

Values in France

*Olivier Galland, Yannick Lemel and Jean-François Tchernia**

Values are a thorny subject, because being for the most part acquired during childhood and teenage years, they are highly internalised. Everyone has a set of values, but while they strongly influence people's judgement and actions they are not always consciously held or coherently expressed.

Studying the "values" of the population first calls for preparing a questionnaire which approaches the issue indirectly. The approach consists in surveying for each major domain, such as religion and politics, indications that can be related to either identity or behaviour, beliefs or general opinions (e.g. on the role of religion). Out of such a set of indications, a researcher can then deduce the primary values of the persons surveyed. This inductive approach calls for a wide body of knowledge on the part of the researcher(s) spanning the various branches of sociology and political science.

There is a great diversity of value-based opinions

Can it be said that the answers given by the people interviewed as part of the Values survey (see *box 1*) are organised in such a way as to be broadly coherent in a number of areas? Can such coherence be explained by the existence of this or that set or system of values among the French? There is no black or white answer to these questions. People's positions on matters political, religious, and to a lesser degree, moral, are the easiest to pinpoint by using compound factor analysis - the method used in this survey -

to build scores that summarise the data gathered (see *box 2*).

The influence of Catholicism continues to weaken, though to a slightly lesser extent among the young

There is a general trend in Western countries for a fall in religious affiliation and practice, though the extent to which this is taking place differs from country to country. France hasn't avoided this general trend. In 1999, when asked "Do you consider that you belong to a

* Olivier Galland is part of France's Observatoire du changement social [Observatory for Social Change] (CNRS, FNSP); Yannick Lemel works for Laboratoire de Sociologie Quantitative [the Statistical Sociology Lab]; Jean-François Tchernia is the head of a consultancy, Tchernia Études Conseil.

Box 1**The "Values" survey**

The results featured in this article are drawn from a survey carried out in March and April 1999 among a sample of 1,821 respondents representative of the broader French population and aged 18 or over. This survey was carried out as part of a Europe-wide university study programme that has been running for the past 20 years, and pursuant to which three series of surveys were staged in 1981, 1990 and 1999 (see *For further information*). The survey consists of individual interviews and last around an hour. The questionnaire covers all the main spheres of values: work, family, morals, social relationships, religion and politics. It is the outcome of a joint effort between researchers of various nationalities working in various branches of the social sciences. This article was directly based on the collective report drawn up by the French team under the tutelage of Pierre Bréchon, les valeurs des Français [the French's values] (see *For further information*).

religion?", 58% of respondents answered "yes", against 74% twenty years before, in 1981. Among young adults aged 18 to 24, the corresponding figures were 48% and 59% respectively.

However, a distinction must be drawn between belonging to an institutional religion and taking part in religious practices organised by such an institution on the one hand, and harbouring religious beliefs on the other. Over 90% of the people who considered that they belonged to a religion declared that the religion in question was Catholicism. The percentage of people who admit that they belong to a religion is higher when the question is asked in a more direct way, along the lines of "Do you belong to a religion?" rather than "Do you consider that you...?".

The importance attached to taking part in religious ceremonies and ritual has been falling over

the past twenty years, but the prevalence of religious opinions and convictions has been developing rather differently. Thus between 1981 and 1999, the proportion of people who admitted taking part in religious ritual on a monthly basis declined from 18 to 12% of the overall population, and even more sharply among young adults. Similarly, the perceived importance of religious ceremonial at birth or upon marriage is falling.

Although "belief in God" also tends to be fading (on average 56% of respondents declared that they "believed in God" in 1999 compared with 62% in 1981), belief in life after death has remained stable, or even increased. The proportion of young people who believe in a life after death, in hell, in heaven or in reincarnation (one in four French people acknowledged harbouring such beliefs in 1999) is on the rise (see *figure 2*). Broadly

Box 2**Is there a structured 'system of values'?****The answers given by the respondents**

The data of the survey was based on the answers given to the questions therein by the various respondents interviewed. This set of data is not structured in any particularly clear manner: the correlation between the answers to the various questions is too weak to allow any underlying general principles to be drawn directly from these answers.

