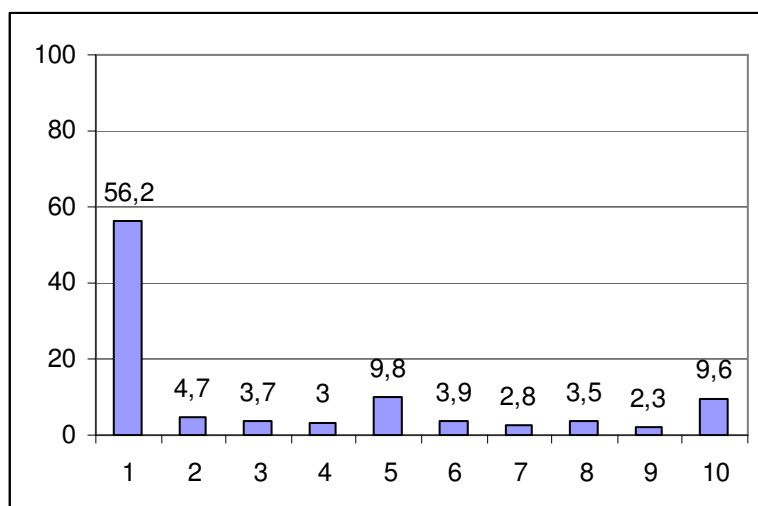


Note : The GEQ index has been rescaled in the following way : 0 = lowest thru -1,5 ; 1 = -1,5 thru -0,5 ; 2 = -0,5 thru 0,5 ; 3 = 0,5 thru 1,5 ; and 1,5 thru highest ; weighted N = 46 564.
Sources : See Appendix 11.1.

Figure 1 indicates that in advanced countries there is a cleavage between those who strongly endorse (3 + 4) and those who are hesitant or negative (0 + 1). We assume now that the basic attitude towards acceptance of homosexuality is connected with the gender equality orientation. To validate this assumption about a basic sex cleavage in advanced countries we employ the VWS.

In order to derive an index of value orientation towards homosexuality, we employ a micro based indicator in order to construct macro scores. For attitudes towards homosexuality we employ the following response item from the WVS: Please tell me whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between: homosexuality (scores from 1 (=never justifiable) to 10 (=always justifiable)). The advantages of the micro based indices on gender and homosexuality is that they allow for both macro and micro enquiries into the sources of such value orientations. Figure 11.2 shows the distribution in the entire sample of respondents in all countries concerning the orientation towards homosexuality.

Figure 2 : Opinion on justifiability of homosexuality (percentages)



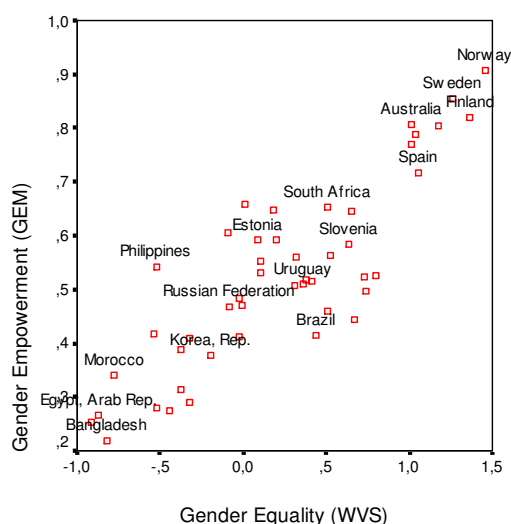
Note : The scale goes from 1 (= never justifiable) to 10 (=always justifiable) ; weighted N = 85 853.

Sources : See Appendix

Let us now enquire into these two value orientations, gender on the one hand and homosexuality on the other hand, and attempt to find some of their determinants, either on the macro level (countries) or with micro data (individuals).

The micro based index upon gender equality, taken from survey data in the WVS), may now be related to the macro based indices. Interestingly, the macro variation derived from micro data is strongly correlated with the variation in gender empowerment, a macro based index – see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Gender equality and Gender empowerment ($r = .856$; $N = 47$)



Sources: See Appendix

Thus, societies where gender equality is strongly endorsed in citizen attitudes are more or less the same societies where a strong development of gender empowerment has taken place. At the macro-level it is evident that gender differentiates between countries, whether gender is measured by macro based indices or attitudinal data as used in a micro based index.

Value orientations condition public policy, at least in the long run. Thus, the growing political saliency of homosexuality would be impossible without value change in the basic attitudes towards sex in the population. Let us look at the support for homosexuality, first with individuals and second at the macro level. The micro sources of a positive evaluation of homosexuality are found in Table 1.

