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# The Perception of Security in a World Comparative Perspective

Juan Díez-Nicolás \*

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### *Abstract*

*Security has been an important value in traditional societies, and a key value in present developed and less developed societies. Data from more than 60 countries demonstrate that it is more important than freedom and equality. The problem is what level of freedom are we prepared to lose to get a certain level of security. People perceive three levels of security: personal, community and national.*

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### Introduction

Security has always been an important value in traditional societies, but it has become a key value in present societies, both developed and less developed, particularly since the end of the Cold War. During that period most of the literature on security referred to national or state security because of the military (nuclear) equilibrium between the two blocks. But when that period ended, the concept of security has been enlarged to individual, societal, global, and human security.

The concept of security has changed because of globalization, a significant change in the worldwide social environment. First, the city provided security to individuals, later the state provided security to its citizens, but at present the nation-state is not capable of providing security. That is the reason why most scholars, researchers and politicians are developing an interest in other ways of providing individual and societal security.

### Two Key Theoretical Frames

Though it is widely accepted that national and international security are different, the fact is that both are very much interrelated. The idea that internal and external security are not separate, as they were during the Cold War, is present in most works of the post-Cold War period, or at least the emphasis is placed on the idea that they are very interrelated. Nevertheless, though most scholars after the Cold War period emphasize the interdependence between internal and external security, the academic division of labor continues to differentiate them, if only for heuristic purposes. The concept of security has not been the exclusive domain of experts in international relations and politics, but has also

\* Juan Díez-Nicolás is *President of ASEP* and *Professor of Sociology at Universidad Camilo José Cela* (Madrid, Spain). All the opinions expressed in this briefing are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of *Universidad Camilo José Cela* or of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

received great attention by social scientists, who have focused on multiple aspects of security, not only state but individual and societal security.

During the period between the end of World War Two and the fall of the Berlin Wall, security was not the main concern of individuals in more developed societies. This short period is also the period of change from industrial to post-industrial societies, or the change from industrial capitalism to financial capitalism. Two theoretical lines with a more sociological perspective give some new insights to explain why security has become such a key value in present societies.

The first theoretical frame of reference started in the late 70's, as a reaction to the excessive optimism generated by the rate of economic development during the previous fifteen years. Its beginning could be placed on the first oil crisis of 1973 and the publication of the first report to the Club of Rome, "Limits to Growth". Many well-known reports at that time described a future following a chain of events that started with 1) an unprecedented rate of world population growth that 2) would impose an accelerated intensive use of world natural resources, especially on energy, that 3) would produce a lower quality of life (in spite of accelerated growth of technology), 4) which would lead to increasing social and economic inequalities between countries and within countries (because those individuals, groups and countries in positions of power would tend to defend and improve their quality of life at the expense of those with less power), that would lead to 5) increasing social conflicts, latent or manifest, between countries and within countries. The corollary of this forecast was that increasing social conflicts would probably lead those in positions of power to recur to more authority, bringing about more authoritarian (left or right) political regimes, as the most rapid and efficient way to resolve conflicts. This hypothesis, which in great part seems to have been confirmed, especially in recent times with the 2007-08 financial crisis, is producing high levels of social and economic inequalities, and therefore insecurity in the populations, and thus a new concern for security.

The second theoretical frame of reference started in 1977 with Ron Inglehart's theory about change in values' systems. In fact, Inglehart's theory establishes that in traditional pre-industrial societies, values were traditional and materialistic because people were primarily concerned about their personal and economic security.

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After World War Two those two sources of insecurity were controlled through the world peace brought by the bi-polar power system of the Cold War and through the welfare state. However, World Values Survey (WVS) data from the 2005 and 2010 waves provided evidence for many of the more developed countries suggesting that a change from the new post-materialistic, self-expression or emancipative values that had grown since the end of World War Two till the year 2000 was taking place; a change that implied a certain return to materialistic values and to greater wishes for more authority, because of the growth of personal insecurity (many local wars, the Gulf, the Balkans, international and national terrorism, organized crime, narco-traffic, etc.) and the growth of economic insecurity (unemployment, early retirement, migrations, financial capitalism, globalization, etc.). The growth of insecurity in all realms of life is ubiquitous in the day-to-day news cycle (food, health, environment, traffic, unemployment, poverty, terrorism, national defense, crime, energy, stock exchanges, etc.), and it is producing a very important change in values, including a higher demand for authority (as observed in the WVS waves of 2005 and 2010), which probably will lead to justify more authoritarian governments even in traditional

democracies. The time series from the 1981 to the 2010 waves of WVS shows a significant decline of post-materialist values since 2000, in contrast with previous waves, and a significant growth of the desire for more authority, especially in more developed countries. Data from the WVS 2010-14 wave based on more than 85,000 personal face-to-face interviews in 59 countries confirms the decline in post-materialist values already observed in the 2005 wave. And the provisional data from the on-going seventh WVS wave in about 60 countries confirm again the trend observed since 2000.