The "scores" – a summary of the data

In order to determine the coherence of the data collected, one must find a way to compound it. To do so, one uses the statistical technique known as compound factor analysis. This technique en-

ables one to generate 'scores' that basically summarise the data at hand. A 'score' is merely a numerical index together with a numerical value attributed to each respondent. Using this technique, the mass of answers yielded by the survey can be replaced by a few tens of scores.

The 'revelevatory index' of the scores

How many scores must one retain in order to secure a suitable summary of the data? The answer to this question depends on one's need for accuracy. Using all the scores, it is possible to reconstitute a body of data roughly analogous to that yielded by the survey. But if one cuts down the number of scores used, any data that is reconstituted will be based on a narrower body of detail than the original data: its res-

olution, or degree of variance from person to person within the sample will be lesser than that of the original data.

The 'revelevatory index' of a set of scores is precisely this: the ratio between the variance of the reconstituted data and that of the original data. It is expressed as a percentage (between 0 and 100%). The greater the number of scores retained, the greater the revelatory index of the set of scores.

Figure 1 demonstrates the revelatory index of scores for a compound factor analysis carried out on a selection of 90 items of data representative of the various questions asked. The scores are classed in decreasing order of effectiveness. The first score has an intrinsic revelatory index of 6%. The

speaking, we are witnessing an upsurge in probabilistic answers that betray an erosion in people's certainty and a trend for increasing doubt.

There appears to be a convergence between the values of practising Catholics, little or non-practising Catholics and non-Catholics. On the one hand, there is a resurgence in the respect for authority, civic norms and faithfulness to one's partner, particularly among people who claim to be atheistic or irreligious. In this, their convictions are getting closer to those of religious and practising Catholics. On the other hand, increasing numbers of the latter are

prepared to accept concepts such as divorce, euthanasia or suicide, thus getting closer to mainstream views.

A low degree of politicisation

The concept of "politicisation", devised by political scientists, refers to a person's interest in politics, be they or not active politically. A traditional indicator of politicisation, in any political poll, is the frequency with which people discuss politics. The 1999 Values survey reported that around a third of the French never talk about politics with

their friends (same proportion as in 1981 and 1990), half of them talk about it from time to time, and one in ten do so often. Other indications can be used to measure the degree of politicisation of the French: a third of them consider that politics is either relatively or very important, and a little more than a third of them (37%) are actively interested in politics.

The weak degree of politicisation among the French is not a new phenomenon - it has been prevalent for a long time. The analysis of a compound indicator derived from the three statistics set out in the foregoing paragraph shows that politicisation is

second, which is the next most effective, contributes a further 3% to the overall revelatory index (i.e. the two together have a revelatory index of 9%), etc. the contribution of the following scores to the overall revelatory index gets lower and lower; each of them only provides a minor increase to the overall revelatory index. It is clear that many scores will be required to re-constitute anything close to the original data.

Coherence or scattering of data?

Are there any latent underlying factors behind the answers, whose determination would enable the answers to the questions asked to be predicted with any degree of accuracy? To put it another way, do the answers given form a 'system'? the procedure for building compound factor analyses of correlation ensures that the answers to questions related to the same score (or to the same set of scores) are correlated between them and thus that they point towards the latent dimensions that potentially underpin all the opinions expressed.

But the revelatory index is diluted among a large number of scores. The answers to the questions are, indeed, scattered. Knowing the answer to a given question only pro-

vides a vague ability to predict the answer to another question, so that it is unreasonable to expect that there are well-organised systems of values underlying the answers provided.

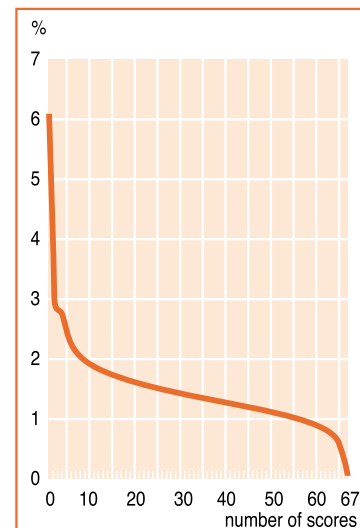
The quest for an underlying structure

By proceeding in a quite arbitrary manner, one can retain those questions that exhibit the strongest correlation among all the responses to all the questions. These questions enable us to identify the broadest underlying principles that can be detected. The 'natural' threshold for selecting these questions is suggested by the form of the curve in figure 1. It would lead us to retain the first seven scores. So what are the domains of the questions that correspond to these first seven scores?