Table 1. Attitudes to homosexuals and gender, age, education and income: eta correlations

Gender		Age		Education		Income	
Group	Homosex.	Group	Homosex.	group	Homosex.	group	Homosex
Male	3,07	15-29 yrs	3,51	Lower	2,77	Lower	2,85

Female	3,48	30-49 yrs	3,36	Middle	3,37	Middle	3,21
		50 + yrs	2,94	Upper	4,05	Upper	3,60
Eta	,066	Eta	,072	Eta	,149	Eta	,097

Sources: See Appendix

That culture matters for homosexuality is strongly confirmed in Table 2

Table 2. Regression: attitudes to homosexuals and value orientations, gender, age, education and income (WVS 4th wave 1999-2002)

Independent variables	Regression coefficient	t-stat
Traditional/secular rational	1,149	73,90
Gender Equality orientation (GEQ)	,748	52,98
Post-Materialist	,530	24,24
Gender	,097	3,64
Age	-,067	-3,98
Education	-,048	-2,51
Income	,039	2,26
Constant	2,146	25,90
R square	,310	
N	30289	

Sources: See Appendix

Just as individuals differ in their support for homosexuality, so do societies differ in their acceptance of homosexuality? The macro picture is well captured by culture on the one hand and economic modernisation on the other hand (Table 3).

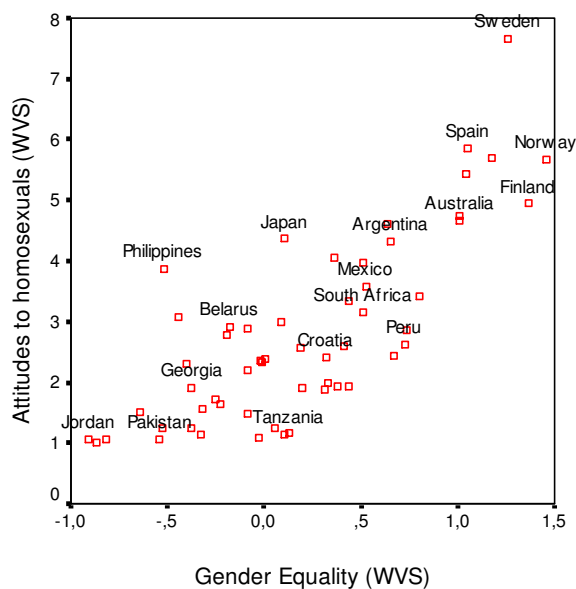
Table 3 Attitudes to homosexuals and cultural factors: Pearson's correlation

Cultural factors	Correlation	Attitudes to homosexuals
Protestantism (LN)	r	,475
	Sig	,000
	N	77
Islam (LN)	r	-,484
	Sig	,000
	N	77
Iberian legacy	r	,109
	Sig	,371
	N	69
Family system (Todd)	r	,762
	Sig	,000
	N	77

Sources: See Appendix

One may relate the attitudes towards homosexuality to the gender value orientations. Figure 4 shows how they correlate strongly at the macro level.

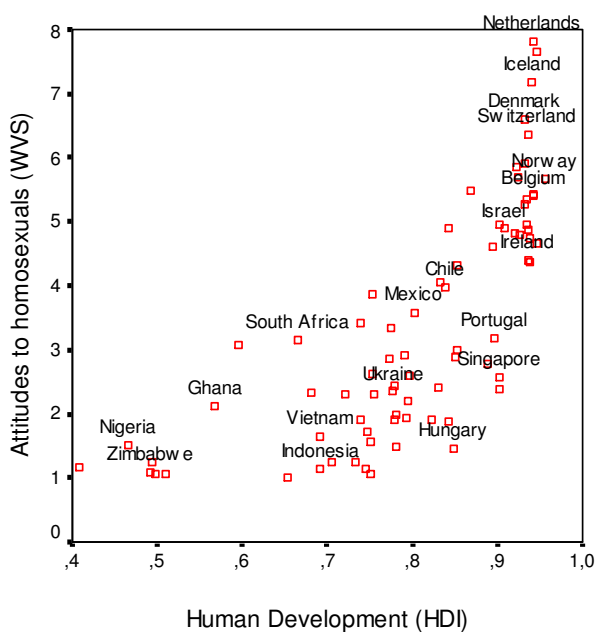
Figure 11: 7. Gender equality orientations (GEQ) and attitudes to homosexuals ($r=.78$; $N = 56$)



Sources: See Appendix

But both these value orientations – gender and homosexuality – are strongly supported in societies with a high level of modernisation and the so-called post-modern society. - see Figure 5.