Besides, the data seems to show that the change towards a greater concern for security and desires for more authority has been observed first in more developed countries, and within each country, in the social center groups. The change disseminates later towards less developed countries and the social periphery within each society, confirming Johan Galtung's center-periphery theory. It seems appropriate to say that the 20th century was characterized by the confrontation of two very important values: Freedom vs. Equality, but the 21st century will be characterized by the confrontation between two other values: Freedom vs. Security, so that the problem will be to know how much freedom societies are ready to give up in order to guarantee a certain level of security. It is not a coincidence that Security has become the fastest growing business in the world today, and not only because of the arms race, but because of the industry of security in all realms of our life (food, health, energy, economy, justice, finance, crime, national defense, etc.). Provisional results from the on-going seventh WVS wave, based on more than 100,000 personal face-to-face interviews in more than 60 countries around the world suggest that about two thirds of respondents prefer Freedom to Equality, and about two thirds of R's prefer Security to Freedom.

As a provisional corollary, and drawing still on another theoretical scheme (Hawley's social ecosystem theory), all forms of social organization (political, economic, family, educational, etc.) including value systems, are instruments of adaptation of human societies

to their environment. Together with technology, these constitute the peculiar and unique way that human societies survive in their environment (non-material and material culture) contrary to plants and animals, whose adaptation is always mechanic, given by genetic heredity. Human history demonstrates that the interaction between population and environment, through the intervening effect of technology (mainly communication and transportation technology) have affected the responses produced by societies through changes in the social organization (economic, political, educational, familial, etc.) and values systems. This suggests that maybe we are at the point of a great change that may affect the present model of economic organization (capitalism, and especially financial capitalism) and the present model of political organization (parliamentary democracy). Without a crystal ball it is difficult to predict what will be the new models, though it is well known that through human history these two models have changed many times, and that it would be very unusual that they will perpetuate forever when the other three elements of the social ecosystem (population, environment and technology) have changed so much in the past decades. Therefore, present insecurity might also be a result of the objective and subjective perception that the two main social organizations: the economy and the polity are changing dramatically, without our knowing where the world is heading to. The main hypothesis sustained here is that values change because of the levels of security in society, both personal and economic.

## **A New Framework for Study**

The above reflections, which I have developed in several publications in the last decade, are the basis for the theoretical scheme that I have developed to research security. Thus, a first study in 2007 with a national representative sample of 1,200 face-to-face interviews in Spain allowed the construction of a Synthetic Index of Subjective Security, covering internal and external security. This index was validated through another survey based on a representative sample of 8,000 face-to-face interviews in Madrid in 2008. The 2010 WVS

wave gave the opportunity to validate the Subjective Security Index (SSI) by including a new set of questions that, for the most part, replicated questions from the Spanish set, though it introduced a couple of new ones. However, as has been explained and demonstrated, the SSI can accept many different questions provided they measure the same variables. Following the methodology of the Spanish surveys, a main component analysis was produced with all the questions measuring different aspects of security.

After several statistical analyses it was decided to construct an index of perception of security for each one of the three dimensions that emerged from several main component analysis, plus a fourth one that would summarize the previous three, with the fewer number of items that would combine the different dimensions of security, and would avoid as much as possible unnecessary redundancies. Four indexes were therefore constructed, based on the following individual items/indicators:

**Personal Security Index (PSI):** Preferred not to go out at night; did not carry much money; carried a knife, gun or other weapon.

**Community Security Index (CSI):** Drug sale in the streets, robberies, alcohol consumption in the streets.

**National Security Index (NSI):** Worries about international war, about terrorist attack, about civil war.

**Total Security Index (TSI):** Sum of Indexes of Personal (PSI), Community (CSI) and National (NSI) Security.

## **Conclusion**

As might be expected, and has been verified with the data from the sixth wave of the WVS, developed countries seem to feel subjectively more secure than less developed countries, but variation even among countries within the same world geo-cultural region is very wide. One important finding has been that exposure to information usually leads to a lesser, not a

greater, perception of security. Significant finding is that there is great variation in the levels of the four levels of security, among the seven geo-cultural world regions, and among the countries within a region. This implies that the country continues to be the most important unit of analysis in international comparisons. A third major finding is that the variables used to explain subjective security in any of the four levels cannot really explain an important proportion of the variance (14% seems to be the highest). And this finding supports the idea that to explain security one needs not only subjective measures, but also objective measures, like crime rates, proportion of the PIB devoted to defense, personnel in the armed forces and other security institutions, social and political conflicts, etc. These objective measures are more difficult to obtain, but previous research in Spain has suggested that macro-variables (properties of countries rather than of individuals) have more explanatory power than individual.

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## Trans European Policy Studies Association

Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000

Brussels, Belgium

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