The data involved concerns opinions in the fields of religion, then politics, followed (in order of decreasing importance) by indications of people's degree of liberalism and of their preferred family types. Other questions - regarding people's perceived identity - contribute very little to defining these first seven scores.

This conclusion should be taken with a pinch of salt. The compounding power of these first scores is weak. Religion and politics may partly structure the first

Figure 1 - The revelatory index of successive scores¹ in a compound factor analysis of 90 data elements



1. Expressed as a percentage. The sum total of revelatory indexes by definition amounts to 100 %.

Source : Values survey

highest among men, particularly those in the higher social categories, and among those people having undertaken long periods of study. Among the latter, the degree of politicisation is lower than ten years ago: the proportion of extensively educated people with a high degree of politicisation dropped from 58% in 1990 to 51% in 1999.

Although politicisation relates to a state of mind, involvement in politics relates to the political actions and behaviour of the population. Various surveys have clearly demonstrated a steady, long-term decline in electoral turn-out over the past decades. The *Values* survey confirms this trend, but also shows that there has been a concurrent growth in less conventional political activities such as demonstrations and petitions. If we take just five such behaviours or activities (signing a petition, taking part in a boycott, taking part in an authorised demonstration, taking part in a wildcat strike, occupying offices or industrial plants), it emerges that close to three quarters of French people have taken part in at least one such activity, whereas only one in two had done so in 1981.

Thus, the French are turning their backs on institutionalised forms of involvement in politics, and are adopting more spontaneous, unconventional and less involved modes of behaviour.

Still in the political sphere, the *Values* survey also yields a picture of political affiliation. This is usually compounded as Left or Right-wing political tendencies. For the past ten years, and particularly since the fall of the Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, much has been written about the decline of

the Left-versus-Right divide. However, the *Values* survey shows that this aspect is still highly relevant. Not only were respondents able to state their personal position relative to the Left-versus-Right divide, they were also just as aware of the respective ideological positions of both Left and Right as they were ten or twenty years ago. For instance, law and order is clearly seen as a characteristic aim of the Right, whereas separation between politics and religion is seen as a typical characteristic of the Left. Although with respect to certain issues, such as moral permissiveness, the respective positions of Left and Right are tending to soften and converge, the political divide retains a marked significance as far as the French are concerned.

Permissiveness, liberalism and individualism

Moral tolerance is increasing. More and more French people are coming round to the idea that everyone should be entitled

to live their private lives as they see fit, notwithstanding religious or moral conventions. If one looks at the change in a permissiveness indicator compounded from the answers to several questions (on homosexuality, divorce, abortion, etc.), the growth in moral permissiveness is very apparent indeed (see figure 3). Permissiveness is growing across the board, but at different rates depending on people's age group: its growth is most moderate among young people (who were the most permissive age group in 1981), whereas it is growing much faster in the intermediate age groups. As a result, the moral positions of French people aged 18 to 60 are closer than ever nowadays. Only people in the older (60+) age group remain markedly less permissive than the average, in spite of substantial changes in their behaviour.

The unquestionable growth in moral permissiveness does not however mean that the French believe that permissiveness

Figure 2 – Belief in the after-world among people aged 18 to 29¹

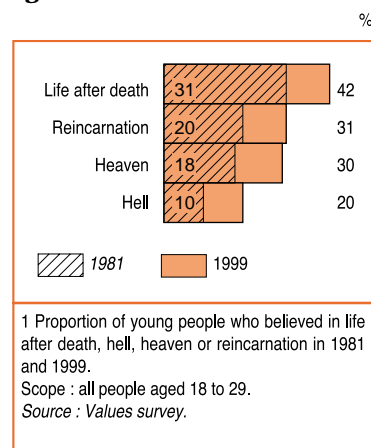
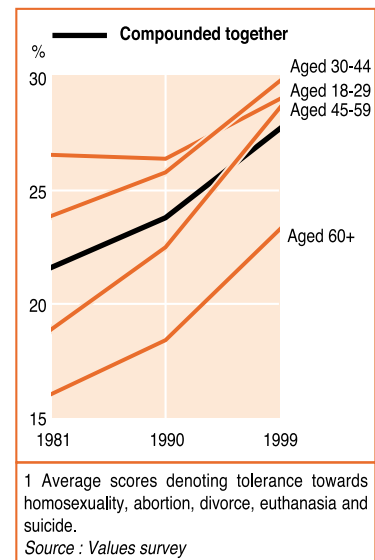