Figure 5 : Human development and attitudes to homosexuality ($r= .74$; $N = 76$)



Sources: See Appendix

Value change is a fundamental force behind politics and the making of new public policy. The policies towards women empowerment and the acceptance of homosexuality in law would not have come about without the powerful currents of value orientations among citizens supporting these developments. There is a cleavage in advanced societies between those who endorse the new politics of sex as against those who oppose it. Attitudes towards gender and homosexuality are connected at the micro level. And their occurrence on the macro level is strongly embedded in major cultural aspects of society.

MICRO GENERALISATIONS: ARE THE BELIEFS OF MUSLIMS DIFFERENT?

The emergence of Islamic terrorism on a major scale as witnessed in the attacks on New York, Madrid and London raises a few questions for scientific enquiry. Muslim fundamentalism may be approached in several ways. One cannot deny the relevance of an interpretative approach attempting to isolate the sources of fundamentalism in Islam by examining various schools in Islamic thought. Nor can one neglect an historical examination of the evolution of major events in the fundamentalist story, such as the victory of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the coming of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Yet, to understand the place of Islamic fundamentalism in Muslim and Non-Muslim societies it is necessary to find out whether fundamentalist doctrines have mass support with Muslims around the world. This is a research task that looks for generalisations about mass beliefs among ordinary people. Using surveys we have the possibility today of reaching out rendering a picture of differences in belief systems among people in the Muslim civilisation in contrast to people in other civilisations. The larger the N that such surveys are based upon, the better inductive conclusions we can make, all other things identical. These generalisations should hold true today without any claim to universality, whatever that claim could imply for the social sciences, given the fact that social systems always change more or less quickly.

Below I will examine a few belief items in order to illuminate whether Muslims in general support fundamentalist values. Such an enquiry can best be done by putting the beliefs of Muslims against those of Non-Muslims. Again, the possibility of both macro and micro conclusions are open, as the views of individuals can be aggregated to averages for countries.

CONCLUSION

In the great books in the philosophy of science, the specific nature of social science generalisations has not been pinned down. It is believed that the social sciences go about searching for eternal truths about human nature and social systems. This is a completely wrong account of the conduct of enquiry in the social sciences.

Instead, the social sciences focus upon the establishment and use of generalisations that are specific to time or space.

Appendix. Micro-level data

Abbreviation	Description	Variables in Inglehart et al. 2004
AGE	Age group; recoded as: 15-29 = 1, 30-49 = 2, 50 + = 3	V225(x003r2)
EDUCATION	Educational level; recoded as: lower = 1, middle = 2, upper = 3	V226(x025r)
GENDER	Gender as a dummy variable; male = 1, female = 2	V223(x001)
GEQ	Gender equality orientation index achieved thru applying a factor analysis on five items	V78(c001(recoded)), V110(d019(recoded)), V112(d023(recoded)), V118(d059), V119(d060)
HOMOSEXUALS	Justifiability of homosexuality going from never (=1) to always (=19)	V208(f118)
INCOME	Income level; recoded as: lower = 1, middle = 2, upper = 3	V236(x047r)
Post-materialist orientation	Postmaterialism orientation index based on four items	y002
Survival/Self-expression orientation	Index measuring survival vs. self-expression values; see Inglehart and Baker 2000: 24 for the construction of the index	survself
Traditional/secular rational orientation	Index measuring traditional vs. secular-rational values; see Inglehart and Baker 2000: 24 for the construction of the index	tradrat5

Appendix. Macro-level data used

Abbreviation	Description	Sources
Family system	Classification of countries as belonging to family types according to degree of individualism where the	Based on Todd (1983)

	absolute nuclear family scores high and the African family system score low	
GDI	Gender-related development index; based on estimations for different number of years	UNDP (2000-2004)
GDP 1999	GDP per capita expressed as PPP in US\$	CIA (2000)
GEM	Gender empowerment measure; based on estimations for different number of years	UNDP (2000 – 2004)
GEQ	Gender equality index; aggregated to the national level, based on both the 3 rd and the 4 th wave of WVS	Inglehart et al. 2000, 2004
HDI	Human development index; based on estimations for different number of years	UNDP (2000-2004)
HOMOSEXUALS	Attitudes to homosexuals aggregated to the national level, based on both 3 rd and the 4 th wave of WVS	Inglehart et al. 2000, 2004
Iberian legacy	Legacy of Iberian colonial rule as a dummy variable where 1 = Iberian legacy, 0 = no such legacy	Based on de Blij (1996, pp. 496-97)
Islam (LN)	Percentage of the population estimated to adhere to the Muslim creed around 2000; natural logarithm	Barrett et al 2001
Protestantism (LN)	Percentage of the population estimated to adhere to the Protestant creed around 2000; natural logarithm	Barrett et al 2001

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