



What came first, the secular chicken or the economic egg?

The Primacy of Secularization in Human Development

BY DAMIAN RUCK

Why is it that secular countries tend to be rich and religious ones poor? Answering such a question involves unpicking a complex knot of social and cognitive factors, and requires the help of researchers from numerous disparate disciplines. So we answer a humbler question: what came first, the secular chicken or the economic egg?

Showing that secularization happens before economic development does not prove that secularization causes a prosperous society. However it does rule out of the reverse because of basic physics. The arrow of time runs only forwards, so current economic performance cannot be in response to future secularization.

Max Weber vs Emile Durkheim

Gallup are the Rolls-Royce of international opinion surveyors. They showed us that people living in richer countries place less importance on religion than those living in poorer countries¹. Although

beliefs, the steam-powered scholars of yesteryear have already noted that industrialized nations tend to be more secular than their pre-industrial counterparts. However, two giants of early 20th century social science, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, had opposing interpretations of this fact.

Durkheim proposed the ‘functionalist’ model of secularization. He thought religion existed to provide a series of practical functions to society. Religion brought people together every Sunday, and it also provisioned education and welfare for the community. However, he also saw that the material security and rising living standards brought by economic progress was filling these functions, pushing religion to the margins of society². Max Weber, on the other hand, argued that the Protestant Reformation was the religious phase-shift at the root of economic development. He proposed a ‘protestant work ethic’ that, once infused into a society, would unleash a stampede of productivity and economic improvement³.

Weber and Durkheim’s views are incompatible. Durkheim proposes that economic prosperity leads to future religious change, whereas Weber proposes that a religious change leads to future economic prosperity. We want to help settle this debate. Was Durkheim correct in saying that the economic egg hatched into a secular chicken? Or was Weber right, when he argued that the chicken of religious reform laid an economic egg.

Two Out of Three Ain't Good

Unsurprisingly, we are not the first to lay siege to

this particular castle. Others have done so using the modern arsenal of advanced statistics and powerful computers (something of which Weber and Durkheim could not have conceived). Yet the castle has proven harder to overrun than we'd hoped. Some studies have shown Durkheim to be correct⁴, some Weber⁵ and some both⁶. We think these contradictions arise because it's just so damn hard to measure how secular the world is. For the best results, we need data that has three qualities: it should cover as many different countries as possible, it should stretch as deep into historical time as possible, and should take into account the inherent complexity of a concept like 'secularization'. Many of the cited studies have two of these data qualities, but none have all three.

Population surveys have been a fixture in the West for a long time. So if we ignore the rest of the world, and focus only on western countries, we can get a multi-dimensional measure of secularization that stretches back into history. There is just one big problem. People in western countries are not typical, they are WEIRD, as Joe Henrich puts it (an acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic⁷). For those tempted to generalize their WEIRD observations to the rest of the world, the story of Easterlin's happiness-income paradox should act as a cautionary tale.

In the 1970's, economist Richard Easterlin noticed that, within a particular country, the richer a person is the happier they are. A fact that won't surprise many. The paradox arose when he compared *average* income and happiness across *many* countries and found that there was no relationship⁸. A lot of ink was spilled trying to explain how it could be that income affects the happiness of individuals, yet has no effect at the level of whole societies. But, as the data accumulated over the next 40 years, it turned out there was no paradox to explain.

Back when Easterlin was writing, only a few countries bothered to ask their populations how happy they were, and these were always rich western countries. Since then poorer countries have started asking about happiness, which is bad news for

the Easterlin paradox. In these poorer parts of the world, where extra income could mean escaping subsistence level poverty, richer countries are quite a lot happier than poorer ones⁹. Easterlin's sample of WEIRD countries were all from the high end of the income scale where, as he showed, there wasn't a strong relationship (it turns out money can't buy you much happiness when you're already rich).

To avoid falling into the Easterlin trap, we need to make sure we include non-western countries in our sample. One way of measuring secularization on a global scale is by looking at church attendance, because it is more readily available than expensive survey data. But this is actually quite a coarse and impoverished measure of secularization. It is perfectly possible for a sincerely religious person to never set foot in a church, while the most tepid of religionists might regularly show up every Sunday (perhaps to fulfill some Durkheimian social function). Secularization is a complex multi-dimensional concept and so should be measured using a clutch of related survey questions asking things like: "How important is God in your life?" and "Do you think it's important to teach your child to be religious?"