Figure 3 – Moral permissiveness score¹



should apply to all social interactions. They seem to draw a clear distinction between choices that only affect the individual, and behaviour that affects other people. As far as the latter is concerned, their attitudes haven't evolved towards greater laxity, quite the contrary: there appears to be growing concern for tighter regulation of social behaviour. The *Values* survey yields two very salient examples: a resurgence of respect for authority, and a resurgence of the idea that faithfulness is a key component of a successful relationship. On both these issues, there has been a substantial shift in attitudes, particularly over the past ten years, and most markedly among young people. Here again one witnesses a convergence of the attitudes of French people aged 18 to 60.

Moral permissiveness, which more and more French people are in favour of, inevitably generates some tension: relationships between people are no longer controlled by intangible religious standards that were once common to all (see *box 3*). People's individual liberty, whilst more

and more widely condoned, must therefore be ever more strictly controlled as soon as it emerges from a strictly individual context: it is this ambiguity, this contrasting meld of permissiveness and concern for tighter regulation among the French, that appears to emerge from the answers given to the *Values* survey.

The rise in micro-societal considerations

Both the way they define themselves and some of their behaviour show that the French see themselves increasingly as belonging to categories that are closely related to their immediate circles and surroundings and their individual characteristics, at the expense of any sense of belonging to wider categories and of membership of organisations that are meant to represent collective interests. This trend is probably merely the continuation of a very long-term and deeply ingrained evolution towards individualism. For instance, when asked which defining

geographical entity they feel that they belong to first and foremost, the French tend to name their city, municipality or county, before their region or country as a whole (as for Europe, it only arouses a very vague sense of belonging). Furthermore, an individual's narrow circle of "friends" appears to be gaining an increasing importance in the lives of the French, and this is mirrored by a decline in their involvement in associations whose purpose is not strictly utilitarian or entertainment-related.

A corollary of this trend is the growing suspicion or indifference towards those social categories whose characteristics are most distant from the mainstream. More and more French people declare that they would not like to have people as neighbours with salient characteristics that are out of the ordinary (supporters of the extreme right or left,

Box 3

Differences in age and generation

When carrying out any analysis of changes in people's values, it is vital to factor in generation-related effects. Indeed, new generations brought up in different circumstances can bring new values into the equation or reinterpret those that were imparted to them by their elders.

The *Values* surveys have detected such effects. 20 years ago, young people were far more permissive than adults. These generation-related differences converged substantially owing to dual but contradictory trends. The new

young generations are somewhat less permissive and markedly less anti-authoritarian than previous generations of young people. Conversely, older people (up to 60 years of age) have been influenced by the global trend towards greater moral permissiveness, so as to substantially dampen the effect of ageing, which would previously cause people to develop more conservative positions, particularly after the ages of 30 or 40. Thus, in terms of morality, there is nowadays very little difference between the attitudes of French people aged 18 to 50 or even 60!

For further information

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emotionally unstable characters, etc.) or deviant (people with a criminal record, alcoholics, etc.). Among a list of eight types of hypothetical neighbours put to them on the three dates on which the survey was carried out (including, in addition to the already mentioned categories, families with many children,

immigrant or foreign workers), 11% of French people pointed out at least three as being undesirable in 1981, 25% in 1990, and 29% in 1999. But this suspicion of other people who were different only appears to have increased where the highlighted behaviour is perceived as a potential threat in people's

interpersonal relationships. Thus, unlike the other categories of controversial neighbours, homosexual neighbours (added to the survey's list in 1990) are more and more tolerated. Once again, this reflects the combined effect of moral permissiveness and the growing concern for regulation of interpersonal relationships. ■