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A DIGRESSION ON SOME FUNDAMENTAL VALUES IN PORTUGAL A HUMBLE ECONOMIST'S PERSPECTIVE

António Caleiro ¹

ABSTRACT

Objective:

For a long time, the (scientific) study of certain subjects was hampered by the lack of data. Paradoxically, nowadays, in certain matters, the existence of data does not trigger the production of studies of that nature, even though those matters are demonstrably relevant, at various levels. In our case, these matters correspond to the fundamental values of a society, namely, altruism, care, compassion, equity, fairness, forgiveness, humanity, justice, respect, trust, etc. As far as we know, in fact, there are 3 (credible) sources of data on some of those, and other, values, which include the case of Portugal, namely the European Social Survey, the European Values Study, and the World Values Survey. The objective is, therefore, to analyse (some of) the data that these sources present about Portugal, thus contributing to a better characterization of Portuguese society, in terms of its fundamental values.

Methodology:

In the field of a society's fundamental values, establishing causal relationships is a task subject to methodological risks. Therefore, an exploratory data analysis methodology was deliberately chosen, focusing on: first, a descriptive statistics analysis of the selected variables, for that using histograms; second, a cross-analysis of the selected variables under the form of contingency tables and the corresponding mosaic plots. Some statistic tests on the (eventual) association between the variables were also performed.

Originality:

Regarding the subject on which we are going to digress, in a deliberately simple way, i.e., some fundamental values of the Portuguese, we must begin by acknowledging that, before us, some authors have already looked, better than us, into this subject. One of the first references we find is the work of Vala et al. (2003) on social values in Portugal, in comparison with Europe. Also establishing a comparison between the Portuguese case and the European case, Silva (2011) addressed the particular topic of the relationship between values and happiness.

Still placing the Portuguese case in context with the European case, Duque (2013) analysed the case of values in the work domain. Using data from the European Values Survey (1990, 1999 and 2008), Duque (2013) draws attention to the fact that the two factors that the Portuguese consider most important in their work/job were a good salary (first place in 1999 and 2008, and second in 1990), but also pleasant people (first place in 1990, and second in 1999 and 2008). The same author also considered the case of the relationship between values and religiosity in Duque (2022), for that using the 2020 wave of the European Values Survey. Also considering the values of the European Values Survey, in its 1990, 1999, 2008 and 2020 waves, the work of Ramos & Magalhães (2021a) is a mandatory reference. Here, it is particularly interesting the conclusion that the family plays a fundamental role in the lives of the Portuguese. See also, Ramos & Magalhães (2021b).

^{1*} Universidade de Évora: Departamento de Economia, Portugal. E-mail: caleiro@uevora.pt. I would like to thank the (anonymous) referees for their insightful comments, as well as the audience at the presentation. All the remaining flaws and/or shortcomings are, obviously, my own.

Thus, regarding the originality and added value of our work, we aim to complement the literature on the matter, considering other data sources and another methodology.

Results:

In line with our objectives, we consider 3 data sources on values and, in each of these, the most recent wave of surveys: the ESS11 edition 3.0 (2023) of the European Social Survey (<https://ess.sikt.no>), see ESS ERIC (2025); and the joint dataset EVS/WVS 2017-2022 of the European Values Study (<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu>) and the World Values Survey (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>), see EVS/WVS (2022).

With regard to trust in others, in particular regarding how each person thinks others are fair towards them, it can be said that the level of trust in others and in their fairness does not reach very high values. Considering particular groups of people, the levels of trust in family are significantly the highest (and quite high). On the other hand, the lowest levels of trust correspond to those who each one is meeting for the first time. Apparently, once we get to know the other person personally, the levels of trust increase significantly.

Somewhat related to the previous aspect, we have the issue of immigration. In fact, the prevailing opinion seems to be neutral regarding the question of whether immigrants make the country better or worse to live in. However, there seems to be a (much) more favourable opinion that their presence is good for the economy. Interestingly, when asked whether, given the shortage of jobs, employers should give priority to national citizens, most (strongly) agree. Also interesting is the fact that, again in light of the shortage of jobs, most of those interviewed (strongly) disagreed as to whether employers should give priority to men (over women).

Turning now to religion and happiness, the results indicate that levels of religiosity are significant, but even more so are the levels of happiness. In fact, when all levels of religiosity and happiness are considered, according to the usual statistical tests, there does not seem to exist a strong association between these two aspects. However, when one is happy enough and (also) religious enough, there does seem to exist a positive association between those two aspects. In our opinion, it is also very interesting that women are more religious than men and are also those who, in general, are less happy (than men), but are, nevertheless, those who manifest (more than men) a maximum level of happiness.

In terms of fundamental values, such as equality, respondents were (very) in favour of its fundamental importance. Somewhat related to this result, material values, such as wealth, were not shown to be very important. Moreover, modesty and humility are values that the interviewees particularly value. Caring for the well-being of others is also important. Again, when these issues are considered, broken down by gender, it can be seen that women show more sensibility (than men) to the needs of others, eventually because they attach more importance (than men) to helping others and caring for their well-being.

Practical implications:

Despite the humble nature of this study, quite honestly, the implications, in social terms, of acknowledging (or, indeed, ignoring, as is most usual the case) that (some) fundamental values come together as a system, are immense. As an illustration, consider a public policy that aims to increase people's happiness. This will be more successful the more public decision-makers take into account values, such as justice and equity, and not so much material wealth, which are, indeed, important for happiness. Another example of significant implications is related to the defence of gender equity measures based on reinforcing the role of women and their values.

Another example of relevant practical implications relates to trust (in the others), which is essential to be increased. This increase will be achieved, all the more, when each of us adopts behaviours that make us trustworthy (to the others), which is an individual decision that each

of us should understand as the most appropriate for everyone, including ourselves. As we know, a very unpleasant situation, in social terms, is associated with the verification of the non-cooperative equilibrium, in the so-called “prisoners’ dilemma” game. This fact explains, for example, the well-known “Tragedy of the Commons.” Simply put, this happens because each person does not trust the others. Thus, increasing trust can avoid this situation, allowing everyone to be better off.

Research limitations:

There are certainly several limitations to this study, firstly because it only considers the case of one country, in this case, Portugal. It is hoped that the reader will be able to forgive this fact. Added to this are the methodological limitations, since a very simple data analysis was deliberately chosen.

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