Using the World Values Survey, we constructed a rich multilayered measure of secularization using questions like the ones mentioned. What's more, these questions were asked in 109 different countries representing all five inhabited continents. This truly global sample traverses the full income range, which should keep us out of the Easterlin trap. But for all its geographic and conceptual richness, the World Values Survey is lacking one important quality: historical depth.

Diving Deeper into Historical Secularization

The World Values Survey goes back as far as the early 1980's, but countries from the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia only show up in the record during the last 15 to 20 years. Trying to detect the secularization trajectories of countries using such a stunted time series is impossible. It's

Pitch to Publication

Secularization and economic growth

like trying to guess the future movement of the stock market by looking at the frenetic zig-zags comprising just a day's worth of trading.

Unfortunately, there is no getting around the fact that systematic surveying is only a few decades old in many parts of the world. So it appears there is no way we can reach the historical depth required to discover whether economic development or secularization came first.

But we have found a way to dive deeper. We have snuck a view of secularization from the earliest decades of the 20th century. This temporal periscope presents itself if we acknowledge a simple fact: that peoples beliefs and opinions tend to form and harden during the first few decades of their lives¹⁰. Despite a lifetime of ups and downs (often in response to economic booms and busts¹¹), people unwittingly carry a fossilized representation of past secularization from their youth right into the modern day. This means we are able to use birth date as a proxy for historical time period, because if you want to know how secular the world was in the 1940's, then you should ask someone who came of age in the 1940's.

This new historical depth accompanies the global scope and conceptual richness already offered by the World Values Survey. So, unlike previous studies, our data has all three qualities required to definitely test whether it was the secular chicken or the economic egg that came first.

The Secular Chicken lays an Economic Egg

The data are clear: secularization precedes economic development and not the other way around. We can declare a partial victory for the Weberians in the battle of the classical sociologists; Durkheim's functionalist model does not square with the way societies have evolved in the 20th century. Weber's victory is partial because we cannot say that he was correct in all of the detail, or even that secularization directly causes economic development.

In reality, society is a cacophony of interacting causes, effects and dynamic emergent properties. Trying to isolate a single cause for economic development is a mug's game. But we can check if some other, more salient, factor accounts for the explanatory potency of secularization, such as cultural history or a respect for individual rights.

Taking cultural history into account is unfashionable in many of the social sciences. But in anthropology they are acutely aware that the historical relationships between different tribes must be considered lest they run into 'Galtons problem'¹². For example, when two neighboring tribes hunt with the same type of spear, they need to know if both groups invented that spear independently, or if they both inherited the same design because they are culturally related. And asking this question is no less important when comparing modern states consisting of millions of people, where political and economic shocks spread more readily between countries that have a shared cultural history¹³.

Sure enough, a country is far more likely to adopt the secular beliefs of a neighbor if they share a language or religion. Although cultural history compliments secularization, it does not displace it as an explanation for economic development. Both shared culture and secularization cut through the cacophony and proclaim their importance for promoting economic development.



Secularization (Usually) Begets Respect for Individual Rights

A respect for the rights of individuals is the moral triumph of the humanitarian revolution⁴ and is the key cultural value that unlocks economic development¹⁴. This individualism is the 'leg up' secular societies need to reach economic prosperity. We already know that declining adherence to religious doctrines leads to greater tolerance of homosexuality, abortion and divorce. But we show secular societies become prosperous only when they have a greater respect for these individual rights.

Zooming in on different regions of the world, we see poor secular societies alongside rich religious ones. Take those former communist countries like Russia and Ukraine, where violent repression during the 20th century left religion marginalized. Despite the religious bounce-back they've seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall, these countries remain highly secular yet show middling economic performance. In fact they are poorer than the fairly religious countries of Catholic Europe, such as Italy and Ireland. The cultural value that really distinguishes East from West Europe is a greater respect for individual rights.

Although this isn't to say that secularization is merely incidental. Religious institutions are inherently conservative and often drag their heels

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on moral issues. Many have explicit doctrines that prohibit homosexuality, divorce and abortion. This transforms what could be a simple respect for individual rights into a five-year theology PhD. So it is easy to understand why individual rights normally only flower once religious influence withers.

That said, it is individual rights that are needed for sustained economic growth, and these don't require a secular world. If religious institutions can embrace modern cultural values and become less of a conservative force, then they could provide moral guidance in the economically prosperous societies of the future. □

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